Gender Stereotypes and Figurative Language Comprehension[*]

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to show how and to what extent social and cultural cues influence figurative language understanding. In the first part of the paper, we argue that social-contextual knowledge is organized in "schemas" or stereotypes, which act as strong bias in speaker's meaning comprehension. Research in Experimental Pragmatics has shown that age, gender, race and occupation stereotypes are important contextual sources of information to interpret others' speech and provide an explanation of their behavior. In the second part of the paper, we focus on gender stereotypes and their influence on the comprehension of figurative language, to show how the social functions of figurative language are modulated by gender stereotypes. We provide then an explanation of gender stereotypical bias on figurative language in terms of possible outcomes in the social context.

I. Socio-cultural Influences on Figurative Language Understanding

Every time we play with words, we have a certain audience in mind. If we do not know very well our audience, or we run the risk to be misinterpreted, or we choose to stay anchored to the literal meaning of conventional expressions. Figurative language comprehension seems to require "something more" than the knowledge of conventional meaning of utterances. Non-literal language, such as simile, metaphor, metonymy, irony, etc., requires the understanding that what the speaker literally says is different from what she intends to convey, which concerns the pragmatic field. Traditionally, Pragmatics has been relegated to a secondary role by Chomskyan linguistics, interested in grammar as a context-free device of the Faculty of language. On this view, language is a cognitive mechanism totally autonomous and separate from other cognitive functions. By contrast, Modern Pragmatics has instead paid attention to contextual cues on the interpretation of the "speaker's meaning", i.e. the intention to mean something different from the conventional meaning of speaker's utterance. In this sense, Pragmatics has abandoned Chomskyan solipsistic view of the Faculty of language, and it has privileged the mentalistic aspect of intention comprehension over other belief structures which influence how we communicate to other people. More precisely, these beliefs structures concern social and cultural aspects of our everyday lives.

As Katz pointed out, «despite their seeming centrality, the history of linguistics and psycholinguistics has evolved to marginalize, and even ignore, social and cultural factors» (Katz, 2005, p. ix). However, recent trends in research in Pragmatics have been brought to scholars' attention a number of social and cultural cues to figurative language comprehension, such as gender, ethnicity, socio-geographic origin, personality traits, socio-economic status, occupation, social power, political background, relationships of familiarity or friendship, etc. (Colston & Katz, 2005). According to this view, social and cultural aspects strongly influence the way human beings communicate. Figurative language understanding is indeed a complex interactive system which «even at the earliest moments of production and comprehension, simultaneously evaluates and integrates knowledge of linguistic structure – that is, how language is used and the socio-cultural factors of relevance» (Katz, 2005, p. x). Therefore, figurative language, being so context-dependent, is the best "tribunal of experience" for testing the structures of social and cultural knowledge people own.

As Lippman wrote, we tend to use social stereotypes to categorize people in different social groups and compare them to better understand the social world (Lippman, 1922). Social stereotypes are identified according to what we consider the "same nature" people belonging to a social group share, i.e. the particular pattern of characteristics or traits perceived as similar in members of a certain group. This could be explained as a natural tendency to draw and stock information about others on the basis of their (perceived) similarities in order to predict their behavior and communicate with them. In this paper, we aim at showing how and to what extent, social stereotypes modulate linguistic behavior understanding.

In philosophy of language, stereotypes have been described as "negative" when a-critically applied to individual traits departing from the social stereotype and used then as a prejudice which leads to misunderstand others' behavior. For instance, the stereotype of race based on the color of the skin could become a prejudice when used to dichotomically divide people into categories of "good" (e.g. white skin) and "bad" (e.g. black skin) in order to judge their behavior. From this perspective, stereotypes could produce a "false consciousness" and become troublesome because the judgments entailed could lead to misleading caricatures of "out-groups". However, they could also be "positive" bias in case we use them as simple categories for understanding others' behavior. According to Gadamer (1960), for instance, the interpreter never begins the interpretation with a state of mind similar to a *tabula rasa*, but always with some expectations, some pre-judgement, from which a first interpretative project arises. A good interpreter must continually test her interpretation to make her hypotheses more adequate, changing them when they do not find confirmations. In a similar vein, in analytic philosophy, Davidson wrote that the interpreter begins the interpretation with some expectations expressed by a "prior theory" (Davidson, 1986). During the interpretative process, the prior theory is modified and adjusted to be adapted to the speaker's intentions. An interpreter should interpret the speaker's utterances according to holistic criteria: the meaning she gives to a single word depends on the meaning of the whole sentence where it is inserted, and the meaning of a single sentence can be understood only inside the language used by a linguistic community in a social context.

In social psychology, stereotypes are usually conceived as generalizations or descriptive simplified categories people use to classify social groups and their individual members. From a social-psychological perspective, stereotypes

could be considered cognitive shortcuts we use to reduce the complexity of our everyday social world: when activated, people are judged in terms of the group's standards (Dovidio, 1999). In other words, stereotypes would be energy-saving devices associated with an unintentional and unconscious process (Gilbert & Hixon, 1991; Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994). Indeed, they seem to be automatically activated, especially for some fundamental categories such as those of age, gender and race (Lepore & Brown, 1997).

The effect of activating stereotypes on interpretations of subsequent information in a stereotype-consistent direction is well documented. Stereotypes shape interpretations and influence how information is recalled: people do recall information better and more readily when it is consistent with a preexisting stereotype than when it is inconsistent with it (Bodenhausen, 1988). Stereotypes guide expectations, inferences and impressions when people are not motivated to inhibit them and require a greater effort to be overcome (Devine, 1989; Kunda, 1999). However, as far as they are cultural products, they can also be modified. Some studies have shown that the exposition to other cultures could change individual stereotypes (Pepitone, 1986), while other studies have demonstrated that individual stereotypes could get softer according to exposition times and conscious reflection on their content. Studies on immigrant populations have shown that the longer someone from another culture has lived in their adoptive home, the more she will come to hold the values of the new social context (Hewstone, 1996): for instance, Chung & Fisher (2001) study on Chinese immigrants in Canada shows that their consumption stereotypes vary according to the exposure to foreign consumption behaviors and values. Other studies on stereotype change and prejudice reduction have pointed out that a significant increase in knowledge corresponds to a significant decrease in negative stereotyping. However, Hill & Augoustinos (2001) showed that education programs aimed at reducing prejudices towards Aboriginal Australians, hardly changed the existents stereotypes, even thought they could entail a decrease in old-fashion racism, when applied in "real world" context. At any rate, cross-cultural research has proved to be fundamental to specify the shared contextual basis of social cognition which cannot be comprehended by the classic "automatic processes" theory.

II. Social Stereotypes and Non-literal Language

It has been argued that social stereotypes could be considered as cognitive structures (or *schemas*) which contain large networks of abstract information about traits, attributes and expected behaviors of members of a particular social group (Blumentritt & Heredia, 2005). These "social schemas" are a particular class of semantic associations: stereotypes are indeed composed by a set of semantically related concepts, which are frequently associated. A concept is more easily recalled by another concept when they are stereotypically related. As a wide literature testifies (see for a review Devine, 1989 and Dovidio, 1999), semantic priming, i.e. the exposure to a semantic stimulus influencing the response to a later semantic stimulus, is indeed the most important method used in the experimental study of stereotypes activation. Stereotype priming effect is usually activated by an implicit association test (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Nosek, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2005): each participant is presented with a list of semantic categories and some common trait features, and is asked to associate the target traits with the categories presented. The activation of stereotypes has been shown through participants' faster responses to traits stereotypically consistent with the prime category (e.g. White-anglosaxon) than to traits stereotypically inconsistent with the prime category (e.g. White-musical) (Dovidio, Evans, & Tyler, 1986).

This series of experimental studies have shown that language itself is a vehicle of social stereotypes, at the extent that it is difficult to imagine a natural language as free from stereotypes (Maas & Arcuri, 1996). Blumentritt and Heredia (2005) analyze how and to what extent stereotypes influence on behaviour, memory, social judgment and attitudes. In particular, they focus on the relationship between stereotypes and language processing and they suggest that «stereotypes can be construed as a special case of figurative language.» (Blumentritt & Heredia, 2005, p. 262) Because of their implicit structure of semantically related concepts, they are indeed important contextual cues to non-literal language understanding.

According to some researchers on social stereotypical categorization and non-literal language comprehension, social stereotypes – like speaker's gender, ethnic group and occupation – are found to be powerful bias on non-literal language interpretation. For instance, gender stereotypes are found to be a social constraint which comes into play very early in the process of sarcasm comprehension (Garnham, Oakhill, & Reynolds, 2002). Similar results have been found for ethnic (Heredia & Blumentritt, 2002) and occupation stereotypes (Pexman & Olineck, 2002a). In particular, Katz and Pexman

inserted speakers' occupation in the context of ironic utterance, both because «occupation is an indicator of the speaker's social status» and «also a variable that conveys the speaker's social knowledge» (Pexman, Ferretti, & Katz, 2000, p. 203).

