Semantic Boost on Episodic Associations: An Empirically-Based Computational Model

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Abstract

Words become associated following repeated co-occurrence episodes. This process might be further determined by the semantic characteristics of the words. The present study focused on how semantic and episodic factors interact in incidental formation of word associations. First, we found that human participants associate semantically related words more easily than unrelated words; this advantage increased linearly with repeated co-occurrence. Second, we developed a computational model, SEMANT, suggesting a possible mechanism for this semantic-episodic interaction. In SEMANT, episodic associations are implemented through lateral connections between nodes in a pre-existent self-organized map of word semantics. These connections are strengthened at each instance of concomitant activation, proportionally with the amount of the overlapping activity waves of activated nodes. In computer simulations SEMANT replicated the dynamics of associative learning in humans and led to testable predictions concerning normal associative learning as well as impaired learning in a diffuse semantic system like that characteristic of schizophrenia.

Keywords: Word associations; Episodic memory; Semantic memory; Neural networks; Semantic maps

1. Introduction

Word associations are basic building blocks of human cognition in general and human learning in particular. Understanding how such associations are formed can give us a fundamental insight into the cognitive structures underlying learning and memory.

A viable association between words is demonstrated phenomenologically when the presentation of one word brings the second word to the perceiver's awareness. By definition,

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associations are based primarily on episodic learning. That is, words are associated if they co-occur in time and space, and the strength of an association is determined by the cumulative effect of such episodes. An important aspect of this definition is that associative learning is not necessarily intentional. Indeed, associations are often established incidentally, that is, without intention and without allocating attention to the learning process.

Connections between words can also be based on a semantic relationship. For example, words can share common semantic features (e.g., when they belong to the same semantic category such as GOAT–LION), can maintain a part-whole relationship (e.g., WHEEL–CAR), a functional relationship (e.g., BROOM–FLOOR) and more (Cruse, 1986). Note that if words co-occur frequently they may become associated whether they are semantically related or not, but semantically related words are not always associated (Neely, 1991; Prior & Geffet, 2003). Indeed, episodic associations and semantic relationships are probably based on different properties. Yet, many semantically related word pairs are also episodically associated, which might suggest that the two types of relations, indeed, interact.

This paper focuses on understanding this interaction in detail. Performance experiments with human participants were first performed to characterize the interaction between the categorical neighborhood organization of the semantic system and the episodic dynamics of associative learning. In these experiments the participants' ability to form associations between semantically related and unrelated words was compared. Semantic relations were found to facilitate forming new associations in a specific manner: They provide only a minor initial advantage, but instead facilitate the process by which the episodic associations are strengthened over multiple repetitions, up to a ceiling.

These performance patterns were then used as a starting point for developing a computational theory of word associations, expressed in the SEMANT computational model. In SEMANT, semantic similarity is based on distributed representations (cf. HAL) and episodic associations are based on spreading activation, both represented together in a laterally connected semantic map. The model was validated in simulated associative learning experiments, and then used to draw predictions for future human experiments on asymmetry of associations and potential causes of mediated associations in schizophrenia. In this manner, SEMANT expresses a computational theory of semantic and episodic effects in word associations, and serves to drive future research.

2. Background

There is considerable evidence that semantic and episodic memory systems interact. Most of such studies (e.g., McKoon & Ratcliff, 1986; Neely & Durgunoglu, 1985; Shelton & Martin, 1992) were based on the semantic priming paradigm and focused on examining existing structures. In particular, several studies showed considerably larger semantic priming effects on performance if the prime and the target are also episodically associated (Chiarello, Burgess, Richards, & Pollock, 1990; McRae & Boisvert, 1998); to some extent, these results generalize into newly formed associations as well (Dagenbach, Horst, & Car, 1990; Schrijnemakers & Raaijmakers, 1997).

A converse influence of semantic relationship on associative learning has also been documented. For example, early studies reported more accurate cued recall for strongly related than for weakly related word pairs using the paired associate paradigm (e.g., Underwood & Schultz, 1960; McGuire, 1961; Wicklund, Palermo, & Jenkins, 1964). Supporting these earlier findings, Epstein, Phillips, and Johnson (1975) suggested that semantically related words were more likely to be associated during an incidental learning procedure than unrelated pairs, even if the orientation task did not involve semantic processing. More recently, Guttentag (1995) reported similar findings in children. Moreover, using sentential context rather than relatedness between words, Prior and Bentin (2003) found that associations between unrelated words are formed more easily when they are embedded in a sentence than when they are presented as isolated pairs.

Although such studies suggest that semantic relationships between words affect how associations are formed between them, the data needs additional corroboration, primarily because the strength of pre-experimental associative links between semantically related words has not been sufficiently controlled. Hence, the reported advantage for associating semantically related over unrelated words could have been induced by associative connections that existed before the experiment rather than by an interaction between the two types of connections during associative learning. Therefore, human experiments investigating the semantic influence on the formation of new associations between words were performed as a starting point in the current study, as will be described in the next section.

Given that empirical data exists, computational modeling is an ideal tool to make sense of it and to formulate specific theories about the process. The modeling can be done at several different levels of abstraction, depending on the level of explanation desired. At the highest level, the semantic and episodic interactions can be formalized in Bower's one-element model (Bower, 1961). For example, the semantic relationship advantage could be modeled so that in each trial there's a fixed chance that an association is learned between semantically related word pairs, and a smaller fixed chance that it is learned between semantically unrelated pairs. Such a model accounts for the interaction, but it does not explain how these learning patterns emerge from memory structures, and it is therefore limited in its predictive power.

At a more detailed level, a popular approach to explaining the organization of semantic memory is representing concepts by distinguishable patterns of activity over a large number of nodes (Hinton, 1990; Farah & McClelland, 1991; Hinton & Shallice, 1991; Plaut & Shallice, 1993; Moss, Hare, Day, & Tyler, 1994; Masson, 1995; Plaut, 1995). Each node participating in a representation accounts for a specific semantic micro-feature, and semantic similarity is expressed as an overlap in activity patterns over the set of micro-features. Activity propagates through recurrent connections until the network settles to a stable state (an attractor), representing the semantically related items. Such a model matches much of the same data but allows more detailed explanations and predictions to be drawn. For example, Plaut's (1995) model suggests a distinction between the way by which semantic and episodic relations are formed: Whereas semantic relations are encoded in the micro-features, episodic relations between word pairs are based on co-occurrence information throughout the learning history. On the other hand, the attractor models are rather difficult to interpret, and it is difficult to separate the different factors contributing to their behavior. In particular, Plaut's (1995) model does not specify what mechanisms underlie the process of forming episodic

associations and how the strength of existing semantic connections among other factors affects this process.

The goal of computational modeling, however, is not just to model the data, but to be able to draw predictions that can be verified in future empirical experiments. The SEMANT model is a principled model specifically designed to suggest and test such a mechanism. SEMANT is not an attractor network, but is instead based on three well-known principles that make its processing and learning transparent: map-like memory organization, spreading activation, and Hebbian adaptation. Its core process is Spreading-Activation over Semantic Networks, which is a well-established theory of semantic memory organization (Quillian, 1966; Collins & Loftus, 1975; Cottrell & Small, 1983; Waltz & Pollack, 1985). According to this theory, each concept is represented by a node in a semantic network, and semantically related nodes are connected with weighted links. When a concept is processed, the appropriate node is activated and the activation spreads along the network connections in a manner proportional to the connection weights, gradually decreasing in strength over time. In order to bring a word to awareness, its activation must exceed a threshold. Thus, the spreading activation model provides a simple, transparent process that can be readily matched with experimental data.

