



Accessibility Advantage of Unobservable Self-Aspects Reverses for Distant Memories - Both Episodic and Semantic

Blazej Mrozinski¹; Jerzy J. Karylowski²

¹SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, ²Institute of Psychology, Polish Academy of Sciences

ABSTRACT

Self-reports regarding how people visualise themselves during events that occurred in the past show that for events from the distant past individuals report assuming a more external perspective than for events from the recent past.

Thus it appears that, with the passage of time, representations of self embodied in memories of past events lose their position of an insider and assume a more ordinary position of self as an object seen from the perspective of an outside observer.

Results show that self-judgements regarding unobservable, covert characteristics were faster for recent—compared to more distant—autobiographical events. However, self-judgements regarding observable, overt characteristics were faster for more distant events.

This suggests an accessibility-based mechanism underlying the shift from internal to the relatively more external perspective in forming self-images related to the distant past.

CONTACT

Blazej Mrozinski
University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw, Poland

bmrozinski@swps.edu.pl

Preparation of this poster was facilitated by the Polish National Science Center grant UMO-2016/21/B/HS6/03236

INTRODUCTION

Previous research suggests that, with the passage of time, representations of self in episodic memory become less dependent on their initial (internal) perspective and shift toward an external perspective normally characteristics for how other people are represented. Results of the presented experiment show that the relative accessibility of observable versus unobservable trait-aspects in autobiographical memories varies depending on whether the memory involves recent or a more distant past. In the case of representations of the self retrieved from recent autobiographical memories, trait-judgments regarding unobservable (covert) self-aspects are faster than trait judgments regarding observable (overt) self-aspects, indicating greater accessibility of unobservable self-aspects. Yet, in the case of self-representations retrieved from memories of a more distant past, judgments regarding observable self-aspects are faster, indicating greater accessibility of observable self-aspects. Thus, with the passage of time, self-representations embedded in personal memories appear to lose their distinct reliance on the internal perspective and to assume a more external perspective. This suggests that such older self-representations with their greater emphasis on observable aspects are more compatible with how other people are typically represented.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

96 undergraduates (74 women and 22 men, age $M = 22.47$ years, $SD = 1.60$) participated in presented research. The experiment was conducted individually in the computer lab. Half of the participants were assigned to the episodic and the other half to the semantic memory condition. Experimental task divided into two parts, involving the recent event and the distant event. Participants recalled a specific event or general memory of themselves (recent or distant) and wrote its brief description. This part was followed by self-ascription judgements. Judgements involved a different personal characteristic and were always preceded by a qualifier feel or by a qualifier act, referring to either internal or external manifestation of a given characteristic. The resulting design was a 2 (episodic vs. semantic memory) \times 2 (feel vs. act judgment) \times 2 (recent vs. distant event) mixed-model with the first variable manipulated between- and the remaining two variables manipulated within-participants (and counterbalanced). Responses were provided on a two-point (Yes/No) scale.

RESULTS

A 2 (memory type: episodic vs. semantic) \times 2 (judgment type: feel vs. act) \times 2 (time: recent vs. distant) mixed model ANOVA was conducted on latencies and the means are presented in Figure 1.

