Probing connections between morphologically related words

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It was shown that access to the base word depends on the properties of its derivatives, most notably on the morphological family size (e.g. Moscoso del Prado Martin 2004). Evidently, this effect is due to the fact that derivationally related words are connected in the mental lexicon. We explore the role of different factors in the relative strength of such connections.

In Russian, verbs can be derived from other verbs by prefixation and by suffixation. Prefixed verbs tend to preserve all inflectional properties of the base verb except for its aspect, but their semantics is often only partly predictable. Suffixation always changes the verb’s inflectional class, but allows for a much lesser semantic variability than prefixation. We looked at the suffixes -va- used for secondary imperfectivation and -nu- deriving semelfactives.

To explore whether suffixed or prefixed verbs have a stronger connection to their base verb in the mental lexicon, we conducted a masked priming lexical decision experiment with three conditions: a suffixed prime, a prefixed prime and an orthographically and semantically unrelated prime (control). We found that suffixed primes produced significantly shorter response latencies compared to the control condition than prefixed primes did. Thus, regular and predictable semantic correspondences are more important than shared morphological features (the forms of prefixed and base verbs literally coincide except for the prefix).

We are currently running a follow-up experiment with nonce verb primes having nonce prefixes and nonce suffixes to tease apart a potential role of position in these findings.

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