

USAGE JUDGMENT IN KOREAN IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS



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Abstract

This study reconceptualizes errors in the use of Korean idiomatic expressions not as a deficiency of knowledge, but as a failure in the coordination of the “usage judgment” process during real-time language production. Previous studies have analyzed idiomatic expressions from semantic, pragmatic, or cultural perspectives; however, they have limitations in explaining how learners select expressions and generate errors at the moment of utterance. To address this issue, this study proposes an integrated judgment model in which semantic, pragmatic, and cultural–conceptual factors interact. It introduces the concept of “usage judgment” and conceptualizes errors as a “layered failure structure” arising from the miscoordination of multiple judgment dimensions. By shifting the unit of analysis from individual components to the judgment process itself, this study provides a theoretical framework for explaining error-generation mechanisms not adequately explained in previous research.

Keywords: Idiomatic expressions, usage judgment, layered failure, pragmatics, cultural code

Chapter 1. Introduction

Idiomatic expressions constitute a complex linguistic domain in which semantic non-compositionality, cultural presuppositions, and pragmatic conditions interact. This complexity makes them particularly challenging for second language learners. Unlike ordinary lexical items, idiomatic expressions cannot be used appropriately based on lexical knowledge alone; their use requires sensitivity to discourse context, speaker–hearer relationships, and culturally grounded evaluative norms. In this respect, the process of using idiomatic expressions is inherently multifaceted.

Given these characteristics, errors in idiomatic expression use cannot be easily reduced to a lack of semantic knowledge or grammatical competence. Rather, they emerge from the interaction of multiple factors. In particular, cases in which learners produce inappropriate utterances despite understanding the meaning of an expression highlight a problem that cannot be sufficiently explained by single-dimensional approaches.

Previous research has often focused on classifying idiomatic expressions according to cultural codes and examining their distribution and pedagogical applications. Such approaches have contributed to revealing the cultural meanings

embedded in idiomatic expressions and to facilitating learners' comprehension. However, while effective in organizing error types, classification-based approaches offer limited insight into how such errors are actually generated in the process of language use.

In other words, assigning errors to specific cultural codes or semantic categories does not adequately explain how learners select expressions at the moment of utterance or how failures in coordination arise during that process. This points to a fundamental limitation of approaches that treat errors primarily as outcomes rather than as processes.

Against this backdrop, the present study reconceptualizes errors in idiomatic expression use not as deficiencies in isolated knowledge, but as failures in the “usage judgment” process operating during real-time language production. By focusing on a judgment structure in which semantic, pragmatic, and cultural–conceptual factors interact, this study seeks to account for the underlying mechanisms of error generation that have not been fully captured in previous research.

To this end, the study first reviews the limitations of cultural code–based classifications as well as semantic and pragmatic approaches. It then proposes a theoretical formulation of the concept of usage judgment. Building on this, the internal structure of the judgment process is systematized, and errors arising from the interaction among its components are conceptualized as a “layered failure structure.” Through this framework, idiomatic expression errors are redefined as the outcome of a multidimensional judgment process.

By shifting the unit of analysis from individual components to the entire judgment process, this study offers a more refined theoretical framework for explaining idiomatic expression use. In doing so, it extends existing cultural code–based approaches and opens up new possibilities for interpreting idiomatic expression errors within the structure of real-time language production.

Chapter 2. Theoretical Background

Previous studies on idiomatic expressions can be broadly categorized into semantic and pragmatic approaches. The semantic approach has contributed to elucidating the internal structure of idiomatic expressions by focusing on their non-compositional meanings and through componential analysis (Nunberg, Sag, & Wasow, 1994; Moon, 1998). However, while effective in explaining the semantic system of expressions, this approach has limitations in accounting for how learners actually select expressions through judgment in real usage contexts.

