

# Comprehension of Idioms and Proverbs in the context of Language Loss

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September 2023 Batch

## Abstract

*Formulaic language consists of idioms, proverbs, expletives, collocations and so on. It is part and parcel of everyday life. Formulaic language is made up of fixed phrases that function as a single lexical item which are preserved in long-term memory (Wary,2002). Earlier research attributed the processing of formulaic language (FL) to right hemisphere; however, recently whole brain representations have also been reported. Theories on comprehension of FL like Bobrow & Bell,1973; Swimmey & Cutler,1979; Gibbs & Nayak,1989 and Abel,2003 have dealt with different levels of representation and processing. Thus, the aim of this study was to understand the processing of formulaic language especially idioms and proverbs in Telugu in the context of brain damage. Telugu idioms and proverbs from 'Tests of Language Proficiency Telugu', CIIL, Mysore, were given to six Telugu speaking adults to rate for familiarity and frequency. Five persons with brain damage were then asked to select the correct response from a choice of four (literal meaning, lexically matching, distractor and correct response) for each item. The items were also listed as decomposable and non-decomposable Idioms and Proverbs. Findings revealed that the persons with brain damage gave around 60% correct responses. Familiarity played a dominant role as compared to frequency. More correct responses for decomposable items were noted. Dual Idiom Representation Model (Abel,2003) was found to account for the results. It can be concluded that FL is stored in long term memory, and preserved even in the context of language loss. The processing of formulaic language in language disorders would thus help in understanding the complexities of language storage and retrieval. This could also have both clinical and theoretical implications.*

*Key Words: Formulaic Language, Telugu, Language Disorders*

## Introduction

Human communication is unparalleled in the animal kingdom. Hocket lists 12 main features that distinguishes human and animal communication, one of them be creativity. Formulaic language such as idioms & proverbs are created in Language and used every day by speakers of all languages across the world. Formulaic sequences provide an important insight into the

nature of linguistic knowledge. The linguists got interested formulaic language as it could not be explained within the domain of standard grammar. Chomsky (1975) points out that '.... the possibility that certain idioms or metaphors might be characterizable as sentences which occur, but are not of the highest degree of grammaticality....'. Thus, the interpretation of figurative Language has 4 dimensions - Speaker, Hearer, Language & context, and all these dimensions are bound by conceptual Universe.

## **Review of Literature**

Sharma (1990) noted that a study of metaphor involves 3 steps - Recognition, Reconstruction and Comprehension. As metaphor is part of the formulaic language, the same can be applied to idioms and proverbs. Theories on comprehension of FL like Bobrow & Bell, 1973; Swinney & Cutler, 1979; Gibbs & Nayak, 1989 and Abel, 2003 have dealt with different levels of representation and processing. Bobrow and Bell theory deals with serial processing of the two levels of meaning, the literal and nonliteral, whereas, Swinney and Cutler proposed a parallel retrieval of both the levels.

Gibbs and his colleagues (Gibbs & Nayak, 1989; Gibbs, Nayak and Cutting 1989; Gibbs, Nayak, Bolton & Keppel 1989) identified 3 groups of Idioms – decomposable (eg. break the ice), Abnormally decomposable (eg. Spill the beans) and Nondecomposable (eg. chew the fat).

Abel (2003) proposed the Dual Idiom Representation (DIR) model. It postulates that there is a parallel existence of idiom entries & constituent entries. The degree of decomposability and the frequency with which the idiom is encountered determines its lexical representation. If there is no idiom entry for a particular idiom, conceptual representation is accessed during comprehension. Abel found that the non-native speakers encounter idioms less often than native Speakers, the L1 and L2 lexicon vary with regard & the no. of idiom entries. The model assumes that non-decompositional directly have Idiom entry while for decompositional idioms there are two entries – the lexical and idiom entries. The idiom entries should be regarded as additional pieces of information about the frequently occurring Linguistic entries.

According to research, the processing of formulaic language engages right hemisphere of the brain. Thus, it would be interesting to note, how the formulaic language is processed by the brain when brain damage occurs. Research on aphasia has shown that frequently occurring idioms or proverbs were more easily retrieved. Hence, the aim of this study was to

understand the preservation, processing and comprehension of the formulaic language in persons with brain damage especially in the context of idioms and proverbs.

