BOOK REVIEW

Figurative Language Comprehension: Social and Cultural Influences, Herbert L. Colston and Albert N. Katz (Eds.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2004, 360 pages, $89.95 (cloth).

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The study of figurative language is progressing. In the edited volume *Figurative Language Comprehension: Social and Cultural Influences*, Herbert Colston and Albert Katz have assembled a diverse collection of essays detailing the variety of ideas and methodologies scholars are incorporating in the study of nonliteral language comprehension. This area of research is still relatively young but holds much promise in the context of understanding the nature of language and cognitive processes. The study of figurative language presents researchers with a very difficult task, and does not easily afford an integrated theoretical approach. This problem is magnified by the particular focus of the volume: sociocultural influences. Language comprehension in an infinite variety of social and cultural contexts is an extraordinarily complex amalgam to examine empirically. This collection of work certainly conveys the excitement and difficulty of such a fledgling enterprise. Fortunately, the volume includes many excellent scholars summarizing fascinating work, and in doing so, sets the stage for current and future researchers by explicitly laying out the problems that must be addressed.

The volume is divided into four major sections: Sociocultural knowledge influences, sociocultural phenomenological influences, sociocultural processing issues, and new sociocultural influences. As the titles suggest, there is quite a bit of overlap across these sections, and the editors acknowledged the great difficulty they had in organizing the chapters. That said, I think the organization mostly succeeded and, while content in the chapters sometimes overlapped more than I would have preferred, the editors did a fine job of presenting a coherent and organized volume. I will discuss a couple of the chapters in some detail to provide some sense of the content. All of the chapters contribute to the quality of the volume but, for me, some stood out for reasons of personal interest.

In the introductory chapter, Colston does an excellent job putting the volume in context and preparing the reader for what lies ahead. He concludes this essay with

a brief outline of how the themes of the book represent ongoing issues facing nonliteral language researchers and he then suggests future directions for the field. Of particular importance to my mind is the issue of authenticity. In my studies of nonliteral language, I have been particularly concerned with examining language use in the wild, so to speak, and I have also created experimental materials from real speech. It has long been my contention (and part of my training) that to uncover how language works, we need to study language as it manifests in real environments. As Colston aptly points out, this cannot be done with the kind of control a good scientist needs to discover causal relationships between variables in the world. Therefore, we must impose experimental control that unfortunately undermines much of the richness in human communication. This is quite a dilemma with no clear resolution, but Colston and I agree that some compromise must be made if we are to appropriately analyze language use and come to understand anything important about how it all works.

The first chapter following the introductory essays is by Dale Barr and Boaz Keysar, and in it they present an overview of how egocentrism influences language use. They base this notion on their observation that speakers often violate mutual knowledge when using language. The mutual knowledge idea was first clearly articulated by Clark and Marshall (1981) and it refers to the set of knowledge that interlocutors knowingly share, and its effect on how conversationalists coordinate their talk. Barr and Keysar show that there are many contexts in which speakers do not use mutual knowledge considerations when using language, and instead act in a manner that is egocentric. People seem to be poor at judging the ambiguity of their own utterances with a bias toward overestimating others' understanding in favor of their own perspective and, as a result, do not consider others' knowledge when producing utterances that are actually ambiguous to a particular listener. Barr and Keysar attribute much of the empirical support for mutual knowledge to methodological flaws. According to them, researchers have confounded what people know (i.e., information known to the self) with shared information (i.e., known to be shared). When this is remedied, they claim, results end up supporting an egocentric perspective. In the chapter, the authors present the results of many studies showing this, and it provides for a fairly convincing and quite interesting read.

As Colston points out in his introductory chapter, both views have a piece of the truth, and we must disentangle the factors that contribute to people's differential reliance on common ground and egocentrism when using language. In recent work, Ray Gibbs and I have shown that people take on many extra cognitive costs to optimize relevance for listeners and this is in stark contrast to the predictions of an egocentrism approach (Gibbs & Bryant, 2005). In our analyses of naturalistic spontaneous interactions, we show that speakers consider the needs of listeners and these considerations manifest as, for example, longer response times to answer questions, increased use of discourse markers and other procedural speech phenomena when answering, as well as particular answers that violate egocentric ex-

pectations. Barr and Keysar explicitly state that in real conversations they would expect more egocentrism than in contrived laboratory contexts but this is not what we found. We need to explore what elements of the language use environment afford a particular processing strategy for effective communication with others; that is, when do people actually rely on mutual knowledge and when do simple egocentric strategies work well enough? Barr and Keysar of course admit that people keep track of others' knowledge but they present a compelling case that this is often neither necessary nor economical.

