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Reading and Interpreting Metaphor

Mimi Huang

Recent studies in cognitive processes have developed various approaches to explore how meaning is accessed, particularly in the initial stage of interpretation. The graded salience hypothesis (Giora, 2003), and the reordered access model (Duffy et al. 1988, Rayner et al. 1994), for instance, both predict the initial activation of a word's salient meaning (i.e. its encoded lexical meaning) regardless of context. In the subsequent interpretive stage, although various theories may differ, they tend to agree that the activated meaning can be (further) influenced by the contextual information. It is not always clear, however, as to how the initially activated meaning may sustain, fade away, or further interact with the contextual information. It is the aim of this paper to examine this issue through the study of metaphorical interpretation.

The analytical account proposed here features a key notion of 'salience', which refers to the highly accessible meaning(s) of an entity at a given time point of processing in a discourse. In metaphorical interpretation, if the metaphorical meaning (either encoded or not) becomes highly accessible after the initial processes, this meaning will be regarded as salient at that given time point, and is eligible for further interaction with contextual information in the discourse. In order to examine the development of such salient meaning, a study will be carried out on participants who read a number of short narratives that use metaphors to narrate a certain concepts. The study will examine whether an entity's metaphorical meaning is accessible to the participants at various stages of reading, and if such meaning sustains, and interacts with, the contextual information in the ongoing interpretive processes. Importantly, this study will also explore if a salient meaning produced locally in a discourse has the potential to achieve global salience in the participants' cognition.

References:

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