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Do truth-endorsing adjectives act as cues to non-literality in the processing of modified metaphors? A psycholinguistic investigation of English 'actual', 'literal', and 'real'

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English adjectives like 'actual' and 'real' have been described, semantically, as reinforcers (Feist, 2009), that is, as linguistic expressions that reinforce the meaning of the head they modify. Unlike most reinforcers, however, 'actual' and 'real' have a clear semantic meaning of their own, one which relates to truth in spite of any grammatical meaning of reinforcement. Given that these reinforcers occur syntactically before the modified head, which is to say that in online comprehension they are processed before the actual carrier of referential meaning, how do such expressions impact the processing of non-literal language like metaphors? We address that question by introducing an experiment where we investigate the processing of metaphors of the sort *X is Y* in contexts where they are modified by the adjectives 'actual', 'literal', and 'real'. Crucially, we test whether these modifiers act as strictly semantic, and thus truth-endorsing, cues or as pragmatic cues that signal non-literal meaning.

We present a self-paced reading task where participants are asked to read different types of metaphoric statements, namely statements that contain modifiers that bias a figurative reading ("He is a wise owl ..."), statements that contain truth-endorsing reinforcers ("He is a literal owl ..."), and statements that contain modifiers that do not bias a figurative reading ("He is a barn owl ..."). We compare reading times at the critical region immediately following the modified noun, where comprehenders encounter a cue that signals the temporary nature of the description (e.g., "... sometimes in class"), thus rendering the figurative reading more sensible than the non-figurative one. Fillers prevent participants from learning that truth-endorsing adjectives consistently precede metaphoric statements (e.g., He is a real childminder sometimes after work; She is an actual volunteer sometimes for charity).

Pilot data shows that the truth-endorsing adjectives pattern with the metaphor-supporting adjectives, yielding reading times that are descriptively similar to those from metaphor-supporting adjectives while being descriptively faster than those from non-metaphoric ones, contra an account in which the semantic meaning of the reinforcers outweighs their pragmatic meaning during incremental processing. What these preliminary results seem to suggest is that a cue derived from a modifier whose semantics signal a message's literal truth can in fact ease the processing of non-literal, metaphoric language. We discuss these results in light of recent work on modification, interpretation of discourse particles, and incremental language processing.

References

- Feist, J. (2009). *Premodifier order in english nominal phrases: A semantic account*.
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