Take The Red Eye

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Abstract: When confronting multi-word constructions, non-native speakers of English encounter one of the most formidable challenges in language acquisition. Frequently, such constructions do not convey their intended meaning upon initial inspection, leading to natural confusion among learners. The idiom under discussion in this context possesses a figurative interpretation that cannot be deduced solely from the literal meanings of its constituent words. Students tasked with understanding this idiom underwent two distinct stages of comprehension: initially encountering the idiom devoid of context, followed by exposure to it within a brief contextual framework. While it is acknowledged that context plays a significant role in deciphering multi-word constructions, there are instances where context proves less pivotal. However, as elucidated in this article, this is not the scenario with the idiom under consideration.

Keywords: Red, eye, flight, idiom, figurative

The idiom "red eye," denoting an overnight flight arriving at its destination early in the morning, or a very early flight, emerged in American English during the late 1960s. Despite its relatively recent adoption with this specific meaning and the prevalence of American English exposure among learners of English as a second language, it was anticipated that the idiom would present challenges to students, particularly when encountered in a context-free scenario. In an experiment involving 43 students aged 15–17, ranging in English proficiency from A2+ to B1+, the initial phase required students to translate the idiom without additional context. Remarkably, only 5 students refrained from providing any translation. This abstention could stem from two possibilities: either they perceived the idiom as figurative and struggled to grasp its intended meaning, thus opting not to provide a translation, or they were potentially distracted by a quasi-similar figurative expression in Romanian and hence chose not to translate it. The majority of students (29 of them) employed a word-for-word translation approach, yielding translations strictly based on the literal meanings of the constituent words: "red" as "roșu" and "eye" as "ochi." However, 8 translations deviated from the literal meanings, leading to figurative interpretations of the expression. Notably, one student opted for a paraphrase instead of a direct translation, indicating a nuanced understanding of the language. Despite some translations approximating the idiomatic meaning, none of the students succeeded in providing the desired translation. The existence of a comparable figurative expression in Romanian, where red eyes may signify fatigue from a late flight, likely influenced many students to interpret the idiom literally without fully grasping its idiomatic connotation.

RED EYE	**Translation**	**Number of translations**
	Ochi roșu/ochi roșii/ochii roșii – red eye/eyes	**29**
	A anticipa ceva dinainte să se întîmple – to anticipate something before happening	**1**
	To be beaten up	**1**
	Ochii trădătorului – eyes of the traitor	**1**

	Obosit – tired	**3**
	Furie – rage	**1**
	Nervos – angry	**1**
	Oboseala sau a avea ochii tot timpul asupra a ceva – tiresome or be permanently looking at something	**1**
	No answer	**5**
	TOTAL ANSWERS	**43**

As a second stage of the experiment the students were presented the same idiom but this time in a short context which was meant to provide them enough information so as to be able to grasp the idiomatic meaning. Inserting the idiom in a context which provides additional information may prove useful for those who try to understand it or on the contrary may confuse them even more. The key words of the context the idiom was presented in were – *flight, Houston, four in the morning*. The assumption was that having these words would eventually lead the students to the figurative meaning of the expression. The results are presented in the following table.

My original flight was cancelled so I caught the red eye back to Houston and I got in at four in the morning.	**Translation** **Zborul meu inițial a fost anulat așa că am prins zborul de noapte înapoi la Houston și am ajuns la 4 dimineața.**	**Number of translations**
	...am fost nevoit să merg înapoi la Houston și să iau altul la 4 dimineața – I had to go back to Houston and get another at 4 in the morning	**1**
	...am prins o escală la Houston... – I got a layover in Houston	**1**
	...am luat un ultim avion spre Houston... – I took the redeye to Houston	**1**
	...am adormit înapoi către Houston... – I fell asleep back to Houston	**1**
	...am prins la Houston... – I caught in Houston	**2**
	...am prins ochiul înapoi la Houston... – I caught the eye back to Houston	**3**
	...am prins autobuzul înapoi spre Houston... – I caught the bus back to Houston	**1**
	...am prins/luat zborul de noapte înapoi la Houston... – I caught the redeye back to Houston	**3**
	…am prins ochiul roșu înapoi la Houston… - I caught the redeye back to Houston	**3**
	...am prins alt zbor... – I caught another flight	**1**

	He caught another way to get home	**1**
	...am prins avionul înapoi la Houston... – I caught the plane back to Houston	**1**
	... o să caut ruta de întoarcere spre Houston... – I shall look for the way back to Houston	**1**
	... am prins zborul roșu înapoi la Houston... – I caught the red flight back to Houston	**1**
	Tren – train	**1**
	Ochii roșii – red eyes	**1**
	Zborul de urgență (un zbor special pentru oamenii care au pierdut zborul principal) – emergency flight (a special flight for people who missed the main flight)	**1**
	Luck	**1**
	Ochii roșii de la statul treaz – red eyes from being awaken	**1**
	Zbor pe timp de noapte – redeye	**1**
	Zbor urgent – urgent flight	**1**
	Drum – road	**1**
	A merge cu ocazia? Taxi? – To hitchhike? Taxi?	**1**
	I'm thinking of Lucifer	**1**
	No answer	**12**
	TOTAL ANSWERS	**43**

If we take into account that at first exposure to the idiomatic expression only 5 students did not provide a translation and when dealing with it in a contextualized version their number doubled we can infer that the context not only proved unhelpful but also confused them even more. The translations provided by students for this contextualized version of the idiom varied widely in their accuracy comprehension of the idiomatic meaning of the construction.

