

Metaphor Institutionalization as Phase Transition: Case Studies of Chinese Metaphors

Authors : Xuri Tang, Ting Pan

Abstract : Metaphor institutionalization refers to the propagation of a metaphor that leads to its acceptance in speech community as a norm of the language. Such knowledge is important to both theoretical studies of metaphor and practical disciplines such as lexicography and language generation. This paper reports an empirical study of metaphor institutionalization of 14 Chinese metaphors. It first explores the pattern of metaphor institutionalization by fitting the logistic function (or S-shaped curve) to time series data of conventionality of the metaphors that are automatically obtained from a large-scale diachronic Chinese corpus. Then it reports a questionnaire-based survey on the propagation scale of each metaphor, which is measured by the average number of subjects that can easily understand the metaphorical expressions. The study provides two pieces of evidence supporting the hypothesis that metaphor institutionalization is a phase transition: (1) the pattern of metaphor institutionalization is an S-shaped curve and (2) institutionalized metaphors generally do not propagate to the whole community but remain in equilibrium state. This conclusion helps distinguish metaphor institutionalization from topicalization and other types of semantic change.

Keywords : metaphor institutionalization, phase transition, propagation scale, s-shaped curve

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