

## UNDERSTANDING OF IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS IN CHILDREN BETWEEN 11 – 14 YEARS

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**Abstract:** *Introduction: Figurative language goes beyond the literal meaning of words, bringing an unclear concept alive. Understanding idiomatic expressions begins in early childhood, gradually improving with age. Objectives/Aim: As there is a dearth of Indian studies done on this aspect, it would be interesting to know the developmental trends in a multilingual country like India. Method: The participants in the study were selected from four age groups (11; 0, 12; 0, 13; 0 and 14; 0 years). A total of twenty-seven idioms were scrutinized and selected for the purpose of the study. An idiom interpretation task was administered. Participants were given a multiple choice task – figurative, literal and incorrect interpretation. They were asked to read the idiom and select its appropriate interpretation. Appropriate statistical methods were done to determine the mean percentage of all the interpretations across the age groups. The results yielded a significant main effect between the groups ( $p < 0.001$ ). Literal interpretations were dominating in the 11 year age group, and predominant figurative interpretations in the subsequent groups, along with a decrease in the literal interpretations. A developmental trend was observed in the comprehension of idiomatic phrases.*

**Key words:** *idioms, figurative, understanding*

### Introduction

Figurative language brings an unclear concept alive. It goes beyond the literal meaning of words, providing new effects or fresh understandings into an idea or a subject. Figurative language materializes a concept and pursues to classify and emphasize meaning by referencing a word or phrase in terms of something familiar to the conversational partner, usually to achieve a special meaning or effect (Akbarian, Jones & West, 1992). Adolescents begin to use and understand

language that has a figurative, rather than a literal function (Nippold & Haq, 1996; Nippold, Moran, & Swartz, 2001). Burkato & Daehler (1995) suggested that figurative language can be used to establish intimacy between some discourse participants while excluding others (Gerrig and Gibbs, 1988), and provides stimulation for later language development.

However, figurative language is so much a part of our thinking and learning processes that we may not realize how important it is in our daily lives. Hence they are used for cognitive understanding of language and the world around us. Nippold (1990) examined students' literature books, and reported that at Grade 3 (ages 8-9 years), an average of 6% of sentences contained at least one idiom, increasing to 10% by Grade 8. Being competent in the usage of figurative language is generally thought of as critical to everyday survival. As suggested by Nippold (1998) "gaining competence with figurative language is an important part of becoming a culturally literate and linguistically superior person". Though school age children and adolescents do not frequently encounter outdoor social situations on the usage of figurative language, they do often come across them in their classrooms and textbooks (Hollingsed, 1958; Boatner, Gates, & Makkai, 1975; Arter, 1976; Lazar, Warr-Leeper, Nicholson, & Johnson, 1989; Nippold, 1990; Nippold, 1991, 1993; Kerbel & Grunwell, 1997). Research has shown that students' reading comprehension is sometimes hindered by the presence of idioms in written passages (Edwards, 1975; May, 1979), and not only are they commonly found in academic reading materials and in social peer interactions (Donahue & Bryan, 1984), but also in the verbal instructions of classroom teachers (Kerbel & Grunwell, 1997).

Expressions such as 'beat around the bush', 'to bury the hatchet', 'tomorrow is another day', 'to grow red in the face', can have both literal and figurative interpretation, depending on the linguistic context. Such phrases that are pervasive in all styles of language use have been defined as 'giant lexical units whose figurative meanings are arbitrary and not easily discerned from analyzing the words composing them' (Gibbs, 1994 & Speake, 1999). The full meaning and more generally the meaning of any sentence containing an idiomatic expression is not a compositional function of the meaning of the idioms elementary grammatical parts (Katz & Postal, 1963; Cacciari & Tabossi, 1988; Pulman, 1993). Idioms are considered as non-literal phrases whose figurative interpretations cannot be derived from their literal meanings (Loelene & Maureen, 2003) and cannot be easily translated into another language (Rowe, 2004). However, a few idioms can also have a literal meaning. This relation between the literal and non-literal meaning of an idiom can be closely related, somewhat related or not related (Nippold & Rudzinski, 1993). Compared to non-idiomatic expressions of the same length, idioms are more demanding in terms of processing. According to Romero Lauro et al, (2008) this is due to the processes of alternative meanings selection and inhibition in the case of idioms. Palmer (1981) and Cruse (1986) consider idioms as 'dead metaphors'. According to this view, idioms were once metaphoric but have lost their metaphoricity over time and are now equivalent to simple literal phrases. Idioms have fixed and conventionalized meanings that result from years of

