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Interpreting Figurative Meaning

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The book “Interpreting Figurative Meaning”, by Gibbs and Colston, examines very important, but still unsolved, questions related to the processing and interpretation of figurative language. The main aim of the book is to overview available evidence and propose a ‘theoretical umbrella’ that may account for the diversity of approaches to figurative language. Indeed, plenty of theories and experimental studies have contributed to create a complex picture of figurative language and a number of confusing conclusions. The book by Gibbs and Colston offers a comprehensive overview of the available theoretical approaches and empirical work – from psycholinguistics to neurolinguistics – and paves the way for a new approach to figurative language interpretation, namely, the “dynamical overview of language” (p. 339).

The book is intended for audiences interested in figurative language from both a theoretical and experimental point of view at all levels. The book is suitable for linguistics, cognitive science, and neuroscience undergraduates and postgraduates who are approaching the study of figurative language since it offers a comprehensive state of the art without going into excessive technical details. It is also suitable for more experienced theoretical linguists who are not familiar with cognitive approaches to figurative language and/or with experimental studies on figurative language.

The book is composed of seven chapters (including an Introduction) that guide the readers through a series of outstanding questions and possible new research lines. The introductory chapter sets up the core focus points of the book. The authors discuss how the cognitive effort required to interpret figurative meanings and the deriving cognitive effects have been discussed in previous literature. The chapter introduces all the main issues that the book tries to solve, outlining both the merits and shortcomings of the available studies on figurative language.

Chapter 2, entitled “Identifying figurative language”, addresses the specificity of figurative language, as opposed to non-figurative language. Experimental studies assume that figurative language is somehow ‘different’ from non-figurative language (often addressed as ‘literal’ language). Gibbs and Colston raise skeptical questions about the definitions of ‘figurative’ and ‘literal’ and the reliability of the assumptions behind this difference. The authors evaluate some attempts to define figurative *vs.* literal meanings within the cognitive approaches to figurative language and point out that this dichotomy is often based on a non-sufficient description of what is ‘literal’. Scholars often refer to several different notions when talking about ‘literal’ meaning (e.g., coded meaning, minimal meaning, semantic meaning, context-free meaning) and, thus, ‘literal’ often does not refer to the same conceptual entity across experiments leading to inaccurate generalizations about language comprehension (p. 22).

In Chapter 3, entitled “Models of figurative language comprehension”, the authors review the most important theoretical frameworks in which experimental data on figurative language comprehension have been framed. They start from traditional models, namely the Standard Pragmatic View (Grice 1989), as opposed to the direct access view (Gibbs 1994). As extensively discussed in the literature, both of these traditional models

deal with the early stages of processing and argue about whether the comprehension of figurative language passes through a mandatory step of literal meaning comprehension and rejection (Grice 1989) or is direct (Gibbs 1994). Both approaches are supported by a wide range of studies based on online measurements – including a wide number of very sensitive online studies such as Event-Related Potential (ERP) studies – that actually do not give a definite answer to the literal-first question (cf. Bambini & Resta 2012). New models, supported by behavioral findings, are also reviewed by the authors. Specifically, the Graded Salience Hypothesis (Giora 2002), Constraint Satisfaction View (Katz & Ferretti 2001), Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1995/2008; Carston 2002), Conceptual Blending Theory (Fauconnier & Turner 2002), Embodied Simulation Theory (Barsalou 2008), and the Dynamical Systems View (Gibbs 2006).

In Chapter 4, entitled “Interpreting specific figures of speech”, Gibbs and Colston sum up empirical research concerning the main instances of figurative meaning: metaphor, metonymy, idioms, irony, and proverbs. They suggest that it is unlikely that a single theory is able to account for the variety of existing figurative language uses. The authors address this issue by discussing two main points. The first regards the materials used in experimental protocols since the choice of specific stimuli may strongly affect results. If stimuli do not sufficiently represent real figurative language use, neither will the results. The second point concerns the tasks used in experimental protocols. One should keep in mind that the use of a specific task, or alternatively, of no task, affects the results – as confirmed by neurolinguistic evidence – and that some tasks, such as those used in psycholinguistics, do not help in understanding the real process of comprehension.

Chapter 5, entitled “Indeterminacy of figurative experience”, examines the communicative role of figurative language in depth and pays attention to how figurative language conveys complex social and pragmatic meanings. A separate section is devoted to each trope, namely metaphor, metonymy, idioms, proverbs, and irony. The detailed theoretical framework is enriched by the discussion of the main empirical findings regarding each specific trope, involving several experimental techniques (e.g. ERP, functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging – fMRI – and Eye Tracking). The discussion shows that simply differentiating between the efforts required by ‘figurative’ versus ‘non figurative’ language does not allow a full discrimination of the indeterminative nature of different figurative meanings and the way people experience them.

