IDIOM COMPREHENSION: TWO APPROACHES

Abstract

Basing on the two most influential theories in the literature on idiom comprehension (Glucksberg 2001; Vega Moreno 2003, 2004, 2005) as well as on the account of familiar metaphor comprehension (Wilson – Carston 2006), the present author proposes an account of comprehension of familiar idioms as metaphorical expressions. Unfamiliar metaphors are comprehended on-line in a relevance-guided comprehension procedure which involves adjustment of concepts encoded in idiom constituents. When the metaphorical denotation of the idiom is memorised, the well-known idiomatic string is comprehended just as familiar metaphors in the sense of Wilson – Carston (2006), i.e. in the process of disambiguation of two encoded senses.

0. Introduction

In the recent study of comprehension of idiomatic expressions two accounts have become most influential: the approach developed by Glucksberg (2001, 2004) and the one defended by Relevance Theorists (Wilson – Carston 2006; Sperber – Wilson 2005, Vega Moreno 2003, 2004, 2005). The aim of this paper will be to compare and contrast these two approaches to idiom comprehension. In performing my study I will conduct an analysis of theories of metaphor and idiom comprehension present in both accounts. My concern will also be to analyse differences and relationship between the approaches proposed by Glucksberg (2001, 2004) and by relevance theory. Finally, I shall propose an account of idiom comprehension, which combines the main tenets of both theories. It will be argued that in the light of Glucksberg’s (2001) theory of idiom comprehension, the account proposed by Vega Moreno (2003, 2005) presents only the initial stage of idiom’s meaning.
construction. After the idiomatic meaning is learned by a language user, the idiom is comprehended as a familiar metaphor in the sense of Wilson – Carston (2006). Idiom variants, on the other hand, may be regarded as novel metaphors and understood according to Vega Moreno’s theory.

1. Metaphor comprehension by Glucksberg

In the traditional approach to metaphor, figurative expressions of the form X is Y have been viewed as implicit comparisons. Such expressions would be comprehended by being turned into the simile X is like Y, in which the properties of X and Y would be then compared. However, findings on comprehension of metaphor reported by Glucksberg (2001, 2004) show that metaphors such as this included in the sentence My lawyer is a shark are comprehended faster than the comparable simile My lawyer is like a shark. On the ground of these findings, Glucksberg (2001, 2004) opposes the view that metaphors are simply covered similes, as they prove that metaphors are comprehended in a different way than just by comparing the salient features of the vehicle and the topic.

According to Glucksberg (2001, 2004), metaphors are not comparisons but class-inclusion statements. They evoke their meaning via dual reference, which means that the metaphor vehicle shark is used to refer not to the literal shark but to all predatory creatures in general.

Similarly in the statement My job is a jail the salient features of the vehicle jail are attributed to the topic job. This particular job is now included in the more general category JAIL, and as a consequence of that categorization becomes similar in relevant respects to literal jails (Glucksberg – McGlone – Manfredi 1997).

Glucksberg names yet another class of metaphors – predicative metaphors. In these, according to Glucksberg, verbs are used figuratively. For example the verb to fly embodies a swift action. According to the class-inclusion theory metaphor interpretation involves selecting a salient feature of the vehicle that might attribute a value to the topic (Vega Moreno 2004). This process results in ad-hoc construction of an attributive category, which the metaphor vehicle is taken to exemplify (Vega Moreno 2004). Metaphors are class-inclusion assertions, because they assert that the topic belongs to the new category. For example, in the comprehension of the sentence My wife’s surgeon is a butcher, the hearer aligns the properties of the vehicle with the properties of the topic and constructs the attributive category “people who grossly botch their job”.

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2. Idiom comprehension by Glucksberg

Glucksberg (2001) proposes typology of idioms based on the degree of compositionality and semantic transparency. Idioms in the case of which there is no relation between the figurative meaning and the meanings of its constituents are non-compositional idioms. The examples of these are idioms such as *cheesecake*, meaning ‘pinup art’ and *lemon*, meaning ‘product hopelessly flawed, impossible to repair’ (Glucksberg 2001: 73).

Glucksberg opts for the compositional approach to idiom structure in which the literal meanings of idiom’s constituents map onto the components of idiomatic meaning. Compositional idioms, according to Glucksberg, may be opaque or transparent. Transparency indicates to what extent meaning of an idiom may be inferred from the meanings of its constituents.

