The Influence of Number of Syllables on Word Skipping during Reading

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Running Head: Number of Syllables and Word Skipping

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We would like to submit the Appendix included at the end of this document as supplemental material to be published online separately.

Abstract

In an eye-tracking experiment, subjects read sentences containing a monosyllabic (e.g. *grain*) or a disyllabic (e.g. *cargo)* five-letter word. Monosyllabic target words were skipped more often than disyllabic target words, indicating that syllabic structure was extracted from the parafovea early enough to influence the decision of saccade target selection. Fixation times on the target word when it was fixated did not show an influence of number of syllables, demonstrating that number of syllables differentially impacts skipping rates and fixation durations during reading.

Introduction

During reading, saccadic eye movements are necessary to move words into the center of the visual field, the fovea, where word recognition is enabled by high visual acuity. However, there is one exception where word recognition seems to be accomplished exclusively on the basis of parafoveal processing. When a word does not receive a direct fixation during first-pass reading, the word has been skipped. And if the word does not receive a regression after it has been skipped, the identity of the word has to have been established exclusively on the basis of parafoveal processing, possibly in combination with the predictability of the word from the surrounding context. Word skipping is far from being a rare phenomenon. On average, 1/3 of all the words are initially skipped (for reviews, see Rayner, 1998, 2009).

The two factors that have the most substantial impact on word skipping during reading are word length and predictability. Short words are skipped more often than long words, and words that are predictable from the preceding context are skipped more often than unpredictable words (e.g. Balota, Pollatsek, & Rayner, 1985; Drieghe, Rayner, & Pollatsek, 2005). High frequency words are also skipped slightly more often than low frequency words, though this effect is numerically smaller than the effects of word length and predictability (Brysbaert, Drieghe, & Vitu, 2005). Even though current models of eye movements in reading (e.g. E-Z Reader, Reichle, Rayner, & Pollatsek, 2003; SWIFT, Engbert, Nuthmann, Richter, & Kliegl, 2005) uphold diverging opinions on some fundamental issues (e.g. serial versus parallel lexical processing), all of them incorporate word length, frequency, and predictability as the main factors for the system to decide whether or not to skip the next word.

These influencing factors show that the word that is skipped was processed up to a certain extent when the oculomotor system decided to skip it. Indeed, research has shown that the level of processing is quite high during average reading conditions. Drieghe et al. (2005) observed that even in a sentence where the word *cake* is very predictable, the visually similar non-word *cahe* will not be skipped more often than the non-word *picz*, indicating readers picked up the difference between the predictable word and the visually similar non-word. However, research has also shown that when necessary, skipping can occur based on incomplete word identification, such as for very long words where the end of the word will fall outside the letter identification span (Rayner, Slattery, Drieghe, & Liversedge, 2011).

Because skipping is influenced by how much information can be extracted from the parafoveal word, as well as how easy it is to process that word, it is tempting to assume that manipulations of parafoveal preview which result in reduced fixation durations when the eyes do land on the target word (e.g. correct vs. incorrect orthographic information as a preview) also result in increased skipping of the preview. However, the relationship between skipping rates and fixation times of words is not as straightforward. Parafoveal processing of a word can occur right up until the moment the saccade is launched towards the target word (or the word after it), but the decision to skip a word needs to be made considerably earlier. This is due to the time it takes to program a saccade after the target has been decided upon (e.g. in the E-Z Reader model, this is estimated to be about 125 ms, Reichle et al., 2003). In other words, finding an effect on skipping of a target word means the word was processed up to a certain extent in the parafovea quite some time before the saccade was launched. This also makes an effect on skipping rates one of the earliest effects possible in the eye-tracking record for word processing during reading.

One of the types of information that is extracted from the parafovea is phonological information. Pollatsek, Lesch, Morris and Rayner (1992) used a boundary change paradigm and found a parafoveal preview benefit for a homophone compared to a visually similar non-homophonic control (e.g. *sent* vs. *rent* as a preview for *cent*). Ashby and Rayner (2004) extended these findings by showing shorter fixation times for targets when syllabic congruent previews (e.g. *de_πxw* as a preview for *device*) were presented compared to syllabic incongruent previews *(e.g. dev_πx* as a preview) even though the incongruent preview shared more letters with the target word (see also Ashby & Martin (2008) for a replication in a display change lexical decision task). This shows that prosodic information is extracted from the parafovea by the reader and used to facilitate word recognition (see also Ashby, Treiman, Kessler, & Rayner, 2006 for evidence of parafoveal vowel processing).

