

Comprehension of Conventional and Idiomatic Metaphors: Russian Evidence from Self-Paced Reading Task

Cherepovskaya Natalia

The purpose of this study is to analyze how two types of metaphors are processed compared to the same expressions used in the literal meaning (e.g. *razvalivat'sja na časti*, 'fall to pieces', about a person and an object). One of the main ongoing debates in this field is whether metaphors are more difficult to process than literal expressions, in particular, whether to understand a metaphor, the speaker must process and reject the literal meaning of the expression first. So far, the experimental evidence is inconclusive, and the present paper sheds new light on this problem, presenting data from a self-paced reading experiment on Russian.

The first type of metaphors, termed conventional, is engrained in the speakers' minds on the conceptual level, but can be expressed in different ways (e.g. the metaphor 'body as a delicate object' stands behind the following expressions: *razvalivat'sja na časti*, 'fall to pieces', *čuvstvovat' sebja razbitym* 'feel slack', literally 'feel broken', *raskalyvat'sja* 'to split' (about one's head) etc.). The second type, idiomatic metaphors, is fixed both on the conceptual and on the linguistic level (e.g. *krepkij orešek* 'a hard nut to crack' about a person).

We designed 18 pairs of target sentences with three identical fragments in each pair: the crucial one, containing the metaphor or the same expression in the literal meaning, the one before that (to control for so-called spill-over effects in processing) and the one after that (to be able to analyze later stages of processing). 28 native speakers of Russian took part in our study.

For conventional metaphors and their literal pairs, there was no significant reading time difference for any fragment. These findings support the hypothesis that metaphors are processed as easily as literal expressions. However, the crucial fragments in the sentences with idiomatic metaphors were read faster than in the sentences with identical literal expressions. We can conclude that idiomatic and non-idiomatic metaphors require different processes to be understood; that idiomatic metaphors are stored in the mental lexicon as a whole, which facilitates their processing; and that their processing definitely does not involve the assessment of literal meaning.