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Syllable splitting in literate and preliterate Hebrew speakers: Onsets and rimes or bodies and codas?

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Abstract

This study examined consonant–vowel–consonant (CVC) syllable splitting among literate (Grade 2) and preliterate (kindergarten) Hebrew speakers. Consideration of both the architecture of Hebrew orthography and phonology led to the prediction that a body–coda rather than an onset–rime subdivision would predominate. Structured and unstructured tasks confirmed the claim that there exists a subsyllabic, supraphonemic level of phonological awareness that is more accessible than individual phonemes. However, as predicted, the syllable body rather than the rime was found to be the more accessible biphonemic unit. Moreover, this preference did not appear to be solely the product of orthographic structure; rather it was also inherent in spoken phonology. Access to single phonemes, in contrast, shifted from an early preliteracy advantage for (monophonemic) onsets to a literacy-based preference for codas.

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Introduction

Although there is now nearly universal agreement that phonological awareness is one of the cornerstones of alphabetic literacy acquisition (Lieberman & Shankweiler, 1979; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Stanovich, 2000; Vellutino, Fletcher, Snowling, & Scanlon, 2004; Wagner & Torgesen, 1987; Ziegler & Goswami, 2005), there remains a lively debate concerning some of the details of this relation. One area that has witnessed ongoing debate is the issue of phonological unit size. Although there is no dispute that access to phonemes is critical in learning to read an alphabetic script, considerable controversy surrounds the role of other larger phonological units, such as syllables, and multiphonemic subsyllabic units, such as complex onsets and rimes¹ (Bryant & Goswami, 1987; Bryant, Maclean, Bradley, & Crossland, 1990; Hulme et al., 2002; Morais, Alegria, & Content, 1987).

A number of theorists have claimed that, in the development of phonological awareness, there exists a developmental progression from so-called large phonological units (e.g., words, syllables) to smaller phonemic units, with some authors proposing an intermediate subsyllabic level between syllables and phonemes consisting of onsets and rimes (Bryant, 2002; Goswami & Bryant, 1990; Goswami, 2002; Treiman, 1987, 1992; Ziegler & Goswami, 2005). The exact nature of this progression and its significance for literacy acquisition has generated a good deal of controversy (e.g., Bryant, 2002; Bryant & Goswami, 1987; Goswami & Bryant, 1990; Hulme et al., 2002; Hulme, Muter, & Snowling, 1998; Morais et al., 1987; Muter, Hulme, Snowling, & Taylor, 1998). More recent work suggests that early awareness of supraphonemic subsyllabic units is indeed a developmental precursor of later phonemic awareness (Anthony & Lonigan, 2004; Anthony, Lonigan, Driscoll, Phillips, & Burgess, 2003; Carroll, Snowling, Hulme, & Stevenson, 2003; Ziegler & Goswami, 2005). Furthermore, causal modeling supports a causal relation between earlier awareness of supraphonemic units and later phoneme awareness (Anthony et al., 2003; Bryant et al., 1990; Carroll et al., 2003). It appears, then, that such units may be an important developmental stepping-stone in young children's growing awareness of the phonological structure of words.

In addition to the claim regarding the developmental role of supraphonemic units, a number of researchers have attempted to demonstrate direct links between these units and early reading and writing. This issue has kindled considerable interest among both psychologists and educators, at least in English, owing in part to the higher degree of spelling–sound consistency that often exists between multiletter orthographic patterns or rimes (e.g., *-ight*) and phonology in comparison with individual grapheme–phoneme correspondence (Adams, 1990; Treiman, Mullennix, Bijeljac-Babic, & Richmond-Welty, 1995). However, the empirical evidence regarding the hypothesized use of rime-based analogical strategies among beginning

¹ Although linguists (e.g., van der Hulst & Ritter, 1999) employ the terms *onset–rhyme* and *head–body* to refer to the C + VC subdivision as distinct from the *body–tail* (CV + C) subdivision, we adopt the terms *onset–rime* (C + VC) and *body–coda* (CV + C) when referring to the structure of spoken syllables so as to maintain continuity with the existing psychological literature in this field.

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