

Anneli Pajunen
University of Tampere, Finland
anneli.pajunen@staff.uta.fi

Seppo Vainio
University of Turku, Finland
seppo.vainio@utu.fi

Lexical-morphological knowledge of the inner structure of words: Development of derivational skills in Finnish

[Preference: oral presentation, main session]

In Finnish, new words are frequently derived from underived or derived stems. There are hundreds of derivational suffixes, and many of them may be contained in one word. In the developmental context, the amount of new words increases quickly but it is well-known that many school-age children and young adults have problems with understanding the exact meanings of derivations and compound words (Honko 2013, Kusnetsoff 2015; Tyler and Nagy 1989). It is also known that the use of derivational items increases gradually; primary school children most often use underived words (80 % of words are underived with comparatively basic meaning; Pajunen 2012). The ability to analyze the inner structure of complex words correlates with reading comprehension and academic skills (Carlisle 2000, Nippold 2006).

We tested lexical-morphological knowledge with a priming test in electronic form (Pohjankukka & Vainio 2013): participants are first shown a prime, then the target word and so on in individually random order. The task for participants is to make a lexical decision for the target word. They press the button to answer whether or not the target word is a possible Finnish word. There are over 500 words and the designed setting is a 2 x 2 x 3, i.e., the Word class of the targets (nouns vs. verbs) x the target word Frequency (high vs. low) x the Prime type (morphologically related vs. nonce word derived vs. unrelated). The stimuli are divided by three counterbalanced lists by prime type, a participant gets only one version of each prime–target pairs (168 pairs + practice pairs). The ability to derive words is measured by reaction times and correctness of the answers. The prediction is that morphologically the related prime facilitates and the derived nonce word inhibits the reaction time of the target compared to the unrelated prime. The ability to recognize derived Finnish words has not been tested before by using the priming method; there is no earlier research on the development of derivational skills in Finnish.

The study is part of the project Later Language Development funded by Kone Foundation (2013–2015) and consists of a set of tests that single out various aspects of lexical knowledge (= semantic, morphological, syntactic); there are also thesis written on the same topic. In our talk, we will discuss development of derivational skills by 12 and 15 year old school children as compared to young adults (altogether 300 participants).

References

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