

The Effect of Degree of Conceptualization of Idioms by Native (American) vs. Non-native (Iranian) English Speakers on Learning Idioms

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Abstract—One of the most challenging parts of learning a foreign/second language is vocabulary, and perhaps the most difficult part of the vocabulary for EFL learners is learning both literal and figurative meanings of idioms. This study was an attempt to find out how EFL learners make a mental image of English idioms as compared with native English speakers. For this purpose two hypotheses were formulated as: 1) prior knowledge of an idiomatic phrase figurative meaning does not influence the mental image of native (American) and non-native (Iranian) English speakers based on phrase's literal meaning, and 2) nonliteral interpretation of figurative phrases does not help native (American) and non-native (Iranian) English speakers conceptualize the literal meanings of idiomatic expressions. After the data analysis the following results were obtained: 1) prior knowledge of an idiomatic phrase figurative meaning can influence the mental image of native English speakers and native Persian speakers based on phrase's literal meaning, and 2) nonliteral interpretation of figurative phrases is not effective in terms of conceptualizing the literal meaning of idiomatic phrases neither for Persian speakers nor for English speakers. The results of this study can be beneficial for L2 teachers and students as well as for material developers.

Index Terms—idiom, mental image, conceptualization, literal language, figurative language

I. INTRODUCTION

Every language has phrases or sentences that cannot be understood literally, most of which have historical, philosophical, sociocultural, or even political origins. Even if we know the meanings of all words in a phrase and understand the grammar completely, the meaning of the phrase might still be bewildering. As an important part of the language and culture, idioms reflect the transformation in conceptualization of the universe and the relationship between human beings and the universe. This colorful aspect of languages is used to communicate our thoughts and feelings, to give life and fullness to the language by taking the existing words, blending them in a new sense, and making new meanings, exactly like a work of art (Lennon, 1998).

Traditionally, idioms are considered as fixed phrases or sentences whose meaning cannot be realized from their literal meaning of their segments. Some specialists believe that idioms and their meaning must be saved separately in the lexicon and this meaning must be learnt as a whole item.

Baker (1992) defined idioms and fixed expression as two different categories and referred to them as fixed patterns of language which permit little or no change in form, and often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual elements. Carter (1998) classified idioms as a type of frozen expression that lets in proverbs, stock phrases, catchphrases, allusions, idiomatic similes and discoursal expressions. Then again, Cacciari said that “the ability to make sense of idioms is not restricted to the simple mechanism of retrieving an idiom’s meaning from lexical memory” (Cacciari, 1993, P. 41).

Studies have demonstrated that idioms are not realized before age 6 (Abkarian et al., 1992) and this is the probable age when the ability to understand idioms takes off. All the same, while Nippold (1998, 2006) compared the development of idiom apprehension to lexical development arguing that it is gradual, and almost unlimited, other studies suggested that figurative competence evolves between 7 and 11 years of age (Levorato & Cacciari, 1995; Cain et al., 2009). Kempler et al. (1999) provided proofs from a large cross-sectional study that idiomatic knowledge begins fixation after age 11 and comes close the adult state. Attempting to apprehend idioms and proverbs has fully demonstrated that where the speaker and the hearer do not directly share the same sense of reality, the hearer will have to imaginatively reconstitute his own sense of reality based on the clues provided by the speaker. Metaphorical concepts and folk theories are important guides to this reorganizing activity. It is often potential to get at least a limited grasp of someone else’s understanding even where you do not establish your actions on his/her metaphors. This is likely because you have access to those metaphors via your culture’s pool of conventional metaphors and folk theories – presuming that you are both members of the same culture. (Dugan, 2003, p.8)

In similar studies of the cognitive processing of idioms, the function of mental imagery in apprehension idioms rested a controversial issue. Cacciari and Glucksberg (1995) carried on an experimental study to find out whether bringing forth mental images of idioms can ease their understanding. Their results seemed to reject both the possible connection between the literal mental image of an idiom and the figurative meaning of the idiom, and the facilitatory impact of mental imagery on comprehension.

