Idiomaticity Bias in Sentence Translation

Andonova, E.[12], Janyan A. [1], Popivanov I.D.[1]

[1] Department of Cognitive Science and Psychology, New Bulgarian University, Sofia, Bulgaria
[2] Bremen University, Bremen, Germany

Figurative language is considered to be among the greatest challenges in translation. The problem is compounded with ambiguous phrases which allow both a literal and a figurative reading, e.g., *a piece of cake* or *kick the bucket*. Theories of figurative language processing diverge on the issue of the precedence of literal vs. non-literal processing. On some views, comprehenders bypass literal meaning and access idiomatic meaning directly (Gibbs, 1984) while on others, linguistic analysis is first carried out but only until enough information is available to prompt recognition of the idiomatic nature of the string (Cacciari & Tabossi, 1988). Understanding figurative language in this case would involve suppression of the literal meaning that is activated prior to access to the figurative one. The Graded Salience Hypothesis (Giora, 2003) instead considers the degree of meaning activation to be dependent on its relative salience, and, in processing idiomatic language, the figurative meaning to be accessed faster as it is more salient than the literal meaning in the case of familiar idioms.

In a study of highly proficient Bulgarian-English bilinguals, ambiguous strings (allowing both a literal and a figurative reading) embedded in sentences and their translations were presented for verification in a 2 (Preceding Context Bias: Idiomatic vs. Literal) x 2 (Translation: Literal vs. Idiomatic) design. The verification task involved translation judgments of sentence fragments that included a translation of either the literal or the figurative reading of the ambiguous phrases in English.

As in a previous study (Andonova et al., 2008) on translation verification for ambiguous strings out of context, participants had a strong idiomaticity bias—overall positive verification rate was higher for idiomatic translations than for literal translations (64.80% vs. 38.55%) even though context support for the two readings was counterbalanced (main effect of translation bias; $F=11.70$, $p=.002$). A translation bias by context bias interaction ($F= 11.52$, $p= .002$) revealed that although idiomatic translations were significantly more acceptable than literal translations when embedded in idiomatic context (81.80% vs. 29.50%), the two kinds of translation were equally acceptable with literal context (47.80% vs. 47.60% for idiomatic vs. literal translations). Thus, the preceding sentential context was not strong enough to override the idiomaticity bias. In analyses of positive verification times, idiomatic translations for strings embedded in idiomatic context were processed much faster (2243 ms) than when they were embedded in literal context (2981 ms) or than literal translations overall (3200 ms and 3036 ms for literal and idiomatic context), although the interaction did not reach statistical significance. This shows that the idiomaticity bias led to more cognitive effort affecting the speed of verification of idiomatic translations if preceding context was literal, even though context played a minor role in verification decisions. Findings are discussed in terms of theories of figurative language processing and bilingual translation.