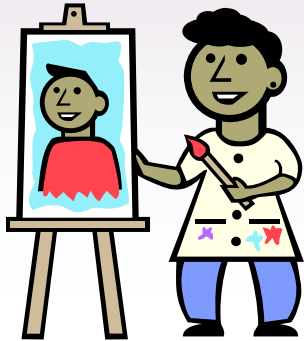


# **Does this painting “speak” to you?**

**A corpus-based comparison of abstract and  
representational painters’ metaphors for art**

Karen Sullivan  
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# Does this painting “speak” to you?



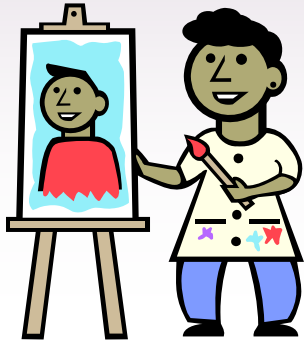
- **Representational** art includes identifiable imagery



- Abstract art involves **non-representational** lines, shapes and/or colors)

- The differences between these genres are recognized by artists, critics, and viewers

# Does this painting “speak” to you?



- Do representational and abstract artists conceptualize their artistic process differently?



- Are these differences apparent in the **metaphors** (specifically, **ART IS LANGUAGE**) these artists use to describe their artistic process?

# Does this painting “speak” to you?

This talk will cover:

- Representational vs. abstract art
- Artistic “languages” and “vocabularies”
- “Narrative”: What’s art about?
- Who are artists “talking” to?

# Representational vs. abstract art

- The corpus consisted of 160 artist's statements from four sequential (2002-2003) volumes of *New American Paintings*
- *New American Paintings* is a quarterly book-length "Juried Exhibition-in-Print," which includes 3 paintings and an artist's statement from every artist it represents
- For the purposes of this study, the artists' work was sorted into three categories based on the artists' own descriptions: **representational**, **non-representational (abstract)**, and **partly representational**

# Representational vs. abstract art

Representational art was described by artists using terms such as:

- *figurative*
- *representational*
- *hyper-realist*
- *photographic*
- *photojournalistic*



Rod Penner, *Commerce St./Brenham, TX*

# Representational vs. abstract art

Non-representational art was described by artists using terms such as:

- *abstract*
- *abstractions*
- *not intending to construct a recognizable form*
- *working abstractly*
- *no precise referent*



Michael Braden, *Ojai Series: No. XXIV, Four Square*

# Representational vs. abstract art

Some partly representational art combined areas of representation and abstraction, using phrases such as:

- *abstract but also interested in figuration*
- *flat space, flat color and an isolated image*
- *the recognizable image of a house with areas of color*

