


Chapter 18

Between the Lines: Idiom Comprehension in Typically Developing Children, Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder, and the Role of Bilingualism

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how idiom dimensions might modulate processing across typically developing kids (TD) and kids with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). First, it explores the cognitive and linguistic strategies employed by TD children, highlighting the role of context integration, semantic analysis, and developing text comprehension skills. Then it analyzes the often-controversial patterns of idiom processing in ASD, where difficulties may stem from interactions between core language abilities, Executive Functions (EFs), and Theory of Mind (ToM), further modulated by the specific semantic features of the idioms themselves. Critically, it extends this analysis to the understudied role of bilingualism, considering whether potential bilingual advantages in EF might influence idiom processing in ASD, especially for more ambiguous idioms. Finally, it outlines essential methodological considerations, including idiom dimensions' assessment, task design sensitivity, and cross-linguistic approaches, to guide future research in disentangling these complex interactions and advancing both theory and practice.

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INTRODUCTION

Idioms, with their non-compositional meanings and complex semantic dimensions, pose unique challenges for language processing. While research in neurotypical and neurologically impaired adults has revealed how idiom internal linguistic characteristics modulate brain activation and comprehension, far less is known about how children acquire and process idiomatic expressions. This gap is particularly significant for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), whose challenges in pragmatic language, theory of mind (ToM), and executive functioning (EF) may intersect critically with the demands of figurative language. Understanding idiom processing in both typically developing (TD) children and those with ASD, therefore, offers a window into the interplay of linguistic development, cognitive control, and social cognition.

THE COMPLEX NATURE OF IDIOMS

Idioms are an essential component of everyday language, enriching communication, adding nuance, and creatively conveying complex thoughts and ideas. Unlike literal expressions, whose meanings are derived compositionally based on their individual words, idioms have meanings that cannot be fully comprehended solely from the combination of the meanings of their constituent words (Glucksberg, 1991). They are multifaceted expressions with a complex semantic nature (Papagno et al., 2004). For example, the idiom “kick the bucket” means “die,” but this figurative meaning cannot be deduced solely by combining the meanings of the constituent words of the expression. However, other idioms like “want a piece of action” are comprised of words that highly contribute to their figurative interpretation. Such differences signal idioms’ intricate semantic nature. Idioms differ in terms of various linguistic dimensions, with some of them extensively studied: familiarity, frequency, ambiguity, decomposability, transparency, and predictability.

Familiarity refers to the extent to which an idiom is known or understood (Nordmann et al., 2014). More familiar idioms are more easily understood, and speakers of a language easily recognise them. Research has shown that more familiar idioms are processed differently compared to less familiar or even unfamiliar idioms, which would require a type of processing that resembles that of novel phrases (Schweigert, 1986). On a similar note, *frequency* is mainly linked to how often individuals encounter an idiom, regardless of whether they understand its meaning. It reflects how often a specific idiom appears in a language (Schweigert, 1986). However, terminological inconsistency exists as relevant research often presents the two dimensions interchangeably. For instance, in a norming study on English idiomatic

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