Chapter 6, entitled “Factors shaping figurative language understanding”, outlines the parameters that one had to take into account in the design of experiments about figurative language. The focus is on a multiplicity of factors that include, but are not limited to, experimental materials, which are often addressed as the fundamental element to be modulated while designing experiments. Specifically, the discussed factors are: people, language materials, understanding the goal/task, and empirical methods used to assess understanding. Within each factor, some possible modulations are reviewed and some others are suggested. For example, differences due to people are discussed in terms of age, language experience, gender, occupation, culture, political backgrounds, cognitive differences, bodily experience/bodily action, geographic origin, personality, social relationship and common ground. Detailed references to previous literature (if available) are provided.

Chapter 7, entitled “Broadening the scope of figurative language studies”, provides a final summary of research on figurative language and outlines the authors’ recommendations for future research. According to them, future studies should present a more precise vision of figurative language, while paying more attention to its communicative power, and its underlying cognitive architectures, without disregarding

real-contexts of use. Their proposal is summed up in five points: (1) using realistic speech and writing; (2) paying attention to experimental effects caused by multiple interacting forces; (3) seeking convergence between different levels of analysis; (4) analyzing temporal unfolding of figurative language across a variety of discourse types and knowledge domains; (5) situating research findings within the wider context of brains, bodies, and world interactions. A context-sensitive dynamical approach is claimed to capture the real differences in how people use and are affected by figurative language. The Dynamical Overview of Language, a theory not specifically concerned with figurative language, is considered relevant to a correct explanation of people's use and interpretation of figurative meanings, and is identifiable as the authors' proposal.

Gibbs and Colston present a comprehensive and detailed review of the available findings related to figurative language research. The book also highlights shortcomings, both in experimental designs and interpretation of data, and opens up several new research lines. To the best of our knowledge, the book can be considered one of the most complete reviews of figurative language. The authors have fully achieved the goals expressed in the introduction, namely to critically evaluate recent empirical work on figurative language, and to propose a theoretical umbrella that can accommodate data.

The book enters a research line widely addressed in the last thirty years and it is outstanding for its high quality. Summing up the main questions raised by the authors may allow for understanding the role of the book within previous literature on the topic. The first question addressed concerns the oversimplification of the label 'figurative language' versus 'literal language' and the assumptions behind this differentiation. 'Figurative language' refers to a highly complex set of phenomena based on different conceptual assumptions that are likely to evoke very different cognitive effects. Scholars must be aware of these issues before designing new studies. The second question concerns criticisms toward all aspects involved in figurative language comprehension, namely the materials, the people, the communicative context, and the reliability of the indicators of people's online processing when encountering figures of speech. Researchers are strongly encouraged to investigate the modulation of these factors.

Several merits of Gibbs and Colston's work should be acknowledged. First, they have made room for all approaches to figurative language, which allows the reader to have a comprehensive view of the questions at hand. Second, they have addressed quite complex experimental issues without overburdening the reader with excessive technical details. For example, ERP, fMRI, and Eye Tracking studies are discussed while avoiding excessive technical details that non-experts might not understand. The result is a book that helps experts recapitulate what was previously known about figurative language in the most complete way, and as such, beginners gain an extensive picture of the issue and, arguably, may be prepared to start their own research lines. At both levels, the book provides scholars with the tools to derive remarkable research questions.

Interestingly, the book sheds light on the complexity of studies on figurative language by paying attention to different kinds of tropes and a number of issues that are not often addressed in the literature (e.g. among others, the modulation of features concerning subjects). For this reason, Gibbs and Colston's book is a valuable addition to the existing series of books on figurative language, which has focused mainly on metaphor (e.g. Gibbs 2008). It represents a complete handbook for those who would like to address the issue of figurative language, from both a theoretical and experimental point of view, with references to the most outstanding problems. The need for a comprehensive account of figurative language, and of an 'umbrella' theory emerges as a necessary condition for reconciling the variety of available accounts and interpretations. Interestingly, Gibbs and

Colston propose a new vision of figurative language and point toward communicative effects and cognitive architectures as they are modulated in real-world contexts.

Overall, this well-organized and highly stimulating book is a major contribution to figurative language studies and paves the way for greater attention to context and ecologically valid materials and tasks in experimental research on figurative language, without disregarding a closer look at theory.

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