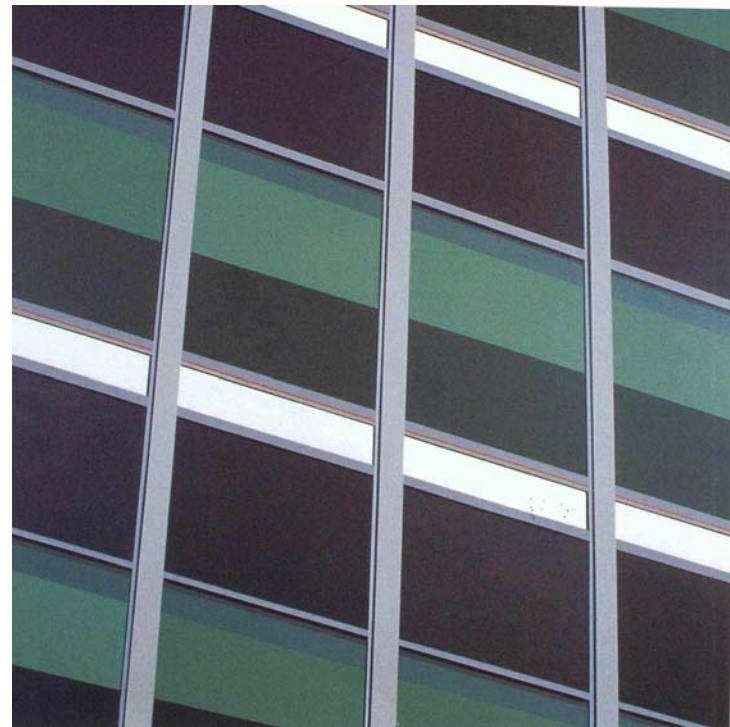


Douglas Bloom, *Arborescent Blue*

# Representational vs. abstract art

Other partly representational art found abstraction in representational images, using phrases such as:

- *artwork blurs the line between abstraction and representation*
- *locate abstraction in representational subjects*
- *adapt(ed) images from various sources and ...abstract(ed) their form*



Tommy Fitzpatrick, *Secondary Broadway*

# Representational vs. abstract art

Based on these criteria, the 160 artists in the corpus include:

- **56** representational artists
- **43** non-representational artists
- **61** partly representational artists

Most artists' statements involved relevant examples of ART IS LANGUAGE (35 representational, 23 non-representational, and 40 partly representational artists)

# Artistic “languages” and “vocabularies”

Via the metaphor ART IS LANGUAGE, the artist “speaks” to the viewer using the “language” of art:

## ART IS LANGUAGE

LANGUAGE

speaker 1

→

speaker 2

→

speech

→

vocabulary

→

language

→

ART

artist

viewer

art

???

???

# Artistic “languages” and “vocabularies”

Three representational and 5 partly representational painters referred to “languages” of subject matter.



Courtney Jordan, *Queensboro Bridge*

- *a **language** of bridges, buildings and skyscrapers*
- *modern architecture is a visual **language***
- *a personal **vocabulary** of symbols and images*

# Artistic “languages” and “vocabularies”

Representational and partly representational artists’  
“languages” metaphorically map vocabulary onto  
subjects/images:

## ART IS LANGUAGE

### LANGUAGE

speaker 1

→

speaker 2

→

speech

→

vocabulary

→

language

→

### ART

artist

viewer

art

**subject matter**

**system of**

**subject matter**

# Artistic “languages” and “vocabularies”

Six non-representational painters referred to “languages” of colors, shapes or brushstrokes.

- *an imprecise language of color*
- *the vocabulary of the language of form*
- *the language of mark-making*
- *a vocabulary of colors and forms*



Martina Nehrling, *Let a Little*

# Artistic “languages” and “vocabularies”

The “vocabulary” of abstract artists instead consists of colors and forms:

## ART IS LANGUAGE

LANGUAGE

speaker 1

→

speaker 2

→

speech

→

vocabulary

→

language

→

ART

artist

viewer

art

**colors/forms/  
brushstrokes**

**system of  
colors/etc.**

# “Narrative”: What’s art about?

Artists use their “speech” to tell “stories,” “narratives” and “allegories”:

## ART IS LANGUAGE

### LANGUAGE

speaker 1

→

speaker 2

→

speech

→

narrative

→

### ART

artist

viewer

art

???

# “Narrative”: What’s art about?

Seven representational and nine partly representational painters used *narrative* to refer to sequences of events suggested by their subject matter. *Story* and *allegory* were used similarly.

- *my drawings **tell stories***
- a still life *specifically arranged to support a **narrative***
- ***narratives** made up of objects we think we know*
- a portrait with a *specific kind of **narrative***  
***ambiguity** of the sitter...*



Mitchell Marco, *Boy with Gun*

# “Narrative”: What’s art about?

Representational and partly representational artists  
metaphorically map narrative onto the sequences of events  
implied by their subject matter:

## ART IS LANGUAGE

### LANGUAGE

speaker 1

→

speaker 2

→

speech

→

language

→

narrative

→

### ART

artist

viewer

art

subject matter

**sequence of  
events in subject  
matter**

# “Narrative”: What’s art about?

Six non-representational painters used *narrative* to refer to their own painting process, as evidenced in their works.

