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An Eye For Figurative Meaning: The Effects of Familiarity on Metaphor Comprehension

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Abstract: The career of metaphor hypothesis suggests that processing preference is a result of conventionality whereby conventional metaphors are processed through categorization, and novel ones processed through comparison. Alternatively, the categorization model predicts that apt metaphors are processed as categorizations whether or not they are conventional. However, research has largely ignored another known factor to influence metaphor processing, namely familiarity. The categorization model predicts familiarity to play no role in deciding on processing strategy. On the other hand, the career of metaphor hypothesis predicts that familiarity to play a facilitating role in metaphor comprehension. In this experiment, we used the eye tracking paradigm and controlled for aptness and conventionality, and manipulated familiarity in order to test these predictions. Our initial results support the career of metaphor hypothesis suggesting that familiarity facilitates metaphor processing. We discuss the implications these results have on the psycholinguistic models and briefly speculate on their philosophical consequences.