

# **Factors influencing children’s interpretation and acquisition of Chichewa idiomatic expressions: A Systemic Functional Linguistics Approach**

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## **Abstract**

Adopting Systemic Functional Linguistics, the study investigated factors that influence idiom interpretation and acquisition in children. Semantic analysability, idiom structure and idiom modification were investigated in 20 native Chichewa speaking children aged between 4 – 14 years. Three experiments were conducted to examine these factors. The data for the study were analysed qualitatively by comparing responses that children gave to identify patterns, differences and similarities. Response types given by children were identified and coded. The data were then quantitatively analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The results showed that children’s interpretation and acquisition of idioms is not dependent on the analysability and internal structure of the idioms, although these may affect interpretation and acquisition. The idiom can be analysable or can have a well-formed structure but children can still fail to interpret

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it if they lack knowledge of the socio-cultural context within which the idiom is consumed. The results also showed that idiom modification does not affect children's interpretation of idioms. The paper argues that the socio-cultural context within which idioms are produced is central to their interpretation and acquisition. As such, teachers should explain the socio-cultural contexts within which idioms were produced to facilitate idiom learning.

**Keywords:** children, Chichewa idiomatic expressions, idiom interpretation and acquisition, socio-cultural context, Systemic Functional Linguistics

## **Introduction**

Idioms are very common in daily human communications such that speakers do not realise that they use idiomatic expressions to express thoughts and feelings. Riehemann (2001, p. 2) defines an idiom as an expression “made up out of two or more words, at least one of which does not have any of the meanings it can have outside of the expression”. Although idioms are common, “an idiomatic expression or construction is something a language user could fail to know while knowing everything else in the language” (Fillmore & O’Connor, 1997, p. 6). Thus, learning idioms is a challenge (Irujo, 1986) to adults and even more so to children. Research findings indicate that many children have problems in interpreting idioms and that children below the age of 7 interpret idioms literally (Levorato & Cacciari, 1992, 1995; Ackerman, 1982). However, children still acquire idioms as part of the linguistic repertoire (Levorato et al., 2007) and use them as they mature. This has generated strong research interest in the study of the processes underlying idiom acquisition in children (Levorato et al., 2007). This study examines the factors that influence idiom interpretation in native Chichewa speaking children in Malawi with regards to semantic analysability, internal structure and modification.

### **Issues in idiom interpretation and acquisition**

Idiom comprehension and interpretation is said to be affected by several factors such as familiarity of the idiom, linguistic context and transparency/semantic analysability of the idiom. Research has shown that the most familiar idioms are easier to understand than less familiar ones (Schweigert & Cronk, 1992/93; Titone & Connine, 1994; Janyan & Andonova, 2000; Titone, Holzman & Levy, 2002; Cain, Oakhill & Lemmon, 2005; Kamanga, 2007; Libben & Titone, 2008). Titone and Connine (1994) define familiarity as a rate at which a listener or reader encounters a word in its written or spoken form and the extent to which the meaning of a word is well known. In these studies, speakers had no problems interpreting idioms rated familiar but had problems interpreting idioms rated unfamiliar. For instance, in the study of Chichewa idiom interpretation, Kamanga (2007) found that familiarity influenced the way Chichewa speakers interpreted Chichewa idioms. When idioms in both written and oral forms were presented to Chichewa speakers, speakers correctly interpreted all the idioms they rated 'often' and 'more often' (i.e. familiar idioms). Most speakers had problems interpreting idioms which they rated 'rarely' and 'never' (i.e. unfamiliar idioms). Most of these idioms were wrongly interpreted while others were not interpreted at all.

Apart from familiarity, idiom interpretation is also affected by context in which the idiom occurs. It is usually impossible to infer the meaning of a phrase until it is seen in its immediate context (Bílková, 2000). Studies have shown that idioms are easier to understand when they occur in linguistically supportive contexts compared to non-supportive or absent contexts (Ackerman, 1982; Kemper, 1986; Cacciari & Levorato, 1989; Nippold & Martin, 1989; Gibbs, 1987, 1991; Levorato & Cacciari, 1995, 1999; Liontas, 2001; Laval, 2003; Bulut & Çelik-Yazici, 2004; Cain, Oakhill & Lemmon, 2005; Kamanga, 2007). In her study, Kamanga (2007) found that Chichewa speakers could not interpret unfamiliar idioms when presented out of context but the same unfamiliar idioms were correctly interpreted when they were presented in context. This suggests that context plays a very crucial role when it comes to the interpretation of unfamiliar idioms because as Cain et al. (2005) and Lacroix, Aguert, Dardier, Stojanovik & Laval (2010) suggest, context facilitates the interpretation of

idioms by providing the necessary semantic information from which the reader or listener can extract or infer the appropriate sense of the expression.

