Semantic Distance as a Predictor of Metaphor Selection

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Empirical research on metaphor has focused on the interpretation and comprehension of figurative language, while ignoring the production or encoding of metaphors. This research presents a basic model that attempts to explain the encoding of metaphors in expressive communication. A basic premise of the model is that similarity in connotative meaning, measured as proximity in semantic space, leads to metaphor selection. Two experiments that tested the premise are described here. The first utilized a semantic differential based on Osgood's work, while the second utilized a specially developed instrument. Results of both experiments supported the hypothesis.

Once thought of as a "mere" stylistic device that enhances the aesthetic value of speech and literature, metaphor is now recognized as a theoretically significant feature of language. A growing body of literature in psychology and cognitive science (for reviews, see Billow, 1977; Ortony, Reynolds, & Arter, 1978) has added to the already extensive analysis of metaphor by philosophers (e.g., Beardsley, 1962; Eco, 1984), rhetoricians (e.g., Osborne & Ehninger, 1962), linguists (e.g., Helmer, 1972; Campbell, 1975), and communication theorists (e.g., Bowers & Osborne, 1966; Frentz, 1974; Jordan, 1971, 1972; Reinsch, 1971; Siltanen, 1986). But although numerous studies have addressed the process of interpreting metaphors, only one (Koen, 1965) has examined

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the encoding or production process in adults (see Winner, McCarthy, & Gardner, 1980, for developmental research on children). Utilizing a sentence-completion task, Koen (1965) found that subjects were more likely to select a metaphorical word to complete a sentence when available cue words were associated with the metaphorical choice than when the cue words were associated with the literal choice. This research reveals the importance of context when creating a metaphor. We suggest that additional research must be conducted on the process of metaphor encoding, and we agree with Bolinger, who says, "A semantic theory must be able to account for the process of metaphorical invention" (Bolinger, 1965, p. 567). Thus, the purpose of the present study is to propose and test an initial model of metaphor selection.

This model makes the assumption that individuals select metaphors in order to accomplish a communicative goal. Camac and Glucksberg (1984) provided support for this assumption by comparing decision latencies for words from apt metaphors to decision latencies for associatively related words and for randomly paired words. Decisions were faster for associatively related words, and equal for words from metaphors and randomly paired words. These results suggest that in apt metaphors, listeners do not rely simply on similarities between tenor and vehicle. Instead, auditors must assume that an utterance is intended to be informative, and they select features that create a meaning for the metaphor. As Camac and Glucksberg note, "metaphors are used to convey information" (p. 453).

The proposed model of metaphor selection further assumes that metaphors are used to communicate a source’s attitude about a concept, identified as a tenor (Richards, 1936), by associating it with another concept, known as a vehicle (Richards, 1936). This theoretical assumption applies best to expressive communication, in which symbol choice is relatively spontaneous and un-self-conscious. It would seem to apply less well to instrumental communication, such as thoughtfully constructed persuasive messages. In the latter case, symbols may be chosen in part for their calculated impact on the receiver, and less for their expression of the source’s attitude.

Current models of metaphor focus almost exclusively on the interpretation of figurative language by receivers, but they address issues that are relevant to understanding the encoding process. Two important issues are the relationship between the tenor and the vehicle, and the cognitive processing of a receiver of a metaphor.

Several different models attempt to explain the relationship between the tenor and the vehicle in a metaphorical assertion (Tourangeau & Sternberg, 1981). Similarity models (e.g., the feature comparison hypothesis of Johnson & Malgady, 1979) posit that metaphors are deter-