

Steps of the mind over figurative meanings Behavioral and ERP investigations

Abstract

This project focuses on the temporal dynamics of pragmatic processing of figurative uses of language, such as metaphor and metonymy. Its main interest concerns the way the construction of communicated meaning unfolds in real time. For example, when one hears that a *certain lawyer is a shark*, do we first step into the representation of a shark with gills and sharp teeth and then into the one of a very aggressive lawyer, or do we directly consider the representation of the hostile lawyer? Likewise, when a person is called ‘the espresso’ (as in ‘*the espresso wants to pay*’), do we spend time contemplating an animacy violation or do we immediately make the reference to the client? Besides, how long does figurative interpretation last and how much does it cost when compared to non-figurative uses of language?

The last years have witnessed an increasing interest toward the behavioral and ERP correlates of metaphor and metonymy, but the literature lacks a consistent interpretation, and the debate is highly controversial. While some researchers conclude that figurative interpretation does not demand enhanced cognitive effort and temporal delay (e.g. Gibbs, 1994), some assume an initial semantic (literal) processing step (Coulson & van Petten, 2002). Others predict a more elaborate scenario, including extra processing costs as well as facilitatory benefits contingent on context (Noveck et al., 2001) and conceptual load (Rubio Fernández, 2007). Following this latter scenario, the starting point of the current project are two different theories on pragmatic interpretation: one positing a dual-step model, in line with the Gricean intuitions, and the other positing a context-dependent process, along Sperber & Wilson’ proposal.

Following the guidelines of an adversarial collaboration, this joint project brings together two young researchers who are open-to-dialogue while defending contrasting theoretical views. On the basis of previous experiments by the researchers involved (Bambini et al. 2008; Schumacher in press), the plan is to agree on new behavioral and ERP experimental paradigms that will be capable of charting the steps of figurative interpretation and that will be run on a cross-linguistic basis (Italian and German) over a period of two years. The final aim is to find new experimental evidence in favor of either of the two theoretical positions, thus contributing to formulating a consistent interpretation of the already available data. Such findings will ultimately have implications for general models of sentence processing.

Researchers involved

- **Valentina Bambini**: Laboratory of Linguistics, Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, Italy, v.bambini@sns.it
- **Petra B. Schumacher**: Department of English and Linguistics, Johannes Gutenberg-University, Mainz, Germany, petra.schumacher@uni-mainz.de
- Arbiter: **Ira Noveck**, L2C2, University of Lyon – CNRS, Lyon, France, ira.noveck@isc.cnrs.fr

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