

From snakes with feet to cows on the ice: How idioms are far from *lost in translation* for bilingual speakers

Dr Gareth Carrol, University of Birmingham

In this talk I will discuss idioms as a specific example of figurative language. Idioms are both lexically fixed and have a figurative meaning that belongs to the whole phrase. We use idioms freely in natural language, and while native speakers have little trouble (and often show a processing advantage) understanding phrases like *kick the bucket* or *bury the hatchet*, they remain a significant challenge for language learners. Even at high levels of proficiency, non-compositional phrases are problematic for non-natives, and it has been claimed (e.g. by Cieślicka, 2006, 2013) that idioms retain a ‘literal salience’ that reflects a tendency for language learners to process them word by word rather than as ‘whole units’.

In a series of studies (Carrol & Conklin 2014, 2015; Carrol, Conklin & Gyllstad, 2016), I have investigated how high-level learners of English deal with idioms, focusing on two questions:

- 1) How do language learners process unfamiliar idioms, that is, idioms that they have had to learn in their second language?
- 2) How does first language (L1) knowledge affect processing of both form and figurative meaning?

I will summarise results using online measures of processing such as reaction times and eye-tracking that help to expand our understanding of how idioms exist in the mental lexicon. The results suggest that as proficiency increases, language learners show an increasing ability to successfully interpret the figurative meanings of English idioms. However, it is clear that this remains highly variable even for advanced non-native speakers, and that even when figurative meaning seems to be processed without difficulty, there is little evidence of the processing advantage (the *idiom superiority effect*) that is consistently reported for native speakers. In order to test the extent of L1 influence, I use the novel approach of translating idioms from other language – Chinese and Swedish – and testing participants from these language communities. For both sets of speakers, the form in particular of well-known phrases from the L1 is recognised and provides a boost to processing in the L2. The picture in terms of comprehension and integration of figurative meaning is more complex, and indicates that proficiency may play an important role in how well second language speakers are able to deal with non-compositional phrases.

I will finish by presenting preliminary results from a new project investigating the interplay of familiarity, transparency and decomposability for known and unknown (translated) idioms, and novel metaphors. By investigating the intuitions of native and non-native speakers for different types of phrase, we will be able to better understand how factors like language ability and metaphorical competence interact with the various semantic factors that contribute to figurative understanding.