Cuing multiple meanings by marking

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Language is ambiguous but the ambiguity need not always be resolved to arrive at a single intended meaning. In order to help addressees understand additional, meanings intended simultaneously, cooperative speakers may cue the less dominant or less salient of the meanings (The Low-Salience Marking Hypothesis, Givoni 2011). Contrary to salient meanings, meanings low on salience are less familiar, less frequent, less prototypical, or less conventional and may therefore be lost in comprehension (The Graded Salience Hypothesis, see Giora 1997, 2003). Consider examples 1-2 (relevant utterances underlined, marking in bold, and intended meanings, in italics, for convenience). In example 1, marking the idiom “blew up in their face” alerts addressees to the literal, compositional use which, as the speaker points out, is not the default metaphoric one. In fact, it is the interplay between the salient figurative meaning, already activated on encountering the idiom, and the less salient interpretation, made explicit via marking, that gets across the speaker’s message of ‘a plan gone wrong’ because of ‘bombs’. In example 2, while marking both senses of the word “spoiled”, the writer aims to highlight the polysemous nature of the word. If the reader activates only the salient meaning, s/he will miss the force of the argument – the connection between ‘being ruined’ and ‘spoils of war’ leading to ‘overindulgence and abuse of power’.

1. The Israelis, in their narrative, went as far as they could with Rabin and Barak and Olmert, and each time the Israelis tried, it blew up in their face, double entendre, not as a metaphor, and for years people couldn’t walk in the street and sit in a café without being blown up, and they’re traumatized. [Alper 2015, S.G. translation from Hebrew]

2. But this is not a democracy; it is a nation and a nation’s people spoiled (in both senses of the word) by a separate and unequal domestic regime and an occupation that has become a 43 year-old violent apartheid. [Schaeffer 2010]

This talk will address the notion of such ‘meaning markers’ and will offer additional support attesting to their role as ‘meaning shifters’. Givoni, Giora and Bergerbest (2013) showed that cues, termed “low-salience markers”, are used to draw addressees’ attention to meanings low on salience. In two off-line experiments participants were asked to rate the proximity of the interpretation of polysemous sentences to those offered at a scale's ends. Items were identical, except for the inclusion or exclusion of a marker. Results show that items including a marker drew attention to the less salient meaning, regardless of non/literalness or the marker’s semantics.

However, two alternative explanations for the results are possible. (1) The position of the marker could be prompting the additional meaning, not the marker itself (see also: Katz & Ferretti 2003; Traugott 1995; Van de Voort & Vonk 1995). (2) Any addition following or modifying a polysemous concept may give rise to multiple meanings, as the addition calls for some inference. Given these two caveats, our paper will present two experiments that address these issues. In Experiment 1, participants have been presented with mini-sentences either followed or preceded by markers. Experiment 2 follows the procedure of Givoni et al. (2013), only this time participants have been presented with mini-sentences followed either by a marker or a fill-in marker (Givoni, Bergerbest & Giora 2016). This latter experimental design also enables an online comparison not allowed in a marker vs. no-marker design, due to the orthographic and morphological difference between such conditions. A fill-in marker enables us to thoroughly equate polysemous sentence-probe interval as well as a smooth reading without adding biasing information. Design for an online lexical decision task tapping automatic responses to such markers will be presented (Experiment 3).

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References

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