Review: What Is Missing in Research on Idioms?

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Idioms: Structural and Psychological Perspectives by Martin Everaert; Erik-Jan van der Linden; Andre Schenk; Rob Schreuder

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What is Missing in Research on Idioms?

Idioms: Structural and Psychological Perspectives

Edited by Martin Everaert, Erik-Jan van der Linden, Andre Schenk, and Rob Schreuder. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1995. 336 pp. Cloth, $59.95.

This edited volume consists of papers presented at the Idioms Conference in the Netherlands in 1992. Combining perspectives from psycholinguistics, theoretical linguistics, and computational linguistics, the book presents the more popular themes in research on idioms, including their unique syntactic behavior and the processing of figurative versus literal meaning. In particular, the compositionality of idioms is given a great deal of attention. The book is comprehensive and interdisciplinary. Nevertheless, it fails to break any new ground, and many of the chapters ignore issues that could shed light on how idioms are processed.

Compositionality

In psycholinguistics and linguistics, it is generally agreed that an idiom is a conventionalized set of words whose overall meaning is to some extent distinct from the meanings imparted by each of the words in isolation. There is disagreement, however, on compositionality and the internal semantics of idioms. In particular, contention centers around whether the subparts of an idiom are semantically decomposable, that is, whether each word in the idiom contributes meaning to the overall meaning. Early work in generative linguistics generally assumed that idioms were noncompositional (Chomsky, 1965; Fraser, 1970). In this view, which relied heavily on syntactic arguments, meaning was assigned to the entire idiom (e.g., *spill the beans*) but not to its individual words (e.g., *spill*). In recent years, this view has been challenged by studies that have shown that idioms are in fact decompositional, that is, that the individual words of idioms contribute to the overall meaning (Cacciari & Glucksberg, 1991; Gibbs, 1992; Gibbs & Nayak, 1991; Gibbs, Nayak, & Cutting, 1989; Wasow, Sag, & Nunberg, 1983). This recent trend is seen in the current volume.

Cacciari and Glucksberg (chapter 2), for instance, argue that the semantic content of an idiom includes its overall meaning as well as the meanings contributed by each word. They claim that when an idiom is processed, both its figurative meaning (of the entire idiom) and its literal meaning (of each individual word) are activated. Thus, when a person hears an idiom such as *spill the beans,* not only is the figurative meaning of the entire idiom accessed, but the literal meanings of its subparts, such as *spill* and *beans,* are activated. Cacciari and Glucksberg also claim that literal meaning is accessed more quickly than figurative meaning. Though appealing, their view of compositionality of idioms is problematic because it presupposes a hard and fast line between figurative and literal meaning. They assume a meaning dichotomy that is more uncommon than common in language. As Langacker (1987), Talmy (1988), and others have demonstrated, there is a natural gradation between figurative and literal meaning. Consider the idiom *make a run for it.* Depending on the

context, *run* in this phrase could refer to bipedal motion or to driving quickly. Should *run* be arbitrarily earmarked as literal when it refers to bipedal motion and as figurative when it refers to quick, nonbipedal motion, even though both instances of *run* are very closely related to each other? Making such arbitrary distinctions reflects an oversimplified view of semantics. Another problem is that figurative is matter of degree; some meanings are more figurative than others. For instance, the idiom *Bob is running around behind her back* refers to secretly having an affair. It can be argued that *run* in this case is more figurative than *run* in *Herb borrowed my car to run to the store.* Furthermore, when one assumes a sharp distinction between figurative and literal, natural meaning connections are missed. For instance, the idiom *to lose one's marbles* (as in *John lost his marbles,* indicating loss of sanity) evolved from a literal use of *to lose marbles.* Therefore, the idiomatic statement shares meaning properties with the original phrase, including the notion of the human agent losing something. (This is not to say that every time an English speaker hears a phrase such as *John lost his marbles,* he or she processes the original literal meaning.)

Gibbs, in chapter 5, also argues for compositionality. He points out that some idioms, such as *kick the bucket,* do not semantically decompose as well as others, such as *spill the beans.* Gibbs also challenges the view that figurative and literal meaning are distinct or that the former is derived from the latter. Moreover, he does not agree with the idea that the literal and figurative meanings of each word in an idiom must be activated every time an idiom is encountered. Gibbs allows for the possibility that people may access only figurative meanings of words or of particular word combinations that make up an idiom. In addition, Gibbs cites evidence to support the idea that metaphorical thought motivates the understanding of idioms. In this view, metaphors such as *anger is heat* are believed to underlie how people experience and think about anger. A number of idiomatic expressions reflect this metaphor, such as *to blow one's stack* or *to explode with rage.* The fact that idioms have evolved with these particular words (*blow, explode, burn*) and that they are used to express anger is not seen by Gibbs or most cognitive linguists to be arbitrary; it is believed to be motivated by conceptual experience (Lakoff, 1987). Although his discussion is compelling and consonant with cognitive linguistic theory, Gibbs could have been more explicit about how metaphorical mapping works and about how it might be empirically tested.

