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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 39(0)

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Publication Date

2017

Peer reviewed

When reading is harder than a mother kucker: Top-down effects of the taboo-ness on novel word pronunciation

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Abstract: When pronouncing novel/unknown words, readers often use prior experience with similar, neighbor words. Comparison to neighbors can be helpful for unknown or novel words (wug is like pug), but it can also lead to errors (pint is not like mint). We investigate whether pronunciation can be affected by top-down influences, specifically the perceived taboo-ness of a known neighbor. While orthographic similarity typically biases novel-word pronunciation to be similar to a known word, taboo-ness might bias pronunciation away from a likely one. Adults read aloud words from three lists— novel words that were neighbors to taboo words, novel words that were neighbors to benign words, and known control words. All known neighbors and controls were frequency matched. Results show differences in the correspondence between pronunciation of novel words and known neighbors depending on the relative taboo-ness of the known neighbor. Findings suggest that perceived taboo-ness has top-down influences on reading.