Gibbs and O'Brien (1990) showed that mental imagery plays a role in idiomaticity in that the meanings of idioms are partially motivated by conventional images and conceptual meaning. The degree of comprehension may depend on certain characteristics of the idiom that is being perceived, e.g., imageability and semantic conceptualization.

As suggested by Gibbs & O'Brien (1990), forming (literal) mental images may facilitate the understanding of completely unfamiliar idioms, for instance, when help comes from the mapping of image-schemas that are mentally "pre-viewed." In this case, the success of the mapping in predicting a plausible interpretation of the unknown idiomatic expression may depend on a number of linguistic and experiential (e.g., cross-cultural validity) factors, for example, the degree of transparency of idioms.

Abel (2003) asserted that idiom entries do not exist in many cases, so processing will be possible only if conceptual representations are integrated. Conceptualization is a non-linguistic aspect of language that forms world knowledge. The distinction of lexical meaning and conceptual knowledge is supported by some studies (e.g., Potter, 1984; Potter and Kroll, 1987; de Groot 1992; Kroll and Sholl, 1992; Kroll, 1993; Kroll and Stewart, 1994). It was considered that for some idioms conceptual information activates the comprehension and interpretation of idioms. Idioms as a part of the language and culture reflect the transformation in conceptualization of the universe and the relationship between human beings and the universe. Motivating links are allowed for by the established image knowledge about the image (oftentimes culture-specific), and the conceptual metaphors that 'associate the image and the knowledge to the meaning of the idiom' (Lakoff 1987, P.450).

Though presumably the majority of idioms learners encounter are American due to the dominant role of American English on television and film, EFL learners also show tendency in learning and using such expressions. Studies of idiom processing have concentrated on the literal/figurative distinction and have looked at which aspect is processed first, or whether the literal and figurative meaning might perhaps be processed simultaneously when an idiom is encountered. Even though idioms are generally regarded as difficult to grasp because of their figurativeness and variability, even five-year-old children have been reported to understand certain idioms, although literal interpretations are more common until the children enter school and gradually acquire more figurative expressions in their language (Nippold and Martin 1989, Nippold and Rudzinski 1993).

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Idioms are composed of a fixed set of words that have significance conceptual role in language comprehension apart from their grammatical or logical one. The meanings of phrases and sentences are commonly derived from the meanings of their individual words and their syntactic structure. Therefore, investigation of the individual word meanings by the learner will not be sufficient for language comprehension. So the meaning of idioms is frequently comprehended literally by activating the L1 concept due to the lack of knowledge of all possible meanings a word or expression could have. Thus the learners have problems in understanding the meaning of idiom which is not predictable from the usual meaning of its parts. It is necessary to comprehend idioms through conceptualization that is appropriate to the situations in which may cause misunderstandings and miscommunications.

Even if those students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) might show a high degree of verbal fluency in their discourse, they seem to lack the conceptual appropriateness. They tend to speak or write with the formal structures of English but think in terms of their first language.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study sought to answer the following questions:

- 1-Does prior knowledge of an idiomatic phrase figurative meaning influence the mental image of native (American) and non-native (Iranian) English speakers based on phrase's literal meaning?
- 2-Can nonliteral interpretations of figurative phrases help native (American) and non-native (Iranian) English speakers conceptualize the literal meanings of idiomatic expressions?

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

This study comprised two groups of participants. The first group consisted of 25 (12 female and 13 male) undergraduate monolingual native English speakers who took part in a dissertation project as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy in 1997 by Heather Bortfeld at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. The data she obtained in her study from native English speakers was used in this study as baseline for comparison with non-native (Persian) English speakers. It is worth mentioning that the permission had been obtained

from Heather Bortfeld to apply the native English speakers' data she used in the fulfillment of her aforementioned dissertation. (See Appendix A)

The other group of participants included 25 (14 female and 11 male) Persian native speakers. All of the participants in this group were advanced EFL learners studying English as a foreign language at Nahid Foruzan Art and Cultural Institute in Isfahan. They were chosen based on the application of a Quick Placement Test (QPT).

