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# READING WORDS, NUMB3R5 and $YMβOL$

Manuel Carreiras [1,2,*], Jon Andoni Duñabeitia [1], and Manuel Perea[3]

[1] Instituto de Tecnologias Biomédicas, Universidad de La Laguna, Spain

[2] Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience, University College of London, UK

[3] Universitat de València, Spain

* Corresponding author:
Manuel Carreiras
Departamento de Psicología Cognitiva
Universidad de La Laguna
38205-Tenerife (Spain)
phone: +34 922 317515
fax: +34 922 317461
e-mail: mcarreir@ull.es; m.carreiras@fil.ion.ucl.ac.uk
http://www.neurocog.ull.es

Words in alphabetic languages are processed via their constituents (see Pelli, Farell, & Moore, 2003). To recognize a printed word, we need to process the identity and position of its letters, hence distinguishing between *cat* and *fat*, or *dog* and *god*, but not between tABLe and TabLE, or *chair* and **CHAIR**. Recently, Dehaene, et al., (2005) proposed a neuronal model with feed-forward connections only, according to which the brain decodes words through a hierarchy of local combination detectors in the occipito-infero-temporal pathway sensitive to increasingly larger fragments of words. In particular, they tentatively proposed detectors for letter shapes in V4, abstract letter detectors in V8, which represent letters denoting their identities but abstracted from their visual appearance (e.g., CaSe, **font**, size), and detectors for letter strings in the left fusiform gyrus (LFG). Nonetheless, although activation in the LFG appears to be related to the presence of orthographic structure in the input stimuli, it is still unclear how tolerant the LFG is to deviations of letter identities and whether the system is specialized for the recognition of letter strings (see Kronbichler et al., 2004; Price & Devlin, 2003).

Letters, symbols and numbers are usually thought to imply different cortical mechanisms (Polk et al., 2002; Reinke et al., 2007). However, NUM83R5 ΔND $YMβ0L$ C4N B€ U$3D Δ$ L3††3R$ !N 4 $3N7€NC€, ΔND †H3 R3$UL7!NG $3N7€NC€ C4N B€ UND3R$†00D. Thus, the coding of digits and symbols as letters presents an important challenge to determine if the LFG extracts and stores abstract patterns during initial presentation of visual objects, or alternatively, if the LFG is formed by domain-specific neurons involved mainly in letter-word identification during prelexical processing.

A recent study by Perea, Duñabeitia, and Carreiras (in press) using a masked priming paradigm investigated whether words with letter-like symbols and numbers activate their base words The results were clear-cut: Response times to words preceded by a masked prime composed of digits (M4T3R14L-MATERIAL) or symbols (MΔT€R!ΔL-MATERIAL) were very similar to response times to words preceded by an identity prime (MATERIAL-MATERIAL), and all of them were faster than controls (see Box 1). No effects were found with pseudoword targets. Thus, when embedded in words, digits and symbols are encoded in a letter-like manner. This finding suggests that access to whole lexical entries (words) can be achieved somewhat independently of physical form, probably on the basis of some top-down feedback that normalizes the visual input (see Jordan, Thomas, & Scott-Brown, 1999). Information of digits and symbols that resemble letters may not have been accessed. This finding is problematic for the Dehaene et al.'s model –this model posits a hierarchy of detectors with feed-forward connections only, according to which letters are uniquely identified at a very early stage.

Future research should be aimed at clarifying: i) Are the numeric values of the embedded digits and the abstract meanings of the letter-like symbols accessed?; ii) Are the local detectors based on domain-specific neurons, and iii) Under conscious processing, will the reading of letter-like characters be equally effortless?

**TEXT BOX**

The use of numbers as parts of words is called *leet* (or 1337), a visual encryption code that allegedly can be easily read by any human reader (e.g., the digit 3 may look like the letter E), but that would foil most search engines (e.g., strings like l0tt3ry cannot be easily detected). Primes had at least three *leet* digits (e.g., M4T3R14L instead of MATERIAL). The *leet* numbers employed were A=4, E=3, I=1, S=5. In Experiment 1, the prime-target conditions were: i) identity (MATERIAL-MATERIAL), ii) related *leet* (M4T3R14L -MATERIAL), iii) related symbol (MΔT€R!ΔL-MATERIAL) and iv) control letter (MOTURUOL- MATERIAL). The same manipulation was carried out in pseudowords. The three experimental conditions were faster than the control, showing similar priming effects (see Figure 1: Reaction Time for control minus each experimental condition). To avoid physical continuity between primes and targets, primes were presented in 10-pt font and targets in 12-pt font. Experiment 2 included two additional control conditions: control *leet* (M6T2R76L-MATERIAL), and control symbol (M□T%R?□L-MATERIAL). Again, reaction times were similar across the three experimental conditions and were substantially faster than the response times in the control conditions. No effects were found for pseudowords in any of the two experiments.

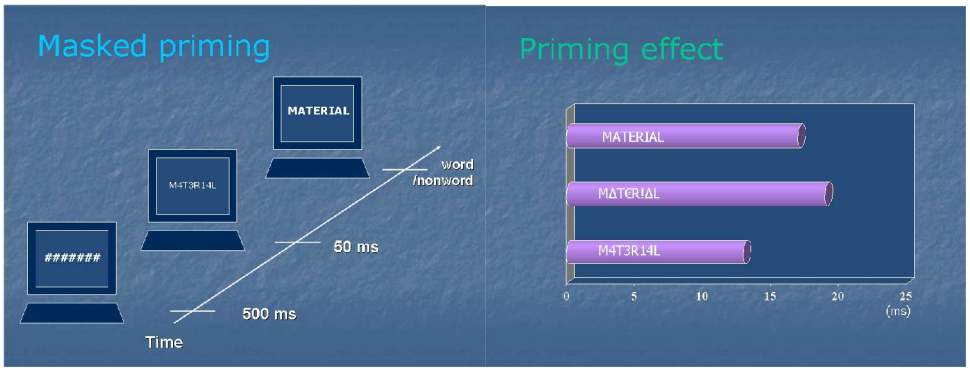


Figure 1: Left panel: Masked priming procedure. Right panel: Net priming effects for the three experimental conditions with respect to the control condition.

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