

Idiomatic Mastery in a First and Second Language
Monica Karlsson (2019)

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Figurative language permeates everyday vocabulary in all languages, however little is still known about idiom construals and the different stages of acquisition of this linguistic phenomenon. Foreign language instructors have assumed that idioms, ‘identified as fixed expressions consisting of multiple morphological (or prosodic) words that, just when they occur together, have a non-literal interpretation’ (Bruening, 2020:365), are difficult to grasp by students at all stages but mostly by low proficiency learners. These expressions ‘challenge standard notions of meaning composition as they are, by definition, multi-word strings with a figurative meaning that differs from the sum of its parts’ (Beck and Weber, 2020:837).

The book *Idiomatic Mastery in a First and Second Language*, written by Monica Karlsson, aims at enlightening scholars, teachers, and students about the nature of idiomaticity and its processing. As the author highlights, an idiom is an umbrella term representing all kinds of multi-word sequences. Nevertheless, the study mainly focuses on classical idioms, ‘exemplified by *bite off more than I can chew*, *have an axe to grind*, *kick the bucket*, *rain cats and dogs* and *spill the beans*’ (p. 20). Karlsson presents her work in a book comprised of seven chapters written in English that address idioms from an empirical perspective by analyzing

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different aspects of ‘advanced learners’ comprehension, retention and production of idiomatic expressions in a first (Swedish) and second (English) language’ (pp. 21–22). In simple terms, the author thus takes learners’ comprehension of idioms as her point of departure and then she proceeds with production. However, every chapter contributes to a better understanding of the whole picture of idiom construals.

In the introductory chapter, Karlsson presents the rationale of the book, which is no less than acknowledging the difficulties learners encounter when dealing with figurative language. As she puts it, idioms are ‘one of the most difficult areas of the lexicon for second language learners (...) [even] for very advanced students’ (pp. 17–18). She blames it on idioms’ double layer of semanticity and their occurrence in non-conventional form, which ‘explain why instructors tend to neglect teaching figurative language in a structured way, despite the fact that curricula often mention multi-word sequences as one important part of vocabulary teaching’ (p. 18). Although Karlsson focuses on the Swedish educational context, it is fair to point out that this problem goes beyond Scandinavia and attaches to every single contemporary educational system, as figurative language is as universal as ‘emotions in songs and literature’, where this sort of language blossoms (Barchard, Grob and Roe, 2017:443). EFL textbooks rarely deal with idiomatic expressions in a systematic manner, as many are still centered on grammar as their core.

Chapter 2, ‘The simultaneous effects of age, context, transparency and frequency on idiom comprehension in a first and second language’, explores the comprehension of canonically used idioms in 71 advanced teenage (13–18 years old) learners. This empirical study analyzes the effects of age, context, transparency, and frequency in the secondary (from six educational levels) students’ comprehension of canonically used idioms in L1 (Swedish) and L2 (English). For this purpose, Karlsson designed two parallel tests (one in the learner’s mother tongue and the other in their target foreign language) containing 27 items each combining the aforementioned facilitators. The results of the experiment show a similar improvement in the recognition and understanding of idioms from younger (13 year old) to older students (18 year old) both in the L1 (an increment of 31%) and in the L2 (29%). Moreover, the results also portray a picture which is far from full mastery (only 67% of correct answers) in both tests. However, similar, L2 students’ performance was poorer mainly due to their low L2 proficiency and their poor L1 idiom comprehension. As far as the second objective of the study is concerned, the author finds out that context is the main facilitator that students relied the most on, especially in the L1, even more than transparency, probably because ‘a learner’s ability to make inferences based on contextual clues is generally thought to develop before their ability to perform semantic analysis’

(p. 542). Nevertheless, when students could not turn to context, they would resort to transparency, especially in the L2 ‘where the skill to analyze semantically has been shown to develop in tandem with lexical inferencing, hence making learners more inclined to consider decomposition in a second than a first language’ (p. 543).

