

# An experimental approach to the study of neologisms

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## Introduction

Neology is an area of knowledge devoted to the analysis of new words that appear in a specific period of time. Neologisms present some kind of novelty related to:

- **Meaning:** *mouse* (animal -> computing)
- **Structure:** *eco-friendly* -> *eco-* (comb. form) + *friendly* (adj.)
- **Grammatical category:** *friend* (n.) -> to *friend* (v.)

Three main criteria are usually applied to determine the neological nature of a lexical unit (Rey, 1976). However, these parameters are usually not enough and, to some extent, they are also arbitrary.

**a) Diachronic criterion:** a lexical unit is considered a neologism if it has appeared recently

**b) Lexicographic criterion:** a unit is neological if it is not registered in dictionaries

**c) Psycholinguistic criterion:** a unit is considered a neologism if it is perceived by speakers as a new unit

On the one hand, the studies that have been carried out using this methodology did not focus on neologisms, but on possible and impossible words related to the model of lexical access and prefix stripping suggested by Taft & Forster (1975) (Longtin & Meunier, 2005; Sánchez, 2012). On the other hand, neological studies related with the identification of neologisms did not apply a reading methodology (with eyetracker), but only a psycholinguistic perspective (Sablayrolles, 2003; Varó, 2013). Finally, some studies put together both reading methodology and neology study (Lehrer, 2003; de Vaan, Schreuder & Baayen, 2007).

The starting point of this research consists on measuring different aspects related with neologisms and non neological units. In this sense, as Cabré (2011) states, novelty has a higher processing cost.

## Experiment

### Sample description

- **Participants:** 12 native speakers of Spanish from Spain who hold a university degree
- **Age:** 20-40 years old

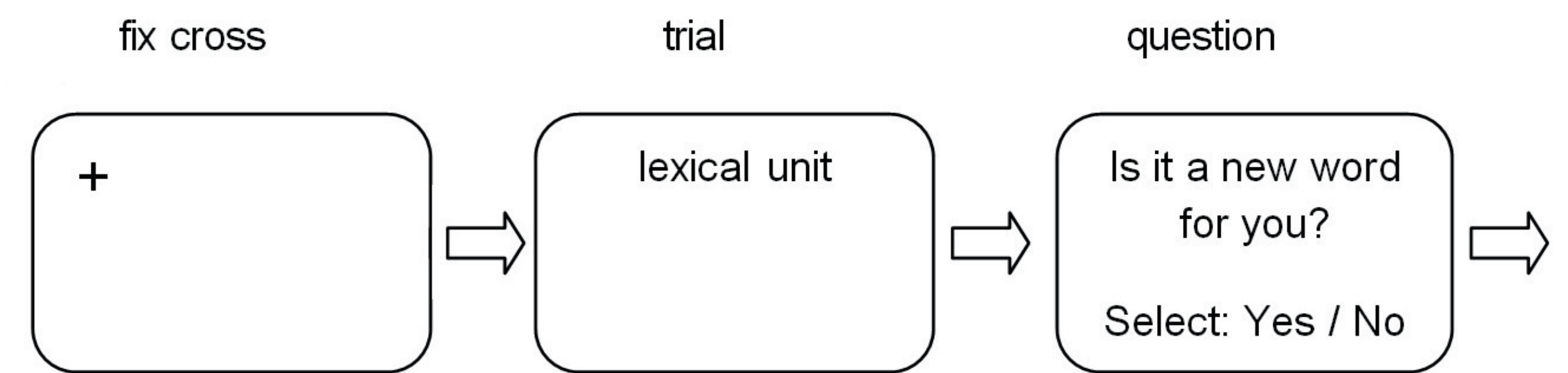
### Materials and experimental design

- 40 neologisms -> *desinserción*  
[prefix + noun: *disinsertion*]
- 40 non-neological units -> *desinfección*  
[prefix + noun: *disinfection*]
- 40 filler stimuli -> *designación*  
[noun: *designation*]

Some restrictions:

