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Of false friends and familiar foes: Comparing native and non-native understanding of figurative phrases

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Abstract

Research into figurative language identifies variables such as familiarity, transparency, decomposability and motivation, all of which play an important role in how native and non-native speakers learn, process and understand figurative phrases. However, these variables are not always defined and operationalised in the same way, and are often treated as independent. We discuss these factors as they relate to the judgements that language users make, and as they relate to the ability to correctly infer meaning in a range of familiar and unfamiliar idioms, and novel metaphors. In a rating study, we show that familiarity has a clear effect on perceptions of transparency. For less familiar idioms, judgments of decomposability after the meaning became known were strongly affected by whether or not speakers were correct in guessing the meaning. We also saw clear cross-language effects, whereby idioms that exist in the L1 for non-native speakers were seen as more familiar, more transparent and were better identified. We discuss how these factors contribute at different stages to allow speakers to make sense of both familiar and unfamiliar figurative phrases.

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1. Introduction

Figurative language – referring broadly to any language where a speaker means something other than what is literally expressed (Gibbs and Colston, 2012) – is a pervasive element of everyday communication. Native speakers use idioms, metaphors and other tropes so frequently that they may seem fairly unremarkable, yet the challenge they present to language learners is substantial. In this paper we aim to explore some of the factors that contribute to how native (first language, L1) and non-native (second language, L2) speakers understand figurative meaning. How do native L1 and L2 speakers differ in their ability to interpret and infer non-literal meaning, and how does this relate to the broader complex of skills that make up “figurative competence” (Pollio and Pollio, 1974)?

This paper has two primary aims. The first is to provide a broad overview of the literature as it relates to the topic of figurative competence, and we purposefully incorporate a wide range of studies and topics here. For example, we briefly address the development of figurative language and semantic abilities in first language acquisition and relate this to the

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development of figurative competence in a second language, since there are important parallels in the kinds of skills that speakers require. We go on to discuss a range of studies that are relevant to the question of figurative competence, highlighting not only the key findings, but also attempting to reconcile the differences in terminology and conception that sometimes obfuscate the overlap between otherwise highly complementary research. As such, a subsidiary aim is to consider the different dimensions that are often described in the literature and attempt to develop a more unified way of talking about them. Our second aim is to specifically explore the question of how native (English L1) and non-native (English L2) speakers perceive and interpret figurative phrases. We concentrate here on how differences in relative familiarity and language proficiency impact other judgements, such as intuitions about the semantic properties of different phrases. We also consider cross-language overlap here, to establish how far L1 knowledge contributes to figurative understanding.

1.1. *Figurative competence in L1*

The ability to correctly interpret figurative meaning involves development of the same broad cognitive and linguistic abilities that underpin more general language comprehension (Levorato and Cacciari, 1992, 1995, 1999). Typically, figurative competence begins to look adult-like by around 10–11 years of age (Levorato and Cacciari, 1999; Vulchanova et al., 2011). This emerges from the development of the ability to consider language on a broad level, utilising developing skills of inferencing from context and semantic analysis to enable children to process a broader range of meanings (Cain et al., 2009). Even from a young age, children can successfully use context to help them guess the meaning of idioms (e.g. Cain and Towse, 2008; Cain et al., 2009; Gibbs, 1991). The ability to apply semantic analysis also seems to be available from an early age (e.g. Gibbs, 1987, 1991), and becomes more important as children get older (e.g. Nippold and Taylor, 1995; Levorato and Cacciari, 1999).

Developing abilities in semantic analysis and inferencing are essential if children are to move towards adult-like understanding of figurative language, and seem to be a natural part of more general linguistic and cognitive maturation. In the case of idioms, the additional factor of familiarity plays a very important role. Idioms – generally defined as non-compositional figurative phrases – are often lexically fixed, opaque and imbued with aspects of culture that make them hard to interpret on first encounter. How children begin to acquire the plethora of idioms that exist in any language remains very much an open question. The “language experience” view proposes that learning idioms and other expressions is a direct result of the amount of meaningful exposure a speaker receives (Nippold and Rudzinski, 1993). However, Reuterskiöld and Van Lancker Sidtis (2012) showed that children as young as eight were significantly better at recalling idioms than novel (non-figurative) phrases after even one exposure, suggesting that there may be something inherently salient or noticeable that helps these to be learned. The idiom literature provides ample evidence that familiarity is an important aspect of how idioms are processed and understood (e.g. McGlone et al., 1994; Schweigert, 1986, 1991; Schweigert and Moates, 1988; Swinney and Cutler, 1979), although this seems to be a property of all familiar “formulaic” language, rather than being specific to idioms (e.g. Tabossi et al., 2009). The ability to successfully interpret idiomatic language, and figurative language more generally, is therefore grounded in two key areas: a sophisticated set of semantic and inferencing skills that help to derive meaning based on analogy, analysis and context; and a broad and detailed knowledge of the conventional figurative phrases that are in common use in the language.

A key question for this paper is how these two competencies interact to aid figurative understanding. Idioms are often classified according to their semantic properties, and whether they are decomposable (can be interpreted via the component words) or non-decomposable (knowledge of the whole phrase is the only way to infer the meaning) has important implications for how they are processed and represented (e.g. Abel, 2003; Caillies and Butcher, 2007; Gibbs, 1980; Gibbs and Nayak, 1989; Gibbs et al., 1989; Nunberg et al., 1994; Titone and Connine, 1994). In line with broadly usage-based models of language (e.g. Tomasello, 2003), frequency can also have an influence on representation, regardless of the semantic properties for any given phrase (see also Goldberg, 2003, for a similar view in Construction Grammar). Libben and Titone (2008) collected normative data for 219 English idioms, including characteristics such as familiarity, decomposability and meaningfulness (how confident respondents were that they actually knew the figurative meaning for any given phrase). Their results showed a significant interaction of familiarity and decomposability, such that decomposability only made a contribution to how meaningful phrases were for the lowest familiarity items. When idioms were highly familiar, the degree of decomposability made no difference to how they were understood. Libben and Titone went on to propose two routes to idiom comprehension – direct retrieval of meaning for highly familiar phrases, and semantic analysis/decomposition for low familiarity phrases.

Keysar and Bly (1995, 1999) also explored the relationship between semantic properties and familiarity for idioms. In their studies, participants were taught the meaning of archaic and unknown idioms (selected and pre-tested to ensure that they were generally unfamiliar to participants, e.g. *the goose hangs high*). Participants were taught either the correct meaning or its conceptual opposite and subsequently, they regarded the learned meaning as more transparent,

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