Understanding figurative and literal language: The graded salience hypothesis

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Abstract

In this study I test the prevalent claims among contemporary psycholinguists that understanding metaphor does not involve a special process, and that it is essentially identical to understanding literal language. Particularly, I examine the claims that figurative language does not involve processing the surface literal meaning (e.g., Gibbs 1984), and that its comprehension is not processing-intensive, because it does not involve a trigger (e.g., Keysar 1989). A critique, review and reinterpretation of a number of contemporary researches on literal and figurative language reveal that figurative and literal language use are governed by a general principle of salience: Salient meanings (e.g., conventional, frequent, familiar, enhanced by prior context) are processed first. Thus, for example, when the most salient meaning is intended (as in, e.g., the figurative meaning of conventional idioms), it is accessed directly, without having to process the less salient (literal) meaning first (Gibbs 1980). However, when a less rather than a more salient meaning is intended (e.g., the metaphoric meaning of novel metaphors, the literal meaning of conventional idioms, or a novel interpretation of a highly conventional literal expression) comprehension seems to involve a sequential process, upon which the more salient meaning is processed initially, before the intended meaning is derived (Blasko and Connine 1993; Gerrig 1989; Gibbs 1980; Gregory and Mergler 1990). Parallel processing is induced when more than one meaning is salient. For instance, conventional metaphors whose metaphoric and literal meanings are equally salient, are processed initially both literally and metaphorically (Blasko and Connine 1993). The direct/sequential process debate, then, can be reconciled: Different linguistic expressions (salient–less salient) may tap different (direct/parallel/sequential) processes.

1. Introduction

Contemporary research on figurative language has claimed that understanding metaphor is essentially identical to understanding literal