
Comprehension of idiomatic expressions in low-literacy readers of Easy German: an experimental investigation

Lena Wieland & Ingo Reich

Universität des Saarlandes

lena.wieland@uni-saarland.de, i.reich@mx.uni-saarland.de

We present an investigation into the comprehension of idiomatic expressions in *Leichte Sprache* (Easy German), a variety that primarily supports low-literacy readers and individuals with cognitive impairments (Bock & Pappert 2023). Despite recommendations to minimize idiomatic expressions in Easy German, little empirical research has examined how these populations process idiomatic language in simplified contexts.

We address this gap by examining the effects of *context*, *literacy*, *transparency*, and *literal plausibility* on the comprehension of 24 idiomatic expressions, such as *jemandem einen Bären aufbinden* (to pull someone's leg), selected from our previous rating study involving 30 participants without cognitive impairments, ensuring a balanced representation across dimensions of transparency and plausibility. In the main study, 31 low-literacy participants, assessed using the *lea.diagnostik* tool (Koppel & Wolf, 2014), will complete a multiple-choice task to assess recognition and a ranking task to evaluate figurative versus literal preferences. We hypothesize that (i) higher literacy improves comprehension; (ii) transparency impacts comprehension, making transparent idioms easier to interpret; (iii) plausibility affects preferences, favoring literal interpretations; and (iv) transparency and plausibility interact to modulate comprehension. Our preliminary findings from a GLMM analysis (Knudson, 2024) of low-literacy participants interpreting idioms *without* context in a sentence interpretation task show literacy ($b = 0.0313$, $SE = 0.0084$, $p < .001$) and plausibility ($b = 0.4367$, $SE = 0.1646$, $p = .008$) predict accuracy, with significant interactions ($b = -1.3610$, $SE = 0.3304$, $p < .001$) indicating that highly transparent and plausible idioms are challenging.

By examining idiom comprehension in Easy German, our research aims to offer novel insights into how figurative language can be adapted for low-literacy populations.

References. Bock, B. M. & S. Pappert (2023). *Leichte Sprache, Einfache Sprache, verständliche Sprache*. Tübingen: Narr. • Knudson, C. (2024). *Glmm: Generalized linear mixed models via monte carlo likelihood approximation* [R package version 1.4.5] (<https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=glmm>) • Koppel, I. & K. D. Wolf (2014). *Otu.lea. eine niedrigschwellige online-diagnostik für funktionale Analphabetinnen in der Kursarbeit. Alfa-Forum* 86, 28–31.