
Three Kinds of Constructionism: The Role of Analogies and Metaphor in the Debate over Niche Constructionism

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Abstract

Throughout the year a lively debate has flourished around Niche Construction Theory. The debate involves a persistent disagreement between the advocates of niche constructionism and its critics. The critics propose a distinction in narrow construction, limited to the production of evolutionary advantageous artefacts, and broad construction, of which they are unwilling to recognise the relevance in evolutionary processes. On the other hand, constructionists point out the universality and relevance of any construction process in evolution. I will argue that those two categories rely respectively on the figure of speech of analogy and on the figure of speech of metaphor. Afterwards I will introduce a further distinction in the figure of speech of analogy, offering a three-tier categorisation of constructionism: literal, analogical and figurative construction. Throughout this categorisation I will show that, unlike the current opinions, the real core of construction theory lies in the part of what has been so far classified as broad construction, and that the constructionist research programme has a different aim from the adaptationist programme, relying also on a different kind of causation. This approach offers an economical way to categorise construction cases, to compare them with other theories, and to throw light on constructionist theories. In the context of a broader overview of philosophy of science it also shows how metaphors have influenced the structure of the theories, and which kind of constraints arise from the way a theory is developed.

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