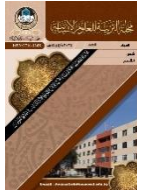




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Psycholinguistic Analysis of some common English Expressions: Perceptive Insights

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Abstract

Extensive effort is made in the past years in linguistics regarding the mechanisms by which representations of expressions are stored, accessed, and processed. This research intends to establish a rudimentary, but basic and affected point about the activation-status of parts of English expressions when and after they are processed. To help explain how the human language capacity deals with idiomatic meaning of those expressions in a spoken language, expressly or impliedly.

(Holsinger and Kaiser 1978) and Swinney (1979) These two models are just foundational models among a lot of models in relation to the work. This paper arises two main questions: (1) What role do the parts of an expression play in its access and processing? (2) will the parts of expression be activated strongly enough to comprehend this expression, or the parts of expression fall out of an excited state (comprehension state) because they are not useful, having been eclipsed by the idiomatic meaning of the expression

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مجلة علمية فصلية محكمة، تصدر عن كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية / جامعة الموصل



تحليل علم اللغة النفسي لبعض العبارات الانكليزية الشائعة: رؤى معرفية

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الملخص

معلومات الارشفة

بُذلت جهودٌ واسعة النطاق في السنوات الماضية في مجال اللسانيات الاجتماعية و اللغويات فيما يخص بالآليات التي تُخزّن بها تمثيلات التعبيرات (البيانات) ومعالجتها (الفهم و الاستيعاب). يهدف هذا البحث إلى الاخذ بنظر الاعتبار نقطة بدائية، ولكنها أساسية ومؤثرة، وهي حالة تفعيل أجزاء العبارات الإنجليزية عند معالجتها وبعدها. وهذا الاسلوب في التعامل مع المفردة يساعد في تفسير كيفية تعامل قدرة اللغة البشرية مع المعنى الاصطلاحي لتلك التعبيرات في اللغة المنطوقة، صراحةً أو ضمناً. (هولسينجر وكايزر 1978) وسويني (1979). يُعد هذان النموذجان مجرد نموذجين أساسيين من بين العديد من النماذج المتعلقة بهذا العمل. تطرح هذه الورقة سؤالين رئيسيين: (1) ما الدور الذي تلعبه أجزاء التعبير في الوصول إليه ومعالجته؟ (2) هل تفعيل أجزاء التعبير بقوة وسيلة كافية لفهم هذا التعبير، أم ستفقد أجزاء التعبير حالة الفهم لعدم فائدتها، بعد أن طغى عليها المعنى الاصطلاحي للتعبير؟

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Introduction

Mental representations are core to prescientific psychology, but psychology does not present a rigorous definition of representation. physics provides, rigorously, a definition of mass and energy. Representation, rigorously, is defined as, a mathematical and computational concept.

Activation means the cognitive process by which linguistic representations (such as words, concepts, or grammatical structures) stored in memory become temporarily more accessible or "active" during language comprehension or production. Key aspects of activation:

1. Core metaphor for processing: Activation serves as an important metaphor in computational and cognitive models of language, representing the amount of "energy" or accessibility assigned to linguistic units during processing.
2. Spreading activation: A central principle where activation spreads from one representation to connected nodes in a network. For example, when you hear or read a word like "doctor," related concepts (e.g., "hospital," "nurse") become partially activated through associative links in the mental lexicon.
3. Lexical access: During word recognition or speech production, multiple lexical candidates are simultaneously activated. The correct word is selected when its activation level exceeds a threshold, while competitors may be inhibited. This explains phenomena like:
 - Semantic priming: Faster recognition of a target word (e.g., "nurse") when preceded by a related word ("doctor")
 - Speech errors: When a highly activated but incorrect word is selected (e.g., saying "fork" instead of "spoon")
4. Interactive activation models: Frameworks like the TRACE model for speech perception or Levelt's model of speech production use activation levels across multiple processing levels (features → phonemes → words → concepts) that interact bidirectionally to facilitate efficient language processing.

5. Bilingual contexts: In multilingual speakers, activation often occurs across languages simultaneously ("language co-activation"), where words from both languages become activated during processing, requiring additional control mechanisms to select the target language.