In the case of fully transparent idioms, such as *spill the beans* and *smell a rat*, we can see one to one relation between the idiom’s constituents and the components of the metaphorical meaning. In this example the word *spill* corresponds directly to the act of revealing and the word *beans* maps directly onto *secrets*.

In opaque idioms, such as *kick the bucket*, the relation between the idiom’s constituents and its idiomatic meaning may not be evident, but still, the meanings of individual constituents constrain the way in which language users interpret and use the idiom. Idiomatic expressions such as *kick the bucket* behave as predicative metaphors. The word *kick*, meaning ‘to strike something with one’s leg’ in the idiom *kick the bucket* stands for an abrupt and swift action which maps on the manner of death and contributes to the metaphorical meaning of the idiom ‘to die suddenly’. What is more, the act of kicking is a discrete action and that is why the meaning of the word *kick* constrains the use of the idiom.

While it is acceptable to say *He laid dying all week*, the sentence *He laid kicking the bucket all week* is unacceptable. A similar mapping may be observed in the idiom *fly off the handle*.

In Glucksberg’s (2001) classification there is yet another class of idiomatic expressions, called quasi-metaphorical idioms, such as *skating on thin ice*, which act as nominal metaphors. They refer simultaneously to a hypothetical situation, which is an ideal exemplar of a situation of certain sort, and to a real situation described in terms of the hypothetical, ideal one. The features of the ideal exemplary situation map directly onto the situation in reality.

The theory of idiom comprehension developed by Glucksberg (2001) accounts for the understanding of semantically transparent idioms, such as *spill the beans* and *smell a rat*. In this theory Glucksberg (2001) proposes that the idiom *spill the beans*, when heard for the first time, is opaque to the
hearer, which means that the hearer is not able to infer the figurative meaning of the idiom from the meanings of its constituents. However, as a result of frequent use in metaphorical context, the idiom’s components become polysemous as they acquire their idiomatic meanings as secondary, literal senses. Thus the components of the idioms *spill the beans* and *smell a rat* have at least two interpretations: the literal meaning which is context free and the idiomatic meaning which is activated in idiomatic contexts.

Quasi–metaphorical idioms, such as *skating on thin ice*, behave as metaphors. They literally refer to situation, action or event that epitomises a class of situations, actions or events. *Skating on thin ice* epitomises a prototypical risky action, and may be used to any activity that is risky.

The drawback of Glucksberg’s theory of idiom comprehension is the fact that it does not give any explanation on how the idiom constituents and the idioms as a whole would acquire their meaning. Relevance Theory comes at rescue here.

3. Metaphor comprehension in Relevance Theory

According to Relevance Theory, metaphor emerges as a loose use of language. Its comprehension involves broadening and narrowing of the concepts. To illustrate the relevance-theoretic comprehension strategy of metaphor let’s consider the example below:

(1) A: Tell me more about your daughter.
B: Well, she’s an angel.

According to Relevance Theorists, to grasp the intended figurative meaning of the word *angel*, the hearer will decode the concept ANGEL with the denotation ‘heavenly creature’. This concept contains such properties of literal angels as being endowed with supernatural powers, dwelling in heaven, having wings, being good and gentle. Following the path of least effort, the hearer uses the concept ANGEL to construct a narrower concept ANGEL* which excludes the features of being a supernatural, heavenly creature and having wings, but evokes the properties of being good and gentle.

Relevance Theory claims that broadening and narrowing of the concepts is not unique to comprehension of metaphor. Concept adjustment takes place also during the processing of the literal language, as in the following examples (Wilson – Carston 2007):

(2) For recycling we need empty bottles. (EMPTY* = close to empty)
All politicians drink (DRINK* = drink alcohol)
Familiar vs. novel metaphors
Studies on metaphor comprehension (e.g. Blasko – Connine 1993; Gentner – Wolff 1997; Giora 1997, 2002; Bowdle – Gentner 2005) have proved that unfamiliar and novel metaphors take significantly longer to process than either literal sentences or familiar metaphors. This suggests that familiar and novel metaphors must involve a special comprehension procedure.

Both, relevance-theoretic approach and Glucksberg’s approach, make distinction between familiar and novel metaphors. Glucksberg (2004) as well as Relevance Theorists claim that metaphors that are novel at first, become a second encoded sense overtime. Glucksberg, however, fails to offer any account of how this might happen.

