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Sunday, March 30th: 1:30-2:00

Idiom Compositionality Effects on Word by Word Reading

Psycholinguistic models of idiom processing differ in their predictions concerning the contribution of compositionality (the relation of component words to overall meaning) to interpretation of a phrase as literal or figurative. A related question is when and how during the reading process ambiguity between two such possible meanings is resolved. The present study will address both these issues by measuring the speed at which adult native English speakers read idioms followed by idiomatically and literally-biased contexts. Participants will read sentences presented word-by-word at a self-paced rate, and their reaction times on the “idiom” and “disambiguating” regions will be compared. It is predicted that processing of a disambiguating region will be slower when it is incongruent with the reader’s initial interpretation, thus providing an indication of which reading was immediately activated. The extent to which the idioms’ familiarity and decomposability ratings mediate this effect will be used to provide support for either compositional, noncompositional or hybrid models of idiom comprehension.