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The Development of Idiomatic Understanding – A Review

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Introduction

Although the majority of language development occurs during the preschool years, development persists into the adolescent years too. Adolescence is the period of a child's life as he approaches adulthood and can begin anywhere from 8-14 years of age and continues until 18-21 years of age. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), considers adolescent age range to be between 10-19 years. The hallmark of this period is marked by numerous physical changes as well as certain cognitive, emotional, social, and educational changes. During preadolescent and adolescent years, language develops in a slow and protracted manner. This development includes learning to use more complex language and to communicate differently depending on the situation. Language normally learned when children are in the adolescent years, attending middle and high school, is called later or advanced language development. Linguistic development during this time is subtle but important.

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One apparent measure of linguistic development is in the area of semantics. It is the number of words in an individual's vocabulary. Miller and Gildea (1987) have estimated that at the time of high school graduation, a typical adolescent will know about 80,000 words. Vocabulary sizes being only a part of the adolescent's semantic development, other parts involve the type of words they learn and what they do with the words and their meanings. These may include the type of definitions provided for words, the ability to complete verbal analogies (like "if principal is to academics then judge is to: ____?") and skill in detecting and deciphering statements that are ambiguous. There are several reasons for this semantic growth - educational exposure, life experiences, and cognitive shifts into formal/hypothetical thought levels. Adolescence is also a peak period for the use of a number of areas of figurative language. Among these are verbal humor, idioms, metaphors and similes, and proverbs.

Figurative language brings an unclear concept alive, going beyond the literal meaning of words, providing new effects or fresh understandings into an idea or a subject. They materialize a concept and pursue to classify and emphasize meaning by referencing a word or phrase in terms of something familiar to the conversational partner, usually to achieve special meaning or effect (Abkarian, Jones & West, 1992). Adolescents begin to use and understand language that has a figurative, rather than a literal function (Nippold & Haq, 1996; Nippold, Moran, & Swartz, 2001). Burkato & Daehler (1995) suggested that figurative language can be used to establish intimacy between some discourse participants while excluding others (Gerrig and Gibbs, 1988), also providing stimulation for later language development. Though children do not frequently encounter outdoor social situations of the usage of figurative language, they do often come across them in their classrooms and textbooks (Boatner, Gates, & Makkai, 1975; Nippold, 1991, 1993). Nippold (1990), examined students' literature books, and reported that at Grade 3 (ages 8-9 yrs) an average of 6% of sentences contained atleast one idiom, increasing to 10% by Grade 8.

Being competent in the usage of figurative language is generally not thought of as critical to everyday survival. However, figurative language is so much a part of our thinking and

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learning processes that we may not realize how important it is in our daily lives. Hence they are used for cognitive understanding of language and the world around us. The use of figurative language is not only limited to poetic situations, but rather it can be considered as a universal characteristic of speech (Pollio, Smith & Pollio, 1990). Pollio, Barlow, Fine & Pollio (1977) estimated that four such figures of speech are uttered per speaking minute. The comprehension of proverbs is also considered as a good indicative marker for the achievement of success in school (Nippold, Uhden, & Schwarz, 1997; Nippold, Hegel, Uhden, & Bustamante, 1998). In addition to the mentioned aspects of figurative language, the usage of metaphors, similes, idioms & slangs and jargon, for which adolescents are well-known, is also based primarily on figurative language. This usage of slangs and jargon has been linked to peer acceptance and the ability to establish friendships during adolescence. According to Nippold (1998) “gaining competence with figurative language is an important part of becoming a culturally literate and linguistically superficial person”.

Idiomatic Expressions

Expressions such as ‘going over the head’, ‘beat around the bush’, ‘to bury the hatchet’, ‘to grow red in the face’ can have both a literal and a figurative interpretation, depending on the linguistic context. Such phrases that are pervasive in all styles of language use have been defined as ‘giant lexical units whose figurative meanings are arbitrary and not easily discerned from analyzing the words composing them’ (Gibbs, 1994 & Speake, 1999). The full meaning and more generally the meaning of any sentence containing an idiomatic phrase is not a compositional function of the meaning of the idioms elementary grammatical parts (Katz & Postal, 1963; Cacciari & Tabossi, 1988; Pulman, 1993); rather they are considered as non-literal phrases whose figurative interpretations cannot be derived from their literal meanings (Loelene & Maureen, 2003) and cannot be easily translated into another language (Rowe, 2004). However, a few idioms can also have a literal meaning. The relation between the literal and non-literal meaning of an idiom can be closely related, somewhat related or not related (Nippold & Rudzinski, 1993). They can be commonly used while others are rarely used. Compared to non-idiomatic expressions of the same