Sperber – Wilson (2006) and Wilson – Carston (2007) claim that metaphorical expressions which are often used in a figurative context may undergo semantic change, which means that ad hoc concepts may become a new encoded sense. Wilson – Carston (2007) give an example of the words saint and angel which, as a result of frequent use in metaphorical context, may receive a new encoded sense SAINT* and ANGEL* and, therefore, become polysemous. The comprehension of such familiar metaphorical expressions does not involve any ad hoc concept construction and the meaning is retrieved from the mental lexicon in the process of disambiguation, just as the meaning of literal expressions.

4. Relevance Theory: solutions to Glucksberg’s problem

Vega Moreno proposes a solution to the issue of ‘emergent properties’ based on Relevance Theory. She claims that the ‘emergent properties’ are nothing more than just implications derived inferentially which the hearer may use as potential implicatures of the utterance. To illustrate this case let us consider the following example:

(3) Doctor: I am afraid the surgeon who performed a caesarean on your wife perforated both ovaries. I had no choice but to remove them.

Husband: I want that surgeon out of the hospital. That surgeon is a butcher!

(Vega Moreno 2004: 298)

When the hearer hears a sentence above they may retrieve from memory the concepts SURGEON and BUTCHER and the assumptions that surgeons must be highly skilled and precise as well as delicate in order not to harm their patients, and that butchers cut meat in a way that is far from gentleness and precision. The hearer adds these assumptions to the context and derives the implication that the surgeon does not have necessary skills required in his job. Further on, the hearer may derive inferences that a patient was hurt because of the surgeon’s incompetence and that the surgeon was careless and
negligent, and for this reason should be removed from the hospital and subjected to punishment or trial (Vega Moreno 2004). As a result the hearer will construct the ad hoc concept BUTCHER* denoting people who perform surgeries in a way that is far from precision and delicacy and may cause damage to their patients.

Vega Moreno claims that pragmatic adjustment may not only be applied to concepts which are encoded in the utterance, but also to the concepts encoded in thoughts, which are considered during utterance interpretation. If a hearer hears the sentence *My lawyer is a shark*, they will consider the assumption coming from his knowledge about sharks, that sharks are aggressive. He will then construct the concept AGGRESSIVE* which will be further adjusted to derive implications about lawyers.

On the assumption that the client is satisfied with his lawyer the concept AGGRESSIVE* may be adjusted to denote positive aggressiveness, (AGGRESSIVE**) if the client is afraid of his lawyer, the concept AGGRESSIVE* may be adjusted to denote negative aggressiveness (AGGRESSIVE***; Vega Moreno 2004).

5. Idiom comprehension in Relevance Theory

Vega Moreno (2003, 2005) claims that the idiomatic meaning of idioms such as *spill the beans* is initially imposed on the whole phrase. After the metaphorical sense of the idiom spill the beans is learnt, the hearer applies the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure to construct the idiom’s meaning in a given context. Whenever the hearer encounters the familiar idiomatic string, the hearer, following the path of the least effort, constructs ad hoc concepts: SPILL* which denotes an action of revealing a hidden entity and BEANS* which denotes countable objects. The hearer decodes also the ad hoc concept [[SPILL THE BEANS]]* which is encoded in the whole idiomatic phrase, and which denotes an act of revealing hidden information.

When the hearer encounters the utterance in which the phrase *smell a rat* means idiomatically ‘to know intuitively that something is wrong in the situation, especially that someone is dishonest or deceitful’, they will decode the concepts: SMELL ‘to collect information from the environment using one’s nose’ and RAT ‘a rodent’. Guided by the expectation of relevance they will construct a contextually compatible ad-hoc concept SMELL* constructed through concept broadening to denote an act of intuitive cognition as well as the concept RAT*. The idiom *smell a rat* seems to convey its meaning through weak implications activated by the concept RAT* (Sperber – Wilson 2006). The encyclopaedic properties of the concept RAT* give access to weak implications of ugliness, grossness and a wide range of
negative connotations (Sperber – Wilson 2006) which map onto the deceit/dishonesty part of the idiomatic meaning. The hearer will also access the concept encoded in the whole phrase [[SMELL A RAT]]* encoding the situation in which someone gets to know intuitively about something being wrong in a situation or about someone being dishonest.

Upon hearing the utterance containing the idiom *kick the bucket* the hearer will decode the concepts KICK ‘to push something abruptly with one’s leg’ and BUCKET ‘a container used for storing liquids’. Following the need for relevance, he will construct the ad hoc concept [[KICK] THE BUCKET]* denoting metaphorically a situation in which someone dies suddenly and within this concept he will construct a broader concept KICK* providing access to the property of kicking being an abrupt, forceful and discrete action, the property which maps onto the manner of death (cf. Sperber – Wilson 2004, 2006; Vega Moreno 2003).