Transparency (semantic analysability) of the idiom has also been identified as affecting idiom interpretation (Levorato & Cacciari, 1999; Titone, Holzman & Levy, 2002; Cain et al., 2005). Transparency is the degree to which the literal and the nonliteral meanings of an idiom agree or compare (Cain et al., 2005; Lacroix et al., 2010). Idioms are regarded as transparent when the literal and non-literal meanings compare closely, but when the meanings are not related idioms are regarded as opaque. Some scholars such as Titone and Connine (1999), Levorato and Cacciari (1999), Titone et al. (2002) and Cain et al. (2005) have argued that transparency of idioms influences how the idioms are processed. They argue that idioms are easier to understand when there is a close relation between their literal and figurative senses. However, this seems not to be the case with Chichewa idioms. Kamanga (2007) found that Chichewa speakers interpreted semantically analysable and non-analysable idioms equally when these were presented to them. Speakers were able to give meanings of semantically analysable as well as semantically non-analysable idioms without having any problems. This finding suggests that it is not transparency (semantic analysability) of idioms that is critical here but the speakers' prior knowledge of the socio-cultural context in which Chichewa idioms are consumed.

The factors affecting idiom interpretation discussed above: familiarity, semantic analysability of an idiom and context have also been found to affect idiom acquisition by children. Research has shown that children easily acquire the idiomatic meaning of familiar idioms than of less familiar ones (Levorato & Cacciari, 1992; Nippold & Rudzinski, 1993; Titone & Connine, 1994; Nippold & Taylor, 1995; Hsieh & Hsu, 2010; Vulchanova et al., 2011). Research has also established that children understand analysable idioms more readily than non-analysable idioms (Gibbs, 1987; Gibbs & Nayak, 1989; Nippold & Taylor, 1995; Cacciari & Levorato, 1998; Leung, 2011; Fadlon, Horvath, Siloni & Wexler, 2013). However, no study has been conducted on the role of semantic analysability in the acquisition of Chichewa idiomatic expressions. The only study on the acquisition of Chichewa idiomatic expressions by Kamanga & Banda (in press) focussed on the role of context in idiom acquisition. The study did not test whether analysability affects idiom acquisition in children, although

Kamanga (2007) found that analysability does not affect idiom interpretation in adult native Chichewa speakers. There is need to establish whether analysability affects how the idioms are acquired by children in Chichewa. Research has also revealed that linguistic context plays a very crucial role in idiom acquisition (Levorato & Cacciari, 1995, 1999; Laval, 2003; Hsieh & Hsu, 2010; Leung, 2011, Kamanga & Banda, in press). Context helps young children infer the figurative meaning of an idiom (Huber-Okrainee, Blaser & Dennis, 2005). Kamanga and Banda (in press) found that Chichewa speaking children produced more idiomatic interpretations when idioms were presented in linguistically supportive context than when they were presented out of context. Levorato and Cacciari (1999) found that children were able to give idiomatic answers to semantically non-analysable idioms when these idioms were presented in context unlike when they were presented out of context. This implies that context helped the children interpret the non-analysable idioms. However, Kamanga and Banda (in press) observe that the contextual cues provided by the linguistic context are not enough to enable children acquire idiomatic meaning. It has also been established that the internal structure of the idioms affect how children interpret and acquire the idioms (Crutchley, 2007; Leung, 2011; Vulchanova, Vulchanov & Stankova, 2011). Leung (2011) and Vulchanova, Vulchanov and Stankova (2011) observed that idioms with unusual structures were difficult for children to process and acquire. However, this has not been tested in Chichewa. Literature also indicates that age affects idiom acquisition. Research findings show that children abandon non-idiomatic interpretation of idioms when they grow up (Prinz, 1983; Levorato, 1993; Laval, 2003; Levorato, Nesi & Cacciari, 2004; Hsieh & Hsu, 2010; Vulchanova et al., 2011; Karuppali & Bhat, 2013; Kamanga & Banda, in press).

Although the above factors have been found to affect children's interpretation and acquisition of idioms, as far as it can be ascertained, no study has been carried out to test these factors on native Chichewa speaking children. Most of the studies that have tried to account for idiom interpretation and acquisition have been done in the West and have mainly studied the acquisition of English idioms. In addition, these studies have not tested if syntactic modification affects interpretation and acquisition of idioms in children. Furthermore, the studies did not take into consideration the socio-cultural context in which idioms are expressed. Idioms are social semiotic and, therefore, need to be

interpreted and acquired within the social and cultural context. The current study adopted Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) in examining whether syntactic modification, semantic analysability and idiom's internal structure affect interpretation and acquisition of idioms in native Chichewa speaking children. SFL was adopted because it treats language as a social semiotic system, thus it allows for the uncovering of the socio-cultural contexts in which Chichewa idioms are consumed. The study asked the following questions: To what extent does semantic analysability affect children's interpretation and acquisition of Chichewa idioms? To what extent does the internal structure of idioms affect children's interpretation and acquisition of them? Does syntactic modification affect children's interpretation and acquisition of idioms?

### **Systemic Functional Linguistics**

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a theory about language as a semiotic system, developed by Halliday (1985) and Halliday and Matthiessen (2004). It views language as a resource for meaning-making in a social and cultural context (Eggins, 2004). Thus, the "aspects of a given context define the meanings likely to be expressed and the language likely to be used to express those meanings" (Wattles & Radić-Bojanić, 2007, p. 47). As such, any description of a 'text' must relate to the description of a social context because according to Eggins (2004, p. 7) "context is in a text: text carries with it, as a part of it, aspects of context in which it was produced and, presumably, within which it would be considered appropriate". Fawcett (2008, p. 6) defines a 'text' as "an instance of language in use," whether written or spoken. Thus idioms as texts need to be understood within the social context in which they are produced and consumed.

