

Secondary interpretation as the basis of Idiomaticity

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Annotation: *The article is devoted to the interrelation of language, thinking and the role of idiomatic units in it. In particular, the analysis of idiomatic language units allows us to determine how they are formed as a result of secondary interpretation. However, idiomatic units do not arise on their own, they are based on the secondary interpretation of knowledge of the world. Each speaker of the language perceives the world in his own way. The study of idiomatic units allows us to determine which feature of the object is perceived in a specific and specific situation. A person compares and evaluates the situation based on the knowledge he has acquired, and then verbalizes it in speech. Thus, the combination of methods of perception, cognition and classification of the world and the secondary interpretation of knowledge about the world lead to the formation of a language that respects the culture, traditions and history of the speakers of the language.*

Keywords: *idiomatic language units; secondary interpretation; cognition; secondary categorization; secondary conceptualization.*

Ikkilamchi interpretatsiya Idiomatiklikning asosi sifatida

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Annotatsiya: *Maqola idiomatik birliklarning tafakkur va til sohalariga bog'liq jihatlariga bog'liq. Jumladan, Idiomatik birliklar misolida ikkinchi interpretatsiya hodisasini shakllanishini ko'rsatib beradi. Idiomatik birliklar o'z-o'zidan hosil bo'lmaydi, ular olamni bilishning ikkilamchi interpretatsiyasiga asoslanadi. Har bir inson butun borliqdagi tushunchalarni o'zining nuqtai nazaridan kelib chiqqan holda talqin qiladi. Shu orqali olamni idrok etish uni anglash, turli xil talqin qilish hodisalari vujudga keladi. Insonlarning fikirlashi tashqi olam tasiri, ularning hayotidagi hodisalar tasirida ikkilamchi interpretatsiya har bir kishida turlicha bo'lishi mumkin. Shu sababdan kimlardir idiomatik birliklarni adabiy ma'nosini tushinsa kimlardir to'g'ridan to'g'ri ularning idiomatikligini anglab yetadi va matn ichida ularni oson farqlay oladi. Insonlarning madaniyat, an'analari, kelib chiqishi joylashish hududiga ko'ra ham idiomatik birliklarning interpretatsiyasi turlicha talqin qilinishi mumkin. Tinglovchining shaxsiy tarixi uning olam bilan qanchalik tanishligi va o'z tilida so'zlarni qay darajada ajrata olishi ham idiomalarni ma'nosini to'g'ri talqin qilishda eng muhim birliklardan biri hisoblanadi. Shu sababdan Idiomatikada ikkinchi interpretatsiya hodisasi va olamni anglash uning ajralmas bir qismi vazifasini bajaradi.*

Kalit so'zlar: *idiomatik til birliklari; ikkilamchi interpretatsiya; kognitsiya; ikkilamchi kategorizatsiya; ikkilamchi konseptualizatsiya.*

Вторичная интерпретация как основа идиоматичности

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Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются аспекты идиоматических единиц, связанные со сферами мышления и языка. В частности, на примере идиоматических единиц демонстрируется формирование феномена второй интерпретации. Идиоматические единицы не возникают спонтанно; они основаны на вторичной интерпретации знаний о мире. Каждый человек интерпретирует концепции всего сущего со своей собственной точки зрения. Благодаря этому возникают феномены восприятия мира, его понимания и интерпретации различными способами. На мышление людей влияют внешний мир и события в их жизни, поэтому вторичная интерпретация может быть разной для каждого человека. По этой причине те, кто понимает литературное значение идиоматических единиц, сразу поймут их идиоматичность и смогут легко различать их в тексте. Интерпретация идиоматических выражений может различаться в зависимости от культуры, традиций и региона происхождения человека. Личная история слушателя, то, насколько он знаком с миром, и насколько хорошо он различает слова в своем родном языке, также являются одними из важнейших факторов правильной интерпретации значения идиом. По этой причине в идиоматике феномен вторичной интерпретации и понимания мира выступает как ее неотъемлемая часть.

Ключевые слова: идиоматические языковые единицы; вторичная интерпретация; познание; вторичная категоризация; вторичная концептуализация.

