

Carryover effects in free recall reveal how prior experiences influence memories of new experiences

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Abstract

We perceive, interpret, and remember ongoing experiences through the lens of our prior experiences. Inferring that we are in one type of situation versus another can lead us to interpret the same physical experience differently. In turn, this can affect how we focus our attention, form expectations of what will happen next, remember what is happening now, draw on our prior related experiences, and so on. To study these phenomena, we asked participants to perform simple word list learning tasks. Across different experimental conditions, we held the set of to-be-learned words constant, but we manipulated the orders in which the words were studied. We found that these order manipulations affected not only how the participants recalled the ordered lists, but also how they recalled later randomly ordered lists. Our work shows how structure in our ongoing experiences can exert influence on how we remember unrelated subsequent experiences.

17 Introduction

18 Experience is subjective: different people who encounter identical physical experiences
19 can take away very different meanings and memories. One reason is that our subjective ex-
20 periences in the moment are shaped in part the idiosyncratic prior experiences, memories,
21 goals, thoughts, expectations, and emotions that we bring with us into the present moment.
22 These factors collectively define a *context* for our experiences¹³. situation models: forming
23 expectations, predicting ambiguous future experiences The contexts we encounter help us
24 to construct *situation models*^{15,24} or *schemas*^{2,18} that describe how experiences are likely to
25 unfold based on our prior experiences with similar contextual cues. For example, when
26 we enter a sit-down restaurant, we might expect to be seated at a table, given a menu,
27 and served food. Priming someone to expect a particular situation or context can also
28 influence how they resolve potential ambiguities in their ongoing experiences, including
29 ambiguous movies and narratives³².

30 Our understanding of how we form situation models and schemas, and how they in-
31 teract with our subjective experiences and memories, is constrained in part by substantial
32 differences in how we study these processes. Situation models and schemas are most often
33 studied using “naturalistic” stimuli such as narratives and movies^{20,33,34}. In contrast, our
34 understanding of how we organize our memories has been most widely studied using
35 more traditional paradigms like free recall of random word lists¹¹. In free recall, partici-
36 pants study lists of items and are instructed to recall the items in any order they choose.
37 The orders in which words come to mind can provide insights into how participants have
38 organized their memories of the studied words. Because random word lists are unstruc-
39 tured by design, it is not clear if or how non-trivial situation models might apply to these
40 stimuli. Nevertheless, there are *some* commonalities between memory for word lists and
41 memory for real-world experiences.

42 Like remembering real-world experiences, remembering words on a studied list re-
43 quires distinguishing the current list from the rest of one's experience. To model this
44 fundamental memory capability, cognitive scientists have posited the existence of a spe-
45 cial representation, called *context*, that is associated with each list. According to early
46 theories e.g.^{1,6} context representations are composed of many features which fluctuate
47 from moment to moment, slowly drifting through a multidimensional feature space. Dur-
48 ing recall, this representation forms part of the retrieval cue, enabling us to distinguish
49 list items from non-list items. Understanding the role of context in memory processes is
50 particularly important in self-cued memory tasks, such as *free recall*, where the retrieval
51 cue is "context" itself.

52 Over the past half-century, context-based models have enjoyed impressive success at
53 explaining many stereotyped behaviors observed during free recall and other list-learning
54 tasks^{6-8,12,21-23,27-29}. These phenomena include the well-known recency and primacy
55 effects (superior recall of items from the end and, to a lesser extent, from the beginning of
56 the study list), as well as semantic and temporal clustering effects⁷. The contiguity effect
57 is an example of temporal clustering, which is perhaps the dominant form of organization
58 in free recall. This effect can be seen in the tendency for people to successively recall items
59 that occupied neighboring positions in the study list. For example, if a list contained the
60 sub-sequence "ABSENCE HOLLOW PUPIL" and the participant recalls the word "HOLLOW", it is
61 far more likely that the next response will be either "PUPIL" or "ABSENCE" than some other
62 list item¹⁰. In addition, there is a strong forward bias in the contiguity effect: subjects
63 make forward transitions (i.e., "HOLLOW" followed by "PUPIL") about twice as often as
64 they make backward transitions, despite an overall tendency to begin recall at the end of
65 the list. There are also striking effects of semantic clustering^{3,4,9,14,25}, whereby the recall
66 of a given item is more likely to be followed by recall of a similar or related item than