In SFL, social context is the total environment in which a text is created. It is a bridge between a text and the situation in which texts actually occur (Halliday & Hasan, 1989). It is divided into context of situation (register), context of culture (genre) and ideology (Eggins, 2004). Context of situation are all extra-linguistic factors that are present in the text. It is an environment within which a text is performed and interpreted (Halliday, 2009b, p. 1). A context of situation is described with respect to field of discourse, tenor of discourse and mode of discourse. Field of discourse is the social action which language expresses.

Tenor of discourse refers to who is taking part, social relations being enacted between participants and the roles participants adopt. Mode of discourse is the channel or wavelength selected. Context of culture is the way in which people organise texts through language choices with an aim to achieve a social purpose. Martin (2009, p. 159) refers to context of culture as “the system of staged goal-oriented social processes through which social subjects in a given culture live their lives”. The context of culture is related to the context of situation in that context of situation is an instance of context of culture (Halliday, 2009a). The context of situation is the immediate environment experienced, a pattern of linguistic choices and the context of culture is a pattern of register choices, a pattern of a pattern of texture (Martin, 2009).

Ideology refers to the beliefs, values and points of view of the world we hold whether consciously or unconsciously. It is how language constructs, presents and encodes our view of the world. Hence, “to use language at all is to use it to encode particular positions and values” (Eggins, 2004, p. 11). No matter what register of the situation is or the genre we are in, our ideological positions will influence the way we use language. Just as no text is free from genre and register, no text is free from ideology (Eggins, 2004). Ideology greatly contributes to the meaning of a text to the extent that “understanding a text can depend not simply on knowledge of word or clause meaning but also, crucially, on cultural frames of reference and meanings” (Lirola, 2005, p. 19). This, therefore, suggests that it would be difficult to interpret idioms without the knowledge of the socio-context in which they are produced and consumed.

Systemic Functional Linguistics recognizes three modes of meaning also called metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal and textual. Ideational metafunction is the means for construing our experience of reality, both internal and external experiences or ‘going-on’ of the world, that is, “what kind of activities are undertaken, how participants in these activities are described, how they are classified and what they are composed of” (Martin & Rose, 2003, p. 66). Ideational metafunction has two aspects: logical and experiential in the construal of experience as meaning (Lavid, Arús & Zamorano-Mansilla, 2010). Experiential metafunction is concerned with meaning in the clause and logical metafunction is concerned with meaning between clauses in clause complexes (Eggins, 2004). The interpersonal metafunction is concerned with enacting

social roles and relationships between participants as meaning. Through the interpersonal metafunction, users of language make meanings about interpersonal dimensions such as “the power or solidarity of their relationship; the extent of their intimacy; their level of familiarity with each other and their attitudes and judgements” (Eggins, 2004, p. 184). The interpersonal metafunction is expressed through MOOD. “MOOD is concerned with the topic of information or service and whether it is giving or demanding and the tenor of the relationship between interactants” (Haratyan, 2011, p. 262). The Interpersonal meaning of the clause, in the MOOD system, is defined by the system of MOOD TYPE and the system of MODALITY (Eggins, 2004).

The textual metafunction is “the level of organisation of the clause which enables the clause to be packaged in ways which make it effective given its purpose and its context” (Eggins, 2004, p. 298). The textual strand of meaning does not add new content nor new interpersonal dimension into a text but it is crucial to the hanging together and making sense of a text. Hence, it is at the helm of the creation of text. The ideational and interpersonal meanings cannot be expressed in a coherent manner without the textual systems although these meanings are essential to the creation of text (Eggins, 2004). Thus, Matthiessen, Teruya and Lam (2010, p. 220) refer to textual metafunction as “the enabling metafunction, providing the resources for presenting ideational and interpersonal meanings as a flow of information in text unfolding its context”. However, a text cannot be created by textual choices alone. It would be devoid of content and we would not interact with it (Eggins, 2004). The textual metafunction structures the message using two types of texture forming resources: the structural and the cohesive. The structural resources make reference to the intraclausal relationships and the cohesive resources to the interclausal relationships (Lirola, 2005, p. 38).

All the three metafunctions discussed above are of equal status and none is more important than the other (Teich, 1999). These metafunctions exist simultaneously in every clause as such, every clause expresses different strands of meaning. These different strands of meaning are interconnected making up a single entity (Fawcett, 2008). Thus, every clause is ‘multifunctional’ as it includes different layers of meaning.

