What's Transparent About Transparent Idioms?

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Abstract

The literature on idiom acquisition has long assumed that transparent idioms (such as *slipped my mind*) are easier to understand than opaque ones (such as *a piece of cake*). However, transparency effects have proven task-dependent. Additionally, many studies supporting transparency advantages tested adults or children at around age 10, which is the age when idiom comprehension reaches adult-like levels (Vulchanova, Vulchanov, and Stankova 2011). Many theorists (Norbury 2004; Whyte et al. 2014) expect that autistic children will struggle with opaque idioms more than their non-autistic peers. However, studies of autistic and other clinical populations have yielded mixed results.

Fifteen children (5 autistic, 7 typically developing, 3 other) between the ages of 6;5 and 10;6 (M = 8.44 years, SD = 1.37) were introduced to a pair of novel idioms via definitions.

Children were read short stories that set up the appropriate pragmatic context for one of the idioms. They were then presented with two pictures side-by-side (one for each idiom) and asked to point to the picture where the cartoon character used the idiom that made the most sense. The two pictures were identical, varying only in which idiom the cartoon character said. The pictures avoided iconic depictions of the idioms. Caregivers of the children completed the Children's Communication Checklist-2 (CCC-2) to provide measures of their children's linguistic abilities.

Participants performed similarly on transparent (M = 2.20/3, SD = 1.01) and opaque (M = 2.47/3, SD = 0.64) idioms, with a mean transparency advantage of −0.27 (SD = 1.10), showing slightly better performance on opaque idioms. Crucially, autistic children without language impairment did not differ significantly from their typically developing peers on any outcome and were the only group to not show an opaque advantage. This is consistent with the view that difficulty with idioms found in some people with autism is due to language delay rather than autism. CCC-2 measures of semantics ($r = -.804$, $p < .001$), coherence (-0.695, $p < 0.01$), scripted language (-0.679, $p < 0.05$), syntax (-0.635. $P < 0.05$), global communication scaled (0.706, $p < 0.01$), and global communication composite (0.68, $p < 0.05$) significantly impacted transparent idiom performance. No measure predicted opaque idiom performance.

A linear regression derived the CCC-2 scores needed for a child to show a net transparency advantage of zero. The linear regression showed that a child with a global communication composite score of 103.43 (100 is the population mean) would not on average show a transparency advantage. These findings suggest that relying on transparency to recall the meanings of idioms is a resource for skilled communicators, not a default strategy for the average child. Future work will replicate the study with larger samples and include children with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD).

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