

How do we decompose foreign words? Comparing masked priming effects in visual word recognition in a native and non-native language.

Saturday, June 24, 2017 10:50 AM (1h 55m)

Research suggests that letter strings are analysed in terms of their constituent morphemes early on during visual word identification, independently of their semantics—the brain sees DEAL and ER in DEALER, but also CORN and ER in CORNER (e.g. Rastle et al., 2004). Results are less clear as to whether non-native speakers carry out the same processing in the recognition of a foreign word (e.g., Heyer & Clahsen, 2015; Diependaele et al., 2011). This study takes up this issue by involving L1 Italian-L2 English speakers in a masked priming task where morphologically transparent, e.g. employer-EMPLOY, morphologically opaque, e.g. corner-CORN, and non-morphological pairs, e.g. brothel-BROTH, are contrasted. Participants took up the task in both their L1 and L2; and, critically, they underwent a thorough testing of their lexical, morphological, phonological, spelling and semantic proficiency in their second language.

Overall, results suggest markedly different priming between L1 and L2. L1 items with a transparent and opaque relationship showed significant priming, compared to the orthographic baseline. However, L2 items with an opaque relationship were indistinguishable from the orthographic baseline. This general pattern, however, is critically qualified by proficiency in L2—low scores were associated with similar priming in the three conditions, whereas highly proficient participants showed substantially more facilitation with transparent pairs than with either opaque or orthographic items. Despite we used a wide array of different proficiency tests, none of them seems particularly more important than the others, i.e., a general proficiency score explains individual variability with parsimony and effectiveness.

Diependaele et al. (2011). *Journal of Memory and Language*, 64, 344-358.

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

Rastle et al. (2004). *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 11, 1090-1098.

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Session Classification: Poster 2 (with coffee)

Track Classification: Freely Contributed Paper