Lexical Broadening in Figurative Meanings: How Relevance Principles Constrain Children's Interpretations

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Abstract

The study examines lexical pragmatics account for figurative meanings interpretation where by the linguistically encoded meaning differs from that which is intended by the words used especially in the case of metaphor and hyperbole. Arriving at the speaker's meaning of figurative meanings involves a lexical pragmatic process of broadening. Such a process is context dependent in which the hearer relies on the contextual items and pragmatic expectations activated by the context in which words occur. As it is widely known, processing figurative meanings by children is difficult since their pragmatic competence is still underdeveloped. However, recent body of research have proved that though children's interpretation of figurative meanings is to some extent uneasy, they have the ability to cope with figurative meanings if the contextual clues and world knowledge are available. Hence, the study aims at finding out what relevance principle; cognitive and communicative principles, determines the optimal relevant interpretation in understanding figurative meanings. The data analysis showed that strengthening an existing assumption and creating implicatures maximizing children's cognitive effects. It is also demonstrated that frequency of use and the accessibility of the context are the most affecting contextual factors that minimize their processing efforts.

Keywords: relevance principles, cognitive effects, processing efforts, children's interpretations, figurative meanings.

1. Introduction

As it is widely accepted, Grice (1989:107-8) opens the gate for an inferential model as an alternative to the classical (code) view of communication. Comprehension, according to the classical view, is achieved by interpreting the signals to get the speaker's intention. In inferential view, comprehension is achieved by inferring the speaker's meaning through evidence provided by both the linguistic form of the utterance and the context. Broadly speaking, it is based on the idea that the explicit content of an utterance is underdetermined by the linguistically encoded meaning, and that its interpretation engages pragmatic inference. Huang (2017:49) points out that Grice's theory is inevitably viewed to be revolutionary. It seeds the land for a new inferential perspective which has been developed and reformed by many succeeding theories. Relevance theoretic approach is one of these theories which has been proposed in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a cognitive alternative to Grice's theory as Clark (2013:43) postulates. This approach assumes that inferencing is essential to linguistic communication. It is dependent on the interplay of contextual effects and processing efforts. The greater the contextual effects are, the greater relevance is. However, the smaller the efforts required, the greater the relevance of the input is. In Sperber and Wilson's (1986:119) words, this theory is based on two principles; *cognitive principle* "human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance", and *communicative principle* "every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance". Human cognition tends to maximize relevance. To achieve its aim of relevance, then, a proposition activates a number of contextual assumptions in minimal processing effort.

1.1 Contextual (Cognitive) Effects

Based on the context, the cognitive effect is achieved by the interaction of the new information and the existing assumptions. Positive cognitive effects, as Sperber and Wilson (1995:265) posit, are the changes that arise in the addressee's cognitive system. They involve developments in his representations of the world that are produced as an input in a particular context. Subsequently, not all changes are positive. The changes that add a new piece of information to old ones, update old information and recognize an existing knowledge are positive effects. Three types of positive cognitive effects are suggested by Sperber and Wilson (ibid:266): *Strengthening an existing assumption, contradicting and eliminating an existing assumption and* combining with the context to yield

contextual implication.Ifantidou (2001:90-3) exemplified these positive effects as follows:a. Strengthening an existing assumption.

(1) a. Do you like cats?

b. I don't like any animals.

c. If he does not like animals. Then, he doesn't like cats.

'He doesn't like cats' is an existing assumption, not a contextual implication. It is strengthened by the new information: 'He does not like animals.

b. Contradicting an existing assumption. The same example can be considered for illustration:

(2) a. Do you like cats?

  b. I don't like any animals.

  i. He has a cat. He likes cats.

'He has a cat. He likes cats.'contradicts the existed assumption (b) 'He does not like animals'.

c.Contextual implication which is a conclusion derived by the input and the context (the new information) is illustrated below:

(3) You decide to call Mary with the following thought:

    a. If Mary is in, she must be writing her essay. (You call Mary and discover):

b. Mary is in.

