

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

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INTRODUCTION

Ongoing debate: Are metaphors more difficult to process than literal expressions? Does the speaker need to process and reject the literal meaning to understand a metaphor? [Glucksberg 2003, Giora 2007].

My contribution: The experimental evidence is inconclusive so far. My paper sheds new light on this problem. I 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):

- **Conventional metaphors** are 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.).

- **Idiomatic metaphors** are fixed both on the conceptual and on the linguistic level (e.g. *krepkij orešek* 'a hard nut to crack' about a person).

EXPERIMENT

Participants: 28 native speakers of Russian (14 men, 14 women, average age 24).

Method: A moving window self-paced reading task.

Materials: 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 and the one after that.

Examples:

Sergeij Ivanovich / k uzhasu vseh rodstvennikov / razvalivalsja na časti, / prostav tri časa / pod prolivnym dozhdem.

Sergei Ivanovich / to the horror of all relatives / was falling to pieces / after standing for three hours / in the pouring rain.

Ljubimyj babuškin stul / k uzhasu vseh rodstvennikov / razvalivalsja na časti, / prostav tri časa / pod prolivnym dozhdem.

The grandma's favorite chair / to the horror of all relatives / was falling to pieces / after standing for three hours / in the pouring rain.

Sotrudniki policii / nikak ne mogli / raskusiť krepkij oreshok / kak ni staralis' / vybit' u nego / priznanie.

Policemen / absolutely could not / bite through a hard nut to crack / however hard they tried / to beat a confession.

Ryžie belochki / nikak ne mogli / raskusiť krepkij oreshok / kak ni staralis' / dobrat'sja do zernyška.

Red squirrels / absolutely could not / bite through a hard nut to crack / however hard they tried / to get to the seed.

RESULTS

1. For **conventional metaphors** and their literal pairs, there was no significant reading time difference for any fragment.

2. The crucial fragments in the sentences with **idiomatic metaphors** were read faster than in the sentences with identical literal expressions ($F = 5,062$; $p=0,025$).

Conclusions:

- These findings supports the hypothesis that metaphors are processed as easily as literal expressions.

- Idiomatic and non-idiomatic metaphors require different processes to be understood

- Idiomatic metaphors are stored in the mental lexicon as a whole, which facilitates their processing and their processing definitely does not involve the assessment of literal meaning.

- Average reading times for these fragments are presented in Fig.1 and Fig.2.

Fig. 1. Average reading times for the sentences in the conventional metaphor condition (ms)