Before describing the details of SEMANT and its predictions, in the following sections the empirical data on which it is based will be reviewed.

3. Human performance experiments

Two experiments were performed on human participants, in order to characterize the interactions between episodic and semantic memory systems in some detail. The first experiment showed that it is easier to form new episodic associations between semantically related words compared with unrelated words. During an incidental study phase, ten randomly ordered Hebrew word pairs were repeated 20 times. In each trial, two words were displayed sequentially for 350 ms each and a Stimulus Onset Asynchrony (SOA) of 700 ms. After an additional SOA of 800 ms (relative to the onset of the second word), a single letter was presented and the participant was requested to determine (pressing an alternative button) whether this letter was or was not included in either of the preceding words (Kutas & Hillyard, 1988; Smith, Bentin, & Spalek, 2001). Hence, episodic proximity was established by having the participants store the two words together in working memory for 800 ms. The shallow processing orientation task was selected in order to avoid task-biased semantic activity at study and depth of processing effects for single words (cf. Craik and colleagues, e.g., Craik & Lockheart, 1972; Craik & Tulving, 1975).

Following the study session in which the participants performed with an accuracy of over 90%, the strength of the association between the words in each pair was unexpectedly tested using a cued recall test and a free association test. In the cued recall test, the first words of half of the studied pairs were presented as cues, and the participants were requested to respond with the cue's associate. In the free association test, the participants were presented with the first words of the other half of the pairs, and the participants were asked to respond with a first free-associate. Correct cued recall performance and responding with the episodically paired word in the free association tests were considered evidence that an association between

Table 1
Percentage of cued recall and free association for
pairs of semantically related and unrelated words

Relatedness	Cued Recall	Free Associations
Related	38.8%	7.5%
Unrelated	19.4%	1.3%[1]

[1]Based on 16 participants.

the two words was incidentally formed during study. The effect of semantic relationship was tested between subjects. One group of 32 participants was tested with semantically related but not associated pairs (e.g., MILK-SOUP)[1] and another equally sized group was tested with semantically unrelated words (e.g. PAINT-FOREST). The performance of the 64 subjects is presented in Table 1.

Both cued recall and free association revealed stronger associations between semantically related pairs than for unrelated pairs [$t(62) = 2.8$, $p < 0.01$ and $t(46) = 2.36$, $p < 0.025$ for cued recall and free associations, respectively). These results support earlier studies such as that of Epstein et al. (1975) reporting that semantically related words are easier to associate than unrelated words.

There are at least two possible explanations for this effect. One is that the probability of encountering two related words in real life episodes is higher than encountering two unrelated words. Hence, although not evident while testing word associations explicitly (in our pilot survey), weak episodic associations may have existed between semantically related words, and those could have facilitated associative learning. Another possible explanation is that activation spreads more efficiently among semantically related than unrelated words in the semantic system. This effect makes it easier to form associative connections during each new episode of concomitant activation. Although the two accounts are not mutually exclusive, they should affect cued recall performance in distinguishable ways. Pre-existent (weak) associations should enhance associative strength at the very beginning of the episodic associative learning process. Following this initial boost, however, pre-existent association should not influence the learning curve. In contrast, facilitated associative learning should be evident (at least up to a ceiling) at each recurrent learning episode. Consequently, the effect of efficient spread of activation should manifest as a steeper learning function for related than unrelated pairs.

In order to test the relative contribution of each of these two factors, in a subsequent experiment the semantic relationship between the words in each pair (within-subject factor) and the number of repetitions during the incidental learning phase (between-subjects factor) were manipulated. Twenty-four pairs of exemplars representing 24 semantic categories were selected. As in the previous experiment, the words in each pair did not elicit one another in free association questionnaire in which participants were requested to provide the first three associates in response to a cue word. From the list of 24 related pairs, two study lists were prepared. Each list comprised of 12 related pairs form the list above, and 12 unrelated pairs. The unrelated pairs were scrambled pairings of the other 12 pairs. The related pairs in list A were scrambled in list B and the unrelated pairs in list A were reorganized to form the related
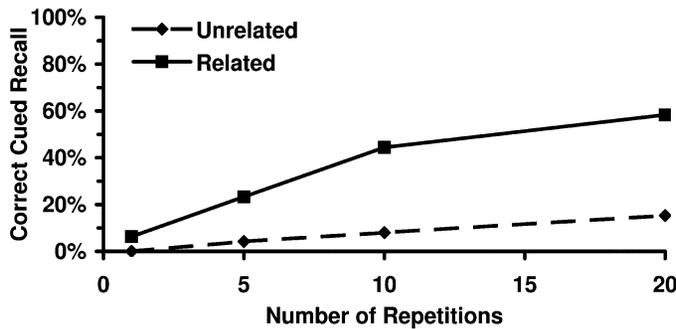
Fig. 1. Average percentages of correct recall for the related and unrelated word pairs over increasing number of learning repetitions. Semantic information enhances the process of forming associations, up to a ceiling effect.

set in list B. Four different groups of 24 participants were assigned to one presentation (i.e., no repetition), 5, 10 or 20 presentations during an incidental learning phase, during which they performed the letter search task. Following study, the participants were unexpectedly presented with a cued recall test in which the first word of all 24 pairs were presented as cues and the participants were requested to respond with the paired associated word from the study phase.

All participants performed the letter search task at study with accuracy above 85%, suggesting that they paid attention to the words. Cued recall was better for semantically related than unrelated words for all groups, and the semantic advantage increased with increased repetition (Fig. 1). Mixed-model ANOVA showed that both main effects were significant [$F(1,92) = 204$, $p < 0.0001$, and $F(3,92) = 25$, $p < 0.0001$, for semantic relationship and number of repetition factors, respectively]. More revealing, however, was the significant interaction between the two factors [$F(3,92) = 19$, $p < 0.0001$], which showed that each repetition contributed more to related than to unrelated pairs. These results suggest that semantic information does not only provide an initial advantage, but enhances the process of forming episodic associations (at least if they are formed incidentally). The effect of the interaction, however, has a ceiling, above which additional repetition contributes equally to forming both related and unrelated associations. Any further learning is based on co-occurrence only.

The second experiment, therefore, extended the results of the first experiment, distinguishing between semantic and episodic contributions to the associative process. Together, the results describe in detail how semantic relatedness facilitates forming incidental episodic associations between words. Next, a computational model for this process is presented, and predictions for further experiments derived.

4. Computational model—SEMANT

The computational simulations were based on SEMANT (Semantic and Episodic Memory of Associations using Neural neTworks), a biologically-motivated and psychologically real neural network model of the semantic system.[2] Following an overview of SEMANT, the

semantic representations, the network architecture, and the model dynamics will be described in this section.

4.1. Overview

SEMANT is a two-dimensional self-organizing map network where semantically related concepts are represented by nodes that are closer to each other than semantically unrelated nodes. Episodic associations are represented on this map as direct connections among the nodes. Activation among nodes spreads along both semantic and associative connections. Inspired by the notion of Hebbian learning, the strength of an association between two conjointly activated nodes is enhanced when the "wave" of activation spreading from one node overlaps with the activation spreading from the other node. Since spreading activation decays with distance from the source, the closer the two concepts are on the semantic map, the greater the overlap between their activations. Hence, when two semantically related words are conjointly activated, the associative connection strength between them increases by a large amount. On the other hand, because semantically unrelated words are further apart on the semantic map, their concomitant activations overlap less and consequently their associative connection strength increases by a smaller amount.

