

Do pragmatic signals affect conventional metaphor understanding? A failed test of deliberate metaphor theory



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Abstract

Different signals, or tuning devices, in language, including certain discourse markers, comparatives, intensifiers and semantic meta-language, sometimes accompany verbal metaphors. Some scholars have claimed that these signals give evidence of “deliberate metaphor” use on the part of speakers and writers. So, understanding these particular uses of metaphor requires people to infer deliberation, which leads them to pay greater notice to these figures and enhances their understanding of the cross-domain mappings motivating metaphorical utterances. Many linguistic analyses argue that deliberate metaphor is a critical part of metaphor use, yet no empirical study has explored whether people really infer greater deliberation and cross-domain mappings when encountering so-called pragmatic signals of metaphor. The present study tested this idea and did not find evidence in support of the deliberate metaphor proposal. This conclusion raises serious doubts about the psychological validity of the idea that some metaphors are produced and understood as being deliberate.

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1. Introduction

Do pragmatic signals influence people’s understanding of verbal metaphor? This article reports the findings of a psychological study that explicitly investigated this question. Consider the following conversational exchange:

Mark and Larry were old friends who had not seen each other for several years.

Mark was telling Larry about his marriage.

Mark said, “We experienced many problems early on after we got married.”

“My wife and I always seemed to argue about even the littlest thing.”

Larry replied, “This must have been difficult for both of you.”

“Have things improved over time?”

Mark replied,

“We really have come a long way since the wedding.”

Most people readily understand Mark’s final reply to express the idea that his marriage has improved over time, thus providing an implicit “yes” to Larry’s question. One possibility is that people infer Mark’s intended meaning through the recruitment of a relevant conceptual metaphor, in this case ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS ARE PHYSICAL JOURNEYS.

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Under this view, listeners tacitly recognize that “come a long way” in this context reflects metaphorical meaning because of the cross-domain mapping between marriages and physical journeys. An enormous body of research from cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistics and cognitive neuroscience provides empirical support for this claim (Gibbs, 2011a; Gibbs and Colston, 2012).

Some scholars, however, have argued that phrases such as “come a long way” do not really convey metaphorical meaning because they are so conventional and familiar (Jackendoff and Aaron, 1991; Pinker, 2007; Steen, 2008). People may not necessarily be aware, consciously or otherwise, that the statement “We really have come a long way since the wedding” expresses metaphorical meaning in the above context. Many conventional metaphors may have once expressed metaphorical meanings that were widely understood as such by speakers and listeners. But over time, these conventional phrases, such as the “come a long way” phrase, have become literalized and are simply understood without any recruitment of conceptual metaphorical knowledge.

It is not clear, though, how this latter view of conventional metaphor explains the psycholinguistic findings showing that people typically recruit cross-domain knowledge when interpreting verbal metaphors, both conventional and novel (Gibbs, 2011a). Still, critics of conceptual metaphor theory have gone on to argue that certain use of conventional metaphor may be metaphorically awakened in particular discourse contexts. Imagine a slightly different version of the above conversational exchange between Larry and Mark:

Mark and Larry were old friends who had not seen each other for several years.
 Mark was telling Larry about his marriage.
 Mark said, “We experienced many problems early on after we got married.”
 “My wife and I always seemed to argue about even the littlest thing.”
 Larry replied, “This must have been difficult for both of you.”
 “Have things improved over time?”
 Mark replied, “Well,”
 “We really have come a long way since the wedding.”

Does the addition of the discourse marker “Well,” before Mark’s final reply, alter our understanding of what Mark aims to communicate? There is a long tradition of study on discourse markers, such as “well,” that has explored the pragmatic functions of discourse markers and other pragmatic signals in discourse (Blakemore, 2002; Fraser, 1990). In recent years, however, some metaphor scholars have claimed that speakers and writers sometimes explicitly signal their deliberate intent to use metaphor through various pragmatic signals (Goatly, 1997; Steen, 2008). For example, speakers may signal that they are using metaphor by including different discourse markers (e.g., “well,”), comparatives (e.g., “like”), intensifiers (e.g., “actually,” “quite,” or “utterly”), words that indicate specific kinds of meaning (e.g., “literally,” “metaphorically”), as well as phrases expressing meta-comments on the speaker’s communicative intentions (e.g., “so to speak,” “one might say,” “a figure of speech”). These various discourse devices may generally be understood as “pragmatic signals” that act to alert listeners and readers to the special, metaphorical nature of what people say. Under this view, in the above conversation between Larry and Mark, the use of words such as “well,” “like,” “literally” or “one might say,” may alert listeners to a speaker’s deliberate, even conscious, use of an otherwise clichéd, conventional metaphor (e.g., “come a long way”). People presumably pay closer attention to the underlying cross-domain mapping originally motivating the conventional metaphor when these pragmatic signals are present.

One immediate difficulty with the proposal that people sometimes use specific pragmatic signals to alert others to their use of metaphor is that these devices are not at all specific to metaphor (Gibbs, 2011b). Words and phrases such as “well” “like,” and “one might say” are found throughout spoken discourse, and not just restricted to use with metaphor. One study examined a large corpus of language for the presence of so-called “signals” or “tuning devices” for metaphor and found that these are employed with non-metaphorical language 60% of the time (Shutova and Teufel, 2010). These observations cast doubt on any one-to-one link between specific pragmatic signals and metaphorically used words or expressions.

2. Deliberate metaphor theory

The idea that speakers and writers sometimes explicitly signal their use of metaphor has become a major topic of debate, especially in regard to the possibility of “deliberate metaphor.” This theory suggests that some instances of verbal metaphor should be characterized as being “deliberate” in both their production and interpretation (Steen, 2008, 2011, 2013). Under this view,

“a metaphor is deliberately used when it is expressly meant to change the addressee’s perspective on the referent or topic that is the target of the metaphor, by making the addressee look at it from a different conceptual domain or space, which functions as a conceptual source. In such cases as ‘Juliet is the sun,’ this is precisely what is being asked of the addressee. The utterance expresses a blatant falsehood, while drawing attention to the new

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