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LEXICAL RECOGNIZABILITY IN TEXT PROCESSING: A PSYCHOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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The article examines lexical recognizability as a multidimensional psycholinguistic phenomenon emerging in connected reading rather than in isolated word paradigms. While traditional research on visual word recognition has primarily focused on orthographic, phonological, and morphological processing of single words, less attention has been devoted to how lexical access operates within coherent discourse. The study addresses this gap by analyzing lexical recognizability in literary texts, emphasizing the interaction between bottom-up lexical properties and top-down contextual constraints. The theoretical framework is based on Morris’s four-level model, which includes morphological structure, word familiarity, grammatical class (content versus function words), and lexical ambiguity. Using a qualitative analytical approach, excerpts from Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby and Cormac McCarthy’s The Road are examined to illustrate how these dimensions function dynamically in descriptive and minimalist prose. The analysis demonstrates that lexical recognition in discourse is adaptive and context-sensitive: word frequency and orthographic familiarity alone do not

determine processing ease. Instead, recognition depends on the compatibility between lexical input and the developing discourse model. The findings highlight the role of morphological decomposition, phonological activation, contextual prediction, and stylistic cues in shaping word accessibility during reading. Literary context amplifies the interaction between lexical features and narrative expectations, revealing how readers integrate ambiguous, low-frequency, or morphologically complex words into coherent mental representations. The study contributes to psycholinguistics by bridging classic models of lexical access with literary text analysis and by conceptualizing lexical recognizability as a situated, integrative process in natural reading environments.

ЛЕКСИЧНА ВПІЗНАВАНІСТЬ У ПРОЦЕСІ ТЕКСТОВОГО СПРИЙНЯТТЯ: ПСИХОЛІНГВІСТИЧНИЙ ПІДХІД

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Ключові слова: *розпізнавання слова; морфологічна декомпозиція; лексична неоднозначність; аналіз художнього тексту; контекст, когнітивне опрацювання тексту*

У статті розглянуто лексичну впізнаваність як багатовимірний психолінгвістичний феномен, який виникає в процесі зв'язного читання, а не в ізольованому сприйнятті окремих слів. Традиційні дослідження зорового розпізнавання слів переважно зосереджувалися на орфографічній, фонологічній та морфологічній обробці окремих лексем, відтак значно менше уваги приділяли тому, як лексичний доступ

функціонує в межах цілісного дискурсу. У статті цю прогалину заповнено шляхом аналізу лексичної впізнаваності в художніх текстах із наголосом на взаємодії лексичних властивостей у процесі сприйняття «знизу вгору» (bottom-up) та контекстних обмежень у процесі сприйняття «згори вниз» (top-down). Теоретичною основою дослідження є чотирирівнева модель Морріса, що охоплює морфологічну структуру, знайомість слова, граматичний клас (повнозначні та службові слова) та лексичну неоднозначність. Із застосуванням якісного аналітичного підходу проаналізовано фрагменти романів Ф. Скотта Фіцджеральда «Великий Ґетсбі» та Кормака Маккарті «Дорога» з метою продемонструвати, як зазначені параметри динамічно функціонують у дескриптивній та мінімалістичній прозі. Проведений аналіз засвідчує, що лексичне розпізнавання в дискурсі має адаптивний і контекстно зумовлений характер: частотність слова та орфографічна знайомість самі по собі не визначають легкість його сприйняття. Натомість успішність розпізнавання залежить від узгодженості лексичного сигналу з моделлю сприйняття художнього тексту, яка формується у свідомості читача. Отримані результати підкреслюють роль морфологічної декомпозиції, фонологічної активації, контекстного прогнозування та стилістичних маркерів у формуванні доступності слова під час читання. Літературний контекст посилює взаємодію між лексичними характеристиками та наративними очікуваннями, демонструючи, як читачі інтегрують неоднозначні, низькочастотні або морфологічно складні слова в цілісні ментальні репрезентації. Дослідження робить внесок у психолінгвістику, поєднуючи класичні моделі лексичного доступу з аналізом художнього тексту і концептуалізуючи лексичну впізнаваність як ситуативний та багатокомпонентний процес у природних умовах читання.

Introduction. Lexical processing represents a core psycholinguistic mechanism underpinning reading comprehension, as words function not merely as visual forms but as cognitive units carrying meaning. Research in visual word recognition has extensively explored how isolated words are identified through orthographic, phonological, and morphological cues. Yet, in natural reading, words rarely appear in isolation; instead, lexical access occurs within continuous text, where constructing meaning, integrating semantic information, and predicting upcoming content are central cognitive objectives.