- *By incorporating a performative aspect to the (painting), I am attempting to leave just enough room for something of a hermetic – if not **abbreviated – narrative***
- *a **narrative** of (the artist’s) own creative process*



Di Stefan, *Untitled (Orange)*

# “Narrative”: What’s art about?

Three non-representational artists claimed to have no interest in “narrative”. Some of these seemed to use “narrative” in the representational painters’ sense, in reference to to a sequence of events implied by the painting’s subject matter.

- ***not narrative***
- ***non-narrative***
- *I am concerned neither with **narrative** nor image*



Margaret Neill, *Shake Up*

# “Narrative”: What’s art about?

Abstract artists metaphorically map narrative onto the sequence of events involved in their own artistic process:

## ART IS LANGUAGE

### LANGUAGE

speaker 1

→

speaker 2

→

speech

→

language

→

narrative

→

### ART

artist

viewer

art

colors/forms/  
brushstrokes

**artist’s own  
creative process**

# Who are artists “talking” to?

ART IS LANGUAGE typically maps “**speaker 1**” and “**speaker 2**” onto the **artist** and the **viewer** of an artwork.

However, the creation and the viewing of a painting are typically separated in time, so viewers’ “reply” to the artist cannot easily map to the ART domain.

## ART IS LANGUAGE

LANGUAGE		ART
speaker 1	→	artist
speaker 2	→	viewer
speech	→	art
<b>speaker 2’s speech</b>	→	<b>???</b>

# Who are artists “talking” to?

One solution is to conceptualize art as written, not spoken, language. In written language, it is normal for readers to be denied the opportunity to respond to an author’s work.

## ART IS WRITTEN LANGUAGE

### WRITTEN LANGUAGE

writer

→

reader

→

writing

→

### ART

artist

viewer

art

# Who are artists “talking” to?

Representational (and partly representational) artists usually solve this problem by describing their art as various types of **written**, not spoken language. The more representational artists referred to more descriptive written genres:

- *journalistic in nature*
- *photojournalism*
- *reporting*
- *a record*
- *biography*
- *autobiography*
- *a visual diary*



Sally Cleveland, *Dairy Gold Plant*

# Who are artists “talking” to?

Partly representational artists were more likely to refer to their work in terms of fiction or poetry.



Patricia Hernandez, *To Know How Much of Yours You Are*

- *more fiction than biography*
- *mythology*
- *poems*
- *poetic*
- *lyrical*



Andrew Long, *Traveling by Universe*

# Who are artists “talking” to?

ART IS LANGUAGE typically maps “**speaker 1**” and “**speaker 2**” onto the **artist** and the **viewer** of an artwork.

However, the creation and the viewing of a painting are typically separated in time, so viewers’ “reply” to the artist cannot easily map to the ART domain.

## ART IS LANGUAGE

LANGUAGE		ART
speaker 1	→	artist
<b>speaker 2</b>	→	<b>viewer</b>
speech	→	art
<b>speaker 2’s speech</b>	→	<b>???</b>

# Who are artists “talking” to?

Abstract artists had a completely different solution. They usually **eliminated the audience from their mappings**, and instead considered their **materials, canvas, or design elements** as “**speaker 2**”.

## ART IS LANGUAGE

### LANGUAGE

speaker 1

**speaker 2**

speaker 1's speech

speaker 2's speech

→

→

→

→

### ART

artist

**materials/elements**

paint application

results of paint  
application

# Who are artists “talking” to?

Non-representational artists used phrases such as:

- *my **statement** is each dot I make...then I **respond** to each unexpected play of dots*
- *a **dialogue** with paint*
- *an **interchange** with the painting activity*
- *I **listen** to my composition*
- *a **dialogue** between myself and that first mark on the canvas ...*
- *a **conversation** between the work and myself*



Masako Kamiya, *Autumn*

# Who are artists “talking” to?

Sometimes the art elements even talk to each other, excluding the artist as well as the audience from the metaphor.

