

Tess Fitzpatrick: 'What word associations can (and cannot) tell us about the mental lexicon'

Department of English Language and Applied Linguistics



Applied Linguistics Research Circle Weekly Talk

What word associations can (and cannot) tell us about the mental lexicon

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which word association methods have been used in applied linguistics and psycholinguistics research. Evidence suggests that word association tasks can reveal subtle but important differences in how individuals process language and construe meaning. Indeed, studies over the last fifty years have variously claimed that word association response patterns can discriminate variables including age, cognitive function, second language proficiency, personality, psychoses, and attitude/perspective. These differences could account for how language acquisition, use, and attrition (dementias, aphasias) affect connections between words in people's

minds. However, while findings hint at group effects and stable individual profiles, much of the research in this area has been fragmentary, results contradictory, and methodological approaches inconsistent and speculative. We will scrutinise the evidence to date, and consider how tenable it is to include word association methods in our linguistic toolkit, and under what conditions they can reliably be deployed.

Tess Fitzpatrick is Professor of Applied Linguistics at Swansea University, where she is Head of Applied Linguistics, Director of the Language Research Centre and co-founder of the Applied Linguistics and Welsh research group. Tess' work on second language vocabulary acquisition and testing is informed by her early career as an EFL teacher and teacher trainer. Her research focuses on vocabulary processing, and she leads the Lexical Studies research group at Swansea. Through the development of a new methodology for lexical investigation, using associative responses, she has extended her lexical research to contexts of ageing, dementia, and word choices in medical care. Tess was Chair of the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL) between 2015 and 2018. In 2017, she was awarded Fellowship of the Academy of Social Sciences, and in 2021 she was admitted as a Fellow of the Learned Society of Wales.