

Relevance Theory and Conceptual Integration Theory: Deflationary Accounts of Metaphor

Relevance Theory proposes a “deflationary account of metaphor,” allegedly in contrast with Cognitive Linguistics (Sperber & Wilson, 2008). Within this approach, metaphor is an interesting phenomenon where the principle of relevance can be seen at work, but it does not constitute a separate cognitive operation with respect to the comprehension of literal utterances or other figurative expressions. Recent attempts to bridge the gap between the two approaches point at the possibility of considering metaphors as arising both from entrenched mappings across conceptual domains *and* communication in context (Tendahl & Gibbs, 2008; Tendahl, 2009; Wilson, 2011). This is compatible with recent work in Relevance Theory showing that associative links have an impact on the access to contextual assumptions and implications (Wilson & Carston, 2006, p. 429).

Cognitive Linguistics and Relevance Theory share fundamental points of agreement, such as an inferential approach to communication and the basic postulate that no literal processing of an utterance is needed to start comprehension. Based on these agreements, Vega Moreno (Moreno, 2007, p. 141) has proposed that a weaker version of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1993) can integrate with the relevance-theoretic approach to metaphor comprehension. However, the central postulate of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, *human thought is intrinsically metaphoric*, remains hardly compatible with a deflationary account of metaphor.

Part of the problem is relevant theorists’ view of Cognitive Linguistics as a unitary approach, and very especially their conflation of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Conceptual Integration Theory (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). Conceptual Integration Theory deals with mappings not between broad experiential domains, but between *mental spaces* (Fauconnier, 1985, 1997), ad-hoc conceptual packets built in on-line conceptualization and communication. Recent research on conceptual integration shows that some of the classic mappings postulated by Conceptual Metaphor Theory are in fact emergent from intricate conceptual integration networks, dependent on cultural factors and arising in communicative contexts (Fauconnier & Turner, 2008; Coulson & Pagán Cánovas, forthcoming). As one of the governing principles of conceptual integration, relevance is crucial in guiding the instantiation of these templates in contextually situated linguistic expressions. Speakers and listeners’ understanding of these utterances arises both from conceptual mappings based on entrenched templates and from on-line inferential processes.

Another part of the problem is that, until very recently, Conceptual Integration Theory has mainly dealt with individual examples and not so much with conceptual templates. This paper will examine some of the classic examples contrasting cognitive linguistic and relevance approaches to metaphor comprehension, such as the surgeon-butcher blend, time-space mappings, and weak implicatures in poetic effects. These examples will be analyzed as instantiations of different entrenched mappings based on usage, and not on conceptual projections across domains. These conceptual templates are built by conceptual integration and its interactions with multiple contexts in an ongoing process throughout human development and cultural learning, thus becoming entrenched cognitive habits. The instantiations of the generic patterns in particular utterances are always context dependent, and guided not only by relevance

but also by the other governing and optimality principles striving to keep the on-line mental simulation as integrated as possible, while maximizing its connections to its inputs and the distribution of meaning across the network of mappings.

Within this model, emergent meanings arise both from the activation and integration of pre-existing conceptual materials, and from on-line inferential processes relying on context and knowledge of communicative intentions. Literal and figurative cases, including both conventional and novel metaphoric expressions, are seen as landmarks in a continuum with no distinct categories. Relevance Theory can provide contextual constraints for Conceptual Integration Theory and thus increase the power of this approach to test interpretive hypotheses (Brandt & Brandt, 2005; Tendahl & Gibbs, 2008). The interplay of relevance with the other governing principles of conceptual integration can help answer one of the major questions in research on conceptual mappings, namely, how the content of any given mental space should be determined.

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