From the existing assumption (a) and the new information in (b), the addressee can infer information not deduced from either (a) or (b) alone:c. Mary must be writing her essay.Thus, it is a contextual implication derived on the basis of the input and the context.

1.2 Processing Efforts

The efforts exerted in processing an input to achieve at a cognitive effect through memorizing, inferring, and other cognitive processes are described by relevance theorists as processing efforts. Wilson and Matsui (1998:174) suggest that processing efforts of an utterance are determined by the form of the utteranceand the accessibility of the context. If the utterance is complex, then the hearer exerts more efforts to process it than less complex one. The same thing is true if the utterance is easily accessed, less processing efforts will be required. Effectively, Wilson and Matsui (ibid:196) recommend the following factors to determine the processing efforts: (1) The linguistic (form) complexity of an utterance in terms of the length of the utterance, order of the utterance, its syntactic complexity, order of mention and syntactic position. (2) The logical complexity of the utterance in terms of thematic roles, semantics of the main verb and the choice of expressions. (3) Overall salience. (4) The accessibility of the context and (5) Frequency of use.

Generally but more precisely, different utterances need different degrees of processing efforts. Longer utterances, for example, typically require more efforts than short ones. Equally, novel words usually need more efforts to be processed than common ones. To illustrate these factors, Ifantidou (2001:95) considers the following example whereby Peter wants to arrive at Boston by plane as soon as possible, and he wants to know when the next plane is. He asks Mary, who may answer him in one of these utterances:

(4) a. The next plane to Boston is at 5.30.

b It is sometime after 4.00.

c.It leaves 7,500 seconds after 3.25.

Obviously, (a) is more relevant to Peter as it entails the other two utterances, since 7,500 seconds after 3.25 is in fact 5.30. Answer (a) costs less effort than (b) and (c) to drive the intended information since it is shorter than and logically less complex than the other answers (ibid).

2. Lexical Broadening

It is usually well-defined as a lexical pragmatic process where a lexical item is used to convey a more general sense than its encoded denotation. In essence, it is an expansion of the denotation of the linguistically encoded meaning of a word. The main idea of broadening is that speakers sometimes choose to produce an utterance that departs the literal meaning in its interpretation (Carston,1996:207). Therefore, broadening,as Wilson and Carston (2007:243) claim, does not preserve the literal meaning of a word since one or more of the logical characteristics of the concept it indicates may be discarded, resulting in the formation of an ad hoc concept that differs from the lexically encoded concept as shown by Figure (1) below.
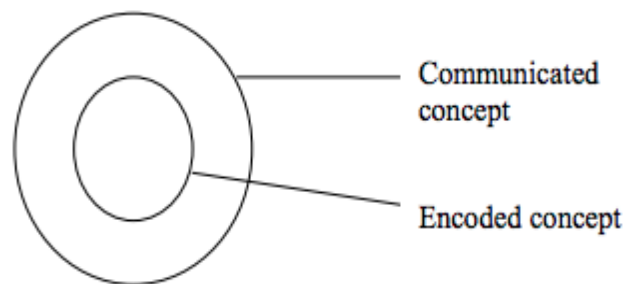
Figure (1) Broadening, Adopted from Wilson(2003:4)

Figurative uses of language as metaphor and hyperbole are believed to involve broadening in their interpretation as Wilson and Kolaiti (2017:157) illustrate, the word 'lion' in 'John is a *lion'* is metaphorically used to mean 'very brave'. The word 'forever' in 'It took *forever* to finish this paper' is a hyperbolically used to mean 'much longer than expected or desired'. Notably, Sperber and Wilson (1986) have objectively accounted for these figurative uses within relevance theory as guided by the principle of relevance. They (ibid:231) explicate that every utterance represents an interpretation of a speaker's thought. This mental representation can be *interpretively*used as an interpretation of actual thoughts or desirable ones, or *descriptively* as a description of an actual state of affairs or desirable ones. Metaphor and hyperbole two figurative uses of language that broadening has believed to contribute to their interpretation.

