

Your Unconscious Knows Your Name



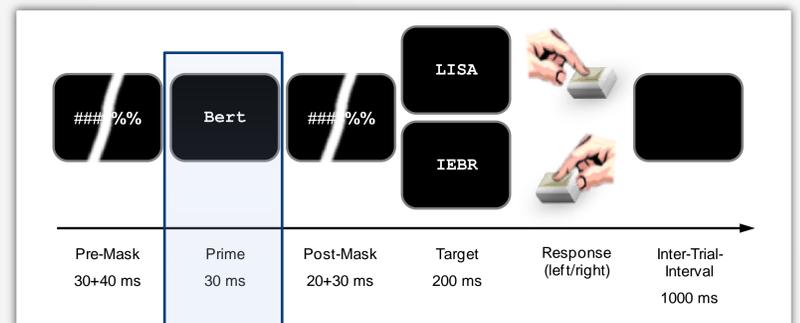
Roland Pfister, Carsten Pohl,
Andrea Kiesel, & Wilfried Kunde

University of Würzburg, Germany

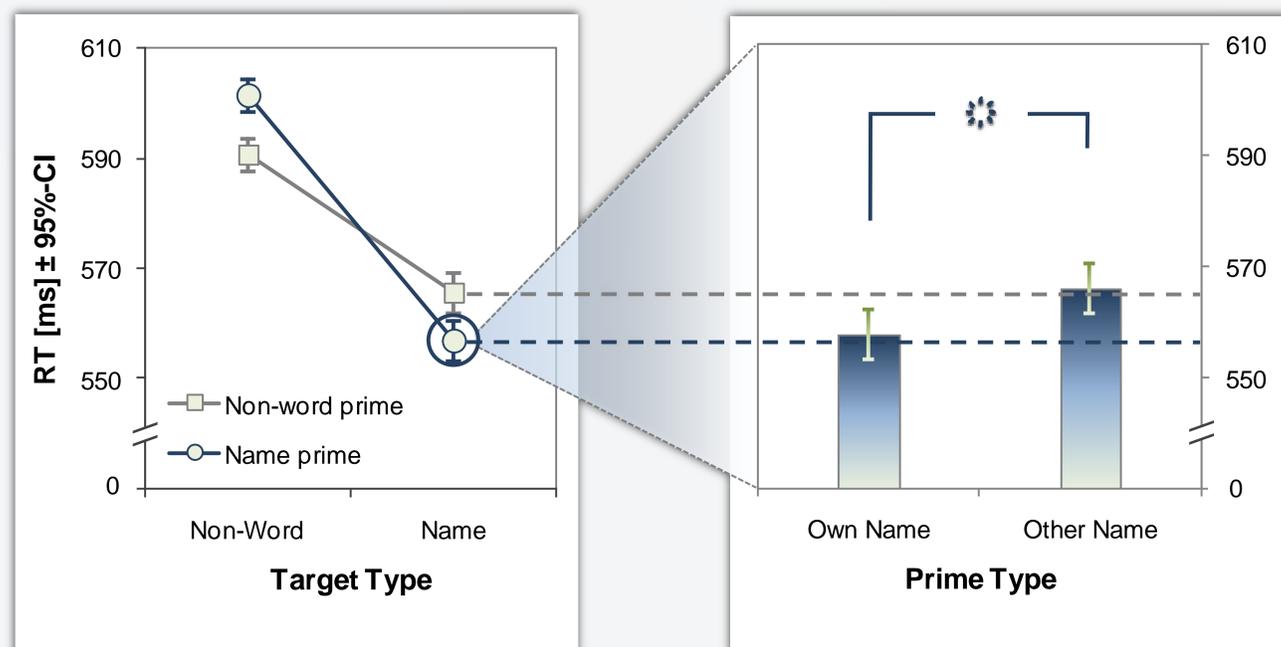
Background & Method

The own name is among the first concepts that a human being encounters. It is experienced thousands of times throughout the entire lifespan and it is one of the most resilient entries in memory. Accordingly, the sound of one's spoken name and the appearance of its written equivalent constitute a unique part of our conscious experience. It is unknown, however, whether the own name is also unique for the unconscious mind.

We conducted a subliminal priming experiment in which participants (N = 24) classified a target as name (e. g., "LISA") or non-word (e. g., "IEBR"). The target was always preceded by a masked prime stimulus and SDT-results indicated that primes were indeed rendered unconscious. Unbeknown to the participants, among these primes were the name of the current participant and the name of another, yoked participant.



Including the participant's own name and the name of a yoked partner!



Results

Responses were faster when prime and target called for the same response than for opposite responses, revealing typical priming effects, $F(1, 23) = 28.35, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .55$.

Detailed analyses of name targets showed that the own name prime facilitated responding just like target primes whereas the other name did not and elicited slower responses than the own name prime did, $t(23) = 2.68, p = .013$.

Conclusions

The present results depart from classic findings on the own name's astonishing potential to capture attention and its preferential access to consciousness (e. g., Moray, 1959). Here we demonstrate that the own name is also processed preferentially in the unconscious mind, even though its neural representation is too weak to reach consciousness eventually.

References & Full Article

- Moray, N. (1959). Attention in dichotic listening: Affective cues and the influence of instructions. *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 11, 56-60.
- Pfister, R., Pohl, C., Kiesel, A., & Kunde, W. (2012). Your unconscious knows your name. *PLoS One*, 7(3), e32402.