

Conscious Identification: Where Do You Draw the Line?

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What constitutes conscious identification? What is, perhaps, the central argument in the present paper, is that previous researchers attempting to show semantic activation without conscious identification have done an inadequate job of measuring conscious identification. This point is well-taken. However, the measurement problem is actually more than just a measurement problem. What first has to be dealt with is the issue of how to define the concept being measured.

If an observer can accurately report a word which is presented, everyone would agree that a conscious identification has taken place. On the other hand, if the observer claims to know nothing of the nature of the word, and shows no indication of knowledge on any objective measure, a conscious identification has clearly not occurred. Unfortunately, these two possibilities are not exhaustive. Do we wish to argue the observer has or has not made a conscious identification if, a) the identity of the word is known but because the observer isn't certain and wishes to maintain a high report criterion, it isn't reported, b) the observer has the correct word in mind but does not believe it was the word which was presented, c) the word is among two or three possibilities the observer is considering but one of the others is reported, d) the observer knew the identity of the word momentarily but the knowledge was so fragile that it was quickly forgotten, like the

inappropriate meanings of polysemous words or e) the observer knows some of the physical features of the word and could, if forced, make a reasonably accurate guess? As this list of possible scenarios makes clear, knowledge about the identity of a word is not an all or none thing but is, in fact, better represented as a continuum (the reader can undoubtedly conceive of other levels on this continuum). Recognizing, then, the essentially continuous nature of knowledge about a word, when it comes to "conscious identification" the first problem becomes where do you draw the line.

The author, who is rightly attempting to be as conservative as possible in evaluating the evidence for semantic activation without conscious identification, appears to have divided this continuum somewhere around level d. Others more favorably disposed toward the notion of semantic activation without conscious identification may choose to divide the continuum somewhere around level b. The problem this creates for different camps of people talking to one another is obvious. If an experimental setup could be created so that, for example, level c was consistently achieved and semantic activation was noted, the liberals would accept it as a demonstration of semantic activation without conscious identification while the conservatives would not. Unfortunately both (or neither) would be right.

The potential definitional problems created by the use of the term "conscious identification" appear to be numerous. However, for the sake of argument let's assume that we can divide the knowledge continuum into a consciousness part and an unconsciousness part at some spot which almost everyone feels comfortable with, perhaps somewhere around level d. The question then becomes how to determine which stimuli are above that criterion and, hence, are "consciously identified" and which are not. Clearly, simply

asking for a report is insufficient, a point the author makes many times. He suggests instead that more modern psychophysical techniques, particularly signal detection techniques, are now available to help answer this question.

In theory the idea of using signal detection techniques sounds reasonable. Unfortunately, with the continuum divided as suggested in the last paragraph, the implementation will be somewhat problematic. In the first part of the experiment, in which the conditions for preventing a conscious identification are established, the observer would presumably view words followed by masks in an appropriately light-adapted environment. In the typical signal detection procedure, the observer would then be asked either to choose between two alternatives, one of which is correct, or make a yes-no decision about a single alternative. Now consider the fate of those words which fall below the criterion on the knowledge continuum -- that is, those words from which the observer can recognize only a letter or two. Even in the most controlled situations, this small amount of information should allow the observer to show a d' greater than zero for these words. In fact, only the words which the observer completely fails to perceive (i.e., none of whose properties the observer detects) would produce a d' of zero. Consequently, only those words could be classified as not being consciously identified. Thus, the effect of this situation would be to force the criterion to a lower position on the knowledge continuum, making a fair test of the semantic activation without conscious identification hypothesis impossible.

In essence, the semantic activation without conscious identification hypothesis, as stated, does not appear to be testable. The reason is that the term "conscious identification" is too vague to lend itself to empirical investigation. Further, operationalizing it in a way which would be workable appears to require the adoption of a polarized position. That is, either

conscious identification would have to be defined as the ability to report the presented word accurately, or the lack of conscious identification would have to be defined as the total absence of any indication of knowledge about the word on any objective measure. To anyone willing to adopt either of these positions, the present paper appears to offer some useful insights. To those who feel that both positions do violence to their definition of conscious identification, the implications are also clear. The best solution would be to avoid the use of the term altogether.