This distinction raises a fundamental psycholinguistic *research question*: how does lexical access differ when words are processed in isolation compared to when they are embedded in coherent discourse?

The topicality of this study is determined by the increasing focus of contemporary psycholinguistics on context-dependent mechanisms of lexical processing during reading. Therefore, investigating the multidimensional nature of lexical recognizability contributes to the development of modern theories of reading and has practical implications for language education and literary text analysis.

Contemporary research on lexical recognizability during reading builds on classic psycholinguistic foundations while integrating modern empirical evidence from self-paced reading, eye-tracking, and neurocognitive studies. Below are key contributions from recent literature that extend Morris's ideas to current theoretical and methodological contexts [Traxler & Gernsbacher, 2006].

Lexical recognizability constitutes a fundamental component of reading comprehension, allowing readers to access word meanings rapidly and integrate them seamlessly into the ongoing interpretation of text. Psycholinguistic research indicates that visual word recognition involves a complex interaction of orthographic, phonological, and semantic representations [Rayner, 2019]. In skilled adult readers, words are processed not as isolated letters but as holistic units, facilitating fluent reading and efficient comprehension.

Recent empirical studies underscore the multifaceted nature of lexical recognition. For instance, research published in the *Journal of Cognition* (2026) emphasizes that word recognition is a cognitive process that integrates perceptual input, attentional allocation, orthographic processing, and semantic activation. This interplay enables readers to identify words swiftly within their textual context while sustaining comprehension across sentences and extended passages.

The precision of word recognition also plays a pivotal role in reading development. Karageorgos et al. (2020), in a longitudinal investigation, demonstrated that accurate lexical recognition significantly influences both reading speed and overall comprehension.

These findings suggest that even adult readers rely on efficient lexical access to process complex texts effectively. Complementing this perspective, studies on bottom-up processing reveal that the ability to identify sublexical elements – such as letters or word fragments – directly impacts text understanding [Wiley et al., 2024]. Collectively, this research highlights that fluent reading depends on the automatic activation of lexical entries within the mental lexicon.

Empirical evidence from recent psycholinguistic studies indicates that individual letters are recognized more accurately when they occur within real words than in isolation or within nonwords. For example, Massol and Grainger (2025) demonstrated that letters embedded in words and sentences are identified with higher accuracy compared to when the same letters are presented in pseudowords or nonword strings, highlighting the word superiority effect and suggesting that readers process text holistically rather than letter-by-letter.

Contemporary research trends in lexical recognizability emphasize three interconnected aspects. First, the automation of lexical access, achieved through the integration of visual, phonological, and semantic information, enables rapid and efficient word processing. Second, attentional mechanisms and eye fixation patterns significantly influence lexical recognition, with fixation durations closely correlating with processing efficiency and the ease of accessing meaning in text. For example, de-la-Peña (2024) found that shorter fixation durations and efficient eye movement patterns are associated with more rapid recognition and integration of words during implicit reading tasks, indicating that attentional deployment reflected in fixations plays a central role in lexical processing.

Third, numerous studies confirm that automatic word recognition supports higher-level comprehension, freeing cognitive resources for interpreting narrative structures, stylistic elements, and deeper semantic content. According to the *lexical quality hypothesis*, readers with high-quality lexical representations recognize words more efficiently and with less cognitive effort, enabling them to devote attention to complex meaning integration and narrative inference during text processing [Perfetti, 2007].

This article addresses a critical gap in psycholinguistic research by examining lexical recognizability in the context of connected reading, particularly within literary texts, rather than isolated word paradigms. While previous studies have extensively explored visual word recognition and the role of frequency, morphology, and lexical ambiguity, few have integrated these factors with narrative context, stylistic devices, and discourse-level expectations.

By analyzing passages from Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* [Fitzgerald, 2004] and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* [McCarthy, 2006], this study demonstrates how morphological structure, word familiarity, grammatical class, and lexical ambiguity interact dynamically with top-down contextual cues to influence recognition and comprehension. The findings highlight the adaptive and context-sensitive nature of lexical access, providing deeper understanding of how readers process text in naturalistic, complex reading environments. Therefore, the study contributes to the field by bridging classic psycholinguistic models with contemporary literary analysis, offering new insights into how bottom-up and top-down mechanisms jointly shape lexical processing in real-world reading.

