The synchronic motivation of idioms: An empirical study

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This contribution aims at empirically analyzing the synchronic motivation of French idioms (such as fr. *casser sa pipe* 'to die'). By adopting a native speaker-based approach, this empirical study will investigate the plurality of motivational processes involved in idioms' motivation, as well as the potential factors limiting and/or contributing to idioms' motivation.

The synchronic motivation of idioms is traditionally described as a cognitive phenomenon based on the cognitive links between idioms' compositional and idiomatic meanings (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen 2005: 87). Although idioms are considered part of the lexicon (Mejri 1997), the criteria on which phraseological motivation relies differ from those determining the motivation of lexical units in general. According to Koch's definition of lexical motivation (2001: 1156), two lexical units are motivated if there is a formal relation between their forms and a cognitive relation between the concepts designated by their forms. Contrary to idioms' motivation, which is solely based on the cognitive links between idioms' compositional and idiomatic meanings, lexical motivation can manifest itself in different ways: Extrinsic motivation, that is the possibility to motivate a lexical unit (for ex. fr. *manuel*) via a formally different lexical unit (fr. *main*) (Marzo 2013: 148), and polysemy-based motivation, which occurs when a lexical unit (for ex. eng. *mouse* 'computer device') is motivated via a formally identical lexical unit (eng. *mouse* 'small rodent') (Marzo 2008: 174). Due to the limited amount of empirical studies within the field of idioms' motivation (such as Gibbs & O'Brien 1990), it is not clear whether extrinsic motivation and polysemy-based motivation only concern simple and complex words, or, on the contrary, these motivational processes participate in the motivation of idioms too.

Our questionnaire study conducted with French native speakers will fill this gap by investigating the synchronic motivation of two groups of French idioms: Non-polysemous idioms and polysemous idioms, i.e. idioms having two or more idiomatic meanings (Moon 1998: 187). The questionnaire's structure is based on the *Tübingen Two-Step Method* (Marzo 2013: 96-101), which proved to be the most valid tool to empirically study idioms' motivation among those that we previously tested. This method is characterized by its division into two steps: The first step identifies a specific motivational process for each stimulus (see Fig. 1) and the second step requires participant to explain idioms' motivation in their own words by means of open questions. A potential answer for the motivation of fr. *Vieux loup de mer* 'old and experienced sailor' (Option 1, "The indicated meaning is based on the meaning of the words forming the expression") collected through our pretest is as follows:

> Le loup est un animal intelligent, fonctionnant avec des règles très précises. Il est souvent considéré comme le roi de la forêt, c'est son territoire. L'environnement de la forêt est ainsi remplacé par celui de la mer.

According to you, why does the expression – Vieux loup de mer – mean "old and experienced sailor"?

Multiple answers are possible.

- ☐ The indicated meaning is based on the meaning of the words forming the expression ("vieux"/"loup"/"mer").
- ☐ The indicated meaning is linked with another meaning of the expression.
- ☐ The expression is linked with another expression.
- ☐ There is no reason that could explain why this expression has the indicated meaning.

Fig. 1: Example for step 1 with the stimulus fr. Vieux loup de mer *'old and experienced sailor' (translated into English).*

Our data will provide a more complete insight on the functioning of idioms' motivation. In particular, they will shed light on the potential factors influencing the motivation of idioms (for ex. subjective familiarity and number of lexical components) and the types of motivational processes employed by native speakers.

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