When the hearer encounters the phrase *fly off the handle* in the idiomatic context s/he will decode the literal senses FLY ‘to move in the air’ and HANDLE ‘an object designed to be grasped or held by the hand’, but will take the concepts as the starting point in the inference process and will construct the ad-hoc concept [[FLY] OFF THE HANDLE]* of a metaphorical denotation ‘suddenly lose one’s temper’. Within that concept s/he will construct a loose concept FLY* to denote ‘sudden, fast and uncontrollable action’, and a broader concept HANDLE* denoting the state of ‘being in charge or in control over something’, the properties of which map onto the meaning of the idiom. If the idiomatic phrase is encountered in the sentence in (4) below:

(4) Father will **fly off the handle** when he gets to know that you have sold the house.

the hearer will add the encyclopaedic assumptions from the concepts to the contextual assumption that houses constitute a valuable property and that selling a house without an owner’s permission will certainly make him angry, and will arrive at the interpretation that will satisfy his expectations of relevance. According to Vega Moreno (2003), idioms such as *skating on thin ice* are completely transparent and evoke their metaphorical meaning as a whole phrase.

(5) Lending money to John is **skating on thin ice**.

When the hearer hears the idiomatic phrase, in order to arrive at the intended speaker’s meaning, they may consider the assumptions that skating on thin ice is a dangerous, life-threatening activity. From his knowledge about lending money they may assume that lending money to some people is
risky because they may not return the borrowed sum. As a result the hearer will construct an ad hoc concept [*SKATING ON THIN ICE]* with the denotation “risky action” and will conclude that lending money to John is endowed with risk because John is not a person to rely on and that is why he will not pay back the money.

6. Polysemy and idiom variants

As a consequence of polysemous meaning, two meanings of the idiom co-occur in the process of comprehension. One reason to claim that in idiomatic phrases literal and metaphorical meanings run in parallel is that phrases which function as idioms in the idiomatic context function also as literal phrases in the literal context. In the examples below only the literal meaning is activated, the idiomatic meaning is suppressed by the context:

(6) (a) My dog **smelt a rat** in the garden.
(b) My one year old son **spilled the beans** all over the floor.
(c) I **kicked the bucket** with paint and stained the new carpet.

What also speaks for the duality of the idiom’s meaning is that in a context which allows for an ambiguous meaning both senses are activated in the hearer. The hearer readily grasps the intended literal speaker’s meaning, but the idiomatic meaning is also activated, often causing a humorous effect. Let us consider the following example from Giora (2003: 19):

(7) Iddo and Omri are eating supper together. Iddo fetches himself a glass of juice out of the refrigerator.
Omri: I want to drink too.
Iddo’s mother: Iddo, totci lo et ha-mic (‘take the juice out [of the refrigerator] for him’)
Iddo (laughingly): ha...ha...le-hotci lo et ha-mic (to take/squeeze the juice out of him – a Hebrew idiom meaning ‘drive one crazy’).

The boy starts laughing which means that he grasped both senses, the literal one, intended by his mother, and the idiomatic meaning which was not intended.

However, probably the most important argument speaking for the duality of idiom’s meaning is that idioms do not always occur in their standard form. Language users often create idiom variants by rearranging idiom’s constituents and adding new words to the idiom’s structure in order to modify the information conveyed by the idiom or to enrich it with a new sense. Idioms in alternative forms are constructed when the speaker refers to the literal meaning of the idiom, but the meaning they intend to convey is
idiomatic (Fernando 1996: 48). To illustrate this claim, let us look at the example from Glucksberg (2001: 73):

(8) A: Did the old man kick the bucket last night?
   B: Nah, he barely nudged it.”

In the example above, the speaker refers to the literal meanings of the verbs kick and nudge, while the meaning they have in mind is idiomatic. What is more, such idiom alternations are created spontaneously and effortlessly by the speaker and are comprehended by the hearer with equal ease.

According to Glucksberg (2001), when polysemy is established for both idiom and its constituents, the variants of the canonical form may be processed just as literal phrases, by retrieving contextually motivated word meanings and performing linguistic analysis of the word meanings and the grammatical structure of the idiom.