- "Am fost nevoit să merg înapoi la Houston și să iau altul la 4 dimineața" (I had to go back to Houston and get another at 4 in the morning): The translation missed exactly the part of the context where the idiomatic phrase was and therefore did not grasp the idiomatic meaning.
- "Am prins o escală la Houston" (I got a layover in Houston): This translation missed the intended meaning of the phrase as according to it Houston was not the destination but merely a stop, thus the idiomatic interpretation being also overlooked.
- "Am luat un ultim avion spre Houston" (I took the red eye to Houston): This translation partially captured the figurative meaning, associating the "red eye" with the last chance to fly somewhere, but did not fully grasp the idiomatic sense.
- "Am adormit înapoi către Houston" (I fell asleep back to Houston): This translation reflected an understanding of flights and the potential exhaustion associated with them but did not directly address the idiomatic meaning of the phrase.
- "Am prins la Houston" (I caught in Houston): This translation only focused on the action of catching and the location of Houston, neglecting the idiomatic interpretation.

- “Am prins ochiul înapoi la Houston” (I caught the eye back to Houston): These translations halted at the word “eye”, failing to grasp the figurative meaning of the phrase.
- "Am prins autobuzul înapoi spre Houston" (I caught the bus back to Houston): This translation reflected the student's response to the flight cancellation, offering an alternative mode of transportation but missing the idiomatic sense.
- "Am prins/luat zborul de noapte înapoi la Houston" (I caught the red eye back to Houston): These translations demonstrated an understanding of the idiomatic meaning, accurately capturing the concept of a nighttime flight.
- "Am prins ochiul roșu înapoi la Houston" (I caught the redeye back to Houston): These literal translations failed to capture the figurative meaning of the idiom as their main focus was on the literal meanings of the constituent words of the construction.
- "Am prins alt zbor" (I caught another flight): This translation acknowledged the presence of the idiom but did not specify the type of flight – a late one - missing the idiomatic interpretation.
- "Am prins avionul înapoi la Houston" (I caught the plane back to Houston): This translation only referred to a part of the phrase, lacking clarity on the type of flight, this type of flight being in fact the idiomatic meaning of the construction.
- "O să caut ruta de întoarcere spre Houston" (I shall look for the way back to Houston): This translation extended beyond the immediate context, focusing on finding an alternative route rather than the idiomatic meaning.
- "Am prins zborul roșu înapoi la Houston" (I caught the red flight back to Houston): This interpretation misconstrued the idiomatic sense, attributing the colour "red" to the flight instead of understanding the phrase as a nighttime flight.
- "Tren" (train): This alternative mode of transport was suggested by the student in response to the flight cancellation, overlooking the idiomatic interpretation.
- "Ochii roșii" (red eyes): This literal translation reflected the individual words' meanings without capturing the idiomatic sense.
- "Zborul de urgență" (emergency flight): This interpretation added an element of urgency to the flight, deviating from the idiomatic meaning.
- "Luck" (luck): This response acknowledged the situation's uncertainty as losing one flight and catching another (even if a late one) can easily be percieved as a sign of luck, but did not directly address the idiomatic interpretation
- "Ochii roșii de la statul treaz" (red eyes from being awake): This translation focused on the physical consequences of sleep deprivation rather than the idiomatic meaning. Although having red eyes can be associated with waiting for a late flight the translation did not lead to this.
- "Zbor pe timp de noapte" (red eye): This translation accurately captured the idiomatic meaning of the phrase
- "A merge cu ocazia? Taxi?" (To hitchhike? Taxi?): This student provided alternative transportation options but did not address the idiomatic interpretation although it can be assumed the student clearly realised the presence of a figurative construction.
- "I’m thinking of Lucifer" (I'm thinking of Lucifer): This response referenced a TV character with red eyes, demonstrating a connection to the concept of red eyes but failing to capture the idiomatic meaning of the phrase

The transition from a context – free environment to one with contextual cues significantly influenced the students' ability to grasp the idiomatic meaning of the phrase. While many initially relied on a word-for-word translation technique based on the literal meanings of the words, the introduction of contextual clues prompted a shift in perspective for some of them.

Keywords such as "flight", "Houston", and "four in the morning" served as important prompts that enabled students to move away from a strictly literal translation approach and consider a potential figurative interpretation. This shift allowed them to better understand the idiomatic meaning of the phrase and offer more accurate translations.

The importance of context in understanding idiomatic expressions cannot be overstated. Clear and relevant contextual cues provide valuable cues that help learners move beyond the literal meanings of individual words and grasp the intended figurative meaning of the expression as a whole. This experiment highlights the role of context in facilitating language comprehension and the acquisition of idiomatic expressions.

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