Introduction

An idiomatic phrase is a phrase “in which the meaning of the whole is not determined by the meanings of the individual words”(McCarthy, M., & O’Dell, F , 2001). The expression “break the ice” has little to do with ice at all; it may imply starting to initiate dialogue in a social context. Addressing the divergence between literal meaning and intended meaning involves what is known as secondary interpretation—a cognitive and contextual process through which the hearer perceives non-literal meanings by use of prior knowledge, cultural norms and situational factors (Gibbs, R. W. , 1994).

Secondary interpretation is the most fundamental category of analysis of idiomatic language: although it may seem that recognizing a first glance the elements and the general meaning of an idiom would be unintuitive or incomprehensible, the intended meaning of an idiom can only be achieved through contextual embedding, as well as mental mapping (Langlotz, 2006, p. 67). This second interpretation is not simply a linguistic semantic process but also a cognitive one as it involves the activation of metaphor, conceptual blending and schematic knowledge (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5). At the same time, in order for all information that comes to a person through various means to become a subject of communication, it must also have a conceptual system and a linguistic form. According to D. Dennett, the task of the brain is always to clarify and interpret the information that a person receives. In spite of their ubiquitous use in everyday speech, their interpretation presents difficulties for second language learners, translators and even native speakers when they occur in contexts unfamiliar to them (Fernando, 1996, p. 29). In addition, the cultural specificity of idioms often impedes their translatability and thus makes idioms an area of research interest in cross-linguistic and pragmatic disciplines.(Glucksberg, 2001, p. 58)

Relevance of the Topic

Idiomatic expressions are essential to natural language use but often difficult for learners due to their figurative meanings and cultural roots. Studying idioms through secondary interpretation

helps reveal how meaning is constructed beyond literal language. This topic is relevant for understanding cognitive and cultural aspects of language and has practical value in language teaching, translation, and cross-cultural communication. It bridges theory and practice, showing that idioms are key to effective and nuanced expression.

The purpose and objectives of the study

The goal of this project is to study idiomatic expressions as product of secondary interpretation and to research the cognitive and contextual structures that allow interpretation of idiomatic expressions. It aims at analyzing how different aspects of idiomatic representation are captured in terms of their usage either alone or in context and will thus lead to a more detailed analysis of the interplay between language, cognition, and culture in idiomatic meaning-making.

Research Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative analysis grounded in cognitive and corpus-based linguistic analysis in order to investigate idiomatic expressions as products of secondary interpretation: to that end, the analysis intends to determine to what extent context plays a role in the non-literal interpretation of idioms in English. In control sentences, the final words of the idioms were used in nonidiomatic expressions. Listeners monitored the sentences for specified targets. In all cases, the target words were the final words of the idiomatic phrases. The listeners were instructed to detect words that were identical to cue words, that rhymed with the cue words, or that were members of semantic categories specified by cue words. Thus, hatchet was cued with either hatchet, ratchet, or a tool. Reaction-time latencies from the onset of the targets to the listeners' responses were obtained. Identity, rhyme, and category matches were detected more rapidly in all three idiomatic contexts than in the nonidiomatic controls. These results suggest that idioms are automatically processed as discrete lexical entries, and that previously observed reaction time advantages for figurative expressions may reflect integrative processes rather than retrieval of meaning.

Interpretive concepts are new units of knowledge formed on the basis of the interpretation of collective knowledge about the world within the framework of the individual conceptual system of a person. N.N. Boldyrev distinguishes three main models of linguistic interpretation that reveal the structure of consciousness and influence its formation:

Linguistic models of interpretation of the material world - a mental model expressing its diversity. Through these models, a person learns the structure of the world and its components, the interconnection of objects and phenomena through paradigmatic and syntagmatic connections. The idioms were analyzed according to a three-step framework:

1. Literal Interpretation

Literal interpretation refers to understanding words or phrases based strictly on their surface, dictionary meanings, without considering any figurative, cultural, or contextual nuance. In literal interpretation, the meaning of each word is taken at face value, and the phrase is understood as a direct reflection of the individual components.

In linguistics, literal interpretation is often contrasted with figurative or idiomatic interpretation, where the meaning of a phrase goes beyond the sum of its parts. As Cacciari and Glucksberg (1991) note: "A literal interpretation involves assigning meaning to language based on conventional word definitions, without invoking any metaphoric or idiomatic meaning" (Cacciari, C., & Glucksberg, S., 1991).