- *multiple **dialogues** between background and foreground, shape and color, and also with the edge of the paintings*
- *color, paint and form meet and **respond to one another***



Tony Beavy, *Counterparts*

# Who are artists “talking” to?

Abstract artists usually eliminated the audience from their mappings, and instead considered their **materials**, **canvas**, or **design elements** as “**speaker 2**”.

## ART IS LANGUAGE

### LANGUAGE

speaker 1

**speaker 2**

speaker 1’s speech

speaker 2’s speech

→

→

→

→

### ART

artist/elements

**materials/elements**

paint application

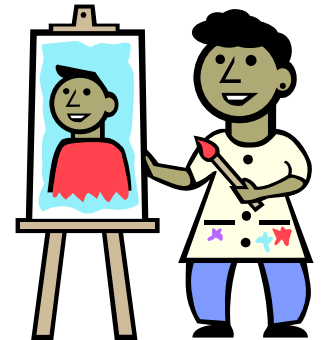
results of paint  
application

# Summary: Conclusion

- Abstract artists' "conversations" relegate the audience to the role of "eavesdroppers," whereas representational painters intend to "speak" directly to the audience.



- Artists' use of **ART IS LANGUAGE** demonstrates representational and partly representational artists' greater concern with **subject matter** and **audience**, and abstract artists' interest in **color, shape, and their own artistic process.**

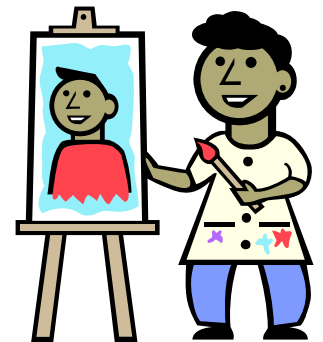


# Summary: Research Questions



- What leads to artists' different conceptualizations of their artistic process, and use of metaphors such as ART IS LANGUAGE? Do these differences also underlie the differences in the artists' work?

- Does abstract artists' focus on the artistic process render **familiarity** with this process more essential to the appreciation of abstract art than representational art?



# Thank you!

(Ask me about EMCL4 and Multidimensional Scaling!)

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Zevitas, Steven T., ed.

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# Artists' Use of Language Metaphors in 2 Dimensions

