Word-formation, cognition and the organization of the mental lexicon

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What is this research about?
We investigate word-formation, i.e. the way people form words in different languages as well as the cognitive principles behind word-formation. We try to answer questions such as, e.g. Why is it lead-er-ship and not ‘lead-ship-er’? In other words, we research the way affixes, or suffixes (pieces of words such as -er and -ship), order when words are formed. Intriguingly, there are restrictions on affix ordering in all languages in the world (Manova 2015). As typical of Cognitive Linguistics, our research is usage-based and large body of data such as electronic corpora and dictionaries as well as psycholinguistic experiments inform our theoretical claims.

Hypotheses
H1: If SUFF1 tends to combine with only one SUFF2 of a major lexical category (N, A, V), SUFF1-SUFF2 combinations are unique pieces of structure and speakers should know them by heart.
H2: If speakers know suffix combinations by heart, existing combinations should be recognized with higher accuracy than non-existing ones.

A psycholinguistic experiment

TASK: Decide as quickly and as accurately as possible if a suffix combination exists.

PARTICIPANTS: 64 native speakers of Polish, non-linguists; mean age 23; no history of developmental dyslexia or other reading disabilities.

STIMULI: 60 items, 2 lists each with the combinations of the other in reverse order, i.e. each participant saw all combinations.

• 30 existing suffix combinations from Polish, e.g. -arnia as in kawiarnia ‘café’
• 30 non-existing combinations created by changing the order of legal ones or by manipulating letters, e.g. form the existing -arnia to -nilar.

TIME FOR DECISION: 10 min max. per suffix combination

Results and discussion

Q: If suffix combinations are represented in the mental lexicon, why is the accuracy of the existing combinations not (close to)100%?
• The accuracy of existing unproductive and infrequent combinations, e.g. -ac2-ostwo as in smark-ac2-ostwo ‘bratness’, is low.

(1) Suffix combinations are most probably stored in the mental lexicon

References


Financial support: