Computational Models of Figurative Language and the Role of Abstractness

The distinction between abstract and concrete words (such as "dream" in contrast to "banana") is considered a highly relevant semantic categorisation for Natural Language Processing purposes. For example, previous studies have identified distributional abstractness as an important feature in automatic approaches to figurative language detection across languages (Turney et al. 2011, Tsvetkov et al. 2014, Köper & Schulte im Walde 2016, 2017, Aedmaa et al. 2018), cf. the literal vs. figurative meanings of "break the ice" in examples (1) vs. (2), with the concrete word "lake" in the literal meaning example (1) and the abstract word "conversation" in the figurative meaning example (2).

(1) [break the ice] on the lake

(2) [break the ice] in the conversation

In this talk I will first present classifiers that distinguish between literal and figurative language, relying heavily on distributional and abstractness/concreteness information. In the second part of the talk, I will zoom into concreteness norm properties, contextual characteristics of abstractness information as well as figurative language in discourse, in order to take an in-depth look into the interplay between abstractness and figurative language and to discuss the limits of this interaction.