Considering that idioms are texts which need to be interpreted in context, the paper adopts SFL framework to explain the factors that influence idiom interpretation and acquisition in Chichewa speaking children. The paper utilises SFL terms such as context of situation, context of culture and text to explain how children interpret and acquire the meanings of Chichewa idiomatic expressions.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Twenty native Chichewa speaking children from Mpalume village in Chinamwali Township, Zomba, Malawi, participated in the study. These children come from families that use Chichewa all the times and go to a local primary school in the area where the medium of instruction in the lower classes is Chichewa. Furthermore, the school teaches Chichewa as a mandatory subject, as such children have the opportunity of encountering idiomatic expressions more often. These children were in the age groups 4 years (range 4.1 – 4.11; mean 4.3), 6 years (range 6.0 – 6.11; mean 6.6), 9 years (range 9.0 – 9.8; mean 9.3), 12 years (range 12.2 – 12.9; mean 12.5) and 14 years (range 14.0 – 14.2; mean 14.1). Four children were selected for each age group. The 4-year-olds were selected because they are not very much exposed to idioms. Idiom comprehension starts when children start school, around 7 years old and above (Levorato & Cacciari, 1992, 1995). However, there is also a view that children around the age of 4 are able to handle non-literal expressions like idioms (Schnell, 2007). Therefore, 4-year-olds were selected to find out the transition and to ascertain whether idiom acquisition starts when kids are in school. The 14-year-olds were selected because they are exposed and understand a good number of idioms (Levorato & Cacciari, 1999). All the 20 children were normal and met the following exclusion criteria: diagnosis of a language disorder; severe learning difficulties or requirement for special educational services; schooling in a language other than Chichewa or not studying the language at school; chronic disorder (e.g. diabetes); history of premature birth or low birth weight (e.g. birth weight <2500g/5lbs, and/or <37weeks gestation) and history of hospitalization or medical attention for a closed head injury (Huber-Okrainee, Blaser & Dennis, 2005).

***Materials***

Idioms were picked from Chichewa textbooks used in schools in Malawi. In total, 110 idioms were identified and evaluated regarding their familiarity by 20 adult native speakers of the language who were above the age of 25 years. The evaluation of idioms in terms of familiarity was necessary because there are no frequency references available for Chichewa idioms. The adult native speakers were asked to say how frequently they had heard, seen or used each idiomatic expression without considering whether or not they knew what it meant. Using a 4-point scale ranging from never (1) to more often (4), the idioms that they had never heard, seen or used were to be rated 1; idioms that they had heard, seen or used very often were to be rated 4. From the idioms that were rated familiar, top 10 semantically analysable and top 10 semantically non-analysable idioms were picked. In total, 20 idioms were picked. The most familiar idioms were picked because research has shown that they are the most meaningful (Author, 2007, 2012; Janyan & Andonova, 2000; Titone & Connine, 1994; Schweigert & Cronk, 1992/93). Familiar semantically non-analysable idioms were also picked because Kamanga (2007, 2012) found that semantic analysability did not affect idiom interpretation in Chichewa and we wanted to find out if this is also the case with idiom acquisition by children.

The twenty selected idioms ranged from phrase idioms to sentence idioms. Phrase idioms included noun and verb phrase idioms. Adjectival phrase idioms are very few in Chichewa (Kamanga, 2007) and the few idioms that were picked from the text books were rated unfamiliar so they could not be used for the study. Chichewa has no prepositional and adverbial idioms (Author, 2007) hence not on the list. The noun phrase idioms included those with structures N+Adj, N+Adj+N, N(Infinitive)+N(base), N(derived)+N and verb phrase idioms included those with structures V+N(base), V+N+Adj, V+N(Locative), V+N+N (Locative), V+N+Numeral. Sentence idioms included simple sentences only as complex sentence idioms are very few (Kamanga, 2007) and those that were picked from the text books were rated unfamiliar so they could not be used.

Apart from having a list of the selected 20 idioms, these idioms were also put in sentences. In total, 20 sentences were created, each containing one idiom.

Thus, 10 sentences contained semantically analysable idioms and the other 10 contained semantically and non-analysable idioms. These idioms had the structures described above. Lastly, idioms that could be modified were identified from the selected 20 idioms. A total of 6 idioms were picked. The idioms were then modified syntactically. The syntactically modified idioms were also put in sentences and each sentence contained one idiom only. No options were provided for the children to choose from in all the tools described above.

### ***Procedure***

Three experiments were conducted. Experiment 1 and Experiment 2 tested children's ability to understand both semantically analysable and non-analysable idioms. These experiments also tested whether the internal structure of idioms influences children's ability to understand and acquire them. Experiment 3 tested whether syntactic modification affects idiom understanding and acquisition. On average experiments took a maximum of 8 minutes as children have too short attention span.

In Experiment 1, the researcher read twenty sentences containing idiomatic expressions to each child. The experimenter read each sentence to one child at a time. The child aged 6 and below listened as the experimenter read while that aged 9 and above followed on a printed version. After reading the sentence, the experimenter asked the child to answer the question: 'What does it mean that he/she did (or was) ... idiom?' (e.g. What does it mean that he broke the ice?'). The child had to answer this question before the next sentence was read. No answers were provided by the experimenter for the child to choose from. The children had to find answers on their own. This was necessary to attest whether context facilitates idiom interpretation in children when semantically analysable and non-analysable idioms with different structures are embedded in linguistic context. Each child was tested individually. The order of the sentences was the same with each child. The experimenter recorded the answers given by each child on the response sheet.

