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ERP studies of visual and auditory processing of negated sentences

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Previous research shows that negation is ignored in initial processing and the event-related potential (ERP) component N400 is insensitive to negation in the presence of semantic priming effects [2-3, 5]. But other evidence has shown that negation can be readily integrated and incongruities in negated sentences can elicit an N400 [6]. Most of this research has focused on negated forms such as not, no or any while little is known about prefixally negated words (e.g. unauthorized, unintentional) despite their high frequency of occurrence in language use [7].

**Aim and research questions**

- Two ERP experiments in visual and auditory modalities to investigate affirmatives (authorized), prefixal negation (unauthorized) and sentential negation (not authorized) in sentential contexts such as example 1:

  1) The White House announced that the new Obama biography was authorized/unauthorized/not authorized and the details in the book were correct/wrong in fact.

- ERPs time-locked to the critical word (underlined), the congruency of which was determined by the adjective (bold) in the first part of the sentence. We asked the following questions:

  **Visual study:**
  - Is there a delay in the integration of negated meanings?
  - Is prefixal negation processed similar to the negated form or the affirmative form?

  **Auditory study:**
  - Is auditory presentation of sentences more natural and easier than visual processing?

**Method**

**Material**
- 3 pseudo-randomized lists each including 108 (visual) and 102 (auditory) items

**Participants**
- 26 English native speakers (18 F, mean age=29.9)

**Procedure**
- Counter-balanced, 9 and 11 ms before the adjective and critical words

**Presentation**

- Counter-balanced, 9 and 11 ms before the adjective and critical words
- 32 English native speakers (21 F, mean age=24.8)

**Open questions**
- Prefixal negation more difficult than sentential negation. Why? Unnatural use?
- Early positivity for prefixal negation in auditory study?
- Positive effects in negated sentences in auditory study, P600?
- ERP effects in auditory studies later than those in visual study, unlike previous research?
- Pre-N400 negativity in auditory study (affirmatives), an N250 [1,4,7]

**Results**

**Visual**
- **Affirmative**
  - The White House announced that the new Obama biography was *correct/wrong* in actual fact
  - ERP effects at about prefixally negated words (e.g. semantic priming effects [2,3,5]). But other evidence has shown that negation can be readily integrated and incongruities in negated sentences can elicit an N400 [6]. Most of this research has focused on negated forms such as not, no or any while little is known about prefixally negated words (e.g. unauthorized, unintentional) despite their high frequency of occurrence in language use [7].

**Auditory**
- **Prefixal negation**
  - The White House announced that the new Obama biography was *correct/wrong* in actual fact

**Conclusions**

- Negated sentences were not ignored in early processing [unlike 2-3, 5], nor were they processed the same way as affirmative sentences [unlike 6].
- We found evidence for a more nuanced processing of negation suggesting that incongruities in negated sentences involved different processing mechanisms than those in affirmative sentences.
- Prefixal negation was the most difficult form to process in both studies, hence was not likely to be processed the same way as affirmative forms.
- Auditory processing of negated sentences was easier (clearer ERP effects) than word-by-word visual processing.

**Summary of findings**

- **Affirmative**: N400-P600: successful detection of incongruities (N400) followed by re-evaluation of content to repair meaning (P600)
- **Sentential negation**: no N400, but a negativity with a longer latency than the typical N400: negation not entirely ignored in processing but negated meaning not fully present in memory either.
- **Prefixal negation**: sustained anterior negativity: negated meaning needed to be retrieved from working memory, which was taxing

**References**


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