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Individual differences in subphonemic sensitivity and phonological skills

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ABSTRACT

Many studies have established a link between phonological abilities (indexed by phonological awareness and phonological memory tasks) and typical and atypical reading development. Individuals who perform poorly on phonological assessments have been mostly assumed to have *underspecified* (or "fuzzy") phonological representations, with typical phonemic categories, but with greater category overlap due to imprecise encoding. An alternative posits that poor readers have *overspecified* phonological representations, with speech sounds perceived allophonically (phonetically distinct variants of a single phonemic category). On both accounts, mismatch between phonological categories and orthography leads to reading difficulty. Here, we consider the implications of these accounts for online speech processing. We used eye tracking and an individual differences approach to assess sensitivity to subphonemic detail in a community sample of young adults with a wide range of reading-related skills. Subphonemic sensitivity inversely correlated with meta-phonological task performance, consistent with overspecification.

Introduction

Phonology is important to the acquisition of skilled reading, and limitations in phonological processing contribute to reading difficulties (Brady, Braze, & Fowler, 2011; Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014). Considerable effort has been spent identifying the underlying causes of *decoding-based reading disorder* (RD), commonly called developmental "dyslexia" (e.g., Brady et al., 2011; Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014), and the phonological core deficit model has, perhaps, received the most attention (e.g., Gallagher, Frith, & Snowling, 2000; Liberman, 1973; Liberman & Mattingly, 1985; Stanovich, 1988). This model holds that difficulty in the phonological component of language plays a causal role in reading problems (Harm & Seidenberg, 1999; Puolakanaho et al., 2007; Ramus, 2003; for a review, see Brady, 2011). Indeed, a range of phonological and meta-phonological capacities have well-established associations with reading ability and reading acquisition, including phonological awareness (Bruck, 1992; Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1991; Scarborough, 1989), rapid automatized naming (Blachman, 1984; Wolf & Bowers, 1999), phonological short-term memory (McDougall, Hulme, Ellis, & Monk, 1994), and set for variability (Anthony et al., 2010; Tunmer & Chapman, 2012; Venezky, 1999). Furthermore, it has been suggested that individual differences in meta-phonological skills (e.g., phonological awareness) and phonological representations may modulate the development and expression of skilled reading (Ramus, Marshall, Rosen, & Van Der Lely, 2013).

Of course, factors other than phonology are certainly required to achieve skilled reading (Braze, Tabor, Shankweiler, & Mencl, 2007; Kieffer, Petscher, Proctor, & Silverman, 2016), and are often implicated in failure to do so (Catts & Adolph, 2011; Elwér et al., 2015; Pennington, 2006; Snowling, 2008). Indeed, we assume that a multivariate continuum of skills, capacities, and experiences serve to co-determine how quickly and how well an individual learns to read (e.g., Catts, McIlraith, Bridges, & Nielsen, 2017). Phonological ability is a part of that continuum, but certainly not the whole of it. However, given the importance of phonological capacities to the attainment of reading skills, and the relevance of other factors notwithstanding, our goal in this paper is to better understand the nature of meta-phonological skills differences implicated in variation in reading ability.

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Two accounts of phonological performance deficits: underspecified vs. overspecified representations

Two prominent theoretical accounts of the connection between phonology and reading suggest that this association depends on the degree of specificity of phonological representations. On these accounts, RD individuals' phonological representations are either under- or overspecified (as labelled by Noordenbos, Segers, Serniclaes, & Verhoeven, 2013). The underspecification account suggests that RD individuals' poorer performance on meta-phonological tasks originate from incomplete or imprecise encoding of speech. In contrast, the overspecification account suggests that RD individuals may have excessively fine-grained phonological representations (i.e., more phonological categories) than are characteristic of a given language. We consider both of these accounts in turn.

The underspecification hypothesis suggests that phonological differences associated with difficulties in learning to read originate from incomplete or imprecise encoding of speech, such as impaired sensitivity to rapid acoustic changes in speech stimuli (Tallal, 1980; Tallal, Merzenich, Miller, & Jenkins, 1998). Support for this possibility comes from evidence that the relative distinctiveness of phonological representations in perception and/or production may predict pre-literate children's future reading abilities. For example, Elbro, Borstrøm, and Petersen (1998) reported that kindergarteners who produced less distinct pronunciations were significantly more likely to develop RD in the future, even when factors like non-verbal IQ, articulatory fluency, and lexical access were taken into account.

Underspecified phonological representations would lead to more perceptual overlap between neighboring phonological categories (Elbro, 1998), making it more difficult for a beginning reader to achieve robust and distinct grapheme-phoneme mappings. Consider that English orthography employs a *many-to-many* mapping between phonemes and graphemes (or spelling patterns, more generally). That is, the same phoneme can map to different graphemes (e.g., /s/ in ⟨CENT⟩ vs. ⟨SENT⟩ vs. ⟨PSYCHE⟩) and one grapheme can map to different phonemes (e.g., ⟨SE⟩ maps to /s/ in ⟨LEASE⟩ vs. /z/ in ⟨PLEASE⟩).[1] Underspecification implies that segments that are already similar to each other would sound even more similar to a listener with underspecified representations (see Fig. 1; compare left and center panels). For example, /d/ and /t/, are distinguished only by voicing. "Fuzzier" representations of /d/ and /t/ would result in words like ⟨DENT⟩ and ⟨TENT⟩ sounding more similar, exacerbating the potential for phoneme-grapheme mapping problems. Given greater ambiguity in the mapping from acoustics to perceptual categories, correspondences that are clear for typical individuals become more challenging for individuals with underspecified phonological representations.

Alternately, phonological performance deficits in RD individuals may instead stem from overspecified phonological representations. On the overspecification hypothesis, a listener would have *more* contrastive sound categories than a typical listener (see Fig. 1; compare center and right panels). That is to say, individuals with overspecified phonological representations would retain greater sensitivity to phonetic distinctions that are actually *subphonemic* for most individuals who speak that language. In this case, RD individuals may be more attuned to allophones (phonetic variants within a phonemic category) than to phonemes. There is evidence that individuals with RD show atypical categorical perception: reduced discrimination in native-language phonemic contrasts, but enhanced discrimination in spoken sounds within a given phonemic category (Serniclaes, Sprenger-Charolles, Carré, & Démonet, 2001; Serniclaes, Van Heghe, Mousty, Carré, & Sprenger-Charolles, 2004). For example, on the voice onset time (VOT) continuum, individuals with allophonic perception might register the phones [d], [t] and [t^h] (with VOT ranges of approximately −165 to −40 ms, 0–25 ms, and 25–125 ms, respectively; Lisker & Abramson, 1964), as belonging to distinct phonological categories, even in a language where there should only be two such categories, /d/ and /t/ (with VOT < 30 ms and VOT > −30 ms in English, respectively; Hoonhorst et al., 2009).

Although typical readers are sensitive to allophonic variation at the phonetic level, they nonetheless reliably map allophones onto a smaller set of phonemic categories at the phonological level (see Serniclaes et al., 2004). In contrast, Serniclaes (2006) suggests that individuals with RD fail to associate allophonic variants with appropriate phonemic categories at the phonological level, and use allophones as the primary functional units for speech. While such *allophonic perception*[2] may not cause obvious difficulty in speech processing, the mismatch between phonological categories and graphemes may cause important problems in reading acquisition and processing (Serniclaes, 2006). For example, while typical readers may have consistent phoneme–grapheme mappings (e.g., /d/ → ⟨D⟩; /t/ → ⟨T⟩), individuals with overspecified phonological representations may have more variable mappings (e.g., [d] → ⟨D⟩; [t] → {⟨D⟩, ⟨T⟩}; [t^h] → ⟨T⟩; for schematics, see Fig. 5 in Serniclaes, 2006).

It is worth noting that both underspecification and overspecification hypotheses predict that certain phonetic contrasts may be hard for affected listeners to detect—but for different reasons. For instance, with overspecified phonological representations, additional allophonic representations (e.g., [t]) straddle the boundaries of canonical phonemic categories (e.g., /d/ and /t/), and any two sounds that fall within such a range would be hard to distinguish from each other (see again Fig. 1). However, for phonemes with multiple allophonic variants (e.g., allophones [t] and [t^h] for phoneme /t/), individuals relying on allophonic perception may make unnecessarily fine-grained distinctions among sounds that fall within a single phonemic category. Thus, while both accounts predict cases where there is less sensitivity to distinguishing spoken sounds, only overspecification predicts cases with greater sensitivity. Therefore, behavior indicating greater subphonemic sensitivity would be consistent with the overspecification hypothesis and at odds with underspecification.

Eye tracking: A sensitive timecourse measure for online phonological processing

The debate over whether phonological performance deficits implicated in RD arise from underspecified or overspecified representations is difficult to resolve by way of conventional standardized tests, like measures of phonological awareness (PA) or rapid automatized naming (RAN). Almost universally, standardized phonological skills measures used in reading research, for classroom progress monitoring, or for clinical assessment, are significantly *meta-linguistic* in nature, depending not only on underlying phonological representations and processes, but also on the ability to reason more or less consciously about them. Moreover, such tasks capture only the behavioral end points (e.g., accuracy, response time) of cognitive processes. Therefore, they do not provide much insight into how differences in phonological

[1] Throughout the manuscript, we use the linguistic conventions to notate phones in square brackets (i.e., [ ]), phonemes in virgules (i.e., / /), and graphemes in angle brackets (i.e., ⟨ ⟩). In addition, we use braces (i.e., { }) to represent a set of tokens.

[2] Serniclaes et al. (2004) "refer to this as 'allophonic perception' rather than simply as 'phonetic perception.' Allophonic perception implies that although the perceptual system does not decode speech into phonetic units, it is sensitive to segments that are present as allophones in the language. However, phonetic distinctions that are totally absent in the sounds of the language would not be kept in the phonological repertoire. Thus, speech perception by children affected by dyslexia would be neither reducible to phonetic perception nor equivalent to normal phonological perception. Rather, it would correspond to a deviant phonological development based on allophones rather than on phonemes" (p. 341).

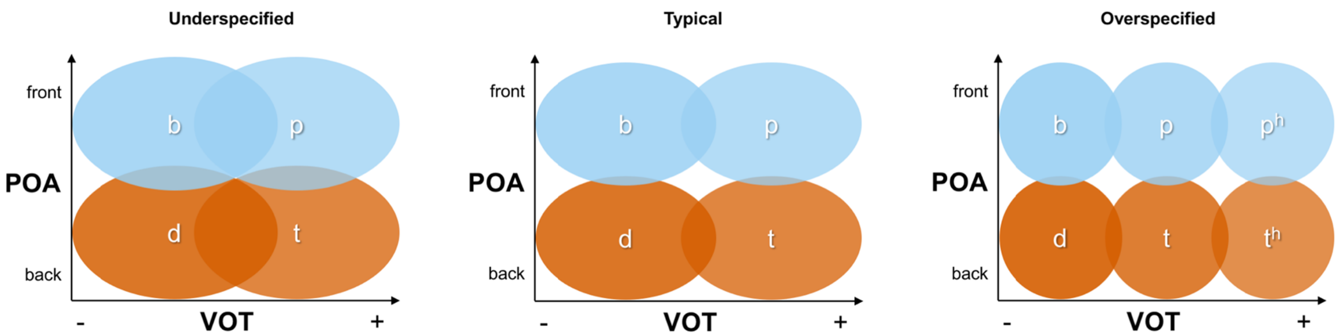

Fig. 1. Phonological categories as functional units in different levels of phonological specification. In listeners with typical language (center panel), the functional units of spoken word recognition are phonemes. While phonemic perception is largely categorical, there is a modest overlap between categories where speech sounds on the boundary may be somewhat ambiguous. Underspecification accounts propose that the phonological categories of RD individuals are phonemic, but have "fuzzy" boundaries (left panel). That is, individuals with underspecified phonological representations use phonemes as functional units in spoken word recognition, but these categories have greater overlap than the categories of typical listeners. Overspecification accounts (right panel), in contrast, propose that RD individuals divide phonological space into more categories than individuals with typical language, where the functional units are allophones ("variants of the same phoneme in the production of speech under the effect of coarticulation"; Serniclaes et al., 2004, p. 338). VOT = voice onset time; POA = place of articulation.

representations relate to reading skill or the fine-grained time course of lexical access and competition (in print or speech).

That said, the relationships among decoding ability, phonological representations, and phonological processing have been investigated with behavioral measures like categorical perception tasks or neurophysiological measures like EEG. Categorical perception is typically measured with identification and discrimination of spoken stimuli varying along a minimal-pair continuum (e.g., /ta/-/da/). The slope of identification rates as a function of the continuum step indicates boundary precision between phonemic categories, whereas ability to discriminate adjacent continuum steps within (usually hard) and between categories (usually easy) can reflect sensitivity to phonemic and subphonemic features (Serniclaes, 2006). Strongly categorical perception is indicated when an individual exhibits a steep (sigmoidal) identification curve and her discrimination is high and maximal at the boundary indicated by the identification curve and poor throughout the rest of the continuum (Serniclaes, 2006). In contrast, as mentioned previously, individuals with RD (or at risk for RD) often show less clear categorical perception: less steep identification slopes, lower peak discrimination at the typical boundary, and additional discrimination peaks at within-category stimulus pairs that often align with phonetic boundaries between *allophones* (2004; Noordenbos et al., 2012a, 2013; Serniclaes et al., 2001), suggesting phonological representations organized allophonically rather than phonemically (Serniclaes, 2006). Although categorical perception tasks have proved fruitful in assessing underlying phonological representations, they nevertheless require post-perceptual meta-linguistic judgments, and so might not be sensitive to subtleties of online speech processing.

On the other hand, neurophysiological measures with high temporal resolution (e.g., EEG) may reflect automatic responses and detect fine-grained differences during online speech processing that reveal the characteristics of phonological representations of the listener. For instance, two longitudinal studies carried out in the USA (Molfese & Molfese, 1997; Molfese, 2000; Molfese, Molfese, & Modgline, 2001) and Finland (Guttorm et al., 2005; Guttorm, Leppänen, Tolvanen, & Lyytinen, 2003; Lyytinen et al., 2004) provide evidence that differences in event-related potentials (ERPs) in response to speech and non-speech auditory signals at birth (e.g., N1 peak latency, N2 peak amplitude, mean amplitude, mismatch negativity) may predict subsequent differences in oral language and literacy skills in the preschool and early grade school years. Furthermore, individuals at risk for or with RD, whose performance in behavioral categorical speech perception tasks is comparable with that of typical readers, still show neural sensitivity to allophonic contrasts as indexed by the mismatch negativity (MMN) component of ERP (Noordenbos et al., 2013; Noordenbos, Segers, Serniclaes, Mitterer, & Verhoeven, 2012b). This implies that, despite indistinguishable behavioral judgment in categorical perception, subtle differences of phonological perception between typically developing vs. RD individuals can be detected with more sensitive measures of automatic, online processing. However, while neurophysiological measures like EEG indeed provide substantial insight, discrepancies between neurophysiological and behavioral results can be challenging to interpret (cf. Noordenbos et al., 2012b; Noordenbos et al., 2013).

To better inform the over- vs. underspecification debate and to potentially provide converging evidence, a more ideal solution would be behavioral measures capable of capturing fine-grained, automatic cognitive processing in real time, such as the Visual World Paradigm (VWP; Tanenhaus, Spivey-Knowlton, Eberhard, & Sedivy, 1995). In a basic VWP study of spoken word processing (e.g., Allopenna, Magnuson, & Tanenhaus, 1998), participants follow simple spoken instructions to interact with a visual scene. Fixation proportions over time closely track phonetic detail, and participants' fixations are assumed to reflect the real-time activation of the pictures' names during lexical access.

The VWP has proved fruitful in measuring the fine-grained nature of online speech processing at various linguistic levels, including discourse/pragmatic (Altmann & Kamide, 2009; Engelhardt, Bailey, & Ferreira, 2006; Magnuson, Tanenhaus, & Aslin, 2008), syntactic (Chambers, Tanenhaus, & Magnuson, 2004; Tanenhaus et al., 1995), semantic (Huettig & Altmann, 2005; Kaiser, Runner, Sussman, & Tanenhaus, 2009), lexical (Magnuson, Dixon, Tanenhaus, & Aslin, 2007), phonemic (Allopenna et al., 1998; Desroches, Joanisse, & Robertson, 2006; Magnuson, Tanenhaus, Aslin, & Dahan, 2003) and, most importantly for the purposes of our study, at subphonemic levels (Dahan, Magnuson, Tanenhaus, & Hogan, 2001; McMurray, Aslin, Tanenhaus, Spivey, & Subik, 2008). While general speech perception and comprehension (as assessed by standardized instruments) do not seem to be severely affected in RD and related phonological deficits (Giraud & Poeppel, 2012; Serniclaes et al., 2004), the VWP has the potential to reveal subtle differences in sensitivity to even subphonemic coarticulatory details in speech (Dahan et al., 2001). For example, Cross and Joanisse (2018) demonstrated differences between adults and children in responses to coarticulatory cues.

Therefore, in this study, we investigated individuals' sensitivity to subphonemic information using a VWP task. We modeled our study closely after the eye tracking experiment used by Dahan et al. (2001), who extended the basic VWP for spoken word recognition (Allopenna et al., 1998) to subcategorical (i.e., subphonemic) detail in speech. In order to tap into participants' sensitivity to subphonemic information, they created spoken stimuli with misleading coarticulation by cross-splicing the onset and nucleus of one word onto the offset of another. For example, they took a target word (W1; e.g., /nɛt/) and spliced its final consonant onto the initial portion (beyond the midpoint of the vowel) of another token of W1, of a different real word (W2; e.g., /nɛk/), or of a nonword (N3; e.g., /nɛp/). Thus, they had three forms of each target word (where subscripts indicate coarticulation present in the vowel): an identity-spliced token with no misleading coarticulation (W1W1; /nε_tt/) as the control condition, a cross-spliced token with misleading coarticulation consistent with a lexical alternative (W2W1; /nε_kt/), and a cross-spliced token with misleading coarticulation that did not favor a lexical item (N3W1; /nε_pt/).

Dahan et al. (2001) study was motivated by earlier work by Marslen-Wilson and Warren (1994), who claimed to have found lexical decision results that conflicted with predictions from the TRACE model of spoken word recognition (McClelland & Elman, 1986). According to simulations conducted by Marslen-Wilson and Warren (1994), TRACE predicts that W2W1 should be harder to process than N3W1, because the initial portion of W2W1 matches a word (W2), which should be strongly activated and so compete with W1, while the initial portion of N3W1 would not selectively activate a competitor. Counter to this prediction, Marslen-Wilson and Warren (1994) found that W2W1 and N3W1 both took longer to recognize in a lexical decision task than W1W1, but W2W1 was recognized just as quickly as N3W1. Dahan et al. (2001) asked whether the lexical decision task might not be sufficiently sensitive to detect differences.

Using the VWP and a sample of university students, Dahan et al. (2001) compared the time course of target (W1) and competitor (W2) fixations (Experiment 2; or just fixations to the target in Experiment 1) given W1W1, W2W1, or N3W1 as the stimulus. They observed that target fixation proportions rose significantly faster for W1W1 (no mismatch) than for N3W1 or W2W1. Crucially, participants were significantly faster to fixate W1 given N3W1 than W2W1—in contrast to Marslen-Wilson and Warren (1994) finding, but consistent with TRACE. Dahan et al. (2001) referred to the difference of target fixations between W1W1 and N3W1 as a *phonological mismatch effect* and the difference between N3W1 and W2W1 as a *lexical competition effect*. That is, while both N3W1 and W2W1 differ from W1 phonologically, W2W1 adds the influence of a specific lexical competitor. Dahan et al. (2001) finding suggests that, compared to final outcome measures (e.g., reaction time and accuracy in lexical decision), the VWP is a more sensitive measure, able to reveal subtle differences during online speech perception that were masked in lexical decision.

As we noted above, standardized assessments that rely on metalinguistic judgements and/or recall appear to identify deviation from typical phonological abilities, but cannot distinguish between the possibilities of under- vs. overspecification. Both hypotheses predict more effortful speech processing and increased competition for clear speech (Fig. 2, top row), and listeners with either underspecified or overspecified representations would be predicted to show weaker lexical activation of a target word (e.g., shallower slopes and lower asymptotes) as compared to typical listeners (Fig. 2, bottom row). Specifically, given underspecification, even clear inputs would result in less selective activation, during which more phonological categories are activated than under typical speech processing. For example, a /t/ input could lead to similar activation among phonemes differing from /t/ by a feature or two, such as /d/, /p/, /k/, etc. (Fig. 2, top left panel). Given overspecification, there would be more competition than under typical speech processing because there would be more phonological categories. For example, a clear /t/ would produce strong competition among [t^h], [t], [d], etc., under allophonic perception (Fig. 2, top right panel). Similarly, poor performance on standardized assessments could result from either kind of deviation (i.e., under- or overspecification) from typical, phonemically-grained perception.

On the other hand, under- vs. overspecification hypotheses have distinct predictions when it comes to real-time phonological and lexical activations for unclear speech with mismatching coarticulation (Fig. 2, middle row). Listeners with overspecified representations would show much weaker lexical activation of the target than typical listeners (Fig. 2, bottom row). In contrast, for listeners with underspecified representations, mismatching coarticulation would give rise to similar phonological and lexical activations as clear speech, since more overlap between phonological categories results in more diffusive and less selective activation. For example, a vowel containing mismatching coarticulatory cues of /p/ would still activate /t/ strongly, consequently leading to similar activation as induced by consistent coarticulation cues of /t/ (Fig. 2, middle left). Overspecification, however, predicts that mismatching coarticulation would activate more partially matching phonological categories than a typical listener would have, causing more disruption from mismatching cues than a typical listen would have. For example, a vowel containing mismatching coarticulatory cues of /p/ would activate at least two allophones ([p^h] and [p]), as opposed to one phoneme (/p/), which would compete with phonological categories consistent with /t/ more than for a typical listener, resulting in an enhanced phonological mismatch effect (Fig. 2, middle right). Therefore, while both under- and overspecified phonological representations may lead to more suppressed phonological and lexical activations overall given clear speech, differences in underlying phonological categories may be revealed by real-time, fine-grained measures that reflect lexical activation as a function of mismatching coarticulatory information.

A community sample for investigating individual differences

Although the hypotheses under scrutiny here have been largely motivated by studies of individuals with RD, we believe that it is worthwhile to expand the investigation to a wider population. Our motivation for an individual differences approach is the premise that phonological processing skills modulate the outcome of reading acquisition continuously across the full range of reading ability. For instance, in Scarborough (1989) study, preschoolers' phonological awareness, measured and analyzed as a continuous variable, uniquely explained the wide variation in reading outcomes at second grade, ranging from reading disabled, to low-achieving, to normal. Also, functional neuroimaging research shows that the amount of overlap between the neural substrates of speech processing and print processing varies continuously with reading skill (Frost et al., 2009; Preston et al., 2016; Shankweiler et al., 2008), implying that better readers tend to engage more phonological processing in reading and supporting the idea that phonological ability may be an important locus on which individuals with different levels of reading competence vary.

While the modal approach to studying reading abilities is to divide participants into dichotomous groups (e.g., typical readers vs. RD individuals), it is clear that language abilities are continuously distributed in the population, as are the consequences of those language differences for the acquisition of reading skill (Frost, 1998; Snowling & Hayiou-Thomas, 2006; Snowling, Gallagher, & Frith, 2003; Stanovich, 1988). Indeed, studies comparing dichotomous and continuous analytic approaches find better statistical fit when treating language ability as a continuous predictor (e.g., McMurray, Munson, & Tomblin, 2014). Further, there is little evidence of discontinuity between the phonological skills scores of those with and without RD (O'Brien, McCloy, Kubota, & Yeatman, 2018; Ramus et al., 2013; Scarborough, 1989). It is just that those whose skills lie in the extreme tail of the distribution may, as a consequence, have noticeable difficulty with phonologically demanding tasks, like learning to read. However, such difficulty may be modulated by exacerbating or protective factors (Catts et al., 2017; Snowling, 2008).

For practical purposes, threshold scores on standard skill measures are sometimes used to assist with decisions about assignment of learners to enrichment or intervention programs. This should not be taken to mean that the underlying causes of variation in reading skill in such readers are qualitatively different from the drivers of variation in more typical learners. Rather, those who have greater difficulty in mastering the written word are simply less capable, than are typical readers, in some of the abilities that determine reading skill (Goswami & Bryant,

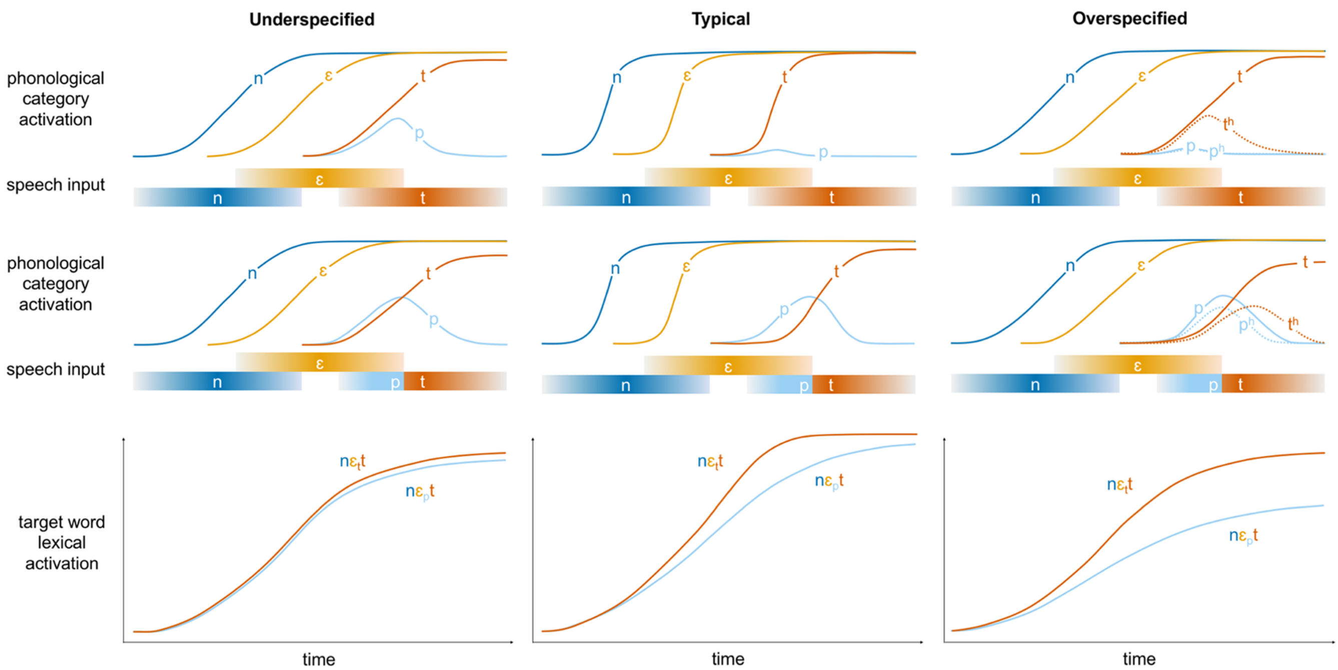

Fig. 2. Hypothesized phonological activations in response to speech input with consistent coarticulatory cues (W1W1; top row) and mismatching coarticulatory cues (N3W1; middle row) as well as corresponding lexical activations of the target word (W1; bottom row) for listeners with typical (middle column), underspecified (left column), and overspecified (right column) phonological representations. For a listener with typical language (middle column), given consistent coarticulation (W1W1), similar phonemes are slightly activated (top panel); here, transient activation of only /p/ is depicted for clarity. The mismatching coarticulation (N3W1) briefly advantages /p/, slightly delaying /t/'s activation (middle panel). As a result, lexical activation of the target word (W1) is slightly suppressed given N3W1 (bottom panel). For a listener with overspecified phonological representations (right column), the target phonological categories are not /n/, /ε/ and /t/, but more detailed units such as allophones (as illustrated here just at the final position, where unaspirated and aspirated variants of /t/ and /p/ all compete). Thus, phonological activation may actually emerge more slowly at each position, because even when coarticulation is ultimately consistent (W1W1), there are more potential competitors at any position given more phonological categories (top panel). Similarly, the mismatching coarticulation (N3W1) activates more partially matching phonological categories than a typical listener would have, leading to substantially more disruption than for a typical listener (middle panel). Consequently, the hypothetical time course of target word lexical activation is depressed given W1W1, and even more so given N3W1, relative to that for a typical listener (bottom panel). For a listener with underspecified phonological representations (left column), the target phonological categories are similar to those in typical listeners (that is, more phonemic than allophonic) but have a coarser grain, leading to more diffuse activation of similar phonemes and slower phonological activation. Hence, /t/ and /p/ compete more strongly given W1W1 than they would for a typical listener (top panel). Mismatching coarticulation (N3W1) would have similar consequences as consistent coarticulation does, since these similar phonemes activate each other as strongly (middle panel). Therefore, while lexical activation would be predicted to be generally more sluggish than for typical listeners, there would be little or no difference due to mismatching coarticulation (bottom panel).

1989). This is a quantitative statement about differences in the achievement of reading skill across the full range of ability, including those with extremely low skill. Moreover, it is important to recognize that both outcome skill measures (e.g., accuracy, reaction time) and online processing measures (e.g., eye tracking) are continuously distributed. Our goal in this paper is to illuminate connections between differences in online speech processing and differences on standardized skill measures across the range of ability.

The current study

We seek new insight into the nature of phonological differences associated with reading abilities through two innovations. First, we augment conventional standardized assessments of linguistic and cognitive abilities with an experimental paradigm aimed at tracking the time course of spoken word recognition at a subphonemic grain, with the potential to distinguish overspecification from underspecification. Second, we employ a community-based sample with greater variability in linguistic and cognitive abilities, as well as demographics, than typical psycholinguistic samples, potentially providing a more representative picture of reading-related ability in the population and enhancing statistical power for investigating individual differences (cf. Braze et al., 2016, 2007; Johns et al., 2018; Johns, Matsuki, & Van Dyke, 2015; Kukona et al., 2016; Van Dyke, Johns, & Kukona, 2014). By comparing individuals' online speech processing to outcome measures of phonological skills more typically used in reading research, we aim to probe the relationship between phonological representations and phonological skills (see Ramus et al., 2013). Thus, we provide new leverage for addressing the under- vs. overspecification debate about the phonological performance deficits implicated in poor reading achievement by investigating the following research questions. Does sensitivity to subphonemic information differ as a function of those phonological skills implicated in reading abilities? If so, does sensitivity to subphonemic information decrease or increase as phonological skills decrease, indicating underspecified or overspecified phonological representations, respectively?

Predictions

Prediction 1: We expected to replicate the well-established finding that performance on standardized measures for meta-phonological skills (e.g., phonological awareness and phonological memory) is highly correlated with performance on other reading-related skills (e.g., decoding and reading comprehension). Testing this correlation will provide a useful empirical contribution, addressing whether the association between phonological skills and reading ability persists in adulthood (one of many aspects of language that have been studied extensively with children but rarely with adults; but see Bruck, 1992; Katz et al., 2012).

Prediction 2: We predicted that individuals' phonological skills would also be correlated with the size of the lexical competition effect (i.e., difference between N3W1 and W2W1) observed in the eye tracking data. We assume that the quality of individuals' lexical representations (Perfetti, 2007) would vary with their phonological skills, such that individuals with lower phonological skills would have lower quality lexical representations due to reading deficiency. Furthermore, higher quality of lexical representations may lead to stronger competition among related lexical items. Indeed, it has been shown that individuals with slower access to lexical information show less interference between lexical competitors (Kukona et al., 2016). Thus, we predicted that individuals with lower phonological skills would have a weaker lexical competition effect. Note that this prediction cannot distinguish between the two alternative accounts under investigation in the current study, since both under- and overspecified phonological representations should cause poor lexical representations because of suboptimal mappings between spoken categories and graphemes. Therefore, it is crucial to probe the factor that could be decisive—individual differences in subphonemic sensitivity—with the phonological mismatch effect.

Prediction 3: Most importantly, we predicted that fine-grained subphonemic sensitivity as indexed by the phonological mismatch effect in the eye tracking task would correlate highly with phonological skills; the mismatch effect is operationalized as the difference between perception of clear speech (W1W1) and perception of speech with misleading, but not lexically biased, coarticulation information (N3W1). A high absolute correlation between an individual's phonological skills and phonological mismatch effect could follow from one of two bases. If lower phonological skills stem from having underspecified phonological representations (i.e., low sensitivity to subphonemic details), the phonological mismatch effect should be smaller for lower-skilled individuals than for higher-skilled individuals, leading to a positive correlation between phonological skills and the phonological mismatch effect (**Prediction 3a**). Conversely, if lower phonological skills originate from overspecified phonological representations (i.e., high sensitivity to subphonemic information), the phonological mismatch effect should be greater for lower-skilled individuals than for higher-skilled individuals, leading to a negative correlation between phonological skills and the phonological mismatch effect (**Prediction 3b**).

Methods

Participants

We recruited 64 college-aged native speakers of English (ages from 16.9 to 24.8 years, $M = 20.9$, $SD = 2.1$; years of education from 8 to 16, $M = 11.7$, $SD = 1.5$) from community colleges, General Education Development (GED) programs, and from the community at large in the New Haven area. The participants for this study were a subset of those participating in a larger study that investigated neural and behavioral individual differences in language, reading, and learning in young adults (see Braze et al., 2016; Kukona et al., 2016). The sample included individuals with wide ranges of cognitive and reading abilities, and none reported having been diagnosed with reading or learning disabilities. The participants gave informed consent and received financial compensation for their participation ($20/hour). All protocols were approved by the Yale University Human Investigation Committee. Three participants were excluded from analyses, one for each of the following reasons: (1) eye tracking data corruption, (2) failing to complete several of the tasks in our assessment battery, or (3) failing to complete a high proportion of critical trials (7 out of 15) of the eye tracking task (see Procedure for details). Thus, preliminary inclusion criteria left 61 participants; one additional participant was later excluded due to their extreme score on one of the individual differences measures (see Individual differences measures).

Materials

Subcategorical mismatch task

The auditory materials were those originally used by Dahan et al. (2001) and consisted of 15 triplets of one target word (W1), one competitor word (W2) and one nonword (N3). Items within each triplet shared the same onset, such as /nɛt/, /nɛk/ and /nɛp/, respectively (for the full set of the 15 triplets, see Appendix A). Dahan et al. (2001) created cross-spliced versions of W1 that all ended with the final consonant of W1, but began with the onset and nucleus from either another recording of W1 (W1W1, consistent coarticulation, e.g., /nɛt/ + /nɛt/ = /nɛ$_t$t/), or from a recording of W2 (W2W1, misleading competitor coarticulation, e.g., /nɛk/ + /nɛt/ = /nɛ$_k$t/) or N3 (N3W1, misleading nonword coarticulation, e.g., /nɛp/ + /nɛt/ = /nɛ$_p$t/). Each cross-spliced item sounds like W1, but items cross-spliced with W2 or N3 have misleading coarticulation on the vowel. The visual materials were similar to those used in Experiment 2 in Dahan et al. (2001), except that their black-and-white line drawings were replaced with color images. See Appendix B for the full list of visual materials.

Linguistic and cognitive abilities assessment battery

In order to assess individual differences in linguistic and cognitive abilities in our sample, we administered a comprehensive set of more than 30 individual differences measures (see Table 1), including several with known connections to reading ability. The majority of these measures were standardized assessments widely used in clinical and educational settings, or in the psycholinguistic literature. For the purposes of our analyses, we selected a subset of measures of various linguistic abilities, cognitive abilities, and demographic indicators based on previous published work from our team (Kukona et al., 2016). The selected measures are indicative of underlying constructs related to reading ability; however, our division of manifest variables into hypothetical (latent) constructs may be more granular than is warranted, based on the reading literature (cf. Braze et al., 2007). Note that we report these measures for completeness, but, as we discuss in more detail later, only the measures for phonological skills are used as an indicator of individual differences in further analyses.

Procedure

The experimental eye tracking task and the assessments were administered individually for each participant over two separate days, with about 3.5 hours per session. Breaks were provided when requested. Standard administration procedures and instructions were used for most published assessments, except that the Reading Comprehension subtest in PIAT was used for both reading and oral comprehension as summarized in Table 1. The visual world task was presented on a desktop computer and participants' eye movements were tracked using an SR-Research Eyelink II head-mounted eye tracker, sampling at 250 Hz. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the 3 lists, varying in which 5 target words (out of 15) were assigned to each of the three conditions, i.e., W1W1 (consistent coarticulation), W2W1 (misleading lexical competitor coarticulation), and N3W1 (misleading nonword coarticulation). There were 30 trials in total, with 15 experimental trials (5 for each condition) and 15 filler trials.

