PERFORMANCE MEASURES OF LEXICAL COMPLEXITY
(ABSTRACT)

Anne Cutler

Psycholinguistic studies of the representation of complex items in the mental lexicon have frequently measured simple word recognition time under the assumption that if lexical decomposition is required for the recognition of complex words, then the recognition of complex words will take measurably longer. It is here argued that this assumption is false, and that the consistent failure to find effects of lexical complexity on reaction time in word recognition studies is a reflection not of unanalysed lexical representation of complex words, but of the inappropriateness of the experimental methodology. Application of reaction time methodology to variables other than simple word recognition time, on the other hand, can be shown to provide strong evidence that the lexical representation of complex items is *not* unanalysed.

This argument holds for a large and heterogeneous class of lexical items which can be said to be in one way or another complex. (1) Homophony. Previous results claiming that recognition of homophones was delayed by an amount of time used for choosing the contextually appropriate reading have been shown to be artefactual; nevertheless, the recognition of homophones appears to involve activation of all, rather than only contextually opposite readings. (2) Implicit negation. The recognition of implicit negatives can be shown to involve a component representing negation, although implicit negatives take no longer to recognise than matched controls. (3) Factivity. Again, factives take no longer to recognise than non-factives, but their representation can be shown to include a factive component. (4) Syntactic complexity. Multi-word strings, such as idioms, can be shown to have unitary lexical representations, accessed as easily as words, but componential in nature. (5) Morphological complexity. Prefixed and suffixed words have lexical representations in which base and affixes are separated, but they take no longer to recognise than non-complex words.

These types of lexical complexity are highly disparate, yet the performance evidence indicates a remarkably consistent picture: the representations of complex items are themselves complex, but complex representations take no longer to access from the mental lexicon than simple representations. A model of the lexicon which involves multiple access routes is proposed to resolve this complex issue.