To examine potential phonological influences on word skipping, we will manipulate the number of syllables in our target words. New, Ferrand, Pallier and Brysbaert (2006) found a significant effect of number of syllables while examining lexical decision times acquired in the English Lexicon Project (Balota, et al., 2007). This effect was independent of other influencing factors such as frequency, number of neighbours and word length. Their regression model showed that increasing the number of syllables in a word increased lexical decision times by 32 ms. Returning to reading, if information concerning the syllabic structure of the parafoveal word comes into the oculomotor system early enough to influence word skipping, this would translate into a higher chance of skipping a monosyllabic over a disyllabic word.

EXPERIMENT

METHOD

Participants. Twenty-six native English speakers with normal or corrected to normal vision from the University of Southampton participated for £4.50 or course credit.

Apparatus. Eye movements were measured with an SR Research Eyelink 1000 system. Viewing was binocular, but eye movements were recorded from the right eye only. Sentences were displayed on a single line with a maximum length of 85 characters, and all letters were lowercase (except when capitals were appropriate) and in monospaced Courier font. The display was 73 cm from the participant's eye, and at this distance three characters equalled 1° of visual angle.

Materials. Sixty monosyllabic or disyllabic target words (e.g. *grain* vs. *cargo*) were embedded in neutral sentences (e.g. *The workers were quick at loading the grain/cargo onto the ship*; see Appendix). Thirty students from the University of Southampton who did not participate in the eye-tracking experiment were presented with the sentence frames up to the target word and asked to produce the next word in the sentence. No significant differences were observed in sentence completion ratio between the monosyllabic (1%) and disyllabic target words (3%, $t(59)=-1.58$, $p>.10$), indicating they were equally (un)predictable from the preceding context. A counterbalanced design was used in which each participant read all sixty sentences, half containing the monosyllabic and half the disyllabic target words, resulting in 30 sentences per condition, per participant. The monosyllabic and disyllabic words were all 5 letter-words and were matched on word frequency, orthographic neighbours and mean bigram frequency, all t's < 1, n.s. (see Table 1) according to the norms collected in the HAL corpus (Burgess & Livesay, 1998). These 60 sentences were mixed with 60 filler items and displayed in a pseudorandom order preceded by 12 practice sentences.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Procedure. Participants were first given a description of the experimental procedure and told they would be reading sentences on the monitor. They were instructed to read for comprehension and told that they would be asked comprehension questions about the sentences. The participant's head was stabilised using a head/chin rest. The initial calibration of the eye-tracker required approximately 5 minutes. At the beginning of each trial the participant had to look at a fixation point on the screen. When the eye-tracker registered a stable fixation on the dot, the sentence was displayed ensuring that the fixation fell at the beginning of the sentence. When participants had finished reading a sentence they moved to the next trial by pressing a button on the response box. Each participant first read 12 practice sentences to become familiar with the procedure. Comprehension questions were presented on 25% of trails; accuracy answering them was 93%. The experiment lasted approximately 30 minutes.

RESULTS

Trials in which there was a blink or tracker loss on the target word or during an immediately adjacent fixation to the target word were removed prior to analysis (0.5% of trials). Fixations shorter than 80 ms, which were within 1 character of a previous or subsequent fixation, were combined with that fixation. All other fixations that were less than 80 ms were removed prior to analysis, as were any fixations longer than 800 ms. Additionally, when calculating the eye movement measures, any data points that were more than 2.5 standard deviations above the mean within a condition for a specific participant were removed. Data loss affected both conditions similarly.

Four eye movement measures were computed: *Skipping probability*, which is the probability that the target word was skipped on first-pass reading; *first fixation duration*, which is the duration of the first fixation on a word; *single fixation duration*, where the reader made only one first-pass fixation on the target word; and *gaze duration*, which is the sum of all first-pass fixations on the target word before moving to another word. To ensure that our manipulations did not affect the eye movement behavior prior to reaching the target word, we will also report the *launch site* of the saccade that either skips the target word or lands on it.

This latter measure is expressed in number of characters from the launch position to the space in front of the target word. A series of pairwise t-tests were undertaken with participants (*t*1) and items (*t*2) as random variables.

