

Measuring the impact of cross-cultural differences on learners' comprehension of imageable idioms

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Imageable idioms are figurative expressions that tend to call up a conventional scene in the native speaker's mind. However, do these imageable idioms call up the same scene in the language learner's mind?

We report an experiment in which 78 French-speaking students were asked to 'guess' the meaning of unfamiliar English idioms, without the benefit of contextual clues. The results invite teachers and learners to approach the semantics of many imageable idioms as non-arbitrary, while giving due attention to obstacles to comprehension raised by both cross-linguistic and cross-cultural variation. The article concludes with a set of guidelines to anticipate and remedy those comprehension problems.

Introduction

In this article we try to measure the impact of cross-cultural differences on language learners' interpretation of *imageable* idioms. Imageable idioms are defined as 'idioms that have associated conventional images' (Lakoff 1987: 447). Evidently, *imageability* is a matter of degree. For example, *Keeping someone at arm's length* may be more imageable to most language users than *Giving someone the bird*.

In a language-learning context, a high degree of imageability may enhance the semantic transparency of idioms. Transparent idioms are figurative expressions whose meaning is more easily 'guessable' than that of opaque ones. The lower the degree of semantic transparency of an idiom, the more a language learner will have to rely on contextual clues to figure out its meaning. For idioms with high transparency, on the other hand, the lexical components may serve as primary pointers.

The degree of semantic transparency of an idiom is determined by the interplay of various factors, including the following:

- i Idioms whose constituents individually contribute to the overall interpretation tend to be more transparent than non-decomposable ones (Gibbs 1993). For example, *To pop the question* can be decomposed as 'pop' standing for 'ask' and 'the question' standing for

'marriage proposal'. *To kick the bucket*, on the other hand, does not appear to be decomposable.

- ii Idioms that belong to a cluster of expressions which reflect a common metaphoric theme tend to be more transparent than more isolated cases (Gibbs 1993). A *metaphoric theme* stands for our understanding of an abstract domain in terms of a more concrete *source* domain. For example, *To let off steam* (which, along with *She was fuming*, *He got all steamed up*, *She erupted*, etc., reflects the metaphoric theme ANGER IS HEAT) may be more transparent than *To sell someone down the river*.
- iii Idioms that are closely associated with a given metaphoric theme tend to be more transparent than more 'peripheral' ones. For example, *She was fuming* is a more 'central' instance of ANGER IS HEAT than *He hit the ceiling* (Lakoff 1987: 384–5).
- iv Idioms with a clear etymological origin tend to be more transparent than those whose origin has become obscure. For example, the etymological origin of *Under one's own steam* (i.e. steam energy on ships and trains) is probably clearer to most language users than that of *It's under way*.
- v An additional variable affecting an idiom's degree of semantic transparency in a language-learning context may be its culture-specific grounding. This is the potential variable that we shall be focusing on.

Conventions differ across cultures, so that straightforward images in one culture need not be self-evident in another. The imageable idioms of a given language may not call up the same conventional scenes in the minds of learners of that language. *She broke my heart*, for example, may be semantically quite opaque to members of a community whose culture does not conceive of the heart as the seat of the emotions (Fernando 1996: 124–35). Comprehension problems caused by such outspoken cross-cultural differences will mostly be confined to situations where 'distant' cultures meet.

It is also the case, however, that learners' comprehension of imageable idioms could be impeded by more subtle differences existing between closely related linguistic cultures, such as English and French. Although both languages share the same metaphoric themes, their degrees of conventionality may differ. One way of estimating the salience of a given metaphoric theme is by counting the variety and the frequency of occurrence of its expressions in a linguistic corpus. For example, English appears to have a wider variety of idiomatic expressions exploiting the imagery of HATS than French. Similarly, the domain of SHIPS is a more productive source for metaphor in English than in French, while conversely the domain of FOOD appears to be a more productive source for metaphor in French (Boers and Demecheleer 1997). A 'rich' experience of a given source domain is likely to fuel multiple associations around that domain. The more salient a source domain becomes in everyday life, the more likely it is to trigger metaphoric projections as well (Boers 1999).

