

Idiom comprehension in aphasic populations

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The aim of the present paper is to provide an insight into the issue of idiom comprehension in patients who are in the process of recovery from the syndrome of aphasia. Research in figurative language comprehension has seen a robust development in the recent decades. However, it has not been until quite recently that psycholinguists began to delve into the aspect of metaphorical language comprehension in brain damaged populations. It was observed that even though the ability to produce and understand language is recovered in the majority of patients with cranial trauma, the impairment of some aspects of comprehension may protract. The understanding of idioms, metaphors, similes and proverbs, due to their specific, non-literal character, has been evidenced to pose a serious problem to aphasic patients, as they fail to decipher the figurative meaning of the utterance, and, instead, tend to process the message literally (Papagno et al. 2004).

In the present study three patients who suffered from aphasic disorder were tested for comprehension of idioms by means of two multiple choice tasks. The stimuli for the experiment comprised a battery of 60 idiomatic phrases in Polish, distributed equally across six categories of idioms. In the first task the patients were supposed to choose a correct paraphrase of a given idiom from the three presented options – a figurative paraphrase, a literal paraphrase and a random sentence. The second task necessitated a choice of a correct paraphrase of an idiom from three options – a figurative paraphrase, an unrelated paraphrase containing one of the words from the idiom and a random sentence. Identical tasks were also conducted on three matched controls with no reported language deficits.

The obtained results corroborated the hypothesis that patients who are in the process of recovery from aphasia encounter various pitfalls in the comprehension of idiomatic language. Predominantly, they exhibit an inclination to choose the erroneous, literal paraphrases of the presented idioms over their correct, idiomatic counterparts. This implies that the intricacy of idiomatic phrases' processing constitutes an immense difficulty for patients diagnosed with aphasia. The feasible explanations for such a state of affairs include the lack of control over suppression mechanisms (Cacciari et al. 2006) or the inability to access the learned, idiomatic meanings (Papagno et al. 2007).

Bibliography

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