B. Materials

All of the native English speakers who participated in Heather Bortfeld's study were paid five dollars for their participation in the experiment. There were 12 women and 13 men, and all identified themselves as native speakers of English. None reported the ability to speak another language to a degree that would allow them to be considered bilingual.

1. Proficiency Test

To select the required number of Non-native advanced learners, a quick placement test used to identify participant's proficiency level. The test consisted of two parts. The first part had 40 questions: 5 cloze passage questions, 15 preposition, grammar, pronoun, and vocabulary questions, and 20 completion questions. The second part had 20 questions: 10 cloze passage questions and 10 completion questions. All questions were multiple-choices. It was given to 90 EFL learners and those who scored between 48 and 55 (according to the test level chart) were selected to take part in the study.

2. Idioms

Twenty-five English idioms in native English were introduced to native English participants by Heather Bortfeld. The same idioms together with their Persian translations were given to native Persian participants (See Appendix B for the list of idioms in English and Persian).

C. Procedure

Three steps were included in this study: proficiency testing, pretesting to measure the participants' idiomatic knowledge, and conducting two sessions for the main experiment in which the participants were tested. In order to make it easy for non-native speakers (Persian speakers) to describe their mental images fully, they were encouraged to write in Persian if they found this idea helpful (almost all did so).

1. Pre-test

At this stage 25 English idioms in English were introduced to all participants. They were instructed to clarify those English phrases which they knew their idiomatic meanings and they were strongly asked to avoid guessing. In order to continue this research, native speakers had to answer at least 15 out of 25 idioms and non-native speakers had to answer maximum 10 out of 25.

2. First Session

In the first session, all participants in both studies were instructed to take three steps for each idiom: a) read both the idiomatic phrase (and the accompanying literal translation. (See Appendix B), b) form a mental image based on the literal meaning of the idiomatic phrase, and finally c) describe briefly in the provided space the first figurative meaning that came to their mind upon reading each English phrase. A "study sheet" listing the 25 idioms (in English only) with their phrases' idiomatic meanings (also in English— as defined in Boatner, Gates, & Makkai, 1995) was provided by the experimenter and was distributed among the participants. (See Appendix C).

3. Second Session

In the second session, both groups were again given the same set of instructions and a list of the 25 American English idioms in English. They were asked to read the list of idiomatic phrases carefully and to form and describe mental images based on the literal meanings of each phrase.

V. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

A. Investigating about the First Research Question

In order to test the validity of the first hypothesis, the general performances of the two groups in the first session were compared separately to their performances in the second session. Table 4.1 gives the descriptive statistics for this comparison and figure 4.1 illustrates the means graphically.

TABLE 4.1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR HYPOTHESIS ONE

Statistics	Persian		English	
	Session 1	Session 2	Session 1	Session 2
No.	25	25	25	25
Mean	7.56	18.80	18.44	21.12
SD	1.387	2.363	1.558	1.481
SEM	.277	.173	.311	.296

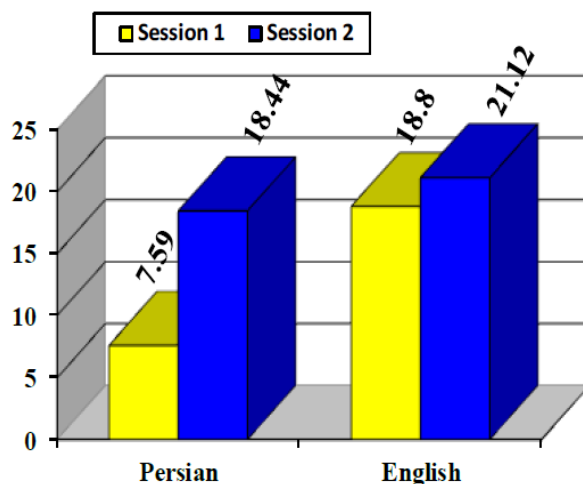


Fig. 4.1. Graphic representation of the means for hypothesis one

According to Table 4.1 and Figure 4.1, the amounts of means for both groups seemed to be different in the first and second sessions. In order to find out if the differences were statistically significant or not, two separate paired-sample *t*-tests were employed: one for the Persian participants and one for the English participants. Table 4.2 indicates the results of these *t*-tests.

