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Do bilinguals avoid ambiguity? An experimental study of lexical ambiguity in spoken Mandarin

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Abstract

Previous research has proposed that bilinguals would rather be redundant than ambiguous. To test this hypothesis, we conducted an experiment examining lexical ambiguity in spoken Mandarin at the tonal, segmental, and orthographical levels. Using a picture naming task, we explored how L1 Mandarin L2 English speakers in the UK and more-monolingual speakers in China resolve ambiguity by analysing their verbal responses when naming pictures, manipulating whether the context in which a picture is named makes the preferred label ambiguous (e.g. do speakers avoid saying “fen3 si1” when describing a picture of glass noodles when it appears alongside a picture of fans which shares the same label? do bilinguals avoid this ambiguity more than more monolingual peers as claimed?). Our results do not support this hypothesis, as no reliable differences between groups were found. Despite the null results, we observed several interesting patterns worthy of further investigation.