Table 2 shows the means for all the eye movement measures. There was no difference for the launch site distance [$t1(25)=-1.39$, $p>.10$; $t2(58)=-1.31$, $p>.10$)]. However, monosyllabic words were skipped 5.6% more often than disyllabic words [$t1(25)=2.17$, $p<.05$; $t2(59)=3.34$, $p<.01$]. There were no differences present in any of the fixation duration measures on the target word, all *t*'s < 1, n.s.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

We were surprised to see that the effect of number of syllables was observed in skipping rate but not reflected in fixation times on the target. To ensure that the presence or absence of the effect was not due to factors that we had not controlled for, we ran a linear mixed-effects model (lme) using R (2009) specifying participants and items as crossed random effects. The significance values and standard errors reported reflect both participant and item variability. These analyses have the advantage that they result in considerably less loss of statistical power in unbalanced designs due to missing values than traditional ANOVA's. Especially for fixation times, where trials when the target word was skipped are counted as missing data, this could have affected the results. The *p*-values were estimated using posterior distributions for model parameters obtained by Markov-Chain Monte Carlo sampling. All the patterns observed in the models were identical whether they were run on log-transformed or untransformed fixation durations, allowing us to present the data run on the untransformed fixation durations in order to increase transparency. Unlike the regression weights for the fixation durations, the regression weights for the skipping probabilities cannot be directly interpreted as effect sizes because they originate from a logistic lme model which is better suited for the binomial nature of skipping rates.

As fixed factors, we included number of syllables and launch distance. Model comparisons showed that the interaction between the fixed factors had to be removed from the models because it did not contribute significantly to the fit of the data with the exception of the model for the skipping data. All the fixed effects estimates are shown in Table 3. As in the pairwise t-tests, the effect of number of syllables was significant only for skipping rates but not for the fixation times. A numerically small but significant effect was observed from launch distance on all measures. This effect shows reduced parafoveal processing when the launch distance increased due to reduced visual acuity, leading to less skipping and longer fixation times. Finally, an interaction was observed in the skipping model between launch site distance and number of syllables. This interaction shows an increased effect of number of syllables when the eyes were close to the target word. Again, this could be expected given that it is reasonable to assume that it would be difficult to pick up syllabic information from a far launch site due to reduced visual acuity.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

DISCUSSION

Our experiment explored whether information concerning syllabic structure could be extracted from the parafoveal word early enough to influence how often it would be skipped. Our results clearly show that this is the case as monosyllabic words were skipped 5% more often than disyllabic words. Even though this effect is comparable in magnitude to that of skipping a high-frequency word versus a low-frequency word (Brysbaert, et al., 2005) - in other words it is a non-trivial effect size - it was not reflected in the fixation times when the target word was fixated.

Skipping rates and fixation times for a word are often considered correlated measures of the same phenomenon, with both reflecting the amount of preceding parafoveal processing. However, the time window in which parafoveal processing can build up to impact word skipping or fixation times is slightly different. To influence saccade target selection, information needs to enter the system before the start of saccadic programming. If information comes in at a later point, it can still affect fixation durations on the target word after the eyes have landed on it, but this new information can no longer influence skipping rates. Moreover, a number of experimental manipulations have shown to differentially impact word skipping and fixation durations (Drieghe, 2008), indicating that different underlying mechanisms drive these phenomena. And indeed, the current study can be added to this list.

Likewise, the decision as to which word to target and where to target within a word is influenced by different factors. Whereas predictable words are skipped more often than unpredictable words, there is usually no difference in landing positions when the words are not skipped (e.g. Rayner, Ashby, Pollatsek, & Reichle, 2004). Similarly, in the present study, there was no difference between the landing position in a monosyllabic versus disyllabic word in the current study (both 1.8 characters into the word). All these factors indicate that saccade target selection is a process during reading which is distinctively different from other processes related to saccade programming and can be influenced by factors related to lexical processing which are distinct from those which are reflected in fixation durations.

An alternative possibility for why the number of syllables of the target word influenced the skipping rates but not the fixation times could lie in fact that these two measurements are not independent[1]. If easier words are skipped more often than difficult ones, the remaining monosyllabic words could be as difficult on average as the disyllabic words. As such, a difference in processing ease between mono- and disyllabic words could be obscured in the fixation times because skipped words are counted as missing values for calculating fixation times. However, a strong indication that our fixation times are not obscuring any difference in processing ease comes from lexical decision times on the specific items we presented to our participants. Lexical decision times available from the English Lexicon project averaged 561 ms for our monosyllabic words and 572 ms for the disyllabic words. This 11 ms was only marginally significant [$t(57) = -1.66$, $p = .10$] and as such indicative that our lack of effect in fixation times is not due to a subset of the stimuli (i.e. the ones which were not skipped) as these lexical decision times were collected on all the stimuli.

It would also be interesting to compare the observed skipping rates (and fixation times) with those for multisyllabic and/or longer words. If no difference is observed between the skipping rates of a disyllabic and a trisyllabic word, this would have important implications for oculomotor control. It would mean that the effect we observed of number of syllables is due to the oculomotor system having learned that it is usually not problematic for text understanding to skip a monosyllabic word. Alternatively, a more quantitative effect would result in monosyllabic words being skipped more often than disyllabic words and disyllabic words in turn being skipped more often than trisyllabic words. However, such an experiment would be prone to floor effects for the skipping rates.