In Experiment 2, children were exposed to a list of 20 idiomatic expressions, one month after the completion of Experiment 1. These were the same idioms that were embedded in the sentences in Experiment 1 but in this list no context

was provided. The experimenter read the idioms to each child at a time. The child aged 6 and below listened as the experimenter read while that aged 9 and above followed on a printed version. After reading each idiomatic expression, the experimenter asked the child to say what the idiomatic expression meant. The child had to answer this question before the next idiomatic expression was read. No answers were provided by the experimenter for the child to choose from. The children had to find answers on their own. Each child was tested individually, and the order of the idioms was the same. The experimenter recorded the answers given by each child on the response sheet.

In Experiment 3, children were presented with a set of sentences that contained syntactically modified idioms, one month after the completion of Experiment 2. The experimenter read each sentence to one child at a time. The child aged 6 and below listened as the experimenter read while that aged 9 and above followed on a printed version. After reading each sentence, the experimenter asked the child to say what the idiomatic expression meant in the sentence. The child had to provide the meaning of the idiomatic expression before the next sentence was read. No answers were provided by the experimenter for the child to choose from. The children had to find answers on their own using the context provided in the sentences. Each child was tested individually. The order of the sentences was the same with each child. The experimenter recorded the answers given by each child on the response sheet.

For validity, all the experiments described above were also conducted on adult Chichewa native speakers. The same procedures used in children experiments were used in adult experiments. Throughout the experiments, the participants together with their parents/guardians were reminded that participation was voluntary and that they had a right to withdraw or withdraw their children/wards at any stage without any obligation to explain their decision and without penalty. Confidentiality was maintained by using identification codes that consisted of a letter and the age of a participant.

### ***Coding and analysis***

The data were analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively. In qualitative analysis the responses were compared several times to identify patterns, differences and similarities. It involved identification of types of responses

given by the children. Types of responses were named accordingly. After identifying the response types, the identified response types were coded for statistical analysis. In quantitative analysis, the data were statistically analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22. Descriptive statistics (frequencies) and inferential statistics (cross tabulations, paired-sample t-test and Analysis of Variance [ANOVA]) were conducted. Frequencies were conducted to determine how many times children gave a specific type of response. Cross-tabulations were conducted to determine what type of response was common for a certain type of idioms in specific environments. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests were conducted to compare mean scores of more than two groups. To determine whether modification affects idiom interpretation, the responses given by children in Experiment 3 were compared with the responses children gave in Experiment 2, where the idioms were not modified, through a paired-sample t-test. Only responses that children gave in Experiment 2 for the idioms that were then modified in Experiment 3 were extracted for comparison with responses for their modified counterparts in Experiment 3. The paired-sample t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores for children when the idioms were not modified and when the idioms were modified. This test helped us to establish if modification of idioms affect the acquisition of idiomatic meanings.

## **Results and Discussion**

Factors that influence idiom interpretation in native Chichewa speaking children were examined. Three factors: semantic analysability, idiom's internal structure and idiom modification were tested in three experiments. The results from these experiments have been presented below.

### *Semantic Analysability*

Research findings have shown that children understand analysable idioms more readily than non-analysable idioms (Gibbs, 1987; Gibbs & Nayak, 1989; Nippold & Taylor, 1995; Cacciari & Levorato, 1998). This factor was tested in two experiments (Experiments 1 and 2) described above. Twenty idioms, 10 analysable and 10 non-analysable, were presented in sentence context and out of context. When analysable and non-analysable idioms were presented in sentence context in Experiment 1, the one-way between-groups Analysis of

Variance (ANOVA Test) with analysability as independent variable showed no significant difference between the responses on analysable idioms and non-analysable idioms ( $F(1,398) = 3.270, p = .071$ ). This indicates that analysability did not affect the way children interpreted the idioms when they were presented in sentence context. However, the one-way between-groups Analysis of Variance (ANOVA Test) with analysability as independent variable showed significant differences between the responses on analysable idioms and non-analysable idioms when idioms were presented in out of context in Experiment 2 ( $F(1,398) = 7.285, p = .007$ ). This shows that analysability affected how idioms were interpreted by children when the idioms were presented out of context. Children gave more idiomatic meanings (75) for analysable idioms than they gave for non-analysable idioms (60). A possible explanation is that lack of context did not provide hints on the socio-cultural contexts within which the idioms are consumed. Idioms are deeply rooted in a particular culture and carry rich cultural elements (Chunke, 2011; Rizq, 2015), as such, one needs to access what in SFL is called the context of culture within which the idioms are embedded if they are to correctly interpret an idiomatic expression. Linguistically supportive context helps young children to infer the figurative meaning of an idiom (Huber-Okraanee, Blaser & Dennis, 2005) by providing clues regarding the situational and cultural context in which an idiom is used. Idioms could not be interpreted if a speaker lacks knowledge of the socio-cultural aspects guiding the use of an idiomatic expression (Kamanga & Banda, in press).

