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Metaphor and Causal Reasoning

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Abstract: We conducted a series of studies on the implied causal structure of metaphors. Some metaphors are “systemic” and highlight the complexity of relationships. For example, describing a national park as the “backbone” of the park system situates the park in a larger body of national parks, specifying a set of relationships between that park and the whole system. Other metaphors don’t enforce the same level of relational structure, instead highlighting a particular element of a scene or event. For example, describing a national park as a “pearl” of the park system emphasizes the beauty of the park, but leaves the relationship between this park and the rest of the elements in the system only weakly specified. We contrasted metaphors that implied more or less systemic relational structure and found that they influenced how people construed an event like the designation of a national park.