

Comprehension of Idiomatic Expressions in Low-Literacy Readers of Easy German: An Experimental Investigation

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We present a planned experimental investigation into the comprehension of idiomatic expressions in *Leichte Sprache* (Easy German), a simplified variety of German aimed at enhancing accessibility by reducing the complexity of vocabulary, morphology, and syntax (Bredel and Maass, 2016). Easy German primarily supports low-literacy readers and individuals with cognitive impairments (Bock and Pappert, 2023). Although recommendations suggest minimizing idiomatic expressions in Easy German, limited empirical research has explored how these populations process idiomatic language in simplified contexts.

We address this gap by examining the effects of literacy, transparency, and literal plausibility on the comprehension of 24 idiomatic expressions. (e.g., *jemandem einen Bären aufbinden* [lit.: "to tie a bear on someone", fig.: "to pull someone's leg"]). Idioms were selected from a prior study (N=30) with participants without cognitive impairments, ensuring a balanced distribution across two key dimensions: transparency, the degree to which the idiomatic meaning can be inferred from its literal components, and plausibility, reflecting the extent to which the idiom appears contextually or logically reasonable.

In the main experiment (N=31 low-literacy readers), we assess comprehension using a multiple-choice task for idiomatic recognition within a simplified linguistic context and a ranking task to evaluate preferences for idiomatic versus literal interpretations. Participants' literacy is assessed with the *lea.diagnostik* online tool (Koppel and Wolf, 2014). We hypothesize that (i) higher literacy correlates with better comprehension; (ii) transparency impacts comprehension, making transparent idioms easier to interpret; (iii) literal plausibility affects preference, with highly plausible idioms ranked lower than literal alternatives; and (iv) interactions between transparency and plausibility modulate comprehension. To ensure timely execution of the experiment before the conference, we will establish a timeline that includes finalizing data collection by early January.

Our preliminary findings from a GLMM analysis (Knudson, 2024) of low-literacy participants interpreting idioms *without* context in a sentence interpretation task indicate that literacy score significantly predicts accuracy, ($b = 0.0313$, $SE = 0.0084$, $z = 3.72$, $p < .001$), suggesting better comprehension with higher literacy (Fig. 1). Additionally, plausibility predicts accuracy ($b = 0.4367$, $SE = 0.1646$, $z = 2.65$, $p = .008$). A significant interaction between transparency and plausibility was observed, ($b = -1.3610$, $SE = 0.3304$, $z = -4.12$, $p < .001$), indicating that idioms characterized by high transparency and high plausibility are particularly challenging for participants (Fig. 2).

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, informing educational and communicative strategies for cognitively impaired readers.

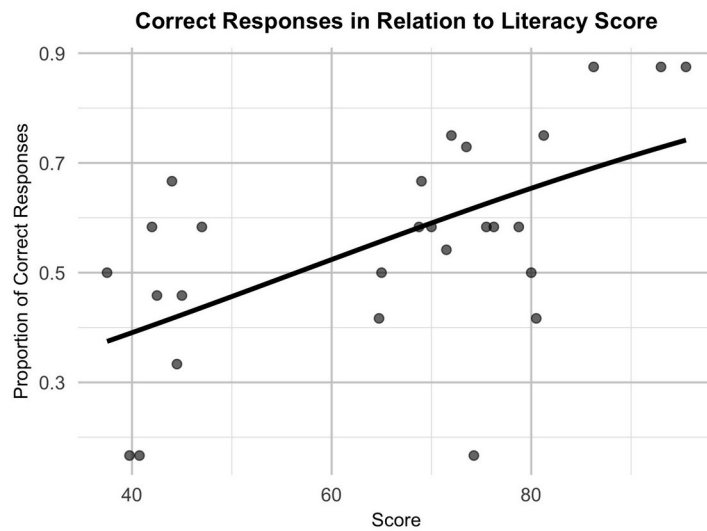


Figure 1

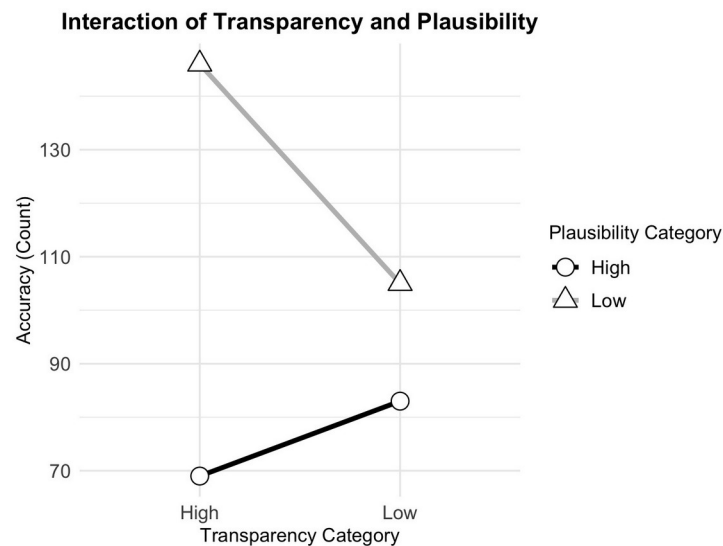


Figure 2

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