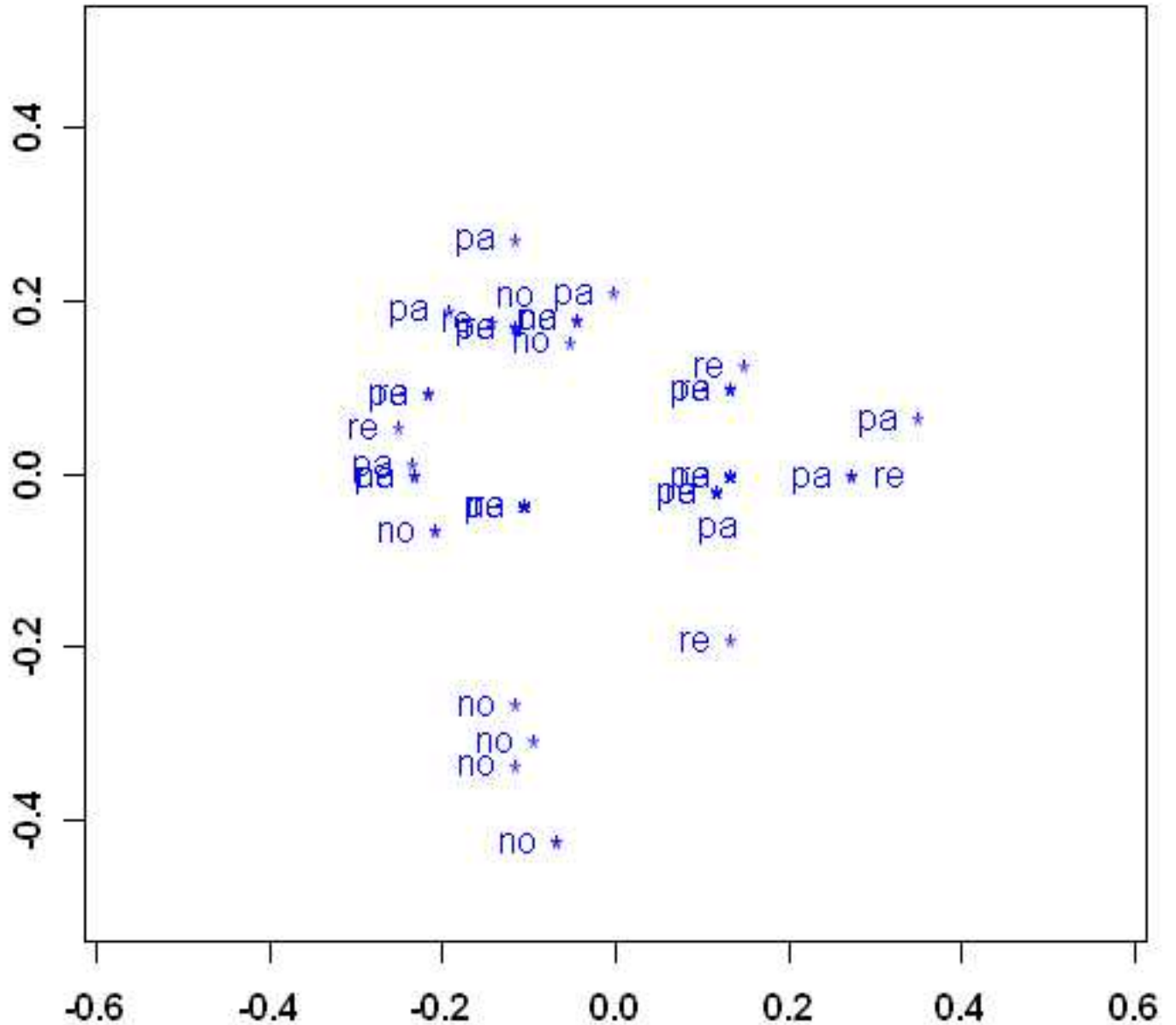
Last-Minute  
Appendix: A  
Multidimensional  
Scaling Analysis,  
courtesy of  
EMCL4

