Sweet Sunshine and Warm Hugs: Aphasic Subjects' Comprehension of Metaphors in Context (Abstract)

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Comprehension of metaphor in brain damaged subjects previously has been investigated in an attempt to assess both the "linguistic" and the "aesthetic" characterizations of cerebral hemispheric dominance (e.g., Winner and Gardner, 1977). Further, tasks which require comprehension and production of metaphor are frequently recommended to the clinical aphasiologist as a means to determine subtle, yet present, linguistic deficits in the high level aphasic client. Obviously, with a greater understanding of metaphorical competence, assessment techniques may be improved. One purpose of this study was to describe metaphorical comprehension performance of brain damaged subjects, and to determine if such ability might differentiate etiologies (CVA or closed head injury). The second purpose of the investigation was to determine if comprehension of metaphors improved with the inclusion of extralinguistic context.

Thirteen aphasic subjects (due to CVA) and nine with closed head injury (CHI), participated in this study, along with 22 non-brain-damaged controls. Comprehension of 18 randomized metaphors, taken from Winner and Gardner (1977), was examined in each of three conditions: (a) sentence only; (b) sentence plus video, literal interpretation; and (c) sentence plus video, metaphorical interpretation. In response to each stimulus, subjects pointed to one of four pictures; (a) one depicting the appropriate metaphorical interpretation, (b) one illustrating the literal interpretation, (c) one showing the stimulus adjective only, and (d) one demonstrating the stimulus noun only.

Counts were made of each subject's response choices for each condition. Data were initially subjected to a completely randomized factorial ANOVA, with the factors of group, etiology, condition, and response. A significant interaction emerged among the factors of group, condition, and response when all brain damaged subjects were compared to all who were not. Comprehension of metaphors for both groups improved with the addition of context, although the mean number correct was less for the brain damaged group (8.36), than for those who were non-brain-damaged (13.40). A subsequent ANOVA, which omitted the factor of response, revealed that, although the non-brain-damaged subjects comprehended metaphors significantly better than the brain damaged individuals, regardless of condition, there was no significant difference between the performances of CVA and CHI subjects.

REFERENCES

Winner, E. and Gardner, H., Comprehension of metaphor in brain-damaged patients. Brain, 100, 717-729, 1977.