In psycholinguistics, compositionality is not just a theoretical ideal—it is treated as a psychologically real processing strategy that the human language system uses to efficiently construct meaning online. Compositionality (Principle of Compositionality) is the fundamental idea that the meaning of a complex linguistic expression (e.g., a phrase or sentence) is determined systematically from:

1. The meanings of its constituent parts (words/morphemes)
2. The syntactic rules that combine them.

This principle is often attributed to the philosopher Gottlob Frege and is sometimes called Frege's Principle.

Whatever the specific interpretation of compositionality, idioms have a semantics that is different from what would be created if we applied the regular rules of semantic interpretation.

Geeraerts argues that the semantic specialization of idioms is a matter of degree, and that semantic interpretation is not just a question of bottom-up compositionality or literal-to-figurative transfer; the reinterpretation processes that can be observed in idioms point to the existence of top-down and figurative-to-literal interpretations.

All authors, in this volume, agree that complex units are syntactic expressions which exhibit lexical co-occurrence restrictions that cannot be explained in terms of regular rule-governed syntactic or semantic restrictions. The fact that "kick the bucket" means 'die' does not follow from any underlying principle or from our knowledge of the world. The fact that we have to say "spill the beans" and not to say "spill the peas" does not follow from any grammatical rule but simply has to be learned, even if we assume that this expression is semantically compositional or analyzable. This means, one could say that complex expressions are complex expression by convention, and an expression have to be explicitly learned and remembered. There are some limitations, Often these limitations are grammatical principles, and other limitations are restricted

in form because of extralinguistic factors. So we can say that the topic of this research is conventionalized complex expressions.

Literature Review / Theoretical Framework

This review examines several influential theories and perspectives pertinent to our subject, with idioms serving as a particularly illustrative case. Idioms—fixed multiword expressions whose overall meaning cannot be deduced from the sum of their individual components (Swinney and Cutler 523; Shoebottom)—are pervasive across human languages. They enable speakers to convey complex ideas with precision and efficiency.

The cognitive storage and processing of idioms have long intrigued linguists, prompting multiple theoretical models. One foundational proposal is Swinney and Cutler's (1979) Lexical Representation Hypothesis, which posits that idioms are stored in the mental lexicon as holistic units, akin to individual words. Crucially, this model suggests that upon encountering an idiom, listeners compute both its literal (word-by-word) and figurative meanings in parallel. Empirical support comes from studies showing that native English speakers recognize idiomatic phrases as meaningful significantly faster than non-idiomatic strings. Nevertheless, the hypothesis raises an important question: to what extent do the literal components of an idiom remain activated once its figurative meaning has been accessed? Swinney (1979) acknowledges that while literal meanings are momentarily activated during idiom recognition, this activation is transient. As Gibbs (469) observes, "this effect is only momentary, which suggests that people maintain only the meaning appropriate to the context."

An alternative account is the Hybrid Representation Model, which proposes that idioms enjoy a dual mode of access: they are directly linked to their figurative conceptual meaning while simultaneously being mediated through their literal constituents (Holsinger and Kaiser 1978). In this framework, idioms exhibit a one-to-one correspondence between form and meaning—similar to lexical items—yet their interpretation remains dependent on the processing of individual words within the expression. This model underscores the functional relevance of literal components during idiom comprehension, a point central to the present inquiry.

This perspective directly challenges Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr.'s claim in "On the Process of Understanding Idioms" that "people do not compute the literal interpretations of

idioms either before or as they comprehend their figurative meanings" (465). In contrast, this paper advances the hypothesis that the constituent parts of idioms remain cognitively active during processing—a phenomenon potentially generalizable to other complex or compound expressions in English. Collectively, these theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights into how multiword expressions are accessed, represented, and interpreted in the human mind.