4.2. Input representations

Word semantics was based on lexical co-occurrence analysis according to the Hyperspace Analogue to Language (HAL) model of Burgess and Lund (1997). In this model, high-dimensional numeric representations for words are formed based on the context in which they occur in large text corpora. A moving window of several words is placed around each word in the text. A co-occurrence matrix is calculated according to how often each word occurs in the different positions in the window. The rows and columns of this matrix are high-dimensional vector representations for each word. To make them computationally tractable, the 100 dimensions with the highest variance are used for the final representations. As has been shown in a number of studies, the resulting HAL vectors capture the semantic of words fairly well: Semantically related words have similar, closer, representations (Lund, Burgess, & Atchley, 1995; Lund, Burgess, & Audet, 1996; Burgess & Lund, 1997; Li, 1999, 2000; Li, Burgess, & Lund, 2000). In the present study, HAL representations were 100 dimensions long and formed based on the 3.8-million-word CHILDES database (Li, 1999; MacWhinney, 2000). Forty-eight nouns were selected from this database to form 24 pairs of words. The words in each pair were exemplars from the same semantic category. The words were the English translation of the 48 Hebrew words used in the second of the human experiments described above. In some cases, if a direct translation did not exist or the translated word did not appear in the set of HAL representations, a similar English word was chosen. Another 202 nouns were selected randomly from the same set of representations in order to create a richer semantic neighborhood for the 48 words of interest. The words are listed in the appendix.

4.3. Self-organizing maps

The SEMANT architecture is based on a Self-Organizing Semantic Map with lateral connections (Ritter & Kohonen, 1989; Miikkulainen, 1992; Miikkulainen, Bednar, Choe, & Sirosh, 2005). The Self-Organizing Feature Map (SOM) is an Artificial Neural Network (ANN) that classifies high-dimensional data and represents their topological structure in a two-dimensional map (Kohonen, 1990). The algorithm has two different versions of implementation. One version is biologically motivated and, therefore, includes computations that are biologically plausible. The other version is oriented towards practical applications, and the equations that govern it are abstractions of the computations in the biological version. SEMANT is based on a hybrid implementation that retains the computational efficiency of the abstract model but includes psychologically verified mechanisms when they are crucial for the performance of the model.

The SOM architecture is a feed-forward, two-layered neural network. The input is presented on the first layer, while the second layer, consisting of a 2-D array of nodes, self-organizes to represent the topology of the input space. In SEMANT, the nodes of the output layer are interconnected with all-to-all lateral connections. Inputs that are significantly different in their semantic features are mapped onto distinct locations in the output space; similarly, inputs with many overlapping semantic features are mapped onto nearby locations. The organization of the map, i.e. the assignment of weight vectors to the nodes in the second layer, is formed in an unsupervised, iterative process, driven by the statistics of the input's features.

The map's response to the input vector is determined by calculating the scalar product of the weight vectors of each node and the input vector:

$$s_{ij} = \sum_k w_{ij,k} x_k, \tag{1}$$

where s_{ij} is the response of node (i, j) in a two-dimensional map, x is the input vector and $w_{ij,k}$ is the weight between component k of the input vector on node (i, j). Each iterative adaptation step consists of two stages: First, the node in the output layer that responds most strongly to the current input vector is found. Second, the weight vectors of the most responsive node and neighboring nodes are modified to become more similar to the input vector. The neighborhood in which weight vectors will be modified is defined around the most responsive node, with a radius that decreases from nearly the size of the entire map down to zero as the self-organization progresses. The weight vectors of nodes in the neighborhood are changed to become closer to the input vector according to

$$w_{ij}(t+1) = w_{ij}(t) + \varepsilon(t)[x(t) - w_{ij}(t)], \tag{2}$$

where $w_{ij}(t)$ is the weight vector of node (i, j) at time t, $x(t)$ is the input vector at time t, and $\varepsilon(t)$ is the adaptation rate, which is usually decreased to zero with t. In this process, the weight vectors of the map nodes become approximations for the input vectors and the weight vectors of neighboring nodes become similar, which results in an ordered map of the input space.

4.4. Semantic maps

The SOM algorithm is commonly used to visualize high-dimensional inputs with inherent metric properties (Kohonen, 1990, 2000). Such inputs are typical to low-level perception. However, when dealing with high-level processing such as semantics in language and memory, the inputs are often discrete and not necessarily metric. There are two major ways to represent semantics (Ritter & Kohonen, 1989). According to the first, the representation is a *feature vector*, where bits represent a set of fixed properties (big/small, has 2 legs/4 legs, etc.). According to the other, the context of the word, e.g., the random representation of the word and its predecessor and successor words, is used as the input. In both cases, *Semantic Maps* are created, that is, meaningful maps of word semantics that express grammatical and semantic relationships between words. Because the latter methodology can be automated, it can be applied to large corpora such as the entire text of the Grimm fairy-tales (Honkela, Pulkki, & Kohonen, 1995). Therefore it was also adopted for SEMANT, using the HAL approach for creating the representations.

Semantic maps have been successfully used in various investigations of the semantic system addressing issues such as language acquisition, semantic priming, semantic and episodic memory, and were used to document representation and retrieval (Scholtes, 1991; Miikkulainen, 1993; Lowe, 1997; Kohonen et al., 2000; Li, Farkas & MacWhinney, 2004; Mayberry, 2004). Because self-organizing maps are based on Hebbian learning and maps in general are common in many parts of the cortex (Knudsen, Lac, & Esterly, 1987), self-organizing maps are most appealing as a biologically plausible analogue of classic semantic networks (Spitzer, 1997).

4.5. SEMANT architecture

The core of the SEMANT model is a semantic map consisting of 250 nouns organized in a 40 by 40 grid. The semantic map is extended to include all-to-all unidirectional lateral connections. These connections represent potential associations between two words. The strength of each connection is composed of semantic and episodic components:

$$Lat_{ij,uv} = Sem_{ij,uv} + Epi_{ij,uv}, \tag{3}$$

where $Lat_{ij,uv}$ is the connection weight from node (i, j) to node (u, v). The semantic component represents the distance on the map, given by

$$Sem_{ij,uv} = \frac{AMP}{(1 + e^{(|w_{ij} - w_{uv}|^2 - SFT)SLP})}, \tag{4}$$

where w_{ij} is the map's weight vector for node (i, j) and *AMP*, *SLP*, and *SFT* are free parameters.[3] The equation describes a reverse sigmoid with *AMP* defining its height, *SLP* its slope and *SFT* its offset. Therefore, the strength of each lateral connection is inversely proportional to the 100-dimensional distance between the nodes' weight vectors. Initially, the episodic part of all lateral connections is zero. Hence, prior to any learning of new associations, the lateral connections capture only the topographic organization of the map, that is, the words' semantic relations.

The semantic map was organized in two phases. In the first phase, aimed at producing a gross organization, the neighborhood size was decreased from 40 to 3 over 10,000 iterative adaptation step. In the second organization phase, aimed at fine tuning the map's representations, the neighborhood size was decreased from 3 to 0 over additional 20,000 iterations. The adaptation rate (ε) was 0.5 throughout the organization process but decreased linearly as a function of the Euclidian distance square between the updated node and the most responsive node at each iteration.

