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Contextual Images As Metaphors

In the standard version of conceptual metaphor theory, metaphors are stable connected structures in the conceptual system that emerge either because there is some similarity between two domains of experience (resemblance-based metaphors) or because the two domains are correlated in bodily experience (correlation-based metaphors). I propose that in addition to these two types of metaphor there is a third type; I call them “context-induced” metaphors. These metaphors emerge from the (immediate and less immediate) context in which conceptualizers conceive of ideas in metaphorical ways.

I suggest that the context can have a priming effect on (metaphorical) conceptualization. The effect of various kinds of context on metaphorical conceptualization can take a variety of forms, and several of them produce imagistic metaphors. The kinds of contexts that can produce context-induced metaphors include the following: (1) the immediate physical setting, (2) what we know about the major entities participating in the discourse, (3) the immediate cultural context, (4) the immediate social setting, and (5) the immediate linguistic context itself.

Of these, the context that most clearly produces imagistic metaphors is the immediate physical setting. Various aspects of the physical setting can prime conceptualizers, and thus they can select various (visual, auditory, etc.) images from the context as source domains for their metaphorical targets. This process can be both conscious and unconscious. In the paper, I discuss several examples of such imagistic metaphors.

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