

Metaphors in the (Mental) Lexicon

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In this presentation, metaphors are defined as simple lexemes rather than phrases, specifically verbs and nouns. Dictionaries can treat these straightforwardly as cases of polysemy. For example, the entry for “tiger” may contain two senses, one referring to the wild cat, the other to a fierce person. The metaphoricity of the second sense need not be noted, thus making entries for words like “tiger” indistinguishable from the entries for other polysemous words like “bank.” Because of its particular design, WordNet makes it possible to detect many – though not all – cases of metaphoric extensions and to distinguish them from ordinary polysemy [1].

Dictionaries contain conventionalized metaphors (like “tiger” in the sense of fierce person), but cannot include spontaneously generated ad-hoc metaphors, such as when someone refers to her place of work as a “jail” ([2], *inter alia*). These metaphors are not only created by language users on the fly but also present no comprehension problems despite the fact that they are not represented in speakers’ mental lexicons.

Both conventionalized and ad-hoc metaphors depend crucially on the exploitation of semantic similarity and analogy. I discuss the nature of metaphors in terms of semantic similarity as represented in WordNet, and argue that WordNet has the potential to account successfully for the phenomenon of ad-hoc metaphor. Relevant preliminary results of an empirical study of association and evocation among WordNet lexemes will be presented.

References

1. Fellbaum, C.: Towards a Representation of Idioms in WordNet. In Harabagiu, S., ed.: Proceedings of the Workshop on Usage of WordNet in Natural Language Processing Systems, COLING/ACL 1998, Montreal, CA. (1998) 52–57.
2. Glucksberg, S., Keysar, B.: Understanding metaphorical comparisons: Beyond similarity. *Psychological Review* **97** (1990) 3–18.