

Online Processing of Lexical Ambiguity by Persian EFL Learners

Sheila Hamidinejad, Mohammad Javad Rezai

Yazd University (Iran)

roodmina@yahoo.com, mjrezai@yahoo.com

Abstract

Processing lexical items in general and lexical ambiguity in particular is considered as one of the debated areas in psycholinguistic research. According to theoretical linguistic accounts, lexical ambiguity is not a uniform phenomenon, but rather it is subdivided into two types, namely homonymy and polysemy. The present study endeavored to examine whether Persian EFL learners process these types of ambiguities in Persian and English differently. The role of proficiency was also taken into consideration in such kind of processing.

Sixty EFL learners both in advanced and intermediate proficiency level participated in this study. To this end, four types of ambiguous words, homonymous words (e.g., "punch"), polysemous words with metaphorical extensions (e.g., "mouth"), polysemous words with a count/mass metonymic extension (e.g., "chicken"), and polysemous words with a container/containee metonymic extension (e.g., "bottle"), were used in a cross-modal sentence-priming lexical decision task. The obtained data were analyzed using professional E-prime software.

The results obtained from the pilot study revealed a distinction between homonymy and polysemy implying differential processing depending on the type of ambiguity. It was found that EFL learners process ambiguous words with related meanings faster than words with unrelated meanings.