

Inferring Conceptual Metaphor entailments during verbal metaphor understanding

We systematically examined ordinary speakers' intuitions about whether individual metaphoric expressions implied certain inferences typically believed to arise from these statements' underlying conceptual metaphors. Conceptual metaphor theory posits that we understand the conventional expression "I was given new strength by her love", via the instantiation of a conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A NUTRIENT. This conceptual metaphor motivates the conventional expressions "I am starved for affection", with the entailment that the hungry person is the person who desires love. "She is sustained by love," which expresses the entailment that effects of nourishment are the consequences of love, and "She is love-starved," where the entailment expressed comes from the idea that hunger corresponds to the desire for love. We attempt to demonstrate why a certain entailment corresponds to a certain metaphorical expression, but not to others, although some entailments can be more closely related than others. The question we asked is if a person read "I was given new strength by his love," do they recognize that the various entailments associated with LOVE IS A NUTRIENT are implied. On the other hand, if a person read "I was given new strength by his love," do they see expressions such as "Their relationship is really going somewhere" or "They are making great progress in their marriage" as being unrelated, because these are motivated by a different conceptual metaphor. Thus, reference to the same target domain of LOVE RELATIONSHIPS but have a different source domain, giving rise to a different set of meaning entailments. We predicted that items with a consistent conceptual metaphor, linguistic metaphor and its entailment, for instance the expression "The relationship is sustained by his love" matched to "effects of nourishment are effects of love", as well as items which have metaphorical expressions with a common Source Domain, such as NUTRIENT in "Their relationship is starved for love" and "Their relationship is sustained by his love" will receive higher scores. Those items that contain metaphorical expressions with a different Source Domain will receive lower scores. For the Target Domain LOVE the Source Domain JOURNEY in "Their relationship is going nowhere", which conceptual metaphor is LOVE IS A JOURNEY, and the Source Domain NUTRIENT in "Their relationship is starved for love", which conceptual metaphor is LOVE IS A NUTRIENT. Statistical comparison of these three means using planned t-tests revealed that people gave higher agreement ratings to the consistent and related entailment questions than to the unrelated ones. These data suggest that people appear to recognize that a verbal metaphor implies certain meanings related to the underlying conceptual metaphor motivating the existence and continued use of that linguistic expression. However, understanding verbal metaphors does not appear to as directly imply entailments about the target that arise from different conceptual metaphors for that same topic.