repeated use (Ackerman, 1982a). The relationship between the meanings of the words that make up the idioms and the idiom as a whole is at best indirect, if there is any relation at all (Sprengr, Levelt & Kempen, 2006). Idioms are an important part of any language and may be said to be an indicator of one's fluency in that language (McDevilt, 1993). Along with language, idioms also influence reading and social communication (Secord & Wiig, 1993).

Understanding idiomatic expressions begins in the early childhood and gradually improves during the middle and late childhood, adolescence and well into adulthood (Lodge & Leach, 1975; Douglas & Peel, 1979; Strand & Fraser, 1979; Thorum, 1980; Ackerman, 1982a; Prinz, 1983; Brinton, Fujiki, & Mackey, 1985; Brasseur & Jimenez, 1989; Nippold & Martin, 1989; Cacciari & Levorato, 1989; Gibbs, 1987, 1991; Nippold & Rudzinski, 1993; Levorato & Cacciari, 1992,1995; Nippold & Taylor, 1995; Nippold, Taylor, & Baker, 1996; Nippold, 2006; Hsieh & Hsu, 2010; Vulchanova, Vulchanov & Stankova, 2011). Children's understanding of idioms is an important area of research because these phrases frequently occur in spoken and written language, including classroom language aimed at both typical language learners and with language impairment (Kerbel & Grunwell, 1997), thereby increasing the frequency of idioms as children advance to higher educational levels in school.

Although young children provide figurative explanation of some idioms, literal explanations predominate. It was noted that the literal interpretations of idioms starts at 4; 0 - 5; 0 years. Lodge and Leach (1975) examined the understanding of idioms in eighty students who were aged 6; 0, 9; 0, 12; 0, and 21; 0 years, and found that all the groups understood the literal meanings, but the 6- and 9-year-olds had considerable difficulty with the figurative meanings. Although the twelve-year-olds understood some of the figurative meanings, only the twenty-one-year-olds had mastered them, suggesting that younger children lacked a capacity for "semantic duality" and tended to "literalize nearly all inputs". Similarly, Strand and Fraser (1979) designed a task in which comprehension of the literal meanings of idiomatic sentences was assessed separately from comprehension of the figurative meanings. Twenty children aged 5; 0, 7; 0, 9; 0, and 11; 0 years participated in their study. In agreement with Lodge and Leach, Strand and Fraser also found that all groups comprehended the literal meanings of the idioms better than the figurative meanings. Additionally they also reported that, even the youngest children in their study understood some of the figurative meanings and that the oldest children understood most of them.

Twenty children aged 5; 0, 7; 0, 9; 0, and 11; 0 years were studied by Brinton, Fujiki, and Mackey (1985), and it was observed that performance steadily improved with age. They also found that few idioms were difficult while others were easy for children. Prinz (1983) assessed idiom comprehension in a different manner. He compared the difficulty of idiom comprehension under two conditions— multiple-choice versus explanation. He tested sixty students who were aged 7; 0, 9; 0, 12; 0, and 15; 0 years. Performance on both tasks steadily improved as age

increased. Nippold and Martin (1989) examined idiom interpretation in 475 adolescents aged 14; 0, 15; 0, 16; 0, and 17; 0, with a hypothesis that idioms presented in context would be easier to interpret than idioms presented in isolation and the results confirmed that idioms in context were easier for adolescents to interpret than idioms in isolation. They also concluded that the idiom interpretation improves with age. Nippold and Taylor (2002) studied eleven-year-old children and sixteen-year-old adolescents. They asked them to judge the familiarity and transparency of a set of 20 idioms and the results indicated that the children were less familiar with the idioms and had greater difficulty comprehending them than did the adolescents. It is clear from this review that the idiom understanding improves with age.

