

COGNITIVE AND DISCOURSE STRATEGIES IN FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF NON-NATIVE ENGLISH LEARNERS (BS LEVEL) AT HAILEY COLLEGE OF COMMERCE

Aasma Niajabat

Corresponding author

University of Management and Technology

Sadia Noreen

University of Management and Technology

Mehak Munir

University of Management and Technology

Abstract

The current study aims to investigate how BS level non-native English speakers comprehend figurative language and the interpretive strategies they use during spoken and written communication. It explores the cognitive and discourse strategies used by BS Banking and Finance students when interpreting metaphors and idioms and also intends to elaborate the role of contextual cues, imagery, and prior exposure in figurative language comprehension. The study adopts the qualitative design taking figures of speech specifically metaphors and idioms, in spoken and written discourse. Grounded in an adaptive model combining Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Dual Coding Theory, and the Embodied Simulation Framework, the research investigates the interpretive strategies used by 10 BS Banking and Finance students at Hailey College of Commerce, Punjab University, Pakistan. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic discourse analysis. The findings reveal that learners rely heavily on contextual inference, conceptual mapping, visual imagery, and dual processing mechanisms to understand figurative expressions. Challenges such as ambiguity and unfamiliarity were also noted. This study offers pedagogical implications for English language instruction by emphasizing the importance of figurative competence and the integration of idiomatic expressions in language learning curricula.

Keywords: figurative language, interpretive strategies, contextual cues, imagery, idiomatic expressions

1. Introduction

Background of the Study

Nearly every form of everyday speech contains figurative language such as metaphors, idioms and similes. Figurative expressions are different from literal speech because the audience has to think deeply and explain the meaning for themselves. For those who do not speak the language natively, learning about figurative language is more difficult as it includes both language and culture. In education and work settings, the difficulty arises because good command of language shapes the way you communicate, understand information and build relationships. Although figurative language has been widely looked at in psycholinguistics and cognitive science for SLA, studies examining its use in real situations are not as common using unbiased methods.

Figurative language refers to linguistic expressions that express meanings different from their literal interpretation. It includes devices such as metaphors, idioms, similes, hyperbole, and irony, which enrich conversation by allowing speakers to express abstract or complex ideas in more vivid or imaginative ways (Gibbs, 1994). Among these, **metaphors** are especially significant as they include conceptual mappings between two domains, often helping people to understand abstract concepts through more concrete experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For instance, if someone says "time is money," they are not equating time and money literally,

but employing a metaphor that represents time as a valuable, limited resource. **Idioms**, on the other hand, are fixed, culturally bound expressions whose meanings cannot be inferred directly from the meanings of individual words. Expressions like “kick the bucket” or “spill the beans” illustrate how idioms require familiarity with language conventions and cultural context (Fernando, 1996). Comprehension of such expressions poses challenges for second language learners, especially when idioms are opaque or lack direct equivalents in the learners’ first language. **Discourse analysis** is a qualitative method that investigates how language is used in real-life contexts to construct meaning, identity, and power relations. It provides tools to analyze not only what is said but how it is said, considering both linguistic structures and social contexts (Gee, 2014).

Cognitive linguistics, closely related to this, examines how language reflects human thought, arguing that linguistic structures are shaped by general cognitive abilities and conceptual systems (Evans & Green, 2006). The study also draws on **Dual Coding Theory**, proposed by Paivio (1991), which posits that humans process information through two distinct systems—verbal and imagery-based. This theory suggests that figurative expressions often engage both systems, making them cognitively demanding. Similarly, the **Embodied Simulation Theory** asserts that understanding language, especially figurative language, involves mentally simulating the described experiences, linking linguistic comprehension to sensory and motor systems (Gallese & Lakoff, 2005). For instance, understanding the phrase “grasp the idea” involves simulating the physical action of grasping, thereby grounding abstract thought in bodily experience.

In this research, we examine the ways in which non-native English speakers at Hailey College understand and interpret many of the higher-level idioms and expressions used at the college. The analysis of talk and theories of mind use case studies to learn about the interpretive processes used, the obstacles these learners encounter and how this affects education and ideas about the mind.

Statement of the Problem

Trying to understand metaphors and idioms can be challenging for non-native speakers because they often do not hear them frequently, are unfamiliar with their culture and may not get their meaning right away. The use of figures of speech in all areas of life is important, yet little qualitative research has studied how adult learners interpret those expressions in higher education in Pakistan. Not having any neuroimaging tools means we need to look for another way to understand the cognitive and chat strategies used by people learning figurative language.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the cognitive and discourse strategies used by BS Banking and Finance students when interpreting metaphors and idioms.
2. To explore the role of contextual cues, imagery, and prior exposure in figurative language comprehension.