67 a dissimilar or unrelated one. In general, people organize memories for words along a
68 wide variety of stimulus dimensions. As captured by models like the *Context Maintenance*
69 *and Retrieval Model*²², the stimulus features associated with each word (e.g. the word's
70 meaning, font size, font color, location on the screen, size of the object the word represents,
71 etc.) are incorporated into the participant's mental context representation^{13,15–17,30}. During
72 a memory test, any of these features may serve as a memory cue, which in turn leads the
73 participant to recall in succession words that share stimulus features.

74 A key mystery is whether the sorts of situation models and schemas that people use to
75 organize their memories of real-world experiences might map onto the clustering effects
76 that reflect how people organize their memories for word lists. On one hand, situation
77 models and clustering effects both reflect statistical regularities in ongoing experience.
78 Our memory systems exploit these regularities when generating inferences about the
79 unobserved past and yet-to-be-experienced future^{5,19,24,26,31}. On the other hand, the rich
80 structure of real-world experiences and other naturalistic stimuli that enable people to
81 form deep and meaningful situation models and schemas have no obvious analog in
82 simple word lists. Often lists in free recall studies are explicitly *designed* to be devoid of
83 exploitable temporal structure, for example by sorting the words in a random order¹¹.

84 We designed an experimental paradigm to explore how people organize their mem-
85 ories for simple stimuli (word lists) whose temporal properties change across different
86 "situations," analogous to how the content of real-world experiences change across dif-
87 ferent real-world situations. We asked participants to study and freely recall a series
88 of word lists (Fig. 1). Across the different conditions in the experiment, we varied the
89 lists' presentation orders in different ways across lists. The studied items (words) were
90 designed to vary along three general dimensions: semantic (word *category*, and physical
91 *size* of the referent), lexicographic (word *length* and *first letter*), and visual (font *color* and

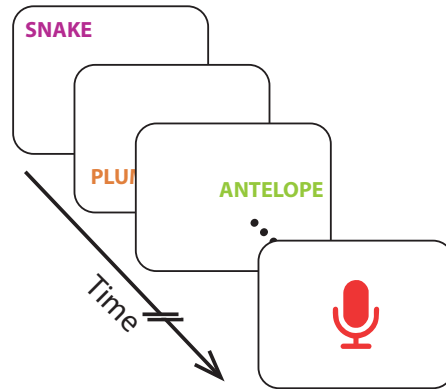


Figure 1: Feature-rich free recall. After studying lists comprised of words that vary along several feature dimensions, participants verbally recall words in any order (microphone icon).

the onscreen *location* of each word). In our main manipulation conditions, we asked participants to study and recall eight lists whose items were sorted by a target feature (e.g., word category). Next, we asked them to study and recall an additional eight lists whose items had the same features, but that were sorted in a random temporal order. We were interested in how these order manipulations affected participants' recall behaviors on early (sorted) lists, as well as how order manipulations on early lists affected recall behaviors on later (unsorted) lists. We used a series of control conditions as a baseline; in these control conditions all of the lists were sorted randomly, but we manipulated the presence or absence of the visual features. Finally, in an *adaptive* experimental condition we used participants' recall behaviors on early lists to manipulate, in real-time, the presentation orders of subsequent lists. In this adaptive condition, we sought to identify potential commonalities within and across participants in how people organized their memories and how those organizational tendencies affect overall performance.

Results

Figure S5.