The results suggest that analysability did not affect how children interpreted idioms when the idioms were presented in context but it affected idiom interpretation when the idioms were presented out of context. These results are consonant with the findings of Levorato and Cacciari (1999) and Fadlon et al. (2013).

Furthermore, Cross-tabulation of response type in relation to analysability of the idioms showed that some responses were associated with non-analysable idioms more than analysable ones when the idioms were presented in sentence context in Experiment 1 and out of context in Experiment 2. The results showed that literal responses were produced more in analysable idioms than in non-

analysable idioms in both sentence context and out of context as in Table 1, below.

Table 1: Response types against Analysability in sentence context and out of context

	Sentence Context		Out of Context	
	Analysable	Non-analysable	Analysable	Non-analysable
Idiomatic	73	66	75	60
Literal	13	5	25	14
Associative	14	13	1	1
Related to idiomatic meaning	12	13	9	17
Same idiom	60	58	71	73
Irrelevant	27	40	18	34

This is consistent with the findings of Leung (2011). For instance, 9- and 12-year old children literally interpreted the idiom *khala maso* (seat eyes = ‘be alert’) when it was embedded in the sentence *Munthu yemwe wabwerayu sitikumudziwa choncho muyenera kukhala maso* (We do not know the person who has come so seat eyes = ‘We do not know the person who has come so be alert’). The idiom was interpreted as *asagone* (they should not sleep), *kuyang’ana* (be awake/to be looking) and *kukhala osagona* (stay without sleeping/be awake). This idiom was also interpreted literally when it was presented in out of context as follows: *kuyang’ana* (be awake/to be looking), *khala osagona* (stay without sleeping/be awake), *osagona* (be awake) and *yang’ana* (be awake/be looking). These responses suggest that children could not realise that the expression was an instance of use that needed to be interpreted in a certain socio-cultural context within which it was produced. An idiom as a text ‘carries with it, as a part of it, aspects of the context in which it was produced and, presumably, within which it would be considered appropriate’ (Eggins, 2004, p. 7). Therefore, the socio-cultural context within

which the idioms were produced is central to the interpretation and acquisition of the idiomatic expressions (Kamanga & Banda, in press).

The table also showed that more irrelevant responses were given for non-analysable idioms than for analysable idioms. For instance, 9-, 12- and 14-year old children gave irrelevant responses when the idiom *dyera masuku pamutu* (eat masuku (wild loquat/Uapaca kirkiana) from one's head = 'exploit someone') was presented in the sentence *Chikondi amakonda kudyera masuku pamutu anzake* (Chikondi likes to eat *masuku* from the heads of his/her friends = 'Chikondi likes to exploit her/his friends'). The idiom was interpreted as *Gwira ntchito wopanda malipiro* (never get paid for the work you did), *Anadya ndalama zonse* (S/he took all the money to himself/herself), *Amachitira anzake nsanje* (S/he is jealousy of others), *Kuwanamiza azinzake* (to cheat others/friends), *Kubera anzake* (to steal from friends) and *kuba* (to steal). Irrelevant responses were also given when this idiom was presented out of context as follows: *Ndalama sanalandire* (S/he did not receive the money), *Kungokugwiritsa ntchito* (make you work for nothing), *Gwira ntchito yaulere* (work without getting paid), *Anamudyera nzake* (S/he ate somebody's something) and *Kupanga ntchito yopanda malipiro* (never get paid for the work you did). These responses indicate that children were aware that the expression was an instance of use that needed to be interpreted within certain socio-cultural context in which it was produced (Kamanga & Banda in press), but they lacked knowledge of the socio-cultural context. So, in search for a meaning that would be relevant, they ended up selecting a meaning that was irrelevant.

The table also indicates that children also gave a high number of meanings that were related to idiomatic meaning when the idiom was non-analysable than when it was analysable. For instance, a meaning related to idiomatic meaning was given when the idiom *tsina khutu* (pinch the ear = 'warn') was presented in the sentence *Apongozi anga anditsina khutu kuti Chikondi ndiwakuba* (My mother/father-in-law has pinched my ear that Chikondi is a thief = My mother/father-in-law has warned me that Chikondi is a thief). The following meanings were provided: *andiwuza* (S/he has told me), *andilangiza* (S/he has advised me), *Andinong'oneza* (S/he has told me secretly) and *awadziwitsa* (S/he has informed them). When this idiom was presented out of context, meanings related to idiomatic meaning were also provided as follows: *Kumuwuza munthu*

*zinthu* (to tell someone things), *Kundiwuza mwakabisira* (to tell me secretly), *langiza* (advise), *Kutetedza nzako* (to protect a friend) and *kudziwitsa* (to inform). These responses suggest that children recognised the idiom as an instance of use to be interpreted within the socio-cultural context in which it was produced but they had fuzzy knowledge of the relevant socio-cultural context.

These findings indicate that analysability affects children's interpretation of idioms in Chichewa although Kamanga (2007) found that analysability did not affect idiom interpretation in adult native Chichewa speakers, who interpreted both analysable and non-analysable idioms equally. From these findings, it is evident that although children recognised that idioms are instantiated in particular context of situation whose meaning is embedded in the context of culture, they still lacked the knowledge to interpret them correctly. Therefore, it can be argued that the ability to interpret idioms as textual choices, relate to ability to interpret what in SFL are called register variables of field, tenor and mode (cf. Eggins, 2004).