The aim of this study is to analyze lexical recognizability in connected reading, focusing on how words are accessed and integrated during comprehension in literary texts. **Objectives** are: (1) to examine the four-level model of lexical recognizability proposed by Morris, including morphological structure, word familiarity, grammatical class (content vs. function words), lexical ambiguity; (2) to illustrate the operation of these levels using examples from literary texts: Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*.

Object of the study – the processes of lexical recognition in text comprehension; **subject of the study –** psycholinguistic mechanisms of word recognition during reading.

Presentation of the main body. The present section examines the empirical and analytical findings related to lexical recognizability in literary texts, with a focus on the four-level model proposed by Morris [Traxler, & Gernsbacher, 2006, p. 378-384]. By exploring morphological structure, word familiarity, grammatical class, and lexical ambiguity, this analysis highlights how these dimensions interact with contextual factors to influence word recognition and comprehension. Literary examples from Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* serve as illustrative cases, demonstrating how lexical access operates dynamically in descriptive, ambiguous, and minimalist prose.

Lexical recognizability may be defined as the degree of cognitive accessibility of a word during reading. In experimental paradigms involving isolated word presentation, recognition is typically rapid and highly automatized. Readers rely on stored lexical representations activated through orthographic input, often without conscious awareness of intermediate processing stages [Melnychuk, 2023; Woolnough et al., 2021]. However, silent reading for comprehension imposes additional constraints. The reader must not only identify the word form but also integrate it into an evolving mental representation of the text. Thus, lexical access becomes embedded within a broader comprehension system involving semantic activation, syntactic integration, and discourse updating.

This distinction between isolated word recognition and contextualized reading suggests at least two important differences: (1) *task orientation*: in isolated paradigms, recognition itself is the goal; in reading, recognition serves comprehension; (2) *contextual pressure*: in text, lexical processing is influenced by prior semantic activation and expectations about upcoming information.

Importantly, lexical recognizability in a literary text is not merely a reflection of lexical frequency or orthographic familiarity. Instead, it emerges from the interaction between bottom-up lexical properties (form, morphology, frequency), semantic representation strength, and top-down contextual constraints. Therefore, lexical access in discourse should be conceptualized as an adaptive process in which recognition speed and stability depend on the compatibility between incoming lexical input and the developing discourse model.

Morphological decomposition plays a critical role in lexical recognizability, particularly for complex words composed of multiple morphemes. Psycholinguistic evidence suggests that the recognition of such words is not purely holistic; rather, readers access and process constituent morphemes during initial stages of lexical retrieval. For example, the frequency of individual morphemes can influence gaze duration and fixation times even when the overall word frequency is controlled [Andrews et al., 2004].

Studies employing eye-tracking during sentence reading demonstrate that morphologically complex words, such as affixed or compound words, elicit processing effects linked to their constituent morphemes. Words with high-frequency roots or affixes are recognized more quickly, indicating that morphemes serve as active processing units that facilitate word identification in context [Bertram et al., 2004]. These findings suggest that morphological structure provides a structural scaffold for lexical access. Rather than perceiving a word as an indivisible form, readers dynamically reconstruct its meaning by activating its components, supporting the view that lexical recognizability involves structural as well as lexical processing.

Moreover, cross-linguistic evidence indicates that the influence of morphology varies with the richness of the language's morphological system. Languages with highly transparent morphological patterns, such as Finnish or Hebrew, may show stronger early morpheme activation compared to languages with less transparent morphology, such as English [Deutsch et al., 2003]. This highlights that morphological decomposition is not only a function of word properties but also interacts with language-specific processing strategies.

Word familiarity is a critical determinant of lexical recognizability, reflecting the reader's cumulative exposure to a word and the strength of its mental representation. Psycholinguistic research has consistently demonstrated that highly familiar or frequent words are processed more rapidly, receive shorter fixation times, and are more likely to be skipped during reading, compared to less familiar or low-frequency words. This effect highlights the interplay of bottom-up lexical properties and experience-driven cognitive accessibility.

Beyond printed frequency, measures such as subjective familiarity ratings and age of acquisition (AoA) provide complementary insights. AoA, in particular, is thought to influence the quality of semantic representations, with earlier-acquired words often exhibiting richer, more robust connections within the mental lexicon. This aligns with psycholinguistic models suggesting that lexical access depends not only on form recognition but also on the activation strength of associated meanings.

