Pigs Do Fly
LANGUAGE USES METAPHOR TO MAKE SENSE OF REALITY.
OUR BRAINS DO JUST THE REVERSE.

HUMANS HAVE A special talent for understanding nuance and complexity. How else would we manage to comprehend lofty concepts like time and morality, ideas that seem to have no referents in objective reality? The brain is crafty, Benjamin Bergen, a cognitive scientist at the University of California, San Diego, explains: It uses the concrete to make sense of the abstract. We rely on brain areas involved in seeing, touching, and moving to mentally simulate whatever it is we hear, speak, or read. When researchers scramble the signal in the movement-processing part of the brain, for example, people get tripped up using action words but have no problems with nouns. We come to understand the world through our bodies—by mentally tethering even the most abstract concepts to tangible things in the physical world.

—Luciana Gravotta

GRASPING AT STRAWS
COMPLEX IDEAS—AND SIMPLE WAYS WE THINK ABOUT THEM.

SERIOUSNESS is weight. People reviewing a job candidate’s résumé judge him to be more serious about the position when they are holding a heavy clipboard than when they are holding a light one. Think: “the gravity” vs. “to make light” of a situation.

MORALITY is cleanliness. People asked to remember something unethical they did are more likely to choose a cleansing wipe as a gift, while those reflecting on their ethical actions tend to choose a pencil. Think: “dirty deeds” vs. “a clean record.”

AFFECTION is warmth. Participants holding a hot beverage rate an imaginary person as being warmer than those holding something cold. Think: “warm smile” vs. “icy stare.”

SIMILARITY is proximity. People judge abstract concepts like justice and loyalty to be more similar when the words are shown closer together. Think: “not identical, but close” vs. “their views couldn’t be farther apart.”

TIME is length. When people are shown animated lines of different lengths, they tend to estimate that longer lines are on the screen for longer—even when they are actually on the screen for less time than shorter ones. Think: a “long” vs. a “short” vacation.

—LG