

Unexpected Abstract to Concrete Metonymies in Corpus

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Cognitive linguists have long argued that our understanding of abstract concepts is grounded in metaphoric or metonymic mappings from more concrete or familiar domains of experience (Lakoff and Johnson 1980/2008, Lakoff and Johnson 1999). The relation between the abstract concepts of reality and insanity in sentence 1 is a case in point. It is understood as a line that blurs into another abstract concept, that is, into nothingness (i.e., into 'the quality or state of being nothing').

1) ... the line between reality and insanity blurs into nothingness. (COCA, our emphasis)

Uses such as these are in line with understanding abstract concepts (a relation) as concrete ones (a line), MOTION as CHANGE, and abstract concepts (nothingness) as bounded entities that something can develop into. In 2, however, nothingness is not used in reference to an abstract concept, but to a space that a flashlight drops into:

2) Her feet dangled in the air over the dark emptiness below, her flashlight dropping into nothingness. (COCA, our emphasis)

Uses such as these are quite unexpected. Here the abstract concept of nothingness is used metonymically for the perceived quality of the space that a flashlight drops into, and this quality, in turn, metonymically for the real-world physical space involved. But how common are uses such as these in authentic data? Are other abstract concepts similarly used as sources in metonymic conceptualizations and are there similar ABSTRACT FOR CONCRETE instances of nothingness in usage-based data? These are the research questions dealt with here.

To investigate abstract concepts in a systematic way, we did a semantic analysis of the usage patterns of the abstract nouns that collocate with the preposition into. The study is based on data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies 2008), which then consisted of more than 560 million words of text from several genres (i.e., spoken, fiction, popular, magazines, newspapers, and academic texts), and a previous study of the 100 most frequent nouns that collocate with into (the present authors, submitted). Our aim was to map out the metonymies that structure into + abstract noun constructions in authentic data and to gain a better understanding of such uses. Results suggest that several abstract concepts besides nothingness are used as sources in metonymic mappings. Some of them are darkness, daylight, obscurity, eternity, compliance, submission, and oblivion. More generally, results emphasize the need for usage-based approaches to language modeling. ABSTRACT to CONCRETE mappings are far from uncommon in authentic data, and abstract concepts may indeed be used as sources in metonymic mappings.

References

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