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## Academic Idioms Through the Lens of Visual Ekphrasis

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### Abstract

Abstract and opaque academic idioms such as “shed light on”, “rule out” and “arrive at a conclusion” are needed in formal research writing but are difficult to memorise through rote learning. Therefore, the aims of our research are the theoretical justification and the practical implementation of a linguo-visual database for academic idioms by using the principle of visual ekphrasis (restoration of the literal physical image behind figurative language).

The hypothesis is that visual ekphrasis (the Bruegelian principle of total literalisation) creates visual “anchors” that improve long-term retention. The theoretical framework combines conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson) that accounts for the origin of abstract idioms in bodily experience and dual-coding theory (Paivio) that illustrates how processing information through verbal and imagery subsystems results in stronger memory traces.

Using Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s painting “Netherlandish Proverbs” (1559) as a prototype visual database, we selected 30 high-frequency academic idioms from Miller’s list, grouped them in five functional categories (classification, generalisation, negation, comparison, conclusion) and designed a large interactive visual scene – part Renaissance, part industrial – where each idiom is shown literally. The poster was made interactive with ThingLink, so users could hover and see the idiom, its meaning and sample sentence.

Key findings: literal visual anchors reduce cognitive load; the absurd, exaggerated picture (e.g. a giant stamp sealing a document for “arrive at a conclusion”) becomes a mnemonic bridge between abstract language and concrete memory. The result is a functional interactive tool called “The Idiomatic Engine” that demonstrates how classical art and modern digital tools can work together to improve idiom

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acquisition. Next steps include testing of retention rates against traditional rote learning.

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