

The eyes have it: How language dominance, salience, and context affect eye movements during idiomatic language processing

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The paper describes an eye movement study into the effects of salience, context, and language dominance on the processing of idiomatic expressions by Spanish-English bilinguals. Salient meanings of figurative expressions are those which are processed first and accessed directly from the mental lexicon, regardless of contextual bias (Giora, 2002, 2003). The research conducted so far with second language (L2) learners and bilingual participants has shown that literal meanings of L2 idioms might be more salient than figurative ones in the course of their processing by nonnative language users (e.g., Kecskes, 2000; Liontas, 2002; Cieślicka, 2006; Cieślicka & Heredia, 2011). In addition, preliminary results imply that the degree of language dominance, or which language is more readily accessible due to usage (Altarriba & Basnight-Brown, 2007; Heredia, 1997; Heredia & Altarriba, 2001), might be a factor in bilingual processing. To investigate whether the degree of literal and figurative activation in bilingual idiom processing may be modulated by the status of the language (dominant vs. nondominant), we recorded eye movements of Spanish-English bilinguals, dominant either in Spanish or in English, while they were reading ambiguous (literally plausible, such as *kick the bucket*) English idioms. Each idiom was used either in its figurative or literal meaning. In addition, each idiom was embedded in a sentence with neutral preceding context, in which case its figurative (*Within seconds she realized she was **in deep water**, and that she would very soon come to regret her words*) or literal (*Within seconds she realized she was **in deep water**, and that she would very soon have to swim back towards the shore*) meaning became clear only thanks to the following disambiguating part of the sentence, or it was preceded by a rich supportive context clearly biasing one of the meanings (*Since both of us were equally guilty of causing the overspend, we both knew we were **in deep water**, and very likely to lose our jobs*). As predicted, gaze duration and fixation count results indicate that the effects of salience and context on eye movement patterns are modulated by language dominance.

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