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Back to the Future of Figurative Language

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Abstract

Figurative language research has addressed a number of key questions brought on by this particular form of communication. Some questions involve figurative language acquisition and development, especially for idioms, proverbs and other culturally variable and relatively fixed forms. Other questions surround how best to approach figurative language explanation—with a holistic account capable of handling all or many figurative forms, versus a more piecemeal approach with different accounts for different figurative forms or families. Perhaps the largest questions have involved how figurative language is comprehended and why it is used. These latter questions also inform one another—how people comprehend figurative language, and how the consequences of that comprehension, might motivate why people use it—in order to bring about those comprehension consequences.

I'll be discussing my recent work on this latter united pair of question, and the decades-long research effort to identify what is accomplished for speakers and hearers using figurative language, and how these things happen. This work also brings us to several new question facing the future of figurative language research such as what can emerging methods tell us about figurative language production and comprehension, are figurative forms exhausted, what broad meta-theoretical approach best suits our efforts going forward, and what role does human social interaction and other fundamental cognitive and social tendencies in us play in accounts of figurative language cognition and usage? Perhaps the biggest emerging questions involve embodiment and figurative language—how should we grapple with embodiment writ large in cognitive science, and embodied simulations more localized in language processing, when contemplating and studying figurative language? Some suggestion on best routes to take will be offered and discussed.