

# The brain dissociates between different levels of prediction during language comprehension



Edward W. Wlotko<sup>1,2</sup>, Margarita Zeitlin<sup>2</sup>, Simone Riley<sup>2</sup>, Maria Luiza Cuhna Lima<sup>2</sup>, Gina R. Kuperberg<sup>2,3,4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Sackler School of Graduate Biomedical Sciences and <sup>2</sup>Department of Psychology, Tufts University; <sup>3</sup>MGH/MIT/HMS Athinoula A. Martinos Center for Biomedical Imaging;

<sup>4</sup>Department of Psychiatry, Massachusetts General Hospital

## Introduction

Comprehenders continually generate probabilistic predictions at multiple levels of representation [1]

Here we asked whether and how predictions at different levels influence neural processing of incoming words

We recorded ERPs using a design in which target nouns fulfilled or violated contextual predictions at the level of *specific lexical items* and/or *verb-argument event structure*

## Design

Lexically constraining contexts (average constraint: 79%)

*The lifeguards received a report of sharks right near the beach. Their immediate concern was to prevent any incidents in the sea. Hence, they cautioned the...*

(1) SWIMMERS / (2) TRAINEES / (3) DRAWER ...

Target nouns were:

- (1) **Lexically Predictable**
- (2) **Lexical Prediction Violations**
- (3) **Lexical Prediction + Animacy Violations**

Lexically non-constraining contexts (average constraint: 26%)

*Eric and Grant received the news late in the day. They decided it was better to act sooner than later. Hence, they cautioned the...*

(4) **TRAINEES** / (5) **DRAWER** ...

Target nouns were:

- (4) **Lexically Unpredictable (non-violating)**
- (5) **Animacy Violations**

## Method

- 24 right-handed native English speaking volunteers participated
- Participants performed an acceptability judgment task
- Discourse contexts appeared in full; the third sentence appeared word-by-word w/ 450 ms duration and 100 ms ISI
- ERPs recorded with 32 Biosemi active electrodes, continuously sampled at 512 Hz with a bandpass filter of DC – 104 Hz

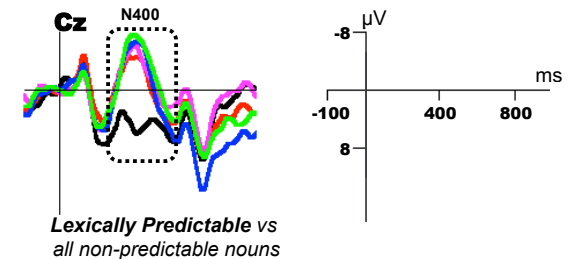
## Results and Discussion

### Semantic predictability

The amplitude of the N400 [2] was selectively reduced to the **Lexically Predictable** nouns compared to all other conditions

All non-predictable critical words (conds. 2-5) were matched on semantic relatedness to the contexts using Latent Semantic Analysis

Thus, the N400 primarily reflects the predictability of an incoming word's *semantic features*, rather than either its lexical predictability or its message-level coherence

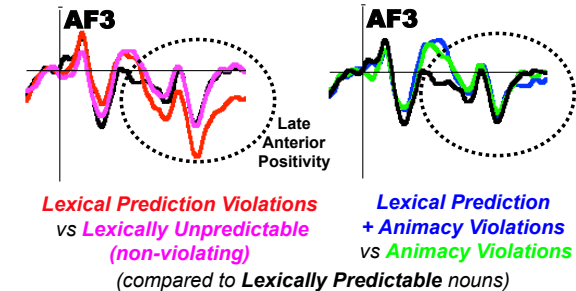


### Violations of lexical predictions

A Late Anterior Positivity was selectively enhanced to unpredictable nouns that were **Lexical Prediction Violations** compared to **Lexically Unpredictable (non-violating)** nouns [cf. 3]

The Late Anterior Positivity was not elicited by lexically violating nouns if these nouns were also **Animacy Violations**

The Late Anterior Positivity effect likely reflects the violation of a *high certainty lexical prediction*, within a coherent meaning representation

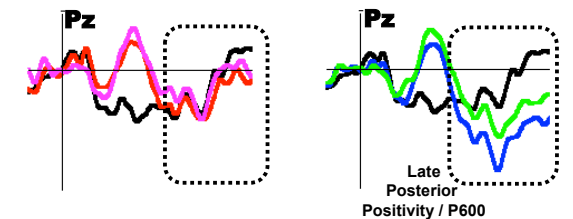


### Violations of event structure predictions

A Late Posterior Positivity (the P600 effect [4,5]) was selectively enhanced to nouns that violated *event structure* based on animacy restrictions of the verb [cf. 6,7]

The amplitude of the P600 was larger for **Animacy Violations in constraining contexts** (violating lexical predictions) compared to **Animacy Violations in non-constraining contexts** (no violation of lexical predictions)

Neural processing of words that violate event structure predictions vs. strong lexical predictions involve *distinct but partially interacting networks*



## Conclusions

We observed clear dissociable neural signatures of *semantic facilitation*, *lexical prediction violations*, and *event structure prediction violations* in the same participants performing the same task

Taken together, these findings support a hierarchical generative architecture in which unfolding bottom-up evidence that has not already been predicted at a given level of representation manifests in the brain as *distinct spatiotemporal neural signatures*

## References & Acknowledgements

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