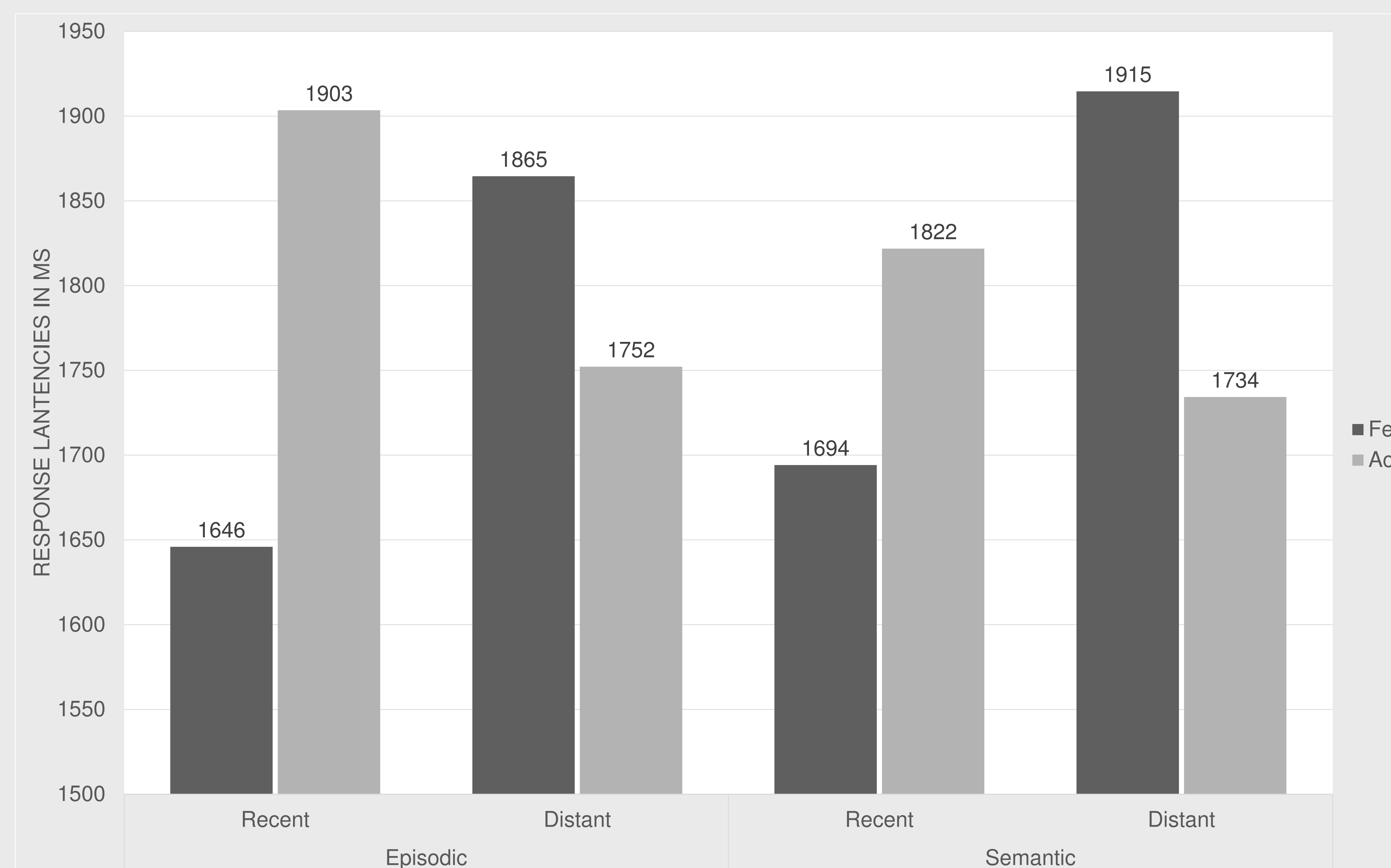
The main effect of time was significant, $F(1,94) = 12.98$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.12$. Specifically, judgments regarding recent memories were, on average, faster, $M = 1766$ ms, than judgments regarding distant autobiographical memories, $M = 1816$ ms

This effect was qualified by the **predicted Time \times Judgment Type interaction**, $F(1,94) = 12.73$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.12$. Comparison of simple effects revealed **that for recent memories, the feel judgments were faster**, $M = 1670$ ms, **than the act judgments**, $M = 1863$ ms, $F(1,94) = 12.58$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.12$. However, **for the distant memories, the act judgments were faster**, $M = 1743$ ms, **than the feel judgments**, $M = 1890$ ms, $F(1,94) = 7.64$, $p = 0.007$, $\eta^2 = 0.08$.

In addition, the feel judgments were faster for the recent, compared to the distant memories, $F(1,94) = 20.08$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.18$. Yet the act judgments, were faster for the distant memories, $F(1,94) = 5.60$, $p < 0.020$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$.

Importantly, the **Time \times Judgment Type interaction was not qualified by a three-way interaction involving memory type**, $F(1,94) < 1$.

In fact, the Time \times Judgment Type interaction was significant both in the episodic memory condition, $F(1,47) = 6.53$, $p = 0.014$, $\eta^2 = 0.12$, and in the semantic memory condition, $F(1,47) = 6.27$, $p = 0.016$, $\eta^2 = 0.12$.



DISCUSSION

Our results show that the effect of time (recent versus distant memories) on accessibility of observable and unobservable self-aspects occurs both for the event-specific (episodic) and for the generalized (semantic) autobiographic memories.

The present experiment suggests that this would be the case especially for generalized representations of the self associated with the relatively distant, rather than with the recent past. This prediction should be explored in future research. Our results also show that, regardless of the effect of time, greater accessibility of observable (versus unobservable) self-aspects is associated with the semantic rather than episodic autobiographical memory.

CONCLUSIONS

Results of the present experiment confirmed that in the case of recent autobiographical memories, trait-judgments regarding unobservable (privileged) aspects of self-knowledge were more cognitively accessible than trait judgments regarding observable (overt) aspects. Yet, in the case of autobiographical memories from a more distant past, judgments regarding observable (overt) self-aspects were more cognitively accessible. Those findings occurred for both episodic and semantic autobiographical memories, for both highly desirable and moderately desirable characteristics, and for both self-descriptive and non-self-descriptive characteristics. In addition, overall, accessibility advantage of unobservable aspects of self-knowledge was greater for episodic compared to semantic memories.

REFERENCES

- Karylowski, J. J., & Mroziński, B. (2016). Accessibility of observable and unobservable characteristics in autobiographical memories of recent and distant past. *Memory* (Hove, England). Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658211.2015.1137323>
- Karylowski, J. J., & Mrozinski, B. (2017). Time Frame Affects Vantage Point in Episodic and Semantic Autobiographical Memory: Evidence from Response Latencies. *Frontiers in psychology*, 8, 615. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00615>