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Children's understanding of ambiguous idioms and conversational perspective-taking

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to test the hypothesis that conversational perspective-taking is a determinant of unfamiliar ambiguous idiom comprehension. We investigated two types of ambiguous idiom, decomposable and nondecomposable expressions, which differ in the degree to which the literal meanings of the individual words contribute to the overall idiomatic meaning. We designed an experiment to assess the relationship between the acquisition of figurative comprehension and conversational perspective-taking. Our sample of children aged 5–7 years performed three conversational perspective-taking tasks (language acts, shared/unshared information, and conversational maxims). They then listened to decomposable and nondecomposable idiomatic expressions presented in context before performing a multiple-choice task (figurative, literal, and contextual responses). Results indicated that decomposable idiom comprehension was predicted by conversational perspective-taking scores and language skills, whereas nondecomposable idiom comprehension was predicted solely by language skills. We discuss our findings with respect to verbal and pragmatic skills.

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Introduction

The aim of this study was to investigate the understanding of two kinds of unfamiliar idiomatic expressions, decomposable and nondecomposable, by children aged 5–7 years. More specifically, we

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investigated whether pragmatic abilities differentially affect the understanding of two types of idiom presented in context. Because the children were not familiar with the idioms used in this study, comprehension necessarily depended on their ability to extract the figurative meaning from the expressions' wording and/or context.

Development of idiom comprehension

An idiomatic expression has traditionally been defined as a phrase whose intended meaning cannot be derived from the meaning of the individual words that make it up (Swinney & Cutler, 1979). However, a growing body of literature supports the view that a strict semantic dichotomy between literal and figurative meanings cannot adequately account for idiom processing (Cacciari & Tabossi, 1988; Titone & Connine, 1994a). Idiomatic expressions appear to vary with respect to compositionality, in other words, the degree to which the literal meanings of their constituent words contribute to their overall figurative meaning (Gibbs, 1992, 1993; Gibbs, Nayak, & Cutting, 1989; Tabossi, Arduino, & Fanari, 2011; Titone & Connine, 1994b, 1999). A distinction is generally made between two kinds of idiom: decomposable and nondecomposable expressions. For example, *to speak your mind* is rated as a decomposable idiom because its figurative meaning (*to be frank*) can be derived from a compositional analysis of the meanings of *to speak* and *mind*, whereas *to kick the bucket* is deemed to be nondecomposable because the meanings of *kick* and *bucket* do not contribute to its figurative meaning (*to die*).

This compositionality factor appears to influence idiom processing. For example, Gibbs et al. (1989) found that it took adults significantly less time to decide that decomposable idioms were meaningful than to decide that nondecomposable idioms were meaningful. Similarly, Caillies and Butcher (2007) demonstrated the effect of compositionality on the activation of figurative meaning in a primed lexical decision task, where decomposable idiomatic expressions were processed faster than nondecomposable ones. Compositionality also affects idiom comprehension by children. Gibbs (1987, 1991) showed that decomposable idiomatic expressions were understood earlier and more easily than nondecomposable expressions due to the semantic relationship between the figurative and literal meanings. More specifically, he demonstrated that when contextual information is provided, kindergartners and first-graders understand decomposable idioms better than nondecomposable ones. Caillies and Le Sourn-Bissaoui (2006) replicated this developmental effect of compositional degree on the comprehension of ambiguous idiomatic expressions in children between 4 years 2 months and 9 years 2 months of age. The children's ability to understand decomposable versus nondecomposable ambiguous idioms was tested using a multiple-choice task (figurative, literal, and contextual responses) that had been proven to be a good test of idiom comprehension (Levorato & Cacciari, 1995). The results showed that children as young as 5 years could rapidly understand decomposable expressions in context, but not until 7 or 8 years was the comprehension of nondecomposable expressions observed (see also Levorato & Cacciari, 1999, for older children). Cain, Towse, and Knight (2009) suggested that developmental changes in idiom understanding can be explained by the fact that the comprehension of decomposable and nondecomposable expressions involves different language processing skills: semantic analysis of the constituent words of the expressions and inference from context. The comprehension of decomposable expressions requires both skills, whereas that of nondecomposable expressions relies solely on the ability to draw appropriate inferences from the context. These studies suggest that compositionality is a dimension of idiomatic expressions that can explain certain developmental changes in children's understanding. Thus, to identify the determinants of idiom comprehension in children, we need to examine the understanding of both decomposable and nondecomposable expressions.

Determinants of idiom comprehension

In the literature, few studies have attempted to identify the skills that children require if they are to start understanding ambiguous idiomatic expressions. Idioms (and other forms of figurative language) are common in everyday written and spoken discourse. The development of their comprehension raises questions about the factors that underpin not only figurative language development but also language development in general. The fact that idioms also cause comprehension difficulties for

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