

We're entering a housing bubble, while leaving our pandemic bubble: **Changing meanings of *bubble* in relation to the outbreak of COVID-19**

Ji-in Kang¹ & Iksoo Kwon²

¹Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, river82123@naver.com

²Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, kwoniks@hufs.ac.kr

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Motivated by Charteris-Black's (2021) observations on changing meanings of COVID-19 related linguistic expressions, this study aims to show that the extended uses of the polysemous lexical item *bubble* are significantly accounted for in the COVID era by exploring attested data in the Coronavirus corpus. It then argues that the changing meanings are metaphorically motivated (Lakoff 2006[1993]) by elaborating how the conceptual motivation helps obtain the intended construal. A usage-based investigation confirms that changing meanings of *bubble* are significantly correlated with the outbreak of COVID-19, exemplifying how language use is motivated by its underlying conceptualization shaped by the users' embodied experiences.

The lexical item in focus, a *bubble*, prototypically refers to "[a] thin membrane of liquid enclosing a volume of air or another gas" (OED). The semantic radial network of *bubble* has expanded significantly due to the outbreak of the pandemic. This network consists of the two schematic properties: EPHEMERALITY and ENCLOSURE as illustrated in (1)-(2).

- (1) The last big jump in sales came almost a decade ago, after the economic downturn from 2007 to 2009 when the U.S. housing ***bubble*** burst.
- (2) South Korea is talking with Singapore about opening its first "travel ***bubble***" in July, which would allow vaccinated travelers on direct flights to bypass quarantine.

In (1), on the one hand, the word *bubble* refers to an unstable, and hence, undesirable state of economic activity in the domain of the U.S. housing market. Its construal is conceptually extended via the metaphors ABSTRACT ENTITIES ARE PHYSICAL ENTITIES and SIGNIFICANT IS BIG: Just as the existence of a bubble may not last long and burst, the economic state, which seemed to be booming, collapsed, and will eventually be nullified, which is undesirable. The term *travel bubble* in (2) refers to an extended concept of safe space, which is coordinated by the two partner countries with the similar situation of COVID-19 infections. The term *travel bubble* evokes an enclosed container with boundaries that conceptually fend off those who have been infected. Its construal illustrates another semantic extension via the metaphor STATES ARE BOUNDED REGIONS (Lakoff 2006[1993]: 204): those who are inside the bubble can travel disease-free as they have all been cleared; those outside the bubble cannot.

To collect attested uses of the lexeme *bubble* produced after the outbreak of COVID-19, a total of 4,119 tokens of *bubble*-compounds (*X + bubble* and *bubble + X*) were collected from the Coronavirus Corpus. It employs its collocation patterns because the collocates would reveal their contexts so that they could help efficiently sort out meanings of *bubble* in the given contexts. The major categories of the *bubble*-compounds are the prototypical sense (Prototypical), the ephemeral nature of bubble (EPHEMERALITY), and the enclosed container with boundaries (ENCLOSURE). This study reveals that those classified as ENCLOSURE category constitute more than two-thirds of the total dataset (74.36%), and the instances all refer to the pandemic bubble. The high proportion of the sense of ENCLOSURE in the corpus supports the premise that real-world experiences motivate meaning changes. Based on the distribution, this paper demonstrates that the radial network of the polysemous lexeme *bubble* has been expanding motivated by real-world experiences via conceptual metaphor and image-schematic construal.

References

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