

Annex 32.



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Contact Information
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Dear Sir,

I hereby send you my answer to your question whether or not string confusion may occur in the word pair 'web' and 'webs'.

As a linguistic expert, I can inform you that string confusion is highly improbable in this case.

First, it is well known among psycholinguists and cognitive psychologists that one does not read every letter of a word and that exterior letters serve as visual clues for word recognition. As a matter of fact, the first and last letters of a word have been shown to be more salient than the rest of the letters and to receive priority in processing. As is shown by Shillcock & Monaghan (2001: 1174) in the international peer-reviewed journal *Neural Computation*, published by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press: "In summary, the exterior letters of visually presented words are afforded priority in processing in a variety of recognition tasks". This also explains that readers can recognize a word even when its interior letters are scrambled. One can definitely conclude on this basis that web and webs are recognized as two radically different words since their last letters are completely different.

Second, Balota, Yap & Cortese (2006: 294-295) have shown in chapter 9 on word recognition of the prestigious *Handbook of Psycholinguistics* that word recognition is often complicated by the difficult translation process from spelling into sounds since English orthography simply does not allow a one-to-one mapping of spelling to sound. However, in the case of 'web' and 'webs', we have completely regular patterns allowing for a one-to-one mapping of spelling to sound, which can only but highly facilitate word recognition in this case.

Third, in their groundbreaking synthesis, Balota, Yap & Cortese (2006: 317) also introduce the orthographic neighborhood or N metric in which "N refers to the number of words that could be generated by changing only a single letter in each of the positions of a word. For example, the orthographic neighbors of the word FALL include MALL, FELL, FAIL, BALL, FULL, CALL, among others". Evidence from eye-fixation patterns while people are reading indicate that there is an inhibitory effect of words with large Ns. However, 'web' and 'webs' are both words with extremely limited Ns. This produces a higher facilitator effect in word recognition.

Fourth, literature supports the notion that there is a morphemic level of analysis in word recognition (A morpheme is the smallest meaningful unit in a language). This means that

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readers first decompose polymorphemic words (i.e. words with more than one meaningful unit) into constituent morphemes. 'Webs' is composed of two morphemes, i.e. the lexical morpheme 'web' and the plural marker '-s'. So the reader will first decompose the word 'webs' into two morphemes, thus clearly recognizing the difference between 'web' and 'webs'. The identification of the plural morpheme '-s' will be the more easier since we are dealing here with a completely regular plural form whereas irregular plurals (e.g. with vowel change such as 'hero'/'heroes') have been proven to be less easily recognizable.

I consider the elements mentioned above reason enough to dismiss the idea of string confusion in the case of the alternation 'web'/'webs'.

I trust that this answers your question.

Should you require more information, please let us know.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Dr. Piet Desmet