Chapter 5

Semantic Priming in Monolingual Russian and Bilingual Russian (L1)– English (L2) Speakers in a Single Word Naming Task:
Semantic Priming in Russian

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ABSTRACT

Identifying and exploring factors that influence bilingual language processing has been the topic of much psycholinguistic research. Semantic priming is typically used to examine semantic processing and refers to the phenomenon in which semantically related items (doctor-nurse) are processed faster and more accurately than semantically unrelated items (doctor-butter). The aim of the chapter is to address two key questions: 1) how the two languages of a bilingual are organised or stored and 2) how the two languages are processed. A review of the literature shows that there are currently no theoretical frameworks that explain Russian monolingual or

Russian (L1)-English (L2) bilingual storage or processing. Monolingual Russian speakers and bilingual Russian (L1)-English (L2) speaking university students were asked to name target words under related or unrelated conditions. The results show that the magnitude of the semantic priming effect was determined by L2 proficiency. The implications for these findings is discussed within the current bilingual theoretical models.

BILINGUALISM AND L2 PROFICIENCY

The ability to use spoken language to communicate with one another is a unique, inherent human characteristic that infants acquire without much effort. The additional ability to speak more than one language, i.e. *bilingualism*, because of contact with other communities, immigration and trade has been reported since antique times dating back to the Sumerians (Woods, 2006). In this respect, a widely accepted definition of bilingualism is '*both regular use and communicative competence*' in L1 (first language, native language, mother tongue) and L2 (second language) (Francis, 1999, p. 194). This very human behaviour has attracted much attention from philosophers to physicians throughout history and from psychologists in modern times.

From an evolutionary perspective, bilingualism can be perceived as a complex and a multifaceted process that involves the interaction of cultures, expression of social experience, and history of a particular people as well as the mechanism of interaction of languages (Roberts, 2013). Bilingualism makes contact with others possible, provides socialisation, forms tolerant attitude towards other cultures while it enhances cognitive abilities. At the same time, it is a prerequisite for the formation and perception of ethnic and social identity (Shi, 2007).

One aspect that has preoccupied researchers in the area of bilingual studies is the difficulties faced by a comprehensive classification of bilingualism that accurately defines an individual's skills in different modalities such as literacy and speech, performance and proficiency on the two languages they speak. The most common perception of a bilingual is someone who is almost equally fluent in two languages or at least proficient enough in their L2.

Various classification systems have been offered to explain the variation in fluency, competence, and order of acquisition for bilingual language use. For example, the degree of knowledge of languages has been labelled as either subordinate (when a bilingual speaks one language better than the other) and coordinate (or "pure", when a person speaks two languages in equal measure) (Grosjean, 1997). In addition, bilingualism has been described according to frequency of usage as either active (where both languages are used on a regular basis) and passive (the frequency of the use of one language dominates the other).

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