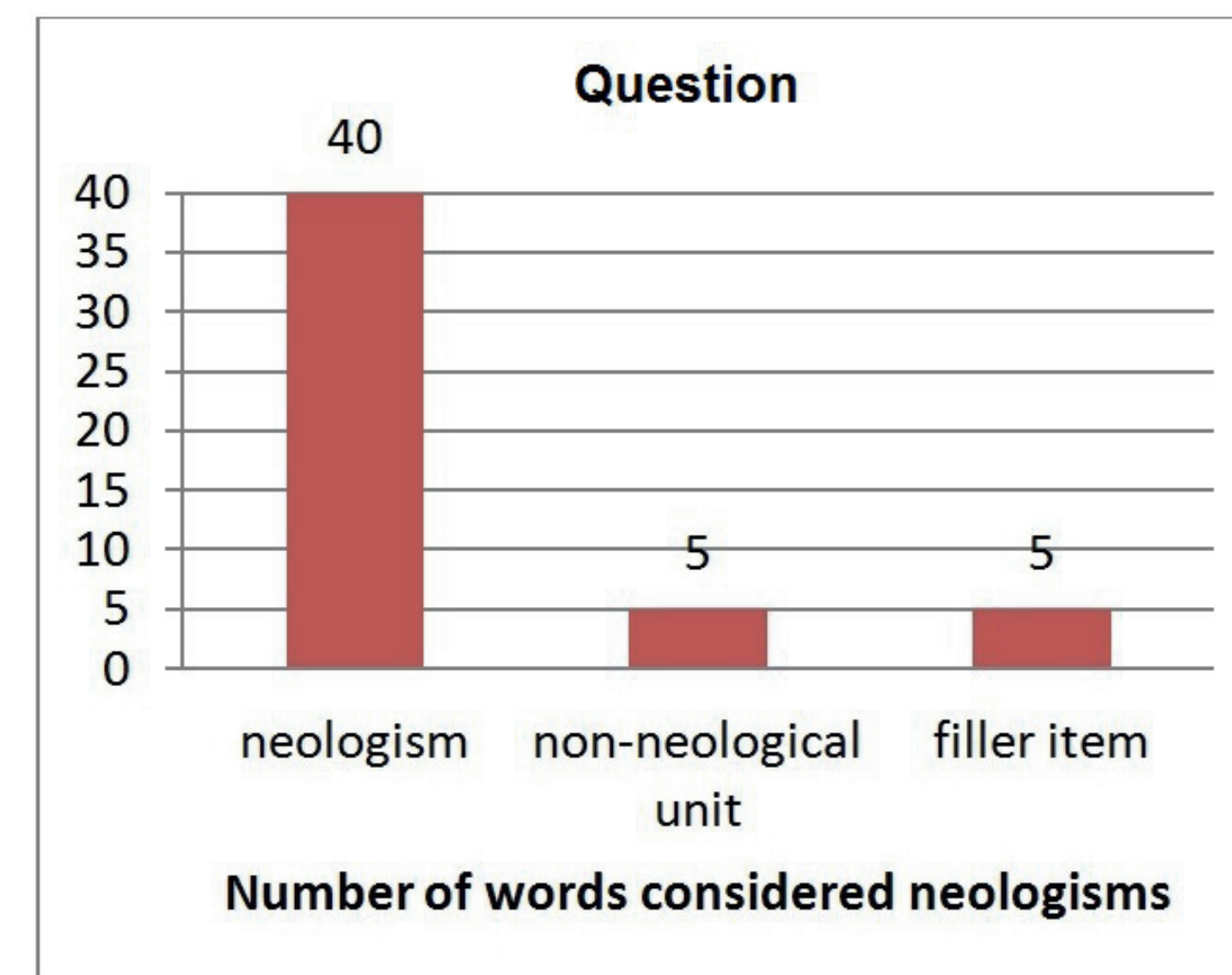
- Grammatical category: nouns
- Word-formation process: prefixation, suffixation, native compounding and neoclassical compounding (10 neologisms, 10 non-neological units and 10 filler stimuli each)
- Structure: number of syllables and letters
- Frequency: a) low frequency; b) high frequency; and c) high frequency

