

The role of orthography in the L2 processing of complex words: An overt priming study.

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Several masked priming experiments have investigated native (L1) and non-native (L2) processing of complex words. While studies on L1 have consistently shown priming effects for morphologically related, but not for orthographically related pairs (for a review, see Amenta & Crepaldi 2012), those on L2 have found effects for both (Heyer & Clahsen 2015). This suggests that while masked morphological priming effects in L1 are genuinely morphological, effects in L2 might be orthographically mediated.

The present study investigated whether the orthographic effects found in L2 are specific to the early, pre-lexical processing stage addressed by masked priming. 40 native and 48 non-native speakers of German participated in an overt priming experiment (SOA: 200ms), which included morphologically (Störung-STÖREN 'disturbance-DISTURB') and orthographically related (Wache-WACHSEN 'guard-GROW') pairs, plus a semantic control set (Wolke-HIMMEL 'cloud-SKY').

In the morphological set, both L1 and L2 speakers showed significant priming effects. In contrast, only the L2 group showed significant priming effects in the orthographic set. Analyses with linear-mixed effects models revealed a significant interaction between group (L1/L2) and prime type (related/unrelated) in the orthographic set, while no interaction between group and prime type was found in the morphological set. In line with the 200ms SOA, both groups additionally showed semantic priming effects.

Our findings suggest that, unlike native speakers, non-native speakers rely on low-level orthographic cues during the processing of complex words, in both the earlier and the later stages of visual word recognition (masked and overt priming). As a result, morphological priming effects in L2 speakers are not genuinely morphological, but instead driven by orthographic similarity between prime and target.

Amenta, S., & Crepaldi, D. (2012). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 3, 232.

Heyer, V., & Clahsen, H. (2015). *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 18(03), 543-550.

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