16th ICPLA (2016) Abstract

Title: Further qualifying the relationship between morphological awareness and reading through longitudinal modeling

Abstract:
A strong relationship between morphological awareness (a meta-linguistic skill involving the awareness of and ability to manipulate the smallest units of meaning in spoken language; Carlisle, 1995) and reading comprehension is consistently reported in the literature. Yet, the nature of this relationship remains unclear. The current research builds on a small set of studies that have attempted to uncover the underlying mechanisms of the morphological awareness–reading comprehension relationship. Based on a recent theoretical framework of reading comprehension (Perfetti, Landi, & Oakhill, 2005), it has been argued that morphological awareness influences comprehension because it plays an important role in aiding word reading. However, a critical limitation of prior studies is that they did not adequately disentangled the confounding influence of morphologically complex words (multimorphemic words; e.g., *endangerment = en + danger + ment*) when considering word reading as a potential mediating factor. The current study addressed this limitation by contrasting word reading and a construct of morphologically complex word reading labelled *morphological decoding* (reading strategy that utilizes the morphemic structure of complex words to produce the correct pronunciation; Deacon, Francis, & Tong, 2015). Namely, we postulated that morphological awareness specifically influences children's ability to read morphologically complex words (morphological decoding) rather than word reading in the general sense, and tested this prediction in developing readers over the span of a year. Using a longitudinal design, we examined the relationship between morphological awareness and morphological decoding in 203 English-speaking children across grades 3 and 4. Cross-lagged structural equation modeling with autoregressive controls (including controls for phonologically awareness, nonverbal reasoning, and word reading) revealed that children's morphological awareness partially explained their gains in morphological decoding. On the other hand, morphological awareness did not explain gains in general word reading once the influence of morphological decoding was accounted for. Our study offers preliminary evidence substantiating the influence of morphological awareness on morphological decoding over time, even beyond general word reading skills. In doing so, we make important strides in elucidating the potential mechanisms underlying the relationship between morphological awareness and reading comprehension in developing readers.

References:

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