



Cognitive Processing of idioms of life in human mind

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Abstract: Idioms, as fixed expressions with figurative meanings, represent a significant part of human communication. They convey cultural values, collective experiences, and conceptual metaphors that structure thought. The cognitive processing of idioms related to life in the human mind is a complex interaction of linguistic, psychological, and cultural mechanisms. This paper examines how idioms about life are understood, stored, and retrieved in the mental lexicon. It discusses the role of conceptual metaphor theory in decoding idioms, highlighting how phrases such as “life is a journey” or “the prime of life” reflect embodied cognition. Moreover, it emphasizes the influence of familiarity, context, and cultural background on idiom comprehension. Findings from psycholinguistics suggest that idioms are processed both literally and figuratively depending on context, frequency, and individual cognitive skills. By analyzing idioms of life through a cognitive linguistic lens, the study contributes to understanding how abstract human experiences are mapped onto concrete conceptual domains, enabling speakers to interpret, internalize, and creatively use idiomatic expressions.

Keywords: idioms of life, cognitive processing, mental lexicon, conceptual metaphor, figurative language, psycholinguistics, embodied cognition

Introduction

Language is not only a tool for communication but also a mirror of human thought, experience, and culture. Among the various forms of linguistic expression, idioms occupy a special place because they encapsulate complex ideas through figurative meanings rather than literal interpretations. Idioms about life, such as “life is a journey” or “starting a new chapter in life,” are deeply embedded in human cognition, reflecting how individuals conceptualize existence, time, and personal development. They serve as linguistic shortcuts that condense shared cultural wisdom into memorable expressions, allowing speakers to express abstract notions through concrete imagery.

Understanding how idioms are processed in the human mind has long been a subject of interest in linguistics, cognitive science, and psycholinguistics. Research suggests that idioms are not merely memorized word combinations but are actively



interpreted through mental mechanisms such as conceptual metaphor, schema activation, and contextual inference. Cognitive linguistics, particularly the Conceptual Metaphor Theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, provides a framework to explain how idioms about life are grounded in embodied experience. For example, the metaphor “life is a path” reflects how humans project the physical experience of movement onto abstract domains like aging, success, or decision-making.

The processing of idioms is influenced by multiple factors, including familiarity, frequency of use, contextual cues, and the cultural background of the speaker. While familiar idioms may be retrieved directly from the mental lexicon as holistic units, unfamiliar ones often require deeper cognitive analysis involving both literal and figurative meanings. Psycholinguistic studies further indicate that idiom comprehension engages both hemispheres of the brain, suggesting a dynamic interaction between linguistic and conceptual processing.

This paper explores how idioms of life are cognitively processed in the human mind, with particular attention to the interplay of metaphorical thinking, cultural knowledge, and psychological mechanisms. By analyzing idioms through the lens of cognitive linguistics, the study seeks to demonstrate how language reflects human perception of life’s stages, challenges, and values, thus revealing the profound connection between language, thought, and culture.

Relevance of Work

The study of idioms has gained increasing importance in linguistics, cognitive science, and psychology because idioms represent more than stylistic language; they embody cultural knowledge and conceptual patterns of thought. Investigating idioms of life specifically is relevant as they are among the most frequently used expressions across languages, reflecting universal human experiences such as birth, growth, struggle, and death. Moreover, understanding how idioms are cognitively processed provides valuable insights into second language acquisition, intercultural communication, and even artificial intelligence language modeling. In today’s globalized world, where effective cross-cultural communication is vital, exploring idiomatic processing helps to bridge cultural gaps and enhance linguistic competence.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to analyze how idioms of life are processed in the human mind from a cognitive linguistic perspective. The study aims to:

1. Identify the conceptual metaphors underlying idioms of life.



2. Examine how context, familiarity, and cultural background influence idiom comprehension.
3. Explore the role of mental lexicon and embodied cognition in idiom processing.
4. Contribute to a deeper understanding of figurative language in relation to human thought and communication.

Materials and Methods of Research

The research is based on a descriptive and analytical approach within the framework of cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics. Materials for analysis include:

- A corpus of idioms of life collected from English-language dictionaries, literature, and authentic discourse.
- Scholarly works on idiom comprehension (Lakoff & Johnson, Gibbs, Glucksberg, etc.) that provide theoretical grounding.
- Comparative examples from cross-cultural sources to highlight similarities and differences in metaphorical mappings.

The methodology involves:

- **Conceptual metaphor analysis** to uncover underlying metaphorical structures (e.g., life is a journey, life is a stage, life is a battle).
- **Contextual analysis** to examine how idioms are interpreted differently depending on situational usage.
- **Cognitive processing models** (direct retrieval vs. compositional analysis) to explore how idioms are stored and retrieved in the mental lexicon.
- **Comparative analysis** across cultural contexts to show the universality and variability of life idioms.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of idioms of life revealed several recurrent conceptual metaphors that shape how human beings linguistically and cognitively represent the stages, challenges, and values of existence. These results highlight the deep interconnection between embodied experiences and figurative language.