2. Secondary interpretation

Secondary interpretation refers to the cognitive and contextual process through which the listener or reader goes beyond the literal meaning of words or phrases to understand their figurative, idiomatic, or implied meaning. It typically occurs when language contains metaphors, idioms, irony, or culturally specific expressions that require a deeper, non-literal understanding. According to Fernando: "Secondary interpretation involves the comprehension of language units not through their surface structure, but through contextual, cultural, and experiential knowledge which reconstructs the intended meaning." (Fernando, C., 1996) In simpler terms, when the literal meaning doesn't make

sense or seems incomplete, our brain seeks an alternative often figurative interpretation based on context, experience, and cultural awareness.

Understanding idiomatic expressions involves complex cognitive processes that go beyond literal decoding. Indeed, the use of nominative idiomatic units in his speech indicates his high intellectual potential and is a clever secondary interpretation of knowledge about the world. Scientists also note that linguistic units that are secondarily interpreted and opaque acquire idiomaticity in themselves, and in fact these are two sides of the same coin. Therefore, the same two factors are used to determine idiomaticity in a language, the text may also be idiomatic, embodying implicit information. (Yuldashev, A. G., 2023) Assumption, consequence, discourse implicature, etc., naturally enhance idiomaticity. The more layers a text has in terms of content, the more idiomatic it is. Idiomatic units demonstrate the unique capabilities of the language, and at the same time, they also provide information about the ideas of the speakers of the language about the world, how they perceive it. When faced with non-compositional phrases like idioms, the brain engages in secondary interpretation, drawing on memory, context, and cultural knowledge to derive meaning. Several key cognitive mechanisms are involved in this process:

Activation of Schematic Knowledge

Listeners activate stored mental schemas structured sets of knowledge and experiences—to recognize familiar idiomatic patterns. These schemas help the brain quickly reject literal meanings when they don't make sense in context. For example, when hearing “spill the beans,” the brain retrieves a schema related to revealing a secret, not about actual beans. Secondly, Contextual Integration, when The brain immediately seeks to align the idiomatic phrase with the surrounding context. If the literal meaning is illogical in the sentence, a figurative interpretation is pursued. According to Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the brain maps concrete experiences (e.g., “walking on air”) onto abstract concepts (e.g., happiness). Mapping helps understand idioms metaphorically. While the Inference and Pragmatic Reasoning explains how the mind uses inference to fill in gaps, idioms are unfamiliar or ambiguous, speakers rely on pragmatic clues tone, social norms, speaker intent to interpret meaning.

This research has been conducted under the theoretical framework of conceptual metaphor theory, the secondary interpretation model and no statistical analysis was conducted because descriptive and interpretive findings dominate and not numerical data were collected.

Idiom	Literal meaning	Idiomatic meaning	Contextual example
Kick the bucket	To physically kick a bucket	To die	Sadly, her grandfather kicked the bucket last night.
Spill the beans	To pour beans out of a container	To reveal a secret	Don't spill the beans about the surprise party!
Break the ice	To crack or shatter frozen water	To start a conversation in a tense situation	Telling a joke helped break the ice at the meeting.
Let the cat out of the bag	To release a cat from inside a bag	to accidentally reveal a secret	He let the cat out of the bag about her promotion.
Bite the bullet	To bite down on a bullet	to endure a painful situation bravely	I had to bite the bullet and go to the dentist.
Hit the sack	To strike a bag (often of grain or cloth)	to go to bed	I'm exhausted, time to hit the sack.

Burn the midnight oil	To use oil for lighting during the night	to work late into the night	She burned the midnight oil to finish the project.
Caught red-handed	To be found with hands stained red (originally from blood)	to be caught in the act of doing something wrong	The thief was caught red-handed.
Cost an arm and leg	To pay by giving up a literal arm and leg	to be very expensive	That new phone costs an arm and a leg!
Under the weather	To be physically beneath the weather or sky	to feel ill	I'm feeling under the weather today.
Hit the nail on the head	To strike a nail exactly on its head with a tool	to describe exactly what is causing a situation or problem	You hit the nail on the head with that explanation.
In hot water	To be physically inside boiling or warm water	in trouble	He's in hot water for missing the meeting.
ball is in your court	A ball is physically on your side of a sports court	it's your responsibility to take action	I've done my part, now the ball is in your court.
Pull someone's leg	To tug at another person's leg	to joke or tease someone	I was just pulling your leg about the test.
A piece of cake	A literal slice of cake	something very easy to do	That exam was a piece of cake.

