*WF* and *NF* Interactions in Lexical Access 1

## **Interactions between Word Frequency and Neighborhood Frequency in Lexical Access**

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#### Abstract

In this study, we attempted to determine whether larger *NF* effects occur for low-*WF* words than for high-*WF* words. The experiment employed a lexical-decision task, in which participants were presented with a lists of single items, half of which were words and half were pronounceable nonwords, varied along possible extreme values of high/low *WF* and *NF* for 4- and 5-letter words. The primary theoretical implication of the study is that there is no search process involved in lexical access, rather that lexical access is a selection event based on the level of activation of a lexical entry produced by semantic, orthographic, and phonological information as it is processed pre-perceptually. Some practical implications of the study are a better understanding of dyslexia and ways to improve the reading habits of children.

Interactions between Word Frequency and Neighborhood Frequency in Lexical Access

 There are many different characteristics of words in languages that influence readers' perceptions of those words. Psycholinguists have as a goal to better understand how humans generate, perceive, and process visual and auditory languages. One such area of study involves the process by which people see and understand written languages and what factors influence this perception and comprehension. To analyze these factors, psycholinguists have come up with some terms to help describe and organize them. *N* represents the neighborhood size, which is the number of other words of the same length that differ from the target by one letter; *P* represents the number of letter positions in a word that allow for neighbors; *WF* represents word frequency, which is how often a word is used in written language; and *NF* represents neighborhood frequency, which is the number of neighboring cohort members that have a higher *WF* than the target.

 Past research has shown that letter-pattern familiarity facilitates word processing and it increases with increases in *N*. However, with increases in *P*, identification is inhibited due to cohort resolution in the search for the correct lexical entry for a word (Johnson, Jankowski, Childers, Miller, Gonsman, & Seifert, 2007). During a lexical-decision task, words and even pronounceable nonwords have an initial neighborhood or cohort with a most active member, and cohort resolution is necessary to decide whether the displayed item is a word or nonword (Johnson, et al., 2007). It is well accepted by most current psycholinguists that printed input (words and nonwords), when initially encoded into a psychological format, is represented by separate preconscious encodings of semantic,

orthographic, and phonological information within the perceptual representation system (PRS) (Tulving & Schacter, 1990). That information then activates all of the lexical entries consistent with each of the pieces of information, which results in the activation of a background of lexical clutter (i.e., the cohort members) (Johnson, et al., 2007).

 The activation provided to each lexical entry by each of the three information types is assumed to be relative to the *WF* of that entry, and the total activation of an entry is the combination of *WF* and the number of information types providing activation (Johnson, et al., 2007). Thus, if the target has a low *WF* and there are cohort members in the mental lexicon that have a higher *WF* than the target lexical entry (which is the *NF*) and are semantically related to the target, then those cohort members will initially receive more activation than the target lexical entry, that is, before cohort resolution occurs. The lexical entry for the display (target word) would be the only entry that receives activation from all three information types, so that entry should have an activation level superior to the activation levels of its neighboring cohort members, even if the cohort members have a higher *WF* (Johnson, et al., 2007). Because of this, it is assumed that lexical selection can almost always occur without complete cohort resolution, that is, without completely eliminating the activation levels of nontarget lexical entries (i.e., background cohort members) (Johnson, et al., 2007). The elimination of the nontarget lexical entries occurs such that their activation is withdrawn and they fade away when they become inconsistent with the incoming information types, whereas the target lexical entry becomes more activated. Cohort resolution occurs as each information type comes into play.

The perceptual/memorial encoding that occurs before lexical access has been previously modeled in the Pattern-Unit Model (Johnson 1974) and the Atkinson and Shiffrin Model (1968). Lexical activation and selection events have been previously modeled in the Cohort Model (Johnson, 1992; Johnson & Pugh, 1994) and the E-Z Reader Model (Reichle et al. 1999). This study has elaborated on and provided further evidence for these models, which have been partially summarized thus far.