On each trial, a fixation cross appeared on the center of the screen in a 5 × 5 grid, and the participants were told to click on the cross in order for the experimenter to check calibration accuracy. The trial began when the participant clicked the cross, and pictures of four objects appeared, including one target (e.g., a net), one competitor (e.g., a neck), and two unrelated distractors (e.g., a ring and a bell), along with four geometric shapes as location references (see Fig. 3 for an example). Participants were instructed to use a computer mouse to follow spoken instructions presented via speakers (which began at picture onset), such as "Point to the bell. Now the net. Click on it and put it below the

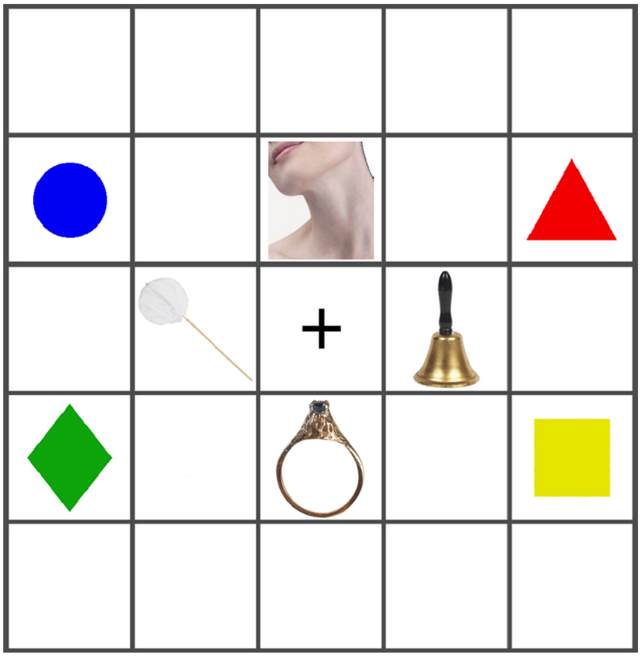

Fig. 3. An example visual display from the eye tracking experiment. The locations of the experimental pictures (target, competitor, and unrelated items) were randomized across trials and participants among the following positions: above, below, to the left of, and to the right of the cross. The locations of the four geometric shapes were fixed in the positions shown in the figure. In this example, the target is *net*, the competitor is *neck*, and *ring* and *bell* are distractors.

circle." On critical trials, participants were always instructed to point to an unrelated distractor first, and then to the target. Eye movements were recorded throughout each trial, starting from the click on the fixation cross and ending with the completion of the trial at the final mouse click. The experimental script was written such that only the correct target could be picked up, and the trial would only end if all following steps below were executed correctly: (1) move and hover mouse cursor on the image specified in the first instruction (e.g., "Point to the bell."); (2) click on the target following the second instruction (e.g., "Now the net."); (3) drag target picture to a location specified in the third instruction (e.g., "Click on it and put it below the circle."). If a participant failed to complete the steps correctly, the trial was terminated by the experimenter.

Results

All statistical analyses were conducted using packages in the R statistical environment version 3.5.0 (R Core Team, 2018). "Packages" refer to special-purpose modules within R that provide specific analyses.

Individual differences measures

Three assessment data points were missing (from different participants for three different tasks: the two Reading Fluency measures and the SDRT Reading Comprehension measure). These values were replaced using multiple imputation applied to the dataset using the mice package (version 2.46.0; van Buuren & Groothuis-Oudshoorn, 2011) before further analysis. For most measures, higher scores indicated better performance. Exceptions are the three sub-tests of CTOPP Rapid Automatized Naming (Colors, Digits, and Letters), where higher scores indicated poorer performance. The raw scores of the CTOPP Rapid Automatized Naming measures were transformed by subtracting participants' scores from the maximum observed score of the corresponding measure, so that for all measures, a higher score indicates better performance.

We observed skewness in most of the raw-score distributions based on quantile-quantile (Q-Q) plots, which compared the score distribution of each assessment against a theoretical normal distribution (car::qqPlot, version 2.1-5; Fox & Weisberg, 2011). Box-Cox power transformations were applied to all assessment scores to normalize the distributions before further analysis to alleviate violations of the normality assumption (Box & Cox, 1964): raw scores of each assessment were raised to the power of an optimal lambda value, ranging from -2 to 2 in steps of 0.1 (MASS::boxcox, version 7.3-47; Venables & Ripley, 2002), that transformed a given score distribution into a normal one (car::bcpower, version 2.1-5; Fox & Weisberg, 2011). To account for variance heterogeneity across measures, Box-Cox transformed scores were further standardized to z-scores (i.e., centered and scaled), allowing direct comparisons across assessments. We examined potentially influential data points by visually inspecting the Q-Q plot of each transformed measure and by evaluating three influence estimates of each data point: Studentized residual, hat value, and Cook's distance (car::influencePlot, version 2.1-5; Fox & Weisberg, 2011). One participant was removed from all further analyses due to their extreme score on the TOWRE Word Naming task (outside of the 95% confidence interval of the Q-Q plot; Studentized residual $= -10.04$; Hat value $= 0.11$; Cook's distance $= 2.38$). After this participant was removed, we re-calculated optimal lambda values and re-applied Box-Cox transformation and standardization to the raw scores for the remaining participants. Visual inspection of the distributions suggested no more overly influential data points falling outside of the 95% confidence interval of the Q-Q plots. Thus, data from 60 participants was retained for further analyses. The descriptive statistics of each measure and specific lambdas applied to the raw scores are listed in Table 2, excluding the removed subject and imputed values. Wide ranges of assessment scores across the board indicated high heterogeneity in the current sample, suitable for use in an individual differences analysis. Simple correlations among the individual differences measures, Box-Cox transformed and standardized, are shown in Table 3.

Composite scores

Individual differences measures tapped into several key reading-related skills: *phonological skills* (measures 1–4 in Tables 2 and 3), *reading comprehension* (5–8), *oral comprehension and vocabulary* (9–12), *decoding* (13–16), *reading fluency* (17–18), *rapid automatized naming* (19–21), *verbal working memory* (22), and *print experience* (23–24). These key skills were categorized based on previous published work from our team that used similar community samples and individual differences measures as the current study (Braze et al., 2016; Kukona et al., 2016). Composite scores were generated by averaging and then standardizing the transformed measures within each category. Table 4 lists the rank correlations among the composites and additional simple measures of general cognitive abilities, i.e., matrix reasoning (measure 25), visuospatial memory (26) and WASI full-scale IQ (27). Consistent with **Prediction 1**, phonological skills composite scores were highly correlated with other reading-related abilities.

Eye tracking

Within trials, fixation proportions to pictures were tracked over time. Eye movements were sampled throughout every trial at the rate of 250 Hz and were down-sampled to 20 Hz (50 ms time steps) for all further analyses. For each trial, at each time step beginning from target word onset, we determined fixation location as falling into one of five categories: target, competitor, a distractor, the cross, or elsewhere. Over-time fixation proportions of the five locations were then computed over trials by condition and by participant at each time step, excluding the filler trials and experimenter-terminated trials (5% of all critical

Table 1
Linguistic and cognitive abilities assessed in the current study.

Cognitive constructs	Measures
I. Phonological skills (phonological awareness and phonological memory)	(a) Elision and blending subtests of CTOPP (b) Digits and nonword repetition subtests of CTOPP
II. Reading comprehension	(a) Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests, Fourth Edition (MacGinitie, MacGinitie, Maria, & Dreyer, 2000) (b) Odd-numbered items of the Reading Comprehension subtest in PIAT (c) Fast Reading subtest of SDRT (d) Passage Comprehension subtest of WJ
III. Oral comprehension	(a) Oral Comprehension subtest of WJ (b) Tape-recorded, even-numbered items of the Reading Comprehension subtest of the PIAT (see Braze et al., 2007)
IV. Vocabulary	(a) PPVT (b) Vocabulary subtest of WASI
V. Decoding skills (word and non-word)	(a) Sight Word Efficiency subtest of TOWRE (b) Letter-Word Identification subtest of the WJ (c) Phonemic Decoding Efficiency subtest of TOWRE (d) Word Attack subtest of the WJ
VI. Reading fluency	(a) Three passages from GORT (b) Reading Fluency subtest of WJ
VII. Rapid automatized naming (RAN)	(a) Three Rapid Naming subtests (i.e., Colors, Digits, and Letters) of CTOPP
VIII. Verbal working memory	(a) An orally administered version of the sentence span task (Daneman & Carpenter, 1980; see also Clark, McRoberts, Van Dyke, Shankweiler, & Braze, 2012)
IX. Print experience	(a) Recognition of author and magazine names (Stanovich & Cunningham, 1992)
X. General cognitive abilities (visuospatial memory and intelligence)	(a) Corsi Blocks (Corkin, 1974) (b) WASI Matrix Reasoning (c) WASI full-scale IQ (weighted average of WASI Vocabulary and WASI Matrix Reasoning)
XI. Demographic information	(a) Age (b) Years of education

Note. CTOPP = Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing (Wagner, Torgesen, & Rashotte, 1999); PIAT = Peabody Individual Achievement Test, Revised (Markwardt, 1989); SDRT = Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test, Fourth Edition (Karlson & Gardner, 1995); WJ = Woodcock-Johnson-III Tests of Achievement (Woodcock, McGrew, & Mather, 2001); PPVT = Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, Revised (Dunn & Dunn, 1997); WASI = Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence (Wechsler, 1999); TOWRE = Test of Word Reading Efficiency (Torgesen, Wagner, & Rashotte, 1999); GORT = Gray Oral Reading Test, Fourth Edition (Wiederholt & Bryant, 2001).

trials). Distractor proportions were divided by the number of distractors (two) to result in the mean proportion of fixations to distractors.

Mean fixation proportions by condition and item type across all participants are shown in Fig. 4A. The overall target fixation proportions replicated the subcategorical mismatch effects seen in Dahan et al. (2001), where participants looked to the target faster and to a greater extent when there was no mismatching coarticulatory information in the word (W1W1), with slower and lesser target fixation proportions when mismatching coarticulation corresponded to a nonword (N3W1), and even slower and lesser target fixation proportions when the mismatching coarticulation was consistent with a word (W2W1). Similarly, the overall competitor fixation proportions also replicated the findings in Dahan et al. (2001), where the rank order of the competitor fixation proportions was complementary to that of the target fixation proportions, showing the highest competitor fixation proportions in W2W1, followed by N3W1, and the lowest competitor fixation proportions in W1W1.

The fixation proportions to distractors did not differ reliably across conditions. Fixation proportions to distractors at word onset were notably higher than to other items. This reflected the residual eye movements to the distractors due to the first step of each trial, where the participant was asked to point to a distractor picture, prior to the critical instruction to point to the target picture. Any bias towards unrelated items clearly dissipated prior to the critical analysis window. Overall fixation proportions to the cross and other regions on the screen did not differ across conditions and did not change notably over time.

To provide a sense of how subcategorical mismatch effects changed with phonological skills, we divided the participants into tertiles based on their phonological skills composite scores. Mean fixation proportions by condition and item type of each participant tertile are shown in Fig. 4B. The top tertile target fixation proportions were very similar to the overall pattern qualitatively, in terms of the rank order of condition. Interestingly, as the phonological skills composite scores decreased, there was a trend for target fixation proportions to decrease in N3W1 but increase in W2W1, to such an extent that individuals with lower phonological skills actually showed a reversal of rank order between W2W1 and N3W1 (see the left-most column of Fig. 4B). This reversal in the target fixations was completely unexpected, although lower-skilled participants' heightened fixations in N3W1 to other regions on the screen (see the right-most column of Fig. 4B) could suggest that these individuals may have noisier processing or that they may be more sensitive to the coarticulatory information and were searching for an alternative picture to match what they perceived. We will discuss the reversal between W2W1 and N3W1 in more detail in a later section.

It is worth noting that, although target fixations and competitor fixations are usually complimentary, there are cases in the literature where sometimes only target fixations are analyzed (e.g., Desroches et al., 2006) and sometimes both target and competitor fixations are analyzed (e.g., Dahan et al., 2001). In inspecting the data, we discovered an oddity with consistent patterns in competitors across tertiles but striking changes in target fixation patterns. Therefore, we focused our analyses on target fixations and further investigated the unexpected pattern of target fixations.

Growth curve analysis and individual differences

In order to characterize the individual differences in the eye tracking data, we employed Growth Curve Analysis (GCA; Magnuson et al., 2007; Mirman, 2014; Mirman, Dixon, & Magnuson, 2008) for target fixation proportions and extracted effect sizes (i.e., differences of

Table 2
Descriptive statistics of the raw scores of the individual differences measures for the 60 participants included in the analysis of eye-movements.