Indeed, speaker's occupation has been shown to influence not only the interpretation of figurative meaning in general, but also the interpretation of ironic intention in particular (Katz & Lee 1993). The above mentioned studies on speaker's occupation, as a cue to either ironic or metaphoric interpretation (Katz & Pexman, 1997; Pexman, Ferretti, & Katz, 2000), Pexman and Olineck (2002a), suggest that «people shared beliefs about the linguistic tendencies of different social groups and that those beliefs influence perceived communicative intent» (Pexman & Olineck, 2002a, p. 270). Katz, Blasko and Kazmerski have forcefully shown that the emergence of sarcasm is produced by a character in the context making a statement incongruent with events in the story (Katz, Blasko, & Kazmerski 2004). Multiple sources of information are conjointly exploited when a listener attempts to understand an ironic utterance and also social-stereotypical categorization contributes to comprehension process. As it is argued in Pexman and Olineck (2002a), these results could be correlated with the specific traits of speaker occupation activated in irony interpretation or their perceived tendencies to be more humorous, to mock or criticize, to be less sincere and to have a lower occupation level, but also to be more polite and positive in case of ironic insults, the most spread form of sarcasm (Pexman & Olineck, 2002b). As we will see in the next section, occupation stereotypes influence metaphor interpretation as well.

III. The Role of Gender in Figurative Language Comprehension

Social factors such as occupation, race and gender stereotypes play an important role in understanding figures of speech, such as metaphor and irony. An example of the influence of occupation stereotypes is the following sentence: (1) "Be careful James, those *sharks* will tell you one thing today and tomorrow say something completely different", which represents a type of figurative language known as metaphoric reference (Gibbs, 1990; Onishi & Murphy, 1993; Stewart & Heredia, 2002). In this sentence, the term "sharks" is clearly not describing a marine animal: instead, it depicts the idea that *lawyers* are bad and cunning. It contrasts with predicate metaphor of the form "A is a B" (e.g., "Lawyers are sharks"), where metaphor consists of a topic

(e.g., "lawyers") and a vehicle (e.g. "sharks"). In sentences such as (1), the vehicle is usually explicit, and the listener must infer the topic from the previous context. Indeed, to understand the sentence (1), information relevant to the topic must come before the metaphoric reference, otherwise it would be difficult to make sense of the sentence. Studies by Gibbs (1990) and Onishi and Murphy (1993) have shown that reading times are longer for metaphor than literal understanding and that it is more difficult to understand metaphoric than literal referential descriptions, because multiple sources of information have to be integrated in the comprehension process. Therefore, comprehension of non-literal reference cannot be as effortless as understanding comparable literal reference (Onishi & Murphy, 1993).

Occupation stereotypes are anyway less powerful in biasing non-literal language when compared to gender stereotypes. In this sections, we focus on gender stereotypes which seem to be more "basic" and influential and to appear very early in child cognitive development (Bemdt & Heller, 1986). Gender stereotypes have been well documented in the literature on irony. For instance, according to Raymond Gibbs (2000), men are prone to make sarcastic remarks almost twice as often as women and are more likely to use sarcastic irony in conversation with friends. In particular, as Jorgensen (1996) points out, there are gender differences in emotional reactions to verbal irony: men were more likely than women to perceive humor in sarcastic irony; on the contrary, women were more likely than men to be offended by sarcastic utterances. Therefore, gender might be one of the more evident stereotypical differences related to verbal irony production and interpretation.

Unlike, gender differences have received very little research attention in the literature on teasing, with contrasting results. A contribution is given by Lampert's research (1996): taking irony as a form of teasing, he reports that men were more likely to tease than women. By contrast, Keltner et al. (2001) argue that there is no evidence of gender differences in the style or behavior of teasing. Katz, Piasecka, & Toplak (2001) have investigated whether gender, as a social category, could suggest a speaker's tendency to make ironic remarks. In the light of their data, men are perceived to be more sarcastic than women. Interestingly, speaker's gender and addressee's gender were processed exactly when participants (adults and children) read the last word in the sarcastic comment (Pexman et al., 2000), suggesting that participants needed to integrate speaker's gender to fully understand it.

