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Investigating the Effects of Linguistic Context and Genre on Metaphor Processing

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Abstract

While metaphor production varies systematically across different textual genres, it is unclear whether genre also plays a role during real-time metaphor processing. We present two experiments that test the scaffolding role of both linguistic context and genre (news or fiction) in an online ‘maze’ reading task. Our study provides new word-by-word reaction time data for an understudied but common type of metaphor in English, genitive metaphors (e.g., *breeze of contentment*). In Experiment 1, we find a difference between metaphor and literal processing in the absence of preceding linguistic context, corroborating previous findings. In Experiment 2, for the same metaphors, we find that genre does not affect processing above and beyond the linguistic context. A norming study on our linguistic contexts moreover showed that readers can infer the genre of a two-sentence excerpt without any explicit instruction. We discuss the implications of our null findings and highlight recommendations for future research.