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length, idioms are more demanding in terms of their processing. According to Romero Lauro et al, (2008), this difficulty in processing may be due to processes of alternative meanings selection and inhibition in the case of idioms. Sometimes idioms are also considered as dead metaphors (Cruse, 1986; Palmer, 1981). According to this view, idioms were once metaphoric but have lost their metaphoricity over time and are now equivalent to simple literal phrases. However, Gibbs (1993) argued that idioms are not dead metaphors with simple figurative interpretations, but instead have complex meanings that are motivated by independently existing conceptual metaphors that are partly constitutive of everyday thought. Idioms have fixed and conventionalized meanings that result from years of repeated use (Ackerman, 1982a). The relationship between the meanings of the words that make up the idioms and the idiom as a whole is at best indirect, if there is any relation at all (Sprenger, Levelt & Kempen, 2006). Idioms are an important part of any language and may be said to be an indicator of one's fluency in that language (McDevitt, 1993). Johnson-Laird (1993) opines that it is difficult to speak spontaneously without ending up with an idiomatic usage.

Along with language, idioms also influence reading and social communication (Secord & Wiig, 1993). Research has shown that students' reading comprehension is sometimes hindered by the presence of idioms in written passages (Edwards, 1975; May, 1979). Such expressions often occur in textbooks for school-age children and adolescents (Hollingsed, 1958; Arter, 1976; Nippold, 1990). Hollingsed (1950) found around 100 to 300 idiomatic expressions per book in elementary based readers. Not only are such idioms commonly found in academic reading materials and in social peer interactions (Donahue & Bryan, 1984), but also in the verbal instructions of classroom teachers (Kerbel & Grunwell, 1997). Lazar, Warr-Leeper, Nicholson & Johnson (1989) evaluated 5400 classroom teacher utterances and found at least one idiom in 11% of all utterances. However Nippold (1995) found that an idiom occurred in 6.7% of all sentences in three to eighth grade reading programmes, revealing a positive relationship between idiom understanding and academic attainment. Hence, an understanding of idioms is important for attaining literacy. Failure to grasp idiomatic expressions can interrupt an individual's understanding of language in social, academic and vocational settings. Nippold and Martin

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(1989) studied idiom comprehension in 475 adolescents, and its implications on academic achievement. Significant correlations were obtained between the idiom interpretation task and certain subtests (English usage, natural sciences reading, and social studies reading) that measure literacy. Edwards (1975) also reported that eighth-grade students (aged 13 through 14), who had obtained high intelligence test scores, showed better comprehension of written passages of text containing idioms than their classmates who had obtained lower intelligence scores.

Type of Idioms

Gibbs (1991) distinguished two types of idioms: opaque and transparent. Opaque idioms such as, "beat around the bush," "shoot the breeze," "spill the bean", conveys little relationship between the literal and the figurative meanings. However, with the transparent idioms such as, "hold your tongues," "skating on thin ice," "keep a straight face", the figurative meaning is actually an extension of the literal meaning. Gibbs therefore assumed that transparent idioms would be easier for children to analyze and interpret than opaque idioms. In order to test this hypothesis, he studied eighty children aged 5, 6, 8, and 9 years, comparing the difficulty of opaque and transparent idioms. He also examined the effects of context on the interpretation of these idioms, using two response modes - explanation and multiple-choice, comparing the difficulty of the same. The results showed that 1) idioms in context were easier to understand than idioms in isolation; 2) transparent idioms were easier than opaque, particularly during the explanation task when context was present; and 3) the multiple-choice task was easier than the explanation task. It was also found that performance on both the explanation and multiple-choice tasks steadily improved as age increased; however even the oldest children did not know all of the idioms.