re=representational

pa=partly  
representational

no=non-  
representational

Correct Classification  
= 97.4



# Artists' Use of Language Metaphors in 2 Dimensions

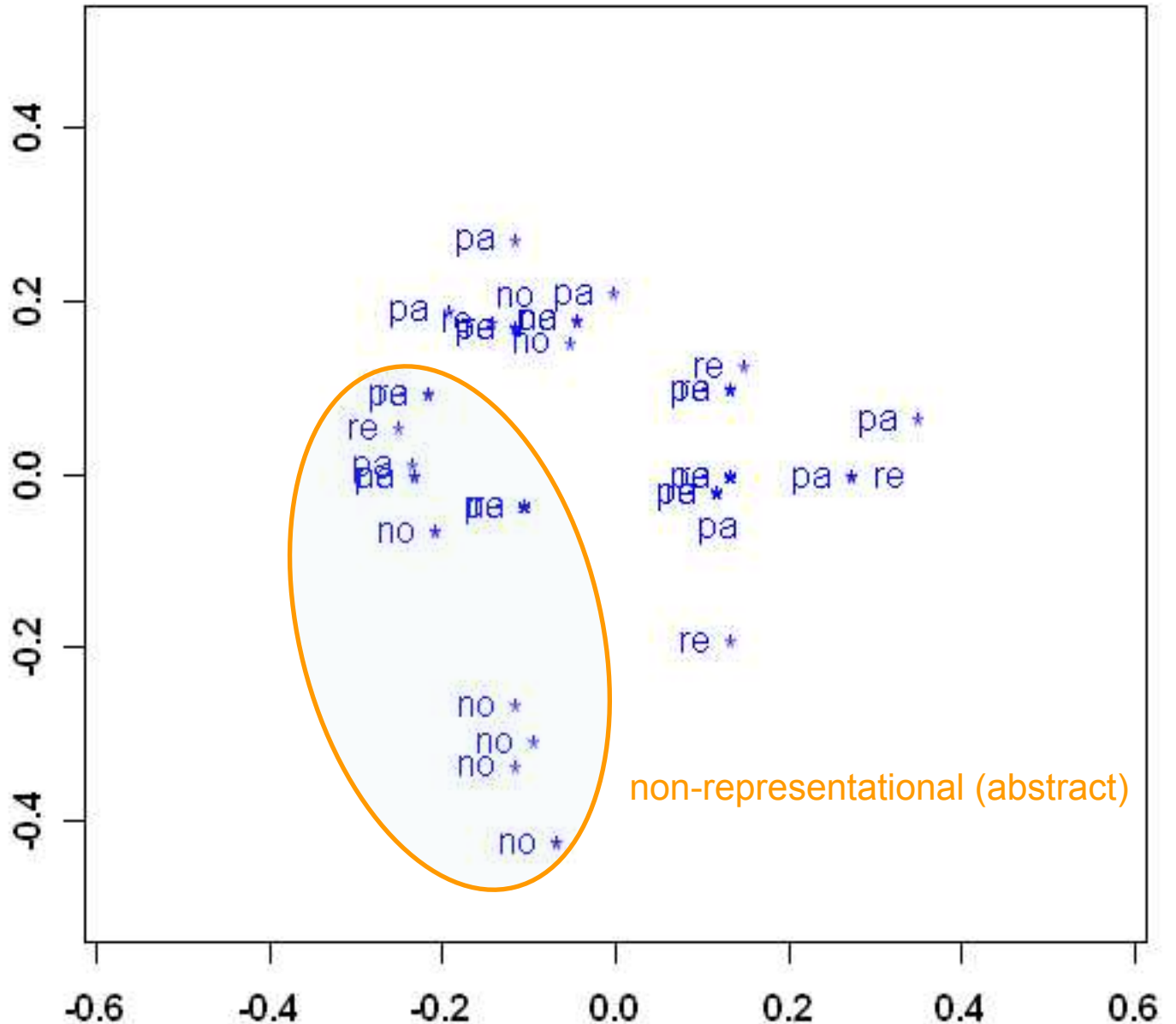