## Methodology

Twenty Telugu idioms and proverbs were chosen from 'Tests of Language Proficiency Telugu', CIIL, Mysore for the current study. All the eleven participants of the study were native speakers of Telugu. Six of them were normal adults and five of them were persons with brain damage. The list was given to normal Telugu speaking adults (4 female and 2 male) to rate for familiarity and frequency, using a three-point Likert scale. For rating for Familiarity, the raters were asked to look for whether they were able to recognize the Idioms / proverbs in spoken or written forms. The Familiarity rating scale also had three 3 points - Very Familiar, Familiar and Not Familiar. While, for Frequency, they were asked to rate for High frequency (>75%), Frequently (around 50%) and Low Frequency (< 25%). Of the Five adults with brain damage - two of them were Broca's Aphasics and three were with non-focal brain damage. Their medical diagnosis by neurologist and Speech and Language Evaluations were done by the Speech Therapists at the respective clinics. Informed consent was obtained from all the eleven participants before commencement of the study. The following table lists the details of the participants with brain damage.

**Table 1: Details of Participants with Brain Damage**

| S.No. | Participant | Age   | Gender | Languages Known                              | Provisional Diagnosis |
|-------|-------------|-------|--------|--|-----------------------|
| 1.    | P1          | 74 yr | Male   | Telugu, Hindi and English (basic vocabulary) | Broca's Aphasia       |
| 2.    | P2          | 57 yr | Male   | Telugu and English                           | Dysarthria            |
| 3.    | P3          | 29 yr | Female | Telugu and English                           | Dysarthria            |
| 4.    | P4          | 55 yr | Female | Telugu                                       | Broca's Aphasia       |
| 5.    | P5          | 48 yr | Male   | Telugu                                       | Dysarthria            |

From the above table it can be noted that three of them were male and two female participants, with an age range 29-74 yrs ( avg 52.6 yrs). The participants with brain damage were asked to select the correct response from a choice of four (one literal meaning, one

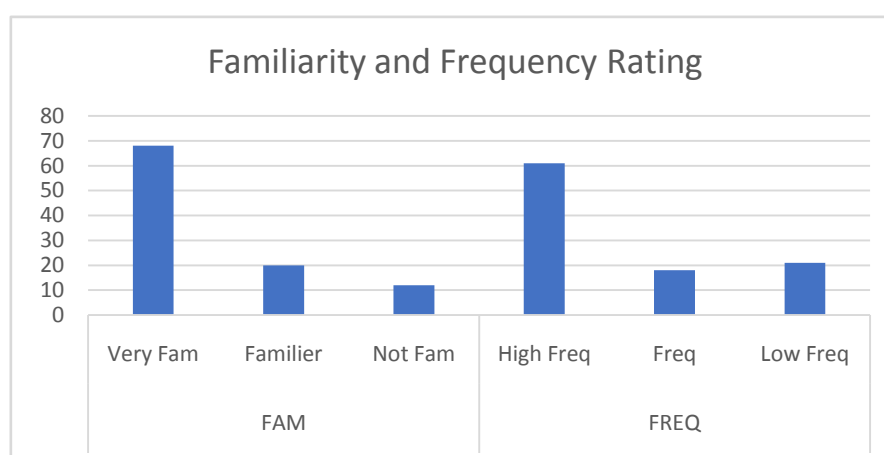
lexically matching, one distractor and one correct response) for each item. Responses were then tabulated for correctness of the response by giving a score of ‘1’ for correct response and ‘0’ for incorrect responses. Qualitative analysis of incorrect responses was also done.

## Results and Analysis

The ratings by the six normal adults for familiarity (FAM) and frequency (FREQ) in terms of the raw scores and percentages, totaling up to 120 items can be noted in Table 2. It can be noted that 68% of items were rated as very familiar, 20% as familiar and 12% as not familiar. Whereas, 61% items were rated as high frequency, 18% as frequently observed and 21% as low frequency. The same can be seen in the figure 1 below.