TABLE 4.2
THE RESULTS OF T-TESTS FOR HYPOTHESIS ONE

Group	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Persian	-11.24	2.067	-27.186	24	.000
English	-2.68	1.796	-7.460	24	.000

As can be seen in Table 4.2, the amount of *t*-observed for both groups (Persian: *t*-observed= -27.186, *p*= .000; English= *t*-observed= -7.460, *p*= .000) is statistically significant. In other words, the performances of both groups were better in session two than in session one. Therefore, the first null hypothesis stating that “prior knowledge of an idiomatic phrase figurative meaning does not influence the mental image of native (American) and non-native (Iranian) English speakers based on phrase's literal meaning” can be rejected because both groups’ prior knowledge gained through the idiomatic definitions which were given to them after session one affected their mental image of the idioms.

B. Investigating about the Second Research Question

To test the validity of the second hypothesis, the three categories– that is, literal, figurative, and hybrid– for each group were compared separately for each session. Table 4.3 gives the descriptive statistics for this comparison.

TABLE 4.3
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR DIFFERENT CATEGORIES FOR DIFFERENT SESSIONS

Language	Statistics	Session one			Session two		
		L	F	H	L	F	H
Persian	No.	25	25	25	25	25	25
	Mean	2.84	2.00	2.72	4.40	3.72	10.68
	SD	.943	1.000	1.308	.707	1.021	1.749
	SEM	.1887	.2000	.262	.141	.204	.350
English	No.	25	25	25	25	25	25
	Mean	5.28	.44	12.72	5.92	1.12	14.08
	SD	1.173	.507	1.948	.997	.600	1.142
	SEM	.235	.101	.390	.199	.120	.282

L= literal; F= figurative; H= hybrid

It can be seen in Table 4.3 that concerning the native English speakers, the means for categories for sessions one and two didn't change much; however, these means for native Persian speakers changed dramatically, especially for hybrid category. Figures 4.2 and 4.3 illustrate the means for Persian and English speakers, respectively.

