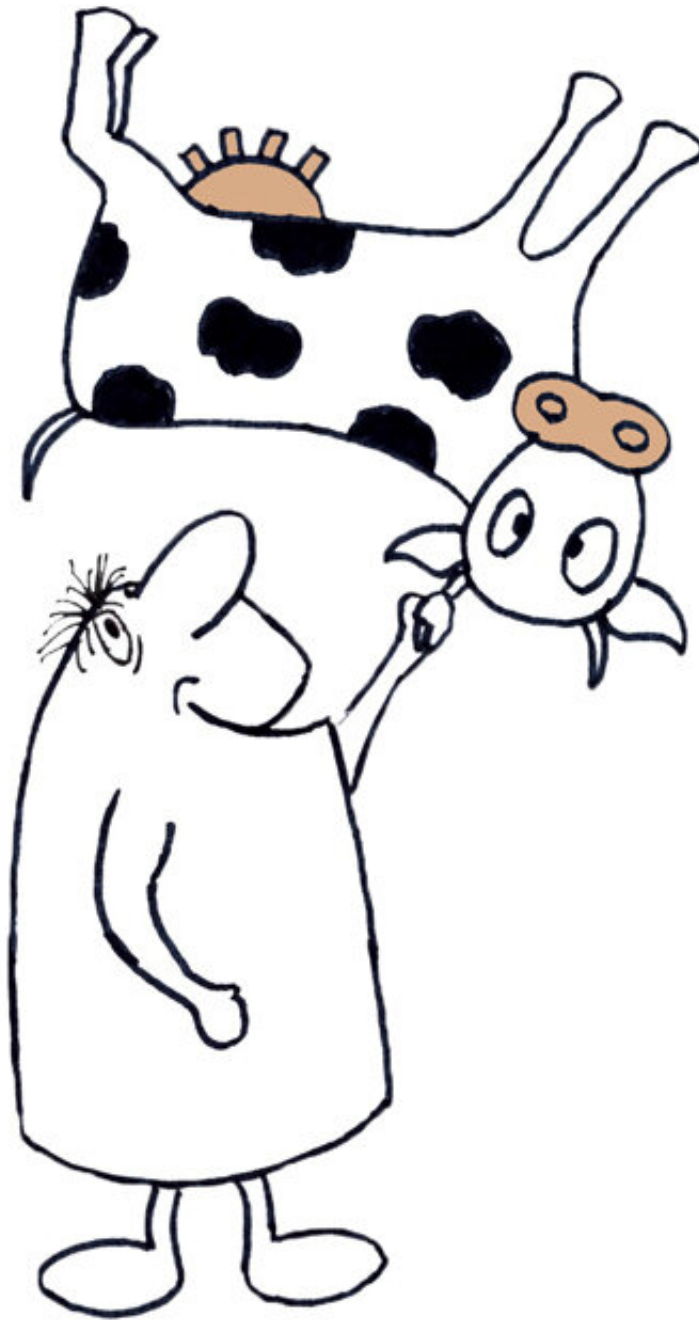


More attention to idioms helps second-language learners

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The Dutch expression 'To grasp the cow at the horns'. Credit: Kasper Boon

Idiomatic expressions like "kick the bucket" or "send someone packing" constitute a special element of a language, and one that is difficult to learn. This is because the meanings of these idioms cannot be derived directly from the meanings of the separate words. On 28 January, the linguist Ferdy Hubers of Radboud University will defend his doctoral dissertation on the process by which such idioms are internalized by people acquiring a second language.

"It is truly one of the most difficult things to "get the hang of," and native speakers use these idioms "at the drop of a hat." They are everywhere; I used two in my last sentence," remarks Hubers.

It can be learned

In his research, Hubers demonstrates that, given enough focused practice (e.g. using a computer program), language learners are indeed capable of learning these difficult-to-master idioms.

His investigation started by identifying the idioms that are known to native Dutch speakers by presenting them with 375 Dutch idioms. He then tested some of the idioms on German students who were learning Dutch. "We wanted to know whether they could be brought up to the same level as native Dutch people and, if so, to identify the best way to do this."

Difference in experience

In his research, Hubers focuses on Dutch. As he explains, however, "The results can be interpreted very broadly. In theory, it works the same way in most other languages." The differences that can be observed between [native speakers](#) and [language learners](#) are thus more a result of differences in experience than of differences in the underlying

mechanisms, as is sometimes thought.

The research also provides [important information](#) for the field of education. Because there is usually not much time available for learning idioms, computer-supported language education could be very useful in this regard. He continues, "We also now know which different types of idiomatic expressions are more difficult to learn and require more attention when teaching a language."

Provided by Radboud University

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