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2019

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):

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ERP studies of visual and auditory processing of negated sentences

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Introduction

Previous research shows that negation is ignored in initial processing and the event-related potential (ERP) component N400 is sensitive 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. unauthorised, unintentional) despite their high frequency of occurrence in language use [7].

Aim and research questions

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 actual fact

2. 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?

Summary of findings

**Visual:**

- **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 meaning not fully present in memory either
- **Prefixal negation:** sustained anterior negativity: negated meaning needed to be retrieved from working memory, which was taxing

**Auditory:**

- **Affirmative:** N400-P600
- **Sentential negation:** no N400 but a P600: re-evaluation of content
- **Prefixal negation:** late positivity (P600): re-evaluation of content

Conclusions

- Negated sentences were not ignored in early processing [ unlike 2-3, 5], nor were they processed the same way as affirmative sentences [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.

Results

**Visual:**

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

**Auditory:**

- The White House announced that the new Obama biography was unauthorized and the details in the book were correct/wrong in actual fact

Material

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

Presentation

**Visual:**

- Counter-balanced, 9 and 11 ms before the adjectives and critical words

**Auditory:**

- Counter-balanced, 9 and 11 ms before the adjectives and critical words

Participants

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

Procedure

**Visual:**

- Fixation cross (depicted upon button press)

**Auditory:**

- Fixation cross (depicted upon button press)

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]

Method

**EEG recording and processing**

- Offline referenced to average of both mastoids
- Filters of 0.01 and 40 Hz
- ICA for removing eye artifacts
- Epochs of 1000 ms (plus 100 ms baseline)

**Analysis**

- Time-windows for detecting N400, P600, and a late effect [5]:
  - Visual: 300-400, 400-500, 500-700, 800-1000 ms
  - Auditory: 200-400, 600-800, 800-1000 ms
- Amplitudes for congruent and incongruent conditions analyzed for each negation type and each time-window separately
- Mixed-effects modeling, multiple models of various complexity compared, model with lowest AIC reported

References


Presented at the XIV International Symposium of Psycholinguistics in Torrevieja, Spain, on 11, April 2019.