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Single words aren't processed in isolation: Effects of associate meanings on lexical and semantic processing

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Abstract

In many lexical and semantic tasks single word stimuli are presented in isolation. It is assumed that responses are a function of the properties of the target word itself, with no contribution from properties of words associated with the target word. Recent research suggests that semantic characteristics of a target word's associate may in fact influence target word responses in a syntactic classification task. The present study examines whether lexical and semantic properties of target word associates are recruited during lexical and semantic decision tasks, and whether the type of associate information recruited varies as a function of task. We found that lexical properties of a word associate are related to accuracy in lexical decision, and that semantic properties of a word associate are related to both response time and accuracy in semantic decision. These findings provide new insight about the way word associates contribute to semantic representation and processing.