4.6. SEMANT dynamics

When a word is presented to SEMANT, an activity "bubble" develops surrounding the node that represents the word in the network. The generated activity wave spreads from the activated node according to synchronized recurrent dynamics. At each time step, the input to each node is the sum of the activities of all nodes in the previous time step, weighted by the lateral connections. The node's activity is limited between the values 0 and 1 according to a sigmoid function

$$s_{ij}(t) = \sigma \left(\sum_{uv} Lat_{ij,uv} s_{uv}(t-1) \right), \tag{5}$$

where

$$\sigma(x) = \frac{1}{(1 + e^{-x})}, \tag{6}$$

and $S_{ij}(t)$ is the activity of node (i, j) at time t.

When two words are presented to SEMANT during the same learning trial (τ), the episodic weights adapt to encode a lateral connection (i.e., an association) between them. Both activities spread independently over the map and the intersection of these activations is summed over all the map's nodes and over all time steps. This sum is added to the episodic component of the lateral connection between these words (only in the direction that corresponds to the order of presentation) according to

$$Epi_{i_{PRM} j_{PRM}, i_{TGT} j_{TGT}}(\tau + 1) = Epi_{i_{PRM} j_{PRM}, i_{TGT} j_{TGT}}(\tau) + \sum_{mn,t} \min \left(s_{mn}^{PRM}(t), s_{mn}^{TGT}(t) \right), \tag{7}$$

where $s_{mn}^{PRM}(t)$ is the activation of node (m, n) at time t resulting from the presentation of the prime word, which is represented in node (i_{PRM}, j_{PRM}), and $s_{mn}^{PRM}(t)$ is the activation of node (m, n) at time t resulting from the presentation of the target word, which is represented in node (i_{TGT}, j_{TGT}).

When the distance between the words is small (indicating that the words are strongly semantically related), the resulting activity waves overlap significantly and the connection between them is considerably amplified at each co-occurrence. Thus, it is easier for SEMANT to associate related words than unrelated words. Conceptually, this method is an abstraction of Hebbian learning of episodic links, since the resulting connection strength depends on the intersection of the activation waves of both words.
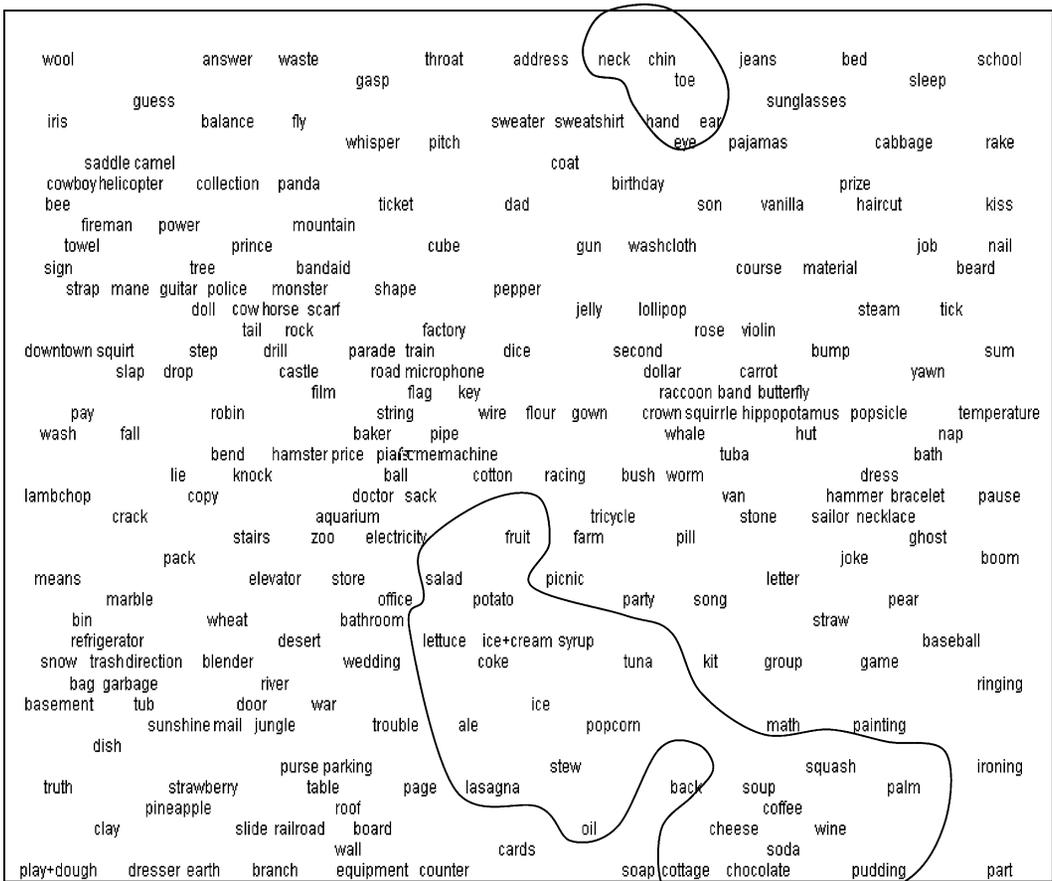
Fig. 2. A self-organized semantic map. Semantically related words, such as those denoting body parts and foods, are mapped to adjacent nodes. Twelve different maps were organized from different random initial values, and were used to simulate different participants.

4.7. Computational participants

In the simulation experiments, 12 different computational participants were generated by self-organizing the semantic map each time from different random initial starting points. The same sequence of input words was used for each participant (see appendix for detailed simulation parameters). The resulting maps learned to represent the semantic similarities in the data, but differed in the details of how they were organized. For example, in the map of Fig. 2, food-related concepts are clustered in the bottom and body parts on top. The food and body part clusters were prominent on other maps as well, but were shaped differently and located in different regions of the map. In this sense, the 12 maps can be seen as different individuals with roughly equivalent semantic systems. Simulated psychological experiments were conducted in this group of computational participants in order to explain the performance observed in human studies.

5. Validating SEMANT as a model of human learning

The first simulation was aimed at verifying the psychological validity of SEMANT, by replicating the human performance in the second experiment described above. Again, this experiment demonstrated that it is easier to form associations between semantically related than unrelated words, and that this advantage increases with repetitive presentation.

5.1. Simulation 1

5.1.1. Experimental setup

Out of the 24 semantically related pairs on the semantic map 12 pairs were chosen with a Euclidean distance between HAL representations shorter than average (0.88) but larger then a pre-determined threshold (0.35). This selection insured that the words in each pair were semantically related, but not strongly enough to be always recalled regardless of any episodic associations. In addition, the other 12 pairs were randomly re-matched to form 12 pairs of semantically unrelated words. The simulation procedure was replicated 12 times using a different map each time and statistical analysis was performed on the data.

5.1.2. Procedure

In each trial during the simulated study phase, SEMANT was given two words one after the other at an appropriate SOA (i.e., the first word was given at time step 0 and the second word only at time step 3). The absolute time scale of the network is arbitrary and was adjusted to fit the data. Each of the 24 pairs (12 related and 12 unrelated) was presented once. Because episodic factors do not affect how activation spreads in the modeled semantic network during the learning phase, the episodic associative strength resulting from multiple presentations was calculated by multiplying the result of a single presentation by the number of repetitions, which varied from 1 to 30.

In each trial during the test phase, the first word in each of the studied pairs was presented again to SEMANT. The resulting activation wave spread based on the same dynamics as during the study phase, except that both semantic and episodic components of the lateral connections now affected propagation. The activity continued to spread until one of the nodes representing a word reached a pre-determined activity threshold (0.98). This word was then emitted as output. If no word-node reached the threshold within eight time steps (at which time the activation wave had usually decayed to a negligible level), the word with the highest activation was emitted as an answer. The latter scenario simulated the situation in which the participant could not recall any word and would answer with the word that first came to mind.