Geeraerts, in chapter 3, also supports the compositional view. Like Gibbs, he assumes that meaning interpretation of an idiom involves more than just deriving the figurative meaning from the literal meaning of the words that make up the idiom. For Geeraerts, the individual words influence the entire meaning of the idiom; simultaneously, the entire meaning of the idiom influences the interpretation of the individual words. Although his arguments for simultaneous top-down and bottom-up processing are appealing and well thought out, Geeraerts's claims are merely theoretical; he provides no empirical evidence.

Some authors in this volume adhere to the older, noncompositional view of idioms. Nicolas, in chapter 9, analyzes the syntax of V–NP forms (e.g., *take advantage*), which are common among English idioms. He argues that this type

of idiom can be internally altered because the modifier has scope over the entire idiom. Hence, *take advantage* can have *unfair* or other adjectives inserted between the verb and the NP because *unfair* pertains to both *take* and *advantage*. From a psycholinguistic perspective, there are many problems with this sort of post hoc analysis. For one, it is unclear to what extent after-the-fact reassignment of semantic scope is viable, let alone psychologically real.

In chapter 10, Schenk also supports the noncompositional position on idioms, arguing that some idiomatic expressions are immune to syntactic alternations because idiom subparts carry no meaning. The analysis also includes proverbs and collocates, which he treats as idiomatic expressions. Like Nicolas, Schenk bases his arguments solely on established linguistic theory. No empirical evidence is provided.

Flexibility

In research on idioms, syntactic flexibility goes hand in hand with compositionality. It is generally believed that the more semantically transparent the idiom, the more likely it is to vary syntactically. Certain idioms, such as *spill the beans,* are more semantically transparent than others, such as *kick the bucket.* For instance, the literal meaning of *spill* shares many semantic properties with the figurative meaning of *spill* in *spill the beans,* whereas the literal meaning of *kick* is quite different from *kick* in *kick the bucket.* Therefore, *spill the beans* can passivize (*the beans were spilled*), whereas *kick the bucket* cannot (*the bucket was kicked*). This line of thinking was introduced in the seminal paper by Wasow, Sag, and Nunberg (1983), who argued against the traditional generative linguistic assumption that idiom constituents do not behave any differently from nonidiomatic constituents with respect to syntactic rules. They found that in many cases subparts of idioms allow syntactic manipulation such as movement or modification.

In recent years, syntactic flexibility and the extent to which idioms differ from nonidiomatic expressions have become important areas of investigation. Some of the chapters in this volume attempt to address this issue. For instance, Van Gestel in chapter 4 argues that X-bar projection levels determine degrees of idiomatic flexibility. He claims that lexical invariability and structural invariability are linked. In his view, if a particular structural level contains only fixed material, it will be completely opaque to syntactic manipulation. Abeille (chapter 1) claims that many idioms in French are noncompositional. She claims that most of the syntactic alternations demonstrated by French idioms can be explained by a noncompositional analysis, namely, one that relies on lexicalized tree adjoining grammar, a type of unification-based grammar.

The lexicon

Early linguistic and psycholinguistic research generally assumed that humans have a mental lexicon, which houses words and information about words. This view is still assumed by most linguistic and psycholinguistic models. Idioms, which behave in some respects like words and in other respects like phrases, have always presented problems for approaches that assume a mental lexicon.

Most early research on idioms regarded idioms as long words, based on the observation that many idioms were immune to certain syntactic transformations, such as passivization.

Jackendoff, in chapter 7, addresses idioms in light of the lexicon. He compares idioms to other fixed expressions, such as familiar song titles and television shows, such as *All You Need Is Love* and *The Price Is Right.* He convincingly argues that an idiom is a member of a large set of fixed expressions in the language and shows that idioms fail to form a neat, self-contained class of expressions. Jackendoff also discusses the problems that idioms—and other lexical items larger than words—pose for traditional analyses that assume lexical insertion rules (whereby lexical items appear in syntactic trees by virtue of ordered phrase structure rules). He argues instead for lexical licensing, which does not require rule ordering (messy for fixed expressions) and is similar (according to Jackendoff) in spirit to head-driven phrase-structure grammar and construction grammar in that it involves constraint satisfaction. Finally, Jackendoff suggests that there "should be no problem with a theory that blurs . . . lexicon and grammar" (p. 155).

Tabossi and Zardon, in chapter 11, also discuss idioms and their place in the lexicon. Citing evidence that indicates that an idiom meaning is activated more slowly than a word meaning, they argue that idioms are stored and processed not as lexical items (counter to Swinney & Cutler, 1979), but as configurations of words. In their view, the literal meaning of an idiom is processed at first and maintained until at some point in the string the configuration emerges and the figurative meaning is activated. They provide convincing arguments, yet they base their arguments on responses from a very small set of stimuli (only 15). More empirical work is needed.

