

Metaphorical Triangulation

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Abstract

Metaphors are powerful tools for explaining abstract concepts, but a single explanatory metaphor may be ineffective if the target system is sufficiently complex or the metaphor is counterintuitive. Drawing on theoretical and empirical research on metaphor and analogy, I describe a more systematic explanatory strategy: metaphorical triangulation. This involves (1) describing an intuitive mental model of the target phenomenon in terms of a concrete—but flawed—metaphor, drawing attention to its weaknesses; (2) presenting an alternative metaphorical model designed to address these weaknesses; and (3) providing supplementary metaphors to further develop the preferred account of the target phenomenon and address shortcomings of the alternative metaphor. I show how philosopher Daniel Dennett used this strategy to illuminate a range of puzzling issues, from evolution to consciousness, and I present some preliminary empirical support for this approach. I encourage scientists and educators to consider how they might use metaphorical triangulation in their work.