

Déjà-vu? Impact of the L1 on processing complex verbs in L2 French

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Background: Word structure has been shown to influence lexical processing, specifically by facilitating word retrieval [1–3]. The degree to which this facilitation effect of morphological structure is observed is not identical across all languages, and differs depending on factors such as orthographic depth, semantic transparency and overall morphological richness of a given language. For languages such as English or French, for instance, which are considered to have opaque orthographies, the sensitivity to morphological structure has been reported to be lower than for languages such as German or Italian, which have more transparent orthographies (cf., e.g., [4]). Similarly, morphological priming effects have been reported as strong in German but weaker in French [3, 5], potentially reflecting morphological richness. A question that arises from these results in L1 processing is how morphological processing is affected in bi- or multilingual speakers, when their languages differ in orthographic depth and morphological richness.

Method: The present study explores this question with regard to visual processing of complex verbs by testing speakers with L1 German and L2 French. For the purpose of this study, a primed lexical decision experiment was constructed and administered to 40 Austrian students studying French at university. In the experiment the effect of prior presentation of prefixed verbs (e.g. *comporter* ‘to behave’) to base verbs (e.g. *porter* ‘to carry’) on decision latencies of the base verbs was measured. The study design took into account the semantic and morpho-orthographic relationship between the base-verb and the derivate, as well as frequency, morphological family size and orthographic neighborhood density. The experiment was set up to determine whether speakers decompose the prefixed verbs and to what extent this is facilitated by the morpho-semantic structure of the verbs. The results of the study were analyzed and compared to those of a group of French university students who were all L1 speakers of French.

Results: The results show that while both French L1 and L2 speakers are overall sensitive to the morpho-semantic structure of the complex verbs, the facilitation effects for morphologically related items are significantly stronger for the L2 group. These results suggest that German L1 speakers transfer their sensitivity for morphological structure to their L2 French. The aim of the presentation is to discuss the repercussions of these differences and their implications for models of bilingual language processing.

References

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