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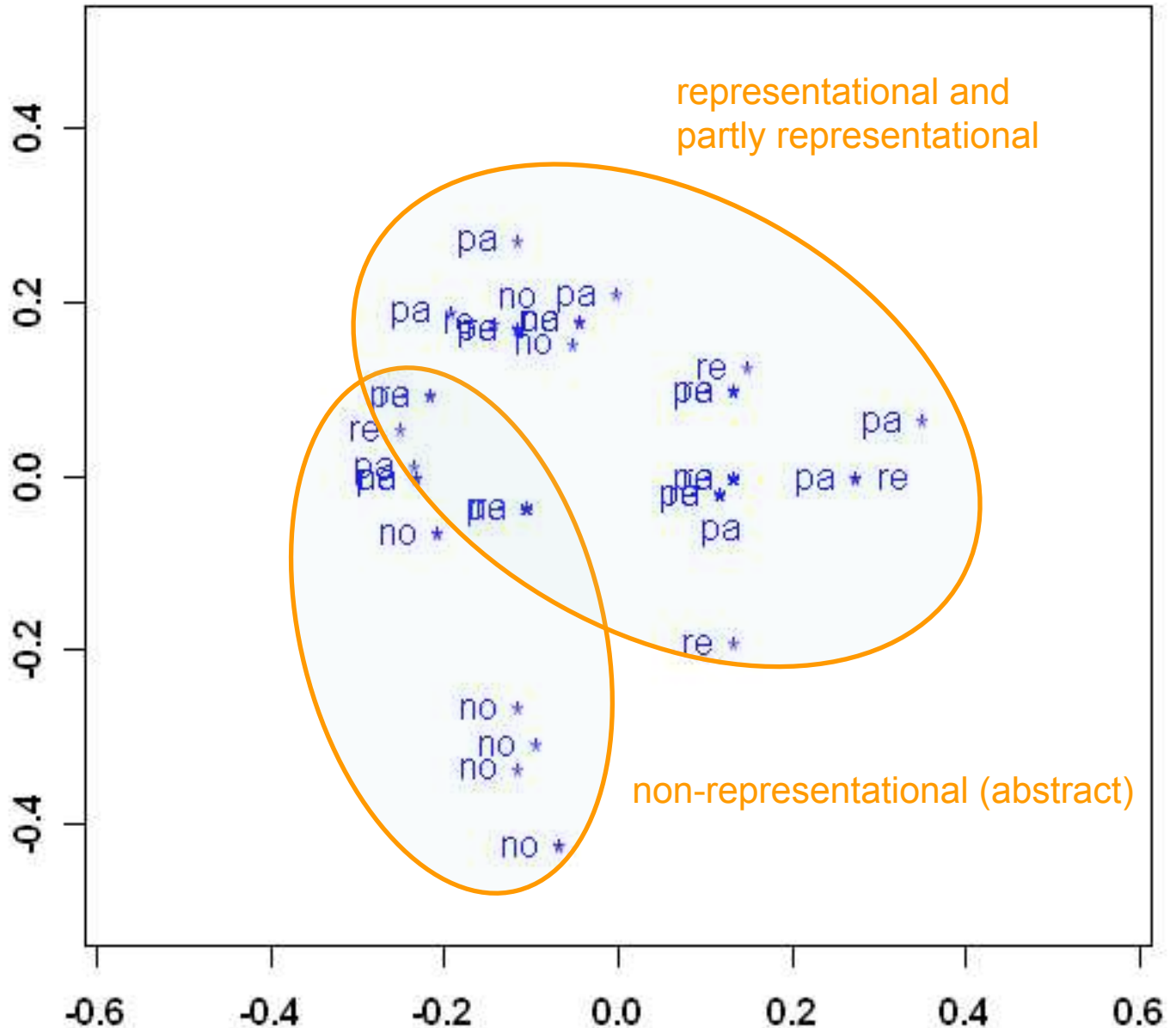
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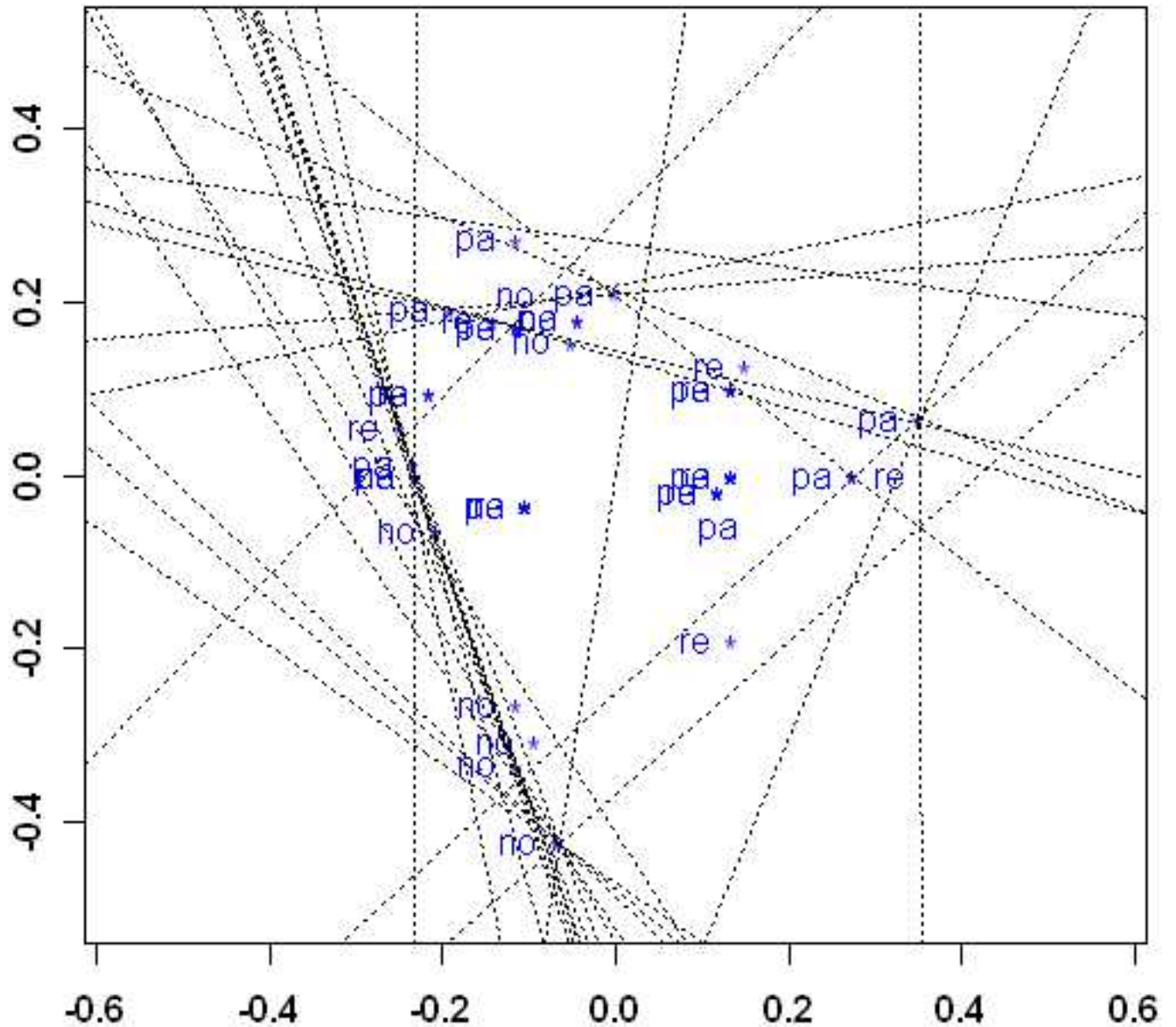
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# Appendix 1: Visual metaphor