Remarks

The book is quite comprehensive. It successfully covers areas of primary concern to idiom researchers, especially compositionality, syntactic flexibility, and the place of idioms in the lexicon. In addition, many of the chapters nicely review standard processing models. For instance, the discussion by Van de Voort and Vonk in chapter 12 provides a comprehensive yet concise description of the lexical representation hypothesis (Swinney & Cutler, 1979), the configuration hypothesis (Tabossi & Zardon, chapter 11), and others.

One big disappointment was that the book failed to say anything original about idioms. With the exception of Jackendoff (chapter 7) and Schenk (chapter 10), idioms were not discussed in connection to other types of fixed expressions. I was surprised to see little mention of phrasal verbs (e.g., *take up, put down*). Because phrasal verbs share many semantic and syntactic properties as idioms (they are multiword phrases with literal and figurative meanings), it would have been nice if one or two articles had specifically addressed them. Some might even argue that phrasal verbs are merely small idioms. In many respects, phrasal verbs make better stimuli than idioms because more dimensions can be controlled; for example, because phrasal verbs contain only two or three words, one could easily control for length (two-word versus three-word types). Another dimension that could be controlled is separability; some idi-

oms can optionally have an NP inserted between the verb and the particle (e.g., *Bill called his mother up* versus *Bill called up his mother*) and others cannot (e.g., *Jan dropped by the apartment* versus *Jan dropped the apartment by*). In addition, one can also control for particle type (*up* versus *in,* and so on). Thus, experiments on phrasal verbs would yield more accurate results than idioms, for instance, with respect to access of literal and figurative meaning.

I was also disappointed to find that none of the articles in the book dealt with how idioms are learned by children in a first language or in a second language. It seems that this would be a fruitful area to explore because such exploration may reveal insight into how idioms are processed and stored at various stages of development. This gap reflects a lack of interest at a more global level. In general, studies on idioms do not look at learning. Similarly, first- or second-language studies on lexical acquisition generally avoid idioms because they are more concerned with acquisition of basic-level words and literal meaning.

The biggest disappointment of the book was that none of the chapters discussed polysemy. Even though idioms nearly always contain words—especially verbs—that are polysemous (i.e., have multiple meanings), none of the studies even mentioned this pervasive phenomenon. Consider the verbs in *make the dust fly, get into trouble,* or *take your time.* Each verb is polysemous in its nonidiomatic uses. For instance, *make* can be used in reference to constructing a physical object, as in *make a* cake, to performing certain linguistic acts, such as *make a statement* or *make a confession,* or to meeting some sort of expectation achievement, as in *make a good husband.* It can also be used in other idiomatic expressions, such as *make the best of things* or *make the headlines.* Upon hearing an idiom with *make,* does one access all meanings simultaneously? It is too easy to say that the idiom has only two meanings, one figurative and one literal. The fact is that idioms are generally much more complex. Any theory that seeks to understand how idioms are stored or processed should attempt to account for multiple meanings and be willing to consider how these meanings connect to other nonidiomatic meanings. This is an area of idiom research that merits serious attention.

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Stereotypes as Rational, Flexible, and Meaningful Self-Referent Responses to Social Context

The Social Psychology of Stereotyping and Group Life

Edited by Russell Spears, Penelope J. Oakes, Naomi Ellemers, and S. Alexander Haslam. Boston: Blackwell, 1996. 422 pp. Paper, $31.95.

In recent years social psychology has witnessed a significant revival of research interest in groups, a revival that has fueled the launch of two new journals about groups: *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* and *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice.* In contrast to the classic research on groups of the 1950s and 1960s, which largely focused on small interactive groups, this revival is characterized by a focus on intergroup relations and on social cognitive processes, with a significant emphasis on social identity and stereotyping (Abrams & Hogg, 1998; Hogg & Moreland, 1995; Moreland, Hogg, & Hains, 1994). Indeed, one criticism (see Levine & Moreland, 1990) of the new research on groups has been that it lacks emphasis on interactive groups and is overreliant on ad hoc noninteractive or perceptual categories.

Two recent and closely related features of this new look in research on groups are an attempt to contextualize social cognition in a group context—to (re)socialize social cognition (Levine, Resnick, & Higgins, 1993; Nye & Brower, 1996)—and an attempt to relate traditional social cognition (Fiske & Taylor, 1991) to social identity processes (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). In recent years this second focus has produced a spate of edited and authored books such as Abrams and Hogg's (1999) edited comparison and integration of social identity and social cognition; Leyens, Yzerbyt, and Schadron's (1994) and Oakes, Haslam, and Turner's (1994) authored books on stereotyping, social cognition, and social identity; Macrae, Stangor, and Hewstone's (1996) edited study of stereotypes and group relations; and Terry and Hogg's (1998) edited integration of attitudinal phenomena, group norms, and social identity. The book edited by Russell Spears, Penelope J. Oakes, Naomi Ellemers, and S. Alexander Haslam (*The Social Psychology of Stereotyping and Group Life,* 1996) belongs squarely in this genre.