

Is literal language easier to understand? An introduction to non-literal language processing

Figurative language has been traditionally considered to be derived from and more complex than literal language. The standard view states that when people process a sentence, the first attempt is at extracting a literal meaning and only if this is found to be defective, the speaker proceeds to consider alternative interpretations related to metaphor, humor or irony (Aristotle 1978, 1998; Grice 1975; Searle 1993). An alternative approach, according to which figurative language uses the same linguistic and pragmatic resources than literal language, also has been proposed. Studies in the fields of cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics suggest that metaphor is not merely a figure of speech, but is a specific mental mapping that influences the way human beings think, reason, and imagine in everyday life (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff and Turner 1989; Lakoff 1993, Glucksberg 2001, 2003; among several others). According to this view, many concepts, especially the abstract ones, are structured and mentally represented in terms of metaphors (Gibbs 1996, 1999). However, despite the fact that the use of non-literal language is really widespread between adult speakers, there are also special populations that can deal with literal meanings but exhibit moderate or severe difficulties for the comprehension of figurative expressions. People diagnosed within the autistic spectrum are often associated to the second group. Evidence of this kind of dissociation is compatible with the idea that literal and non-literal meanings are processed differently, at least in some level. Findings of recent neuroimaging research suggest that the processing of literal, metaphoric and non-meaningful sentences relied on distinct neural mechanisms (Stringaris *et al* 2007; among others). This course aims at discussing topics related to the psycholinguistic processing of non-literal expressions and to the cognitive value of metaphors and other figurative language uses. Is literal language processing 'easier' than non-literal expressions? Are novel and conventional metaphors different in some significant way? Why are many concepts metaphorical? Which are the cognitive and evolutionary foundations of the distinction between literal and non-literal language? Our main goal is to summarize some of the most recent findings and state-of-the-art research on these topics. To this end, we will also provide the necessary background on language processing.

References¹

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¹ The quoted references don't necessarily represent the main literature for the course. Specific references will be indicated in advance.

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