
Differences in processing strategies between native and heritage speakers of Korean and the role of written language

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This research explores the ways heritage speakers of Korean navigate creative and routine uses of language in written form. Korean is particularly well-suited for such an investigation given the complexities of its multi-scriptal lexicon, which comprises two sub-lexicons, one which includes words of Sino-Korean origin, and the other which consists of native Korean words. Due to the Sinitic origin, Sino-Korean words can be written using both Korean Hangul and borrowed classical Chinese characters called Hanja. Hangul may dominate written Korean, but the influence of Hanja is clearly deeply entrenched in the composition of the lexicon. Thus, although Hanja maintains relatively low visibility in written Korean (relative to Hangul), its influence is undeniable to native and heritage speakers, alike. Hanja is especially important as it enables creative use of language; Sino-Korean has a high frequency of homophones, each with a different meaning, that can combine to form creative compounds. The asymmetry between the visual orthographic representation of words in print (Hangul) and the orthographic information that is potentially encoded as part of the lexical information stored in the mental lexicon (both Hanja and Hangul) presents a dynamic testbed for how creative uses of language is processed in the brain, and how such patterns may differ between native and heritage speakers. Previous studies indicate native speakers' ability to intuit whether a Korean word is Sino-Korean or not, and suggest that native speakers actively rely on the contributions of Hanja during Sino-Korean processing. However, it remains unclear whether heritage speakers of Korean demonstrate similar processing patterns. Specifically, to what extent are heritage learners of Korean sensitive to the contributions of Hanja during processing, and how such sensitivities are reflected in their creative uses of language which is potentially informed by contributions of script. This research invites further questions regarding the types of strategies that are employed by heritage speakers in canonic and non-canonic language use, and the ways in which they may depart from those used by native speakers. Through a study using lexical decision with semanto-orthographic priming, which provides a window into what is activated during processing, preliminary results indicate that heritage speakers are especially sensitive to the effects of Hanja, even outperforming native speakers on the task.

References: • Polinsky, M. (2015). Heritage languages and their speakers: State of the field, challenges, perspectives for future work, and methodologies. *Zeitschrift fuer Fremdsprachwissenschaft* 26, 7-27. • Yi, K. (2003). The effects of word type on word recognition in Korean. *Korean Journal of Cognitive and Biological Psychology* 15, 479-498.