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Aesthetic Experience Beyond the Native Tongue: Reading Literary Texts in a Foreign Language

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Abstract

This study investigates how second-language (L2) readers process and evaluate literary metaphors, focusing on the relationship between comprehension and aesthetic response. Sixty Polish participants ($\geq B2$ English proficiency) read excerpts from *The Golden Bowl* while their eye movements were recorded. Measures included fixation count, dwell time, and revisit count. Additional measures included comprehension tests, ratings of beauty, creativity, and surprise, and retrospective think-aloud protocols.

Results revealed positive correlations among aesthetic dimensions and between these and eye-tracking measures (e.g., creativity with dwell time, beauty with revisit count, surprise with fixation count). Comprehension was negatively associated with aesthetic appreciation, replicating pilot findings from an independent text. Less comprehensible metaphors tended to receive higher aesthetic ratings, suggesting that limited comprehensibility does not necessarily impede, and may even enhance, aesthetic engagement. Qualitative analyses of retrospective think-aloud protocols identified sources of aesthetic judgment, including associations, phonoaesthetic qualities, imaginative engagement, complexity, frequency, individual attitudes, and emotional resonance.