Effects of literal plausibility and predictability on the suppression of irrelevant literal meanings in idiom processing

Anna Cieślicka (School of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań)

One of the issues discussed with respect to idiomatic expressions has been the varying availability of literal and figurative senses of idioms in the course of their comprehension by language users. While a number of theoretical proposals have postulated that literal meanings of idiom constituent words are processed first, before retrieving the idiom's figurative meaning (Bobrow and Bell, 1973), others have emphasized the faster availability and/or processing priority of figurative over literal meanings (Gibbs, 1980, 1985; Swinney and Cutler, 1979). More recent, hybrid approaches to idiom processing (Giora, 1997, 1999, 2002, 2003; Titone and Connine 1999) recognize the role of both literal and figurative senses of idiom constituents in their on-line processing by language users. Most current idiom processing models also acknowledge, after Gernsbacher and Robertson (1999), that deriving an idiomatic meaning entails the simultaneous suppression of contextually inappropriate, literal meanings of idiom constituent words. The onset of the suppression mechanism has been shown to be determined by such factors as idiom predictability, literality, analyzability, as well as the surrounding context.

Effects of literality on the comprehension of idiomatic expressions have been demonstrated in a series of experiments conducted by Titone and Connine (1994), who found that literality determines the activation of idioms' literal and figurative meanings during their processing. Analysis of participants' reaction time data from the cross-modal priming study revealed that, while literally plausible idioms showed less activation of the figurative meaning and more activation of the literal meaning of the last word of the idiom string, nonliteral idioms did not demonstrate a comparable activation of the literal meanings of idiom constituents.

Similarly, the dimension of idiom predictability has been found to significantly affect the time course of activation of literal and idiomatic meanings of the idiom string during its comprehension. In their cross-modal study, Cacciari and Tabossi (1988) found that when processing high-predictable idioms, only their figurative meanings were activated by the time the last word of an idiomatic string was encountered. On the other hand, with low-predictable idioms,

whose figurative meanings do not become obvious until after the whole string has been processed, only the literal meaning was found to be active at the end of the idiomatic phrase. This suggests that idiomatic meanings of high-predictable idioms may be accessed faster, allowing an earlier suppression of literal meanings of idiom constituents.

The study reported in this paper aims to investigate the role of literal plausibility and predictability in suppressing irrelevant, literal meanings of idioms in the course of their processing by second (L2) language learners. To assess the varying availability of idioms' literal meanings as a function of literality and predictability, a visual lexical decision task was designed for a group of advanced Polish learners of English. Following the visual display of an L2 idiom in a self-paced reading procedure, each participant saw a literal or an idiomatic target. The L2 idioms were presented in a neutral sentence and they varied in terms of their literal plausibility and predictability. Reaction times to targets accompanying high-versus low-predictable and literal versus nonliteral idioms were next analyzed to evaluate the role of literality and predictability in enhancing the onset of the suppression mechanism.

Bobrow, Samuel A.- Susan M. Bell

    1973   "On catching on to idiomatic expressions", *Memory and Cognition* 1(3): 342-346.

Cacciari, Cristina, Tabossi, Patrizia, 1988. "The comprehension of idioms", *Journal of Memory and Language*

        27, 668-683.

Gernsbacher, Ann M. – Rachel R. Robertson

    1999 "The role of suppression in figurative language comprehension", *Journal of Pragmatics,* 31,

        1619-1630.

Gibbs, Raymond W.

    1980 "Spilling the beans on understanding and memory for idioms in conversation", *Memory and Cognition* 8 (2): 149-156.

Gibbs, Raymond W.

1985   "On the process of understanding idioms", *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 14(5): 465-

472.

Giora, Rachel

1997 "Understanding figurative and literal language: The graded salience hypothesis", *Cognitive*

Linguistics 8(3): 183-206.

Giora, Rachel

1999 "On the priority of salient meanings: Studies of literal and figurative language", Journal of

Pragmatics 31(7): 919-929.

Giora, Rachel

2002 "Literal vs. figurative language: Different or equal?", *Journal of Pragmatics* 34(4): 487-506.

Giora, Rachel

2003   On our mind: Salience, context, and figurative language. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Swinney, David A. – Anne Cutler

1979 "The access and processing of idiomatic expressions", *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal*

Behavior 18: 523-534.

Titone, Debra A. – Cynthia M. Connine

1994. "Comprehension of idiomatic expressions: Effects of predictability and literality", Journal of

Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition 20(5): 1126-1138.

Titone, Debra A. – Cynthia M. Connine

1999 "On the compositional and noncompositional nature of idiomatic expressions", Journal of

Pragmatics 31(12): 1655-1674.