ROLE OF CONTEXT IN THE COMPREHENSION OF AMBIGUOUS ITALIAN IDIOMS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ambiguous idioms are those expressions that have both a figurative meaning and a literal interpretation. For instance in “the man kicked the bucket” two interpretations are possible, one of which is that the man suddenly died. This meaning of “dying” assigned to the phrase “kick the bucket” is associated with it and stored in memory. The other interpretation is formed by integrating the literal meanings of the single words that form the idiom. Because of the characteristics of the meaning retrieval process, it has been assumed in one model of idiom comprehension, the *lexical representation model*, that idiomatic phrases are stored in the lexicon as “long words,” and the meaning associated is automatically activated in the same vein as for “normal” words (Swinney and Cutler, 1979). The time course of the activation of the figurative meaning and of the literal interpretation’s construction may obviously differ, but it is generally assumed that because meaning activation is only dependent on the strength of association between the words that form the idiom, it will be faster than the construction of the literal interpretation, a process that involves not only the level of lexical retrieval, but also sentence-level processes.

Thus, the comprehension of ambiguous idioms presents different characteristics with respect to those offered by lexical ambiguity, in which a single word may take more than one independent meaning (i.e., meanings that are not related to...
each other, as is the case for homonyms). However, the parallelism between the two phenomenons, lexical and idiomatic ambiguity, is such as to make an interesting comparison. One of the most important issues involved in understanding lexical ambiguity, for instance, is the extent to which the meanings associated to a given word are retrieved automatically and independent of context. One very influential theory claims that as the meaning associated to a given word form is automatically activated, the two meanings of a homonym are activated independent of the bias provided by the sentence context (Seidenberg, Tanenhaus, Leiman, and Bienkowski, 1982; Swinney, 1979). The empirical verification of this claim has very important consequences for the construction of a model of sentence comprehension, and for the way the architecture of the human language processor is conceived. Evidence showing that only the meaning biased by the context is activated would imply that lexical and sentence-level processing are not computed by separate and independent mechanisms, carried out by independent “modules” (according to the fodorian terminology: Fodor, 1983; Forster, 1979) but that they do interact. Similar arguments have been provided when considering ambiguity in syntactic parsing (Frazier and Fodor, 1978; Frazier and Rayner, 1987). Also in the case of ambiguous idioms, one can conceive that, as the idiomatic meaning is associated to the idiomatic phrase, it should be automatically activated, independent of whether the sentence context biases the figurative or the literal meaning of the idiom.

As was stated, one influential theory of lexical ambiguity has claimed that lexical meanings are automatically activated, and the influence of context only occurs at a later stage, when the meaning appropriate to the context must be selected and integrated into the sentence representation. Support for this model has come mainly from experiments conducted with the cross-modal paradigm. A sentence, biasing one of the meanings of the word, is auditorily presented, and at the offset of the critical ambiguous word a target word related to one of its meanings is visually displayed, and a lexically decision must be made on it (Seidenberg et al., 1982; Swinney, 1979). Although the first studies found rather uniform support for the automatic access model, later studies showed evidence of selective effects of context when different aspects of the context are taken into account (Kellas, Paul, Martin, and Simpson, 1991; Simpson, 1981; Tabossi, 1988; Tabossi, Colombo, and Job, 1987). One such study was conducted in Italian (Tabossi et al., 1987). The experiments reported in this paper showed that when the context biased salient aspects of the meaning of a lexically ambiguous word, only the target word related to the context-biased meaning was activated. This view was further supported by data from Paul, Kellas, Martin, and Clark (1992), who suggested that the extent to which context influences the initial activation of meaning is determined by the overlap between contextually activated features and the sentence words’ features. Other studies, conducted in English, pointed out the importance of the relative dominance (frequency) of the ambiguous word’s meanings