On the validity of empirical evidence supporting the graded salience hypothesis

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In my talk, I want to point out a few potential weaknesses in Rachel Giora’s empirical support of the graded salience hypothesis. The points I want to make concern the choice of testing material, on the one hand, and the general theoretical underpinnings, on the other.

In a number of articles, Rachel Giora has offered psycholinguistic evidence for the graded salience hypothesis, according to which the distinction of salient/non-salient meaning plays a decisive role in the interpretation process. More specifically, Giora argues that salience is a matter of degree, thus predicting that experimental results for highly, less and non-salient, say, metaphorical meanings should differ. What is more, Giora assumes that cases of metaphor and idiom should differ in how salient their respective literal (compositional) and non-literal (non-compositional) meanings are. Looking at the experimental results regarding these questions, her assumptions seem to be born out.

However, there are a few critical points, two of which are given below, that can be made, which call into question the validity of these results. Thus, looking at some of the material Giora uses in her experiments, alternative explanations for the results are possible. For example, the fact that subjects had more difficulty interpreting the last sentence in (1) than in (2) may not (solely) be due to the non-salient nature of the non-literal reading intended in (1), but might result from the relative difficulty of resolving the anaphoric relations in the two examples.

(1) a. Mary: My husband is terribly annoyed by his new boss. Every day he comes home even more depressed than he had been the day before. Somehow, he cannot adjust himself to the new situation.

b. Jane: Their bone density is not like ours.

(2) Our granny had a fracture just from falling off a chair and was rushed to the hospital. I told my sister that I never had fractions falling off a chair. She explained to me about elders. She said: Their bone density is not like ours.

Another problem concerns Giora’s classification of cases of idiom and metaphor. It is not clear on which basis she differentiates the one from the other. Rather, comparing examples for metaphor (e.g. break ones head) with those for idiom (e.g. on one leg as in He told me the whole story on one leg.) leads one to doubt whether what has been classified as metaphor might not just as well have been classified as an idiom and vice versa, since no clear definitions for the two concepts are offered. In light of this shortcoming, the different results Giora achieves for idioms and metaphors decrease somewhat in their significance.

The point I want to make is not that the graded salience hypothesis as such is flawed. Rather, from a theoretical view point it seems that the empirical evidence used to support this hypothesis is not as robust as it, possibly, would be, if a few more theoretical distinctions and considerations were taken into account.

1Taken from Giora, Rachel (2002) ‘Literal vs. figurative language: Different or equal?’ Journal of Pragmatics 34, pp. 487–506; bold font my emphasis.