The idea that phonological information can be extracted very early from a word is also compatible with research conducted by Jane Ashby and colleagues who showed in a masked priming experiment with EEG recording that phonological feature congruency (non-word primes were congruent or incongruent with target words in voicing and vowel duration) started modulating the amplitude of brain potentials after 80 ms (Ashby, Sanders, & Kingston, 2009). Syllable priming using stimuli similar to the *device* example discussed in the Introduction, influenced ERP's at 100 ms (Ashby, 2010). Moreover, Ashby and Rayner (2004) found evidence that initial syllables are processed in the parafovea during reading to facilitate word recognition speed. The current study extends these findings by showing that the syllable layer of the phonological representation also has an impact on saccade target selection. A first indication that prosodic phonological information could affect saccade planning was reported by Ashby and Clifton (2005) who showed that the number of stressed syllables influenced the number of fixations on high and low frequency words. Our data indicate that such an influence is not limited to within-word saccades but can also affect the planning of between-word saccades.

Further research will be necessary to establish how fine-grained the phonological processing from the parafoveal word is when the system decides to skip the next word or land on it. Even though syllabic structure seems to be extracted and we matched our words to a very high extent on different measures of orthographic familiarity, we cannot yet be certain that our participants did in effect obtain detailed phonological information. One of the alternative possibilities is that participants used a non-phonological shortcut to deduce syllabic structure, since orthographic information can often be used as a fairly reliable predictor of number of syllables. For example, in our materials, all the target words were five-letter words. Of these targets words, 95% of the disyllabic target words presented to participants had a consonant (e.g. *music*) in the middle, while 82% of the monosyllabic target words had a vowel in middle (e.g. *phone*). It may therefore be the case that this difference was the cause of the increased skipping rates that we observed between monosyllabic and disyllabic words, rather than being a purely phonological effect. It is important to note, however, that both explanations reflect the importance of syllabic structure (or indications thereof) for the decision of whether to skip or not.

To summarize, we observed that a monosyllabic word was skipped more often than a disyllabic word, indicating very early extraction of syllabic structure (or indications thereof) from the parafoveal word. This effect was not present in the fixation times on the target. This differential impact on skipping rates and fixation times is compatible with the view that skipping rates and fixation durations cannot always be considered to be correlates of the same underlying phenomenon, i.e. amount of preceding parafoveal processing (Drieghe, 2008). Moreover, the current findings provide novel insights into the decision process of saccade target selection and as such, are very informative for models of eye movement control during reading. Models such as E-Z Reader (Reichle, et al., 2003) and SWIFT (Engbert, et al., 2005) predict skipping rates mostly on the basis of contextual predictability, frequency and word length, even though the current data indicate an important role of syllabic structure. Focusing on the E-Z Reader model, this model assumes that the oculomotor system decides to skip the next word when a distinct step (i.e. *L1*) in its lexical processing has been completed. This step corresponds to the point at which the processing system, from prior experience, estimates that full lexical identification (i.e. *L2*) is likely to be achieved shortly. The current findings point towards phonological complexity being an important factor in this process of deciding whether or not to skip the next word. When the system needs to make an estimation of whether the next word is easy enough to skip, it uses early indications of phonological complexity in this process.

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Footnote

1. We are grateful to Marc Brysbaert for this suggestion.

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Table 1

Lexical statistics for the target words. Standard deviations in parenthesis.

	Log Frequency	Orthographic Neighbors	Log Mean Bigram Frequency
Monosyllabic	8.53 (1.33)	3.60 (2.64)	3.40 (0.21)
Disyllabic	8.53 (1.15)	3.67 (2.99)	3.55 (0.17)

Table 2. Launch site of the saccade landing on or skipping the target word, skipping percentage of the target word, and first fixation duration, single fixation duration and gaze duration on the target word. Standard deviations in parenthesis.

	Launch site (characters)	Skipping %	First Fixation (ms)	Single Fixation (ms)	Gaze Duration (ms)
Monosyllabic	4.27 (1.16)	20.00 (15.50)	218 (44)	221 (42)	237 (61)
Disyllabic	4.45 (1.30)	14.40 (14.80)	219 (33)	220 (36)	235 (49)

Table 3. Fixed effect estimates for skipping percentage of the target word and first fixation duration, single fixation duration and gaze duration.

