As clear as day:
The Transparency of English Idiomatic Expressions

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Idiomatic expressions, like *spill the beans*, are often discussed in terms of their compositionality, or the degree to which the individual components of the expression contribute to the meaning of the whole. Nunberg (1978) proposed a classification system (i.e. decomposable vs. nondecomposable) to account for the different ways in which the individual components contribute meaning, with some studies finding support for these categories (Gibbs & Nayak 1989; Gibbs et al. 1989). Other studies however have shown that the decomposability of an idiom is not a reliable measure (Titone & Connine 1994; Tabossi et al. 2008). In addition, few studies have examined the transparency of idioms as a whole, or the degree to which an expression is considered related to its figurative meaning (Keysar & Bly 1995). The current study investigates the notion of transparency further through a rating task.

180 idioms were extracted from the Oxford Idioms Dictionary (Ayto 2009) and the Collins COBUILD Idioms Dictionary (Sinclair 2011), along with their definition and an example sentence. Participants were presented with each idiom, in random order, together with its definition and example. They were first asked if they knew the expression (i.e. ‘yes’ or ‘no’). Next, they were asked to rate the transparency of the idiom (i.e. the degree to which the expression as a whole seems obvious in meaning) along a continuum using a Visual Analogue Scale (VAS). After the experiment, participants were presented with a few additional questions, such as how often they use these expressions and whether they like using these expressions. They answered these questions using the same VAS scale. Twenty-three native speakers of Canadian English participated, all undergraduate linguistics students from the University of Alberta.

The results show that Knowledge of the Idiom is a significant predictor – the idiom is rated as more transparent, or obvious in meaning, when it is known. This predictor also occurs in several significant interactions, such as with the Frequency of the Idiom (extracted from the Corpus of Contemporary American English; Davies 2008). When participants do not know an idiom, they are not affected by its frequency, as expected. But if they know the idiom, they rate more frequent idioms as more transparent. Knowledge of the Idiom also occurs in a significant interaction with Like Using Idioms. Participants who do not know an idiom rate this unknown expression as more transparent if they enjoy using idioms. These findings show that a variety of factors, not just the compositionality of the phrase, contribute to the transparency of an idiom. They also reveal the importance of analyzability – the speaker’s ability to make sense of the idiom. Moreover, individual differences, such as one’s experience with or enjoyment of using idioms, can also have influential effects on how transparent speakers consider an idiom.

References