Importantly, phonological representations play a pivotal role in reading. Even in silent reading, early phonological activation facilitates recognition, especially when words present ambiguous or irregular pronunciations. For example, words like *lead* (metal) versus *lead* (to guide) engage competing phonological patterns that influence fixation durations and integration processes. Psycholinguistically, this underscores that lexical access is not purely orthographic but integrates visual, phonological, and semantic information dynamically.

The grammatical class of a word – whether it is a content word or a function word – affects its recognizability, particularly in connected text. Content words carry semantic meaning, denoting entities, actions, or attributes, and often participate in productive compounding or derivational processes. Function words, in contrast, primarily serve grammatical or syntactic roles, such as linking content words, marking tense, or indicating relationships within the sentence. They contribute little independent semantic content.

Research on eye movements and reading behavior indicates that readers process these two classes differently. Content words tend to receive longer fixations, reflecting the additional cognitive effort required to access and integrate their semantic content. Function words, especially when short, frequent, and predictable, are more likely to be skipped or processed peripherally, indicating that their recognizability relies heavily on context rather than lexical form alone [Staub, 2024].

Importantly, while early stages of lexical access may show minimal differences between word classes, integration into the evolving mental representation of the text amplifies these distinctions. Content words contribute more to discourse construction, requiring the reader to activate associated semantic networks and integrate information across the sentence or par-

agraph. Function words, while critical for syntactic structuring, impose less semantic processing load and are often recognized through pattern-based or predictive mechanisms. Thus, lexical recognizability in text is modulated not only by the intrinsic properties of the word but also by its functional role within the sentence. The interaction between word class, frequency, length, and predictability determines the ease with which a word is identified and incorporated into the developing discourse representation.

Lexical ambiguity arises when a single word form corresponds to multiple meanings. Such ambiguity provides a unique window into the dynamic nature of lexical recognizability, as readers must not only identify the word but also select the appropriate meaning for integration into the ongoing discourse. Early research distinguished between *exhaustive access* and *selective access* models. Exhaustive access models propose that all possible meanings of an ambiguous word are initially activated, independent of context, and selection occurs only at later stages. Selective access models, in contrast, suggest that context can influence the activation of meanings early on, allowing readers to preferentially access the contextually appropriate interpretation [Simpson, 1994].

Psycholinguistic studies demonstrate that both mechanisms may operate depending on the characteristics of the word and sentence. For instance, the relative frequency or meaning dominance of interpretations affects which meanings become available first. Balanced ambiguous words, with meanings of roughly equal probability, tend to activate multiple interpretations simultaneously, whereas biased words, dominated by a single meaning, show faster access to the dominant interpretation. The subordinate bias effect further illustrates the role of context: when sentence context supports a less frequent meaning, readers exhibit longer fixation times, reflecting the increased cognitive effort required to boost activation of the subordinate interpretation.

Context plays a crucial role in shaping lexical recognizability, acting as a top-down influence that interacts with bottom-up word properties. Beyond orthography and morphology, *phonological information* contributes to the recognition process. Early activation of phonology can aid in distinguishing homographs or words with multiple possible pronunciations, facilitating rapid selection of the context-appropriate meaning. For example, encountering a word like "wind" in text may trigger different phonological patterns depending on whether the narrative describes weather or motion, illustrating that lexical access in connected reading is sensitive to sound-based cues even in silent reading.

From a *linguistic and cultural perspective*, the recognizability of words also depends on the reader's familiarity with language-specific conventions, idiomatic expressions, and culturally embedded vocabulary. Readers' background knowledge – including dialectal or regional variations – modulates the ease with which words are accessed and interpreted. Words that are highly frequent in one variety of English may be rare or carry different connotations in another, influencing fixation times and integration into mental text representations.

The *literary context* further illustrates the dynamic interplay between lexical properties and broader discourse. In narrative or poetic texts, authors often manipulate syntax, vocabulary, and semantic ambiguity to create aesthetic or interpretive effects. Lexical recognizability in such contexts is not solely determined by word frequency or morphological transparency; it is also guided by narrative cues, stylistic devices, and thematic expectations. For instance, in descriptive passages of literary fiction, low-frequency or archaic words may be recognized more efficiently if the surrounding context strongly supports their meaning, highlighting the predictive and integrative nature of reading for comprehension.

