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How does context influence the recognition of idioms?

It was traditionally believed that literal and figurative meanings of idioms are activated simultaneously (Swinney and Cutler, 1979). More recent studies have shown that idioms are processed literally before encountering the Idiom Recognition Point (IRP) – at which point the comprehender realizes that it is an idiom (Cacciari and Tabossi, 1988). After this moment, a figurative meaning of an idiom is activated along with the literal meanings of its constituents that are stored in the hybrid lexical representation (Cutting and Bock, 1997, Sprenger, Levelt, and Kampen, 2006). In this talk I will discuss the results of a psycholinguistic study which supports the more recent view. Two experiments were conducted on Polish idioms with the aid of a timed cloze response method (Staub et al., 2015). 50 native speakers of Polish were asked to provide spoken continuations of idiomatic expressions presented without context (Experiment A) and in literal or figurative contexts (Experiment B). The aim of Experiment A was to establish the Idiom Recognition Point (IRP) for each idiom (with the assumption that IRP = cloze probability above 65%). In Experiment B, the responses of the subjects were measured at the IRP and one word before (IRP-1) and after it (IRP+1) in order to estimate idiom cloze probabilities (CPs) and idiom response times (RTs). The result obtained for CPs indicate that the figurative meaning of an idiom was automatically activated also in the case of idioms presented in the literal context. However, the significant difference in RTs between figurative and literal context conditions suggests that the idiomatic meaning had to be later discarded, and the literal meaning was computed from the literal meanings of idiom constituents stored in the lexical representation of an idiomatic expression.