On the tip of the tongue:
The effect of first syllable cues in word finding failures

Nina Jeanette Hofferberth
Goethe-University Frankfurt
Germany

The tip-of-the-tongue (TOT) phenomenon refers to the state in which a speaker is temporarily unable to retrieve a familiar word. Speakers in a TOT state can often give some information about the target (e.g., initial letter(s), number of syllables) but cannot retrieve the complete phonological form. TOTs offer insight into the architecture of the language production system and give evidence for the existence of two stages (lemma/lexeme) in speech production (Caramazza, 1997; Dell, Chang, & Griffin, 1999; Levelt, Roelofs, & Meyer, 1999). James & Burke (2000) demonstrated that phonologically related cues boost activation of the target word. White & Abrams (2002) showed that it is the first syllable of the target (presented in a cue word), which leads to significantly more TOT resolutions, compared to the middle and last syllable. Abrams et al. (2003) demonstrated that TOT resolution requires the entire first syllable and not only the first letter.

In the present study, reaction-time experiments were performed to investigate whether the correct first syllable of the target facilitates TOT resolution and whether another first syllable with similar frequency inhibits TOT resolution. The syllables were presented individually, which means not in another word to avoid providing any semantic information. With the correct first syllable, TOTs were positively resolved approximately five times as much compared to a wrong syllable. The results indicate that the presentation of the correct first syllable of the target word strengthens the weakened phonological connections that cause TOTs, and facilitates word retrieval – with syllables presented in a cue word and also with syllables presented individually. These findings show the importance of the initial part of a word, and support the transmission deficit model (Burke et al., 1991) which states that TOTs are caused by week connections between lexical nodes and phonological nodes.

References