English meronymy: Preliminary results from the Novel Objects
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The 3-D stimuli known as Novel Objects were developed in the MesoSpace project in order to test how speakers of different languages would productively apply meronyms to unfamiliar entities. When the Novel Objects were originally developed, they were piloted with English speakers. Although the pilot did not provide as much usable data as would be obtained from fully running the tasks, it gives some indications of what is typical in English meronymy. This presentation concentrates on the part identification task. The most frequently used class of meronyms consisted of general-purpose terms, such as top, edge, and back, which are not tied to any specific domain. Body part meronyms, such as leg and arm, were used for the parts of those objects that are more organic in form, which provides a basis for comparison with Mesoamerican languages in which body part terms are used by default for any object. The data do not provide any evidence for non-unique mapping of body part terms in English, but nothing can be concluded from this. Geometrical terms, such as triangle and circle, were less frequent. Artifacts terms such as block and faucet were also less frequent, and generally invited a comparison to a whole artifact, not a part of one. Plant meronyms such as branch and trunk did occur, but marginally. In most instances, the participants established an orientation for each object before describing the landing sites, and the orientation was sometimes re-negotiated. This, along with the frequency of orientation-dependent terms like top and bottom, suggests that orientation is important to English speakers' meronymic strategies. However, only in a few instances did the participants advance an identification or interpretation of the object as a whole. As expected, the frame of reference used was overwhelmingly relative. Altogether, an in-depth comparison between English and Mesoamerican languages in terms of meronymy should at least cover the optionality or obligatoriness of body part terms, the relative importance of orientation, and the nature of the mapping from bodies to other entities. Such a comparison will help to define the possibility space of how meronymy works across languages.