Nippold and Rudzinski (1993) designed an experiment to examine the role of transparency and familiarity on idiom understanding in youth. The task contained 24 different idioms representing three levels of familiarity—high, moderate, and low—with eight expressions for each level. Adolescents rated the expressions as less familiar but more transparent than did the adults. Given these differences between groups, only the ratings of the adolescents were used

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in selecting idioms for the main experiment in this study. After the 24 idioms had been selected based on their familiarity and transparency ratings, an idiom explanation task was written. This task was presented to additional groups of 150 students who were aged 11, 14, and 17 years. Each idiom occurred in a brief written story. Students read the stories silently and provided written explanations of the idioms. The results showed that performance on the task steadily improved with each successive age group and the results concerning familiarity were consistent with the view that the development of figurative language depends to a large extent upon the amount of meaningful exposure one has to such expressions (Ortony, Turner, & Larson-Shapiro, 1985). Moreover the results concerning transparency were with the consistent view that in addition to exposure, figurative understanding develops as the learner applies a metalinguistic strategy of attempting to infer the nonliteral meaning of an expression from the literal meaning of the words comprising it, contradicting the hypothesis that idioms are learned as giant lexical units (Strand & Fraser, 1979; Hoffman & Honeck, 1980; Ackerman, 1982b).

In a study, Nippold and Taylor (1995) presented the same set of 24 idioms and story contexts that had been used in the Nippold and Rudzinski (1993) study to additional groups of 150 students who were aged 11, 14, and 17 years. However, the students responded through a multiple-choice mode rather than an explanation mode. With respect to this study, it was found that the multiple-choice response mode was easier than the explanation mode at each of the three age levels. This result was consistent with other studies of idiom understanding (e.g., Ackerman, 1982b; Prinz, 1983; Gibbs, 1987, 1991; Nippold & Duthie, 2003). In another study Mola (1993) found out that the idioms which were comprehended and produced most correctly were those which were frequently used, and those whose meanings were transparent.

Factors Influencing Idiom Comprehension

Cain et al (2005) suggested that there are three factors in idiom comprehension – familiarity, transparency and context. Written text was also considered as an additional factor. Cain and his colleagues stated that idioms that are presented within a context (written text) are easier to understand than those presented in isolation. The context might provide the necessary semantic

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information from which the reader can extract the nonliteral (figurative) intent appropriate for the situation (Levorato & Cacciari, 1992). This Global Elaboration Hypothesis, proposed by Levorato and Cacciari (1992), predicts that individuals will comprehend idioms and other figures of speech when they are able to go beyond a local, piece-by-piece elaboration of the text to search for a global, coherent meaning. This influence of context on the comprehension of idioms was supported by many researchers (Douglas & Peel, 1979; Ackerman, 1982a; Brinton, Fujiki & Mackey, 1985; Gibbs, 1987; Cacciari & Levorato, 1989; Nippold & Martin, 1989; Qualls et al, 2003). The contexts are important for less common idioms whose meanings are not yet fully known, particularly for unfamiliar opaque idioms whose meanings are not fully derivable through semantic analysis of phrases.

Both the factors - familiarity and transparency play a critical role in the development of idiom understanding. Like many aspects of the lexicon, these factors are constantly undergoing change. Adults, having lived longer and having had more life experiences, generally show greater familiarity with idioms than do adolescents (Nippold & Rudzinski, 1993). Studies of familiarity with specific idioms have produced contradictory results. Keil (1986) claims that frequent exposure to an idiomatic expression do not guarantee that children will comprehend the idiom. Levorato and Cacciari (1992) concluded that familiarity plays only a minor role in idiom comprehension for older children. Studies done by Nippold and Rudzinski (1993) and Nippold and Taylor (1995) found that idioms higher in familiarity were comprehended with greater accuracy by typically developing adolescents. Laval (2003) reported that French 9-year-olds rely on familiarity to a great extent in comprehending idioms. He showed that metapragmatic knowledge varies with both linguistic convention and context. Cain, Towse & Knight (2009) conducted two experiments comparing 7- and 8-year-olds' and 9- and 10-year-olds' ability to use semantic analysis and inference from context to understand idioms. A multiple-choice task was used and manipulations of the idioms, w.r.t its transparency and opaqueness, familiarity and novelty, and its presentation of it with or without a supportive story context was carried out. Their performance was compared with that of adults and 11- and 12-year-olds. Results broadly support Cacciari and Levorato's global elaboration model. However it was also found that the

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youngest children were able to use semantic analysis to derive the meanings of transparent idioms as well as being sensitive to meaning in context. They also demonstrated that the language processing skills that aid idiom comprehension, as well as idiom knowledge itself, are still not fully developed in 11- and 12-year-olds.

