

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to provide a unified account of the comprehension of novel and conventional figurative uses of language in everyday conversation. The first two chapters present a view of human cognition as having evolved towards increasing efficiency, characterised by the selection and processing of just those sources of information which are likely to yield cognitive benefits and incur limited costs in processing effort. Pursuing the pragmatic framework of Relevance Theory developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, I take this view of cognition to set the grounds for a relevance-driven, inferential approach to human communication. The rest of the thesis focuses on the role that selective accessing and inference play in the comprehension of a range of everyday figurative uses varying in their degree of familiarity or conventionality.

After reviewing existing cognitive approaches to metaphor in chapter three, I provide my own relevance-theoretic analysis in the next chapter. I argue that metaphor interpretation involves processing assumptions selected from the encyclopaedic entry of the concept encoded by the metaphor vehicle and the inferential construction of a new (broader) concept. In chapter five, I analyse the claim that the meaning of idioms is not completely arbitrary but partly related to the meaning of their parts. In chapter six, I provide an account of the interpretation of idioms (and idiom variants) which captures this relation. In these chapters, it is argued that the selective processing resulting from relevance-driven comprehension often leads to the construction of new concepts for novel metaphorical uses and the development of pragmatic routines for processing familiar figurative uses.