Abstract

How realistic is it to assume that psychologists, linguists, philosophers and others may someday be able to construct a general theory of utterance interpretation? Over the past 50 years, scholars have uncovered a tremendous amount about the processes and products of human language understanding. We have proposed a huge assortment of theories to explain how very specific types of utterances may be interpreted (e.g., syntactically ambiguous expressions, figurative language, pragmatic implicatures), with some of us working hard to articulate more comprehensive theories that could be applicable to all aspects of utterance interpretation. Yet the empirical data reveals many complexities that, on the surface, make some doubt whether a general theory of utterance interpretation is a feasible possibility. This talk describes some of these complexities in the empirical literature, focusing on figurative language use. I go on to argue that language scholars must embrace the diverse ways that people use and understand utterances and suggest concrete steps that we all should take if we are to one day find a more general theory, one which is perhaps tied to how people engage in any intentional action.