### ***Internal structure of idioms***

Some studies on children's acquisition of idioms have shown that the internal structure of the idioms affect how children interpret and acquire them, especially when the idioms have unusual structures (Crutchley, 2007; Leung, 2011 and Vulchanova, Vulchanov & Stankova, 2011). Effect of idiom's internal structure on children's interpretation and acquisition of idioms was investigated in this study. Idioms with different internal structures N+Adj; N+AdjP; N(Infinitive)+N(base); N(derived)+N; V+N(base); V+N+Adj; V+N(Locative); V+N+N(Locative); V+N+Numeral and S(Simple) were presented to children in the sentence context and out of context. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted. When idioms were presented in sentence context in Experiment 1, the one-way between-groups Analysis of Variance (ANOVA Test) with internal structure as independent variable indicated significant difference between the responses on idioms with different internal structures ( $F(9,390) = 2.283, p = .017$ ). This suggests that the internal structure of the idioms affected children's interpretation of the idioms when the idioms were presented in sentence context. Here it can be suggested that the linguistic context in which the idioms were

embedded did not help the children to infer the meanings of the idioms. The one-way between-groups Analysis of Variance (ANOVA Test) with internal structure as independent variable also showed significant difference between the responses on idioms with different internal structures ( $F(9,390) = 4.901, p < .0001$ ) when the idioms were presented out of context in Experiment 2. These findings indicate that the internal structure of the idioms affected how the idioms were interpreted by children. This is consistent with the findings by Crutchley (2007); Leung (2011); Vulchanova, Vulchanov and Stankova (2011).

However, from a formal perspective, this analysis of idioms does not really tell us how children arrived at the interpretations they gave for some of the idioms. For instance, let us consider how children interpreted the following verb phrase idioms with V+N(base) structure (the basic verb phrase structure in Chichewa), *tsina khutu* (pinch the ear = ‘warn’); *tsamira dzanja* (lean on the hand = ‘die’); *taya madzi* (throw away water = ‘urinate’); *khala maso* (seat eyes = ‘be alert’) and *uma mutu* (dry the head ‘be dull’). Among these idioms *tsina khutu*, *tsamira dzanja* and *taya madzi* are all well-formed in as far as grammatical rules are concerned but *khala maso* and *uma mutu* are ill-formed because they violate complement selection rule. Leung (2011) and Vulchanova, Vulchanov and Stankova (2011) observed that idioms with obsolete grammar were difficult for children to process when they involved children in idiom comprehension activities. In this case, one would assume that children would not find it difficult to interpret well-formed idioms in Chichewa and that they would find it difficult to interpret ill-formed idioms. However, the findings of this study indicate that this is not always the case because when the idioms listed above were presented in sentences in Experiment 1 and out of context in Experiment 2, children aged 9 to 14 years were able to provide idiomatic meaning for *uma mutu* and failed to interpret *khala maso* both ill-formed idioms. Children were able to provide idiomatic meanings for *taya madzi* but found it difficult to interpret *tsina khutu* and *tsamira dzanja* which are all well-formed. In this context, it is difficult to predict, basing on the structure of the idioms, which idioms will cause problems to children when interpreting the idioms or which ones will not cause problems. Thus, it can be concluded that it is not only the structure of the idiom that is critical here. For instance, let us consider *tsamira dzanja* a well-formed idiom. This idiom has both literal and figurative meanings but none of the children gave a literal interpretation for this idiom which suggests that children

recognised the idiom as an instance of use that needed to be interpreted in a special context but they lacked knowledge of the context of situation and context of culture within which the idiom was produced. Thus, it can be concluded that the structure of the idiom did not help these children to arrive at the meaning of the idiom. For children to interpret this idiom figuratively, they needed to know how the Chewas bury each other. When one of the Chewas dies, they have the dead body lay sideways in the coffin when burying the person thereby resting on the arm. Children needed this cultural knowledge for them to interpret the idiom appropriately, although the structure of the idiom did not pose problems. It can, therefore, be argued that idioms as texts are acquired together with the socio-cultural context in which they are produced and consumed, and the socio-cultural context forms part of the idioms (Kamanga & Banda, in press). As such, idioms can only be interpreted within the socio-cultural context in which they were produced. If idioms are separated from the socio-cultural context in which they were produced, they could not be interpreted nor acquired.

