Presenting figurative idioms with a touch of etymology: More than mere mnemonics?

What this study was about

The study investigated the extent to which knowledge of the etymology (literal origin) of idioms (e.g. ‘waiting in the wings’ originating from actors waiting in wings of the theatre to go on stage) helps second language learners comprehend and recall their figurative meanings, and estimate whether they are typical of informal discourse.

What the researchers did

- **Participants**: First language (L1) Dutch 2nd and 3rd year university students, aged 19-21, majoring in English (their second language/L2)
- **Set up**: Participants were arranged into experimental and control groups with their year-group peers.

In **Experiment I** (online/computer-based), control groups (for both years) completed tasks in the following order:

1. **Identify-the-informal-idiom**: 4-option multiple-choice questions, participants told ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ choice as feedback;
2. **Identify-the-meaning**: 3-option multiple choice (e.g. “What is the figurative meaning of ‘jump the gun’?”);
3. **Identify-the-informal-idiom**: same as step (1), but participants could rectify their choice;
4. **Identify-the-source**: 3-option multiple choice (e.g. “What domain of experience do you think the following idiom comes from? ‘jump the gun’”), participants given etymological feedback (e.g. “In athletics a contender who jumps the gun sets off before the starting pistol has been fired”);
5. **Gap-fill**: (e.g. “Although we had agreed not to tell anyone about my pregnancy…my husband jumped the _____ and told his parents straightaway.”).

For experimental groups, steps (2) and (4) were swapped around.

In **Experiment II** (pen and paper), 22 x 3rd year students encountered 16 idioms. Using handouts, each idiom was presented three times, on each occasion participants explained its meaning. The first handout presented the idioms in isolation, the second presented them in verbal contexts (from Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms). The third handout was the same as the second, but also included etymological information (from Oxford Dictionary of Idioms). Participants’ responses at each stage were rated ‘correct’ or ‘wrong’ by an experienced EFL teacher, unaware of the purpose of the experiment.

What they found

The results from the first experiment showed that:

- participants were better at the **Identify-the-meaning** task if they had first completed the **Identify-the-source** task, which gave them etymological information;
- participants who had had the opportunity to use etymological information to figure out the meaning of idioms were (on the whole) better able to recall them;
- participants who completed the **Identify-the-source** task were better at rectifying their decisions about which idioms can be used in informal contexts than those who had completed the **Identify-the-meaning** task.

The results from the second experiment suggested that knowing the origin of an idiom could help learners guess its meaning.

These results provide positive evidence for two cognition theories of interest to the researchers.

Things to consider when thinking about this study

As the researchers acknowledged, the results are limited by the small sample sizes, and the fact that participants’ ability to rectify their initial **Identify-the-informal-idiom** choices (step 3) was poor, even for the experimental group who completed the **Identify-the-source** task, thus encountering etymological information, in-between (i.e. step 2). In addition, the results may not be generalisable to other ages, language combinations, or other methods of drawing attention to the literal senses of idioms such as puns that ‘resuscitate’ literal meaning (e.g. he’s been sitting on the fence [putting of the decision] for so long that his bottom has started to hurt!).

In your context

To what extent would presenting an idiom with its etymology help your learners remember and recall it?


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