Overall, lexical recognizability in connected text emerges from a complex interaction of bottom-up features – orthography, morphology, phonology – and top-down influences – semantic context, cultural and linguistic knowledge, and literary expectations. This framework underscores that word recognition is not a static process but a situated, adaptive phenomenon shaped by the interplay of linguistic form, meaning, and context.

The following literary example illustrates contextual influence on lexical recognizability. Consider a passage from Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*: "He smiled understandingly – much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life." In this excerpt, several aspects illustrate psycholinguistic mechanisms of word recognition in context: (1) *lexical ambiguity and contextual disambiguation*. Words like *understandingly* and *reassurance* are morphologically complex and infrequent. Their meanings are not immediately obvious in isolation, but the surrounding narrative context provides semantic cues that guide the reader's recognition and interpretation; (2) *morphological decomposition*. The adverb *understandingly* is derived from the adjective *understanding* plus *-ly*. Readers can leverage their knowledge of morphemes to access the word meaning more efficiently, illustrating the point about morphological constituents supporting lexical access; (3) *predictive processing and literary style*. Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald's literary style, with its rich descriptive and evaluative language, sets up expectations for emotionally rich vocabulary. Readers anticipate words that describe perception or emotion, which

facilitates recognition of less frequent, contextually supported words; (4) *integration across sentence and discourse levels*. Recognizability here is not only about identifying individual words; it is about integrating them into the ongoing mental model of Gatsby's character and the scene's mood. Function words in a phrase like *it was one of those* are quickly processed, while content words like *eternal* and *reassurance* require deeper semantic integration.

This example demonstrates that lexical recognizability in literary texts is dynamically shaped by morphological cues, frequency/familiarity, word class, lexical ambiguity, and the stylistic and thematic context in which words appear. It highlights the adaptive, context-sensitive nature of reading, bridging the four dimensions outlined by Morris with real-world reading experience [Traxler & Gernsbacher, 2006, p. 378].

One more literary example demonstrates minimalist and context-dependent lexical recognizability. Consider a passage from Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*: "He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth."

This passage highlights several aspects of lexical recognizability: (1) *context-driven disambiguation*. Words like *intestate* are rare and potentially ambiguous. In isolation, *intestate* might be interpreted in its legal sense ("without a will"), but the surrounding apocalyptic context cues the reader to interpret it metaphorically, referring to the lifeless, lawless world. Context constrains and guides lexical access efficiently; (2) *morphological and lexical complexity*. Complex words (*relentless*, *absolute*) are accessed through their morphological components (*relent* plus *-less*, *absolut* plus *-e*) and by leveraging prior semantic knowledge, facilitating recognition despite low frequency; (3) *minimalistic style and predictive processing.* Cormac McCarthy's sparse style, with short sentences and limited function words, heightens the importance of each content word. Readers rely heavily on semantic and contextual cues to integrate word meaning and construct the scene. This illustrates how literary style can amplify the interaction between bottom-up lexical properties and top-down discourse expectations; (4) *integration with discourse representation*. Recognition of these words is not merely about form; it involves integrating them into a mental model of the bleak landscape, characters' psychological state, and narrative tension. The cognitive load increases with lexical rarity and ambiguity, demonstrating that recognizability is adaptive and context-sensitive.

This example complements the Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald excerpt by showing that lexical recognizability is highly contingent on context and style: in richly descriptive prose, readers benefit from predictive cues; in minimalist, ambiguous prose, recognition depends more heavily on discourse-level integration and inferential processing.

Conclusions and future research prospects. Lexical recognizability in text processing emerges as a multi-dimensional psycholinguistic phenomenon, shaped by the interaction of word-intrinsic properties and contextual constraints. Four presented levels – morphological structure, word familiarity, grammatical class, and lexical ambiguity – provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how words are accessed and integrated during comprehension. Contextual modulation amplifies these effects. Phonological cues, cultural and linguistic knowledge, and stylistic or narrative devices influence how words are recognized and interpreted. Literary examples from Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald (*The Great Gatsby*) and Cormac McCarthy (*The Road*) demonstrate that in descriptive, ambiguous, or minimalist prose, recognizability is not solely determined by frequency or orthographic familiarity but is heavily influenced by discourse-level expectations and predictive processing.

Future research may further explore how literary style, cross-linguistic variation, and narrative context shape lexical access, offering deeper insights into the flexible and context-sensitive nature of reading.

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