### Procedure

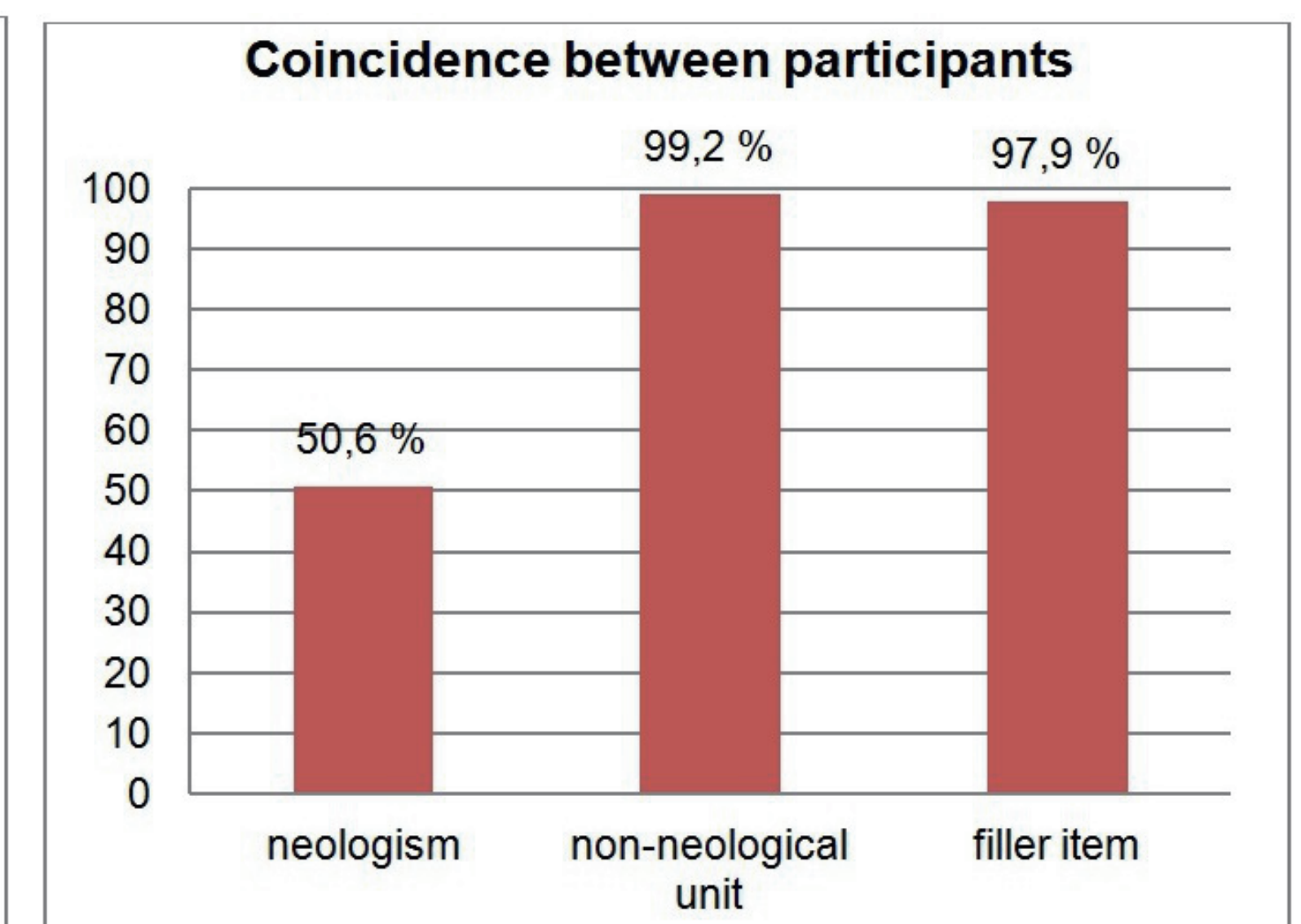


Self-paced reading.

