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Sleep maintains the priming effect of ambiguous word-meanings

Abstract

Ambiguous words have several word-meanings attached to them, for instance the word “bat” can either refer to the nocturnal animal or to a baseball bat. It is possible to prime a specific meaning of the ambiguous words by presenting them in certain contexts. This effect has been suggested to last up to 20 minutes. The present study investigated the effect of sleep on the priming of word-meanings by comparing two conditions, sleep and wake. Two separate experiments were conducted, a daytime nap and overnight sleep. Participants were firstly primed with sentences containing ambiguous words and then tested in a word-association task. Following this, they were asked to either sleep or stay awake for 1 ½ hours or overnight after which they completed a second word-association task. The results suggested that the priming effect benefitted from nocturnal sleep, whereas the priming had disappeared after a time-period in a waking state.