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Journal of Pragmatics 36 (2004) 2185–2189

journal of
PRAGMATICS

www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

Book review

R. Giora, *On Our Mind: Salience, Context and Figurative Language*, Oxford University Press, 2003, 259 pp., hardback.

On Our Mind is the welcome and impressive culmination of two decades of work by Rachel Giora and her colleagues. The book proposes a model of linguistic behaviour based on the notion that ‘meaning salience reigns supreme’ (p. 8). According to Giora, the senses of words and fixed expressions are hierarchically organised in our mental lexicon according to their degree of salience: salient meanings are more accessible than less or non-salient meanings. If we take the English noun *club* as an example, the meaning of ‘association/organisation’ is probably more salient for most English speakers than the meaning of ‘stick’. Meaning salience, Giora argues, correlates primarily with familiarity, but also with frequency, conventionality and prototypicality. Inevitably, therefore, salient meanings will vary from group to group and individual to individual: for golf players, for example, the ‘stick’ meaning of *club* is likely to be equally, if not more, salient than the meaning of ‘association/organisation’. Importantly, Giora points out that salient meanings are not necessarily literal: in the case of the adjective *firm*, for example, the metaphorical meaning ‘strict’ may be as salient as the physical, literal meaning ‘solid’.

The central proposal of the book is the ‘Graded Salience Hypothesis’, which states that salient meanings are always accessed first and automatically (although not necessarily exclusively), regardless of context. This can explain, for example, the functioning of jokes such as the following:

Q: Do you believe in clubs for young men?

A: Only when kindness fails. (p. 167).

The success of the joke relies on the fact that hearers activate the most salient meaning of *clubs* first (i.e. ‘association/organisation’), and then have to replace it with a less salient meaning (i.e. ‘sticks’).

More precisely, Giora suggests that comprehension involves two stages: an initial activation phase and a later integration phase. The initial phase includes two separate mechanisms: (1) a bottom-up linguistic mechanism that involves the activation of meanings from the mental lexicon in order of salience, and (2) a top-down contextual mechanism that predicts meanings (but not necessarily words) on the basis of extra-linguistic and contextual knowledge. In the initial phase, Giora argues, these two

mechanisms operate in parallel: salient meanings are therefore always activated, even though they may be contextually inappropriate.

In the integration phase, the outputs of the two mechanisms above are brought together, so that some meanings are retained for further processing if they contribute to the overall interpretation, while other meanings are suppressed. Salient meanings, Giora argues, are hard to suppress and tend to remain active for potential further processing as long as they are not disruptive. All this is summed up in what Giora calls the 'Retention/Suppression Hypothesis'.

In the course of the book, Giora argues that these two hypotheses can explain language comprehension generally, and particularly lexical access, irony, metaphor and idioms, and jokes. A separate chapter is devoted to each of these phenomena. In each case, Giora shows in detail how her salience-based view of comprehension is supported by the empirical findings of the studies she and her colleagues carried out, as well as by the findings of a large number of other studies.

Importantly, Giora claims that the Graded Salience Hypothesis can explain the apparent inconsistencies in the psychological literature on the processing of literal and non-literal (e.g., ironic, metaphorical) language. While some studies have found no difference between the processing of literal as opposed to non-literal expressions, others have found evidence that non-literal language is processed more slowly and with more difficulty than literal language. The former studies appear to support what Giora refers to as 'the direct access' view, which claims that, in a supportive context, contextually appropriate meanings are always accessed directly (i.e., without an initial literal phase). The latter studies, in contrast, appear to support what Giora calls 'the standard pragmatic view', which claims that literal processing always takes place first, so that non-literal interpretation always involves a further stage of processing.

Giora claims that, cumulatively, the available evidence undermines both these views, and supports a salience-based view. According to this view, the relevant opposition is not between literal and non-literal language, but between salient and less or non-salient language (or, more precisely, language that exploits salient, familiar meanings and language that exploits non-salient, unfamiliar meanings). Given that (a) salient meanings are always activated (regardless of context), and (b) salient meanings may be literal or non-literal the Graded Salience Hypothesis predicts no difference, in the initial phase, between the processing of both literal and non-literal expressions, which rely on salient meanings (e.g., *She ate the beans* in a literally-biasing context and *She spilt the beans* in a metaphorically/idiomatically biasing context). This is consistent with the first set of findings referred to above. On the other hand, the Graded Salience Hypothesis predicts a difference between the processing of salient as opposed to non-salient language, so that an unfamiliar metaphorical expression will involve additional processing because the salient (literal) meaning will be activated first (e.g., *Their bone density is not like ours* as a metaphorical description of the differences between women and men). This explains the second set of findings referred to above.

Giora supports her argument with reference to studies that adopted a wide range of methodologies (e.g., reading times, lexical decisions, moving windows, etc.), which are also critically evaluated for their appropriateness and reliability. She also attempts to support her claims with reference to real discourse, since, as she repeatedly points out, '[i]n

the final analysis, what we are interested in is what happens outside the lab – that is, in the processes involved in spontaneous speech’ (p. 90).