2.1. Metaphor

The relevant literature provides two basic accounts of metaphor. The traditional account where metaphor is accounted for as part of the communication theory. Accordingly, it is a common figure of speech that engages non-literal interpretation. The second account considers metaphor to be a cognitive phenomenon studied as a supplementary use of language besides the normal use of language. More accurately, metaphorical meaning is studied only after studying literal meaning (Song, 1998:78). Traditionally, the study of metaphor goes back very long ago. It wasperceived as rhetorical tool of communication used by politicians to persuade and by poets to entertain. So, politicians and poets should master this figurative use of language. However, literal use of language was seen to be the most appropriate vehicle of communication. It is commonly used to describe reality objectively and directly. This classical view has affected the way linguistic scholars approached the study of metaphor till the last decades of the twentieth century among them Kitty 1987, Grice 1989 and Searle 1990 as depicted by (Song,1998:87). More recently, this view has been abandoned in favour of more recent cognitive approaches in which metaphor is a creative process based on the interaction of mental representations. Phrased differently, metaphor is more than a stylistic device, it is an essentially component of human cognition. Any adequate theory of successful linguistic communication should account for people's use of metaphorical expressions (Rambaud, 2012:34).

Within pragmatic theories, Grice believes metaphor and hyperbole, irony and understatement involve blatant violation to the maxim of quality. According to him, there is a gap between the literal meaning and the thought the communicator expressed. Under this assumption, the utterance may give rise to weak implicatures including poetic and creative implicatures. Metaphorical understanding of an utterance is context dependent. Based on the context, the hearer leaves the literal meaning and starts finding a more reliable interpretation (Clark, 2013:204-12). Departing Gricean view of non-literal uses, relevance theory has developed two different accounts to metaphor. Both of them are deflationary; they view metaphor as part of everyday language not as a superior linguistic device. Relevance theorists do not believe that metaphor is a deviation of a form of communication. The first account assumes points of resemblance between the form of the utterance and the speaker's thought it stands for. The second adopts the formation of ad hoc concepts (Walaszewiska, 2015:145). Recently, the second approach of metaphor has been widely adopted within relevance-theoretic approach to lexical pragmatics. It involves lexical adjustment process that led to the ad hoc concept formation (Wilson and Carston 2007, Sperber and Wilson 2008). Consider the following utterance (5) Boris is a *chameleon*. To interpret the intended meaning of 'chameleon',the concept 'chameleon' would give rise to one of the encyclopedic information associated with it as chameleons are animals that change their appearances and behaviours according to their environment. Thus, this activation excludes that they are lizards, brightly coloured, with ready darting tongues, etc. This accumulated information is used to arrive at the intended implication and to form the ad hoc concept CHAMELEON* based on relevance principles (Carston, 2015:10).

2.2 Hyperbole

Beinga figure of speech that is largely accounted for in relation to metaphorical uses of language, hyperbole is defined by the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary as "a way of speaking or writing that makes something sound better, more exciting, dangerous, etc. than it really is". Another definition can be found in Leech (1981:146) who describes hyperboleas a figure of speech predictably found in literary and non-literary writings as well as everyday use of language indicating exaggeration and overstatement that dates back to classical Greece, Roman rhetoricians and then to the European rhetorical tradition. More precise definition is offered by Claridge (2011:1-2), he postulates that as metaphor, hyperbole is associated with the cognitive configuring of humanfaculty in describing, characterizing and evaluating (praising or satire) feelings, and events in a magnified way. It is a human nature not to be satisfied with the description of things and to enlarge them. Hyperbole involves three types of scales; semantic, pragmatic and argumentative. Semantic scales implicate linguistic common graded scales for example 'adored, love, like'; pragmatic scales signify the speaker's attitude towards a subject (extra-linguistic scales depending on the speaker's experience and his view of the world) and argumentative scales refer to linguistic and extra-linguistic scales relied on the requites of the argumentation. Broadly speaking, hyperbole is an intensified means utilized intentionally by the speaker in the sense of gradability to have some effect on the addressee. Claridge (2011:809) postulates that for relevance theory, hyperbole isa linguistic phenomenon that endorsed broadeningin its interpretation. An utterance involving a hyperbolic expression or phrase works as an ostensive stimulus having an expectation of relevance to the hearer which guides him with the available contextual information to yield a positive cognitive processing effect with the least possible processing effort.Subsequently, like metaphor, hyperbole is a case of figurative use of language fairly involves the same interpretive mechanism that contributes to the construction of ad hoc concepts as the following example presented by Clark (2013:214) illustrates:

(6) 'I'm *starving*' the utterance describes people, who suffer malnutrition, literal understanding of the concept 'STARVING' is deduced. However, assuming it is hyperbole as the speaker uses the concept to mean'he is hungrier than he is usually', the lexical process of understanding leads to the construction of ad hoc concept 'STARVING*' which differ in proposition from the one encoded by the same word.

3. Children's Interpretation

Frank and Goodman (2014:80) discuss one of the fundamental questions in cognitive pragmatics that is how do children learn to figuratively use and understand words and sentences in communication? They explicated that following the wealth of research in developmental pragmatics, children usually learn the meanings of words rapidly. Children also learn to use their stock of vocabulary relatively soon after the emergence of productive language as they are exposed to adults' interaction in a supportive context. They have the ability to infer the meaning of words. Children's ability is constantly improved alongside the acquisition of other linguistic aspects. Conforming these findings, Zufferey (2010:27) affirms that children's cognitive abilities play a key role in language acquisition and comprehension especially on the lexical and pragmatic levels. Children in pre-school stage are able to acquire a large stock of words with their semantic and structural properties. This stock of words plainly enables them to produce and understand straightforward sentences. However, understanding non-literally sentences is more difficult. Extensive research during the sixties, seventies and eighties of the last century debated that to a large extent children at pre-school could not interpret metaphorical expressions appropriately. Only at age eleven or twelve they are able to do that as their cognitive abilities have quite developed to process non-literal language. Consequently, studying children pragmatic development engages understanding how children learn to bridge the gap between the encoded meaning of words and phrases and the communicated meaning of the speaker and how this capacity develops throughout their lives. Early studies on children pragmatic development show that very young communicators were rather insensitive to speaker's intentions and communicated meaning. Nevertheless, the development of new methods and more theoretical research in this field have led to the re-evaluation of previous findings and development of new prospects and theories (Zufferey, 2010:28).A more recent study conducted by Grigoroglou and Papafragou (2017: 53) demonstrates that children can use pragmatic reasoning to assign referents and understand implicated and figurative meanings with respect to the speaker's intentions at age five. They conclude that the deficiency of cognitive abilities is not always the cause of misinterpreting figurative language. It may be attributed to other factors such as context, encyclopedic assumptions, and world knowledge. Equally important, Papafragou (2018:167) speculates that children's cognitive abilities enable them to constantly develop their pragmatic skills to communicate in adult-like way as a member of culture and society.

4. Research Methodology

On the basis of the above discussion, the analysis of this research is intended to identify the contextual factors that satisfythe two relevance principles in the context of this study. As a result, qualitative and quantitative methodologies are combined. The data of this study is represented by ten extracts of figurative uses of language whereby metaphor and hyperbole are used. They are taken from two English short stories written to children ranged (8-12) years old children: Mowgli's Brothers (1894) by Joseph Rudyard Kipling and God's Eye (2016) by Frances Hardinge.Two extracts of each mentioned story will be represented to illustrate the method of analysis which includes italicizing the figurative uses, analyzing them in terms of cognitive effects and processing efforts and statistically counting the frequency of the occurrences and the percentage of the contextual factors achieving these principles. Following Sperber and Wilson (1995), in pinpointing positive cognitive effects, and Wilson and Matsui (1998), in identifying contextual factors minimizing processing efforts, a mode of analysis is developed to analyse figurative meanings in English children's short stories asFigure (2) below demonstrates. It should be mentioned that the contextual factorsare compatible with children's literature peculiarities: since children's literature is in general characterized by simple vocabulary and syntactic construction, linguistic complexity of an assumption is accounted for in light of the content and functional words count in an utterance, logical complexity of an assumption is accounted for in terms of its closeness to the literal meaning. Frequency of use is dealt with by virtue of the order of the word's meaning in Macmillan Children's Dictionary set for (8-12) years old children. A n assumption is easily accessed if it is given instant access to the relevant encyclopedic assumptions about it which may contain relevant schemas describing regular sequences of actions and their causality.
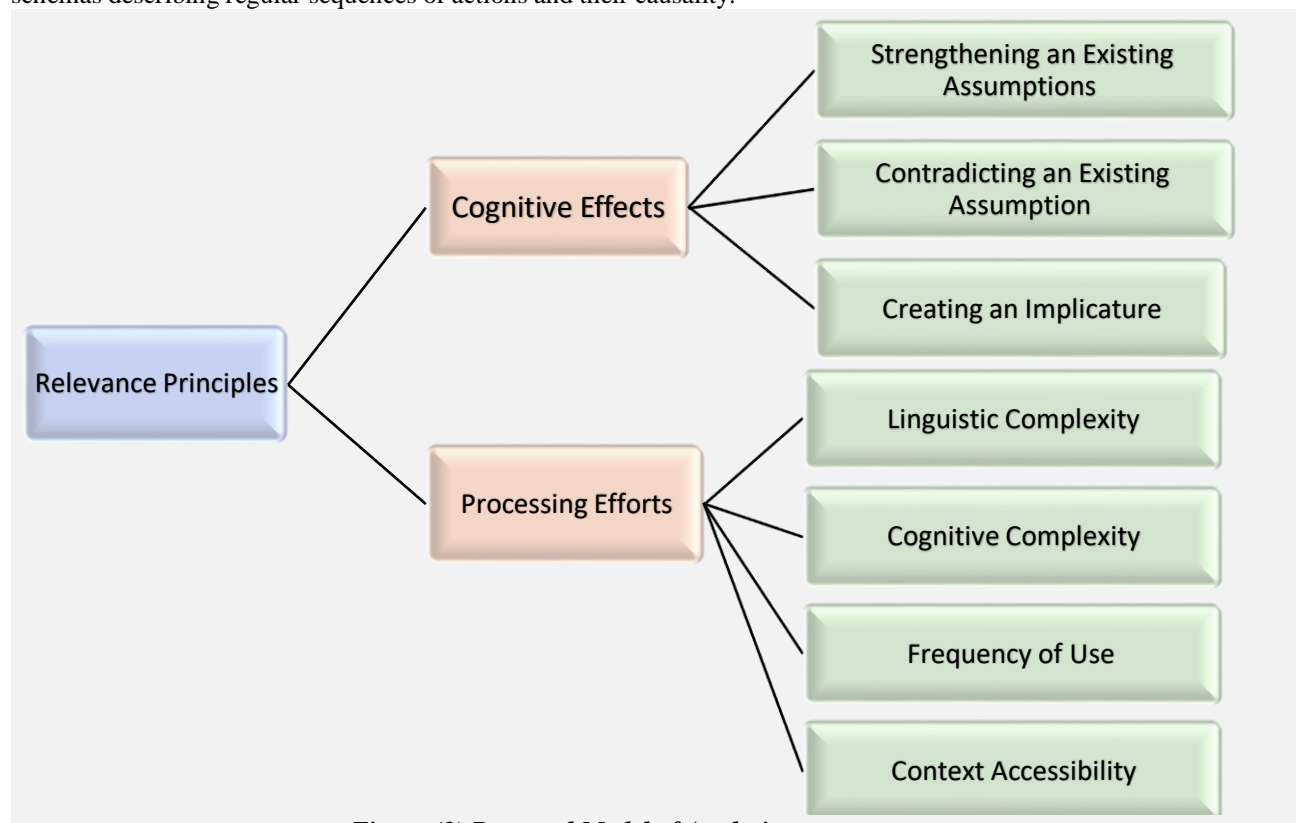

Figure (2) Proposed Model of Analysis

5. Data Analysis
a. Metaphor
Extract (1)from 'Mowgli's Brother' (1894) by J. R. Kipling.
Tabaqui: "Shere Khan, the Big One, has shifted his hunting-grounds. He will hunt among these hills during the next moon, so he has told me."
Father Wolf: "He will frighten every *head of game* within ten miles; and I—I have to kill for two, these days."
The Analysis
In this extract, the italicized is either interpreted literally to mean:
1.Shere Khan will frighten everyone in charge for a sport or competition within ten miles in the jungle.Or metaphorically to mean:

2. He will frighten every animal the wolves could hunt within ten miles in the jungle.
Following the relevance principles of cognitive effects and cognitive efforts, the assumptions can be assed as: (1) contradicts an existing assumption: No sport or competition is held, (2), in turn, strengthens the existing assumption: Shere khan frightened preys. So, wolves could not hunt anymore. In addition to other contextual indicators, (2) creates an implicature that father wolf was angry because he has to hunt for himself and the mother wolf which makes his task more complicated. Concerning processing efforts (1) is linguistically more complex than (2). Moreover, (1) is more logical than (2). (2) is not frequently employed in such context. Finally, (2) is more accessible than (1).Accordingly, the child will evaluate (2) to be the most relevant interpretation.

Extract (2)from 'Mowgli's Brother' (1894) by J. R. Kipling.
Bagheera: "Shere Khan has taught them, that a man-cub has no place with the Pack. In a little time, thou wilt be a man."
Mowgli: And what is a man that he should not run with his *brothers*?"
The Analysis
The italicized word in its utterance is either taken literally to signify:
1. Male people who have the same parents. Or metaphorically to mean:
2. The Pack wolves whom Mowgli lives with.
Adhering to the relevance principles of cognitive effects and cognitive efforts, the two assumptions demonstrates that (1) contradicts the existing assumption that Mowgli should leave the wolves. (2) strengthens an existing assumption: he was raised by wolves. Additionally, it creates with other contextual indications the implicature: he wants to live with the Pack all his life. As far as processing efforts are concerned, the two assumptionsshow the same logical complexity. However, (2) is less logical than (1). Both candidates are frequently used in such context. Finally, (2) is more accessible than (1). Accordingly, the child will evaluate (2) to be the most relevant interpretation.

Extract (3)from 'God's Eye' (2016) by Frances Hardinge.
Cork: "This little *vandal* threw up over one of my pictures!"
Pother: "That sounds like a perfectly natural reaction to me, probably improved it."
The Analysis
The word 'vandal' in the above extract is either literally understood to signify:
1. A criminal because he made a crime as killing or steeling. Or hyperbolically to mean:
2. Acriminal for Cork because he damaged his sketch.
   Relying on the context, the two assumptions achieve the following positive cognitive effects: (1) contradicts an existing assumption that Ben's doing was not a crime, it was undeliberate action. (2) strengthens the mentioned existing assumption. It creates an implicature: Cork was so angry because he has lost his sketch. Besides, the analysisof processing efforts showed the following: (1) is longer than (2). Moreover, it is more logical than (2). (2) is more frequently used. Finally, (2) is more accessible than (1).Suitably, the child will assess (2) to be the most relevant interpretation.

Extract (4) from 'God's Eye' (2016) by Frances Hardinge.
Pother: 'Are you trying to *pull* the poor boy's ear *off*?'
The Analysis
The italicizedphrasal verb in the above extract is either literally understood to signify:
1. Trying to remove the poor boy's ear by pulling it? Or hyperbolically as:
2. Hurting the poor boy's ear very much.
   Following the same constraints, the two assumptions achieve the following positive cognitive effects: (1) contradicts an existing assumption that Cork was not removing Ben's ear. (2) strengthens the existing assumption: Cork was rebuking Benas he has lost his sketch because of Ben. Moreover, it creates an implicature: Cork was hitting Ben violently. Besides, the analysisof processing efforts showed the following: (1) is longer than (2). Likewise, it is more logical than (2). (2) is more frequently used. Finally, (2) is more accessible than (1).As such, the child will consider (2) to be the most relevant interpretation.