Significance of the Research

The findings of this research enrich the study of figurative language comprehension in second language learning for South Asian students. Studying gestures and speech, rather than using brain imaging, allows the study to present a simple and culturally aware understanding of how the mind works with metaphors. Research discoveries can guide teachers in their English language teaching, curriculum designers to focus on figurative ability and assessment builders to pay attention to it. Moreover, this research may provide data useful for cognitive-linguistic studies on how context, metaphor and dual processing play a role in comprehending language non-natively.

Literature Review

Many researchers such as Boers (2000) and Littlemore and Low (2006), have found that figurative language is especially hard for people learning English as a second language (Boers, 2000; Littlemore & Low, 2006). While native speakers pick up traditional sayings and symbols from being with others day to day, those learning another language have to rely on brief lessons and memorizing what is taught. Understanding figurative language calls for both vocabulary and knowledge of the cultural metaphors used in language (Kövecses, 2005).

According to Lakoff and Johnson's CMT (1980), metaphor is more about the way we think than just the language we use. Expressions including "He's in high spirits" are based on the underlying metaphor HAPPY IS UP. Understanding how different words are mapped can be tough for L2 learners who are still unfamiliar with the ideas in the new language.

Paivio (1991) put forward a theory called Dual Coding Theory. Experts argue that you interpret figurative language by using both verbal and imagistic codes at the same time. For example, explanations using idioms might form pictures in the mind, helping learners understand, unless they are already aware of the cultural background of such phrases.

Gallese and Lakoff (2005) propose that figurative meaning is based on the body's own experiences (Embodied Simulation Theory). This theory also points out that to grasp an idea requires knowledge of sensorimotor activities. The fact that L2 learners have little bodily experience with idiomatic language can make it difficult for them to understand. It is emphasized in discourse-based approaches (by Cameron in 2003 and Semino in 2008) that context and function are main factors in metaphors and idioms being used in speech. They are generally used to help people define who they are, keep social relationships manageable and form arguments.

In addition to this, there are few studies of CDA in Pakistani context also e.g. Khan et al. (2017) have indicate the role of print media through CDA in the hands of capitalists and conclude the collusive stance of print media for the promotion of materialistic ideology. Then Ramzan and Khan (2019) expose the stereotyped ideological construction of print media in the hands of Baloch Nawabs and Ramzan et al. (2021a) explain the manipulation and exploitation of Pakistani public in print media through the hands of politicians and powerful community. Bhutto and Ramzan (2021) claim that Pakistani print media discharge the pacifier and collusive stance for manipulation and Nawaz et al. (2021) describe power is striving for negative them and positive us in ideological representation of print media. Ramzan et al. (2020) claim that the power of mass media for the last few decades has been considerably influencing our lives directly or indirectly, so the role of media discourse has become very significant in the lives of people. Ramzan and Khan (2024a) study linguistic coherence as a cultural insight and suggest there is a presentation of culture in narrative discourse along with analyzing pragmatic hedges from politeness perspectives and conclude that there is a discourse which enhances politeness by the use of hedges (Ramzan and Khan, 2024b)

Misinterpreting these expressions at work or in college might cause problems for people around you. Although many studies use brain imaging tools, there is not much research that observes how non-native speakers use and understand figurative language during normal conversations. The purpose of this study is to address that gap by examining spoken and written data from Pakistani learners of English with discourse analysis guided by cognitive-linguistic theory.

Methodology

This research follows an interpretive, qualitative approach to investigate the way non-native English speakers understand figures of speech such as metaphor, idioms etc. The study is being conducted with Hailey College of Commerce, Punjab University students, selecting a group of 10 undergraduate students from the BS Banking and Finance program. All these participants

include adults from several cities of Pakistan who practice academic and everyday English. Information was gathered from naturally occurring talks in regular interviews and online interview with the help of a semi-structured interview. Participants were asked to answer the questions and motivated to talk about everyday and academic subjects, during which metaphorical and idiomatic language often appears.

Audio recordings of what participants say were made and these recordings were transcribed using Turboscribe software. The research applied discourse analysis based on thematic analysis, hoping to discover how participants learned to deal with figurative expressions. Participants were observed applying interpretive strategies such as repeating information, pausing, requesting clarification and taking context into account. With the help of an adaptive framework combining Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1991) and Embodied Simulation Theory (Gallese & Lakoff, 2005), the research examined how language and behaviors can be linked to the brain, not through imaging but through conventional scientific understanding.

