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The role of literary metaphors in aesthetic appreciation

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Abstract

Research on empirical aesthetics has only recently included the study of literary texts, and not yet addressed the role played by metaphors. We first created alternative versions of modern poems devoid of literary metaphors but equal in other properties to the original poems. The former are perceived as more beautiful. Second, we had participants read sentences extracted from poems and recorded their reading times and beauty ratings. Sentences could be literal, contain dead metaphors, conventional, novel or extremely novel metaphors. Increasingly more novel and creative metaphors lead to increasing aesthetic appreciation, showing a clear linear relationship. Even extremely novel metaphors are appreciated, despite being more difficult to read. These results are only partially in line with current theories. Finally, aesthetic appreciation is only partially driven by increasing cognitive load: metaphoricity plays a more important and substantial role. The contribution of our results to extant theories will be discussed.