Ratings of the Familiarity of Idioms' Figurative Meanings and the Likelihood of Literal Meanings Among U.S. College Students

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Samples of college students from three states (Ohio, New Hampshire, Illinois) rated 390 idioms on familiarity of their figurative meanings. The Illinois samples also rated the likelihood of encountering the idioms' literal meanings. Results suggested some modest regional differences in idiom familiarity, and consistent with Popiel and McRae (1988), the likelihood of encountering an idiom's literal meaning is relatively independent of the familiarity of its figurative meaning. The 314 idioms rated by more than 75% of the subjects are listed with the idioms' familiarity ratings, as are the 20 most and least familiar idioms for each of the three states. The 248 idioms rated by at least 75% of the Illinois subjects and the idioms' figurative and literal ratings are also presented.

During the last several years, there has been an increase in the amount of research on idiom comprehension. Yet, for all of the effort employed, the number of conclusions drawn has been small. There are currently at least three models of idiom comprehension, and each of the models has received support in the literature. One model holds that the literal meaning of an idiom is computed first, and only if that meaning is inappropriate, is the figurative meaning retrieved (Bobrow & Bell, 1973). Another model of idiom comprehension argues that the figurative meaning is retrieved first and the literal meaning is computed only when the figurative meaning is inappropriate (Gibbs, 1980, 1986; Schweigert & Moates, 1988). The simultaneous processing model holds that the figurative and literal meanings are computed simultaneously (Swinney & Cutler, 1979).

Currently, the evidence fails to fully support any particular model; however, researchers have been identifying factors that influence idiom comprehension. Two such factors are the familiarity of the idioms' figurative meaning (Schweigert, 1986) and the likelihood of encountering the idioms' meaning (Cronk, 1990; Popiel & McRae, 1988). To control for the effects of these factors in their studies, researchers now must conduct preliminary studies in which subjects rate the idioms' figurative and literal meanings, or must borrow their materials from other researchers. The former proce-
procedure is time consuming and monotonous; the latter restricts external validity. To minimize or avoid these problems and provide a corpus of idioms from which other researchers may wish to sample, we asked college students from three geographical locations to rate idioms for the familiarity of their figurative meanings and the likelihood of encountering their literal meanings.

METHOD

Subjects

Samples of native English-speaking subjects from introductory psychology courses at Ohio University (Athens, OH), Plymouth State College (Plymouth, NH), and Bradley University (Peoria, IL) participated in this study between 1984 and 1989. In Ohio, 164 subjects participated, in New Hampshire, 66 subjects participated, and in Illinois, 76 subjects participated. No demographic data was obtained from the subjects, but fewer than one percent of the subjects were more than 22 years old. Subjects earned extra course credit for their participation in this study.

Materials

Three hundred and ninety idioms with meaningful literal meanings were chosen from A Dictionary of Idioms for the Deaf (Boatner, 1969). Two lists of 195 idioms each were compiled. These lists were used by the Ohio and New Hampshire samples. Because the Illinois samples had an additional rating task to complete (rating the literal meaning of the idioms), the original 2 lists were divided into 4 lists of 97 idioms each (2 randomly chosen idioms were omitted). In all, 388 idioms were rated by subjects from all three states.

Procedure

Groups of subjects, with 30 to 50 subjects in each group, participated. Instructions were printed at the top of each list and were also read out loud by the researcher. These instructions explained that the subject was to rate each idiom on a 5-point scale representing how often the subject had heard each idiom used as a figure of speech. A 1 meant that the subject very often heard that idiom used figuratively, and a 5 meant that the subject very rarely heard that idiom used figuratively. So that the mean ratings would not be inflated by subjects who did not recognize the phrases as idioms, subjects were instructed not to rate any idiom for which they did not know the figurative meaning. Each subject was given one list of idioms to rate. In Ohio and New Hampshire, subjects rated the familiarity of 195 idioms' figurative meanings. In Illinois, subjects rated the familiarity of 97 idioms' figurative meanings. All ratings were recorded on computer scoring sheets. The Illinois subjects also rated idioms for the likelihood of encountering the idiom's literal meaning. Instructions printed on the top of the list and read to the subjects explained that they were to rate each idiom for how likely it was