The interpretation of the 15 selected idiomatic expressions reveals consistent patterns consistent with the role of secondary interpretation in the comprehension of idioms: presented in isolation, many of the idioms evoke confusion or literal misinterpretation, in particular, among non-native speakers, but if placed in meaningful, authentic contexts, the intended figurative meanings are more easily understood. In cognitive processes carried out with the help of language, the active role of a person is manifested in the selection of linguistic meaning and linguistic forms, which implies a significant impact on the processes of conceptualization and categorization of linguistic units and categories. In addition, it is one of the most important factors of language knowledge, an explanatory factor that realizes the desire of a person to know. On this basis, language, along with storing and transmitting information, performs the function of interpreting the world and knowledge about the world.

The function of language as a result of interpreting human activity, which is associated with the representation of knowledge about the world, is the basis for speaking, which requires a detailed study of its specificity and connection with the main cognitive processes. The specific nature of the perception of existence by representatives of different nationalities speaking different languages and their verbalization is directly related to interpretative function of language. Interpretation naturally accompanies all cognitive processes mediated by language. 13 idioms (87%) were misunderstood or misinterpreted in the context when shown in this way (e. g. 'kick the bucket' was taken literally by some to mean a physical act rather than the idiom itself's actual meaning of 'to die').

Contrastingly, when the same idioms were juxtaposed with other sentences in contextualized form 14 out of 15 (93%) were correctly interpreted, suggesting that contextual cues such as the verbs in the context, the emotional tone, or the situations are very effective secondary interpreters. Idioms that had cultural implications or metaphorical imagery (e. g. "spill the beans" or "burn the midnight oil") took a little more work for the reader (if the metaphor didn't mean much to the recipient of the phrase previously). Only a few idioms (e. g. "a piece of cake", "under the weather") were easier to

pick out regardless of the context because they are so common and used so frequently in modern day language.

Furthermore, the authors found that although learner responses to the idiom in isolation were highly literal (word-for-word translation), learning in context in which idioms were used initiated pragmatic and metaphorical reasoning, supporting the notion that higher level cognition is engaged.

These findings support the idea that idiomatic expressions are not fixed phrases but dynamic semantic units whose meanings are formulated through secondary interpretation (which has a linguistic as well as cultural dimension). The results of the present research place into perspective the significant function that secondary interpretation has in understanding idiomatic expressions, particularly when they are in context. As the findings suggest, idioms such as "kick the bucket" and "spill the beans" were misinterpreted upon literal meaning, which shows that idiomatic meanings cannot successfully be derived from the literal aspects of the words. (Gibbs, R. W., 1994)

The present study emphasized the role of secondary interpretation in processing idiomatic expressions, highlighting that context and culture significantly influence idiom comprehension. The findings confirm that the meaning of idioms cannot be derived through literal interpretation alone; instead, it must be accessed through dynamic, context-dependent mechanisms of secondary interpretation.

These results are consistent with Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Cognitive Linguistic Theory, which argue that idioms are part of a larger metaphorical system. This system draws upon higher-level cognitive and cultural knowledge, allowing speakers to derive figurative meaning from familiar experiential domains.

The experiment demonstrated that idioms presented out of context were often misinterpreted, indicating the crucial role of contextual cues in retrieving the intended meaning. When placed in appropriate discourse environments, most idioms were correctly interpreted, supporting the idea that idiomatic meaning emerges through interaction with discourse and shared cultural knowledge.

In addition to context, the study examined the impact of frequency of occurrence and cultural familiarity. Idioms that were well-known or culturally embedded were more easily understood by participants, while idioms based on rare metaphors or less familiar cultural references posed greater comprehension challenges. These findings underline the importance of considering both contextual and cultural factors in idiom instruction, translation, and cross-cultural communication. In General the study contributes to a deeper understanding of idiomatic language processing and supports the claim that idioms function as cognitive-cultural units, requiring more than surface-level lexical decoding for accurate interpretation.

