

Psycholinguistics approaches to figuration

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Figurative language provides a testing bed for language processing in general, since it requires speakers to utilise a sophisticated range of skills. These include linguistic, pragmatic and cognitive skills such as disambiguation of word meanings, suppression of irrelevant meanings, inferencing from context and identification of speaker intention, as well as the application of a detailed set of schemas and cultural knowledge to arrive at the correct outcome. The toolkit of psycholinguistics - where precise measurements of behavioural responses are used to build an understanding of underlying cognitive processes - can be used to enrich our understanding of this complex topic. In this talk I will introduce some of the key methods, such as eye-tracking, and discuss how they can be used to explore a range of interesting and challenging questions. These include, how different kinds of figurative language are understood and processed; how speakers from different backgrounds tackle figurative language; how competing linguistic information is utilised in a dynamic way during online language use; and how these processes can break down in certain circumstances. I will draw on a range of innovative example studies from the literature to demonstrate the ways in which all figurative language researchers could potentially benefit from psycholinguistic techniques, and present some guidance for those wishing to take their first steps in this direction.