

Do too many linguistics spoil the research?

Creativity and fixedness in creative uses of proverbial idioms:

A cross-linguistic, corpus-driven study

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Keywords: proverbial idioms, fixedness, creativity, cross-linguistic, corpus linguistic

Both cognitive linguistic and other literature on idioms describes some idioms as being fixed or frozen (e.g. Fillmore et al. 1988, Moon 1998, Gibbs 2001, Croft and Cruse 2004, Goldberg 2006, Langlotz 2006). However, the categorization and other processing required in order to apply a proverbial idiom¹, such as *too many cooks spoil the broth*, which has both a concrete, literal meaning and an abstract, idiomatic meaning, to fit a specific, concrete, contextualized situation in the real world (with its abstract meaning, no less) does not seem particularly simple.

The ubiquitous nature of human creativity (e.g. Kaufman and Sternberg 2010) suggests that speakers will manage to find a way to apply creative solutions to the problem of applying such proverbs, regardless of how fixed or frozen they are. To reveal precisely how they do so is the main goal of this in-progress study, which contrastively examines linguistic creativity in uses of proverbial idioms in English, Japanese, and Korean in order to document the patterns with which speakers of each language employ proverbial idioms creatively, in hopes of contributing to the study of proverbial idioms and of attesting to the profound relevance human creativity should bear on theories of language in general.

Here, I report on the results of a study of the proverbial idiom *too many cooks spoil the broth* and its translational equivalents in Japanese and Korean (*sendō ōku-shi-te fune yama-ni noboru* and *sagong-i manh-eumyeon bae-ga san-eulo ga-nda*, respectively). I employed the Sketch Engine website and queried the largest, web-based corpus available for each language (the so-called “tenten” corpora, because they have more than 10⁹ words). Rather than relying on my intuition to predict types of creative uses, as earlier literature on idiomatic creativity tended to do (e.g. Moon 1998, Langlotz 2006), I extracted most uses of the proverbial idiom in each corpus, including creative uses, by searching for all potential creative constructions and manually sorting the data, resulting in 327 (English), 517 (Japanese), and 667 (Korean) tokens. Then I applied ID tags (Atkins 1987) to the data, labeling fixed forms and creative uses (and, in the latter case, specifying the type(s) of creativity exhibited).

Strikingly, the data reveal that so-called creative uses represent the majority of uses in all three languages: more than half the English and Japanese, and 4/5 of the Korean data were creative uses. Various types of creativity were observed, with English being most likely to employ lexical substitution. Japanese and Korean were more likely to use contraction. However, Japanese speakers focused on the first half of the proverb, and were free to drop only the second half, while Korean speakers were able to drop either half of the proverb.

The results will be discussed in some detail, including specific methods of creativity that speakers of each language employed, or failed to employ, as well as in light of what they reveal about the study of proverbs in general.

References

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¹ In this paper, the term “proverbial idioms” is used in order to indicate idioms with a “teaching story”. There is no clear cut boundary between idioms and proverbs, but the boundary is gradable. As is well known, the meaning of idioms and proverbs is not predictable from the sum of their components’ meaning.