5.1.3. Results and discussion

As evident in Fig. 3, SEMANT successfully replicated the pattern of results found in human subjects. At early stages, the semantically related pairs were associated faster than unrelated pairs. After about ten repetitions, a ceiling effect reduced this pace, such that their advantage over the unrelated pairs stops growing. In contrast, the pace of learning unrelated pairs was relatively constant throughout the repetitions.
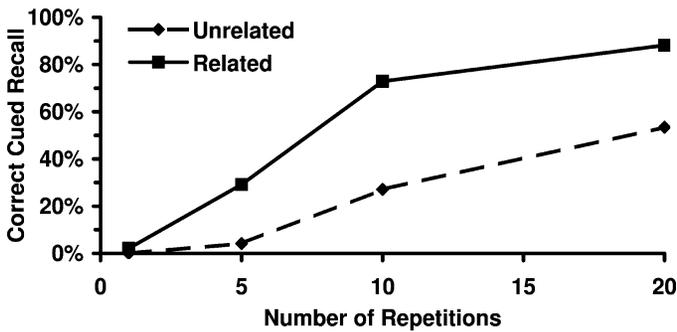
Fig. 3. Average percentages of correct recall in the model over increasing repetitions. The performance of the model matches that of the behavioral experiments (Fig. 1), suggesting that word recall could be due to computations in a laterally connected semantic map.

It is important to emphasize that due to the sigmoid transfer function (Equations 5 and 6) as well as the recurrent dynamics, SEMANT's response changes nonlinearly with increasing repetitions. Moreover, the performance in the simulated cued-recall test depends nonlinearly on the lateral connection strengths. Hence, the nearly linear learning curves in SEMANT (until the ceiling effect) cannot stem merely from the linear way in which multiple repetitions were modeled (Section 4.1.2). Instead, they accurately represent an equal contribution of each learning trial to the correct cued-recall performance.

Statistical analysis of the data revealed that both main effects, i.e. the effect of semantic relatedness and the effect of number of repetitions, as well as the interaction between them were reliable [$F(1,11) = 104.4$ $p < 0.001$, $F(3,33) = 352.4$ $p < 0.001$ and $F(3,33) = 35.2$ $p < 0.001$, respectively]. This result demonstrated that SEMANT is a psychologically valid model; it further suggests that the observed human associative learning and cued recall performance could arise from computations involving a laterally connected semantic map. In two subsequent simulations, SEMANT was used to derive predictions that characterize these processes in more detail.

6. Implicit asymmetry in forming associations

Unlike semantic relationships, associations between words are directional. In free association questionnaires, for most pairs the participants would reply with word B after A with a different probability than the other way around (Koriat, 1981). In SEMANT, *explicit asymmetry* is achieved by the unidirectional lateral connections, which represent the association between two words in the map. However, SEMANT demonstrates an additional asymmetry that is *implicit*: It is sometimes easier to form an association between two words in one direction than in the opposite direction even before any episodic information is taken into account. Simulation 2 was aimed at quantifying this phenomenon.
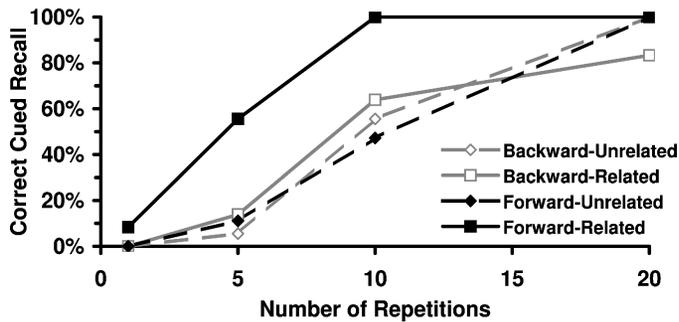
Fig. 4. Average percentages of correct recall demonstrated by SEMANT for related and unrelated word pairs in forward (sparse to dense) and backward (dense to sparse) directions. The model predicts that learning is easier from sparse to dense neighborhoods.

6.1. Simulation 2

6.1.1. Experimental setup

The density of the semantic neighborhoods of the words used in Simulation 1 was determined by counting the number of words (out of the 250 total words in SEMANT's lexicon) that were within a fixed 100-dimensional distance (0.4) in their HAL representations. Based on this count 3 related and 3 unrelated pairs were selected in which the difference in the semantic densities of the two words in a pair was the greatest. These 6 pairs were used in this simulation. As before, the simulation procedure was replicated 12 times using a different map each time and statistical analysis was performed on the data.

6.1.2. Procedure

As in Simulation 1, the six pairs were presented one word at a time. First, the pairs were presented in the forward direction, from the word with the sparse semantic neighborhood to the word with the dense semantic neighborhood in each pair. Then, the network was reset to its original state and the entire procedure was repeated with the pairs presented in the opposite order (from dense to sparse). The "cued-recall" performance of the two directions was compared statistically.

6.1.3. Results and discussion

As shown in Fig. 4, when the pairs were presented in the forward direction (sparse neighborhood → dense neighborhood) associations were learned faster than when the order of presentation was reversed [$F(1,11) = 24.8$ $p < 0.001$]. However, a significant interaction between direction of presentation and semantic relationship effects [$F(3,33) = 3.9$ $p < 0.05$] revealed that the order of presentation influenced only the semantically related words. Post hoc analysis of the order effect showed that whereas the related word pairs were learned faster in the forward than backward direction [$F(1,11) = 46.6$ $p < 0.001$], order had no effect on unrelated word pairs [$F(1,11) < 1.00$].

The reason for this implicit asymmetry is that activation spreads over a non-uniformly distributed high-dimensional space (as will be elaborated in the General Discussion).

Consequently, each word results in a unique pattern of activation over the map over time. In particular, spreading the activation from a sparse neighborhood to a dense one takes longer than the other way around. Therefore, for semantically related pairs, the intersection of the two activation waves is larger and persists longer when the first word is in a sparse neighborhood than when it is in a dense neighborhood. For unrelated word pairs, the difference is inconsequential because the activation waves do not overlap significantly.

Although implicit asymmetry has not yet been observed in human performance, indirect evidence suggests that it might be psychologically real. For example, Dagenbach, Horst, and Carr (1990) found that it is easier to add a new word to semantic memory than to establish a link between two formerly unconnected words already existing in semantic memory. This result is consistent with the asymmetrical directionality prediction of SEMANT if newly learned words are assumed to be poorly embedded into their semantic neighborhood and, therefore, to have a sparser semantic neighborhood than familiar words do.

7. Modeling associative learning in schizophrenia

Based on Collins and Loftus's (1975) theory of spreading activation, Spitzer (1997) suggested a model of schizophrenic thought disorder (STD) where the activation wave over the semantic network of STD patients spreads faster and farther away from origin as compared to normal participants. Such atypical activation may explain experimental results in STD patients, who show stronger direct priming (e.g., between the words COW and MILK) as well as more indirect, mediated semantic priming (e.g., between the words BULL and MILK, mediated by the word COW) than normal subjects. It may also explain the clinical phenomenon of loose, oblique and derailed associations. There are at least two possible accounts for the aberrant spreading of activation in the STD semantic system: (1) the total amount of activation may be higher in STD patients than in typical population, and (2) the activation may be shallower in STD patients but more widespread. In Simulations 3A and 3B these two possible accounts are tested in SEMANT. By comparing the performance in each of the simulations with those of human participants it is possible to obtain insight into what might be causing semantic disorders in STD patients.

