LINGUISTICS

How words take on new meaning

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In English, we use the same word to describe the flesh of animals when served as food, a person's secret plan, and a sports event. In fact, the word 'game' has even more meanings. How do words take on new or alternative meanings?

This is a question addressed by Christian Ramiro, at the University of California, Berkeley, and colleagues, who used computer models to test different accounts of word-meaning evolution. Three examples are a model in which a new sense of the word always relates back to the original sense, a model in which only the last developed sense of a word influences its new meaning, and a model in which meaning follows a nearest-neighbour chain. In the chaining model, different meanings can evolve into separate strands, and the newest meaning in each strand always relates back to the most closely related meaning that exists for a given word. Of the compared algorithms, this model best predicted in which order a set of about 5,000 English words took on new meanings over the past 1,000 years.

The current study provides an elegant formal account for how words evolve, pointing to mechanisms that ensure that new meanings are understandable to listeners.

Anne-Marike Schiffer