



Philosophische Fakultät



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Compositionality in depiction and description

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Although language is often taken to be a paradigmatic case of the use of arbitrary symbols to communicate ideas, it is also clear that linguistic utterances across all modalities frequently incorporate elements of iconic depiction. We are still in the early stages of understanding how depiction works from the perspective of compositionality, e.g. the meanings of words like “red” and “ball” clearly combine to describe a “red ball”, but what about depictions (e.g. depictive co-speech gestures, sign language depictive classifiers, written quotations, demonstrations, etc.)? This talk builds upon existing semiotic work in depiction and description to argue in favor of separate and parallel systems of meaning in language, one that involves a non-symbolic representation of a particular which we should resist analyzing in terms of truth conditions, and a separate symbolic, propositional meaning. Only the latter is able to support the kind of alternatives required for propositional meaning, as diagnosed by (a) semantic work on negative quantifiers and polar questions, and (b) experimental pragmatic work on contrast and quantity implicatures. We leave with an eye toward explaining the pervasiveness of both depictive and descriptive aspects of language based on their separate compositional functions.