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Verbs are More Metaphoric than Nouns: Evidence from the Lexicon

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Abstract

When asked to paraphrase semantically strained sentences (e.g., the lantern limped), participants alter word meanings to fit the context (e.g., the light flickered). Judges who were asked to classify these meaning extensions classified verb extensions as primarily metaphoric and noun extensions as primarily taxonomic or metonymic/associative (King & Gentner, 2019; in prep.). To determine whether these online patterns are reflected in established word senses, we sampled 120 nouns and 120 verbs from three different frequency bands (100 wpm, 10 wpm, and 1 wpm) and obtained metaphoricity ratings of every sense for each word (1015 senses total, Oxford Dictionary API). Verb senses were rated as significantly more metaphoric than noun senses overall. In addition, metaphoricity increased as sense frequency decreased, and this effect was stronger for verbs than for nouns. Verbs' high propensity for metaphoric extension has implications for evolution of word meanings.