Literal, metonymic, and metaphorical idioms:  
An empirical corpus dedicated to their semantic properties and perception

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Main interests of this project: The factor of non-literalness in the semantic processing of (German) idioms.

Metonymy is more basic to cognition than metaphor; both are more complex than literal language, as theoretical and empirical findings suggest. This has not been applied to or tested in idioms. This project focuses on (non-)literalness in idioms and its effect on semantic and cognitive processing. Degree of familiarity, transparency, and (in this project) degree and kind of non-literalness are expected to influence processing difficulty, also in idioms. Specifically, the author suggests a causal relationship between non-literalness and transparency:

1. Nature and degree of non-literalness directly impact their degree of transparency.
2. Transparency affects semantic processing difficulty. Transparency is defined as a combination of how closely or distantly related an idiom and its meaning are (Nippold and Taylor 2002; Cacciari and Glucksberg 1995) and second, an idiom's understandability (cf. Nunberg et al. 1994).

An extensive explorative pilot study with 430 adult German native speakers was conducted to test these suggestions. It comprises four separate rating surveys on familiarity, degree of non-literalness, understandability, and degree of relatedness between each idiom and its meaning. The items are 80 literal, 80 metonymic, 80 rather transparent metaphorical, 80 rather opaque metaphorical idioms. Participants were blind to the distinction of idiom types.

Several significant correlations in ratings were found. First, familiarity and understandability were found to correlate, so understandability can seemingly not be completely teased apart from familiarity. Thus, the assumed relationship between understandability as a part of transparency and a direct influence on non-literalness cannot be borne out.

Furthermore, it was found that participants are very susceptible to the relatedness between an idiom and its meaning and to its degree of non-literalness. A significant correlation was found between understandability and the closeness of relation, and a significant negative correlation was found between understandability and non-literalness (the more easily understandable, the more literal the idiom was rated). Most interestingly, a highly significant negative correlation was found between the degree of non-literalness and relatedness. This means that the more non-literal an idiom is rated, the more likely the relationship between idiom and meaning is rated as distant. This indicates an interaction of idiom type and extremity of ratings, specifically, that the metonyms as a group are perceived as more literal than the metaphors and second, that the relatedness between metonymic idioms and their meanings is perceived as closer than in metaphorical idioms. It also seems to back the assumption of a causal relationship between idiom type and distance of relation of idiom and meaning and that this relationship is perceivable to native speakers. More in-depth analyses will be available by the time of the conference.

Goal of the studies:
1) to find and verify correlations and relations between these four properties
2) to form a corpus of idioms matched on these properties which shall be used in semantic priming studies with reaction time and EEG measurement on cognitive and semantic processing of differently non-literal idioms, both in healthy and language-impaired.

1Michl, Diana: „Taking the route through the mind’s eye: Why metonyms are more transparent than metaphors”
Overview of the corpus

The collected idioms from the dictionary "Deutsche Idiomatik" by Hans Schemann (2011) meet a number of syntactic and intertwining semantic criteria:

- they consist of 2 to 7 words, the vast majority consisting of 3 to 5 words
- they contain at least an NP and a VP, and follow the syntactic forms VP+NP or VP+PP, a few with the form VP+NP+PP/NP
- the metonym or metaphor always lies within the noun, never within the verb (alone)
- they always ends in a noun or in few cases, a pronoun, once embedded in a sentence

They also meet a number of meaning- and usage-related criteria.

Examples from the corpus

Literal idioms:

1) *etwas in bester Absicht tun*, [to do something with best intent]
2) *außer Betrieb sein*, [to be out of order]
3) *keine Chance haben*, [to have no chance]
4) *alle Erwartungen übertreffen*, [to surpass all expectations]

Metonymic idioms:

5) *jmd. schlägt das Herz bis zum Hals*, [sb.'s heart is beating up to the neck; to be very afraid]
6) *ein Auge für etwas haben*, [to have an eye for something]
7) *ein offenes Wort sprechen*, [to speak an open word]

Transparent metaphorical idioms:

8) *jmd'es Herz schlägt für jmd*, [sb.'s heart beats for sb]
9) *Den Stier bei den Hörnern packen*, [to take the bull by the horns]

Opaque metaphorical idioms:

10) *jmd. eine Standpauke halten*, [to give sb. a standing kettledrum; i.e. to give sb. a real telling-off]
11) *Geld auf den Kopf hauen* [to hit money on the head; to spend money recklessly]

References