As a consequence of the results obtained in the study previously described, Chapter 3, ‘Do multimodal and visualization techniques enhance students’ comprehension and retention of L2 idioms?’, is composed of two experiments, both addressing the importance of contextual support in the comprehension of idioms. The first one addresses the effects of captioned audio-visual input on learners’ comprehension and retention of L2 idioms and the second one analyzes the effects of still pictures and etymological notes (or a combination of both) on advanced learners’ comprehension and retention of the same linguistic phenomenon. Surprisingly, the author demonstrates in the first experiment that short written contexts are not less helpful for learning idioms than the aforementioned multimodal techniques. The opposite result was obtained whenever the clues were less detailed and specific and when presented at the end of an extended scene after the viewers could have processed all clues before. In the second experiment, Karlsson shows that pictures with idiomatic content were more facilitating for the learner’s learning. In fact, this ‘idiomatic element became even more crucial... [when] the two pieces of information [a combination of an illustration and etymological information] were in conflict with each other’ (p. 546). Regarding etymological notes, the author claims that figurative renderings do not seem precisely ‘more helpful than literal ones’ (p. 546). Finally, when considering retention of idioms, it is clearly enhanced when combining captioned audio-visual input, still pictures and etymological notes.

Chapter 4, ‘Persisting ignorance and (partial) misinterpretations of L2 idioms after treatment’, delves into a greatly unexplored area of research in idiomaticity, namely, the possible reasons for error persistence and misinterpretation of idioms after treatment in the L2. The author here wants to analyze why some answers were misinterpreted or simply not provided in the study presented in Chapter 3. Additionally, Karlsson had realized that ignorance of the idiom’s meaning in her previous study eventually turned into attrition or fossilization, thus ‘reconfirm[ing] the inherently problematic nature of figurative language (...) [and] display[ing] the frailty involved in newly acquired vocabulary of an idiomatic kind’ (p. 550). As put by the author, students faced problems ‘in disambiguating and remembering the meaning of idioms in a second language, (...) [and] despite multimodal and visualization treatments, the majority of them remained unknown or were incorrectly understood’ (p. 374).

Chapter 5, 'L2 comprehension of creative idiom variants', goes a step beyond the understanding and retention of idioms' canonical forms by extending the analysis to more creative idiom variants. The author here relies for her study on Szczepaniak's (2006) creativity continuum (from lowest to highest) that goes from using an idiom in a way that does not involve any change from the original meaning to an idiom utterance that activates neither the literal nor the figurative meaning in the reader's mind. In this line, participants facing these creative idiom variants had to undergo different cognitive processes such as recognizing the idiom as a variant from a conventional one, retrieving that original idiom, comparing the constituent meanings of the two forms, and inferencing the connection between the idioms and their effect in the speech event at hand. In this study of 20 manipulated idiomatic expressions, 'only around 49% of the creatively manipulated tokens were disambiguated correctly' (p. 552) by the total amount of 13 students of 17 years old participating. As the author thus logically concludes, 'the degree to which an idiom is successfully disambiguated indeed appears to stand in relation to the extent to which it has been distorted. Put simply, the more creative an item is, the more difficult it seems to be to figure out its meaning' (p. 439).

Chapter 6, 'Productive mastery of L2 idioms in free composition writing', presents the last experimental study of the book. The author now delves into production of idiomatic expressions as if it was the last stage in a logical continuation of the acquisitional process of figurative language (from comprehension to production). However, the claim seems true that production of idioms has been less analyzed than comprehension and retention in the literature. The study here presented follows up the research described in Chapter 3, as the same participants from that experiment are now asked to write a fictional essay using ten idioms seen in the treatment. As 671 out of 882 tokens are employed and only 211 errors were made by those considered lower achievers or those students who did the test in a sort of exam situation, the author considers these results a clear success of retention. The most common mistake among participants was grammatical errors (mostly verb form and tense) induced by the lexical make-up form rather than the idiom itself. Karlsson thus hypothesizes that learners who focus on figurative language at a given activity seem to concentrate more on meaning rather than grammar. Furthermore, the authors find out that in this production task, students chose idioms 'that were already well-known to them, particularly those that were semi-transparent, frequent and (semi-)flexible' (p. 557). In other words, these foreign language learners relied on 'idiomatic teddy bears of relatively high compositionality, commonality and flexibility, and only after having exhausted most of these possibilities they choose other less familiar expressions of varying degrees of transparency, frequency and fixedness' (pp. 557–558).