Vega Moreno (2003, 2005) developed a four-step idiom variants comprehension procedure. With an example of nudge the bucket, a variant of the familiar standard idiom kick the bucket, the first step will involve construction of an ad hoc concept NUDGE*, which unlike KICK*, denotes an action of pushing something gently. As the next step, the standard idiomatic phrase [[KICK] THE BUCKET]* with the denotation ‘die suddenly’ will be retrieved from memory. The third step involves combining the encyclopaedic assumptions from the idiom constituent NUDGE* and from the whole idiomatic phrase in its standard form. The last step in the process of comprehension is the construction of an ad hoc concept [[NUDGE] THE BUCKET]* with the denotation ‘die peacefully’.

7. An alternative approach to idiom comprehension

The comprehension procedure of idioms in their standard forms, described by Vega Moreno (2003, 2005), seems not to be applied whenever the idiom is heard. Instead, it seems to take place only at the beginning of idiom’s meaning comprehension. An ad hoc concept formation seems to operate only when the idiomatic string is heard for the first time. Once the idiom’s meaning is learnt, it enters the mental lexicon as just another literal sense. After that, the ad hoc concept construction is no longer needed.

When the hearer hears the idiom for the first time, the figurative meaning is imposed on the whole idiomatic phrase [spill the beans]* ‘reveal secrets’. Overtime the idiom’s constituents acquire their metaphorical meanings SPILL*, via concept broadening, which starts to be associated with the act of revealing and BEANS*, via concept narrowing, which comes to be associated with secrets. At this point idiom’s constituents become polysemous.
Since idioms are metaphorical expressions, it is plausible to claim that they are understood similarly to metaphors. In particular, familiar idioms may be regarded as familiar metaphors and understood according to Sperber – Wilson (2006) and Wilson – Carston’s (2007) theories. Let us look at the following exchange:

(9) Anne: Why are you so upset John?
   John: Jane spilled the beans.

   In this context John is making a salad for his birthday party, Jane is 3 years old and is John’s younger sister. Given that the idiom *spill the beans* is familiar to Anne, comprehension of the phrase involves only disambiguation between two encoded literal senses:

   **SPILL THE BEANS 1** ‘throw legumes from a container’
   **SPILL THE BEANS 2** ‘reveal secrets’

   Since the context is literal, Ann will use her background knowledge about little children (e.g. inattentiveness, clumsiness) to arrive at a valid inference. The sense that will gain relevance is SPILL THE BEANS 1.

   If we place the same exchange in a metaphorical context in which Jane is John’s best friend and knows all his secrets, the comprehension of the phrase *spill the beans* will again involve only disambiguation between the two encoded literal senses:

   **SPILL THE BEANS 1** ‘throw legumes from a container’
   **SPILL THE BEANS 2** ‘reveal secrets’

   In the metaphorical context the meaning that will be most highly activated is SPILL THE BEANS 2. It will achieve relevance by implying that Jane told everyone about John’s secrets.

   The same comprehension process will take place in the case of the idiom *smell a rat*. The examples in (a) and (b) show the use of the idiom in different contexts.

(10) (a) My dog **smelt a rat** in the garden.
    (b) Susan **smelt a rat** when her husband started to come back home late at night.

   In both cases the comprehension of the familiar idiom *smell a rat* will involve disambiguation between two encoded literal senses:

   **SMELL A RAT 1** ‘to perceive the scent of a rodent by means of the olfactory organ’.
   **SMELL A RAT 2** ‘to know intuitively that something is wrong in the situation, especially that someone is dishonest or deceitful’.

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In the literal context in (a) the sense that is most highly activated and gains relevance is SMELL A RAT 1, while in the metaphorical context in (b) the sense that is most highly activated is SMELL A RAT 2. The meaning achieves relevance by implying that Susan intuitively felt that her husband commits infidelity.

8. Idiom variants

Taking this into consideration, it is justified to claim that idiom variants may be regarded as spontaneous metaphors, as opposed to familiar metaphors in the sense of Sperber – Wilson (2006) and Wilson – Carston (2007). In the case of idiomatic expressions in their altered form, it is unfeasible to store in memory all their possible versions and meanings, as secondary literal senses, just as it happens in the case of idioms in their canonical form. From the point of view of Relevance Theory, it seems much less effort consuming to construct the meaning of an idiom variant ad hoc, whenever the string is heard (cf. Vega Moreno 2003, 2005). To illustrate how the idiom variant pour the beans would be comprehended, let us consider the following dialogue:

(11) Anne: Why are you so upset, John?
   John: Jane poured the beans to everyone.

