The interplay between distinctiveness and intercorrelation in the automatic activation of word meaning

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Does the structure of a word’s meaning affect the activation of its semantic features during on-line language comprehension? We predicted that both feature distinctiveness (D) and intercorrelation (I) with other features would modulate the time-course and strength of activation. We employed a semantic priming task with 0 and 300 msec ISIs and visual concept-feature pairs (McRae & Cree, 2002) factorially divided into low and high D and I groups. While no interactions with ISI reached significance, both the main effects of priming and distinctiveness, and the IxD interaction, did: highD features primed more than lowD and highI more than lowI features with constant lowI and lowD, respectively. Surprisingly, priming was absent in the highD-highI condition. Further analyses revealed that these concepts had more features (NOF) than other groups. These findings demonstrate that both I and D influence automatic meaning activation and suggest that NOF may also modulate these semantic processes.