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An Experimental-Semiotic Approach to the Emergence of Metaphor and Polysemy in Interaction

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Abstract

Polysemy is pervasive in modern language and represents one key factor that allows for the unlimited expressive potential of human language. One important process of historical meaning extension is that of metaphor (Anderson 2017). Recently, the paradigm of Experimental Semiotics has been proposed as a novel methodology to investigate semantic change (Bowerman & Smith 2022). In experimental semiotics, participants have to converge on a novel signalling system in the absence of a shared language. Here we adopt this approach to experimentally investigate the role of metaphor in meaning extensions. Specifically, we will present results of a study in which participants have to communicate about a novel meaning space in a referential communication game. Importantly, participants will only be able to use symbols for which they have previously established symbol-meaning mappings in a prior game. The results show to which degree participants make use of metaphor in in this task.