Further nuancing the discussion, Wasow et al. classify English idioms into three syntactic-semantic categories:

1. Noncompositional idioms (e.g., kick the bucket, saw logs): These function as verb phrases whose meaning is entirely non-transparent. They resist passive transformation, and any adjective insertion applies only externally to the idiom's meaning.
2. Conventionalized metaphors (e.g., spill the beans): Here, the figurative meaning is distributed across components—spill \approx 'divulge', beans \approx 'secret'—though these elements do not carry their idiomatic senses outside the expression. Such idioms permit passive voice and internal adjectival modification.
3. Compositional idioms: In these expressions, both the whole and its parts retain idiomatic meaning independently. They share syntactic flexibility with the second type and additionally allow structures such as relative clauses, as in: "He pulled some strings that were not accessible to anyone."

Research Methodology and Data Analysis

This study adopts a qualitative psycholinguistic approach to investigate how English speakers perceive and interpret selected English expressions—particularly idioms, metaphors, and culturally embedded phrases. The primary aim is to uncover cognitive and perceptual patterns underlying comprehension, interpretation, and potential misinterpretation of these expressions.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) will be applied on chosen expressions (Expressions will be selected based on frequency in contemporary spoken English (using corpora such as COCA – Corpus of Contemporary American English) and their potential for figurative ambiguity) to identify recurring perceptual patterns, interpretive strategies (e.g., literal vs. figurative processing), and sources of difficulty. Coding will focus on:

- Comprehension accuracy
- Use of contextual cues
- Influence of L1 transfer
- Emotional or cultural associations

The study acknowledges limitations related to sample size and linguistic diversity. However, the depth of qualitative insight compensates for breadth, aligning with the exploratory nature of psycholinguistic perception research.

Analysis and Discussion

There are fixed expressions that are semantically transparent, compositional, analyzable. The following classes of expressions:

Category	Core Cognitive Claim	Primary Mechanism
Idiom	Non-compositional meaning stored as holistic units	Direct retrieval from mental lexicon; bypasses literal analysis
Metaphor	Abstract thought structured via concrete domains	Cross-domain mapping grounded in embodied/sensorimotor experience
Collocation	Language shaped by frequency & statistical patterns	Implicit learning of word co-occurrence reduces processing load
Literal	Meaning derived compositionally from parts	Analytical processing without figurative/conventional mediation

A comprehensive classification of expressions with their cognitive linguistic foundations:

Expressio-n	Category	Meaning	Cognitive Claim & Theoretical
blacked out	Collocation (phrasal verb)	Temporarily lost memory or consciousness	Statistical Learning: The brain acquires high-frequency word pairings ("blank" + "out") through repeated exposure, storing them as lexical bundles to reduce processing effort during production/comprehension (Ellis, 2002).
nodded off	Idiom (phrasal verb)	Fell asleep briefly/unintentionally	Non-compositional Processing: Meaning ("falling asleep") cannot be derived from literal components ("nod" + "off"). Processed holistically as a prefabricated chunk stored in semantic memory (Wray, 2002).
I am the one who knocks	Metaphor (contextual/conceptual)	"I am the aggressor/controller" (from Breaking Bad)	Conceptual Metaphor Theory: Embodies POWER IS INITIATING FORCE (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Physical action ("knocking") maps onto abstract social dominance, reflecting embodied cognition where abstract concepts are structured via sensorimotor experience.
spill the beans	Idiom	Reveal a secret unintentionally	Formulaic Language Processing: Meaning is non-transparent and non-compositional. Understood via direct retrieval from long-term memory rather than syntactic decomposition,

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			minimizing cognitive load (Libben & Titone, 2009).
she is so green	Metaphor (conceptual)	She is inexperienced/naïve	Embodied Cognition: Instantiates INEXPERIENCE IS GREENNESS mapping. Green (source domain: unripe plants) → inexperience (target domain). Abstract social concepts are grounded in perceptual experiences (color/ripeness) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).
butter someone up	Idiom	Flatter someone excessively	Idiom Decomposability: Despite partial semantic transparency ("butter" → smoothness), meaning ("flattery") is conventionalized and stored as a unit. Shows how idioms exist on a continuum of analyzability but are still processed as fixed expressions (Gibbs, 1990).
be on the ball	Idiom	Be alert, competent, responsive	Non-literal Conceptualization: No literal "ball" involved. Reflects how conventionalized figurative expressions become entrenched in mental lexicon as single semantic units, bypassing literal analysis during comprehension (Cacciari & Tabossi, 1988).
wet blanket	Idiom	Person who dampens enthusiasm	Figurative Entrenchment: Literal meaning ("damp cloth") is suppressed during comprehension. Demonstrates how frequent figurative use leads