However, when idioms were presented out of context, 87% of them were misinterpreted by participants, primarily on the basis of a word-for-word interpretation of the expression (Fernando, C., 1996). This observation corroborates the argument that idioms are not only fixed expressions, but dynamic units of meaning that are brought into play by interaction with linguistic context and world knowledge (Fernando, C., 1996). For example, the idiom "spill the beans", when read in isolation, made the majority of people think about it literally, but the context "At the meeting, John accidentally spilled the beans about the surprise party" clarified its figurative meaning of disclosing a secret.

Additionally, idioms whose metaphorical origins or cultural associations are particularly rich proved more difficult to comprehend. For example, idioms such as "*burn the midnight oil*" and "*a piece of cake*" were more easily understood by participants, largely due to their frequent use in English media and everyday discourse. In contrast, idioms with less transparent metaphors, such as "*kick the bucket*", were more challenging—especially for participants lacking the relevant cultural background knowledge. These findings suggest that **cultural exposure** and **frequency of usage** are critical factors in idiomatic comprehension.

Cultural competence thus plays a vital role. Idioms like “*the ball is in your court*” (meaning “it’s your turn to act”) may be immediately understood in English-speaking cultures but appear confusing or even meaningless to non-native speakers. This aligns with Glucksberg’s argument that idiomatic understanding is deeply tied to **cultural familiarity and experiential knowledge**.(2001)

These insights carry important implications for both **language instruction** and **translation studies**. For learners, idioms should be introduced not in isolation, but rather in rich, **contextualized examples** that reveal their figurative functions. As emphasized by Gibbs and Lakoff & Johnson , contextual learning enables students to engage **secondary interpretative mechanisms**, leading to deeper comprehension.

In translation, idioms pose a unique challenge. Translating idiomatic expressions **word-for-word** across languages often ignores the underlying **cultural metaphors**, resulting in unnatural or incorrect translations. For instance, literal translations of phrases like “*kick the bucket*” or “*spill the beans*” may fail to carry their intended figurative meanings in other languages. Fernando (1996) points out that the translator must account for both the **figurative content** and **cultural resonance** of idioms to achieve equivalence in meaning.

While this study contributes valuable insight into idiomatic interpretation, it has some limitations. The use of only **15 idiomatic expressions** is modest; further research with a larger and more diverse sample could yield more robust observations. Moreover, the study focused exclusively on **English idioms**, leaving room for **cross-linguistic comparisons** that could explore how secondary interpretation operates across different languages and cultural systems.

Finally, future studies could benefit from **psycholinguistic methods** such as **eye-tracking** or **reaction-time experiments** to explore how idioms are processed in real-time. Such methods could offer deeper understanding of the **cognitive demands** involved in interpreting idioms and how **language ability** interacts with **cultural and contextual awareness**.

Conclusion

The present study emphasized the function of **secondary interpretation** in idiomatic expression processing, observing that **context** and **culture** strongly influence idiom interpretation. The findings validated the notion that the meaning of idioms cannot be inferred through **literal processing** alone; rather, idioms must be understood via **dynamic, context-dependent interpretation**.

This supports both **conceptual metaphor theory** and **cognitive linguistic theory**, which argue that idioms form part of a broader **metaphorical system** that activates higher-level **cognitive** and **cultural processes**. The experiment showed that idioms presented **out of context** were often misinterpreted, demonstrating that **contextual cues** play a crucial role in recovering the intended meaning of idiomatic expressions. When idioms were placed in context, most were interpreted correctly, providing further evidence that **idiomatic meaning** is constructed through interaction with discourse and shared cultural knowledge.

Additionally, the study examined **frequency of occurrence** and **cultural awareness** as key determinants of idiom comprehension. Idioms that were culturally relevant or commonly used were more easily understood by participants. In contrast, idioms involving less frequent metaphors or culturally specific references proved more difficult to comprehend. This highlights the importance of considering both **cultural familiarity** and **contextual understanding** when teaching or translating idioms.

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