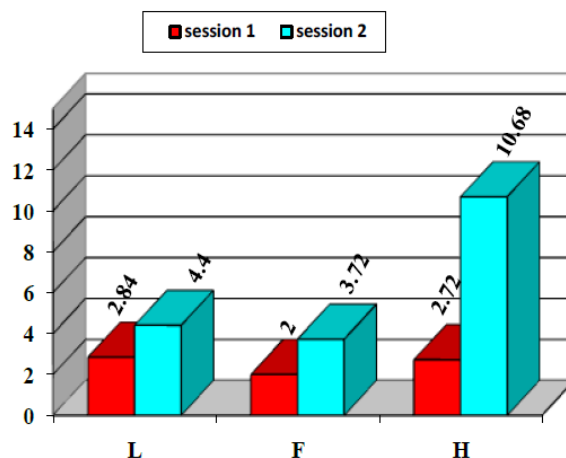


Figure 4.2. Means for Persian speakers

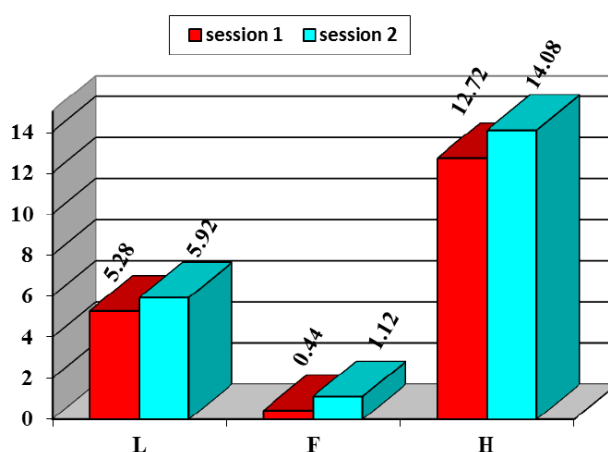


Figure 4.3. Means for English speakers

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Regarding the first question and according to the t-test, the findings of this study confirmed that prior knowledge of figurative meaning of an idiomatic phrase can influence the mental image which is made based on phrase's literal meaning by Persian native speakers and English native speakers. Both groups gained prior knowledge through the idiomatic definitions which were given to them after the first session, and the results indicated that the participants' mental images were affected by this knowledge. The performances of both groups were better in the second session (after receiving the knowledge) than in first session but for the Persian participants the difference was more significant. The statistics showed that native Persian speakers gave more hybrid images in the second session after they received the idiomatic definitions of the idioms. Regarding the second question, the statistics showed that nonliteral interpretation of figurative phrases cannot help native (American) and non-native (Iranian) English speakers conceptualize the literal meanings of idiomatic expressions. In fact, based on the analysis, having nonliteral definitions of idioms was not effective for native English speakers, but it was effective for Persian speakers, of course, not in terms of conceptualizing the literal meaning but in terms of giving hybrid image definitions. In other words, nonliteral interpretation of idiomatic phrases did not help Persian speakers give literal meaning of the phrases; rather, they gave hybrid definitions for them. In the case of English speakers, no special change was observed in their interpretation of the phrases.

The outcome of the current study is to some extent related to the results of a study by Cieslicka (2005). In none of them figurative meaning received priority. In her study 43 polish students took part, and she chose 40 idioms. Every idiom was planted in a neutral sentence, whose beginning did not affect the figurative reading of the upcoming idiom chain (e.g., 'Rose was planning to tie the knot later that day'). For every idiom two pairs of target words to be exhibited visually were built. One of them comprised of the word related to the figurative meaning of the idiomatic expression (e.g., the word BILL was an idiomatic target constructed for the sentence 'Rose was planning to tie the knot later that day') and the other one comprised of a literal target, which was semantically related to the literal meaning of the final word of the idiom (e.g., the word ROPE was a literal target built for the sentence 'Rose was planning to tie the knot later that day'). While listening to each sentence, subjects were visually demonstrated with a word related either to the figurative meaning of the idiom or to the literal meaning of the last word in the idiomatic chain and had to perform a lexical decision task on this word. The experiment demonstrated more loading for visual targets related to literal

meanings of idiom component words than for targets related figuratively to the metaphoric interpretation of the idiomatic phrase.

The results of this current study in the posttests indicated that figurative meaning of an idiomatic phrase could influence the mental image which was made based on phrase's literal meaning by native Persian speakers and native English speakers, and this effect was more on native Persian speakers than native English speakers. The other result was that, figurative meaning of an idiom helped neither native Persian speakers nor native English speakers conceptualize the literal meaning of that idiom, but only it helped native Persian speakers give hybrid definitions.

VII. IMPLICATIONS

First of all, this study may draw teachers' and researchers' attention to idiom learning and teaching in EFL contexts. Idioms are important means in transferring ideas among people, so the more idioms one learns to use, the more language fluency one will acquire. Idioms are an inseparable part of language and they can even make the learning process and communication easier. Recognizing the importance of idiomatic knowledge has several implications for English language teaching. Teachers need to know the types of idioms that their learners should be made aware of, and then they should find the most effective way for internalizing those idioms.

The second implication is that teachers need to pay more attention to problems that might come from interference of learners' L1 into idiom learning especially in EFL contexts. Better informed teachers are more able to recognize and determine the specific needs of their learners and this helps expanding idiomatic knowledge a lot.

The third implication of the study is that teachers require to apply suitable activities for teaching idioms. Activities require to be suitable for the type of idioms being taught besides as the needs and abilities of learners. Teachers also require to teach learners effective learning strategies that will alter them to independently formulate their idiomatic knowledge outside the classroom. L2 teachers should have and suggest different ways to help learners improve their idiomatic knowledge.

