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Cutting classes without scissors: conceptual primitives as a cognitive mechanism for idiom processing

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Abstract: What does it tell us about the conceptual structures underlying language use that a language can use "prick the law" but not "sing the law" to mean "break the law"? Some theorists have speculated about the existence of conceptual primitives, which permeate the meaning of all words in any language (Schank, 1975, Mandler, 2004). If this premise is correct, then these concepts could also be used to decode metaphorical or idiomatic speech. The present research investigates whether people use the same concepts behind the literal verb meaning to infer the meaning of an idiomatic one. We investigated native-English speakers' understanding of idioms in an unfamiliar language, i.e. Brazilian-Portuguese, and their understanding of fabricated idiomatic expressions that use words whose likely primitives conflict with the meaning of the idiom (e.g., "sing the law" to mean "break the law"). Results of this study reveal new insights for the theory of conceptual primitives.