Measures	N	M	SD	Range	Max.	λ
Phonological skills						
1. CTOPP Blending	60	11.67	4.37	5–20	–	0.5
2. CTOPP Elision	60	12.18	5.33	5–20	–	−0.2
3. CTOPP Digit Span	60	15.97	2.79	10–21	–	1.5
4. CTOPP Nonword Repetition	60	8.73	2.08	5–15	–	0.3
Reading comprehension						
5. GM	60	30.23	9.65	10–47	48	0.7
Grade Equivalent		11.44	2.25	4.5–13	–	
6. PIAT	60	25.22	6.80	12–41	41	0.9
Grade Equivalent		5.96	2.62	2.5–13	–	
7. SDRT	59	14.69	6.56	4–30	30	0.2
8. WJ	60	32.98	4.19	22–43	47	0.3
Grade Equivalent		7.72	4.50	2.4–19	–	
Oral comprehension						
9. PIAT	60	27.98	7.74	9–41	41	2.0
Grade Equivalent		7.17	2.92	2.1–13	–	
10. WJ	60	23.97	3.75	17–32	34	0.6
Grade Equivalent		9.90	4.37	3.5–19	–	
Vocabulary						
11. PPVT	60	160.18	18.26	116–197	204	1.7
12. WASI	60	45.77	11.81	17–78	66	0.6
Decoding						
13. TOWRE Words	60	88.02	9.18	68–104	104	2.0
14. WJ Words	60	63.60	6.22	49–75	76	1.4
Grade Equivalent		10.19	4.44	4–19	–	
15. TOWRE Nonwords	60	40.92	12.96	8–61	63	1.4
16. WJ Nonwords	60	24.40	5.08	11–32	32	2.0
Grade Equivalent		8.47	4.95	2.3–19	–	
Reading fluency						
17. GORT	59	17.03	6.84	4–29	30	0.7
18. WJ	59	63.51	15.67	23–98	98	0.9
Grade Equivalent		9.81	3.90	2.6–19	–	
Rapid automatized naming						
19. CTOPP Colors	60	39.38	7.60	27.2–60.9	–	−1.2
20. CTOPP Digits	60	23.63	4.32	16.4–35.4	–	−1.3
21. CTOPP Letters	60	24.98	4.35	18–37.4	–	−0.9
Verbal working memory						
22. Sentence Span	59	36.73	9.98	16–60	–	1.0
Print experience						
23. Authors	60	3.37	3.80	0–18	40	−0.7
24. Magazines	60	5.58	4.54	0–17	40	−0.2
General cognitive abilities						
25. WASI Matrix	60	25.10	5.31	7–35	35	2.0
26. Corsi Blocks VM	60	4.81	1.10	2.2–7.2	9	1.0
27. WASI Full-Scale IQ	60	90.40	17.05	55–138	–	0.1
Demographics						
28. Age (Years)	60	21.01	2.19	16.9–24.8	–	1.7
29. Years of Education	60	11.77	1.49	8–16	–	0.3

Note. *N* = sample size; *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; Max. = maximum possible score; λ = Box-Cox Lambda. GM = Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests; PIAT = Peabody Individual Achievement Tests; SDRT = Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test; WJ = Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement; PPVT = Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test; WASI = Wechsler Abbreviated Scales of Intelligence; TOWRE = Tests of Word Reading Efficiency; GORT = Gray Oral Reading Test; CTOPP = Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing; VM = visuospatial memory.

target fixation proportions between conditions) for individual participants.[3] Note that stimulus-driven eye movements in tasks similar to the visual world paradigm typically lag approximately 200 ms behind phonetic detail in speech (Allopenna et al., 1998). This lag is close to minimum signal driven eye movement latencies (Fischer, 1992; Viviani, 1990). The splice point was approximately 380 ms after word onset (means were 376 ms, 378 ms, and 383 ms for W1W1, W2W1, and N3W1 stimuli, respectively). Therefore, following Dahan et al. (2001), we set the GCA analysis window from 600 ms after word onset (approximately 220 ms after the splice point) to 1200 ms (approximately where target fixation proportions asymptoted).

All GCA analyses were carried out with the lme4 package (Bates, Mächler, Bolker, & Walker, 2015) using a generalized linear mixed-effects model. The base model (i.e., without including individual differences measures) is specified as follow; see Fig. 5 for the computer code. Fixation proportion over time was modeled using orthogonal polynomial functions (i.e., coefficients are independent, and the intercepts

[3] At a reviewer's suggestion, we have carried out a *post hoc* analysis, parallel to the GCA, using the method of Generalized Additive Mixed Modeling (GAMM). Those results can be found in Supplemental Materials (Appendix C). We retain the GCA analysis as primary, as GCA was specified in our original research plan. Differences in outcome for the two analyses were minor.

are centered) up to the third-order, and fixed effects of conditions (i.e., W1W1, W2W1, N3W1) on all of the polynomial terms. The fixed effects captured the average eye movement trajectory of each condition. The model also included random effects of participants on all polynomial terms and random effects of participant-by-condition interaction on the intercept, linear and quadratic terms. The random effects and their interaction with conditions captured how much each participant deviated from the average eye movement trajectory overall and for each condition, respectively.

For each participant, the participant-by-condition random effects estimates of the intercept were used to compute effect sizes by subtracting the random effect estimate of N3W1 from that of W1W1 (i.e., the phonological mismatch effect) and subtracting the random effect estimate of W2W1 from that of N3W1 (i.e., the lexical effect). The two subcategorical mismatch effects were negatively correlated with each other ($r[58] = -.53$, $p < .001$), indicating that participants whose phonological mismatch effect was larger tended to have a smaller lexical effect, and vice versa. This suggests that individuals who have higher subphonemic sensitivity tend to have less lexical competition, possibly due to lower lexical quality, as we shall see next, when we turn to individual differences in standardized measures.

Correlations between the two subcategorical mismatch effects and the assessment composite scores were tested to further inspect the individual differences of language and other cognitive skills in the eye tracking data (shown in Table 5). Overall, individual differences composite scores were negatively correlated with the phonological mismatch effect (W1W1-N3W1) and positively correlated with the lexical effect (N3W1-W2W1). In particular, the phonological mismatch effect shows significant, negative correlations with phonological skills and oral comprehension, while the lexical effect shows significant, positive correlations with phonological skills, oral comprehension, decoding, and reading fluency. Importantly, both effects are most highly correlated with the phonological skills composite. This suggests that performance on these indicators of meta-phonological skills and online phonological processing efficiency depend on overlapping cognitive capacities. The significantly positive correlation between phonological skills and the lexical effect is consistent with our **Prediction 2**, suggesting that lower phonological skills were associated with less lexical competition. The significantly negative correlation between the phonological skills composite and the phonological mismatch effect is consistent with our **Prediction 3**b, indicating that lower phonological skills were associated with higher subphonemic sensitivity.

In short, the correlations among the two subcategorical mismatch effects and the assessment scores revealed the following trends in individual differences: (1) reading related scores, especially phonological skills, were moderately correlated with effect sizes in the eye tracking task; (2) lower phonological skills are associated with greater phonological mismatch effects and smaller lexical competition effects.

Growth curve analysis with phonological skills as a fixed effect

In order to quantify the effect of individual differences in phonological skills on subcategorical mismatch effects, we added the phonological skills composite to the GCA model as a fixed effect, together with its interactions with condition and time (see Fig. 6 for the computer code). Adding the phonological skills composite as a fixed effect to the model significantly improved model fit (Table 6), suggesting that individuals' phonological skills explained additional variance in participants' gaze behavior.

We further examined parameter estimates for interactions involving phonological skills to assess individual differences in the timing and strength of lexical activation under conditions of cue ambiguity. With N3W1 as the baseline condition, we estimated the two subcategorical mismatch effects (i.e., differences between W1W1 vs. N3W1 and between N3W1 vs. W2W1) simultaneously and their interactions with individuals' phonological skills. As shown in Table 7, the fixed effects (i.e., conditions, phonological skills, and their interaction) change over time in a complex fashion, indicated by their relationships with the polynomial terms. We summarize the results in the main text in broad strokes and provide detailed description in Supplemental Materials (Appendix C).[4]

The parameter estimates of W1W1 relative to N3W1 on the polynomial terms indicate that there is a significant phonological effect, the size of which changes over time, ramping up from 600 to 900 ms before slightly ramping off (Fig. 7C). On the other hand, the parameter estimates of W2W1 relative to N3W1 are not significant, suggesting that there is little lexical effect across all participants (Fig. 7C). Our greater interest, as laid out in Predictions 2 and 3, was the interaction between the individuals' phonological skills and the two subcategorical mismatch effects over time (Fig. 7B & D) The interaction between W1W1-N3W1 (i.e., the phonological effect) and Phonological Skills on the polynomial terms suggest that individuals with lower phonological skills demonstrate greater phonological mismatch effects which also increase over time to a greater degree. The interaction between W2W1-N3W1 (i.e., the "inverse" lexical effect: same magnitude as the lexical effect with the opposite sign) and Phonological Skills show that individuals with lower phonological skills tend to have smaller lexical effects. Interestingly, as the lexical effect decreased with phonological skills, it actually became negative. This reversal is not consistent with theoretical accounts of spoken word recognition, on which a lexical cost is predicted, but there is no basis to predict a benefit from lexical competition. In a later section, we will return to address the puzzle of why nonword coarticulation in N3W1 should create greater difficulty than competitor coarticulation in W2W1 for individuals with lower phonological skills.

To recap, the GCA model with N3W1 as the baseline revealed that: (1) the phonological mismatch effect (W1W1-N3W1) is significant across participants, and it increases as individuals' phonological skills decrease; (2) while the lexical effect (N3W1-W2W1) is not significant across participants, it decreases as individuals' phonological skills decrease; (3) the lack of significant lexical effect across participants seems to result from the puzzling reversal between N3W1 and W2W1 in individuals with lower phonological skills.

We further examine the difference between W1W1 and W2W1 (i.e., the total subcategorical mismatch effect) by using the same GCA model with W1W1 as the baseline. Results suggest a significant total subcategorical mismatch effect that does not seem to vary with individuals' phonological skills (though numerically there is a tendency for W1W1 fixations to increase slightly with phonological skills, consistent with our hypothesis illustrated in Fig. 2). The complete report of parameter estimates and detailed description can be found in Supplemental Materials (Appendix C). Taken together, the results of the GCA model with two different baselines suggest that the negative correlation between the phonological mismatch effect and the lexical effect was driven mainly by participants' variation in N3W1, while the difference between W1W1 and W2W1 remained relatively stable.

Post hoc analysis: The effect of place of articulation

The GCA results demonstrated that the phonological mismatch effect (W1W1-N3W1) increased while the lexical effect (N3W1-W2W1) decreased as phonological skills decreased, indicating higher subphonemic sensitivity and smaller lexical competition effects in individuals with lower phonological skills. However, it is not clear why

[4] To address reviewers' concern regarding the effect specificity of phonological skills, we conducted GCA model comparisons including two additional individual differences indicators, decoding and oral language comprehension. Neither decoding nor oral language comprehension demonstrates higher explanatory power than phonological skills. The results can be found in Supplemental Materials (Appendix C).

Table 3
Correlations among the individual differences measures (Box-Cox transformed and standardized).

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.	16.	17.	18.	19.	20.	21.	22.	23.	24.	25.	26.	27.	28.
Phonological skills																												
1. CTOPP Blending																												
2. CTOPP Elision	**0.44**																											
3. CTOPP Digit Span	0.29	0.10																										
4. CTOPP NW Repetition	0.35	0.20	0.22																									
Reading comprehension																												
5. GM	**0.44**	0.36	**0.48**	0.32																								
6. PIAT	0.35	0.33	0.22	0.24	**0.64**																							
7. SDRT	0.39	0.35	0.30	0.29	**0.65**	**0.54**																						
8. WJ	**0.59**	**0.48**	**0.44**	0.39	**0.67**	**0.57**	**0.56**																					
Oral comprehension																												
9. PIAT	**0.52**	**0.45**	0.31	0.29	**0.69**	**0.65**	**0.62**	**0.66**																				
10. WJ	**0.57**	**0.47**	0.32	0.26	**0.72**	**0.66**	**0.61**	**0.62**	**0.75**																			
Vocabulary																												
11. PPVT	**0.54**	**0.41**	0.26	0.36	**0.71**	**0.62**	**0.71**	**0.70**	**0.77**	**0.71**																		
12. WASI	**0.58**	**0.41**	0.27	**0.45**	**0.76**	**0.66**	**0.75**	**0.70**	**0.71**	**0.66**	**0.73**																	
Decoding																												
13. TOWRE W	**0.41**	0.24	**0.41**	0.37	**0.48**	**0.47**	**0.50**	**0.56**	**0.45**	0.35	**0.50**	**0.56**																
14. WJ W	**0.61**	**0.53**	0.30	0.30	**0.61**	**0.56**	**0.51**	**0.65**	**0.60**	**0.65**	**0.73**	**0.60**	**0.63**															
15. TOWRE NW	**0.47**	0.34	0.34	0.34	0.38	**0.42**	0.32	**0.48**	0.34	0.28	**0.48**	**0.46**	**0.77**	**0.69**														
16. WJ NW	**0.43**	0.4	0.29	0.32	**0.43**	**0.47**	0.28	**0.44**	0.36	0.35	**0.50**	0.37	**0.62**	**0.76**	**0.84**													
Reading fluency																												
17. GORT	0.31	0.26	0.35	0.11	**0.49**	**0.41**	**0.53**	**0.46**	0.32	**0.44**	**0.56**	0.40	**0.65**	**0.55**	**0.49**	0.36												
18. WJ	0.40	0.20	0.35	0.39	**0.63**	**0.47**	**0.67**	**0.57**	**0.41**	**0.46**	**0.48**	**0.68**	**0.67**	**0.42**	**0.44**	0.29	**0.52**											
Rapid automatized naming																												
19. CTOPP Colors	0.13	0.21	0.22	0.02	0.32	0.08	0.29	0.37	0.26	0.28	0.19	0.22	0.38	0.28	0.21	0.23	0.29	**0.41**										
20. CTOPP Digits	−0.04	−0.08	0.15	0.12	−0.06	−0.02	0.07	0.05	0.03	−0.08	−0.11	0.07	**0.59**	0.12	0.36	0.18	0.24	0.24	0.31									
21. CTOPP Letters	0.09	0.02	0.30	0.09	0.11	0.14	0.20	0.21	0.11	−0.04	0.00	0.24	**0.62**	0.12	0.43	0.23	0.39	0.36	0.34	**0.64**								
Verbal working memory																												
22. Sentence Span	0.38	0.38	0.18	0.37	**0.48**	**0.58**	**0.46**	**0.59**	**0.46**	0.40	**0.49**	**0.61**	**0.50**	**0.58**	**0.54**	**0.58**	0.27	**0.44**	0.31	0.20	0.13							
Print experience																												
23. Authors	**0.44**	0.13	0.40	**0.44**	**0.64**	**0.54**	**0.53**	**0.58**	**0.47**	**0.42**	**0.58**	**0.59**	**0.61**	**0.52**	**0.51**	**0.46**	**0.47**	**0.69**	0.25	0.03	0.16	**0.41**						
24. Magazines	0.31	0.13	0.27	0.27	**0.46**	**0.51**	0.37	**0.45**	**0.43**	0.40	**0.46**	**0.56**	0.40	**0.46**	0.38	0.30	0.30	**0.42**	0.03	0.16	0.09	0.40	**0.54**					
General cognitive abilities																												
25. WASI Matrix	**0.49**	**0.54**	0.24	0.32	**0.58**	**0.54**	**0.54**	**0.56**	**0.67**	**0.65**	**0.59**	**0.54**	0.31	**0.51**	0.28	0.33	**0.41**	0.38	0.29	−0.06	0.15	**0.41**	0.28	0.10				
26. Corsi	0.40	**0.47**	0.22	0.29	**0.47**	0.39	0.38	0.40	**0.43**	**0.45**	**0.45**	**0.49**	**0.41**	**0.46**	0.40	0.36	0.34	**0.43**	**0.50**	0.07	0.18	0.40	0.34	0.08	**0.54**			
27. Full−Scale IQ	**0.49**	**0.43**	0.19	**0.41**	**0.67**	**0.67**	**0.70**	**0.66**	**0.72**	**0.68**	**0.72**	**0.84**	**0.53**	**0.61**	**0.45**	0.39	**0.51**	**0.54**	0.26	0.16	0.28	**0.62**	**0.41**	**0.45**	**0.77**	**0.47**		
Demographics																												
28. Age	0.02	−0.22	0.27	−0.16	0.27	0.17	0.02	0.12	0.21	0.15	0.10	0.05	0.03	0.05	0.04	0.16	0.10	0.16	0.27	−0.09	0.02	0.09	0.19	0.12	0.07	0.09	0.04	
29. Years of Education	0.16	0.14	0.25	0.25	0.30	0.30	0.39	0.36	0.21	0.25	0.34	0.32	0.21	0.20	0.25	0.21	0.34	0.40	0.06	0.08	0.08	0.35	0.26	0.35	0.17	0.23	0.30	0.28