One of my favorite chapters is by Thomas Holtgraves. In a very succinct and compelling essay, Holtgraves outlines a variety of research examining inference processes involved with implicature understanding. Much of this discussion centers on the phenomenon of relevance violations, that is, violations of the Gricean maxim of relevance where, for example, a speaker replies to a question with a surface propositional form that appears to not address the query. According to Holtgraves, these violations invite interpretations that are often significantly affected by many variables outside the linguistic context, such as speaker status, cultural background, and convention. Holtgraves also draws our attention to the distinction between generalized implicatures (preferred, context-independent meanings) and particularized implicatures (only context-dependent). He notes that much of the work looking at how people understand implicatures has focused on the former but like Holtgraves, I find the latter variety much more interesting. I believe the question of what information is important when communicating through particularized implicatures to be among the most fascinating in psycholinguistic research.

Holtgraves also does a great job in summarizing some of the recent findings regarding cross-cultural differences in indirect language use. There are many interesting studies that have found differences in people's likelihood to produce and interpret utterances in an indirect way as a function of their cultural background. Although I am not convinced of proposals regarding collectivist versus individualistic cultures as an explanation for the effects described, these differences do seem to be related in important ways to cultural structure. My hunch is that more culturally specific factors are at work. By this Gricean account, the nature of these differences likely relates to what is considered a rational interaction in any given cultural context, so when some utterance is viewed as a violation (however that might be determined), people then generate interpretive inferences beyond the initial processing. This work is a good example of how cross-cultural researchers do not need to propose an entirely different theoretical framework to accommodate differences. By uncovering systematic differences between cultures in how particular linguistic phenomena manifest and then connecting these findings to particular aspects of the cultures, we can further our understanding of how these processes operate within cultures. Too often cultural differences are used to break down a paradigm, but instead the differences can illuminate the universals.

Besides the chapters discussed earlier, the volume has a number of interesting contributions. Both editors have their own chapters independent of introductory writings. Colston presents an overview of research on various contextual influences on figurative and indirect language use and does an excellent job making the case concerning the importance of continuing this work. Katz has a similar chapter covering the general themes of the volume that culminates in a defense of a constraint satisfaction approach. This approach represents a class of models of language comprehension that treat various factors (e.g., lexical, syntactic, conceptual, etc.) as sources of information that are probabilistically integrated by a system designed to disambiguate linguistic meaning. I believe this sort of approach holds some promise and the incorporation of this idea into higher levels of processing involved with social and cultural influences is interesting. Ray Gibbs and Christin Izett discuss irony as a persuasive communicative tool and make good use of social psychological research to argue their case. Psycholinguistic studies examining social cognition phenomena in language comprehension can incorporate many existing principles developed by social psychologists and I agree this is a healthy blend of ideas. Other chapters include discussions of gender differences in metaphor use, metaphor in sign language, nonliteral language and stereotypes, common ground and context, social factors in verbal irony understanding, and metaphors in popular sayings.

My only complaint about the volume is the conspicuous absence of a relevance–theoretic approach (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). Somehow, this group of scholars has overlooked one of the more influential meta-theories in communication and cognition. Many distinctions important for researchers in nonliteral language have been developed by relevance theorists such as the notion of procedural versus conceptual encoding (which could substantially refine a constraint satisfaction approach) and descriptive versus interpretative dimensions of utterances (which distinguish metaphor from irony, for example). The study of figurative language involves, at a fundamental level, the study of inferential processing. Few theoretical frameworks, if any, are as sophisticated as relevance theory for this inquiry, so this missing element was disappointing to me.

Overall, I enjoyed the volume very much and I recommend it to all researchers of figurative language and others working in related fields that explore language use and cognitive psychology. The readings are appropriate for scholars in any discipline, really. As all of us studying figurative language know, the subject matter is of general interest to many people. The volume will get you up to speed on current developments in nonliteral language research and the importance of elements outside of the linguistic context. The interaction between language, thought, and culture is a highly complex and dynamic one. The study of figurative language sets itself squarely in the middle of this complexity and has researchers navigating what is surely going to be a long road of empirical adventures.

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