	Skipping Percentage	First Fixation Duration	Single Fixation Duration	Gaze Duration
Intercept	-.59	205***	206***	215***
Number of syllables	-.85**	-.33	-1.20	-4.35
Launch distance	-.48***	2.63***	3.01***	4.55***
Number of syllables x Launch distance	.13*			

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Appendix
Experimental materials

Experimental materials comprised 60 sentences which featured either a monosyllabic or a disyllabic word. The monosyllabic word is always listed first below. The continuation of the sentence after the target word was always the same (except for nr. 58 due to an oversight).

1. Bob thought he heard the loud phone/music in his bedroom.
2. Fred had to write a long rhyme/essay about the civil war for history class.
3. Many people go to hospital having broken their thumb/ankle in a household accident.
4. The employee used a long knife/razor to open the box of pens.
5. Everyone loved the new chief/tutor because he was always nice to everyone.
6. Many school children would like to win the dance/award and receive a prize.
7. The tour guide took the tourists to the smelly swamp/hotel and they did not enjoy it.
8. The villagers saw a lot of smoke/chaos and knew there was trouble in the park.
9. When Billy said he was going to grow a big beard/melon everyone laughed at him.
10. Mike went to the supermarket to buy some steak/basil to have with his dinner.
11. Martin always ate at the old house/table at the weekend.
12. The brand new chalk/atlas has disappeared from the school.
13. A large gnome/kiosk sits at the entrance to the garden centre.
14. Marie had left her flask/apron in the kitchen and she had to go back to get it.
15. A good breakfast to have before school is to put fruit/sugar on top of your cereal.
16. The children thought a scary ghost/robot lived in the attic of the house.
17. Some people say the old crypt/depot is haunted and no one should go there.
18. While on holiday Lucy wants to visit the other lodge/salon that is opening soon.
19. When Meg dropped the red sieve/bongo on the floor it broke into pieces.
20. Everyone competed to play the lead flute/genie in the school production.
21. Some people like to spend their summers in a remote marsh/cabin in the countryside.
22. There is a concert at the small ranch/venue and the tickets have already sold out.
23. Billy found the last fudge/joker in the pack and was very pleased.
24. Shaun broke his tooth/sabre while fighting and must get it fixed.
25. The young child was excited after seeing the first storm/comet in his life.
26. Jo likes to take a walk around the pleasant coast/haven at the weekend.
27. If you want to take up fishing you should read a good guide/novel on the topic first.

28. Adam went to collect his glass/comic from the living room.
29. When Dave broke the new broom/cello he had to go and buy another one.
30. Children were told if they see a big skunk/viper they must run away from it.
31. Employees are reminded to put the correct stamp/label on their packages.
32. Pete was told to clean out the filthy slime/basin before leaving work yesterday.
33. The hotel guests complained because nobody liked to eat broth/mango for breakfast.
34. Jill always wanted to be a perfect bride/boxer before she was thirty.
35. Everyone loved the new squad/puppy that won lots of trophies.
36. In the morning the old truck/piper made a lot of noise and disturbed the village.
37. The journalists were impressed by the gorgeous dress/model at the fashion show.
38. When Sue was a child she always had a cough/dolly during winter.
39. The student had to buy a new skirt/ruler for school.
40. Everyone was warned not to go near the dangerous ledge/rifle or they may get hurt.
41. The workers were quick at loading the grain/cargo onto the ship.
42. Kate always likes to put peach/honey on her porridge in the morning.
43. Eric has trouble with his spine/liver and often has to go to the doctors.
44. Phillip is going to make a lovely badge/mural for his son's birthday tomorrow.
45. Helen saw her first clown/tiger at the circus and she really enjoyed it.
46. Bill likes to listen to the new choir/disco that just started across town.
47. Fred wanted plenty of space/money before inviting his girlfriend to move in with him.
48. Sean hurt his thigh/elbow while playing football and had to go to the hospital.
49. Tourists are told to avoid the nearby cliff/ocean during winter as it can be dangerous.
50. Paul ordered his pancakes with cream/lemon on top when he went to the new café.
51. Joe's mother always got out the biggest spoon/mixer when making him a cake.
52. John was going to the nearest shore/river for a swim to cool down.
53. Jane told me that she thought Bill was a fraud/pilot and had been for a while.
54. Kyle had never seen such a large lorry/hedge before that day.
55. The children were afraid of the old beast/baker living in the spooky house.
56. The builder needed a new drill/cable to finish work on the house.
57. John handed me the small piece of cloth/metal that he found on the floor.
58. Barry left his bike outside the porch when he got home from work.

Barry left his bike outside the diner when he went to work.

59. Mary checked she had packed her torch/diary before going on holiday.
60. The painting captured the reflections of the light/water during the sunset on the beach.