Note. N = 60. The three missing data points were replaced by imputed values using the mice package in R and the scales of the three CTOPP RAN subtests were inverted (by subtracting from their maximum observed scores) before conducting correlational analysis on the Box-Cox transformed assessment scores. Pearson's correlation test critical values: $|r| \geq 0.21$, $p < .1$; $|r| \geq 0.25$, $p < .05$; $|r| \geq 0.33$, $p < .01$; $|r| \geq 0.41$, $p < .001$. Bolded values indicate $|r| \geq 0.41$, $p < .001$.

Table 4
Rank correlations among composite scores.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Phonological Skills										
2. Reading Comprehension	**0.62**									
3. Oral Comprehension & Vocab.	**0.62**	**0.90**								
4. Decoding	**0.58**	**0.57**	**0.55**							
5. Reading Fluency	**0.44**	**0.67**	**0.55**	**0.57**						
6. Rapid Automatized Naming	0.21	0.21	0.14	**0.43**	**0.50**					
7. Verbal Working Memory	**0.62**	**0.54**	**0.59**	0.38	0.30	**0.44**				
8. Print Experience	**0.61**	**0.54**	**0.51**	**0.54**	0.16	0.40	0.39			
9. Matrix Reasoning	**0.61**	**0.66**	0.34	0.39	0.16	**0.59**	0.40	0.08		
10. Visuospatial Memory	**0.47**	**0.53**	**0.46**	**0.44**	0.34	**0.50**	**0.42**	0.22	**0.47**	
11. Full-Scale IQ	**0.75**	**0.82**	**0.52**	**0.51**	0.30	**0.51**	**0.63**	0.38	**0.77**	**0.47**

Note. N = 60. Composite scores were calculated based on the Box-Cox transformed and standardized measures in Table 2 by averaging and standardizing the measures within each category, including phonological skills (measures 1–4), reading comprehension (5–8), oral comprehension and vocabulary (9–12), decoding (13–16), fluency (17–18), RAN (19–21), verbal working memory (22), and print experience (23–24). Additional simple measures of general cognitive abilities, matrix reasoning (25), visuospatial memory (26), and full-scale IQ (27), were also included. Spearman's correlation was conducted to examine the correlation among composites in terms of subjects' rank in each composite. Spearman's correlation test critical values: $|r_s| \geq 0.21, p < .1$; $|r_s| \geq 0.25, p < .05$; $|r_s| \geq 0.33, p < .01$; $|r_s| \geq 0.41, p < .001$. Bolded values indicate $|r_s| \geq 0.41, p < .001$.

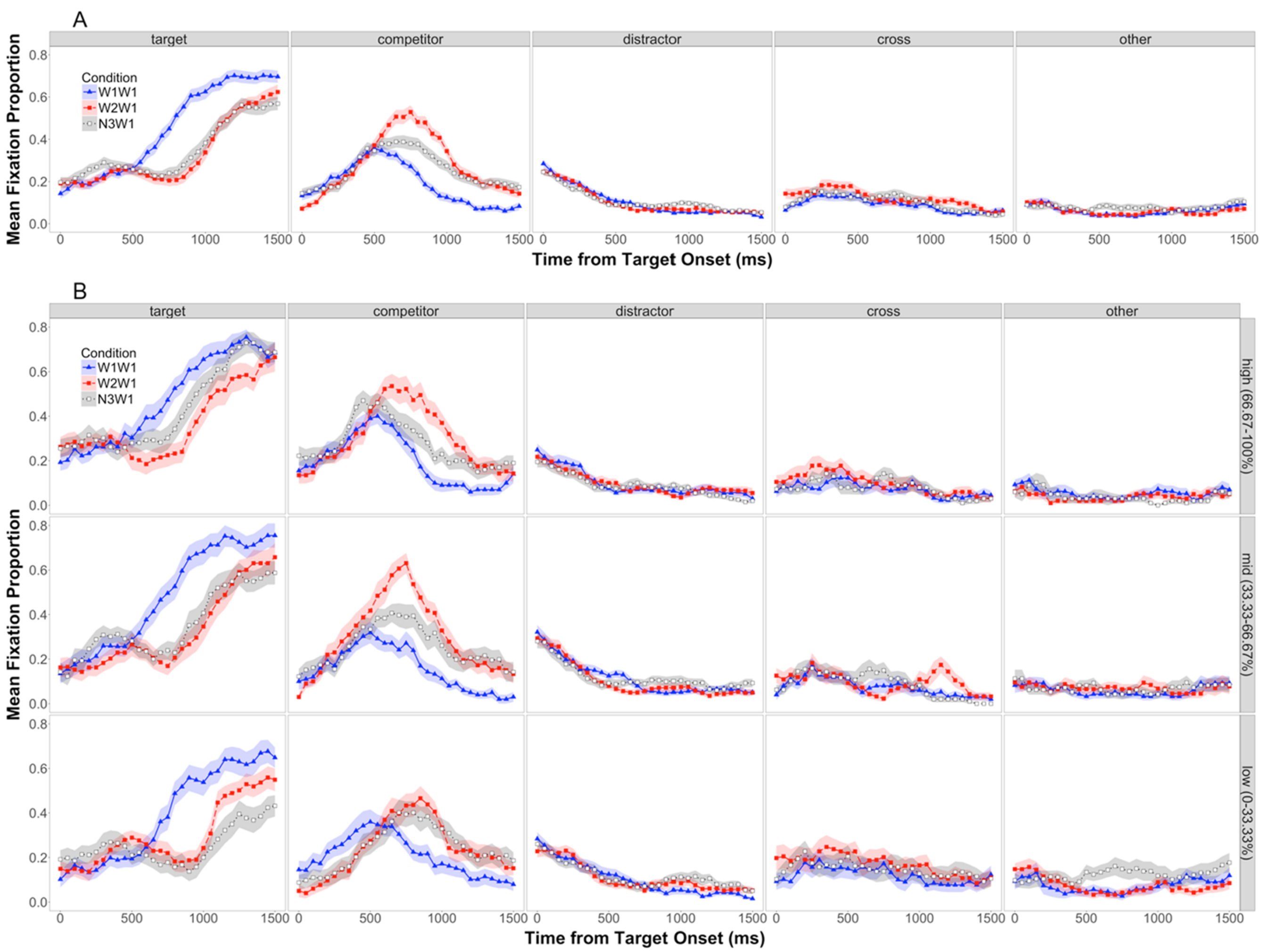

Fig. 4. Mean fixation proportion by fixated object and by condition, (A) collapsed across all participants and (B) divided into tertiles of participants based on the phonological skills composite scores.

there should be a reversal of rank order of fixation proportions between W2W1 and N3W1 in individuals with lower phonological skills. There is no apparent theoretical or computational principle that would predict such a pattern, given that W2W1 and N3W1 were expected to have similar phonological mismatch with W1W1, and coarticulation consistent with a lexical competitor (given W2W1) was expected to be more disruptive than coarticulation consistent with a nonword (given N3W1).

Based on the GCA results and visual inspection of the target fixation proportions with participants divided into tertiles based upon the phonological skills composite scores, it seems that individual differences along the phonological skills continuum were largely driven by

```r
m.wo.phono <- lmer(meanFix ~ (ot1+ot2+ot3)*(COND) +
                             (ot1+ot2+ot3 | SUBJECT) +
                             (ot1+ot2 | SUBJECT:COND),
                   control = lmerControl(optimizer = "bobyqa"),
                   data = data.trg.allCon, REML = FALSE)
```

Fig. 5. Base GCA model specification. `meanFix` = mean fixation proportions; `ot1` = first-order (linear) orthogonal polynomial term; `ot2` = second-order (quadratic) orthogonal polynomial term; `ot3` = third-order (cubic) orthogonal polynomial term; `COND` = Condition (as a fixed effect).

Table 5
Correlations between subcategorical mismatch effects and individual differences scores.

	W1W1-N3W1 (Phono)	N3W1-W2W1 (Lexical)
N3W1-W2W1	**−0.53**	
1. Phonological Skills	**−0.31**	**0.36**
2. Reading Comprehension	−0.18	0.24
3. Oral Comprehension & Vocabulary	**−0.26**	**0.27**
4. Decoding	−0.11	**0.31**
5. Reading Fluency	−0.12	**0.32**
6. Rapid Automatized Naming	−0.08	0.21
7. Verbal Working Memory	−0.04	0.17
8. Print Experience	−0.09	0.22
9. Matrix Reasoning	−0.20	0.09
10. Visuospatial Memory	−0.11	0.19
11. Full-Scale IQ	−0.18	0.22

Note. N = 60. Pearson's correlation test critical values: $|r| \geq 0.21$, $p < .1$; $|r| \geq 0.25$, $p < .05$; $|r| \geq 0.33$, $p < .01$. Bolded values indicate $|r| \geq 0.25$, $p < .05$.

target fixations in the N3W1 condition. This led us to ask whether there might be some aspect of the stimuli associated with the N3W1 condition that could explain the unexpected reversal of N3W1 and W2W1 rank orders among the lower-skilled participants. Therefore, we conducted the following *post hoc* exploratory analysis.

The original stimuli (Dahan et al., 2001) were designed such that W1-W2-N3 triplets were composed of syllables ending in a restricted set of consonants, in order to impose a degree of homogeneity and remove any phonetic bases for observed effects. Final consonants were all stops with either labial (/b/ or /p/), alveolar (/d/ or /t/), or velar (/g/ or /k/) place of articulation (POA). If we assume that labials and alveolars are more similar to each other (towards the front in POA) than to velars (back), a possible confound becomes apparent.[5] We classified triplets as ***W1-N3-similar*** (i.e., W1 and N3 were more similar to each other than they were to W2) when the final consonants of W1 and N3 were either labial or alveolar and the final consonant of W2 was velar. We classified triplets as ***W1-N3-dissimilar*** (i.e., W1 and N3 were dissimilar to each other, and one of them was similar to W2) when one of the final consonants of W1 and N3 was velar and the other was either labial or alveolar. Nine triplets fell into the W1-N3-similar category whereas six were W1-N3-dissimilar (see Appendix A for more details). If some participants were more sensitive to subphonemic details, might this modest difference be enough to induce the N3W1-W2W1 reversal observed in the lower tertiles?

