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The processing cost of negation in sentence comprehension: Evidence from eye movements

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Introduction

Previous research on negation supports the view that negation involves a processing cost. A good number of studies suggest that any kind of negation adds a processing cost to comprehension. Some even showed that words with negative semantics such as fire, a small proportion and forget also take longer to process than affirmatives (Clark, 1969; Just & Carpenter, 1971). Other studies have presented contrasting results as to whether or not morphological negation adds a processing cost to comprehension (Sherman, 1973, 1976; Hoosain, 1973).

Sherman (1973) is, in his first study that found negative prefixes are more difficult to process compared to non-negated forms, but that they are not as difficult as negated forms with not. However, in another study (Sherman, 1976), he did not find any cost associated with negative prefixes on their own, but increased processing times were found when these prefixed forms were in the presence of one or two other negatives (multiply negated statements). Hoosain (1976) also tested prefixed negation in his experiment and did not find any significant differences between negatively-prefixed forms and their base forms.

In this study, three forms of negation namely, SENTENTIAL NEGATION (not), PREFFIXAL NEGATION (un) and DOUBLE NEGATION (not un) were compared to the so-called BASE form (with no negation). Comprehension of these negated forms was tested through reading a congruent or incongruent subsequent context while participants’ eye movements were recorded. See the example below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negation conditions</th>
<th>Contextual manipulations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If the evidence shows that the fire in the school was intentional/ not intentional/ not unintentional</td>
<td>the jury will find guilty/ innocent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research questions

1. Does negation add a cost to the integration of negated information?
2. To what extent do sentential negation, prefixed negation and double negation differ in their contribution towards increased processing difficulty reflected in the eye movements of participants?

Design & Materials

- 4 × 2 full factorial, within-subject
- Negation (base, un, not, un not) × consistency (agreement, incongruency)
- 20 antonym pairs extracted from COCA
- Bounded adjectives were used in the construction of the stimuli in order to minimize differences in meaning interpretations across the four conditions
- 3 ranges of frequencies: base > prefixed, base < prefixed and base ~ prefixed
- Examples: authorized-unauthorized, employed-unemployed, paid-unpaid

Procedure

- 25 native speakers of English (16 females, mean age of 27.4, range 21-42)
- 200 trials: 160 experimental + 40 fillers
- 45-50 minute task
- Sentences accompanied by comprehension questions
- Apparatus: EyeLink 1000

Results

- Area of interest and measures: Total dwell time
- Negated adjective: Total dwell time, first-pass reading time, second-pass reading time, regression-in
- Residual reading times were calculated and used in order to account for frequency and length differences
- Linear mixed-effects model (R software)

Conclusion

- This study provides further support for the processing cost of negation
- Unlike Sherman (1976) and Hoosain (1973), the results of this study suggest that there is a processing cost associated with negatively-prefixed adjectives compared to their base forms, but that these prefixed forms are not as difficult as negated forms with not.
- Double negation proved to be the most difficult and problematic form of negation.

References