Research in idiom comprehension and processing in children (Levorato & Cacciari 2002; Benneli et al, 2006), has further suggested that the ability to work with figurative language (including idioms) correlates with age and years of schooling and is linked to other linguistic abilities, such as meta-linguistic awareness, and the ability to infer from context. The contexts of humorous items such as jokes and riddles also have found to be an influencing factor for the comprehension of idioms. Spector (1996) examined the comprehension of idioms embedded in the context of humor for 90 third, fourth, and fifth grade children (30 children from each grade). The children were asked to detect and explain the idioms. They showed that the detection tasks were significantly easier than explanation tasks for all grades, and significant improvement in understanding occurs with age. The data seem to suggest that idiom comprehension is affected by the level of idiom transparency, the degree of contextual support available in the humor items, and the level of familiarity of the idioms. In another study, Hsieh & Hsu (2010) examined the effect of familiarity, context and linguistic convention on idiom comprehension in Mandarin speaking children. The test participants were of three age groups - 6 and 9-year-olds, and an adult control group. They conducted two experiments - a comprehension task followed by a comprehension task coupled with a metapragmatic task. Finally they concluded that, 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; and 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.

Levorato, Nesi & Cacciari (2004) investigated idiom comprehension in school-age Italian children with different reading comprehension skills. According to their hypothesis, the level of

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a child's text comprehension skills should predict his/her ability to understand idiomatic meanings. In a preliminary phase, they used a standardized battery of tests (Cornoldi & Colpo, 1998) to assess the ability of second graders and fourth graders to comprehend written texts. After classifying them at different age levels - good, medium, and poor comprehenders, the children were then presented with familiar idiomatic expressions (embedded in short stories) which also have a literal meaning. The results of the experiments showed that the ability to understand a text indeed predicted children's understanding of idioms in context.

Levorato, Roch & Nesi (2007) also investigated the relation between text and idiom comprehension in children with poor text comprehension skills. In the first phase of their longitudinal study, six-year-old first graders with different levels of text comprehension were compared in an idiom and sentence comprehension task. Text comprehension was shown to be more closely related to idiom comprehension than sentence comprehension. The follow-up study, carried out eight months later on less-skilled text comprehenders, investigated whether an improvement in text comprehension was paralleled by an improvement in idiom comprehension. The development of sentence comprehension was also taken into account. Children who improved in text comprehension also improved in idiom comprehension. However, this improvement was, instead, weakly related to an improvement in sentence comprehension.

Development of Idiomatic Understanding

Understanding idiomatic expressions begins in the early childhood and gradually improves during the middle and late childhood, adolescence and well into adulthood (Lodge & Leach, 1975; Douglas & Peel, 1979; Strand & Fraser, 1979; Thorum, 1980; Ackerman, 1982a; Prinz, 1983; Brinton, Fujiki, & Mackey, 1985; Brasseur & Jimenez, 1989; Gibbs, 1987, 1991; Nippold & Martin, 1989; Cacciari & Levorato, 1989; Levorato & Cacciari, 1992,1995; Nippold & Rudzinski, 1993; Nippold & Taylor, 1995; Nippold, Taylor, & Baker, 1996; Nippold, 2006). Children's understanding of idioms is an important area for research because these phrases

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frequently occur in spoken and written language, including classroom language aimed at both typical language learners and language impaired (Kerbel & Grunwell, 1997), thereby, increasing the frequency of idioms as children advance to higher educational levels in school.

Researchers have recognized the difficulty of an idiom comprehension task (van Kleeck, 1984; Kamhi, 1987; Roth, 1987), as the metalinguistic skills needed for understanding ambiguities are complex and especially challenging are the skills required for showing comprehension of the ambiguity of idioms. Determining children's comprehension of idioms is not an easy task. For example, even when idioms appear to be understood on multiple choice tasks, these same idioms often are not appropriately interpreted on explanation tasks (Prinz, 1983; Gibbs, 1987). This could be because explanation tasks place great demands on a child's metalinguistic skills. As Nippold and Rudzinski (1993) have pointed out that it is not easy "to reflect upon the meaning of a lexical unit and to state explicitly what is known implicitly". Thus the nature of the task used to assess comprehension appears to affect the results. In addition to the development of metalinguistic skills needed for each task, the decision to compare children's ability to detect idioms with their ability to explain them was based on the probability that the depth of knowledge needed to fully acquire an idiom is not shown until it can be explained.

Although young children provide figurative explanation of some idioms, literal explanations predominate. It was noted that the literal interpretations of idioms starts at 4-5 years. Kempler et al. (1999), however, suggest that age 10-11yrs is the stage when children's knowledge of idioms starts approximating adult-like knowledge. He also proposed that the understanding of idioms follows a nonlinear path very similar to the vocabulary spurt between the second and the third year (Marchman & Bates 1994, Bates & Goodman 1997). However, with idioms, this process takes approximately 4 times longer with a peak at around 11 years, and its onset is much later.