Fig. 8A shows the target fixation proportions based on W1-N3 coarticulation similarity across all participants. When the coarticulation between W1 and N3 was similar (Fig. 8A, left panel), the rank order of the three conditions was the same as the overall pattern, where W1W1 was greater than N3W1, followed by W2W1. However, when the coarticulation between W1 and N3 was dissimilar (Fig. 8A, right panel), the target fixations in N3W1 seemed to be suppressed to a similar level as W2W1, resulting in a greater difference between W1W1 and N3W1. This suggests that participants were sensitive to the POA of the final consonant embedded in coarticulation. In Fig. 8B, results are presented for these two subsets of items by phonological skills tertiles. As individuals' phonological skills decreased, participants seemed to be more sensitive to the dissimilarity in POA among the embedded final consonants. Participants in the lowest tertile showed an extreme case where, regardless how similar the final consonants were between W1 and N3, N3W1 target fixation proportions were suppressed to as distinct from W1W1 as W2W1.

In sum, the patterns in Fig. 8 suggest a possible explanation for the unexpected N3W1-W2W1 reversal for individuals with lower phonological skills: target fixations for N3W1 may have been substantially influenced by fine-grained similarity in POA. On the other hand, the mean level of target fixations given W2W1 was quite stable across phonological skills tertiles, suggesting a robust competition effect due to lexical status. We assume both lexical status and subphonemic similarity are at play in these results. In higher-skilled participants, lexical competition may have a large impact and strongly outweigh the effect of W1-N3 similarity, though that effect is still apparent in the reduced difference between N3W1 and W2W1 for W1-N3-dissimilar items (Fig. 8B, top right panel). In lower-skilled participants, the effect of subphonemic similarity dominates and overwhelms the lexical effect, even for W1-N3-similar items (Fig. 8B, bottom left panel). As we discuss next, this exploratory analysis appears consistent with the interpretation that individuals with lower phonological skills have overspecified phonological representations.

Discussion

We investigated variation in young adults' sensitivity to subphonemic information in spoken word recognition as a function of performance on phonologically grounded tasks using a subcategorical mismatch paradigm (Dahan et al., 2001). Our findings provide new insights into how individual differences in meta-phonological skills relate to online speech processing and underlying phonological representations. Specifically, individuals with lower scores on CTOPP tasks (phonological awareness and phonological memory subtests) appear to exhibit greater sensitivity to subphonemic detail in speech, consistent with the allophonic perception hypothesis (i.e., overspecification) of RD proposed by Serniclaes (2006), Serniclaes et al. (2001; 2004).

Our study tested three primary predictions. First, results show that individuals' phonological skills (CTOPP) in adulthood were positively correlated with their other reading related skills (Table 4), replicating the well-established association between phonological processing and general reading competence. Second, our prediction that individuals with lower phonological skills should experience less lexical competition during online spoken word recognition is supported by a positive correlation between a composite indicator of phonological skills and individual variation in the magnitude of the lexical effect (N3W1-W2W1) in the eye tracking task. Finally, of all individual differences

[5] Our classification is not consistent with some phoneme similarity metrics based on confusion matrices as (e.g., Luce, 1986). However, it is very likely that the phoneme similarity reflected by confusion metrics of intact consonantal phonemes is heavily driven by consonant release, whereas the coarticulation in our stimuli reflects pre-release closure driven by place of articulation.

```
m.w.phono <- lmer(meanFix ~ (ot1+ot2+ot3)*(COND)*(phono.composite) +
                            (ot1+ot2+ot3 | SUBJECT) +
                            (ot1+ot2 | SUBJECT:COND),
                  control = lmerControl(optimizer = "bobyqa"),
                  data = data.trg.allCon, REML = FALSE)
```

Fig. 6. GCA model specification with Phonological Skills as a fixed effect. `meanFix` = mean fixation proportions; `ot1` = first-order (linear) orthogonal polynomial term; `ot2` = second-order (quadratic) orthogonal polynomial term; `ot3` = third-order (cubic) orthogonal polynomial term; `COND` = Condition (as a fixed effect).

Table 6
Comparison between GCA models with vs. without the composite scores of phonological skills as a fixed effect.

	df	AIC	BIC	logLik	deviance	χ^2	$df_{\chi}{}^2$	*p*
without	29	−2716.8	−2549.8	1387.4	−2774.8			
with	41	−2725.1	−2489.1	1403.6	−2807.1	32.37	12	0.001

Note. Adding phonological skills composite scores significantly improved the model fit. *df*: degrees of freedom; AIC: Akaike information criterion; BIC: Bayesian information criterion; logLik: log-likelihood; χ^2: Chi-Square test value; $df_{\chi}{}^2$: Chi-Square degrees of freedom.

representations, consistent with **Prediction 3**b (i.e., overspecification), and not with **Prediction 3**a (i.e., underspecification).

In addition, the relation of unexpected details in our eye tracking results to phonological skills is suggestive of higher subphonemic sensitivity in participants with lower phonological skills (albeit via an exploratory, *post hoc* analysis). The central tendency of our results replicated the main findings of Dahan et al. (2001): participants' fixations to targets were slowed by mismatching coarticulation, with greater slowing on average when misleading coarticulation was consistent with a competitor word (W2W1 condition) than when it was consistent with a nonword (N3W1 condition; see Fig. 4A). A greater phonological mismatch effect among lower-skilled participants manifested most saliently in an unexpected reversal of N3W1 and W2W1. That is, participants with lower phonological skills showed greater interference

Table 7
Parameter estimates of Growth Curve Analysis, using N3W1 as the baseline, on subcategorical mismatch effects as a function of individual differences in phonological skills.

Fixed Effect	Polynomial Term	*Estimate*	*SE*	*t*	*p*
N3W1	Intercept	0.340	0.022	15.103	0.000
	Linear	0.363	0.048	7.556	0.000
	Quadratic	0.096	0.032	3.027	0.002
	Cubic	−0.046	0.018	−2.568	0.010
W1W1-N3W1	Intercept	0.213	0.029	7.259	0.000
(phonological effect)	Linear	0.060	0.063	0.953	0.341
	Quadratic	−0.182	0.044	−4.134	0.000
	Cubic	0.040	0.017	2.297	0.022
W2W1-N3W1	Intercept	−0.027	0.029	−0.918	0.359
(inverse lexical effect)	Linear	0.021	0.063	0.337	0.736
	Quadratic	0.064	0.044	1.462	0.144
	Cubic	0.005	0.017	0.310	0.757
Phonological Skills	Intercept	0.108	0.023	4.767	0.000
x N3W1	Linear	0.129	0.049	2.667	0.008
	Quadratic	−0.070	0.032	−2.199	0.028
	Cubic	−0.017	0.018	−0.921	0.357
Phonological Skills	Intercept	−0.076	0.030	−2.584	0.010
x W1W1-N3W	Linear	−0.148	0.064	−2.322	0.020
(phonological effect)	Quadratic	0.089	0.044	2.011	0.044
	Cubic	−0.005	0.018	−0.294	0.769
Phonological Skills	Intercept	−0.085	0.030	−2.871	0.004
x W2W1-N3W1	Linear	−0.074	0.064	−1.168	0.243
(inverse lexical effect)	Quadratic	0.004	0.044	0.087	0.931
	Cubic	−0.001	0.018	−0.078	0.938

Note. The normal approximation was used to compute parameter-specific *p*-values.

measures, the phonological skills composite had the strongest correlation with the phonological mismatch effect (W1W1-N3W1), consistent with our **Prediction 3** that fine-grained subphonemic sensitivity as indexed by the phonological mismatch effect in the eye tracking task would correlate highly with phonological skills. Moreover, we find a negative correlation between phonological skills and the magnitude of the phonological mismatch effect. This suggests that lower levels of phonological skills may be due in part to overspecified phonological

from coarticulation consistent with a nonword (N3W1; Fig. 4B)—a result that does not appear consistent with any extant theory or model of spoken word recognition. However, a close examination of this outcome revealed a potential explanation: the reversal seems to have been driven primarily by responses to items where places of articulation were more distant between N3 and W1 (than between W2 and W1), suggesting that in those cases, N3 may be more phonologically dissimilar to W1, leading to a more disruptive effect of misleading

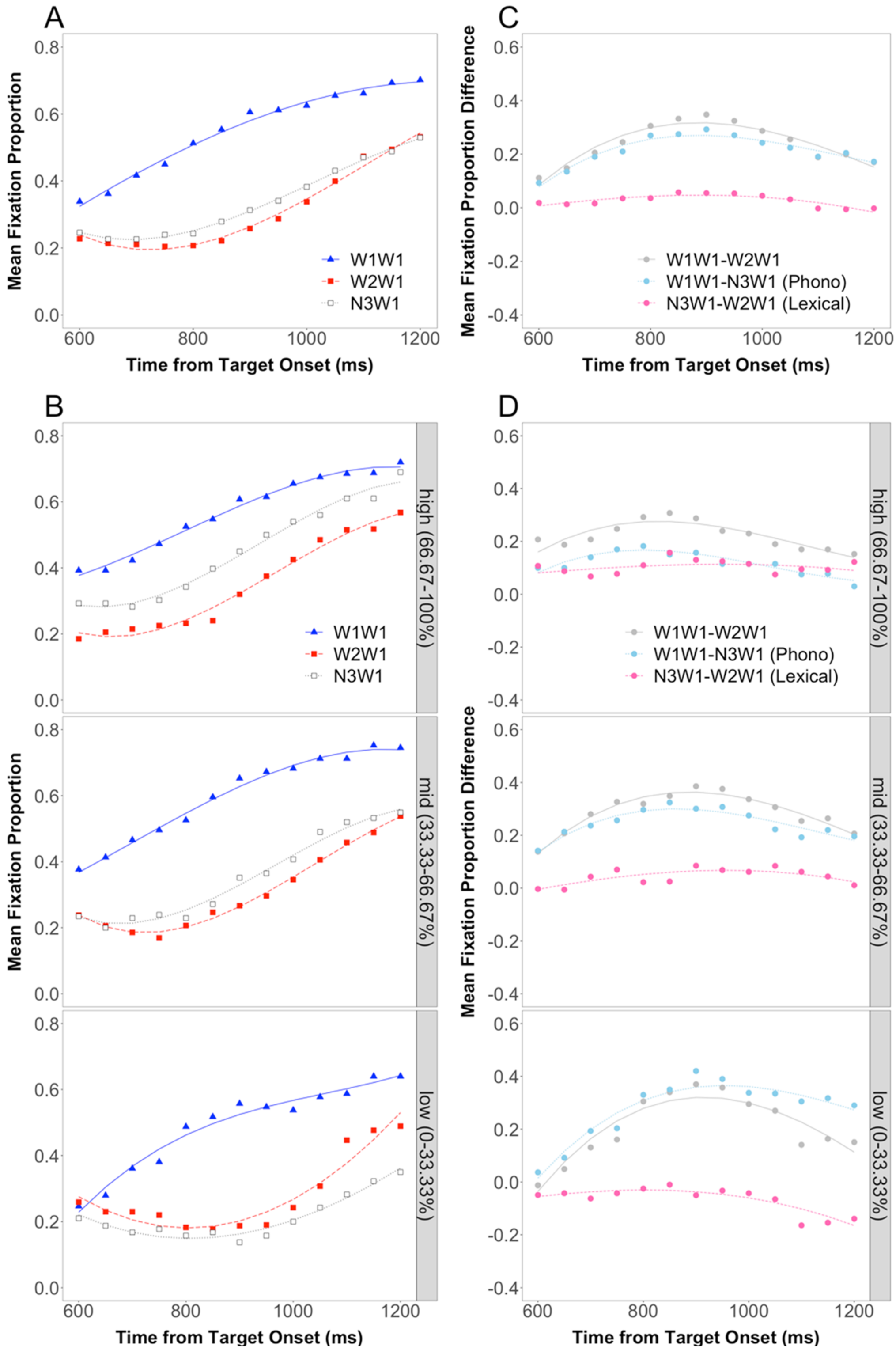

Fig. 7. GCA model fit with conditions and phonological skills composite scores as fixed effects on target fixation proportions (A) collapsed across participants and (B) divided into tertiles of participants based on the phonological skills composite scores (cf. left-most column of Fig. 4A and B, but note the difference in the time range; see main text for the choice of analysis time frame) and on target fixation proportion differences (C) across participants and (D) by participant tertile.

coarticulation (Fig. 4A). This subphonemic similarity effect was stronger for individuals with lower phonological skills, such that it appeared to overwhelm the effect of lexical competition (Fig. 4B); in contrast, the lexical effect dominated in higher-skilled individuals, consistent with the college-based sample of Dahan et al. (2001).

