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Authors

Budnick, Ryan
Wang, Felix

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Iambic Bias in Parsing Syllable Sequences by English Speakers

Ryan Budnick

Felix Wang

Abstract

A majority of English words have initial stress, either by type or by token (Cutler & Carter, 1987). However, the stress pattern of a particular English word depends on its phonological structure; if the second syllable contain a diphthong or tense vowel, the word is regularly iambic (Halle & Vergnaud, 1987; Guion, Clark, Harada, & Wayland, 2003). Here, we provide experimental evidence demonstrating that this phonological pattern is used by adult English listeners processing a sequence of nonce syllable sequences. In Experiment 1, we find that English speakers have an iambic preference parsing a syllable sequence with all heavy syllables. In Experiment 2, we find that processing stress produces an entrainment effect where the rhythm created by the stress pattern will carry on into linguistic material without such cues. Together, these results suggest that English speakers make use of further abstract knowledge of English phonology in finding word boundaries.