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Cognate processing by bilingual and trilingual speakers – evidence from a sentence reading task

Past research has shown that cognates (words sharing form and meaning across languages) are recognized faster than language-unique control words (*the cognate facilitation effect*). This effect has been repeatedly observed in numerous studies conducted with bilingual speakers (e.g. Comesaña et al., 2015; Dijkstra, Miwa, Brummelhuis, Sappelli, & Baayen, 2010; Duyck, Van Assche, & Hartsuiker, 2007; Libben & Titone, 2009; Poort & Rodd, 2017; Van Assche, Drieghe, Duyck, Welvaert, & Hartsuiker, 2011) and it has been found to be modulated by a number of factors such as the task at hand, the level of cross-language similarity (identical vs. non-identical ones) or stimulus list composition. In turn, evidence obtained from multilingual speakers has indicated that cognate facilitation in L3 is not only affected by the task at hand or the level of cross-language similarity but also by the number of languages sharing a given cognate i.e. triple cognates induced stronger facilitation than double ones (Lemhöfer, Dijkstra, & Michel, 2004; Lijewska & Chmiel, 2015; Szubko-Sitarek, 2014). The aim of the present study was to test the influence of yet another factor on cognate processing – the type of languages sharing a given cognate (L1, L2 or L3). To that end, 38 German-English bilinguals and 40 Polish-German-English trilinguals were asked to read English sentences containing two types of double cognates - German-English cognates (e.g. *APPLE-APFEL*) and Polish-English cognates (e.g. *AKTOR-ACTOR*) as well as matched non-cognate controls (e.g. *PLANE*). While the two groups of participants performed the task, their eye movements were monitored. Preliminary results obtained from the bilingual group indicated that German-English cognates induced cognate facilitation both in early and in late reading measures. Somewhat similarly, the data obtained from the trilingual group showed that Polish-English cognates were read faster than control words early on during reading (as indicated by first fixation durations) as well as during the later stages of reading (as shown by total reading time). However, unlike bilinguals, trilinguals read German-English cognates more slowly than controls (leading to cognate inhibition) but this was only observed in late reading measures. These results will be discussed in the broader context of models of language processing in bilingual and multilingual speakers.

356 words

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