Social context trumps superficial similarity in long-term priming
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Previous research has investigated the effect of socio-indexical information on bilingual language processing. Using a short-term (ISI=250ms) cross-language/cross-dialect priming Szakay, Babel & King (to appear) showed that sociophonetic markers can facilitate translation priming during language processing. In the course of speech perception a distinction must be made between the processing of lexical items and their representation in long-term memory. As the short-term priming paradigm can only give us insight into the immediate processing of words, a long-term priming paradigm must be used to investigate the effect of social information on encoded lexical representations (e.g. Sumner & Samuel 2009). The present study demonstrates that shared representations across L1 and L2 are part of social context, and not part of superficial linguistic similarity.

We investigate the effect of social information on bilingual lexical representation in the New Zealand context, where Māori (TR) and English are both official languages. New Zealand English itself comprises two main ethnic dialects: Māori English (ME) and Pākehā English (PE). ME is predominantly spoken by the indigenous Māori population, while PE is mainly spoken by people of European descent. It is generally noted that TR and ME are more likely to be spoken in similar social environments, while PE occupies a different social space in current New Zealand society.

Fifty-four English (L1) {Māori (L2) bilinguals participated in a long-term auditory lexical decision task, where critical prime and target pairs were made up of English-to-Māori and Māori-to-English translation equivalents. Half of the English words were pronounced by a PE speaker, and half by a ME speaker, thus creating four bilingual test conditions: ME-TR, PE-TR, TR-ME, TR-PE. Four English-only repetition priming conditions were also included: PE-PE and ME-ME (within dialect), and PE-ME and ME-PE (cross-dialect). The stimulus was presented in two blocks, where the interval between each prime and target was around 20-30 minutes. Non-related word pairs were used in each condition as control pairs. Reaction times were measured, and priming values were calculated as the difference between reaction times for control and critical pairs.

As predicted, significant priming was obtained in the conditions where the prime and target language varieties are spoken is similar social environments, such as the ME-TR L1-L2 bilingual condition (Wilcoxon rank sum test, W=17865, p<0.001), the PE-PE (W=14821, p<0.01) and ME-ME (W=14834, p<0.01) monolingual conditions. No priming effects were found in the PE-TR bilingual condition, and the cross-dialect PE-ME and ME-PE English conditions, where the two language varieties are spoken in different social environments. The results suggest that long-term representations between social codes are connected, but not between codes that do not share the same social space. That is, Māori English successfully primes Māori and Māori English because the shared social environment unites representations. However, Pākehā English does not prime Māori nor Māori English because these codes are not encoded in the same context of use. Thus, the level of abstraction includes social milieu more than lexical similarity. In conclusion, we argue that shared representations are part of usage and not part of superficial linguistic similarity, such as belonging to the same language.