The pragmatic approach, on the other hand, has explained the appropriateness of expressions in relation to discourse context, speaker–hearer relationships, and communicative functions (Thomas, 1983; Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). This line of research has clarified the functions and usage conditions of idiomatic expressions in discourse. Nevertheless, it provides only limited explanation of how usage

judgments are formed through the interaction between meaning construction and cultural presuppositions.

In addition, cultural–conceptual approaches have contributed to explaining the cognitive and cultural foundations of idiomatic expressions by focusing on conceptual metaphors and cultural presuppositions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2002). Within the context of Korean language education, the importance of incorporating cultural context into idiomatic expression instruction has also been emphasized (Park, 2007). However, these approaches likewise show limitations in explaining how semantic, pragmatic, and cultural–conceptual factors are integrated and operate together in actual language use.

A similar limitation can be observed in cultural code–based approaches. Idiomatic expressions reflect specific cultural experiences and social value systems, and their meanings are organized through cultural codes. Accordingly, previous studies have classified idiomatic expressions according to cultural codes and analyzed patterns of errors. While such classifications are effective in organizing error types, they do not sufficiently explain how errors are generated through specific judgment pathways in real-time language use.

In sum, existing approaches tend to fragment idiomatic expression errors into isolated factors and thus fail to capture the integrated judgment structure that operates in actual language production, where semantic, pragmatic, and cultural–conceptual elements interact. To provide a more precise account of idiomatic expression use, it is therefore necessary to move beyond individual dimensions and adopt an approach that takes the judgment process itself—where multiple factors interact—as the unit of analysis.

Chapter 3. Conceptualizing the Usage Judgment Process

3.1 The Concept of Usage Judgment

In this study, “usage judgment” refers to a cognitive-pragmatic mechanism through which the appropriateness of a linguistic form is determined, not merely based on the comprehension of its meaning, but through the interaction of contextual factors, speaker–hearer relationships, discourse functions, and cultural presuppositions. Rather than a simple retrieval of pragmatic knowledge, it is a dynamic process in which an input expression is filtered through the speaker’s internal evaluative system and selected as the most appropriate utterance.

Usage judgment operates as a real-time processing mechanism under conditions of limited cognitive resources. It constitutes an integrated system in which semantic information, contextual constraints, and cultural presuppositions are jointly activated. Within this process, working memory serves as the site where meaning and context are coordinated, while cultural presuppositions function as a guiding principle that regulates the allocation of cognitive resources and the direction of interpretation.

In second language acquisition research, learner errors have typically been interpreted as part of an interlanguage system and regarded as outcomes of rule

formation and modification. While this perspective is effective in explaining errors as products of developmental stages, it does not sufficiently account for the internal mechanisms of judgment that operate at the moment of utterance.

In contrast, the present study shifts the analytical focus to an integrated judgment structure that encompasses not only pragmatic competence but also meaning construction and cultural presuppositions. By distinguishing between stored knowledge (“competence”) and real-time selection (“judgment”), language use is reconceptualized as an online processing activity.

Accordingly, the scope of analysis is extended beyond the presence or absence of knowledge to the process through which judgments are formed. On this basis, the study proposes a theoretical model that accounts for the interaction between meaning construction and cultural presuppositions—an aspect that has not been sufficiently explained in previous approaches. The concept of usage judgment thus serves as an analytical framework for examining the cognitive selection structure underlying utterance production and as a key unit for explaining the “layered failure structure” proposed in this study.

3.2 The Structure of the Usage Judgment Process

The usage judgment process is structured as a multidimensional system in which semantic, pragmatic, and cultural–conceptual dimensions interact. It is not a simple aggregation of independent components, but a dynamic cognitive-pragmatic mechanism emerging from their interaction.

These dimensions do not operate in a sequential hierarchy; rather, they are simultaneously activated in parallel at the moment of utterance and continuously adjusted in relation to one another. Usage judgment should therefore be understood as a unified process constructed through the interaction of multiple dimensions, rather than as a set of discrete components.

The semantic dimension activates meaning-related components such as evaluative direction, intensity, resultant states, and attitudinal features embedded in the expression. It provides the underlying semantic structure and functions as the point of departure as well as the primary reference for subsequent judgment processes.

