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Mental Imagery as a Sign System?

The query on the nature of mental imagery (MI) is one of the most controversial and yet important questions for cognitive science to solve. Two dominant rival theories were proposed – quasi-pictorial/analog (S. Kosslyn 1988, 1994, Kosslyn et al. 2006) and descriptive/propositional (Z. Pylyshyn 2002, 2004) – to account for mental imagery phenomena. The controversy between the two constituted the well-known Mental Imagery Debate, which yet has not been solved. So, what are mental images really – pictures in one's mind or rather a verbal string of thoughts?

Instead of choosing a particular format (either pictorial or verbal) of mental images, I propose to account for mental imagery as a *sign system*, which consists of various types of signs (*indices, icons, symbols*). Along these lines, a particular mental image can be of both depictive and descriptive format or contain both pictorial (iconic) and propositional (symbolic) elements in itself as parts of the complex sign. The exact structure of a mental image, I believe, depends on a particular cognitive task that it is employed to solve. So, dependent on the task, MI might employ both iconic signs (e.g. pictures) and symbolic signs (e.g. verbal language) in a peculiar combination of them to achieve a more economical and faster solution of the task.

I find the approach to the explanation of the nature of MI in terms of a sign system as the most beneficial, since it implies the unification of rival theories about MI and thus can better explain the divergent empirical data on the issue.

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