The status of written language in heritage language processing

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More than half of the Korean lexicon comprises words of Chinese origin, or Sino-Korean. Unlike native-Korean words, which can only be written using the Korean alphabet, Hangul, Sino-Korean word can be written using two different scripts. In addition to its written form in Hangul, Sino-Korean can also be written using Hanja (Chinese characters borrowed into Korean). It is also important to note that Hangul is the dominant script of the two, and that Hanja maintains relatively low visibility in written Korean. This presents a complex asymmetry between the visual orthographic representation of words in print (Hangul) and the orthographic information that is potentially encoded as part of the lexical information stored in the mental lexicon (both Hanja and Hangul). The interplay between the dominance of Sino-Korean in the lexicon, and Hangul in written Korean raises interesting questions regarding the extent to which the Sino-Korean stratum in the mental lexicon is represented independently of the presence or knowledge of Hanja. Previous studies indicate native speakers' ability to intuit whether a Korean word is Sino-Korean or not, and suggest that native speakers actively rely on the contributions of Hanja during Sino-Korean processing. However, it remains unclear whether near-native speakers of Korean demonstrate similar processing patterns. Specifically, to what extent are heritage learners of Korean sensitive to the contributions of Hanja during processing? The unique complexities of the relationship between the two scripts and the lexicon itself poses an important opportunity to engage heritage learners or speakers of Korean who demonstrate differential abilities in both written and spoken Korean. As an understudied community of speakers, they demonstrate a nuanced language background, the effects of which are also likely to be observed during processing. Through lexical decision, we investigate the status of Hanja in the mental lexicon of heritage speakers of Korean. Crucially, successful parsing of the target stimuli necessarily requires some knowledge of the appropriate Hanja, whether orthographically or conceptually. These findings are discussed in relation to the possibility that the mental representations of Sino-Korean potentially abstract away from the orthographic representation of Hanja while preserving its semanto-conceptual dimension. These results are also discussed within the context of the structure of the Korean mental lexicon and the ways in which differences in the encoded lexical information between native and heritage speakers are reflected. Most importantly, these results challenge existing proposals of the structure of the Korean mental lexicon, which assume a supra-lexical approach in which morphemic constituents are only accessible by way of activation of the entire word. The present study on heritage learners offers further insights into whether the contributions of Hanja at the morphemic level are accessible before or after full word activation, inviting further discussion of the role of morpho-orthographic representations during processing.