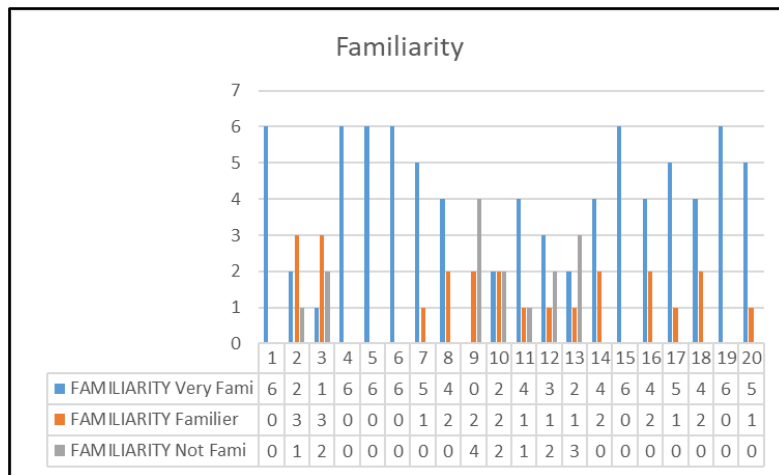
**Table 2: Ratings for Familiarity and Frequency by Normal Adults**

| Type of Rating | Scale     | Raw Score | Percentages |
|----------------|-----------|-----------|-------------|
| <b>FAM</b>     | Very Fam  | 81        | 68          |
|                | Familiar  | 24        | 20          |
|                | Not Fam   | 15        | 12          |
|                | Total     | 120       | 100         |
| <b>FREQ</b>    | High Freq | 73        | 61          |
|                | Freq      | 21        | 18          |
|                | Low Freq  | 26        | 21          |
|                | Total     | 120       | 100         |



**Fig 1 : Ratings for Familiarity and Frequency by Normal Adults**

The following table lists the item wise familiarity ratings of the 20 items taken for the current study.



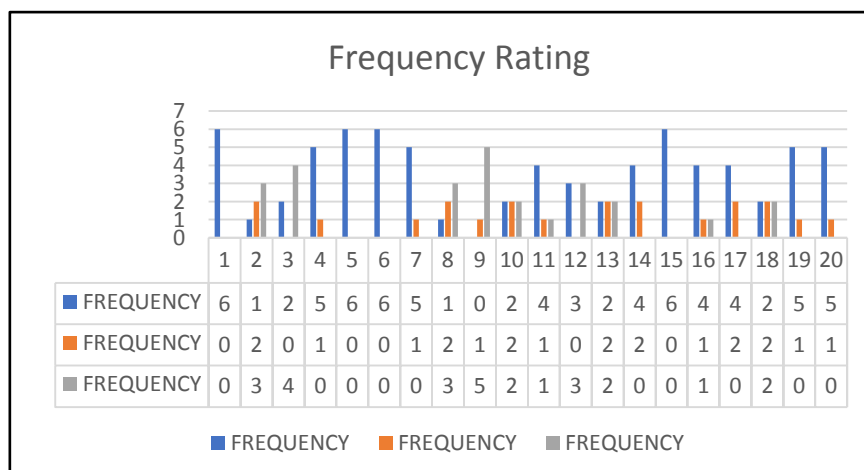
**Fig 2: Item wise Familiarity Ratings**

Based on the category wise items distribution it can be seen that items 1,4,5,6,15 and 19 have been rated as very familiar, whereas 2 & 3 have been rated as familiar and item 9 as not familiar by all the six raters. Item 10 has been put under all three categories as the same score was given. The same has been depicted in table 4 below.

**Table 4: Category wise Items Distribution**

| S.No. | Category      | Items                                     |
|-------|---------------|---|
| 1.    | Very Familiar | 1,4,5,6,7,8,10,11,12,14,15,16,17,18,19,20 |
| 2.    | Familiar      | 2,3,10                                    |
| 3.    | Not Familiar  | 9,10,13                                   |

The following table lists the item wise frequency ratings of the 20 items taken for the current study.



**Fig 3: Item wise Frequency Ratings**

Based on the category wise items distribution it can be seen that items 1,5,6and 15 have been rated asHigh Frequency, whereasno item was rated as frequently occurring and item 9 as low frequencyby all the six raters. Item 10, 13and 18have been rated equally among the three categories. The same has been depicted in table 6 below.

