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Authors

Pissani, Laura
de Almeida, Roberto G.

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Can early birds ... fly? Awakening conventional metaphors further down the maze

Laura Pissani

Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Roberto de Almeida

Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Abstract

Conventional metaphors such as early bird are interpreted rather fast and efficiently since they might be stored as lexicalized, non-compositional expressions. Pissani and de Almeida (2020, submitted) showed that, after reading metaphors (John is an early bird so he can...), participants took longer and were less accurate selecting the continuing word (attend) when it was paired with a literally related distractor (fly) rather than an unrelated one (cry) in a maze task. This suggests that the literal meaning of a conventional metaphor is available immediately afterward. But does the availability of the literal meaning remain further downstream? We examined whether this effect is replicated when there is a medium (6–8 words) and a large (11–13 words) distance between metaphor and word selection. Results indicated that the awakening effect persists but decreases significantly as word distance increases, suggesting that the literal meaning is still available downstream but fades rapidly.