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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 not, a small proportion and few 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), in his first study found that 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 sentences). 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 (negator), PREFIXAL NEGATION (an) and DOUBLE NEGATION (not an) 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</td>
<td>the jury will find guilty in court.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not intentional</td>
<td>not intentional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not</td>
<td>not</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sherman (1976) used different base forms as contextually manipulated words, with different levels of difficulty, in order to test the hypothesis that negation has a processing cost. His results showed that the addition of negation to the base form increases the total dwell time on the negated word. However, his results are not as clear as the results of previous studies, and the effect of negation on eye movements is still not well understood.

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?

Procedure

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

Results

1. Total dwell time on the contextually manipulated word

   ![](image1)

2. Probability of regressions back to the negated adjectives

   ![](image2)

3. Residual first-pass reading times on the negated adjectives

   ![](image3)

4. Residual second pass reading times on the negated adjectives

   ![](image4)

5. Residual Total dwell times on the negated adjectives

   ![](image5)

Discussion

A higher number of regressions back to the negated adjectives, and increased processing time found in first-pass, second-pass and total reading times for these forms (base, not and not an) suggests that participants had difficulty with processing the negated forms and needed to go back and reread and reprocess the meanings of these forms.

No differences were found in the total dwell time on the manipulated words for negation or consistency. This could suggest a good-enough approach to the comprehension of the sentences in which incongruities did not disrupt the eye movements. However, this result is merely tentative as there is no behavioral data available to support it.

Conclusions

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 the 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.

Analysis

- Areas of interest and measures:
  Contextually manipulated word: 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)

References