7.1. Simulation 3A

7.1.1. Experimental setup and procedure

This simulation tested the effect of increasing the overall amount of activation on associative learning. The experimental setup and procedures of Simulation 1 were replicated, except that the amplitude of the spreading activation wave was relatively elevated. As described above (Equation 4), the distance between the word representations (nodes) determines how strongly they are linked according to a reverse sigmoid function (Equation 4). This sigmoid was elevated by multiplying the *SFT* parameter of Equation 4 by a factor of two. As a result, the area underneath the curve increased but the shape of the sigmoid remained similar to that used in Simulation 1 (Fig. 5). The psychological interpretation of this change is that the stronger and unfocused activation wave results from a higher level of excitability in the system. As in
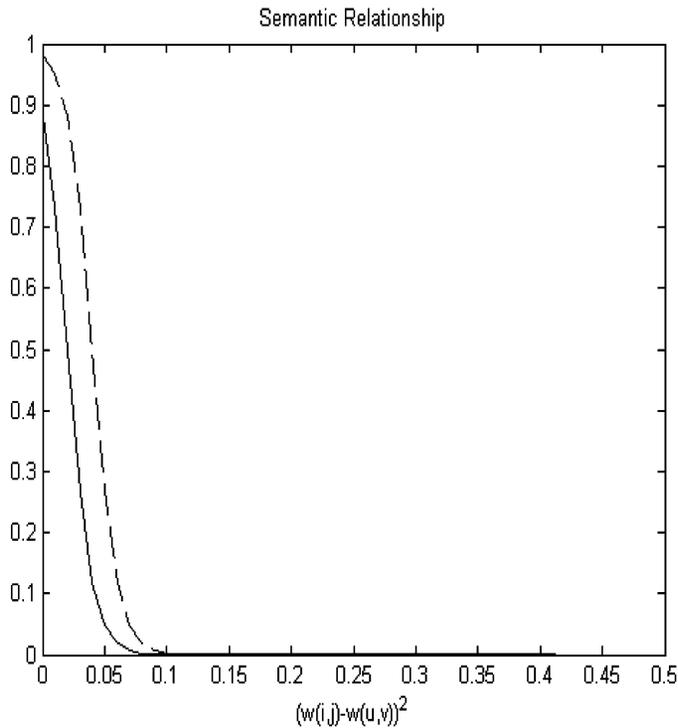
Fig. 5. Semantic relatedness as a function of the distance between word representations in normal participants (solid line) and in STD patients (dashed line) modeled by an elevated curve. Such a curve corresponds to a higher level of excitability in the system.

Simulation 1, the simulation procedure was replicated 12 times using a different map each time and statistical analysis was performed on the data.

7.1.2. Results and discussion

As shown in Fig. 6, running the simulation, SEMANT predicted that the associative recall performance of STD patients in both related and unrelated conditions would improve, at least up to about 10 repetitions [$F(1,11) = 58.9 \ p < 0.001$].

Since both cued-recall and priming depend on memory organization, this finding is consistent with the increased semantic priming reported in schizophrenic patients. Computationally, the improvement in performance was caused by the elevated sigmoid, which generated a greater activity overall. Interestingly, unlike modeling typical performance, when STD constraints are imposed on the simulation the associations between unrelated words were formed as fast as between related words. This pattern was verified by a Relatedness × Number of repetitions × Model (typical, STD) ANOVA showing a significant three-way interaction $F(3,33) = 13.4 \ p < 0.001$. This result corresponds to the finding that STD patients show more mediated associations, in the sense that semantically unrelated words are easier for STD patients to associate than for matched control participants.
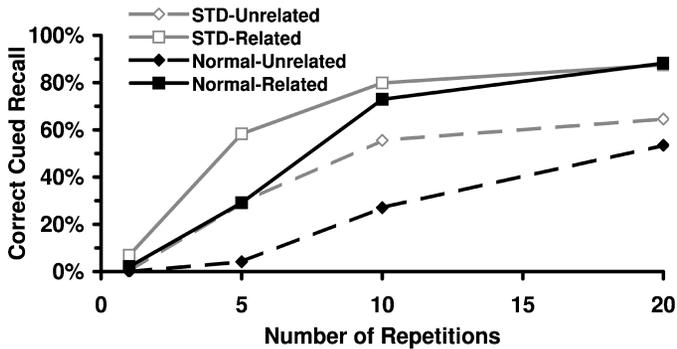
Fig. 6. Averaged percentages of correct recall demonstrated by SEMANT for normal participants and for STD patients with elevated activity. Performance for STD patients is elevated for both related and unrelated pairs and the difference between the two conditions is diminished, suggesting that mediated associations in STD may result from enhanced semantic connections.

Nevertheless, the superior associative recall performance of STD patients predicted by simulation 3A for both related and unrelated pairs is intriguing. Notwithstanding the stronger semantic priming effect, STD patients do not usually succeed in memory tests better than normal participants, especially with incidentally learned associations. Note that the better cued-recall for STD patients resulting from Simulation 3A is a result of higher activation levels in general. To address this problem and explore the second account for the unusual priming effects observed in STD patients, in Simulation 3B a shallower but broader sigmoid was used. Such a sigmoid generates unfocused activation without increasing its overall amount. The goal was to see whether more loose associations would result without a significant increase in overall recall performance.

7.2. Simulation 3B

7.2.1. Experimental setup and procedure

The setup and procedures of this simulation were similar to that of Simulation 3A except that the sigmoid was normalized such that the sum of the semantic components of the lateral connections was identical to that used in Simulation 1 (Fig. 7). Thus, the total strength of the lateral connections in the simulated STD was the same as in the normal case; keeping the overall activation at the same level in both groups. However, the connection profile was much wider, representing an unfocused association system. As in all our previous simulations, the simulation procedure was replicated on 12 different maps and analyzed statistically.

7.2.2. Results and discussion

Unfocused activation was implemented in SEMANT by making the sum of the semantic components of the lateral connections the same in STD and in the typical case. As can be seen in Fig. 8, this simulation resulted in lower percentage of cued recall in related pairs while the performance of unrelated pairs was higher than in the normal case. Statistical analysis (ANOVA) did not show a statistically reliable difference between normal and STD conditions
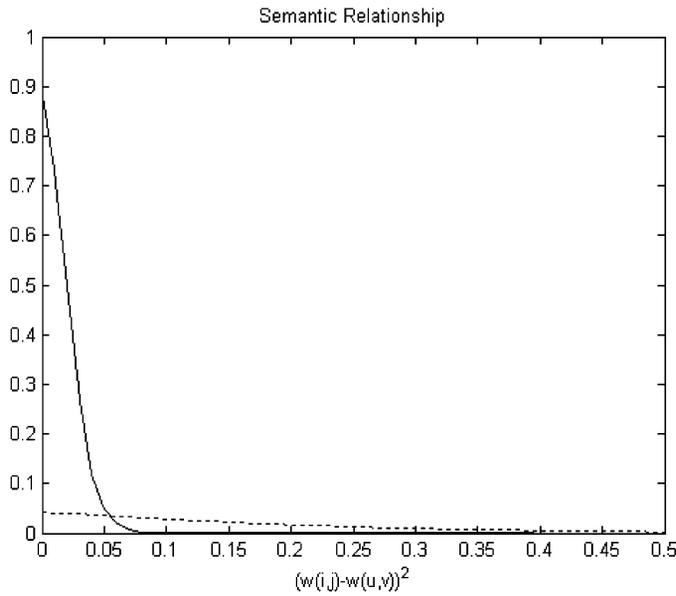
Fig. 7. Semantic relatedness as a function of the distance between word representations in normal participants (solid line) and in STD patients (dashed line), modeled by a shallower and wider curve. Such a curve corresponds to higher unfocused associations.

$[F(1,11) = 0.086 \ p > 0.75]$, but resulted in a significant relatedness effect $[F(1,11) = 193.893 \ p < 0.001]$ and a significant interaction between the relatedness and STD conditions $[F(1,11) = 26.620 \ p < 0.001]$. This interaction indicates that the semantic relatedness had a larger effect in the normal than in the STD case. Moreover, as in Simulation 3A, the qualitative difference in the rate of learning related versus unrelated words was decreased in STD relative to normal [significant three-way interaction $F(3,33) = 15.6 \ p < 0.001$].
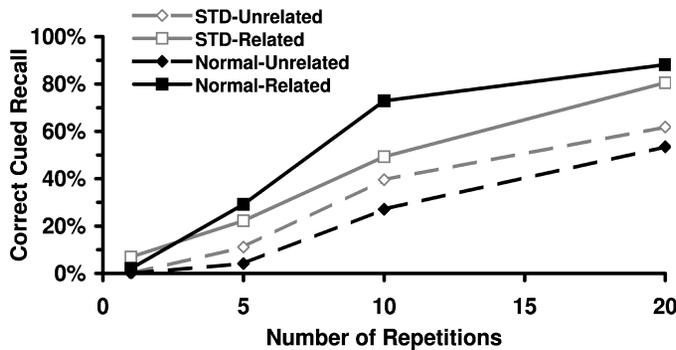

Fig. 8. Average percentages of correct recall demonstrated by SEMANT for normal participants and for STD patients with widespread activity. Performance for STD patients is degraded for related pairs, elevated for unrelated pairs, and the difference between the two conditions is diminished, suggesting that mediated associations in STD may result from unfocused associations.

The conclusion from both Simulations 3A and 3B is that the difference between associating related and unrelated words is diminished in STD relative to normal conditions. However, the pace of learning new associations and the final plateau was determined by the type of model: Assuming higher overall semantic activation in STD (simulated by higher amplitude sigmoid, Fig. 5) resulted in more efficient learning of both related and unrelated pairs, even higher than in the control condition. In contrast, assuming equal excitability in both groups, but spread more diffusely in the STD participants (simulated by a sigmoid with lower amplitude but further reaching influence, Fig. 7) resulted in better associative learning of unrelated pairs but reduced associative learning of related pairs. This result can be useful in uncovering the source of thought disorders in schizophrenic patients. Indeed, preliminary data from an ongoing study in human STD patients and normal individuals suggests that the second model is better supported by real data (Bentin et al., in progress).

8. General discussion

The goal of the present study was to determine how semantic and episodic factors interact in learning new incidental associations between words. Empirical studies with human participants showed that semantically related words are associated more easily than unrelated words, and that this difference is primarily due to higher associative strength added by each episode of co-occurrence. A computational model, SEMANT, was developed to account for this phenomenon and to suggest a more general mechanism for word association. An initial simulation demonstrated that the model is psychologically valid: The computational process of forming new associations between related and unrelated words accurately replicated human performance. Subsequent simulations generated predictions about associative learning between different types of words and modeled different accounts for the peculiar associative learning in schizophrenic patients with thought disorders. These model-derived predictions (as well as others) can be tested empirically in future experiments with human subjects. The model has also broader implications for the study of memory, as will be discussed in this section.

SEMANT suggests that both semantic relationship and episodic associations can be implemented in a single network structure using two types of representations. Semantic relationship is expressed as proximity in a high-dimensional features' space spanned by the numerical representations of the concepts. Episodic associations are represented by arbitrary "physical" connections between the nodes that represent the words. Both types of relations are implemented simultaneously in a self-organizing semantic map with lateral connections. Based on such structure, SEMANT showed that semantic relationship facilitates learning new associations. This facilitation emerges in a natural, mechanistic manner, without involving top-down intentional processes. It is achieved through a process similar to Hebbian learning, where connections are strengthened based on intersections of spreading activation waves over a semantic map.

In SEMANT, the episodic connections do not affect the organization of the semantic map. This modeling approach reflects the assumption that different rules govern the organization of the semantic and episodic memories: The semantic map is organized according to outside

(possibly sensory) information and is not affected by the episodic connections. Indeed preliminary experiments show that newly formed episodic associations do not affect the semantic memory, i.e., they do not bring entire neighborhoods closer together (Silberman, Miikkulainen, & Bentin, 2005). Such effects may be possible at very long time scales, which are currently outside the scope of the model.

The basic principles underlying SEMANT (map-like memory organization, spreading activation, and Hebbian adaptation) are well established in the literature and have been used to model several other phenomena. The fact that these principles can also account for word associations suggests that they may, indeed, represent general mechanisms of cognition. The predictive power in the model was demonstrated in a number of cases. One prediction was that it is easier to form associations for sparse to dense semantic neighborhoods than the other way around; another was that excessive mediated associations in STD could be due to elevated or diffuse spreading activation process, and these mechanisms can be distinguished in the data. A third prediction is that a strong association between semantically unrelated words (e.g., BEER–DAISY) facilitates forming new associations between other words from the same semantic neighborhoods (e.g., WINE–TULIP). This is because each of the new (to be associated) words activates it's own semantic neighborhood, including the previously associated words. The pre-existent episodic association mediates the spread of activation between the new conjointly presented exemplars, thus enhancing the overlap of their activations. This prediction has already been validated empirically in humans (Silberman et al., 2005).

The asymmetric nature of word associations is difficult to explain with computational models that rely on distances between high-dimensional numeric representations. One atypical example is Plaut's (1995) model, which can, in principle, capture asymmetric associations between word pairs based on the relative frequency of the two directions of presentation (although such behavior has not yet been demonstrated in that model). Similarly, SEMANT is based on perfectly symmetric foundations such as high-dimensional vectors and the self-organization algorithm that establishes the semantic map. Nonetheless, SEMANT demonstrates two kinds of asymmetries (as was discussed in section 6). The first asymmetry is explicit; it is achieved by unidirectional lateral connections that are implemented on top of the symmetric organization of the semantic map. These connections make it possible to have asymmetric associations between two words, based on different episodic experiences in the two directions. The second asymmetry is implicit emerging from the non-uniform distribution of concepts in the high-dimensional space. This distribution makes spreading activation asymmetric between two points that would otherwise be equidistant in the semantic space. By doing so, SEMANT suggests a mechanism based on which asymmetric behavioral phenomena can emerge from seemingly symmetric building blocks.

SEMANT demonstrates implicit asymmetry because the weight vectors in the semantic map are distributed non-homogeneously in the 100-dimensional space. However, factors other than semantics may influence this distribution and consequently influence the implicit asymmetry as well. As described in section 4, the density of the weight vectors in the semantic map is determined during the self-organization process and reflects how the numerical HAL representations of the 250 words are distributed. Lund et al. (1995, 1996) argued that HAL representations reflect primarily the semantic features of the words. Therefore, the semantic map in SEMANT is likely to reflect primarily the semantic relationships between words prior

to the episodic learning. However, other factors such as word frequency and word familiarity may be confounded in HAL representations as well, and therefore may affect the semantic density and implicit asymmetry in SEMANT. Additional studies are necessary to disentangle the putative contribution of such factors.