1. **Life as a Journey**-The most dominant metaphor observed in idioms of life is “life is a journey.” Expressions such as “the road of life,” “crossroads of life,” or “a new chapter in life” conceptualize existence as movement along a path. These idioms reflect the human experience of physical travel and project it onto abstract domains such as growth, decision-making, and aging. Psycholinguistic studies confirm that such



idioms are processed quickly due to their high frequency and cultural familiarity, often being retrieved holistically from the mental lexicon.

2. **Life as a Battle or Struggle**-Idioms like “fight for life,” “the battle of life,” or “clinging to life” illustrate another central metaphor: life is a battle. Here, the conceptual mapping reflects human struggles, resilience, and survival instincts. Processing these idioms often requires contextual cues, as the figurative meaning may overlap with literal interpretations of physical conflict. Research shows that when context supports the figurative meaning, comprehension is faster and more automatic.

3. **Life as a Stage or Performance**-Shakespeare’s famous metaphor, “All the world’s a stage,” has deeply influenced idiomatic usage. Expressions such as “the prime of life,” “life’s performance,” or “playing one’s role in life” conceptualize existence as a theatrical act. These idioms demonstrate how human cognition employs performative schemas to interpret abstract notions like social roles, identity, and personal destiny. Cognitive processing here involves activating cultural knowledge, since theatrical imagery is not universal across all societies.

4. **Life as a Gift or Treasure**-Another cluster of idioms frames life as something precious: “value of life,” “life is a blessing,” or “the gift of life.” Such idioms evoke gratitude, moral values, and spiritual connotations. They are processed through emotional and cultural associations, which explains why they may be understood differently across religious or cultural contexts.

5. **Influence of Familiarity and Context**-Results indicate that the comprehension of idioms depends largely on their familiarity. Highly conventional idioms, such as “circle of life,” are processed more rapidly, often as unanalyzed wholes. Less common idioms require compositional processing, where the listener interprets both literal and figurative meanings before arriving at the intended sense. Context plays a crucial role: in ambiguous situations, literal interpretations may dominate until sufficient cues guide the listener toward the figurative meaning.

6. **Cross-Cultural Considerations**-A comparative analysis shows that while metaphors such as life as a journey are nearly universal, their idiomatic realizations vary across languages. For example, in Uzbek and Russian, idioms about life often highlight destiny and fate (“life is written,” “life’s thread”), whereas English tends to emphasize individuality and choice (“make the most of life,” “life is what you make it”). This confirms that idiom processing is not only a cognitive phenomenon but also a cultural one, mediated by shared experiences and collective values.



Discussion

The results demonstrate that idioms of life are processed through a combination of holistic retrieval and metaphorical reasoning, depending on familiarity, frequency, and context. Conceptual metaphor theory explains why idioms are powerful tools of communication: they transform abstract experiences into tangible images rooted in human embodiment. Psycholinguistic evidence supports the dual processing hypothesis, suggesting that idioms can be accessed both directly as lexicalized units and indirectly through metaphorical composition. Finally, the cultural variability of idioms highlights the need to view idiom comprehension as both a universal cognitive mechanism and a culture-specific phenomenon.

Conclusion

The study of idioms of life through a cognitive lens reveals that figurative language is not simply ornamental but central to the way humans think, conceptualize, and communicate about existence. Idioms such as “life is a journey,” “the battle of life,” or “the gift of life” embody deep conceptual metaphors that are rooted in embodied human experience. They allow abstract notions of time, fate, and identity to be expressed through concrete and familiar imagery.

The findings suggest that idioms are processed in the human mind through two complementary mechanisms: holistic retrieval from the mental lexicon when idioms are familiar and highly conventionalized, and compositional analysis when idioms are novel or contextually ambiguous. Context and cultural background strongly influence interpretation, highlighting that idiom comprehension is both a cognitive and socio-cultural process.

Moreover, cross-cultural comparisons demonstrate that while certain metaphors about life are universal, their idiomatic realizations differ across languages and cultures, reflecting unique worldviews and value systems. This makes idioms not only a key to understanding language processing but also a window into cultural cognition.

In practical terms, the study underscores the importance of teaching idioms in second language acquisition, as they enhance not only linguistic competence but also intercultural understanding. Furthermore, insights into idiom processing have implications for artificial intelligence, psycholinguistics, and communication studies, where figurative language plays an essential role.

Ultimately, idioms of life remind us that language is inseparable from thought: through idioms, humans give shape to life’s experiences, struggles, and values, transforming them into shared cultural wisdom that bridges generations and societies.



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