

FIGURATIVE AWARENESS AND IDIOMATIC COMPETENCE IN THE BILINGUAL MENTAL LEXICON: EVIDENCE FROM ENGLISH–ROMANIAN LEARNERS

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Abstract:

This study investigates how bilingual learners represent and process idiomatic expressions across two languages, focusing on the relationship between idiomatic knowledge, figurative awareness, and translation strategies. The data were collected from 24 second-year undergraduate students enrolled in an English Studies programme in Romania (academic years 2023–2024), who completed a bidirectional idiom task requiring (a) the production of English and Romanian idioms, (b) identification of the figure of speech underlying each idiom, and (c) translation between English and Romanian. A total of 720 idiom tokens were analysed using a fine-grained coding scheme capturing figurative categorisation accuracy, translation strategy (equivalent, partial, literal, lexical, erroneous), and error type (metalinguistic, conceptual, literal, non-idiomatic).

The results reveal a systematic dissociation between idiomatic competence and figurative awareness. While participants frequently produced appropriate idiomatic equivalents in both translation directions, explicit identification of figurative mechanisms (e.g. metaphor, simile, hyperbole, metonymy) was highly inconsistent and often inaccurate. Metalinguistic under-specification emerged as the dominant error type, alongside recurrent conceptual mismatches in Romanian–English translation. Importantly, higher figurative awareness did not reliably predict higher translation accuracy, suggesting that idioms may often be processed as unanalysed meaning units rather than as figuratively structured expressions.

The findings are consistent with usage-based and exemplar models of the bilingual mental lexicon, in which idiomatic meaning can be accessed independently of explicit figurative analysis. The study contributes empirical evidence from an under-researched language pair (English–Romanian) and highlights the need to distinguish between procedural idiom knowledge and metalinguistic figurative competence in bilingualism research.

Keywords: *Bilingual mental lexicon; Idiomatic competence; Figurative awareness; Formulaic language; Idiom translation; English–Romanian bilingualism.*