



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at [SciVerse ScienceDirect](http://SciVerse.Sciencedirect.com)

Language Sciences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/langsci

The real complexities of psycholinguistic research on metaphor



Raymond W. Gibbs Jr.*

University of California, Santa Cruz, Department of Psychology, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 December 2012

Received in revised form 2 March 2013

Accepted 5 March 2013

Keywords:

Metaphor

Cognitive linguistics

Psycholinguistics

ABSTRACT

Cognitive linguistic theories of metaphor propose several hypotheses about the cognitive reality of metaphoric thought and language that have been extensively studied by experimental psycholinguists. But the empirical findings on metaphor in psycholinguistics are quite complex. Although significant research supports some claims of cognitive linguistics, especially its advocacy of conceptual metaphor theory, there are also contradictory findings along with several alternative theories of metaphor not seriously considered by cognitive linguists. The present article outlines some of the complexities in psycholinguistic studies on metaphor, and suggests ways to account for this diversity of research findings. Both linguists and psychologists should not assume that a single theoretical model will account for the complex empirical findings, because all metaphoric behaviors depend on the people being studied, the specific aspects of metaphor language employed as stimuli, the explicit experimental task, and the methods used for assessing metaphoric comprehension. People's in-the-moment metaphoric behaviors emerge from the interaction of multiple factors as part of human self-organizing processes. This perspective has several implications for how linguists and psychologists conduct, and interpret the results of, their empirical studies.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Metaphor was an important focus of several articles in a recent special issue of "Language Sciences" devoted to "Converging data sources in cognitive linguistics." Cognitive linguistic studies on metaphor have been hugely influential within the multidisciplinary world of metaphor scholarship Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 1999. Cognitive linguistic studies on metaphor typically employ standard linguistic methods which focus on the tutored intuitions of individual scholars. Yet cognitive linguists sometimes look for empirical evidence from other fields, especially psycholinguistics, for complementary support of their theoretical claims about metaphoric thought and language, especially those related to "conceptual metaphor theory" (Gibbs, 1994; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; 1999). Kertesz et al. (2012) and Rakosi (2012; and also see Schwarz-Friesel, 2012) raise several questions about the psycholinguistic research on metaphor, noting problems with the contradictory findings, the logic behind several experimental studies, and the failure of some linguists and psycholinguists to consider alternative theoretical explanations of their empirical results. More seriously, psycholinguistic experimentation may, according to Rakosi (2012), be inherently flawed as a scientific enterprise, compared to more mature disciplines such as physics, because "the researcher cannot identify and rule out in advance all potential sources of error that can bias the nature of the experiment" (Rakosi, 2012, p. xx). These "flaws" in psycholinguistic experiments, which may be characteristic of many scientific fields, suggest that linguists, and others, should be cautious in their acceptance of certain empirical data on metaphor. Greater meta-scientific reflection is really required to better balance the changing landscape of psycholinguistic findings on metaphor with theory formation within the philosophy of science.

* Tel.: +1 831 459 4630.

E-mail address: gibbs@ucsc.edu

Kertesz et al. (2012) and Rakosi (2012) make many important points their essays. My argument, however, is that we should not assume that empirical psycholinguistics will somehow, someday, present a simple, unified vision of how people use and understand metaphoric language. Instead, both psychologists and linguists need to address the real complexities of metaphoric language use, and the empirical findings from both cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics. Doing so demands a new vision of scientific progress, most generally, and linguistic behavior, more specifically, that is sensitive to the diversity of metaphoric language experience.

I briefly describe three debates within psycholinguistics whose findings have direct bearing on extant cognitive linguistic claims on metaphor. Following this, I outline some of the real complexities associated with metaphoric language experience, and suggest an alternative meta-theoretical perspective, best illustrated by dynamical systems theory, that can help us make sense of the stabilities and variations in real-life metaphor use. My ultimate goal is to articulate a different way of thinking about converging data for cognitive linguistics, which should also change the way cognitive linguists conceive of their research methods and goals.