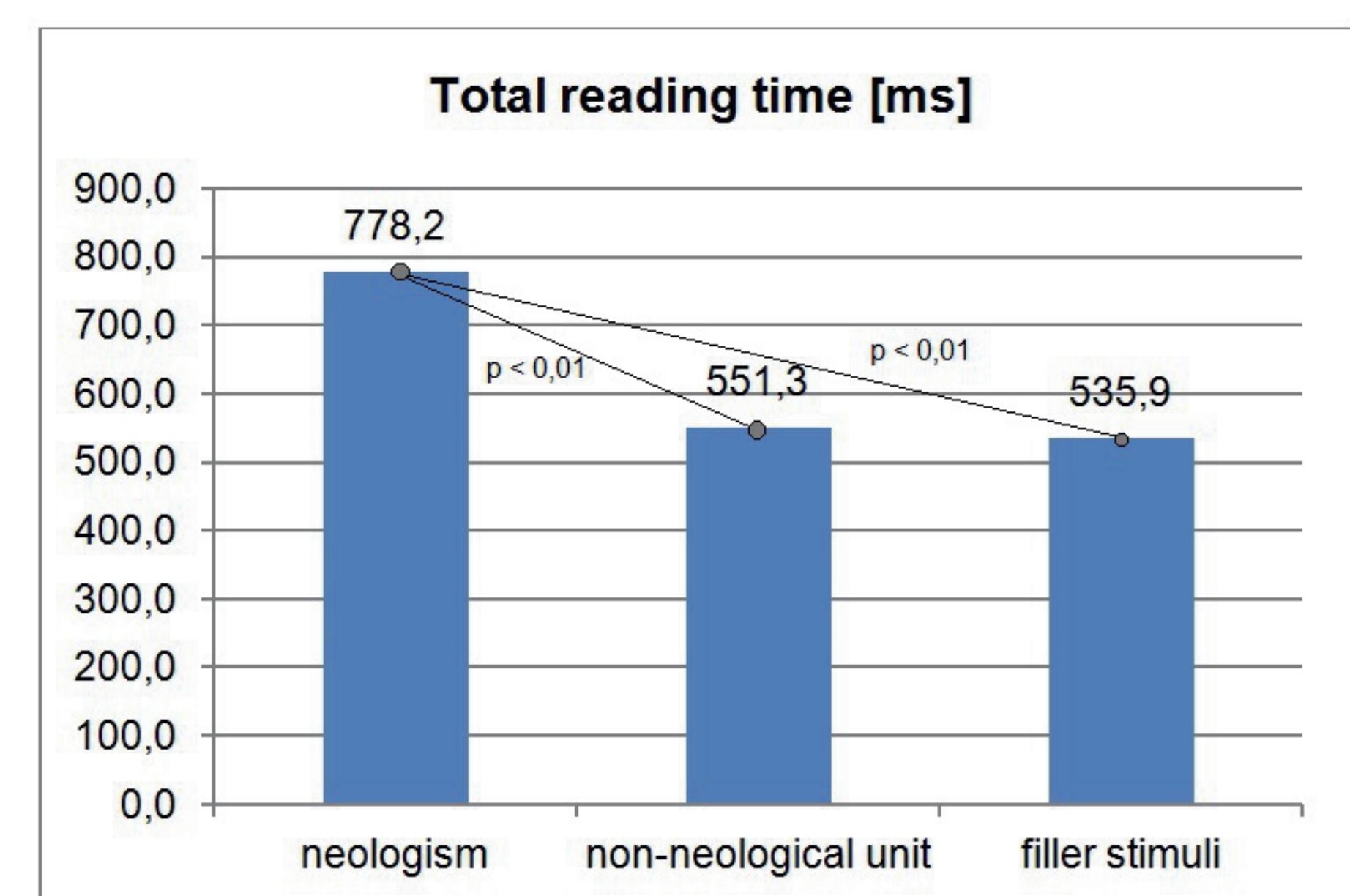
## Results



The answers to the question show that all neologisms were considered new words by at least one participant.



Generally there was no agreement between participants to consider all the lexicographic neologisms as new words according to the answer to the question: "Is it a new word for you?"



- Neologisms need a significantly ( $p < 0,001$ ) higher processing cost than non-neological units with the same structure or other simple and complex words (filler stimuli).
- There is no significantly ( $p = 0,67$ ) difference between non-neological units

## Conclusions

The reasons participants gave for considering some words as new are not always the same (first time they had seen it, new but possible or predictable, seen before but never used, etc.). That is why we can see that only 50,6 % of the answers were positive. The reading experiment with neologisms shows that even if people are unaware that these are very recent units and can be considered new, the processing cost is significantly higher because they are not part of their mental lexicon.

## References

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