APPENDIX (A) PERMISSION FROM DR. HEATHER BORTFELD TO USE HER RESULTS OBTAINED FROM NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS

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Heather Bortfeld, Ph.D. Department of
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December 1, 2012

To Whom It May Concern:

Mahdi Rozati has my consent to use the data from my dissertation, collected from native English speakers, as the baseline comparison for ongoing work with native Persian speakers.

Sincerely,

Heather Bortfeld, Ph.D.

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APPENDIX (B) LIST OF IDIOMS IN ENGLISH AND THEIR LITERAL TRANSLATION IN PERSIAN

به نام خدا
دانش آموز گرامی
اصطلاحات زیر به همراه ترجمه تحت اللفظی آنها را مطالعه نموده و بر اساس آن معنای تلویحی برای هر کدام بنویسید. (منظور معنایی است که مورد نظر بومی زبانان انگلیسی است).

No.	English Idiom	Literal translation in Persian
1.	Blow your stack	به خرمن زدن
2.	Hit the ceiling	به سقف زدن
3.	Lose your cool	خونسردی خود را از دست دادن
4.	Foam at the mouth	کف به دهان آوردن
5.	Flip your lid	پلک زدن
6.	Crack the whip	شلاق را به صدادر آوردن
7.	Lay down the law	کنار گذاشتن قانون
8.	Call the Shots	توپ را گرفتن
9.	wear the pants	شلوار پوشیدن
10.	Keep the ball rolling	توپ را در حرکت نگه داشتن
11.	Keep it under your hat	چیزی را در زیر کلاه نگه داشتن
12.	Button your lips	لبهای خود را دوختن
13.	Hold your tongue	زبان خود را نگه داشتن
14.	Behind one's back	پشت سر کسی بودن
15.	Keep in the dark	در تاریکی نگه داشتن
16.	Go off your rocker	از صندلی خود در رفتن
17.	lose your marbles	تبله های خود را گم کردن
18.	Go to pieces	تکه شدن
19.	Lose your grip	قلاب خود را رها کردن
20.	Bounce off the walls	از دیوار بالاوپائین جستن
21.	Spill the beans	لوبیاها را ریختن
22.	Let the cat out of the bag	به گربه اجازه خروج از کیسه دادن
23.	Blow the whistle	سوت زدن
24.	Blow the lid off	درپوش را برداشتن
25.	Loose lips	لبها را گم کردن

APPENDIX (C) LIST OF IDIOMS AND THEIR FIGURATIVE MEANINGS IN ENGLISH

No.	English Idiom	Figurative meaning in English
1.	Blow your stack	To suddenly become very angry
2.	Hit the ceiling	To get very angry
3.	Lose your cool	To suddenly become very angry
4.	Foam at the mouth	To be extraordinarily angry
5.	Flip your lid	to suddenly become very angry
6.	Crack the whip	To use your authority to make someone work harder
7.	Lay down the law	To tell people what they must do, without caring about their opinions
8.	Call the Shots	To decide what is to be done
9.	wear the pants	To be the person in charge in a marriage or family
10.	Keep the ball rolling	To cause something that is in progress to continue
11.	Keep it under your hat	To keep something a secret
12.	Button your lips	Keep quiet and don't speak
13.	Hold your tongue	You have said enough
14.	Behind one's back	Without someone's knowledge
15.	Keep in the dark	To not tell someone about something
16.	Go off your rocker	Someone who is crazy
17.	lose your marbles	To lose one's mind
18.	Go to pieces	To have a mental collapse
19.	Lose your grip	To be unable to control something
20.	Bounce off the walls	To be very Excited about something
21.	Spill the beans	To give away a secret or a surprise
22.	Let the cat out of the bag	To reveal a secret or a surprise by accident.
23.	Blow the whistle	To report someone's wrongdoing to someone
24.	Blow the lid off	To expose something to public view
25.	Loose lips	Don't talk carelessly

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