

Why sarcastic opposites don't come easy

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Abstract

Nine online experiments and a corpus-based study test the predictions of the Graded Salience Hypothesis (Giora, 2003; Giora et al., 2007), according to which (i) salience-based (often literal) interpretations will be facilitated immediately, regardless of strength of contextual expectation for nonsalient sarcastic utterances (Experiments 1-9). In addition, (ii) the contextual environment of these utterances will resonate with their salience-based interpretation more often than with their nonsalient sarcastic opposites (corpus-based Study 1).

As in Giora et al. (2007), Experiments 1-3 make use of dialogues in which expectancy for a sarcastic utterance is manipulated by sarcastically biasing information, a sarcastic speaker in context mid-position, and, in addition to earlier studies, by an explicit marker, cueing the addressee as to the speaker's sarcastic intent. In Experiments 4-9, contexts taken from Giora et al. (2007), strongly biased toward the sarcastic interpretation via repeated exposure to sarcastic utterances, are further strengthened here by letting participants know the experiments test sarcasm interpretation.

Results from reading times and lexical decisions support the Graded Salience Hypothesis. They show that, even when sarcastic utterances are expected, and even when long processing intervals are allowed, contextually incompatible, salience-based interpretations are faster to retrieve than nonsalient sarcastic ones (Fein et al., 2013).

Results from natural uses corroborate these findings Giora, et al., 2013). They show that, as predicted by the Graded Salience Hypothesis, the natural environment of sarcastic utterances resonates with their contextually incompatible, salience-based interpretations rather than with their opposite sarcastic interpretations.

Nonsalient sarcastic opposites, then, don't come easy. According to the Graded Salience Hypothesis they are difficult to derive because they must be interpreted indirectly, involving a salience-based incompatible interpretation in the process.

Based on

Fein, Ofer, Yeari, Menahem, & Giora, Rachel (2013). On the priority of salience-based interpretations: The case of irony. (In review).

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Giora, Rachel, Raphaeli, Moshe, Fein, Ofer & Livnat, Elad (2013). Resonating with contextually inappropriate interpretations in production: The case of irony. (Submitted).