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The role of the salience of fluency in recognition memory in Alzheimer’s disease

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Recognition memory can rely on two processes: recollection (recall of the details from the encoding episode) and familiarity (feeling that some information is old without any recollection, induced by fluency of processing due to an earlier encounter with the information). In Alzheimer’s disease (AD), whereas there is a clear deficit of recollection, the evidence regarding familiarity is mixed, with some studies showing preserved familiarity and others reporting impairment. The current study aimed at examining whether recognition memory performance can be improved in AD when the use of familiarity is facilitated by the salience of fluency. In two experiments, AD patients and healthy controls performed two verbal recognition memory tasks where the salience of fluency was manipulated by means of letters overlap. Studied and unstudied words were constituted of either two separate sets of letters (no-overlap condition, high fluency salience) or the same set of letters (overlap condition, low fluency salience). The results from both experiments showed that, although performance was globally poorer in AD patients than in the controls, both groups performed better in the no-overlap condition than in the overlap condition. This suggests that AD patients benefited as much as the controls from the salience of fluency.