We can therefore hypothesize that idioms relating to a metaphoric theme

that is more salient in the target culture will tend to be less easily ‘guessable’ to language learners than those relating to a metaphoric theme that is more or equally salient in the L1 culture. More specifically, we can hypothesize that idioms using the imagery of SHIPS will prove less easily ‘guessable’ to French speakers than idioms using the imagery of FOOD. Likewise, we can hypothesize that idioms using the imagery of HATS will prove less easily ‘guessable’ to French speakers than idioms using the imagery of SLEEVES (for which there is no recorded difference in salience between English and French). In an attempt to put these hypotheses to the test, we set up the following experiment.

Experiment

From various English dictionaries we selected 24 idioms involving the imagery of HATS, SLEEVES, SHIPS, and FOOD. We included only idioms which did not have one-to-one equivalents in French. In order to assess the possible impact of cross-cultural differences on the ‘guessability’ of these idioms to French speakers, we first had to minimize the impact of the other variables that determine the degree of semantic transparency of idioms (see above). We wanted to make sure the idioms we would be using in the experiment were comparable in the first place. In order to estimate the semantic transparency of the selected idioms (irrespective of possible cross-cultural variables), we called in the help of five ‘blind’ judges. They were native speakers of English, and experienced EFL teachers. We asked how difficult they thought it would be for a non-native speaker to guess the meaning of our selected idioms without contextual clues, under the assumption that the subject understood the individual words, and that the idioms did not have one-to-one equivalents in the subject’s L1. The judges were asked to rate the degree of difficulty on a scale from 1 (very easy, transparent) to 5 (very difficult, opaque). We then retained only idioms that consistently scored 2 or 3. In other words, idioms that were rated by one or more of the blind judges as highly transparent (e.g. *To miss the boat*) or as highly opaque (e.g. *To eat one’s heart out*) were discarded. This left us with the following slimmed-down set of 12 idioms to be used in the experiment:

Source: HATS

Pass the hat around

Talk through one’s hat

Keep something under one’s hat

Hang up one’s hat

Source: SLEEVES

Laugh up one’s sleeve

Have something up one’s sleeve

Hang on someone’s sleeve

Wear one’s heart on one’s sleeve

Source: SHIPS

Sail through something

Take something on board

Source: FOOD

Have egg on one’s face

Cry over spilt milk

The actual experiment was carried out with the participation of 78 French-speaking students at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. The group was quite heterogeneous, but in general their level of English proficiency was intermediate. The participants were given about 20 minutes to try to guess the meaning of the selected idioms without any contextual clues. They were also asked to indicate whether or not they had come across the given expressions before. The individual words constituting the idioms were explained when necessary, and the participants were allowed to use

French to present their ideas. The four categories (hats, sleeves, ships, and food) were mixed throughout the questionnaire.

Results

All of the items in the questionnaire turned out to be unknown to over 70 (out of 78) respondents. Since we were especially interested in learners' ability to infer the meaning of unknown idioms, we discarded the instances where the respondents indicated they were familiar with a given expression.

Two items raised a particular problem: *To hang up one's hat* and *To wear one's heart on one's sleeve*. A considerable proportion of the population (22% and 53%, respectively) indicated explicitly that they knew these idioms from French and, in fact, mistook them for equivalents of resembling French expressions. These participants ignored the meaning of *Hang up* and interpreted *Hang up one's hat* as the equivalent of French *Tirer son chapeau à quelqu'un*, which means 'congratulating someone'. *Wearing one's heart on one's sleeve* was mistaken for the equivalent of French *Avoir le coeur sur la main*, which means 'being generous'. These two cases clearly reveal the pitfalls of L1 transfer in learners' interpretation of L2 idioms (Cornell 1999), leading learners to ignore or misread lexical clues. The likelihood of transfer from L1 to the target language generally increases when learners perceive the two languages as 'close' (though advanced learners tend to be hesitant about transferability) (Kellerman 1978). Transfer from L1 to the target language can obviously speed up the learning process (when shared features are concerned), but it also raises the risk of negative L1 interference (Swan 1997). We may assume, therefore, that 'false friend idioms' are likely to be especially inviting (and deceitful) to learners who perceive the target language to be 'close' to their L1. We shall return below to the issue of erroneous L1 transfer in idiom comprehension, when we suggest some implications for classroom practice.

