

Dynamics of Metaphoricity in Spoken Discourse

Studying metaphors as they are used in spoken discourse not only reveals their multimodal character but also sheds light on the concept of metaphor itself (Cienki & Müller, to appear). It will be suggested that metaphoricity is an inherently dynamic and gradable property of concepts which may be activated to various degrees in a discourse. Rather than conceiving of metaphor as a static entity – be it a concept, a word or a gesture – we should think of it as a result of a cognitive procedure that may activate or create metaphors online during speaking (Müller 2007; Müller, to appear). This property of metaphors will be documented through cognitive-semantic and interactional micro-analyses of multi-modal metaphors as they are used in spoken discourse. More specifically, verbo-gestural metaphors in narrative interviews about love and childhood experiences of German speakers will be analyzed.

The analyses support the view that the more effort is put into communicating metaphoricity, the more activated metaphoricity is at a given moment in time. Effort is defined in terms of iconic, interactive, semantic and syntactic principles. (1) The iconic principle states that “more material is more meaning”; thus a metaphor expressed only in words is less activated than a metaphor expressed in words and gesture. According to (2) the interactive principle, the more visible a metaphor is made for the audience, the more activated it is. In this way, a large and extended metaphoric gesture, which is performed in the center of the visual attention, can not be overlooked by an interlocutor. (3) The syntactic and semantic principle states that a metaphoric gesture which is syntactically and semantically integrated into an ongoing verbal utterance indicates a high degree of activation of metaphoricity.

Following these principles, an increasing activation of metaphoricity of a specific concept in spoken discourse is empirically detectable through a gradual increase of communicative effort put into metaphoric words and gestures and an increasing interplay between these two modalities. Moreover, it is suggested that an increasing activation of metaphoricity can also be indicated by a stronger effort put into the manual modality itself, namely by an increasingly close interplay between single gestures in complex, multi-layered gesture sequences (Tag 2006).

To conclude: the analyses of multimodal metaphors reveal that metaphors are products of a cognitive process of constructing and activating metaphoricity online during language production. This view offers further support to the Applied Metaphor approach in that it underlines the necessity to distinguish between products and processes (Gibbs 1993) and to distinguish forms of metaphors at different levels of language (Steen 2006; Cameron 1999). Most generally, it supports Cameron’s (1999: 4) take on “Language use in general” as something that is to be “considered as a complex, dynamic system in which language resources (...) are employed in particular contexts to achieve interactional goals under particular processing demands.”

References:

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