

L1 PROCESSING OF FAMILIAR MALAY IDIOMATIC PHRASES

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Introduction

Psycholinguistic research in the area of figurative language processing has been carried out tremendously over the past few decades particularly involving idioms in the English language and other European languages. According to Cooper (1999), the meaning of an idiomatic expression does not always come from meaning of its individual components. For instance, in the idiom *to kick the bucket*, none of the individual words contribute to the actual idiom meaning *to die*. In Malay language, a figurative phrase that is similar in notion to an ‘idiom’ in English is known as *Simpulan Bahasa* (Charteris-Black, 2003). The unique characteristic of idiomatic phrases as having ‘fixed’ meanings different from their single words components has prompted the research into first language (L1) and second language (L2) processing of figurative phrases or sentences. Various models, thus, have been developed contesting issues of compositionality in idiom comprehension (Bobrow & Bell, 1973; Swinney & Cutler, 1979), modular versus parallel views on processing (Cacciari & Tabossi, 1988; Tittone & Connine, 1999) and literality against non-literality (Gibbs, 1980, 1986), amongst other things.

In psycholinguistics, there are basically 3 classes of theories pertaining to idiom comprehension and representation in the human mind. First, the non-compositional view in which idioms are processed much like ‘long words’ (Bobrow & Bell, 1973; Swinney & Cutler, 1979; Gibbs, 1980) or easily put as a single unit. In which case, it is assumed that there is a separate list or storage for an idiom’s figurative meaning and the literal meaning of its constituents. For example, the meaning of *to die* for the idiomatic phrase *to kick the bucket* and *to kick* as in movement of the leg are stored separately. Although advocates of the theory takes on the non-compositional view, they differ in their take on which type of meaning, whether literal or idiomatic is activated first. The second class takes the compositional view of idiom processing claiming that the idiom’s internal semantic structure is crucial for understanding meaning (Abel, 2003; Nunberg, 1978). Finally, the third which takes into account both views and is known as the Hybrid theory (Tittone & Connine, 1999). According to this theory, idioms are stored as both single word-combinations and ‘compositional word sequences’. This theory is considered superior to previous models because it considers the issue of idiom decomposability and much like the Configuration Model (Cacciari & Tabossi, 1988), it allows for the simultaneous activation of literal and figurative meaning in idiom processing.

Distinct from these earlier theories of idiom processing, the Graded Salience Hypothesis (Giora, 1997, 1999, 2003), also known as the familiarity model proposes that due to the salient property of certain idioms, their meanings will be activated first even before the meaning of each word constituent whether or not supporting context is available. This hybrid model suggests a direct access to the meaning of a language item. Thus, in the case of idioms, it disregards the views of