

Bilingual prefabs: Evidence from the predictable code-mixing in Hong Kong Cantonese

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies on the comprehension of code-mixing suggested that it was cognitively demanding (Macnamara & Kushnir, 1971), as the readers/listeners would not know when to prepare for a language switch (Adler, Valdés Kroff, & Novick, 2020) and had to switch back and forth from different language lexicons. However, the code-mixing commonly found in Hong Kong Cantonese does not occur randomly. Some words are produced in a fashion almost like loan-words even though the Cantonese equivalents exist, and therefore people expected to see them expressed in L2 (English) during a L1 (Cantonese) conversation. We hypothesized that the predictable code-mixing in Hong Kong did not require additional cognitive demand in processing because the L2 equivalents were prefabricated into Cantonese (Wang, 1989) and therefore no switching between lexicons was needed.

Thirty-two subjects (16M, 16F, $M_{age} = 21.24$) participated in a two-by-two eye tracking study, with Expectancy (Expected/Unexpected; whether the word was presented in the expected language) and Language-Presented (L1/L2; the language of the stimulus presented in the trial) as the two variables. The mean total fixation duration of the Unexpected conditions ($M = 609$ ms when presented in L1 and 524 ms in L2) was significantly longer than the Expected conditions ($M = 417$ ms in L1 and 458 ms in L2), $F(1, 31) = 15.80$, $p < .001$. No presentation language effect was observed ($F(1, 31) = .34$, $p = .562$). The result was consistent with the assumption that some Cantonese-English expressions were indeed bilingual prefabs and no switching between different language lexicons was needed. It suggested that the two languages of a bilingual might not be distinctively separated into two mental lexicons, instead, words from the two languages might be prefabricated into a bilingual mental lexicon.

References

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