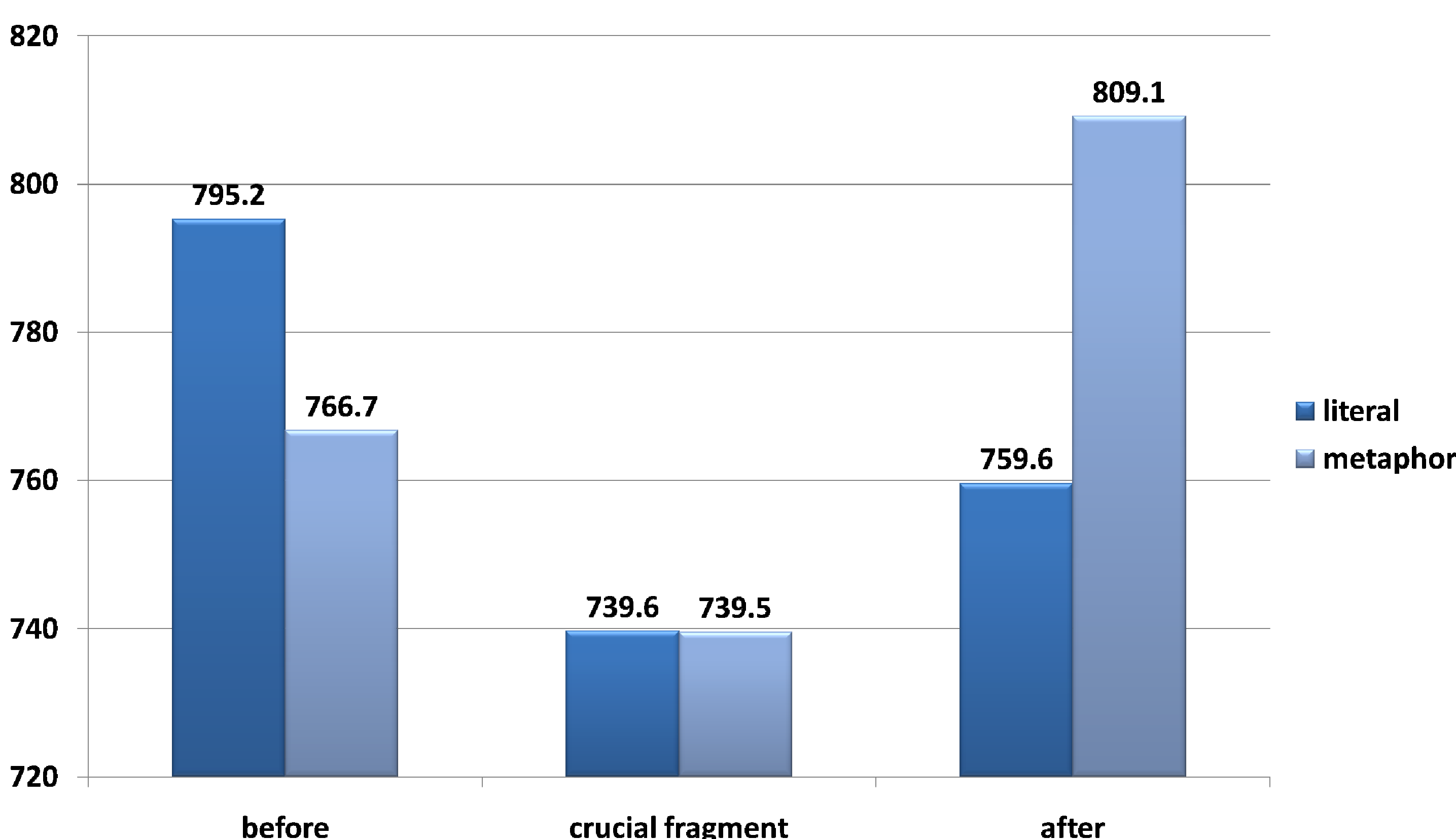
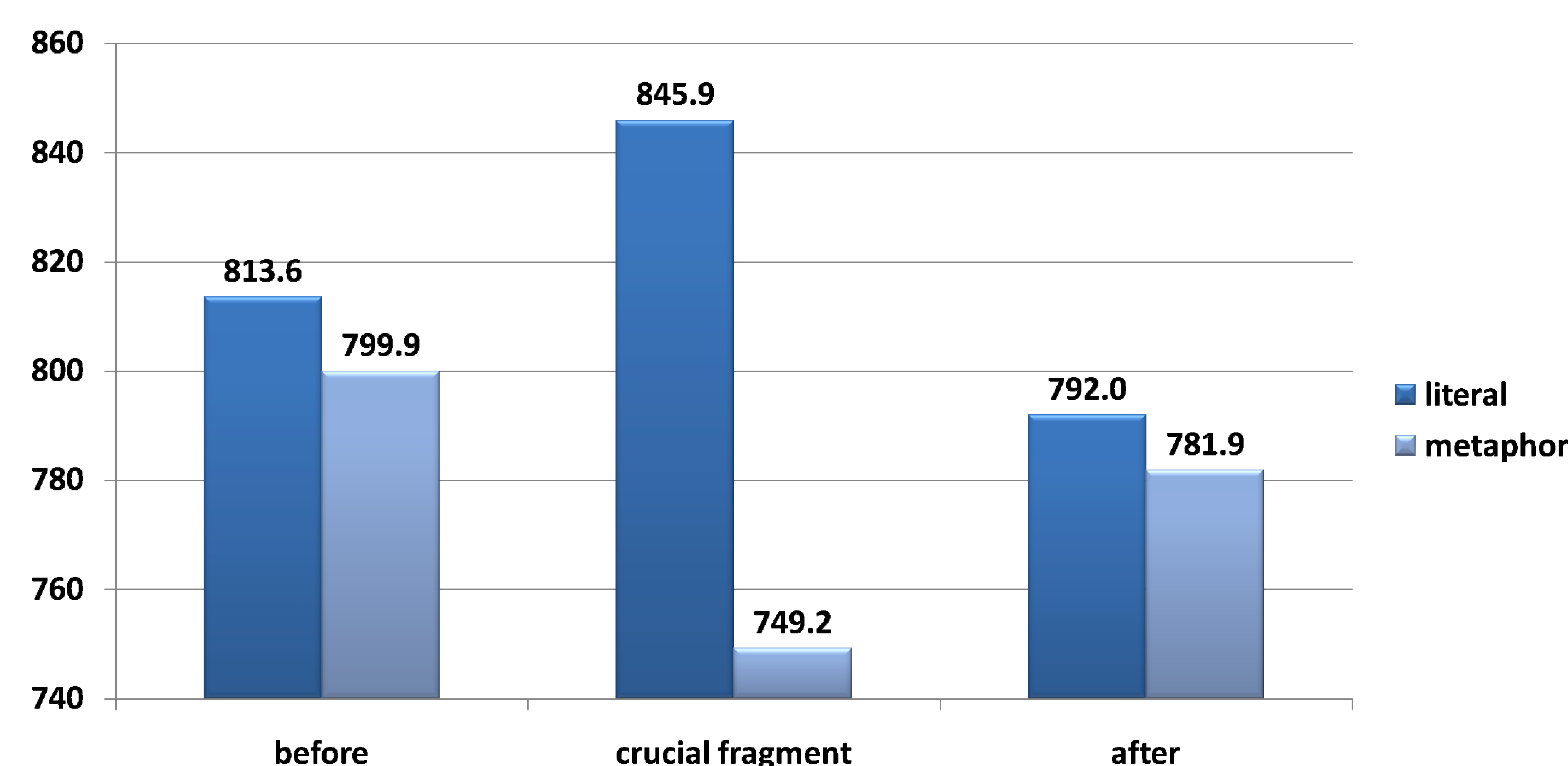


Fig. 2. Average reading times for the sentences in the idiomatic metaphor condition (ms)



REFERENCES

- Giora R. Is metaphor special? // Brain and language. 2007. Vol.100. P. 111-114.
- Glucksberg S. The psycholinguistics of metaphor // Trends in cognitive sciences. 2003. Vol. 7. No. 2. P 92-96.