Chapter 7, 'Summing up and directions for future research', summarizes the content of the different experimental studies described in Chapters 2 to 6 by presenting their main objectives, research design, and conclusions. Interestingly, the author shows her generosity here by addressing further research questions for every study, without the need to resort to repetitions of more lines of research derived from her investigation already described in every chapter after discussing the results of each experiment. This complimentary chapter is not thus a mere recompilation of information but a bounteous source of questions derived from very well presented experiments throughout the book.

Finally, the book also contains a very detailed list of reference section which must be regarded as essential for any person interested in idiomaticity and its processing. The reader will also find the author and subject indexes good resources to search for more specific contents in the book, as Karlsson has collected numerous topics and sources pertaining the study of idioms in the L1 and the L2.

In terms of structure, the text is well-organized and guides the reader through different aspects of idiomaticity and numerous cognitive procedures involved in their processing. The author is able to combine numerous experimental studies (Chapters 2 to 6) into a logical (although seemingly traditional) pattern of learning, namely, from comprehension to production. As the connection between studies in the chapters of the book is so strong, the reader may rather feel there is need for a different order of chapters so that whenever the participants of a study are shared between two different experiments, those two chapters of the book appear one after the other. In fact, the book would benefit enormously from incorporating a visual figure or table that shows the connections between the experiments and the participants involved in every one of them.

On a positive note, Karlsson provides the reader with much needed theoretical notions of idioms in Chapter 1, although she also grounds every experiment on more postulates which help explain the rationale of every research question laid out in the book. However, despite all these theoretical accounts, it seems that the author sometimes relies on very traditional ideas such as Global Elaboration Hypothesis (Levorato and Cacciari, 1995), Model of Dual Idiom Representation (Titone and Connine, 1994; Abel, 2003), Hybrid Model of Idiom Production (Cutting and Bock, 1997); Acquisition via Exposure Hypothesis (Lodge and Leach, 1975; Nippold and Martin, 1989; Prinz, 1983; Ezell and Goldstein, 1991), the Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1975, 1986, 1991; Clark and Paivio, 1991), the Levels of Processing Theory (Atkinson and Shiffrin, 1968), and the more modern creativity continuum (Szczepaniak, 2006). In the same line, it is interesting that the author resorts to one hybrid account of idiom processing such as Titone and

Connine's Model of Dual Idiom Representation (1999) but merely hinted at their Model of Idiom Comprehension (Titone and Connine, 1999). Nevertheless, more than a serious deficit by citing old theories of idiom processing, the author thus shows a clear gap in research that she is trying to fill in with her experiments described in the book. Another breakthrough that this book contains is the comparison of different facilitators in idiom processing such as frequency (apart from age, context, and transparency), which has normally been neglected in research (Dąbrowska, 2018:62).

Additionally, this publication should also be praised by its attempt to integrate connectionist models of language, which is mostly theoretical in nature and whose significance and implications for foreign language acquisition are now being explored (Li and Zhao, 2013:178), into a mundane topic of linguistics such as figurative language. As aforementioned, the author has used numerous theoretical notions (such as connectionism) in her different studies. However, the reader may sometimes feel that the book could benefit from integrating all of the chapters into one common linguistic theory. One more than plausible linguistic framework could be that of interlanguage, as the book mainly deals with how learners develop their idiom construal both in the L1 and in the L2. As mentioned in Chapter 4 when dealing with mental lexicon, interlanguage is regarded as 'highly dynamic systems' (p. 308). In fact, Dynamic Systems Theory (henceforth DST), together with Language Complexity Theory, are key and could become a solution to help further research in idiomaticity. This theory is aligned with the books's general objective, which is 'to seek to understand how change occurs and how elements or agents interact to produce it' (Larsen-Freeman, 2013:590). However, a DST approach would not allow studying idiom construals in such a linear way, from comprehension to production, as 'language, language acquisition, and language attrition are much more intricate, complex, and even unpredictable than a linear position' (De Bot, Lowie and Verspoor, 2007:7). In fact, Karlsson's main theoretical idea does not differ from a DST perspective:

a language learner is regarded as a dynamic subsystem within a social system with a great number of interacting internal dynamic sub-sub systems, which function within a multitude of other external dynamic systems. The learner has his/her own cognitive ecosystem consisting of intentionality, cognition, intelligence, motivation, aptitude, L1, L2 and so on. The cognitive ecosystem in turn is related to the degree of exposure to language, maturity, level of education, and so on, which in turn is related to the SOCIAL ECOSYSTEM, consisting of the environment with which the individual interacts. For any system to grow, a minimal amount of force or resources is needed. In addition, resources are compensatory. For instance, a low aptitude may be compensated by high motivation or vice versa. Each of these internal and external subsystems is similar in that they have the properties of a dynamic system.

They will always be in flux and change, taking the current state of the system as input for the next one. A small force at a particular point in time may have huge effects (butterfly effect) and a much stronger force at another point in time may not have much effect in the long run. Each system has its own attractor and repeller states; however, variation is inherent to a dynamic system, and the degree of variation is greatest when a (sub) system moves from one attractor state to the other. Flux – growth or decline – is non-linear and cannot be predicted exactly. (De Bot, Lowie and Verspoor, 2007:14)

Therefore, I suggest incorporating this linguistic theory as the core of the theoretical approach used for further research in the field of idiomaticity, as it can help disentangle the role of the studied facilitators such as age, transparency, context, and frequency together with other internal and external conditions that could hinder or foster the comprehension, retention, acquisition, and production of idioms in all speakers of L1 and learners of L2. DST ‘have the potential to account for systematicity and variation in idiomatic expression’ (Torre, 2014:97). It is ‘an ideal framework to describe and explain the socio-cognitive status and the variational behavior of idiomatic expressions from a constructionist, usage-based perspective’ (Torre, 2014:237).

Finally, one of the most important consequences of the results of the study is to improve foreign language instructors’ teaching of idioms, as they tend to be disregarded by teachers (especially in the L2). As we had mentioned before, one of the difficulties learners face when dealing with idiomatic expressions is their double semanticity, that is, idioms are not simply stored as multi-word sequences but ‘their literal meanings too appear to be activated during production’ (p. 317). Besides, just a few EFL textbooks include idiomatic expressions in a systematic way. For this reason, Karlsson attempts to provide foreign language instructors with pedagogical implications for every experimental study appearing in the book. However, most of them seem to be very general appreciations. For example, in Chapter 2, the author highlights the importance of focusing idiom lessons on the role of context and gives links to a couple of websites where students can work with idioms in the L1 (Swedish) and the L2. In Chapter 3, the author recommends dividing foreign language learners into groups based on their preferred style of learning and not simply adopting the teacher’s style. In Chapter 5, the author seems to point out that idiom manipulations should remain ‘uncracked’ in the L2 classroom because of their increased difficulty to be understood. This idea seems to follow that linear manner of understanding the acquisition of idiom construals (from comprehension and retention of canonical forms to production of these). However, the author has not given enough evidence to go against the integration of language comprehension and production in early stages of foreign language learning/acquisition. In Chapter 6, Karlsson supports

the use of rote memorization techniques to help avoid mistakes with content and function words in idioms. She also encourages the practice of ‘slot-filling exercises with supportive contexts where students are not only asked to choose among different items but also among different (syntactical) forms of one and the same item’ (p. 535) to help less proficient students in their production of idioms. Once again, the book seems to go in favor of a pedagogical activity which is not precisely encouraged by educational practitioners.

Nevertheless, some other pedagogical implications are revolutionary. For instance, the lesson to be learnt from Chapter 4 is not as simplistic as previously described. It is common for teachers to present several idiomatic expressions to students at the same time in one lesson or present several idioms related in meaning altogether. However, derived from the results of the experiment here presented, Karlsson realizes how difficult it can be to be presented similar idioms at once, since they are more prone to being misinterpreted or quickly forgotten. Besides, ‘idioms need to be recycled, providing ample opportunities to encounter the multi-word units in focus over extended periods of time’ (p. 378). All in all, this book is a great example of an innovative research that is clearly structured and that succeeds in filling a gap in the science of idiomaticity.

Note

For precise page citation, an e-book file format with the extension (.epub) is used.

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