Since such a considerable number of respondents (mistakenly) indicated *Hanging up one's hat* and *Wearing one's heart on one's sleeve* as 'already known', the reliability for our comparative purposes of these two idioms was compromised, and they were consequently separated from the overall results. The participants' interpretations of the remaining idioms were rated as (i) no response; (ii) wrong response (e.g. *Talking through one's hat* interpreted as 'whispering'); (iii) partially correct response, i.e. along the right metaphORIZATION, but lacking detail or precision (e.g. *Keeping something under one's hat* interpreted vaguely as 'hiding something'); and (iv) correct response.

While we acknowledge the obvious limitations of the experiment (i.e. the small number of idioms included), the data seem to confirm our predictions: our French-speaking students were more likely (χ square significant at $p < .001$) to correctly infer the meaning of the English idioms that use the imagery of SLEEVES than that of those using the imagery of HATS. Likewise, they were more likely ($p < .001$) to correctly infer the meaning of the idioms that exploit the imagery of FOOD than that of those that exploit the imagery of SHIPS. More generally, these data offer (tentative) support to the hypothesis that idioms reflecting a metaphoric theme or source domain that is more salient in the target

TABLE 1
Rated responses
HATS VS. SLEEVES (%)

	No	Wrong	Partially correct	Correct
	response	response	response	response
<i>Pass the hat around</i> (76 participants)	14.47	67.11	1.32	17.11
<i>Talk through one's hat</i> (78 participants)	15.38	84.62	0	0
<i>Keep something under one's hat</i> (77 participants)	9.09	44.16	9.09	37.66
Average	12.99	65.37	3.46	18.18
	78.35		21.65	
<i>Have something up one's sleeve</i> (73 participants)	26.03	34.25	19.18	20.55
<i>Laugh up one's sleeve</i> (73 participants)	13.70	15.07	24.66	46.58
<i>Hang on someone's sleeve</i> (74 participants)	13.51	28.38	25.68	32.43
Average	17.73	25.91	23.18	33.18
	43.64		56.36	

TABLE 2
Rated responses
SHIPS VS. FOOD (%)

	No	Wrong	Partially correct	Correct
	response	response	response	response
<i>Sail through something</i> (74 participants)	10.81	66.22	17.57	5.41
<i>Take something on board</i> (74 participants)	21.62	67.57	5.41	5.41
Average	16.22	66.89	11.49	5.41
	83.11		16.89	
<i>Have egg on one's face</i> (76 participants)	25.00	60.53	6.58	7.89
<i>Cry over spilt milk</i> (70 participants)	7.14	24.29	32.86	35.71
Average	16.44	43.15	19.18	21.23
	59.59		40.41	

culture will tend to be less easily 'guessable' to learners than those reflecting a metaphoric theme or source domain that is more or equally salient in L1.

Conclusions and implications

The possible impact of cross-cultural variation on learners' interpreting idioms invites language teachers to give extra attention to figurative expressions in the target language that relate to metaphoric themes that are less salient in L1. At the same time, however, the cases of *Wearing*

one's heart on one's sleeve and *Hanging up one's hat* in our experiment have illustrated the pitfalls of L1 transfer in the interpretation of expressions relating to shared metaphoric themes. These observations suggest that an approach to teaching idioms will benefit from a teacher's awareness of cross-cultural as well as cross-linguistic differences.

In our experiment the selected idioms, which had been rated as having an intermediate level of semantic transparency, were listed without any contextual clues. Nevertheless, almost 35% of the participants' responses overall were at least partially correct. This general result suggests that the semantics of many idioms need not be tackled as arbitrary in language-learning contexts. Learners can be encouraged to first try to decode imageable idioms independently, i.e. as a problem-solving task requiring a deeper level of cognitive processing, before resorting to the teacher or the dictionary for corroboration or falsification (Lennon 1998). A deep level of cognitive processing is known to be beneficial for long-term memory storage (Ellis 1994). Moreover, in normal learning conditions idioms are encountered in context, which facilitates comprehension considerably (Cooper 1999).

