It’s All Greek to Me: A Study of Idiom Familiarity and Comprehension

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One crucial aspect of language use is a person’s ability to recognize that a given phrase can be interpreted multiple ways within a language. In the case of idioms, the meaning of a phrase and its literal translation are often very different, and how humans understand these utterances and their relationship to general language processes is of interest. One promising theory, known as the Configuration Hypothesis, suggests that idioms are understood based on the connections in memory linking each word in the phrase. Unlike other theories, the Configuration Hypothesis suggests that idioms are not stored in a separate list in memory, but that the connections between the words making up an idiom, in the specific configuration of that idiom, facilitates idiom comprehension. From this, it can be hypothesized that the more familiar an idiom is, the stronger its configural connections will be, and the faster its idiomatic meaning will be identified.

To ultimately test this hypothesis, participants will be asked to respond to target words follow highly familiar and not familiar idioms. The target words will be related to the idiomatic meaning of the idiom, related to the literal meaning of the idiom, or unrelated to the idiom. In order to conduct the main experiment, familiar and non-familiar idioms had to be identified for the subject population. Average familiarity scores were derived for 170 idioms through a survey of 84 college students. Participants rated each idiom on a scale of from 1 (not at all familiar) to 7 (highly familiar). However, subject feedback indicated an inherent discrepancy between a subject’s familiarity with the idiom and his or her knowledge of the idiom’s meaning. Thus, the assumption made by many researchers, that familiarity and meaning confidence are equivalent characteristics of idioms, may be inaccurate. Because priming in the main experiment is dependent on participant’s knowledge of the meaning of the idioms, as well as their familiarity, it is crucial to examine these two characteristics independently.

Thus, a second pilot of subject confidence in the meaning of each of the 170 idioms was performed to assess the veracity of this assumption. Subjects were asked to rank each idiom based on how confident they were of the meaning by circling a number from 1 (not at all confident of meaning) to 7 (highly confident of meaning). Additionally, subjects were asked to supply a meaning of the idiom to validate their confidence rating. Average meaning confidences from a survey of 91 college students were compared to average familiarity scores of the same idioms. Meaning confidences and familiarity scores should a correlation of 0.88 suggesting that subjects were very confident of the meaning of highly familiar idioms and less confident of the meaning of unfamiliar idioms. While this correlation does not confirm subjects’ perceptions, the consistent ratings of familiarity and meaning allow for better differentiation of idioms for the main experiment. Idioms will be grouped into high familiarity/high meaning confidence and low familiarity/low meaning confidence for the priming study.

Links between familiarity, meaning and idiom comprehension will provide insight into the Configuration Hypothesis. Moreover, these and other subsequent studies will allow researchers to better characterize the processing of idiomatic phrases in order to understand the complex nature of language processing in humans.

Faculty Mentor: Professor Louisa Slowiaczek

Funded by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute Fellowship