The context of this exchange is metaphorical: Jane is John’s best friend and knows all his secrets. Upon hearing the utterance containing the idiom variant pour the beans, Anne, following the path of the least effort, will decode the concept POUR which denotes an action of making the liquid flow from a container, and the concept BEANS denoting ‘edible legumes’. In the process of adjustment she will construct the ad hoc concept POUR* with a broader denotation of any activity of throwing something lavishly from a container as well as the narrower concept BEANS* denoting ‘countable objects’. The hearer will also retrieve from memory the whole idiomatic string [[SPILL THE BEANS]]* in its standard form, which denotes an action of revealing secrets. The hearer will consider in parallel the encyclopaedic assumptions form both the concept encoded in the constituents POUR* and BEANS*, and from the one encoded in the whole idiomatic phrase in its standard form to arrive at a valid inference. As a result she will construct an ad hoc concept [[POUR THE BEANS]]* with the denotation ‘tell lavishly about someone’s secrets’. The phrase [[POUR THE BEANS]]* will then achieve relevance by implying that Jane, in a very lavish manner, told everyone about John’s secrets.

Let us now consider the example below:
(12) John **smelt a huge rat** in the new business.

When the hearer hears the utterance (12), s/he will decode the concepts encoded in the words *smell*, *huge* and *rat*: *smell* ‘to perceive the scent of something by means of the olfactory organ’, *huge* ‘extremely big’ and *rat* ‘a rodent’. Guided by the expectation of relevance the hearer will construct an ad hoc concept *SMELL* by concept broadening, to denote an act of intuitive cognition, an ad hoc concept *RAT* constructed through concept narrowing, the encyclopaedic properties of which give access to the weak implications of ugliness, grossness and a wide array of other negative connotations (cf. Sperber – Wilson 2006) The hearer will also construct the ad hoc concept *HUGE* loosened to denote something reinforced, bigger and stronger than usual. They will also retrieve from memory the concept encoded in the standard form of the idiom [[*SMELL A RAT*]] denoting a situation in which someone gets to know about dishonesty or deceit using one’s own intuition. Through considering together the concepts underlying the separate words and the whole idiomatic string in its canonical form, the hearer will arrive at the implication that the speaker knows intuitively that something very wrong and dishonest is happening. As the result of the implication the hearer will construct the ad hoc concept [[*SMELL A HUGE RAT*]]. It will then achieve relevance by implying that John intuitively got to know about dishonesty within the business in question.

9. Conclusions

The article shows that familiar idioms in their standard forms may be regarded as familiar metaphors and may be understood according to the theory outlined in Wilson – Carston (2007). In the case of well-known idioms an ad hoc concept construction operates only at the initial stage of idiom’s meaning acquisition, and not whenever the figurative phrase is heard. Idiom variants may be perceived as novel, spontaneous metaphors and in the process of comprehension of idiom variants, ad hoc concept formation must be applied every time the idiomatic string is heard.

The article presented an alternative account of the comprehension of idiomatic expressions, combining the theories developed by Glucksberg (2001), Vega Moreno (2003, 2005) as well as Sperber – Wilson (2006) and Wilson – Carston (2007). The account finds justification in Relevance Theory. Following the path of the least effort the hearer, via disambiguation, retrieves from the mental lexicon the second literal sense encoded in the familiar idiomatic phrase. The metaphorical meanings of idioms in their standard forms are conventionalised, highly predictable and commonly found
in speaking and writing. For this reason they are worth being stored in memory. Retrieving their meaning from mental lexicon in a simple disambiguation process is a shortcut effort-saving comprehension procedure. In the case of standard-form idioms it would be uneconomical and pointless to construct the familiar meaning anew on every occasion when the idiom is heard. Idiom variants, though, occur spontaneously in the conversation and serve a particular purpose. They may be called one-off expressions, because once they fulfilled their conversational task, they fall into non-existence. There is virtually an infinite number of possible alternations and meanings of idiom variants, and language users are unable to predict which meaning they will come across. What is more, storing all the possible idiom variants with their meanings takes storage space. Hence, it would be extremely effort-consuming, and probably even unfeasible for a human mind, to store in memory all the possible senses that may emerge in different contexts. For this reason it is more economical to apply the ad hoc concept formation procedure and construct the meaning of an idiom variant from scratch.

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