**Table 6: Category wise Items Distribution**

| S.No. | Category  | Items                                      |
|-------|-----------|--|
| 1.    | High Freq | 1,4,5,6,7,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20 |
| 2.    | Freq      | 3,10,13,18                                 |
| 3.    | Low Freq  | 2,8,9,10,12,13,18                          |

Comparing the familiarity and frequency, it can be noted that the items that were highly familiar were also highly frequent. Items10 was rated same across all three categories for both frequency and familiarity, whereas item 13 and 18 were rated same across all three categories of frequency.Item 9 was rated as both not familiar and low frequency by all six raters. The same has been depicted in table 7 below.

**Table 7: Category wise Items Distribution for Familiarity and Frequency**

| S.No. | Category      | Items                                     | Category  | Items                                      |
|-------|---------------|---|-----------|--|
| 1.    | Very Familiar | 1,4,5,6,7,8,10,11,12,14,15,16,17,18,19,20 | High Freq | 1,4,5,6,7,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20 |
| 2.    | Familiar      | 2,3,10                                    | Freq      | 3,10,13,18                                 |
| 3.    | Not Familiar  | 9,10,13                                   | Low Freq  | 2,8,9,10,12,13,18                          |

Some of the examples are listed below for understanding the familiarity and frequency rating.

**Example 1: High on Familiarity and Frequency**

**Item 1:** /di:pam vundaga:ne: illu tʃekkabettuko:/

Literal translation: ‘clean the house while the lamp lasts’

- a) /di:pam petʃi illu sarduko:vadam/ ‘lit a lamp and clean the house’
- b) /paristitulu anuku:lamga: vunnappude: dʒa:gratta padaʃam/ ‘being mindful when situations are favorable’
- c) /intʃini te:rʃididdukovadamlo: ʃraddʰa tʃu:padam/ ‘paying attention in making up the house’
- d) /di:pam veliginʃi illu kattuko:vadam/ ‘constructing the house after lighting the lamp’

Expected Response :B

**Item 19:** /ka:kipilla ka:kiki muddu/

Translation: ‘a crow is always fond of its own chicks’

- a) /ka:kulu ma:trame: pillaka:kulanu pre:maga: tʃu:sta:ji/ ‘only crows can love their chicks.’
- b) /ka:kulu tama pillalanu pre:maga: tʃu:ʒavu/ ‘crows do not love their chicks.’
- c) /evari pillalu va:riki muddu/ ‘everyone is fond of their own children’
- d) /tama pillalakante: itarula pillalu muddu/ ‘other’s children are fonder than own children.’

Expected Response: C

### **Example 2: Low on Familiarity and Frequency**

**Item 9:** /gunʃa betʃi ganʃa va:jinʃaʒam/

Translation: ‘to bury and pay obeisance’

- a) /vjaɾdʰamaipo:vadaʒam/ ‘let it go waste’
- b) /je:mi ajiipo:jindi/ ‘what happened?’
- c) /gunʃalo: ganʃa betʃi va:jinʃaʒam/ ‘ringing a bell in a bury pit’
- d) /pu:dʃi petʃaʒam/ ‘completely bury’

Expected Response: A

### **Example 3: Rated same across all three categories of Familiarity and Frequency**

**Item 10:** /ekkaʒaina ba:va ga:ni vaŋga toʃa ka:ʒa ma:tram ka:du/

Translation: except atbrinjal garden, its brother-in-law everywhere else.

- a) /vjavaha:ram daggara bʰandutvam tagadu/ ‘relationship shouldn’t be considered in business matters.’
- b) /ba:va ajinava:du vaŋga toʃa ka:ʒa anni avuta:ʒu/ ‘brother-in-law can be everything at eggplant garden.’

c) /ba:vaga:ri to:te: kada: ani ta:nu tʃeppakunda:ne: ka:jalu ko:sukunta:du/ ‘taking liberty in plucking fruits just because its brother-in-law’s garden.’

d) /sʋa:dʰam maniʃini patanam tʃe:stundi/ ‘Selfishness makes a man fall.’

Expected Response: A

#### **Example 4: Rated same across all three categories for Frequency**

**Item 13:**/petʈani amma petʈane le:du petʈe ammake:moʃindi pedda ro:gam/

Translation: the mother that doesn’t give, let it be. What big illness did the mother that gives regularly get?

a) /ro:dʒu: biʃʃam petʈe a:me oka sa:ri petʈakapo:te biʃʃaga:du ane: ma:ta/ ‘the words said by the beggar when the alms given by a lady everyday were not given all of a sudden.’

b) /manʃiva:re: sama:dʒa:nni vimarʃalaku guri tʃe:sta:du/ ‘good people are the ones that make the society face criticisms’

c) /manʃiva:re: ma:ʈalu paɖutu: vuntʃa:ru sahaɖʒamga:/ ‘good people were naturally the ones who gets criticised.’

d) /petʈani amma petʈane le:du em ro:gam vaʃiɖdo: mari nitjam petʈe a:meku/ ‘leave the matter of the mother that doesn’t give any but what illness did the mother that gives regularly get as she didn’t offer anything to give.

