

**Figurative Language Processing: Metaphoric Reference and Bilingualism**

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Under Review

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## Abstract

The present study examined the processing of metaphoric reference (e.g., *The creampuff didn't show up for the fight* to refer to a cowardly boxer) during on-line comprehension of spoken language in bilinguals. A cross-modal naming task was used to measure activation levels of figurative (e.g., *boxer*) and literal (e.g., *pastry*) interpretation of the metaphoric referential description (e.g., *creampuff*). Experiment 1 measured activation of both meanings at prime offset (0 ms) and 1000 ms after prime offset. Bilinguals in experiment 1 reported high proficiency in English, and that most of their daily communication took place in English, their second language. Overall, the results showed that at prime offset only activation for the figurative interpretation was observed. However, at 1000 ms after prime offset, the opposite was true. That is, only activation for the literal interpretation was evidenced. Experiment 2 involved Spanish-English bilinguals recruited from a bilingual community where usage of both Spanish and English languages is a common occurrence. In this experiment, activation of the figurative and literal interpretations was measured at prime offset (0 ms) and just after prime offset (300 ms post-offset). The most significant result from Experiment 2 was the finding that bilinguals were much faster to name targets consistent with a figurative interpretation at 300 ms than at 0 ms after prime offset. The same pattern was observed for the literal target interpretations. Implications for theories of bilingual language processing and metaphor processing, as well as for research in spoken language, are discussed.

Key words: metaphor, reference metaphor, figurative language, cross-modal lexical priming, bilingual figurative language, metaphoric reference, spoken language comprehension