SEMANT also suggests that the nodes unassigned with words in the semantic map are important, since they serve as a mediating substrate for spreading activation. Any system organized in an unsupervised fashion to accommodate an unknown number of items (such as the human semantic system) should be expected to have a much larger capacity than is usually needed. In semantic maps, the number of nodes in the map is much larger than the number of represented words (e.g., in SEMANT, 250 nodes are embedded in 40^2 nodes, resulting in 6.4 nodes per word on average). However, due to the self-organization algorithm, these unassigned nodes are not distributed uniformly in the high-dimensional space, but rather represent the densest areas of the input space. Consequently, they help magnify the effects that are due to the statistical properties of the input. An example of such an effect is the asymmetry in the learning efficiency between two directions of word pairs, as demonstrated in Simulation 2.

While the similarity between human performance and the computer simulations suggest that SEMANT is a valid psychological model, it is still a high- level abstraction of the underlying biological mechanisms. For example, recall that during the simulation of the learning phase, two words are presented to SEMANT with a certain SOA and the two activation waves spread independently. The lack of interaction between the two spreading waves is a computational abstraction that could be elaborated in a more biologically plausible model. More specifically, in order for two (or more) waves to spread without interaction within the same system, the waves can be labeled, or marked, to carry the information to identify their source throughout their propagation. Such a mechanism is central in the marker-passing extensions to spreading activation (Charniak, 1983; Hendler, 1988). One biologically plausible marker passing mechanism is the synchronized spiking model (von der Malsburg, 1986; Shastri & Ajjanagadde, 1993; Choe & Miikkulainen, 1998; Miikkulainen et al., 2005). If two activations spike at different phases, the information regarding their source is preserved. On the other hand, if the enhancement of the association strength between the two words is done in real-time during the propagation of the waves, and if the sensory input that created the activation is accessible throughout the propagation, a marking scheme may not be needed: The nodes where the waves originated can be identified because they respond maximally to the sensory input. However, it may not be realistic to assume that two (or more) activation waves may propagate through the same system (semantic memory) without interaction. Hence, a more plausible assumption would be that waves that originate from different sources interact in some manner and that the propagation of one affects the propagation of the others. Changing SEMANT to support unlabeled interacting activation and still replicating human behavior is an interesting future research line.

9. Conclusion

Based on detailed studies with human participants, a computational model of forming incidental associations between words was developed. The model suggests that this process could

be based on spreading activation on a laterally connected self-organizing map that combines episodic and semantic factors. It also demonstrates how such associations could be asymmetric and how the associative process can be impaired in STD patients. These results constitute a promising first step towards a computational theory of associative thinking in human.

Notes

1. Importantly, the absence of associations between the words in semantically related as well as unrelated words was tested in a pilot survey requesting 50 participants from the same pool to provide the first 3 associates to each of the words used. In no case a pair included words that were mentioned by a participant among these first associates.
2. The MATLAB code for the SEMANT model is available at http://www.cogsci.rpi.edu/ CSJarchive/Supplemental
3. There are a total of 19 free parameters in this model.

Acknowledgment

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Appendix

Entire lexicon

1. address	35. carrot	69. ear
2. ale	36. castle	70. earth
3. answer	37. cheese	71. electricity
4. aquarium	38. chin	72. elevator
5. back	39. chocolate	73. equipment
6. bag	40. clay	74. eye
7. baker	41. coat	75. factory
8. balance	42. coffee	76. fall
9. ball	43. coke	77. farm
10. band	44. collection	78. farmer
11. band-aid	45. copy	79. film
12. baseball	46. cottage	80. fireman
13. basement	47. cotton	81. flag
14. bath	48. counter	82. flour
15. bathroom	49. course	83. fly
16. bathtub	50. cow	84. fruit
17. beard	51. cowboy	85. game
18. bed	52. crack	86. garbage
19. bee	53. crown	87. gasp
20. bend	54. cube	88. ghost
21. bin	55. dad	89. gown
22. birthday	56. desert	90. group
23. blender	57. dice	91. guess
24. board	58. direction	92. guitar
25. boom	59. dish	93. gun
26. bracelet	60. doctor	94. haircut
27. branch	61. doll	95. hammer
28. bump	62. dollar	96. hamster
29. bush	63. door	97. hand
30. butterfly	64. downtown	98. helicopter
31. cabbage	65. dress	99. hippopotamus
32. camel	66. dresser	100. horse
33. cards	67. drill	101. hut
34. carriage	68. drop	102. ice

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103.	ice-cream	147.	pause	191.	slide
104.	iris	148.	pay	192.	snow
105.	ironing	149.	pear	193.	soap
106.	jeans	150.	pepper	194.	soda
107.	jelly	151.	piano	195.	son
108.	job	152.	picnic	196.	song
109.	joke	153.	pill	197.	soup
110.	jungle	154.	pineapple	198.	squash
111.	key	155.	pipe	199.	squirrel
112.	kiss	156.	pitch	200.	squirt
113.	kit	157.	play-dough	201.	stairs
114.	knock	158.	police	202.	steam
115.	lamb-chop	159.	popcorn	203.	step
116.	lasagna	160.	popsicle	204.	stew
117.	letter	161.	potato	205.	stone
118.	lettuce	162.	power	206.	store
119.	lie	163.	price	207.	strap
120.	lollipop	164.	prince	208.	straw
121.	machine	165.	prize	209.	strawberry
122.	mail	166.	pudding	210.	string
123.	mane	167.	purse	211.	sum
124.	marble	168.	raccoon	212.	sunglasses
125.	material	169.	racing	213.	sunshine
126.	math	170.	railroad	214.	sweater
127.	means	171.	rake	215.	sweatshirt
128.	microphone	172.	refrigerator	216.	syrup
129.	monster	173.	ringing	217.	table
130.	mountain	174.	river	218.	tail
131.	nail	175.	road	219.	temperature
132.	nap	176.	robin	220.	throat
133.	neck	177.	rock	221.	tick
134.	necklace	178.	roof	222.	ticket
135.	office	179.	rose	223.	toe
136.	oil	180.	sack	224.	towel
137.	pack	181.	saddle	225.	train
138.	page	182.	sailor	226.	trash
139.	painting	183.	salad	227.	tree
140.	pajamas	184.	scarf	228.	tricycle
141.	palm	185.	school	229.	trouble
142.	panda	186.	second	230.	truth
143.	parade	187.	shape	231.	tuba
144.	parking	188.	sign	232.	tuna
145.	part	189.	slap	233.	van
146.	party	190.	sleep	234.	vanilla

235. violin	241. wedding	247. wool
236. wall	242. whale	248. worm
237. war	243. wheat	249. yawn
238. wash	244. whisper	250. zoo
239. washcloth	245. wine	
240. waste	246. wire	

Word pairs used in the simulations

Semantically unrelated:
1. necklace—vanilla
2. painting—train
3. van—store
4. guitar—cabbage
5. pear—electricity
6. pepper—song
7. coat—violin
8. office—dress
9. camel—roof
10. oil—cow
11. wall—strawberry
12. carrot—bracelet

Semantically related:
1. bag—purse
2. eye—chin
3. butterfly—bee
4. gun—stone
5. lettuce—chocolate
6. snow—sunshine
7. doctor—baker
8. dice—cards
9. coffee—soda
10. bandage—pill
11. ball—doll
12. desert—river