

Figurative language understanding: inferential issues

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Figurative language can be defined as a type of language that requires us to go beyond the literal meaning of the words or sentences in order to access the meaning being conveyed. Going beyond literal meaning requires mental processes that are of interest to psychologists. The issue is vast because each type of figure, metaphors, idioms, or irony, is assumed to call on specific mental processes. These mental processes are often characterized as inferences, which can be briefly defined as information generated by people to fill in information that is left implicit in *what is said*. My proposal is to distinguish two kinds of inferences that are particularly relevant for figurative language understanding: semantic inferences, which require the retrieval of general background knowledge from words and utterances, and pragmatic inferences, which are based on specific contextual information regarding intentions (informative and communicative). Notice that these pragmatic inferences could encompass inferences about others' mental states, better known as *theory of mind* in the literature. My main hypothesis is that the contribution of these types of inference differs as a function of language, literal *vs.* nonliteral, but also as a function of figures: specifically idioms, metaphors, and irony. Hence, understanding the non conventional metaphor "Steal the silent" obligatory requires a semantic inference in order to create a coherent new meaning, while understanding "He is bright" about an idiot can only be understood as ironic from the context. Because irony is a kind of non-literal language that has no identifiable semantic criteria, in the sense that the semantics of an ironic sentence and a non-ironic one are indistinguishable, it necessarily requires pragmatic inferences to be understood. In my talk, I will focus on several studies I have conducted on the understanding of idioms, metaphors and irony in this framework. Some of these studies have been realized with a developmental perspective, particularly relevant for understanding the concepts, skills or resources involved in these inferential processes.