Idioms like “kick the bucket” hold a special status in sentence processing. Their meaning cannot be constructed from the meaning of the individual parts. In addition, idioms are both semantically fixed, since single words cannot be exchanged, as in “he punched the bucket” and syntactically fixed, since they cannot undergo all syntactic transformations, as in “the bucket was kicked by him”. (e.g., Gibbs & Gonzales, 1985). In a previous study, we have shown that idioms are not as semantically fixed as previously assumed. Participants recognized the idiomatic meaning, even if single words were exchanged with semantic associations, as in “she always reached for the planets” or “she always grasped at the stars” (Smolka & Dörre, 2012).

The present study examined the syntactic fixedness of ambiguous idiomatic sentences, that is, sentences that hold both a figurative and literal meaning: Are idioms interpreted figuratively, even if they are passivized? In a sentence-completion test, we compared the recognition of active and passivized idiomatic and literal sentences.

To this end, (a) 52 idiomatic sentences were paired with (b) 52 literal control sentences holding the same verb in the last sentence position. Half of the sentences were transitive, the other half ditransitive. In addition, 154 literal filler sentences were used.

(a) Der Redner hat den Rahmen gesprengt/ Der Rahmen wurde vom Redner gesprengt.

Literal: The speaker has blown up the frame / The frame was blown up by the speaker.

Figurative: The speaker went beyond the scope of his time.

(b) Die Bauarbeiter haben die Häuser gesprengt/ Die Häuser wurden von den Bauarbeitern gesprengt.

Literal: The builders have blown up the houses / The houses were blown up by the builders.

31 participants heard the sentences via headphones in either active or passive voice without the verb in the last sentence position. Three possible verbs were presented simultaneously on a screen, one completed the figurative meaning, one a semantically related meaning, and the third an unrelated meaning. Participants had to decide as fast as possible via a push button-box, which of the three presented verbs best completed the sentence.

RT and error data showed easier processing of idiomatic than literal sentences, and of active than passive sentences. The lack of an interaction suggested that idiomatic sentences are recognized even if they are presented in passive voice. Interestingly, ditransitive passive sentences showed fewer errors than transitive passive sentences. This indicates that the passivization of idioms depends on syntactic rather than semantic information and that idioms are not as syntactically fixed as previously assumed. We integrate these findings in a model of idiom processing.