In one of the early investigations, Lodge and Leach (1975) examined the understanding of idioms in eighty students who were aged 6, 9, 12, and 21yrs. The task comprised of 10 idiomatic sentences, each accompanied by four pictures (one literal illustration of the idiom, one

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figurative illustration of the idiom and two were foils). After each idiom was read aloud by the examiner, the student was asked to point to the pictures that best expressed the two meanings (literal and figurative). All groups understood the literal meanings, but the 6- and 9-year-olds had considerable difficulty with the figurative meanings. Although the 12-year-olds understood some of the figurative meanings, only the 21-year-olds had mastered them, suggesting that younger children lacked a capacity for "semantic duality" and tended to "literalize nearly all inputs". In response to the above study, Strand and Fraser (1979) suggested that the simultaneous presentation of literal and figurative pictures in the earlier study may have been confusing. Therefore, Strand and Fraser designed a task in which comprehension of the literal meanings of idiomatic sentences was assessed separately from comprehension of the figurative meanings. Twenty children aged 5, 7, 9, and 11 yrs participated in their study. They listened to 20 idiomatic sentences, each of which was accompanied by two sets of four pictures—one set for the literal meanings and one for the figurative meanings. Each set contained one correct illustration and three foils. Similar to the previous study, the children were asked to choose the one picture that best expressed its meaning. For the figurative task, the child also was asked to explain the meaning of the sentence. In agreement with Lodge and Leach (1975), Strand and Fraser (1979) found that all groups comprehended the literal meanings of the idioms better than the figurative meanings. However, additionally they found that, for the figurative meanings even the youngest children in their study understood some of the figurative meanings and that the oldest children understood most of them. They also suggested that ease of understanding some idioms may be a function of the extent to which children are exposed to various idioms and find them relevant to their own experiences.

Twenty children aged 5, 7, 9, and 11 were studied by Brinton, Fujiki, and Mackey (1985), in support to idiom difficulty that varies widely. They administered six different idioms in a short story format accompanied by some pictures. Following the story, the child was asked to select from among four pictures the one that best illustrated the idiom. Here again the choices included one correct figurative interpretation, one literal interpretation, and two additional nonliteral foils. Results showed that performance steadily improved as age increased. They also

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found that few idioms were difficult while others were easy for the children. Prinz (1983) assessed idiom comprehension in a different manner. He compared the difficulty of idiom comprehension under two conditions— multiple-choice versus explanation. He tested sixty students who were aged 7, 9, 12, and 15yrs. The same procedures and idiomatic sentences that had been used by Lodge and Leach (1975) served as the multiple-choice task in this investigation. For the explanation task, each subject was simply asked to explain the meanings of the idiomatic sentences. Performance on both tasks steadily improved as subject age increased. Multiple-choice was found to be easier than explanation.

The usage of picture cues to study idiom comprehension was questionable. With regard to this, Douglas and Peel (1979) tried to test 120 children aged 7, 9, 11, and 13yrs in a more naturalistic procedure for examining idiom understanding. Responses were evaluated for the degree to which literal interpretations versus figurative interpretations were provided. Consistent with other studies (Lodge & Leach, 1975; Strand & Fraser, 1979; Prinz, 1983; Brinton et al., 1985), Douglas and Peel also found that idiom understanding steadily improved with age.

Ackerman (1982b) provided a direct support for the importance of context in interpreting idioms, especially for younger children. In his study, ninety-six children aged 6, 8, and 10 yrs & a group of college students (adults) listened to a series of simple stories, each of which ended in an idiomatic sentence. Like other studies, Ackerman also had a figurative, literal and a neutral version of the story. Following each story, the subject was asked to explain the final sentence. Results showed that the 6-year-olds had difficulty interpreting the sentences, but that the 8-year-olds could interpret them in the presence of idiomatic contexts. In contrast, both the 10-year-olds and the adults could interpret the sentences not only in the presence of idiomatic contexts but also in the presence of neutral and literal contexts. These findings suggested by Ackerman convey that, younger children rely on linguistically biasing contexts to a greater extent than older children when interpreting idioms.