Cognitive investigation of figurative language easily and effectively illustrates how learners in a multilingual environment process and deal with this type of language. Participants were informed in advance about the study's aims and were given informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured, and participants had the right to withdraw at any stage.

Data Analysis

This section presents a qualitative analysis of the interview data collected from five non-native English speakers studying in the BS Banking and Finance program at Hailey College of Commerce, Punjab University. The participants were asked to reflect on their experiences with figurative language, particularly idioms and metaphors, during English language use. Thematic discourse analysis was employed to identify interpretive patterns and cognitive strategies used by the participants in understanding and using figurative expressions.

Theme 1: Contextual Inference and Pragmatic Cues

A recurring theme was the reliance on contextual and social cues to decipher non-literal expressions. For instance, Participant 1 shared an incident where someone used the expression "break a leg". The participant reported:

"I figured it out because others were smiling and wishing the person well so it could not be literal."

This response illustrates the use of pragmatic inferencing and contextual integration, aligning with the embodied simulation framework, which posits that meaning is not only derived from linguistic knowledge but also from the simulation of contextual experience. Participants interpreted expressions by mapping situational cues onto cognitive schemas, an ability indicative of mental flexibility and socio-pragmatic competence.

Theme 2: Semantic Association and Conceptual Mapping

Several participants revealed their ability to understand figurative expressions through semantic analogy or conceptual metaphors. For example, phrases such as "on the same page", "hit the books", "burn the midnight oil", and "piece of cake" were interpreted correctly based on common metaphorical structures: "Burn the midnight oil" was understood as studying late while "Piece of cake" was understood as something easy to do.

These interpretations reflect what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) describe as conceptual metaphor theory, where abstract domains (e.g., effort, ease) are understood through more concrete, embodied experiences (e.g., physical labor or food). The ability of the participants to relate idiomatic expressions to such embodied experiences suggests successful metaphorical reasoning.

Theme 3: Dual Representation of Meaning

The data also suggests that participants experience a dual representation of figurative language—one literal and one figurative—before resolving the intended meaning. A participant shared that "*Once, my friend told me, 'I'm all ears.'* It literally means that I'm all ears. But he wanted to say that I'm listening with full attention."

This dual processing aligns with Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1991), where both verbal and non-verbal mental codes are activated. Participants often initially imagine a literal visual (e.g., ears enlarged) before integrating social cues and prior exposure to infer the metaphorical meaning.

Theme 4: Preference and Interpretation of Figurative Forms

Another pattern emerged in participants' preferences and perceived clarity of expressions. Many favored metaphoric constructions like "*sharp mind*" over direct descriptors like "*clever*":

"He has a sharp mind because it gives a clear picture of what we are trying to say about someone." (Participant 1)

This preference highlights the saliency of imagery and its impact on cognitive processing. Metaphoric expressions often evoke richer mental representations, making abstract qualities more tangible and memorable.

Theme 5: Ambiguity and Cognitive Challenge

While many participants found figurative language helpful, a few highlighted confusions, particularly when lacking prior exposure: "*They are a little confusing if we do not have an idea of what they mean.*" (Participant 3)

This reflects cognitive load theory, where unfamiliar figurative expressions require additional processing effort. It also reveals a pedagogical challenge: learners may initially struggle without contextual grounding or exposure to idiomatic norms.

On the whole, the study indicates that those who do not speak English as their first language at Hailey College use several ways of thinking, including understanding contexts and using metaphors, to understand and apply figurative language. The way they understand metaphors depends on what they have learned before, how clear the context is and how vivid the images are. The results suggest including training in figurative language in English lessons, mainly using instruction connected to culture and experience.

Discussion and Conclusion

This qualitative study explored the interview data taken from 10 non-native English speaker students studying in the BS Banking and Finance program at Hailey College of Commerce, Punjab University, to examine their understanding of figurative language, particularly idioms and metaphors. The findings uncovered that the students relied on contextual and social cues, used semantic associations and conceptual metaphors, and often experienced dual interpretations (literal and figurative) before understanding the meaning. They showed a preference for clear metaphorical expressions, which they found more expressive and memorable. However, some idioms posed challenges when unfamiliar or the context was not clear. These strategies align with the findings of cognitive-linguistic theories such as Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Dual Coding Theory, and Embodied Simulation Framework. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of culturally grounded and context-rich instruction in figurative language to support second language learners in developing deeper linguistic and communicative competence. Overall, how participants understand figures can vary and is affected by their earlier knowledge, the clarity provided and cultural context. For future researches, the study recommends to further strengthen the findings by conducting some neuroimaging techniques-based study to examine the comprehending mechanism by the brain,

integrate figurative language instruction into the curriculum and use context-rich and culturally grounded materials in the classroom.

