

Does emigration affect idiomatic knowledge in the native language?

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Introduction

For the majority of 21st century Dutch emigrants, the Dutch language and culture are still very present in daily life (Doreleijers & van der Sijs, 2019).

Research has shown clear effects of language attrition on phonology, morphology, syntax and vocabulary (De Leeuw et al., 2018; Schmid & Köpke, 2007). Idiomatic language is an aspect of vocabulary that is underinvestigated.

Idioms: kick the bucket and kill two birds with one stone

Particularly rooted in the native language and culture (Boers et al., 2004; Kovecses & Szabó, 1996).

Does emigration lead to reduced knowledge of idiomatic expressions in the native language, and if so, to what extent?

Methodology

503 first generation Dutch emigrants

- age: $M = 55.35$, $SD = 14.28$, min - max = 22 - 93
- emigration length in years:
 $M = 22.25$, $SD = 15.10$, min - max = 1 - 71
- vocabulary knowledge: $M = 95.44$, $SD = 5.19$ (LexTale, Lemhöfer & Boersma, 2012)
- majority was highly educated (79%) and had emigrated to a country in Europe (61.47%)

137 Dutch non-emigrants

- age: $M = 60$, $SD = 12.88$, min - max = 20 - 86
- vocabulary knowledge: $M = 96.86$, $SD = 6.25$
- majority was highly educated (85%)

Idiom knowledge test

1. Background questionnaire
2. LexTale vocabulary test (Lemhöfer & Boersma, 2012)
3. Answer three questions about each idiom:
 - **Familiarity:** How familiar are you with the meaning of this expression? (scale 1-5)
 - **Objective idiom knowledge:** Which definition is the correct one? (multiple choice question)
 - **Transparency:** How clear is the meaning of this expression based on the individual words in the expression? (scale 1-5)

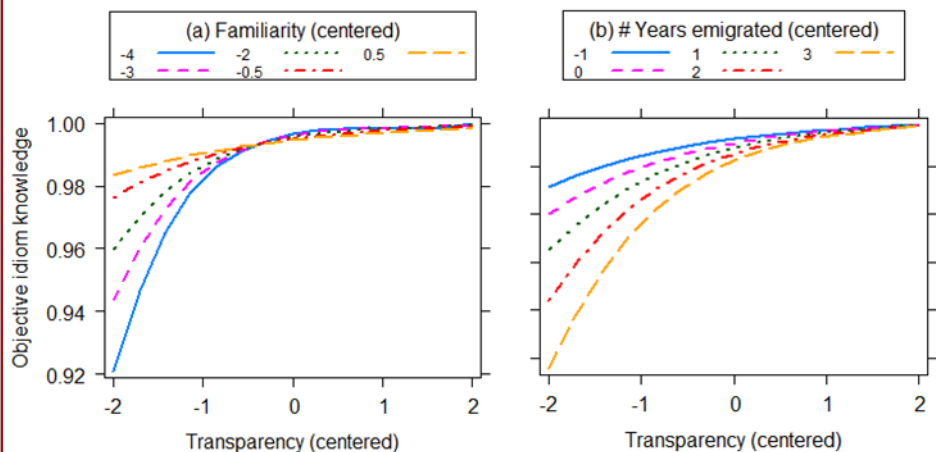
110 Dutch idioms from a larger database (Hubers et al., 2019) divided over four sessions

Results

Idiom property	Emigrants M (SD)	Non-emigrants M (SD)	Sig.
Familiarity	4.52 (0.29)	4.73 (0.35)	***
Transparency	3.50 (0.56)	3.27 (0.59)	*
Objective idiom knowledge	0.95 (0.11)	0.96 (0.10)	*

- Significant differences between emigrants and non-emigrants on each of the dimensions (while controlling for the other dimensions)
- Idiom knowledge is very high for both Emigrants and Non-emigrants

Dutch emigrants



- Effects of transparency and familiarity are similar for Emigrants and Non-emigrants
- The longer the emigration length, the more people rely on transparency information to determine the correct idiom meaning

Conclusions

Emigration does not necessarily lead to reduced knowledge of idiomatic expressions. Under conditions in which emigrants have enough opportunities to be exposed to and actually use the native language, their knowledge of idiomatic expressions is likely to be on a par with that of non-emigrants.



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