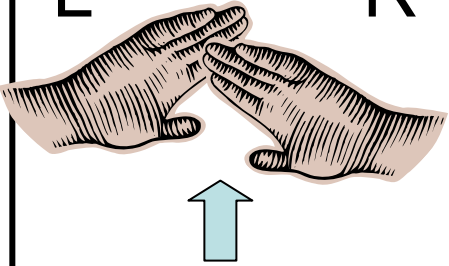





Visually communicated metaphors are found in:

- gesture (McNeill 1992, 2005; Cienki 1998)
- dreams (Lakoff 1997)
- film (Forceville 2002)
- comics (Narayan 2000)
  
- One common visual manifestation of KNOWING IS SEEING is the cartoon convention of depicting a lightbulb over the head of a person with an idea.

# Appendix 1: Visual metaphor

- A subject uses metaphoric gestures to discuss academic dishonesty (Cienki 1998:199-203):

<p><i>...if you do the honest thing,</i></p>	<p><i>will you maybe get the worse grade and have trouble in the future,</i></p>	<p><i>or if you do the dishonest thing,</i></p>	<p><i>will you get ahead?</i></p>
<p>L R</p> 	<p>L R</p> 	<p>L R</p> 	<p>L R</p> 
<p>MORALITY IS UP</p>	<p>BAD IS DOWN; THE FUTURE IS TO THE RIGHT</p>	<p>IMMORALITY IS DOWN</p>	<p>GOOD IS UP; THE FUTURE IS TO THE RIGHT</p>