Inferable Paths and Metaphoric Potholes: Interactions between Inferential Processes for Containing Inferrables and Metaphoric References
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Conceptual metaphors theoretically consist of mappings between particular cognitive elements of target domains and source domains, as in the mappings between the domains LIFE and JOURNEY respectively in the well-known conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY. (cf. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Conventional metaphors based on such conceptual metaphors needn’t be consciously identified by speakers/hearers as metaphors (as when we tell a friend we are at “a turning point”), though the level of availability of such unconscious inferences is affected by context. Perhaps similarly, so-called “inferrables” or “inferable entities” (cf. Prince, 1981, 1992; Birner, 1997; Cote, 2001a, 2001b; Ward & Birner, 2001) are discourse entities that have been neither directly nor situationally introduced into a discourse but that nevertheless have a level of discourse salience (and are hence sometimes referred to with definite referring expressions or even pronouns) because of an inferential link to a discourse entity acting as a contextual anchor for the reference. Various common subtypes of inferrables have been noted. (cf. Prince 1981; Cote, 2001b), generally based on patterns of literal relationships (such as, for example, poset relationships) between an inferrable and its contextual anchor, but it is also logically possible to have metaphoric anchors and metaphoric inferrables.

This paper presents the results of a data collection effort designed to identify limitations/constraints on interactions between these inferential processes, and to characterize subtypes of these interactions in particular linguistic contexts. The majority of the data for this study was collected from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies, 2008-) and from conversations in the Switchboard Corpus (Godfrey & Holliman, 1993). The study focused on “containing inferrables” (cf. Prince, 1981), inferrables whose referring expressions contain their own anchors. With containing inferrables, four linguistic combinations are relatively straightforward to identify (but cf. Hanks 2006): literal inferrable-literal anchor (LL), literal inferrable-metaphoric anchor (LM), metaphoric inferrable-literal anchor (ML), metaphoric inferrable-metaphoric anchor (MM). Though a variety of constructions are possible for containing inferrables, the data for this study were further limited to only those containing inferrables in the construction [NP Prep NP]NP, such as those given in (1) a-d below:

(1) a. The road to his house
b. The latest news about that nightmare
c. A new chapter in our marriage
d. The flip side of that coin

Both NPs in each token were additionally tagged as being definite or indefinite. Metaphoric tokens were subclassified as conventional expressions, creative instantiations of conceptual metaphors, or novel metaphors. Overall, the data suggests that metaphoric expressions are more constrained in LM and ML constructions than in MM constructions, that conventionality is one of the most central constraining factors, but also that interaction with more novel metaphors can be interpreted.

Finally, this paper discusses how these data might be handled within Relevance Theory and Optimality Theory (cf. Sperber & Wilson, 1996; van Rooy, 2004; Blutner & Zeevat, 2009) and argues that constraints are more generally related to speaker’s interpretability goals.
Works Cited