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Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 43(43)

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Publication Date

2021

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Peer reviewed

Pragmatics of Metaphor Revisited: Formalizing the Role of Typicality and Alternative Utterances in Metaphor Understanding

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Abstract

Experimental pragmatics tells us that a metaphor conveys salient features of a vehicle and that highly typical features tend to be salient. But can highly atypical features also be salient? When asking if John is loyal and hearing “John is a fox”, will the hearer conclude that John is disloyal because loyalty is saliently atypical for a fox? This prediction follows from our RSA-based model of metaphor understanding which relies on gradient salience. Our behavioral experiments corroborate the model’s predictions, providing evidence that high and low typicality are salient and result in high interpretation confidence and agreement, while average typicality is not salient and makes a metaphor confusing. Our model implements the idea that other features of a vehicle, along with possible alternative vehicles, influence metaphor interpretation. It produces a significantly better fit compared to an existing RSA model of metaphor understanding, supporting our predictions about the factors at play.