Conventionality, Relationality and Aptness in Figurative Language Processing

Figurative statements can be expressed either in comparison syntax, as similes (*An X is like a Y*), or in categorization syntax, as metaphors (*An X is a Y*). What determines preference for one form over the other? The Career of Metaphor account (Bowdle & Gentner, 2005; Gentner & Wolff, 1997) links this difference to language evolution. Novel figuratives are processed as comparisons, so they are preferred in simile form. In contrast, conventional figuratives can be expressed as metaphors (categorization form), because they have acquired a standard metaphoric abstraction. A second account (Aisenman, 1999) proposes that people prefer to express relational meanings as metaphors and attributional meanings as similes. A third account, Glucksberg and Keysar’s (1990) class inclusion theory of metaphor, claims that the preference for metaphor form depends on aptness, not conventionality (Glucksberg, 2003). We tested these accounts in three studies. In Experiment 1, conventionality and relationality significantly predicted preference for metaphor. In Experiment 2, we found that people provided relational interpretations for both forms. In Experiment 3 (underway) we test the claim that apt figuratives are preferred as metaphors, and ask how aptness relates to relationality. Our findings so far support the Career of Metaphor theory and Aisenman’s relationality hypothesis.