Expected Response:C

**Item 18:** /pedavi viravaʈam/

Translation: ‘to bend the lips downwards’ (to express there is no hope)

a) /batukuta:ɖani tʃeppa:dam/ ‘to say that the person will live’

b) /batakaɖani tʃeppa:dam/ ‘ to say that a person will not live anymore’

c) /pedavi viragoʈʈa:ru/ ‘to break the lips’

d) /batikaɖani tʃeppa:dam/ ‘ to say that the person is alive’

Expected Response: B

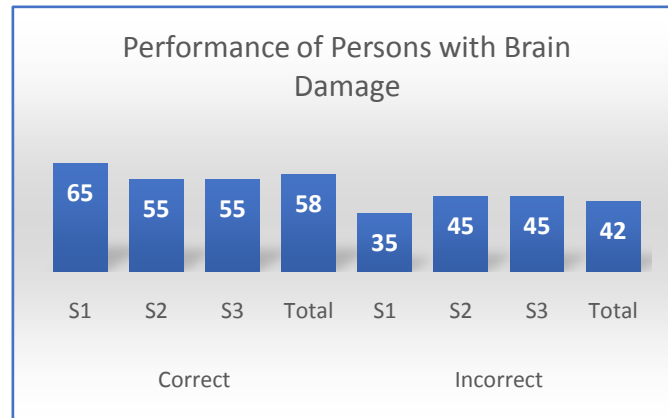
In this study, the data for three persons with brain damage was analysed and is listed in the table and figure below.

**Table 8: Performance of Persons with Brain Damage**

| Response  | PWBD  | Raw Score | Percentage |
|-----------|-------|-----------|------------|
| Correct   | S1    | 13        | 65         |
|           | S2    | 11        | 55         |
|           | S3    | 11        | 55         |
|           | Total | 35        | 58         |
| Incorrect | S1    | 7         | 35         |
|           | S2    | 9         | 45         |
|           | S3    | 9         | 45         |



|  |       |    |    |
|--|-------|----|----|
|  | Total | 25 | 42 |
|--|-------|----|----|



**Fig 4 : Performance of Persons with Brain Damage**

From the above table and figure it can be noted that the responses of Persons with Brain Damage where correct 58% and incorrect 42% of the time on an average. While, the individual responses can be noted from the table. Comparison of the responses with the familiarity and frequency rating can be noted in the following table below.

| S.No. | Responses                                    | Category      | Items   | Category  | Items  |
|-------|--|---------------|---|-----------|--|
| 1.    | Correct<br>1,3,4,5,7,8,11,<br>15,16,18,19,20 | Very Familiar | 1,4,5,6,7,8,10,11,<br>12,14,15,16,17,<br>18,19,20 | High Freq | 1,4,5,6,7,10,11,<br>12,13,14,15,<br>16,17,18,19,20 |
| 2.    | Incorrect<br>2,6,9,10,12,13,<br>14,17        | Familiar      | 2,3,10  | Freq      | 3,10,13,18   |
| 3.    |  | Not Familiar  | 9,10,13   | Low Freq  | 2,8,9,10,12,13,18                                  |

In responses of the persons with brain damage (PWBD), items 4,7,8,11,18 and 19 were given as the correct responses by all three of them. All these responses matched to high familiar and high frequency category. Items 10 and 13, which were marked across categories were given as incorrect responses. Item 9, which was low on familiarity and frequency was incorrect.

## Conclusions

Findings revealed that familiarity played a dominant role as compared to frequency. More correct responses for decomposable items were noted. Dual Idiom Representation Model (Abel,2003) was found to account for the results. Asidioms and proverbs are stored in long

term memory, they were preserved even in the context of language loss. The use of formulaic language in persons with brain damage would thus help in understanding the complexities of language processing and retrieval. This could also have both clinical and theoretical implications.

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