

Lexical and Pragmatic Metonymy Processing: Two Domains vs. One Mechanism

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Abstract: We investigate the compositional properties of metonymy through self-paced reading (SPR) and ERP. We examine lexical metonymy (Novel producer-for-product: All freshmen read/meet Wickstrom) and circumstantial/pragmatic metonymy (A waitress says to another: “Table-13/That couple asked for more wine”). We test the hypothesis that both metonymic types are instantiated by the same interpretive mechanism, a referential dependency between the named and intended entities similar to a pronoun-antecedent relation (e.g., Jackendoff, 1997), and that their real-time implementation is modulated by degree of contextualization (circumstantial >> lexical). Whereas SPR results show cost of implementation only for the circumstantial metonymy contrast and only at the segment directly following the metonymy trigger, ERP results show identical latency and polarity properties for both metonymies (P500) in left anterior electrodes exclusively. These results support metonymy as a unified, computationally isolable reference transfer process whose composition exerts visible cost which increases as demands for contextualization increase.