

## Non-actual 'actual': Expectations for upcoming figurative language arise from cues about message truth

Broadly, language comprehension requires comprehenders to take the surface form of an utterance and recover the speaker's intended message. Comprehenders must decide, among other things, whether an utterance corresponds to actual literal truth or whether the intended meaning is conveyed figuratively (Grice 1979; for less dichotomous approaches see Gibbs 1994; Giora 1997).

Here we ask how a sentence-internal cue impacts comprehenders' resolution of ambiguity between a meaning derivable from a straightforward composition of the sentence's semantic elements and an interpretation requiring inference. The expressions we target are ones that, semantically at least, signal the speaker's commitment to the truth of the current proposition (a commitment expected of speakers in general across contexts). We test comprehenders' interpretation of metaphoric descriptions following expressions like *real/literal/actual*: Do these adjectives support literal or non-literal interpretations? The results highlight the —perhaps counter-intuitive— role that cues to message truth can play in helping listeners move beyond literal truth, possibly via speaker emphasis on the aptness of the metaphor.

**Methods:** Our study compares descriptions across three conditions.

- |   |                       |
|---|-----------------------|
| (1) <i>He is a <u>deceitful</u> weasel...</i> | [metaphor-supporting] |
| (2) <i>He is a <u>real</u> weasel...</i>      | [truth-endorsing]     |
| (3) <i>He is a <u>furry</u> weasel...</i>     | [non-metaphoric]      |

An adverbial signals the temporary nature of the description (e.g., ... *sometimes at work*), rendering the metaphor-supporting condition more sensible than the non-metaphoric condition. Fillers prevent participants from learning that truth-endorsing adjectives consistently precede metaphoric descriptions (e.g., *He is a real childminder sometimes after work*; *She is an actual volunteer sometimes for charity*). We report self-paced reading data (Drummond 2013), with two additional experiments underway: one to establish metaphor conventionality (e.g., "Does *He is a deceitful weasel* describe a person or an animal?") and another to replicate the reading time study with new items and to test whether the observed effects vary with conventionality. Results below model the reading times at the disambiguating adverbial (*sometimes*) using a linear mixed regression (N=23 participants).

**Results:** The truth-endorsing adjectives pattern with the metaphor-supporting adjectives, yielding reading times that are statistically indistinguishable from metaphor-supporting adjectives ( $p=0.86$ ) and reliably faster than non-metaphoric ones ( $p=0.03$ ), contra an account in which truth-endorsing adjectives' semantics provide the primary meaning during incremental processing. As such, a cue whose semantics signal a message's literal truth is shown to ease non-literal processing. The results attest to comprehenders' usage-driven awareness of the multiple roles of *real/literal/actual*, an understudied adjective class (cf. analysis of privative adjectives about falsehood, e.g., *fake/counterfeit*; Partee 2010).

Drummond, A. (2013). Ibx farm. Online server: <http://spellout.net/ibexfarm>.

Gibbs, R. W. (1994). *The Poetics of Mind*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Giora, R. (1997). Understanding figurative and literal language: The graded salience hypothesis. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 8(3), 183-206.

Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Coleman & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and Semantics*, volume 3, pp. 41-58. New York: Academic Press.

Partee, B. H. (2010). Privative adjectives: Subjective plus coercion. In R. Bäuele, U. Reyle & T. E. Zimmermann (Eds.), *Presuppositions and discourse: Essays offered to Hans Kamp*, pp. 273– 285. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing.