Can you wash off the hogwash? –
Behavioral and EEG evidence on the effects of (native) language structure on lexical memory

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Psychologicum, Liebiggasse 5, 1010 Vienna

Humans possess the ability of coining meaning in an almost unlimited number of possible ways. However, this combinatorial ability with respect to coining complex words remains an unsettled issue, since the meaning of word combinations ranges from transparent, as in underwork, to rather opaque and non-compositional, as in understand. Psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic research are therefore puzzled by the following questions: How are the meanings of word combinations like verstehen (‘understand’) and Standpunkt (‘standpoint’) stored and processed—as a whole or via the single constituents? Do we therefore access the meaning of stehen in the course of processing verstehen? Does the specific language experience of a native speaker affect how complex words are stored and processed in lexical memory?

This talk will present a series of behavioral and electrophysiological priming experiments, examining different degrees of combinatorial complexity by using different types of meaning units: stems like steh and stand in verb inflections such as stehen (‘stand’) and gestanden (‘stood’), in verb derivations such as anstehen (‘stand in line’) and verstehen (‘understand’), and in compounds such as Standpunkt (‘standpoint’). Overall, the findings indicate that complex words in German are processed by making reference to the representation of their stem, indicating that lexical memory structures in German differ from those in other Indo-European languages. These findings are relevant to a key debate about general versus language specific aspects of cognition.