References

- Bhutto, J., and Ramzan. M. (2021). "ENGLISH: Verses of Quran, Gender Issues, Feminine Injustice, and Media Transmission - CDA of Pakistani Press Reports. *Rahatulquloob* 5 (2), 111-26. <https://doi.org/10.51411/rahat.5.2.2021/316>
- Boers, F. (2000). *Metaphor awareness and vocabulary retention*. *Applied Linguistics*, 21(4), 553–571. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/21.4.553>
- Cameron, L. (2003). *Metaphor in educational discourse*. Continuum.
- Evans, V., & Green, M. (2006). *Cognitive linguistics: An introduction*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Fernando, C. (1996). *Idioms and idiomaticity*. Oxford University Press.
- Gallese, V., & Lakoff, G. (2005). The brain's concepts: The role of the sensory-motor system in conceptual knowledge. *Cognitive Neuropsychology*, 22(3–4), 455–479. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02643290442000310>
- Gee, J. P. (2014). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Gibbs, R. W. (1994). *The poetics of mind: Figurative thought, language, and understanding*. Cambridge University Press.
- Khan, M. A., Malik, M. R., & Dar, S. R. (2017). Deconstruction of ideological discursivity in Pakistani print media advertisements from CDA perspective. *Ervena: The Journal of Linguistics and Literature*, 1(1), 57-79.
- Kövecses, Z. (2005). *Metaphor in culture: Universality and variation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.
- Littlemore, J., & Low, G. (2006). *Figurative thinking and foreign language learning*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nawaz, S., Aqeel, M., Ramzan, M., Rehman, W., & Tanoli, Z. A. (2021). LANGUAGE, REPRESENTATION AND IDEOLOGICAL STANCE OF BRAHUI IN COMPARISON WITH URDU AND ENGLISH NEWSPAPERS HEADLINES. *Harf-O-Sukhan*, 5(4), 267-293.
- Paivio, A. (1991). *Dual coding theory: Retrospect and current status*. *Canadian Journal of Psychology*, 45(3), 255–287. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0084295>
- Ramzan, M., & Khan, M. A. (2019). CDA of Balochistan Newspapers Headlines-A Study of Nawabs' Stereotyped Ideological Constructions. *Annual Research Journal 'Hankén'*, XI, 27-41.
- Ramzan, M., & Khan, M. A. (2024a). Linguistic Coherence as Cultural Insights in Prologue of the Holy Woman and Epilogue of Unmarriageable. *Contemporary Journal of Social Science Review*, 2(04), 266-281.
- Ramzan, M., & Khan, M. A. (2024b). ANALYZING PRAGMATIC HEDGES FROM POLITENESS PRINCIPLES PERSPECTIVES IN THE PROLOGUE OF THE HOLY WOMAN AND EPILOGUE OF UNMARRIAGEABLE. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and TESOL (JALT)*, 7(4), 1170-1184
- Ramzan, M., Awan, H. J., Ramzan, M., & Maharvi, H. (2020). Comparative Pragmatic Study of Print media discourse in BaluchistaSn newspapers headlines. *Al-Burz*, 12(1), 30-44.

Ramzan, M., Qureshi, A. W., Samad, A., & Sultan, N. (2021). Politics as Rhetoric: A Discourse Analysis of Selected Pakistani Politicians' Press Statements. *Humanities and Social Sciences Review*, 9(3).

Semino, E. (2008). *Metaphor in discourse*. Cambridge University Press.

Appendix 1

The following questions were asked from the students in online semi-structured interviews:

Online Interview Questions

1. "Can you recall a situation where someone used a phrase or expression in English that wasn't meant to be taken literally? What do you think it meant, and how did you figure it out?"
2. "In your opinion, what is the difference between saying 'He is very clever' and 'He has a sharp mind'? Which one do you prefer, and why?"
3. "When studying or speaking English, do you find expressions like 'break the ice' or 'hit the books' confusing or helpful? Can you give examples of such phrases you've heard or used?"