Another salient trait might be captured by conversational indirectness. Holtgraves (2005) found gender differences in production and comprehension of indirect requests. An example of this form of implicit speech is the following sentence: "It's cold in here", said as a request for someone to close the door. He also ideated and validated the "Conversational Indirectness Scale" (CIS) «to measure the extent to which individuals differ in their tendencies to express themselves indirectly and understand indirect meanings» (Pexman, 2005, p. 221). The participants rated their own tendencies to speak sarcastically in general and in specific contexts. According to the results, there is a significant gender difference: male participants gave higher self-reports of sarcasm use than female participants.

Gender differences emerge also in the use of asyndeton. Asyndeton is a form of indirect speech in which the speaker uses a minimal scheme, where conjunctions are omitted, to change the rhythm of the utterance and to imply a great deal more than what is said. An example of this kind of utterance is the following: "I go, I work, I leave". According to the data collected from six experiments conducted by Colston and Lusch (2004), asyndeton is considered a more male-like than female-like form of communication. In particular, men use it as often as direct negative commentary, whereas women use it less often than direct negative remarks. Both men and women reported that asyndeton poses more of a risk for misinterpretation than literal remarks do. Perhaps, men use asyndeton more often than women because its pragmatic functions (to be unconventional and to be humorous) particularly suit men's discourse aims and because the risk of misunderstanding inherent in asyndeton appeals to men's greater riskiness.

IV. Making Sense of Gender Stereotypes in Language Use

Gender stereotypes seem to be one of the most influential cues on figurative language comprehension. As previously reported, gender differences have been found especially in the use and interpretation of irony and sarcasm. Colston and Lee (2004) tried to evaluate whether and why gender differences would be found in people's use of verbal irony, and found that this rhetorical figure is considered a more male-like than female-like form of communication by both men and women. To explain this result, they hypothesized that verbal irony, being an indirect form of language, might entail a greater risk of misinterpretation compared with more direct forms of speech. According to

this hypothesis, male speakers would be more prone to take this risk than female speakers, because men are generally more risky than women in a variety of social activities: a "better-recognized" social status could give them a greater willingness to risk (Byrnes, Miller, & Schafer, 1999; Wiederman, 1997).

The social effect of figurative language could explain why people use this more "expensive" and risky way of communicating. Indeed, other studies showed that verbal irony enables the speakers to perform a variety of pragmatic functions (Roberts & Kreuz, 1995; Lee & Katz, 1998), including to be humorous, to express surprise or mastery over some topic or issue, to diminish or to enhance criticism, to point out a deviance from expectations, to display negative emotions. It is also well documented that ironic comments is thought to be rude, to de-emphasize and to insult to a greater extent than literal comments (Colston & Lee, 2000, and 2004).

The social functions of verbal irony are more employed by female than male participants. On the contrary, the functions of irony used to enhance negativity and be humorous are equally employed by male and female participants. There are gender differences, for instance, in how people attribute blame for a failure. In general, men are more prone to blame the situation or their addressee for failures. Instead, women are more likely to make personal attributions for failures: this could be the reason why women are slightly less likely to use verbal irony. One hypothesis of this behaviour suggests that women usually tend to avoid ways of speaking which present higher risk of misunderstanding and to be slightly less likely to use verbal irony, because a quite common female behaviour is to blame themselves for a misunderstanding in a conversational exchange. As verbal irony may be considered a more aggressive form of talking than literal commentary; more critical and condemning than literally negative remarks, they would try to avoid as much as possible a social negative feedback.

According to Lampert (1996), male and female subjects also have different reasons for using self-direct humor. Men tend to use sarcasm when it would decrease vulnerability, while women use sarcasm to increase social vulnerability and promote intimacy. In sarcasm ratings for ironic compliments, women tend to perceive this kind of compliment as more sarcastic than men. To explain this result, a hypothesis might be that women rate ironic compliments as less polite than men do, because sarcasm would have a negative connotation in this sense (Dews & Winner, 1995; Pexman & Olineck, 2002a).

These findings tell us something about why and whether a social and cultural cue, such as gender, has an effect on non-literal language use. Figurative language, more than literal one, is human beings' way to express what is "unsaid" and implicit in communication. This "unsaid" depends on a background of tacitly shared social conventions and everyday practices, which allow people to understand the implicit part of their communicative exchanges. This tacitly shared background is shaped by more fundamental social and cultural phenomena related to social stereotyping and basic cues such as gender. The ways non-literal communication is influenced by gender stereotypes reveal this tacitly shared background of human communities, complete with their subtle differences.

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