The pragmatic dimension evaluates the appropriateness of an expression in relation to discourse context, speaker–hearer relationships, and communicative function. Even when expressions share similar semantic content, their acceptability may vary depending on relational and situational factors, thereby regulating social appropriateness.

The cultural–conceptual dimension reflects cultural presuppositions and socially grounded evaluative criteria. It establishes an evaluative frame that determines the direction of interpretation, specifying how a given expression may be construed in terms of value and attitude. In this sense, it is distinct from the pragmatic dimension, as it operates at a higher level by shaping the interpretive orientation of judgment.

While the pragmatic dimension adjusts appropriateness within a given situation, the cultural–conceptual dimension functions as a higher-order structure that governs the direction of interpretation. The interaction of these dimensions cannot be adequately explained by approaches that treat them as separate or subordinate components.

These three dimensions are integrated not through linear sequencing but through interactional coupling, whereby the outcome of one dimension may modify or reinforce the interpretation of another. The usage judgment process thus constitutes a dynamic system that is continuously reconfigured through interdependent interactions.

The structure of this process is illustrated in Figure 1.

This interactional framework demonstrates that judgment processes are flexibly adjusted depending on the communicative situation. In particular, the cultural–conceptual dimension plays a crucial role in shaping the overall processing pathway, restructuring the way semantic and pragmatic judgments are carried out.

3.3 Reconceptualizing Errors

This study reconceptualizes errors in idiomatic expression use not as deficiencies in individual knowledge, but as failures in the coordination of the usage judgment process during language production. This perspective moves beyond reducing errors to single-dimensional problems and instead understands them as phenomena emerging from the interaction of semantic, pragmatic, and cultural–conceptual judgment components.

From this perspective, errors are not the result of defects in isolated elements, but arise from misalignment in the coordination of multiple judgment dimensions. Even when semantic understanding is accurate, inappropriate utterances may result from mismatches with pragmatic conditions or cultural evaluative criteria. Conversely, distortions in cultural interpretation may simultaneously influence both semantic construction and pragmatic judgment.

Such error patterns can be conceptualized as a “layered failure structure.” Rather than representing independent failures at individual levels, this structure reflects complex interactions among multiple judgment dimensions.

More specifically, layered failure structures emerge from failures in the coordination of semantic, pragmatic, and cultural–conceptual processes. These failures do not follow a simple linear cause-and-effect pattern; rather, they manifest as non-linear chains of breakdowns in which the output of one dimension reshapes the interpretation of others.

Accordingly, error analysis should move beyond the classification of surface-level types and instead focus on tracing the pathways through which judgments are formed during utterance production. Idiomatic expression errors are thus understood as the outcome of a multidimensional judgment process that cannot be reduced to a single cause. This perspective demonstrates the necessity of redefining the unit of analysis as the judgment process itself.

Chapter 4. Conclusion

This study reconceptualizes errors in the use of idiomatic expressions not as deficiencies in a single dimension, but as the outcome of a multidimensional judgment process. In particular, it formalizes a structure in which semantic, pragmatic, and cultural–conceptual dimensions interact as the “usage judgment process,” and identifies its failure patterns as a “layered failure structure.” Through this, the study proposes a new theoretical framework for explaining idiomatic expression errors.

This perspective complements previous cultural code–based approaches, which have been effective in describing error types but limited in accounting for how such errors arise. By shifting the focus from classification of outcomes to the underlying judgment structure involved in utterance production, this study reinterprets idiomatic expression errors as problems within the process of language use itself.

Accordingly, the study demonstrates the need to expand the unit of analysis from individual components to the entire judgment process, providing a theoretical basis for explaining error-generation pathways that have not been adequately captured in prior research.

Future research should empirically investigate how the usage judgment process operates in actual discourse by drawing on authentic language data. Such efforts will help further refine the explanatory power and applicability of the theoretical model proposed in this study.

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