 The hypothesis tested in this experiment was that larger *NF* effects occur for low-*WF* words than for high-*WF* words. This is due to the fact that low-*WF* words stand out less from their neighboring cohort members, because *WF* plays a role in the level of activation received by each cohort member: activation for a cohort member is higher for higher-*WF* words. In this experiment, we attempted to address the more general question of whether there is a search process involved in lexical access. We also attempted to provide a better understanding of how people perceive and understand words as they read or hear them. Specifically, a goal for the study was a better understanding of how the different factors that influence lexical access interact with each other to yield the complete experience of understanding written language, which is an essential and ubiquitous human experience. The experimental design employed in this study is a  $2x2$ factorial within-subject design, concerning interactions between *WF* and *NF* on reaction time (latency).

#### Method

#### *Participants*

 Seventy-two undergraduate students (men and women) from the introductory psychology classes volunteered to participate in the experiment, as a way to fulfill a research experience requirement. The participants chose to participate in an experiment rather than the alternative of writing a paper for the course.

#### *Materials*

 Four lists of 30 4-letter words that varied on dimensions of *WF* and *NF* (i.e., high *WF*, high *NF*; high *WF*, low *NF*; low *WF*, high *NF*; and low *WF*, low *NF*) and four lists of 30 5-letter words that varied similarly on dimensions of *WF* and *NF* were compiled for the experiment. These lists were generated by selecting words of an appropriate *WF*/*NF* level from a comprehensive list of 4-letter and 5-letter words. All word lists along with information on *N, P, WF, and NF* for each word are in Appendices A-H.

Two lists of pronounceable nonwords, 120 each of 4-letters and 5-letters, were compiled by taking words from the comprehensive word lists that were not used in the eight lists of varied *WF*/*NF* words, and changing one letter in each word to convert it to a pronounceable nonword. A computer program had to be written in order to get *N* and *P* information for the nonwords (*WF* information is not applicable for nonwords since they are not used in speech or text). The 4-letter nonwords are in Appendix I and the 5-letter nonwords are in Appendix J.

The computer displays seen by the participants were composed of lists of 4-letter and 5-letter words (50%) and nonwords (50%), in which the word lists were varied similarly on dimensions of *WF* and *NF*. The means of the *N*, *P*, *WF*, and *NF* values were computed for each of the word lists as well (only *N* and *P* for the nonwords). High-*WF* values were defined as 50 or higher for the 4-letter words, and 10 or higher for the 5 letter words, while low-*WF* values were defined as 49 or lower for the 4-letter words, and

9 or lower for the 5-letter words. High-*NF* values were defined as three or higher for the 4-letter and 5-letter words, while low-*NF* values were defined as 2 or lower for the 4 letter and 5-letter words.

The *NF* values were the same for each word in the two 4-letter word lists that had low-*NF* values, and the *NF* values were also the same for each word in the two 4-letter word lists that had high-*NF* values. The same was also true for the two low-*NF* 5-letter word lists and the two high-*NF* 5-letter word lists. See the appendices for the actual word and nonword lists. Since there were four lists shown to each participant (high-high, lowlow, high-low, and low-high for *NF* and *WF*), counterbalancing occurred such that the same order of lists was never the same for every group of twenty-four  $(4! = 24)$ participants, so there were three iterations of list order for the total number of seventytwo  $(3 \times 24 = 72)$  participants.

#### *Procedure*

 Testing occurred in an individual session for each participant for less than half an hour, during which the participant was instructed to watch the display for a word/nonword to appear during the lexical-decision task. The participant was instructed to press the "Z" key for "yes" when a word appeared on the display, and to press the "/?" key for "no" when a nonword appeared on the display for the lexical-decision task. The keyboard was labeled to identify the corresponding "yes" and "no" keys.

 The reaction time (RT) and accuracy (correctness) were measured for each of the participants' responses to each trial of the lexical-decision task. A positive correlation between response latency (RT) and accuracy (correctness) was expected for the lexicaldecision task, based on the results of previous similar experiments; however, the error

pattern was analyzed for any speed/accuracy tradeoff. Typically though, participants tend to be slower when they are unsure of the response; hence a speed/accuracy tradeoff is uncommon and unlikely. Nonwords were not analyzed, since they were used only for the sake of implementing a lexical-decision task, not for the data themselves. Also, only "yes" responses were analyzed since a "no" response would indicate a perceived nonword.