### **Need for the study**

Idiom comprehension in children has not received required research focus especially in India. As there is a dearth of Indian studies done on this aspect, it would be interesting to know the developmental trends in a multilingual country like India. Hence the present research was undertaken with this objective.

### **Aim of the study**

To determine the developmental trend in the comprehension of idiomatic phrases in typically developing children between 11; 0 – 14; 0 years of age.

### **Method**

The present study was conducted in a relatively quiet room of an English medium school for typically developing children in Mangalore, located in the Southern part of India. The ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Ethical Committee at Kasturba Medical College, Mangalore and the informed consent was obtained prior to the conduction of the study.

#### *Participants*

The participants in the study were selected from four age groups (11 – 11.11, 12 – 12.11, 13 – 13.11 and 14 – 14.11 years). The class teacher recruited five children randomly from each group, thereby making it a total of 20 participants. None of the participants had any obvious cognitive, sensory, or emotional deficits and all students were of the appropriate chronological age for their respective standards, 6 through 9.

#### *Procedure*

An idiom interpretation task was administered to the participants in the study. There was no time limit set for the completion the task. Commonly occurring idiomatic expressions occurring in the

child's core curriculum were collected, along with a few commonly occurring idioms in the local community. A total of twenty-seven idioms were scrutinized and selected for the study. The idioms were presented to the students as a written text. Similar to the study done by Levorato, Nesi & Cacciari (2004), the participants were given a multiple choice task, consisting of an idiomatic meaning (figurative interpretation), literal meaning (literal interpretation) and an interpretation contextually appropriate but not connected with the idiomatic or literal meaning of the idiom string (incorrect interpretation). The students were asked to read the idioms and select the appropriate interpretation of it. For example, if the idiom to be interpreted was "Mark my words", the following are the interpretations that would be given to the student. 1) *Literal*: To take a paper and mark the words that have been told by me; 2) *Figurative*: To attend to what is say; and 3) *Incorrect*: To listen and write down what I say.

#### *Scoring and Analysis*

A score of 2 was given for a figurative interpretation; 1 for literal interpretation and 0 for an incorrect interpretation. The mean percentages of the type of interpretations were analyzed under each of the four groups using SPSS (11.5). Bonferroni Post Hoc Analysis was employed to determine any significant difference between the four age groups.

#### **Results**

Descriptive statistics was done to determine the mean percentage of the figurative, literal and incorrect interpretations across all the age groups. As shown in table 2, there was a considerable increase in the percentage of figurative interpretations, and a corresponding decrease in the literal interpretations of idioms with increasing age. There was also a similar decrease in the number of incorrect interpretations across the age groups, except for the 12 – 12.11 years age group, wherein a higher mean percentage of incorrect interpretation was observed compared to subsequent group. Similar to the mean percentage trend, the number of idioms interpreted figuratively kept increasing as age progressed and vice-versa for the literal and incorrect interpretations. Table 1 reports the performance of the four groups on the three types of interpretations.

Table 1: Mean percentage of figurative, literal and incorrect interpretations and also the average number of idioms under each section.

Groups	Age groups (years)	Mean % of figurative interpretation (average number of idioms)	Mean % of literal interpretation (average number of idioms)	Mean % of incorrect interpretation (average number of idioms)
1	11 – 11;11	33.33 (9)	51.85 (14)	14.81 (4)
2	12 – 12;11	62.96(17)	14.81 (4)	22.22 (6)
3	13 – 13;11	82.22(22.2)	5.9 (1.6)	10.37 (2.8)
4	14 – 14;11	89.62 (24.2)	5.1 (1.4)	5.1 (1.4)

One way ANOVA yielded a significant main effect between the four age groups [ $F(3, 536) = 26.936, p < 0.001$ ]. Post Hoc analysis also revealed a significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) within each of the groups, except between the third and fourth group ( $p = 0.736$ ).