As an example of the explanatory power of Giora’s model, I cannot resist recounting a personal anecdote dating from the time when my eldest daughter was just over one year old. One evening, as she was enthusiastically but rather clumsily enjoying fish and chips for the first time, she ended up with a piece of potato on her left shoulder. On noticing this, I pointed out to my husband: *Look, she has a chip on her shoulder!*, and we both burst out laughing. The laughter was of course due to the pun on the idiomatic meaning of *having a chip on one’s shoulder* (i.e. ‘being easily offended and behaving aggressively as a consequence of (feeling that one is) being treated as inferior’). Although, in context, the idiomatic meaning was entirely irrelevant, both my husband and I immediately activated it, and kept it active long enough to perceive a humorous effect (indeed, I had intended the utterance to be humorous). Given that the idiomatic meaning of the expression *having a chip on one’s shoulder* is at least as salient as its literal meaning (i.e., the sum of the literal meanings of its parts), Giora’s model elegantly accounts for examples such as this: in the initial phase of processing, the salient idiomatic meaning is automatically and rapidly accessed (alongside the literal meaning), even though the context-based mechanism predicts and supports the literal meaning. In the subsequent integration phase, the idiomatic meaning is not suppressed (in spite of its contextual incompatibility) and contributes to further processing, namely to the perception of the utterance as humorous.

On the other hand, some of Giora’s claims are, in my view, less convincing than others, and, since Giora repeatedly invites ‘counterthinking’ on the part of her readers, I will indulge in some counterthinking here.

The argument that the idiomatic meaning of familiar idioms is always accessed regardless of context is not always as plausible as in the case of my ‘chip on shoulder’ example. In the chapter on irony, for example, Giora provides empirical evidence that the ironic meaning of familiar ironies (e.g., *Tell me about it* meaning ‘I know all about this’) is accessed alongside the literal meaning even in literally biasing contexts. In cases such as *Tell me about it*, however, I do wonder how well these findings can reflect what happens in real discourse, where context is so much stronger and richer than it is in the lab. More specifically, I wonder whether, if a friend casually mentions a problem she is having, and I reply *Come on, tell me about it*, she will always automatically activate the ironic meaning of *Tell me about it* in the initial phase of processing. The problem here is not just that the salience of the literal meaning of *Tell me about it* is much higher than in the case of *She has a chip on her shoulder*, but also that, in my view, the prosody and paralinguistic behaviour associated with the ironic use of *Tell me about it* are quite different from those associated with the literal meaning. So, in speech in particular, salient meanings are perhaps best discussed not in relation to ‘neutral’ lexical strings, but to utterances with associated prosodies and other paralinguistic features. Giora only briefly refers to the issue of the varying salience of ‘different representations of the same meaning/context’ in the concluding chapter (p. 198).

Similarly, I sometimes found Giora’s approach to the ‘meaning’ of words rather problematic. Consider the following example, from the chapter on metaphor and idioms:

Sarit's sons and mine went on fighting continuously. Sarit said to me: These *delinquents* won't let us have a moment of peace (p. 112).

Giora describes the results of a study investigating 'priming effects' after the word *delinquents*. She reports that 'responses to the salient contextually incompatible probes (*criminals*) and to the non-salient contextually compatible probes (*kids*) did not differ' (p. 112) and concludes that

studies from lexical decisions tasks show that salient meanings cannot be filtered out, not even when context is strongly biased in favor of the non-salient meaning and where its influence must be highly effective (p. 112).

She also shows that, in similar examples, the 'contextually incompatible meanings' are retained for further processing, and argues that this contradicts both the 'direct access' and the 'standard pragmatic' views of metaphor processing.

While I appreciate that lexical decision studies need to involve single-word probes, I find Giora's approach to meaning here rather too clearcut. Clearly, a successful interpreter of the above example needs to conclude that *delinquents* refers to the speaker's and the addressee's children. However, this conclusion can only be reached by deciding that some aspects of the salient meaning of *delinquents* apply to the children in question. More precisely, the addressee needs to relate (some aspects of) the salient meaning of *delinquents* to the referential meaning in some way (via a cross-domain mapping, class inclusion, or whatever) in order to (a) arrive at a complete understanding of the metaphorical expression (which, in context, does not simply mean 'kids', but something like 'our excessively badly behaved, aggressive, litigious, etc., kids'), and (b) appreciate the full communicative effect of the utterance (exasperation, intimacy, humour, etc.). It is therefore only in a very strict sense that the salient meaning of *delinquents* can be described as 'contextually incompatible', and not at all surprising that this meaning is retained for further processing. I do not think that other approaches to metaphor processing would really argue that the 'criminals' meaning of *delinquents* is either never accessed or immediately suppressed, because they would otherwise not be able to explain the complete interpretation of the metaphor (and not just the correct identification of the referent). For similar reasons, I am therefore also not convinced that well-known phenomena such as the extension of metaphor in discourse can only be explained by the salience-based view, as Giora argues.

Overall, as Giora repeatedly points out, the picture of the mind that emerges from the book is as 'one-track' (p. 168), 'rigid', and 'error prone' (p. 14). However, Giora claims that this apparent rigidity is also a sign of the 'autonomy of the mind – its independence of and resistance to contextual processes' (p. 199). I am still doubtful about the notion of 'autonomy' as intended here, but I very much enjoyed the chapter on innovation, where Giora turns to how our 'one-track' minds produce and comprehend novel, creative language. Here, Giora establishes a link between salience and novelty via the Optimal Innovation Hypothesis, which states that successful, pleasing, 'optimal' innovation should achieve a novel response by establishing a relationship between salient and innovative meanings. This, as Giora points out, is partly a restatement of well-established approaches to creativity, notably the Formalists' notion of 'deautomatisation'.

In conclusion, and in spite of one's inevitable reservations, this is a huge achievement, and a very important book. Giora consistently argues her case elegantly and in meticulous detail, and with more modesty and fairness towards others' views than is often the case in cognitive science. I hope that this book will give her work the added visibility that it deserves.

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