Nippold and Martin (1989) examined idiom interpretation in 475 adolescents aged 14, 15, 16, and 17yrs, predicting that idioms presented in context would be easier to interpret than

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idioms presented in isolation. Results showed that idioms in context were easier for adolescents to interpret than idioms in isolation. For all students combined, the mean accuracy score was 60% for idioms in isolation and 69% for idioms in context. The study also showed that performance under both presentation modes improved as subject age increased. Thus, although accuracy of idiom interpretation slowly improved as subject age increased, even the oldest students had not completely mastered the task in either presentation mode. These results were consistent with Prinz (1983) in showing quantitative improvement but non-mastery of idiom interpretation during adolescence. However, they were inconsistent with Douglas and Peel (1979) who reported mastery by the age of 13yrs. This discrepancy could be attributed to the fact that different sets of idioms were employed in the different studies.

Brasseur and Jimenez (1989) extended the age group (18 through 21, 22 through 29, and 30 through 43 yrs) in order to study the idiom comprehension, by presenting the Idioms subtest from the Fullerton Language Test for Adolescents (Thorun, 1980) to 71 participants. Each of the 20 idioms was presented in isolation, and it was noted that the performance improved as the age increased. This makes it apparent that that idiom explanation continues to improve throughout adolescence and well into adulthood. Nippold and Taylor (2002) studied 11 year old children and 16 year old adolescents. The judgment tasks were identical to those used by Nippold and Rudzinski (1993). The comprehension task was written specifically for the present study but was quite similar to the multiple-choice task used by Nippold and Taylor (1995). The participants were asked to perform three tasks in the following order: Familiarity Judgment, Idiom Comprehension, and Transparency Judgment. The results indicated that the children were less familiar with the idioms and had greater difficulty comprehending them than did the adolescents. However, the children's transparency judgments did not differ from those of the adolescents. For the children, the easiest idioms were also more familiar and transparent than the most difficult expressions. For the adolescents, the easiest idioms were more transparent than the most difficult ones, but the two types did not differ in familiarity.

It is often assumed that there is little relationship between the literal and the figurative meanings of an idiom, and that knowing the literal meaning is not very helpful in learning the

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figurative meaning (Ortony, Schallert, Reynolds, & Antos 1978). This view has led several investigators to hypothesize that people learn idiom as giant lexical units rather than by analyzing their constituents (Strand & Fraser, 1979; Hoffman & Honeck, 1980; Ackerman 1982b). Vulchanova, Vulchanov & Stankova (2011) tested idiomatic knowledge in younger children (preschoolers), and older children (third-graders) with Bulgarian as L1, compared to adults. Their main hypothesis was that around age ten children's knowledge of idioms starts approximating adult-like knowledge (Kempler et al., 1999). Hence, they theorize that the ability to work with figurative language (including idioms) correlates with age and years of schooling and is linked to other linguistic abilities, e.g., meta-linguistic awareness, and the ability to infer from context (Benneli et al., 2006; Levorato & Cacciari, 2002). Their hypothesis was confirmed, revealing that while the idiom comprehension is scarce among the younger group, the older children display advanced linguistic skills in the comprehension and interpretation of idioms.

Therefore, it can be considered that idiom comprehension is a prolonged process in development; and involves a combination of contextual processing and bottom up semantic analysis (Nippold, 2001). The idiom acquisition is a gradual rather than an "all or none" process in which the meaning of a particular phrase is at first exclusively literal, but is gradually broadened to include the figurative meaning as the child grows older. Single lexical items also follow a developmental pattern of gradually increasing complexity and this provides some support for the theory that idioms are giant lexical items.

Conclusion

Language development is an on-going process right from childhood to adolescence. During the adolescence phase of life, this development continues in terms of the understanding and expression of figurative language. Significant correlations have been obtained between comprehension of figurative language and academic attainment, thereby making figurative language a good indicative marker for the achievement of success in school. This usage of figurative language indicates higher level language abilities that exist in the form of idioms,

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proverbs, metaphors & similes. Idioms occur in different types (literal/non-literal, opaque/transparent), each having a unique effect on comprehension. Studies have been done on determining the developmental pattern of comprehension of idiomatic phrases across childhood to adolescence. Understanding of idiomatic phrases can be assessed using different modes such as - explanation and multiple choice tasks. Many studies found that there was a linear increase in the accurate interpretations of idiomatic phrases with age. Idioms can thus be used as a developmental marker to check for language impairments in the later part of language development. However, research under this aspect is still to be continued. Studies in this area have a broader scope in multilingual populations like India, as there is a dearth of studies in this aspect.

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