Conjunction Memory Errors: Familiarity without recollection?

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Abstract

Dual process models of recognition have been used to account for conjunction errors, however it is not clear whether recollection assists to avoid these errors or exacerbates them. This paper describes two experiments aimed at shedding light on the role of recollection in conjunction errors. Compound words were presented in either distinctive fonts or common fonts and later tested in either the common font, the same distinctive font or a distinctive font studied with other words, with lures. Participants correctly recognized more studied items when they were tested in the same distinctive font used during encoding but they also made more conjunction errors when conjunction lures were presented in the font that was used with parent stimuli during study. Importantly, conjunction errors were reduced in the divided attention condition while correct recognition of the studied items was greater in the full attention condition. These results suggest that contextual cues may exacerbate conjunction errors by spurious recollection of episodic details.