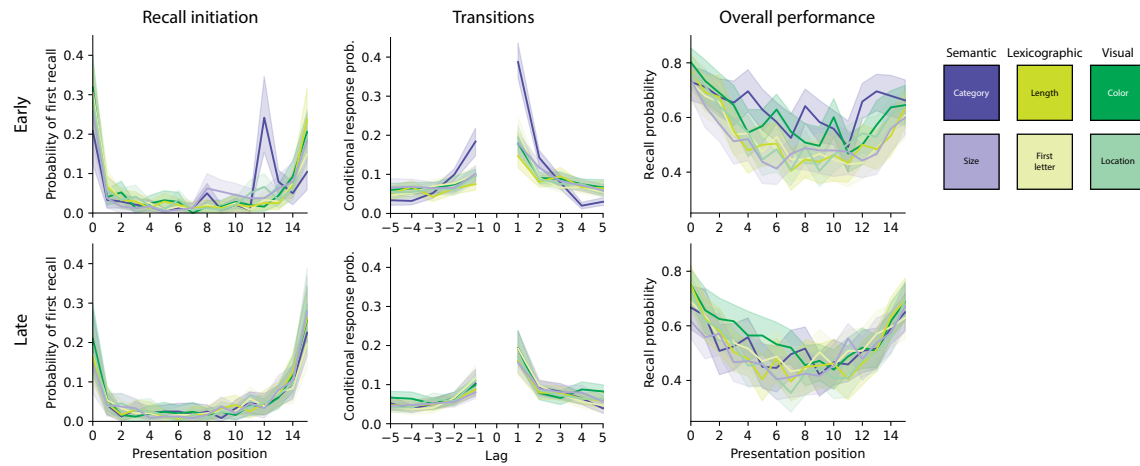


Figure 2: Recall dynamics in feature rich free recall (order manipulation conditions). **Left panels.** The probabilities of initiating recall with each word are plotted as a function of presentation position. **Middle panels.** The conditional probabilities of recalling each word are plotted as a function of the relative position (Lag) to the words recalled just-prior. **Right panels.** The overall probabilities of recalling each word are plotted as a function of presentation position. **All panels.** Error ribbons denote bootstrap-estimated 95% confidence intervals (calculated across participants). Top panels display the recall dynamics for early (order manipulation) lists in each condition (color). Bottom panels display the recall dynamics for late (randomly ordered) lists. See Figures S1 and S2 for analogous plots for the random (control) and adaptive conditions.

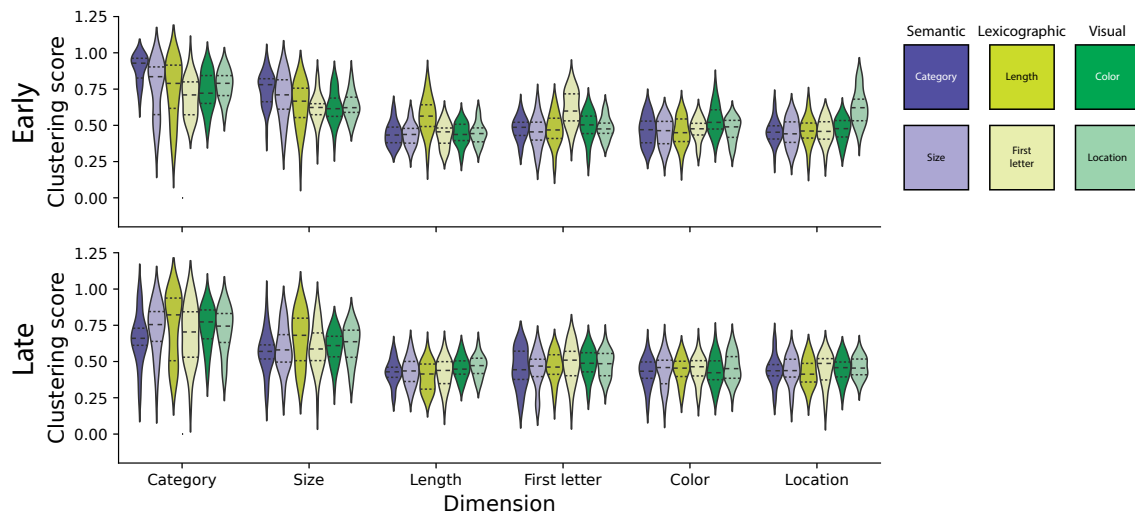


Figure 3: Memory “fingerprints” (order manipulation conditions). The across-participant distributions of clustering scores for each feature type (x -coordinate) are displayed for each experimental condition (color), separately for order manipulation (early, top) and randomly ordered (late, bottom) lists. See Figures S3 and S4 for analogous plots for the random (control) and adaptive conditions.

Discussion

Materials and methods

Participants

Experimental design

Analysis

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