

Processing zero-derived and non-derived Forms in L1 and L2 English

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The process whereby a verb is derived from a noun (e.g., brush) or a noun is derived from a verb (e.g., taste) is called zero-derivation. Some theorists argue that this covert conversion results in greater degree of morphological complexity compared with non-derived forms (Marchand, 1969). Others assert that neither verbs nor nouns are derived from each other and that there is a semantic relationship between the two forms rather than a morphological one (Farrell, 2001). Recent studies have shown that processing zero-derived forms may involve more processing load compared with non-derived complex forms and monomorphemic words (Pliatsikas et al., 2014).

The present study aimed to investigate whether this internal morphological operation of zero-derivation will result in differential processing patterns between zero-derived and non-derived nouns in L1 and L2 English. To this end, a masked priming task (SOA=50 ms) was administered to 32 L1-English and 35 L2-English participants with advanced proficiency. The zero-derived and non-derived noun targets matched in terms of mean frequency and word-length were preceded by identical forms (dream-DREAM; week-WEEK), identical forms with -s affix (dreams-DREAM; weeks-WEEK) or semantically and orthographically unrelated words (south-DREAM; plate-WEEK). The results of the linear mixed-effects analyses revealed similar processing patterns for the two word groups, i.e., derived forms and non-derived nouns in both participant groups. There was no difference in reaction times to the two forms. Both word forms were primed by their morphologically related inflected forms, which is indicative of decomposition. The findings challenge earlier research which reported a higher processing load in lexical decision to zero derived forms and also show evidence for comparable morphological processing routes, i.e., decomposition, in L1 and L2 speakers of English.

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