## Discussion

The present research focused on studying the comprehension of idiomatic phrases in typically developing children between 11 and 15 years. The participants were presented with 27 idioms in a written text with a multiple choice task. The results were scored and analyzed. The accuracy of interpreting the idiom in its figurative sense followed a developmental trend. Participants between 11 – 11.11 years of age showed greater literal interpretations of idioms (51.85%) than figurative (33.33%). However, in the subsequent groups there was a change observed, with a twofold increase in the mean accuracy of figurative interpretations (62.96%) and a marked decline in the literal interpretations (14.81%). Ackerman (1982b) suggested that the 10- year olds were able to interpret the sentences not only in the presence of idiomatic contexts but also in the presence of neutral and literal contexts. This finding was also evident in the present study, as the 11 year olds yielded a mean percentage score of 33.33% in the interpretation of figurative meanings in the presence of a literal and a neutral context. An interesting aspect under the second age group was that, unlike the previous group, in which the literal interpretations dominated figurative as well as the incorrect interpretations, the present group exhibited higher incorrect mean percentages (22.22%) than literal interpretations. This could be because one of the students in the group interpreted ten of the idioms out of 27 as incorrect, thereby increasing the mean percentage. The remaining groups showed an increase in the figurative interpretations (82.22% and 89.62%) and a decrease in the literal interpretations (5.9% and 5.1%) respectively. It is to be noted that children between 14 – 14.11 years still did not achieve 100% accuracy in the figurative interpretation of idioms. This suggests that the idiom understanding continues in

higher age groups. The present study is in accordance with the finding of Lodge and Leach (1975) in which they stated that younger children found it difficult to interpret figurative meanings while twelve-year-olds were able to interpret some of the figuratives. They also found that mastery of the idioms can be achieved at twenty-years of age. This could explain the reason why even the fourteen-year olds were unable to achieve 100% accuracy in figurative interpretations. One way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect obtained between the four age groups, thereby indicating a progressive increase in the accurate figurative interpretation of the idioms. The insignificant difference between the third and fourth group, could be due to the narrow age difference between the groups. If the groups were taken with a 2 – 3 year gap between each of the groups like the previous studies by Brinton, Fujiki, and Mackey (1985) and Prinz (1983), a probable significant effect could have been noted.

The younger children were still able to understand a few of the figurative meanings in the present study. Strand and Fraser (1979) have opined that all the age groups were able to understand the literal meaning better than the figurative meaning. However, numerous other studies are also in support with the present study, indicating an increase in the figurative interpretations as age increases (Douglas & Peel, 1979; Thorum, 1980; Ackerman, 1982a; Brasseur & Jimenez, 1989; Cacciari & Levorato, 1989; Nippold & Martin, 1989; Gibbs, 1987, 1991; Nippold & Rudzinski, 1993; Levorato & Cacciari, 1992, 1995; Nippold & Taylor, 1995; Nippold, Taylor, & Baker, 1996; Nippold, 2006; Hsieh & Hsu, 2010; Vulchanova, Vulchanov & Stankova, 2011). Studies in the comprehension of figurative language have consistently showed this developmental trend evident in children, thus giving a new outlook in the development and use of one's cognitive resources.

## Conclusion

The present research was taken up to study the developmental trend in the understanding of idiomatic expression in the typically developing Indian children between the age groups of 11; 0 – 14; 0 years. Familiar idioms were selected and a multiple choice task was employed. The data was scored based on the type of interpretations such as figurative, literal and incorrect interpretation. Results revealed an age wise progression in the interpretation of idioms. The literal interpretations were dominating in the 11–11; 11 year age group, and figurative interpretations were predominant in the subsequent groups, along with a decrease in the literal interpretations. An insight into the developmental aspects of figurative language such as idioms helps us understand higher level language skills. This information can be of value in the assessment of language and also to establish management goals for intervention. Authors suggest future research to focus on similar aspects of figurative language such as proverbs, metaphors and similes, and also to include representation from higher age.

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