2. Three debates about metaphor

2.1. How much effort does it take to interpret a verbal metaphor?

A traditional belief about metaphor is that people should always require more effort to interpret metaphoric statements, such as “My job is a jail,” than to process roughly equivalent literal speech, such as “My job is bad” The motivation for this hypothesis stems from the assumption that metaphor is a deviant, ornamental use of language, compared to default literal meaning. This assumption implies that metaphoric meaning is only pragmatically inferred after some literal analysis of a statement has been interpreted and rejected (Grice, 1975; Searle, 1979).

But the results of many psycholinguistic studies examining the time it takes people to read metaphoric statements in discourse contexts show that metaphors can often be understood as quickly and in some cases more quickly than literal paraphrases (Gibbs, 1994 for a summary of these studies). Similar results have been reported in regard to how people interpret many other forms of figurative language, including idioms, proverbs, and different kinds of irony (Gibbs, 1994; Gibbs and Colston, 2012). These experimental findings suggest that context plays an immediate role in linguistic interpretation such that literal meanings are not obligatorily analyzed in a bottom-up manner before top-down contextual processes work to create metaphoric interpretations.

Many psycholinguists, and others, have responded that there are still instances in which metaphoric meanings are necessarily more difficult to interpret. For example, people may require additional effort to infer the meanings of novel metaphoric statements (e.g., “My marriage is a rocky roller coaster ride”) or to understand verbal metaphors whose conventional, salient meanings are more distant from these expressions’ metaphoric messages in context (Giora, 2002). Furthermore, people may, at the very least, momentarily activate the literal meanings of individual words when hearing or reading metaphors, without necessarily combining these context-free meanings into an overall literal meaning for the statement (Frisson and Pickering, 2001; Giora, 2002). Part of the difficulty in this debate concerns the very definition of “literal meaning” as researchers conceive of this concept in different ways, which affects how they construct experimental stimulus materials.

Yet another critical issue is that different experimental methods sometimes produce different empirical results (Gibbs and Colston, 2012). For instance, standard reading-time tasks, where people read a metaphoric statement on a computer screen and push a button once they understood what it means in context, often produce results suggesting there is no difference in the speed with which many metaphors and literal paraphrases are interpreted in context. However, when people are asked to make speeded judgments about the appropriateness of some metaphoric statement in context, or when they make a judgment about which of two contexts a metaphor best fits, the results sometimes indicate that verbal metaphors (including novel proverbial phrases) take longer to understand than non-metaphoric phrases (see Gibbs and Colston, 2012 for summaries of these findings).

One may reasonably conclude that verbal metaphors do not always take longer to process than literal paraphrases, given the many results showing fast comprehension of metaphoric statements in context. These findings clearly contradict traditional models of metaphoric, and figurative, language understanding which maintain that metaphor is always understood in a serial, two-step process. Still, the assorted findings on the speed with which metaphors are understood suggest a far more complex picture. Can scholars generally claim support for one theory, as opposed to another, based solely on their own experimental findings? Many critics of CMT, for example, do just this by setting up studies that offer empirical data which, presumably, differ from the predictions of CMT. Yet the specific findings one obtains in a processing time experiment, to take a typical paradigm for studying metaphor comprehension, depends on the people tested, the particular kinds of metaphors employed as stimuli, the experimental task, and, in some cases, the method employed for analyzing the data (e.g., cognitive neuroscience studies show different results depend on how brain images or brain recordings are analyzed, including, to take one instance, which part of the ERP wave is taken to be the true index of processing difficulty).

Finally, almost all the psycholinguistic studies on verbal metaphor understanding examine speeded comprehension in one form or another and this is assumed to reflect what people ordinarily do when hearing or reading metaphors for the first time. Yet people encounter metaphors in a variety of real-world situations where immediate speed is not necessarily part of the understanding task, such as in some conversational situations (e.g., debates where speakers have time to analyze what

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7533930>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7533930>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)