What practical guidelines for teachers can we distil from the above brew of findings? If so many variables are involved, then what advice can we offer to a teacher whose learners encounter an unfamiliar idiom in a text? We propose the following strategy, involving six stages, to anticipate and remedy comprehension problems. It will be clear from the start that not all six stages will always need to be passed through in practice. As an alternative, the proposed six stages can be taken as a checklist to remind teachers of the variables involved in idiom comprehension, as well as the options available to help their learners.

Guidelines for the classroom

- i If the idiom reflects a metaphoric theme that seems absent from the learner's culture, then inform (or remind) the learner of this metaphoric theme in the target culture. This may be relevant when two 'distant' cultures meet.
- ii If the idiom risks being mistaken for the equivalent of a resembling expression in L1, then alert the learner to this risk.
- iii Encourage the learner to tackle the semantics of the idiom as a problem-solving task. If the idiom has a low level of imageability, then invite the learner to resort primarily to contextual clues to infer its meaning, and then test the hypothesis against the lexical constituents of the idiom. If the idiom has a high level of imageability, then encourage the learner to first infer its meaning from its lexical constituents, and then test the hypothesis against the context. The hypothesizing can be done individually, but it is probably more fruitful if the problem-solving task is tackled as a joint effort. As we have seen, imageability is a matter of degree. We hope that the parameters listed in the introduction to this article may help teachers to estimate the location of a given idiom on the cline from very low to very high degrees of imageability. Ultimately, it will be up to teachers to assess whether it is feasible for their learners to infer the meaning of a particular idiom from its constituents.

- iv Corroborate or falsify the learners' hypotheses. If learners are on the right track, then offer further guidance towards the full interpretation. If they stay in the dark, then clarify the meaning of the idiom.
- v Once the meaning of the idiom is established, invite the learner(s) to 'motivate' it. This stage is meant to show the non-arbitrary nature of many figurative expressions. Various approaches can be tried. One can associate the idiom with a more vivid or concrete scene. For example, *Passing the hat round* can be associated with the scene of someone collecting money for a street musician, *Having something up one's sleeve* can be linked with the scene of a magician performing tricks, *Hanging on someone's sleeve* can be exemplified by the scene of an insecure child clinging to its mother, and so on. Deliberately taking idioms literally ('*I had egg on my face, and I hadn't even had breakfast yet.*'), which is a common source of verbal humour, can be a fruitful technique to paint more vivid pictures, too (Irujo 1986). In general, concreteness and vivid imagery facilitate the retention of novel vocabulary (Sökmen 1997). One can also try to lay bare the 'logic' of a given idiom. For example, the milk in *Crying over spilt milk* is obviously a better choice to express pettiness than exquisite cognac would be. Evidently, not all imageable idioms lend themselves easily to such explanations, but the cognitive effort put into the brainstorming activity may nevertheless be beneficial for retention and language awareness. A complementary approach to 'motivating' idioms is to look for their possible etymological origin. *Showing someone the ropes*, for example, could be traced back to the context of sailing (e.g. an experienced sailor instructing a novice).
- vi Finally, if the idiom exemplifies a metaphoric theme that is more salient in the target culture than in the learner's culture (e.g. the relatively high salience of SHIP metaphors in English as compared to French), then raise the learner's awareness of this cross-cultural variation. A comparison with L1 equivalents can be illustrative (Deignan, Gabrys, and Solska 1997). *To miss the boat*, for example, is translated into French as *Rater le coche* ('*To miss the coach*').

When applied successfully, the proposed strategy will enhance the learner's awareness of three facets of comprehending imageable idioms: the non-arbitrary nature of many figurative expressions, the existence of cross-linguistic differences, and the existence of cross-cultural variation. The combination of these three facets may then constitute a prism for the learner's ongoing examination of the colourful spectrum of imageable idioms.

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