

Sources of Variation in 'Embodied' Metaphor: Theoretical and Real-world Consequences

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Our bodily interactions with the world provide a motivation for many of the metaphorical ways in which we talk about abstract concepts and emotions. For example, we often talk about moving through time as if it were moving through space, allowing us to 'look back in anger' or to 'move a meeting forward'. We talk about feeling 'down' when we are depressed, and we talk about emotional closeness as if it were physical closeness. Studies have shown that metaphors such as these have the ability to evoke physical (i.e. sensorimotor) responses in readers and listeners and for this reason, they are sometimes described as 'embodied'. Much of the work on embodied metaphor has tended to assume a single set of universal, shared bodily experiences that motivate our understanding of abstract concepts, and there has been relatively little investigation of the ways in which people's experiences of such metaphors might vary. Factors such as the shape and size of one's body, age, gender, physical or linguistic impairment, personality, ideology, political stance, religious beliefs, cultural and linguistic background all have the potential to impact on the way in which we use and interact with embodied metaphor. Furthermore, the nature of the metaphors themselves, their degree of novelty, the perspective from which they are presented and the contexts in which they are used have also been found to influence the extent to which they are experienced as 'embodied'. In this talk, I explore the different meanings of 'embodied metaphor' and discuss how they relate to one another. I then present findings from studies that we have conducted showing how individual differences and item-based differences shape people's experiences of embodied metaphor. I end with a discussion of how we have made use of theoretical and empirical work on embodied metaphor to address a range of 'real-world' needs, including the development of marketing campaigns, the improvement of care following pregnancy loss and child protection from faith-based abuse. By analysing the ways embodied metaphor varies across different individuals and contexts of use, in both academic and practical settings I aim to provide a deeper understanding of the nature of embodied metaphor itself.