4. Results and Discussion
Based on the analysis of the ten extracts taken from the data under scrutiny, strengthening an existing assumption and creating an implicature areobserved to be the most frequently achieved effects represented in all identified figurative cases in a range (10) and a range (100). While contradicting an existing assumption effect are shown in (2) extracts and in a rate (20).These results can be tabled as below.

Table (1) Frequency of Cognitive Effects in Children's Short Stories

No	Cognitive Effects	Frequency	Percentage

1	Strengthening an existing assumption	10	100%
2	Contradicting an existing assumption	10	100%
3	Creating an implicature	2	20%

Correspondingly, these cognitive effects (i,e. strengthening an existing assumption and creating an implicature) in interpreting broadening cases of metaphor and hyperbole have proved their effectiveness and utility as shown by the figure below.
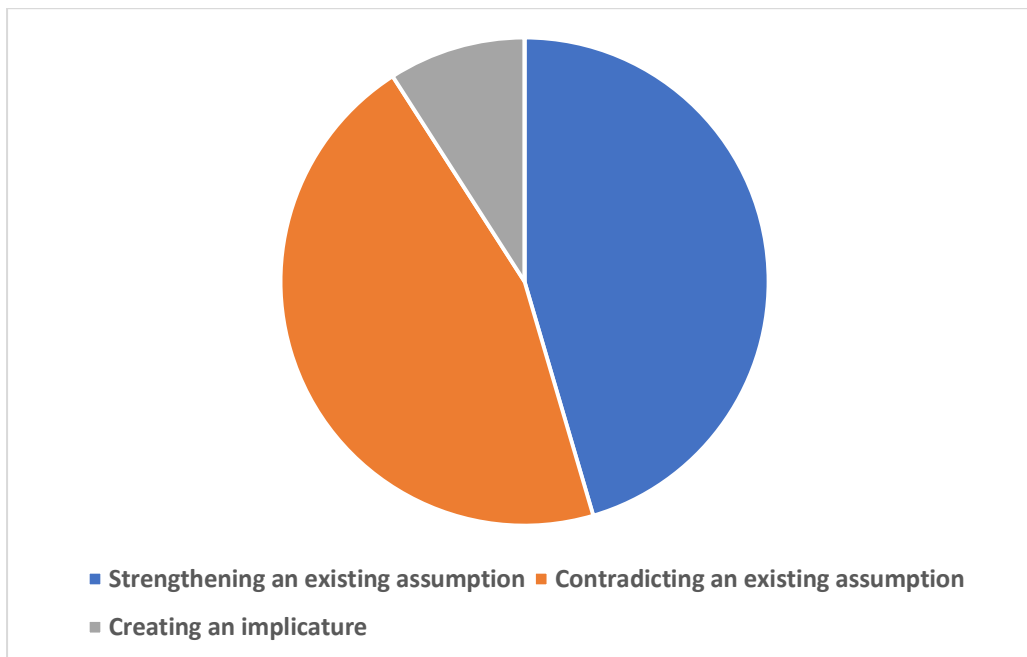

Figure (3) Statistical Representation of Cognitive Effects in the Data of Scrutiny

Furthermore, to elucidate the contextual factors that minimize processing efforts in children's interpretation of the broadening cases of metaphor and hyperbole examined in the present study, the statistical analysis reveals that the frequency of use is the most influential contextual factor in minimizing children's efforts in a frequency (8) out of (10) extracts in a rate (80). This finding proposes the effectiveness of this factor as the more the child is acquainted with the word the least efforts he exerted to process it. It also coincides with the developmental pragmatic findings that novel words hinder the child's interpretation. Contextual accessibility has proved its effectiveness in minimizing processing efforts in a range (7) and a rate (70). This outcome indicates that processing efforts are minimized if the context in which figurative words occur is easily excessed. However, the analysis shows that linguistic complexity and logical complexity have less effect on minimizing children's interpretation than the former elements in a range (3), and a rate of (30) as tabled below and illustrated by Figure (4).