			to direct access to idiomatic meaning without literal mediation (Glucksberg, 2001).
crash landing	Collocation (literal) / Metaphor (figurative)	Literal: Violent aircraft touchdown Figurative: Sudden failure	Dual Processing: • Literal: Statistical co-occurrence in aviation discourse → stored as lexical bundle. • Figurative: Embodies FAILURE IS A PHYSICAL CRASH metaphor—abstract failure mapped onto embodied experience of falling/crashing (Lakoff, 1993).
big cheese	Idiom	Important/powerful person	Arbitrariness of Idiomatic Meaning: No semantic link between "cheese" and "importance." Meaning is purely conventional, illustrating how idioms rely on cultural entrenchment rather than conceptual motivation (Nunberg et al., 1994).
by and large	Idiom (fixed phrase)	Generally, overall	Frozen Formulaicity: Components lack independent semantic contribution ("by" + "and" + "large" ≠ sum of parts). Exemplifies how discourse markers become phonologically and semantically frozen through high-frequency use (Wray, 2008).
moony	Literal adjective	Dreamy, romantically sentimental	Direct Semantic Access: No figurative mapping or conventionalized pairing. Meaning is compositional and

			accessed directly via lexical semantics without metaphorical or idiomatic mediation.
insecure	Literal adjective	Lacking confidence/safety	Compositional Semantics: Meaning derived transparently from morphological components ("in-" + "secure"). Processed analytically rather than as a holistic unit or via cross-domain mapping.
I am not messing with you	Collocation (phrasal verb)	I'm not joking/playing with you	Verb-Particle Constructions: "Mess with" forms a high-frequency verb-preposition pairing. Acquired through statistical learning of co-occurrence patterns rather than syntactic rules alone (Tomasello, 2003).

Conclusion

This study has explored the intricate relationship between language and cognition through the psycholinguistic analysis of selected English expressions. By examining how these expressions are not only constructed but also understood and processed by speakers, we have gained valuable insights into the cognitive mechanisms that underpin language use.

As well as, this research underscores the importance of context in interpreting expressions, as the cognitive load involved in understanding language can vary significantly according to situational factors. This perspective contributes to our understanding of how individuals navigate linguistic ambiguity and derive meaning from contextually rich environments.

The findings suggest that language is not merely a tool for communication but a complex cognitive system that reflects our thoughts, emotions, and cultural contexts. The expressions analyzed reveal patterns of meaning that are deeply rooted in human

experience and cognition, highlighting the interplay between linguistic structures and mental processes. The findings are summarized by the following:

- The literal meaning is core related to the figurative meaning, not only in idiomatic expressions but in English vocabularies.
- Advanced language speakers used the idiomatic meaning of the vocabularies more than primary speakers. That is to say, they are dependent on their intelligence skills which related to the figurative meaning of those vocabularies.
- English expressions depend ,to some extent ,on the visual situation of those used expressions, and the situation or is described according to the shape(picture) which stored in the memory.
- The complex expressions just like "idioms" is semantically compositional or analyzable. This means that, in a sense, one could say that some English expressions are just like" idioms" by convention. Like all conventions, English expressions have to be explicitly learned and remembered depending on what constitute the expression(the literal meaning of the expression).
- we take in to account the illustrative meaning of place or position, which offers insight into the phrase's original use. That's to say, the literal meaning(parts of expression) gives us the illustrative real situation in which we drive the figurative meaning of that expression.
- Ultimately, this study highlight on cognitive dimensions of language, suggesting that a deeper comprehension of other expressions and languages could result additional insights into the universal principles governing human cognition.

Finally, By continuing to bridge the fields of linguistics and psychology, we can enrich our understanding of the cognitive processes that shape our interactions with language and each other.

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