Book review

'Raymond W. Gibbs & Hebert Colston, *Interpreting figurative meaning*'

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Interpreting Figurative Meaning presents a critical review of theoretical

models of figurative language comprehension and interpretation as well as of

relevant empirical research in psycholinguistics and cognitive neuroscience. The

authors present current debates in the field and analyse some of the sources of

contradictory findings that characterise the vast empirical literature. Finally, by

considering some of the limitations of extant theoretical models and the inability

of empirical work to adjudicate between them, the authors propose a new,

alternative theoretical model based on the "dynamical systems theory" that takes

into account the multitude of factors that influence and shape figurative language

interpretation.

After a brief introduction to the book including an outline of its contents

(Chapter 1), the difficulty of drawing a clear-cut distinction between figurative

and literal language is addressed in Chapter 2, "Identifying figurative language".

That chapter also discusses how literal expressions are themselves characterised

by large variability, similarly to figurative expressions, and that the literal

paraphrases of figurative expressions represent inherently different conceptual

entities, making a direct comparison problematic.

Chapter 3 offers an exhaustive review of the different theoretical models

that account for figurative meaning comprehension and interpretation. Some of

these models describe and explain more generally language comprehension and

use in context, while others are specific to figurative language. Different models

are compared in a historical perspective and their merits and limitations

discussed. Crucially, the authors critically review relevant empirical evidence in support or against each model and claim.

The Standard Pragmatic Model and its specific implications for figurative language comprehension is the first to be discussed. In direct contrast to this traditional model, the Direct Access View is described and its criticisms are addressed. The chapter proceeds by reviewing the Graded Salience Hypothesis and the Underspecification View, which both suffer from a relatively modular, two-stage view of meaning interpretation. More recent models postulating parallel and interactive processes are then briefly reviewed, including the Constraint Satisfaction View and the Interpretation-based Processing model.

The authors then then move on to describing the conceptualisation of figurative language interpretation according to the Relevance Theory, which postulates no clear-cut difference between literal and figurative language uses. The Conceptual Blending Theory follows on, with its focus on the online construction of meaning. Finally, the Dynamical System View, the most recent of the models, posits the existence of multiple concurrent meanings (attractors) that compete with each other during figurative meaning interpretation.

Chapter 4 reviews models that account for the comprehension and interpretation of specific figures of speech, and presents a variety of topics and theoretical issues related to the experimental study of different tropes. With regards to metaphor, the processes of comparison and categorisation and the Career of Metaphor Theory are first discussed; then the conceptualisation of metaphor according to the Relevance Theory is presented, as well as the Latent Semantic Analysis, finally leading to embodiment and the Conceptual Metaphor Theory.

The authors briefly review metonymy, but dedicate more space to idioms, mostly focusing on the issue of decomposability; these are followed by proverbs. Finally, there is an interesting discussion of irony, contrasting it with metaphor, highlighting the key role of non-verbal communication in irony comprehension, and also mentioning internal, self-generated irony.

Chapter 5 deals with the fact that figurative expressions evoke a variety of cognitive and emotional experiences, which in turn evoke multiple meanings. This makes it impossible to identify and count the figurative meanings evoked by an expression. This discussion draws upon empirical findings and also theoretical frameworks such as the Relevance Theory, highlighting the crucial role of embodied simulation during figurative language comprehension. The authors also consider several rhetorical functions of figurative expressions such as persuasion in advertising and political discourse, the creation of intimacy between interlocutors or protagonists of a story, aesthetic effects such as pleasure in advertising and in poetry, and the specific suitability of figurative language to express emotional states as well as to evoke emotional reactions in the interlocutor. Irony in particular may be used to take distance in commenting about political events, in creating jocular interactions between friends, or to convey criticism; it also evokes more intense emotional reactions than literal statements.

Chapter 6 provides an analysis of the numerous variables that affect figurative meaning interpretation and create large variability across empirical studies. First of all, the text or discourse recipients themselves differ in age, language experience (e.g., second-language speakers), gender, occupation, culture, political background, cognitive skills, bodily experiences, personality,

and social relationships. Second, the materials used are often very heterogeneous, e.g., figurative expressions may be more or less conventional, frequently used, salient, coherent with the broader discourse, etc. Furthermore, different tasks and different methods are used to assess figurative language interpretation, leading to a variety of empirical findings that need to be carefully evaluated.

The book ends in Chapter 7 with a reminder of the main current issues in the empirical study of figurative meaning interpretation, some suggestions for future investigations, and a discussion of the important contributions of dynamical systems theories.

This exhaustive review and evaluation of theoretical and empirical work on figurative meaning interpretation capitalises on the authors' long-standing dedication to this topic, both at the theoretical and empirical level, and their comprehensive knowledge of the field's history. It represents an invaluable tool for scholars from a variety of disciplines, interested in figurative meaning, and meaning more generally. The clarity of explanation, the relatively straightforward language used, and the numerous examples given make the book accessible to a broad audience. Hence, philosophers, linguists, psycholinguists, psychologists, neuroscientists, computational modellers, sociologists and anthropologists, among others, may benefit from this book.