

BOOK REVIEW

On Our Mind: Salience, Context, and Figurative Language, Rachel Giora, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, 259 pages, \$55 (hardcover).

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The goal of *On Our Mind* is to celebrate the heretofore unheralded role of salience. This first monograph by cognitive scientist Giora "aims to shed light, primarily empirically, on how, in addition to contextual information, *salient meanings and senses* of words and fixed expressions shape our linguistic behavior" (p. 9). In chapter 1, "Prologue," Giora paves the way for the uninitiated. The chapter abounds in lively examples enlightening us as to how meanings and perspectives foremost on our mind determine the way we make sense of all kinds of stimuli, including those that amuse us. For instance, one of Gary Larson's cartoons portrays a person lying on a bed with unfamiliar creatures underneath. It catches us by surprise when we read the caption, *I've got it again, Larry ... an eerie feeling like there's something on top of the bed*. In the remaining pages, Giora's theory, the Graded Salience Hypothesis, beautifully articulates why we find such cartoons so witty. Countless other sociocognitive linguistic phenomena are explicated as well.

Giora's theory is introduced straight on in the first chapter. It is introduced boldly, along with its competitors. Indeed, boldness and forthrightness are trademarks of this excellent monograph. One competitor to the Graded Salience Hypothesis is Fodor's modular view (Fodor, 1983). As does a traditional modular view, the Graded Salience Hypothesis assumes

Two distinct mechanisms: one bottom-up, sensitive only to linguistic information, and another, top-down, sensitive to both linguistic and extra-linguistic knowledge. However, unlike the traditional modular assumption, it assumes that the modular lexical access mechanism is ordered. More salient meanings—coded meanings foremost *on our mind* due to conventionality, frequency, familiarity, or prototypicality—are accessed faster than and reach sufficient levels of activation before less salient ones. According to the graded salience hypothesis, then, coded meanings would be

accessed upon encounter, regardless of contextual information or authorial intent. Coded meanings of low salience, however, may not reach sufficient levels of activation to be visible in a context biased toward the more salient meaning of the word. (p. 11, emphasis mine)

A second challenger is an integrationist view, most recently embodied as a constraint-based view.

This constraint-based view ... assumes a single mechanism that is sensitive to both linguistic and nonlinguistic information. Consequently, in a rich ecology, comprehension should proceed smoothly and seamlessly, selectively accessing the appropriate interpretation, without involving a contextually inappropriate stage initially. (p. 9)

Although Giora concedes that it is quite often the case that only contextually appropriate meanings are made available for comprehension, her claim is that their exclusive activation is not a consequence of some selective compliance with contextual information but rather simply and straightforwardly a function of their salience.

These daring opening statements entice the reader to continue in a quest for the metaphorical proof in the pudding. And the reader is not disappointed. In the next chapters, Giora powerfully demonstrates how salient meanings affect ambiguity resolution (chapter 3), comprehension and production of irony (chapter 4), metaphor and idiom (chapter 5), jokes (chapter 6), and aesthetic novelty (chapter 7). There are few stones left unturned in this *tour de force*. Conflicting data are reconciled; implications are drawn; parsimony is earned.

Chapter 2 sets the stage by explicating the major factors involved in comprehension: salience and context. Giora details how salient meanings should not be conflated with relevant interpretations (Sperber & Wilson, 1986), embodied meanings (Glenberg, 1997), semantic meanings (Gibbs & Moise, 1997), literal meanings (Grice, 1975), accessible referential meanings (Ariel, 1990), or preferred interpretations (Levinson, 2000). These theoretical contrasts demonstrate Giora's multidisciplinary appetite. Concepts and constructs are drawn from experimental psychology, literary theory, pragmatics, aesthetics, and linguistics. It is clear that the monograph not only summarizes two decades of the author's research but also summarizes two decades of the author's synthesis and analysis of other scholars' research.

Giora answers the questions, "Can we really constrain context to the extent that it would affect comprehension entirely so that only relevant meanings would be processed, neither more nor less? Can we really make context strong enough to allow for an efficient and frictionless processing, filtering out inappropriate meanings?" (p. 39). The answer, based on a wide artillery of empirical findings, is a resounding "no." Indeed, rather than cleaving to one empirical methodology (as do

most text and discourse researchers), Giora describes a wide array of data arising from *numerous laboratory and text-based methodologies. Perhaps more striking than the wide range of artillery she brings to bear on her research questions is the fact that she is well versed in each methodology, appreciating their advantages as well as limitations.

Chapters 4 and 5 tackle nonliteral language: irony, metaphor, and idiom. The primary claim is that it is neither literality nor figurativity that primarily affects processing; it is the meanings' degree of salience. This is a daring resolution to numerous decades of debate. It will no doubt spark further debate, but isn't that exactly what we hope our favorite scholars will do?

In chapter 6 Giora explores the effects of meaning salience on joke interpretation. Like the comprehension of other figurative phenomena, such as metaphor and irony, joke comprehension involves activating the salient meanings initially on account of their salience. In contrast to irony and metaphor, however, Giora predicts that joke comprehension involves deactivating these meanings at the punch line position. Indeed, jokes might be missed when the salient meaning is too hard to suppress. This prediction epitomizes one of the core features of Giora's Graded Salience Hypothesis: It is compellingly intuitive.

In chapter 7, "Innovation," Giora extends her research to "the 'other side' of salience—the issue of novelty and creativity" (p. 176). Here, too, salience takes center stage: It is crucial in effecting liking. According to Giora, "It is not extreme novelty but 'optimal' innovation—novelty that allows for the recoverability of the familiar—that is most pleasurable" (p. 176). Whereas the common view focuses on the role of sheer novelty in aesthetics (Brinker, 1988), Giora proposes an aesthetic of optimal innovation. The moral of this chapter is highly predictable:

Highly novel language and thought will be less attractive and catchy, and easier to shirk off. ... Effective novelty (attractive, affecting change), by contrast, induces change but is rooted in salience to the extent that it allows for the recoverability of the familiar. (p. 184)

Perhaps this is why I found Giora's thesis so compelling. It is effective novelty.

Chapter 8, "Evidence from Other Research," functions as a wrap-up, and chapter 9, "Coda: Unaddressed Questions: Food for Future Thought," provides a road map of topics not addressed in the book but deserving future attention. Among them are the conceptual basis of literality and the effect of salient meanings in a first language on the acquisition of a second language. Perhaps most enticing is the flirtation with the assignment of truth. Asking if salient meanings are true, Giora suggests that

Salient information can "feel" more truthful than less or nonsalient information. Apparently, salient information includes several factors that might make it "feel right."

It springs to mind first, it is familiar, it is likable ... and it resists change (that is, it is hard to eradicate or attenuate). No wonder it makes one feel "at home" even when it comes to prejudices. Provoking or de-automatizing salient meanings, concepts, and ideas is, therefore, one of the most important roles of art and science. (p. 199)

Such is the mantra of Giora's book. It provokes salient meanings. It attempts to deautomatize salient meanings. As one reads along, nodding one's metaphorical head, relishing in the intuitive nature of the argument, one can be seduced into believing that much of linguistic behavior—nay, behavior way beyond linguistics—can be accounted for by two factors: salience and context. Can life be this simple?

To be sure, this book presents a compelling thesis. The thesis is supported by countless data points, numerous text analyses, and common sense. But it is a strident thesis nonetheless. Its singularity, its repeated refrain adulating the power of salience is a strong tonic. But it is what was on Giora's mind. And now that these words are penned, the construct of salience should most definitely be on cognitive scientists' minds.

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