Table (2) Frequency of Processing Efforts in Children's Short Stories

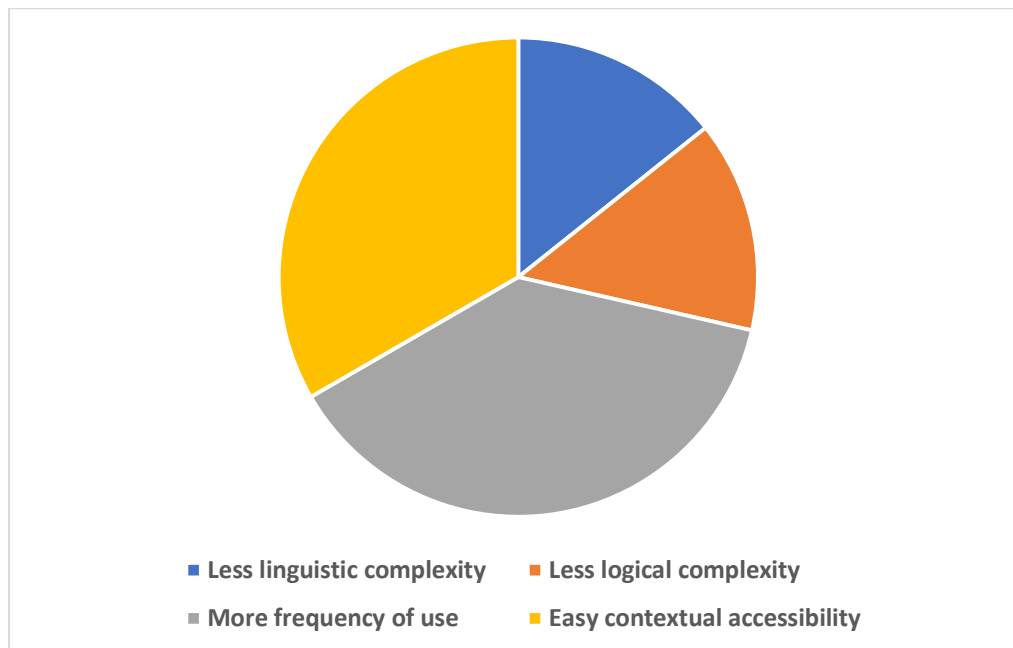| No	Processing Efforts	Frequency	Percentage
1	Less linguistic complexity	3	30%
2	Less logical complexity	3	30%
3	More frequency of use	8	80%
4	Easy contextual accessibility	7	70%

Figure (4) Statistical Representation of Processing Efforts in the Data of Scrutiny.

Conclusions

In light of the above findings, several conclusions can be drawn: First, children's interpretation of figurative meanings is constrained by two pragmatic relevance principles which are cognitive effects and processing efforts. These principles are achievedby the interaction of seven contextual strategies: strengthening an existing assumption, contradicting an existing assumption, creating an implicature, linguistic complexity, logical complexity, frequency of use and contextual accessibility. Second, context plays a vital role in children's interpretation of figurative meanings as in adults' ommuncation. Nevertheless, they differ in the contextual factors that conform their age and cognitive abilities. Third, the most influential cognitive effects in interpreting figurative meanings in the data under investigation are strengthening an existing assumption and creating an implicature. Lastly, as far as processing efforts are concerned, the analysis verified that frequency of use and context accessibility are principal elements in minimizing children's effort and achieving relevance in broadening cases of the analysed data. This can be evident in the high percentages they scored in analysing all the extracts.

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