All the children aged 9 – 14 years and one 6-year old child interpreted the idiom *uma mutu* (dry the head 'be dull') appropriately even though it is ill-formed and lack literal meaning. This shows that the structure of the idiom did not hinder the children from appropriately interpreting the idiom although it is ill-formed. The children were able to recognise the idiom as a meaningful choice. Using the socio-cultural knowledge, the children were able to select the appropriate meaning of the idiomatic expression. These children were also able to appropriately interpret other ill-formed idioms like *kupha phala* (to kill porridge = 'drink beer a lot'), *ona msana wanjira* (see the back of the road = 'go back/return'), *tsala madzi amodzi* (remain one water = 'be about to die/caught') because they were aware of the socio-cultural context within which the idioms are used. But where children failed to interpret ill-formed idioms like *khala maso* (seat eyes = 'be alert'), *kadaunda madzi* (it that piled water together = 'nsima (hard porridge)'), *malo oduka mphepo* (a place where the wind is cut = 'a secluded place'), it can be said that it was not due to the ill-formed structure but the children lacked knowledge of the socio-cultural context within which the idioms are consumed. Similarly, children failed to interpret some well-formed idioms like *tsina khutu* (pinch the ear = 'warn'), *gwiritsa fuwa lamoto* (cause to touch a hot rocky pot stand = 'cheat/fool someone'), *gona pamphepo*

(sleeping where it's cold = 'not married') because of the same reason, lack of socio-cultural knowledge guiding the use of the idioms. The structure of the idioms did not help the children to arrive at the appropriate meaning. Therefore, it can be concluded that children's ability to interpret the idioms does not solely depend on the structure of the idiom, although the structure affects idiom interpretation to some extent, but it is more dependent on children's knowledge of the context of situation and context of culture within which the idioms are produced and consumed.

### ***Syntactic modification of idioms***

Many studies on children's acquisition of idioms have not tested if syntactic modification affects interpretation and acquisition of idioms in children. In this study, this factor was tested in Experiment 3. The responses given by children in this experiment were compared with the responses children gave in Experiment 1 where the idioms were not modified. A paired-sample t-test indicated that there was no statistically significant difference in children's responses on idioms that were not modified ( $M = 3.7667$ ,  $SD = 2.08530$ ) and idioms that were modified ( $M = 3.5083$ ,  $SD = 2.02088$ ),  $t(119) = 1.751$ ,  $p = .083$  (two-tailed). The mean decrease in responses on modification of idioms was .25833 with 95% confidence interval ranging from -.03388 to .55054. The eta square statistic (.025) indicated a small effect size. This shows that children were able to interpret both modified and non-modified idioms equally. For instance, all children aged 9 to 14 years interpreted *taya madzi* (throw away water = 'urinate') figuratively despite the modification. However, all the children failed to interpret *ika kampeni kumphasa* (put a small knife under a mat (made of reed) = 'plot against someone') except one 14-year old child when this idiom was modified and one 12-year old child and one 14-year old child when it was not modified. This suggests that modification did not affect children's interpretation of the idioms. If children are not aware of the socio-cultural context in which the idiom is consumed they will fail to interpret it whether it is modified or not.

### **Implications for Systemic Functional Linguistics**

It seems from the study that idioms are instantiated in particular context of situation whose meaning is embedded in the context of culture, as such, one

needs to access the socio-cultural context within which the idioms are embedded if they are to correctly interpret an idiomatic expression. The socio-cultural context in which idioms are produced forms part of the idioms and the idioms are acquired together with the socio-cultural context in which they were produced (Kamanga & Banda, in press). However, the findings of this study show that children lack knowledge of this socio-cultural context as a result they fail to figuratively interpret idiomatic expressions regardless of their analysability, structure or modification. This indicates that idiom acquisition does not solely depend on the idiom's analysability, structure or modification. Children need to understand the context of situation and the context of culture within which the idioms were produced. Otherwise, idiom learning and interpretation will be impossible as idioms are deeply rooted in a particular culture. Thus the socio-cultural context is central to the interpretation and acquisition of the idioms. Idioms could not be interpreted if a speaker lacks knowledge of the socio-cultural aspects guiding the use of an idiomatic expression. Therefore, it can be argued that "the ability to interpret idioms as textual choices, relate to ability to interpret what in SFL are called register variables of field, tenor and mode" (Kamanga & Banda, in press).

## **Conclusion**

In this study, the results have shown that children's interpretation and acquisition of idioms is not really dependent on analysability and internal structure of the idioms, although these may affect interpretation and acquisition to some extent. The idiom can be analysable or can have a well-formed structure but children can still fail to interpret the idiom if they are not aware of the socio-cultural context within which the idiom is consumed. The results have also shown that idiom modification does not affect children's interpretation of idioms. Children are able to figuratively interpret both modified and non-modified idioms if they are aware of the socio-cultural context in which the idioms are used. It has been argued that the socio-cultural context within which the idioms are produced is central to the interpretation and acquisition of the idioms. The socio-cultural context in which idioms are produced forms part of the idioms and the idioms are acquired together with the socio-cultural context in which they were produced. This, therefore, has implication on the teaching of idioms. When teaching idioms, teachers should explain the socio-cultural

contexts within which idioms were produced and consumed (Kamanga & Banda, in press) so that learners should have background knowledge of the culture of the language in question. Without the socio-cultural context, the learning of idioms could be impossible.

This study focused on factors that influence idiom interpretation and acquisition in native Chichewa speaking children. However, there is need to establish the strategies that these children use to interpret and acquire Chichewa idioms as native speakers. In addition, the study recruited twenty children only, therefore, the results cannot be generalised. Thus, there is need to replicate the study on a larger group of children.

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