 A few problems were encountered during the course of the experiment. For the lexical-decision task, the nonword "SHEEG" was placed in the word list by mistake in place of the word "SHEER" and the error was not discovered until the experiment was well underway. Given that the response was recorded as an error, the mistake only affects the error data and is not noticeable. There were some participants for whom English was a second language that skewed the data somewhat, but the RT/error for each participant in each *WF*/*NF* condition is the median rather than the mean, so that outliers from such participants could be filtered out of the analysis and such a problem seems to have had very little impact on the overall significance of the study.

#### Results

This experiment used a 2x2 factorial within-subject design intended to characterize the expected *WF* and *NF* effects and to establish the expected interaction between *WF* and *NF*. An *F* statistic was computed using a within-subject ANOVA test based on the "yes" results of the lexical-decision task. Participants responded more quickly to high-*WF* words than low-*WF* words, causing a statistically significant *WF* effect:  $F(1, 71) = 195.88$ , p<.001 for *WF*. Participants responded more quickly to high-*NF* words than low-*NF* words, causing a statistically significant *NF* effect: *F*(1, 71) =

54.67, p<.001 for *NF*. Reaction time increased much more for low-*WF* words than for high-*WF* words as *NF* decreased, causing a statistically significant two-way *WF*/*NF* interaction:  $F(1, 71) = 29.97$ , p<.001 for *WF* x *NF*. Participants responded more slowly to 5-letter words than to 4-letter words, causing a statistically significant word length effect:  $F(1, 71) = 36.39$ , p<.001 for word length. There was not a statistically significant twoway word length/*WF* interaction:  $F(1, 71) = 1.94$ , p=.168 for word length x *WF*. There also was not a statistically significant two-way word length/NF interaction:  $F(1, 71) =$ 0.68, p=.41 for word length x *NF*. There was a statistically significant three-way word length/*WF*/*NF* interaction:  $F(1, 71) = 15.45$ , p<.001 for word length x *WF* x *NF*.













As expected, there was an interaction between *WF* and *NF* on RT, such that the *NF* effect was greater for low-*WF* words than for high-*WF* words, as indicated by the *F* values for reaction time and the graphical representation of the data in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Interaction between *WF* and *NF*, such that the *NF* effect was greater for low-*WF* words than for high-*WF* words.

For the error data from the lexical-decision task,  $F(1, 71) = 176.35$ , p<.001 for *WF*; *F*(1, 71) = 55.74, p<.001 for *NF*, *F*(1, 71) = 27.45, p<.001 for word length, *F*(1, 71)  $= 122.06$ , p<.001 for *WF* x *NF*,  $F(1, 71) = 6.46$ , p=.013 for word length x *WF*,  $F(1, 71) =$ 1.56, p=.22 for word length x *NF*, and *F*(1, 71) = 5.88, p=.018 for word length x *WF* x *NF*. As expected, there was no speed/accuracy tradeoff, which is indicated by the barely existent positive correlation between RT and number of errors,  $r = .07$ . A negative correlation would indicate a speed/accuracy tradeoff.

Errors for "Yes" Responses to 4- and 5 letter Words

פטושו שיטוש				
	High WF	Low WF : Mean		
High NF	6.44	10.08	8.26	
Low NF	4.85	18.49	11.67	
Mean	5.64	13.29	9.97	



		High $WF$ Low $WF$ : Mean	
High $NF$	-5.01	8 47	6.74
Low NF	4.85	16.43	10.64
Mean	4 93	12.45	: 869

Errors for "Yes" Responses to 5-letter



#### Discussion

As hypothesized, an interaction does exist between *NF* and *WF*, such that the effect of low vs. high *NF* is greater for low-*WF* words than for high-*WF* words. While reaction time decreased for both high- and low-*WF* words when *NF* is higher, the decrease was much more noticeable for the low-*WF* words than for the high-*WF* words. One surprising occurrence was that participants responded faster to high-*NF* words than to low-*NF* words. This is surprising because logic would suggest that reaction time should increase as *NF* increases, i.e., as the number of neighbors with a higher *WF* than the target increases, because this would lead to an increase in the background lexical clutter. However, it may be that *NF* is similar to *N*, in that the more neighbors, the faster (lower) RT is, due to increased letter-pattern familiarity. This suggests that rather than incorrect cohort members being more disruptive in the lexical access for low-*WF* words than for high-*WF* words, *NF* actually facilitates lexical access is some complicated manner that is not yet understood, possibly via letter-pattern familiarity.

The broader theoretical implication of these results is that lexical access is not a search process, but is rather a process in which the most activated lexical entry is selected as the correct one, such that a search is not necessary for lexical access to occur. If lexical access were a search process, then the time to respond to a low-*WF* word and a high-*WF* word with the same *NF* should be the same, since the target lexical entry should be the next most available entry once the incorrect lexical entries are rejected for both low-*WF* and high-*WF* words. This is due to the fact that a search process is based only on *WF*, rather than a combination of *WF* with the three information types. A search process involves the comparison of each cohort to the target based on *WF*, until the correct lexical entry for the target is found. The search process begins with the highest *WF* cohort and works its way down through the descending *WF* cohorts. Theoretically, in a search process, the larger the *N*, the longer the search should take, since there are more lexical entries through which to search, and *P* would be irrelevant to a search process. This contradicts past studies that demonstrate that in reality, a larger *N* actually facilitates processing instead of inhibiting it, and a larger P actually inhibits processing instead of proving to be irrelevant. Also, since the *NF* remained the same for low-*WF* and high-*WF* words, the time for lexical access to occur should be the same if lexical access is a search process, but there was a difference, which invalidates a search process.

The data from this experiment refute such a claim of a search process. To the contrary, our data show that for high-*WF* targets, the total activation for the target lexical entry (based on all three information types, which eliminate the cohort members as the information types are received) exceeds that of the nontarget *NF* cohort members. Lexical access is a selection process—not a search process. A selection is made when a

cohort member clearly stands out against the cohort background clutter and can even be wrong, which can occur when a selection is made before cohort resolution is complete.

The broader practical implications of this study apply to the improved understanding of dyslexia and to the improvement of reading skills in children learning to read. By understanding lexical access as permitted by this study, it can be better understood why dyslexics have problems with lexical access, which may be due to the fact that the initial orthographic information may not be sufficient to make the target lexical entry stand out against the cohort background clutter. Thus, dyslexics should be encouraged to delay lexical selection until phonological and/or graphic information is also present. Also, this study may be used to improve the manner in which children learn to read. This is due to the fact that, since semantic information is available first, children tend to make semantic errors while reading because they select a cohort that is semantically related to the target, rather than waiting for cohort resolution to progress, which decreases the probability of selecting the correct lexical entry to match the target. Thus, children should be taught to delay lexical selection until all information types are available (i.e., until cohort resolution is complete), or at least until more of the information types are available, so that the probability of their selecting the correct lexical entry is higher.

There are several studies that would be logical follow-ups to this study. One study might involve determining whether *NF* effects occur due to similarity along more than one dimension of similarity, such as both semantically and orthographically (e.g., sing and song), which may account for the large background clutter of activated cohorts in the target display. Another such study should attempt find the extent to which high *WF*-

words are less disrupted in a lexical-decision task by having a large *P*. That issue could not be addressed by this experiment, since neither *P*, nor *N* values were controlled. A third study might look at the nonwords themselves by examining their characteristics other than semantic information, which they do not have by definition. One final study that could be done would be the same as this study, except that a naming task could be used in place of the lexical-decision task, so without the nonwords, such that participants speak a word into a microphone when it appears on the monitor, so that RT can be recorded and analyzed. Such a naming task study would further substantiate the results of this study and we are currently having participants come in for the naming task study.

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# Appendix A



# High WF, High NF 4-Letter Words

### Appendix B



### High WF, High NF 5-Letter Words

# Appendix C



### High WF, Low NF 4-Letter Words

# Appendix D



### High WF, Low NF 5-Letter Words

# Appendix E



### Low WF, High NF 4-Letter Words

# Appendix F



### Low WF, High NF 5-Letter Words

# Appendix G



# Low WF, Low NF 4-Letter Words

# Appendix H



### Low WF, Low NF 5-Letter Words

### Appendix I

### 4-Letter Nonwords



# Appendix J

### 5-Letter Nonwords

