Idiom Comprehension in Mandarin-Speaking Children

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Abstract This study examines the effect of familiarity, context, and linguistic convention on idiom comprehension in Mandarin speaking children. Two experiments (a comprehension task followed by a comprehension task coupled with a metapragmatic task) were administered to test participants in three age groups (6 and 9-year-olds, and an adult control group). Laval (Journal of Pragmatics 35(2):723–739, 2003) showed that familiarity had an effect on idiom comprehension for French 9-year-olds. However, our finding showed that familiarity was important for 6-year-old Chinese children when a context was not given. Abkarian et al. (Journal of Speech and Hearing Research 35:580–587, 1992) claimed that context has little or no effect on comprehension for children under 6. Our results show that context has an effect on 6-year-old children’s understanding of idioms in a different way. Overall, our major research findings are: (1) Familiarity first appeared in responses at age 6. (2) Context played an important role in idiom comprehension and had different effects on different age groups. (3) Linguistic convention starts from age 6 on, and a significant effect took place at the age of 9. (4) Metapragmatic knowledge showed at the age of 6 and could surface even younger. As context and linguistic convention have a substantial effect on the comprehension of idioms, it is necessary to take them into account to explain language functioning and communicative situations.

Keywords Cognitive pragmatics and semantics · Developmental psychology · Plant expressions · Idiom comprehension · Mandarin Chinese

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Introduction

Understanding how idioms are acquired is generating growing interest, especially with regard to the factors that affect the developmental processes that permit idiom comprehension and production (e.g., Lodge and Leach 1975; Ackerman 1982; Prinz 1983; Gibbs 1987, 1991; Cacciari and Levorato 1989; Nippold and Martin 1989; Nippold and Rudzinski 1993; Levorato and Cacciari 1992, 1995, 2002; Levorato et al. 2004). Previous developmental research on this specific topic has tested native speakers of English (Abkarian et al. 1992), French (Laval 2003) and Italian (Leverato et al. 2004). However, an assessment of idiomatic expression comprehension by Mandarin-speaking children, primarily concerned with the underlying cognitive (pragmatic) processes needed for comprehending the expressions, has not been systematically carried out, especially on the respective roles of context and linguistic convention. The linguistic convention here is used in a narrow sense to refer specifically to the arbitrary link between the linguistic form and its meaning in the idiomatic expression.

The current study reports the empirical results of two experiments that tested Mandarin-speaking children’s idiom comprehension. Idioms are expressions in which there is a difference between the literal and the idiomatic meanings. For example, the idiom qing1-mei2-zhu2-ma3 青梅竹馬 ‘green plums and a bamboo horse’ is the name of a childhood game. Literally, it refers to the period of time when a boy and a girl who grew up together used green plums as toys and bamboo sticks as horses. Thus, the idiom is used metaphorically to mean childhood friends. In other words, the meaning of an idiom depends largely on the linguistic convention that relates a given linguistic form to a non-literal meaning, and the convention is agreed upon and shared by a specific language community.

How context facilitates the comprehension of idiomatic expressions is of interest as well. Gibbs (1991) and Leverato and Cacciari (1995, 1999) believe that context begins to be essential for the comprehension of idiomatic expressions at the age of 6 or 7. For children under 6, context has little or no effect on comprehension (Abkarian et al. 1992). Cacciari and Levorato (1989) suggest that 7- and 9-year-olds make more idiomatic interpretations in the literal-context condition. Children as young as preschoolers are able to understand metaphoric language, if the familiar conceptual mappings are presented under proper contexts (Vosniadou 1989; Winner 1979, 1988). On the contrary, the performance of adults is not context-dependent (Ackerman 1982; Cacciari and Levorato 1989).

Overall, the literature shows that context affects comprehension at an earlier age than the linguistic convention does (Ackerman 1982; Leverato and Cacciari 1992, etc.). Karmiloff-Smith (1988) indicates that children adjust their idiosyncratic notions to conventional notions. They invent cognitive theories, and then they filter out the unconventional ones during conceptual development. Ackerman (1982) reported that 10-year-old children and adults were