

THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING METAPHORS WORKING WITH FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE: SOME TOOLS

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Abstract

We present two versions of assessment/intervention tools for metaphors awareness or their comprehension: the TCM, Metaphor Comprehension Test, for children aged 9 to 14, or elementary school (Portugal), and the junior TCM, for children aged 4 to 6 years, or preschool age. They are versions/adaptations for European Portuguese of existing tools in Italian. The authors of the Italian versions are professors at the University of Sapienza, Rome, Italy, with internationally recognized work, presenting the original versions with good psychometric qualities. At the moment, the two instruments are already adapted for Portuguese, in the process of being applied in order to obtain the normative data and their validation. We expect, similar to what happens with the Italian versions, to obtain valid tools, with triple instrumentality: psychometric assessment and dynamic assessment and intervention resource, for various stages of development.

Keywords: *Metaphors comprehension, figurative language, assessment, intervention, tools.*

1. Introduction

The metaphor is seen as a form of semantic conflict induced by the anomalous combination of the conventional meanings of its main constituents - content (content) and vehicle - and the understanding of the metaphor is framed as a meta semantic ability from the analysis of these meanings (Gombert 1990, in Pinto et al., 2006).

In a metaphor, the vehicle is the linguistic figure itself, that is, the immediate image that incorporates or "carries" the tenor (the theme or content of the metaphor). The interaction of the vehicle results and the content gives meaning to the metaphor.

The authors propose a Piagetian functionalist framework, based on Piaget's last equilibrium model (1975), to analyze how this semantic conflict can be faced and resolved by children in the considered development period.

Is understanding metaphors a "thing for children" or not? The authors believe so, provided that metaphors similar to those that children of that age spontaneously produce and that a "game" is established with them. Understanding and knowing how to explain the meaning of metaphors is a complex skill, whose relevance was perceived by various sectors of psychology (cognitive psychology, psycholinguistics, developmental psychology, psychoanalysis and other theoretical currents of clinical psychology, social psychology, sports psychology, etc.), generating, for over forty years, a vast scientific literature.

2. Methodology and instruments

2.1. The TCM

It is a paper and pencil instrument, consisting of 12 items subdivided into 2 groups of metaphors:

From a structural point of view, the TCM is composed of two parts, corresponding to two different types of metaphors, called "physical-psychological" and "conceptual".

The distinction is based on certain semantic characteristics of the two main components of the metaphor that we presented earlier, the "tenor" and the "vehicle", T and V, and the different relationships that are established between them. In physical-psychological metaphors, the two terms belong to different semantic-conceptual domains: one is taken from the universe of human beings, while the other derives from the inanimate universe of physical objects. An example of this is the phrase "The prison guard is a stone" which, expressed to convey information about a psychological quality, establishes a connection between the physical domain (hard stones) and the domain of psychological traits (lack of obstinate feeling). In conceptual metaphors, however, certain concepts or ideas are linked to a concrete object, as in the example "Memory is a sieve", through which we want to express some functional (in this case, dysfunctional) aspects of the memory process. However, the limits are not always so clear, so it can be difficult to decide when a metaphor is unmistakably physical-psychological or conceptual (Winner, 1988).

Were constructed 12 items, divided symmetrically into 6 items containing physical-psychological metaphors and 6 items containing conceptual metaphors.

Examples

Physical-psychological metaphors

1. The prison guard is a rock (adapted from Winner, Rosentiel, & Gardner, 1976, in Pinto et al., 2006);

Conceptual metaphors

1. The family is an umbrella (adapted from Evans, & Gamble, 1988, in Pinto et al., 2006).

2.2. The TCM Junior

It is a paper and pencil test, consisting of 25 items, presented in a playful manner, with 12 sentences and 4 short stories (for each story, there are between 3 to 4 questions).

As an example, we have:

Phrases:

1. "The moon is a lamp.";

Brief history:

"Once upon a time there was a boy named Philip. One morning, Philip flew with his father to the basement of the house. The father opens the cellar door and Philip sees the night and begins to be afraid. So he decides to run and runs away. The father says to the mother: "Philip is a train".

Questions:

a) What do you think "Philip ran away with his father" means;

b) What do you think "Philip sees the night and begins to be afraid" means?

c) What do you think "Philip is a train" means?

The junior TCM allows to apprehend the typical characteristics from the point of view of reasoning and lexical skills of the age group targeted by the test.

3. Conclusion and recommendations

In addition to being able to function as an assessment tool, psychometric and/or dynamic assessment, it will be a useful intervention tool for the educator.

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