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Context-Independent Influence of Explicit Markers on Proverb Interpretation

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Introduction

Understanding the role of explicit markers on proverb interpretation is important because proverbs are often preceded by explicit markers in order to disambiguate their intended meanings in discourse contexts. Recent research by Schwint, Ferretti, and Katz (2006) has investigated the influence of explicit markers (*Figuratively Speaking, Literally Speaking*) on the interpretation of familiar proverbs (*Lightening never strikes the same place twice*) embedded in discourse contexts that are biased toward the figurative or literal meanings of the proverbs. This research suggests that people have more difficulty interpreting the proverbs when they are presented in figurative contexts than literal contexts, and that the explicit markers influence the interpretation of the proverb very quickly; by the second word of the proverbs.

In the present research, we extend these results by 1) investigating the role of explicit markers on proverbs presented in isolation, and 2) by investigating their influence on both familiar and unfamiliar proverbs.

Method

Materials

Stimuli consisted of 50 familiar proverbs (*Lightening never strikes the same place twice*) and 50 unfamiliar proverbs (*Your neighbor's apples are the sweetest apples*). Proverbs were preceded by the explicit markers "Literally speaking" or "Figuratively speaking". All words were presented one at a time for a duration of 300 ms and an SOA of 500 ms.

EEG Recording Parameters

EEG was recorded from 64 electrodes from 32 participants. Impedances were kept below 5K Ω . ERPs were computed in epochs that extended 200 ms before the first word of the markers to 500 ms after the onset of the last word of the proverbs (i.e., -200 to 4500 ms).

Results and Discussion

The results show (see Figure 1) that for familiar proverbs the slow-wave potentials were more positive at frontal locations, and thus easier to comprehend, when preceded by the figurative marker than the literal marker. Alternatively, for unfamiliar proverbs the slow waves were more positive for the literal marker than figurative markers at frontal locations. These results show that participants had the least

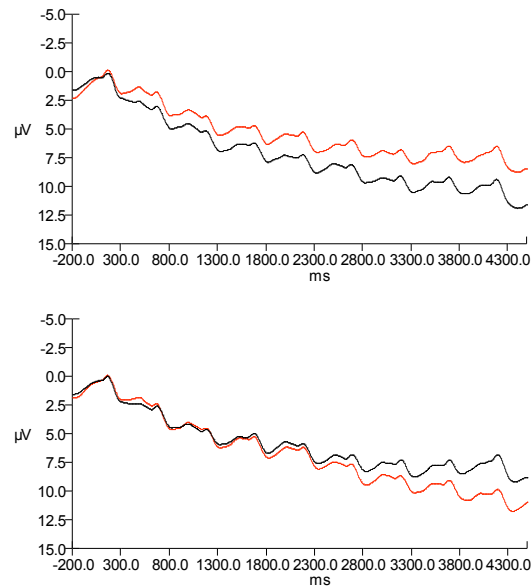


Figure 1: Results at a prefrontal location for Familiar (top) and Unfamiliar Proverbs (bottom). Black = Figuratively speaking and red = Literally speaking.

difficulty interpreting the proverbs when the explicit markers were consistent with the salient meaning of the proverbs. These results are consistent with constraint-based approaches to figurative language (e.g., Katz & Ferretti, 2001) and the gradient-saliency approach (Giora, 2003).

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