Phonological representations, phonological memory, and phonological awareness

Interestingly, one of the first studies that suggested the impact of phonological processing on reading acquisition outcome showed that low-ability readers experienced *less* interference from rhyming items in

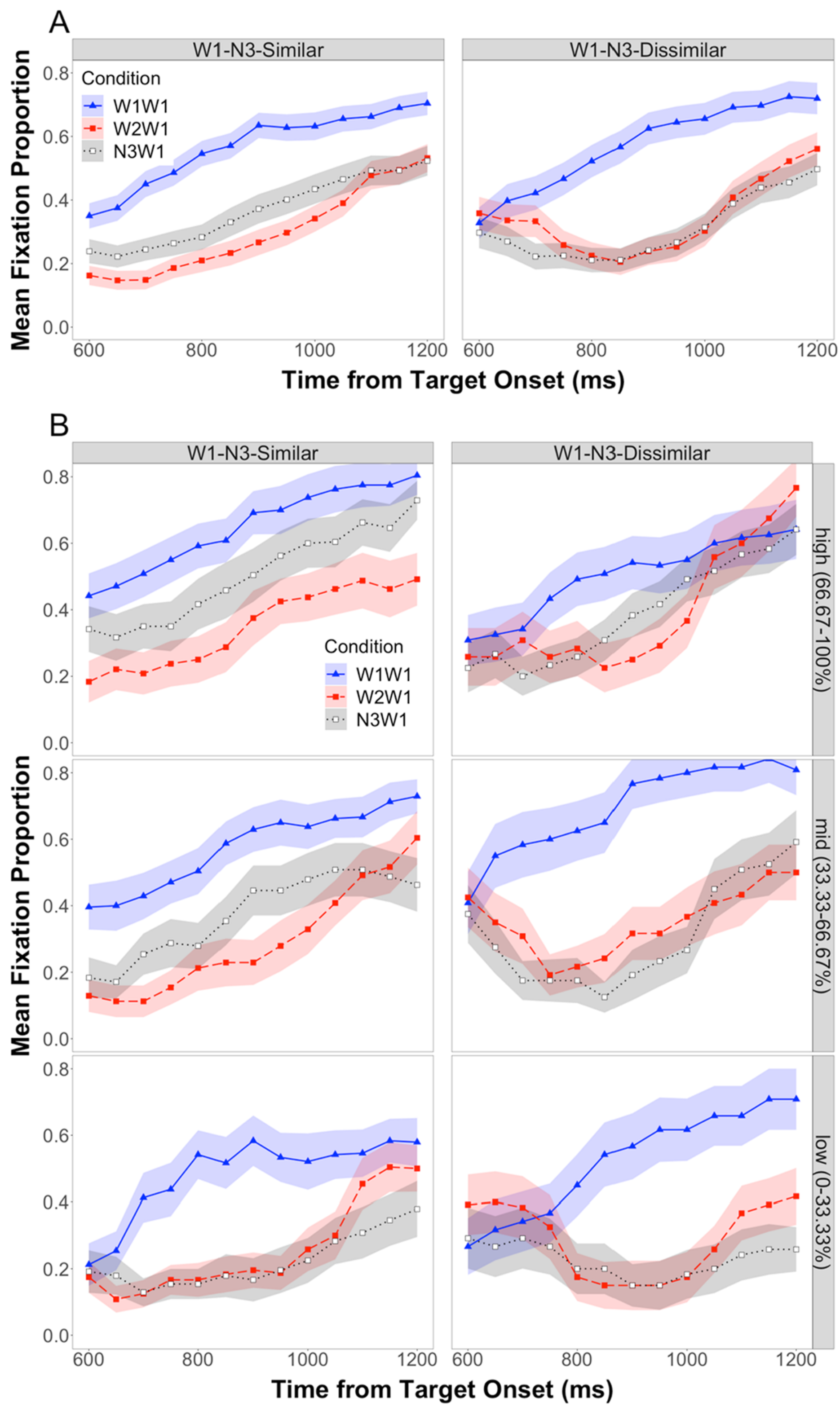

Fig. 8. Target fixation proportions divided by place of articulation similarity between the coarticulation of W1W1 and of N3W1, (A) collapsed across all participants and (B) divided by into tertiles based on individuals' phonological skills.

short-term memory than better readers (Shankweiler, Liberman, Mark, Fowler, & Fischer, 1979). One possible interpretation for this surprising result is that low-ability readers' phonological encodings differed from typical readers in a way that allowed them to better resist interference from similar items in the memory list. In the current study, we hypothesize that this difference is characterized by a higher degree of phonological specification in their representations. In the same vein, although it may appear paradoxical, poorer overall phonological memory performance in low-ability readers has been attributed to encoding and retaining of higher degree of details that saturate the buffer in phonological working memory (Lehongre, Ramus, Villiermet, Schwartz, & Giraud, 2011).

On the other hand, the relationship between phonological processing and phonological representations revealed in the current study may seem inconsistent with some previous studies regarding categorical perception in individuals with developmental language disorders. For example, Robertson, Joanisse, Desroches, and Ng (2009) demonstrated that, when listening to stimuli varying on a place of articulation continuum from “ball” to “doll”, children with specific language impairment (SLI) showed a significantly shallower categorical identification slope and poorer between-category discrimination when compared to the controls. In contrast, children with RD showed similar patterns in categorical perception tasks to the controls, suggesting that children with RD do not seem to have atypical phonological representations. In addition, no significant correlation was found between individuals’ categorical perception and phonological awareness performance across the entire sample, suggesting no direct relationship between phonological processing skills and phonological representations. Yet, there are a few differences between the current study and Robertson et al. (2009) that may help to explain the seeming inconsistency.

To begin with, Robertson et al. (2009) employed a group analysis approach as opposed to a continuous approach. Moreover, a close look at performance levels on their categorical discrimination task indicates that the RD group falls between the SLI and control groups. Indeed, a recent study by Ramus et al. (2013) suggests a continuous distribution in the quality of phonological representations across children with typical reading development, with RD, and with SLI. That is to say, the absence of a significant difference between the RD and control groups in Robertson et al. (2009) may be a consequence of a group design with small sample sizes (n = 14 per group). In comparison, consistent with the view of continuous distribution of abilities across typically and atypically developing trajectories, our focus on individual differences in the current study may provide a more statistically powerful approach.

Furthermore, the absence of significant correlations between phonological awareness and categorical perception measures in Robertson et al. (2009) study may be attributed to two factors. First, Robertson et al. (2009) used but a single measure of phonological awareness (i.e., the phoneme elision subtest from CTOPP), which may not capture the fuller range of phonological processing skills (e.g., different types of phonological awareness and phonological memory) as we did in the current study. Second, the categorical perception tasks of Robertson et al. (2009) require judgment after perception, which, unlike the eyetracking paradigm in the current study, may fail to reveal automatic responses and subtle changes during online speech processing. Therefore, we argue that phonological-based reading disability indeed involves atypical phonological representations, but sensitive measures and appropriate experimental designs are required to capture subtle variation in individual differences along the ability continuum.

Neurobiological bases for reading-related phonological capacities

Our current findings are also consistent with emerging evidence that suggests potential neural bases for atypical phonological processing and representations in RD. In particular, individuals with RD have atypical patterns of neural oscillations in the auditory cortex that have been implicated in speech segmentation and encoding across different time scales, such as syllabic (3–6 Hz) or phonemic (28–40 Hz) rates (Goswami, 2011). Typical individuals demonstrate clear hemispheric specialization in oscillation power, with higher low-gamma (~30 Hz) power in the left hemisphere vs. higher delta (1–3 Hz), theta (4–7 Hz), and high-gamma (50–80 Hz) power in the right hemisphere (Giraud & Poeppel, 2012; Lehongre et al., 2011; Lehongre, Morillon, Giraud, & Ramus, 2013). In contrast, RD individuals do not show left-dominant low-gamma power, which might indicate disruption in the representations of or the access to phonemic units associated with gamma-band entrainment the left auditory cortex (Giraud & Poeppel, 2012; Lehongre et al., 2013). Instead, RD individuals show left dominance of high-gamma power (Lehongre et al., 2011). Such an upward shift of frequency band dominant in the left auditory cortex suggests phonemic oversampling in RD individuals (Giraud & Poeppel, 2012; Lehongre et al., 2011), consistent with the overspecification hypothesis of phonological representations.

In a recent review, Hancock, Pugh, and Hoeft (2017) propose a *neural noise hypothesis* and postulate that increased neural noise (i.e., stochastic variability in neural response) results from higher cortical excitability due to imbalance in specific neurochemistry (e.g., glutamate; Pugh et al., 2014), which then leads to atypical neural oscillations. The neural noise hypothesis for RD has a wide range of implications in sensory processing, representation formation, and multisensory integration across the auditory and visual domains. Of relevance to our current findings, Hancock et al. (2017) propose that neural noise in the auditory domain may affect the time window for sensory processing and integration that is crucial for learning speech and non-speech sound categories (e.g., Gabay & Holt, 2015; Vandermosten et al., 2010).

The neural noise hypothesis, however, may not be able to distinguish between under- vs. overspecified representations implicated in phonological processing. On the one hand, with increased neural noise and spike variability, stimulus representations may become less robust or “fuzzy”, as the underspecification hypothesis postulates. On the other hand, cortical hyperexcitability may affect the time window of sensory processing necessary for learning sound categories, such that affected individuals may not develop fine-tuned phonological representations ideal for a given language (cf. Kuhl et al., 2006) and instead retain overspecified representations that lead to allophonic perception (Serniclaes, 2006).

Therefore, it will be fruitful to further investigate individual differences in the neural underpinnings for phonological representations in future research. Specifically, the spectrotemporal sensitivity of the superior temporal gyrus (STG) has been linked to sensitivity to phonetic features, such as voice onset time, place of articulation, and formant frequency (for a review, see Leonard & Chang, 2014). Given functional and structural deviations in the STG (Maisog, Einbinder, Flowers, Turkeltaub, & Eden, 2008; Paulesu et al., 2001; Simos et al., 2002; Steinbrink et al., 2008) and heightened sensitivity to phonetic features (e.g., Bogliotti, Serniclaes, Messaoud-Galusi, & Sprenger-Charolles, 2008; Noordenbos et al., 2013, 2012a; Noordenbos et al., 2012b; Serniclaes et al., 2004) observed in individuals with RD, a closer examination of STG activity as a function of phonological skills and reading ability may shed light on neural signatures that characterize the grain size of phonological representations. In addition, individual differences in STG activity may also be informative of the interaction between phonological grain size and lexical knowledge (for lexically-mediated phonological processing in STG, see Gow, Segawa, Ahlfors, & Lin, 2008; Myers & Blumstein, 2008) that is likely to have substantial implications in various aspects of language processing.

Conclusion

Individual differences in subphonemic sensitivity during spoken word recognition and in standardized phonological performance tasks suggest that lower phonological skills are associated with higher subphonemic sensitivity, indicating overspecified phonological representations. Our findings provide new insights into how phonological representations may play a role in phonological skills implicated in reading ability. Individual differences in phonological representations implicated in the current study may guide future neurobiological work, deepening our knowledge about the underlying mechanisms and factors that contribute to the dynamic between phonological processing and reading skills.

Author notes

The data and analysis code of the current study are available at https://osf.io/6rd2u/files/. A preliminary report of the current study was reported by Magnuson et al. (2011). Magnuson et al. (2011) summarized trends from a small preliminary subset of the eye tracking data presented here (n = 32, about half of the full sample), and did not consider the individual differences that are our focus in this full report. We thank Joshua Coppola and Erica Davis for their help with this project. This work was supported by US National Institutes of Health [grant numbers R01 HD40353, R01 HD071988] to Haskins Laboratories.

Appendix A. List of Auditory Items

Target (W1)	Word Competitor (W2)	Non-word Competitor (N3)
SIMILAR		
bat	bag	bab
bud	bug	bub
butt	buck	bup
fort	fork	forp
hood	hook	hoop
net	neck	nep
pit	pig	pib
rod	rock	rop
tap	tack	tat
DISSIMILAR		
beak	bead	beab
carp	cart	cark
cat	cab	cag
harp	heart	hark
knot	knob	knog
road	rope	roke

Note. This full set of triplets used in generating auditory stimuli is adapted from Appendix A of Dahan et al. (2001). Stimulus triplets were categorized based on the similarity of final consonants' place of articulation between W1 and N3. Similar: the final consonants of W1 and N3 were either labial or alveolar; dissimilar: one of the final consonants of W1 and N3 was velar, and the other was either labial or alveolar.

Appendix B. List of Visual Items

Target (W1)	Competitor (W2)	Distractor 1	Distractor 2
bat	bag	pen	stool
beak	bead	saw	thumb
bud	bug	fox	eye
butt	buck	clams	ghost
carp	cart	swing	moon
cat	cab	vase	tree
fort	fork	light	hat
harp	heart	desk	claw
hood	hook	eggs	brush
knot	knob	mouse	beer
net	neck	bass	deer
pit	pig	ark	flute
road	rope	knee	glass
rod	rock	bear	fries
tap	tack	skunk	peas

Note. This full list of visual materials is adapted from Appendix B of Dahan et al. (2001).

Appendix C. Supplemental Materials

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jml.2019.03.008.

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