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■ The Cognitive Deficits Responsible for Developmental Dyslexia: Review of Evidence for a Selective Visual Attentional Disorder

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There is strong converging evidence suggesting that developmental dyslexia stems from a phonological processing deficit. However, this hypothesis has been challenged by the widely admitted heterogeneity of the dyslexic population, and by several reports of dyslexic individuals with no apparent phonological deficit. In this paper, we discuss the hypothesis that a phonological deficit may not be the only core deficit in developmental dyslexia and critically examine several alternative proposals. To establish that a given cognitive deficit is causally related to dyslexia, at least two conditions need to be fulfilled. First, the hypothesized deficit needs to be associated with developmental dyslexia independently of additional phonological deficits. Second, the hypothesized deficit must predict reading ability, on both empirical and theoretical grounds. While most current hypotheses fail to fulfil these criteria, we argue that the visual attentional deficit hypothesis does. Recent studies providing evidence for the independence of phonological and visual attentional deficits in developmental dyslexia are reviewed together with empirical data showing that phonological and visual attentional processing skills contribute independently to reading performance. A theoretical model of reading is outlined in support of a causal link between a visual attentional disorder and a

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5 INTRODUCTION

7 **I**n the past four decades, many studies have attempted to identify the nature
8 of the cognitive disorders associated with and potentially responsible for
9 developmental dyslexia. The proposal of a phonological deficit as the
10 cognitive basis of developmental dyslexia is now widely accepted. However, the
11 view that a phonological deficit is the only core disorder in developmental
12 dyslexia seems difficult to reconcile with a variety of evidence which highlights
13 the heterogeneity of the dyslexic population. In particular, dyslexic children with
14 opposite reading profiles have been reported. Children with surface dyslexia fail
15 to read exception words despite normal pseudo-word reading; phonological
16 dyslexic children show the reverse pattern—good exception word reading but
17 poor pseudo-word reading. In addition, there have been several reports of
18 dyslexic children who demonstrated no associated phonological deficit.
19 Researchers who support the view that a phonological deficit is the sole core
20 deficit in developmental dyslexia have argued that heterogeneity in the surface
21 manifestations of dyslexia may be explained by varying degrees of severity of the
22 phonological processing deficit, or that some reading disorders may be seen as
23 general reading delays rather than developmental dyslexia *per se*. However, this
24 heterogeneity of the dyslexic population also raises the interesting possibility that
25 different performance patterns might actually reflect distinct underlying
26 cognitive impairments. Thus, poor pseudo-word reading and phoneme aware-
27 ness skills may be the consequence of an underlying phonological processing
28 deficit, whereas poor exception word reading despite good phonological skills
29 may follow from a non-phonological core cognitive disorder.

30 Defending such a hypothesis requires providing evidence for the indepen-
31 dence between the phonological processing deficit and the second hypothesized
32 cognitive disorder. It further requires demonstrating that the second hypothe-
33 sized disorder accounts for unique variance in the reading performance of
34 dyslexic participants beyond that explained by phonological skills. Informing a
35 causal relationship between a cognitive disorder and specific reading disability
36 further requires a theoretical framework clearly establishing how a dysfunction
37 of this cognitive mechanism would hamper reading acquisition. Discussing
38 current theories on these issues, the present paper gives empirical and theoretical
39 arguments suggesting that a visual attentional deficit appears as a plausible
40 second core deficit in developmental dyslexia.

41 This review first includes a brief summary of the well-known phonological
42 core-deficit literature, emphasising both the strengths and weaknesses of the
43 phonological hypothesis. Then, we discuss the validity of low-level sensory
44 deficits, cerebellar deficits and rapid automatised naming disorders as causal
45 factors in specific reading disability. Evidence for associated visual attentional
46 disorders in developmental dyslexia is then reviewed before focusing on recent
47 findings that suggest that visual attentional disorders contribute to reading
48 acquisition disorders independently of phonological skills. Finally, we finally
49 outline a theoretical model of reading which accounts for the separable influence

1 of visual attentional processes and phonology on various aspects of skilled
2 reading and reading acquisition.

3

5 THE PHONOLOGICAL DEFICIT HYPOTHESIS

7 The most widely accepted hypothesis with respect to the cognitive origin of
8 developmental dyslexia is the phonological deficit hypothesis (Frith, 1997;
9 Snowling, 1981, 2000; Stanovitch, 1986; Stanovitch & Siegel, 1994; Vellutino,
10 Fletcher, Snowling, & Scanlon, 2004; Wilding, 1989, 1990). Numerous studies
11 have shown that, compared to normal readers, developmental dyslexic children
12 are impaired in phonological processing tasks such as non-word repetition
13 (Elbro, Borstrom, & Petersen, 1998; Snowling, 1981; Snowling, Staskhouse, &
14 Rack, 1986), phonemic fluency (Frith, Landerl, & Frith, 1995), picture naming
15 (Snowling, van Wagendonk & Stafford, 1988), phonological learning (Aguar &
16 Brady, 1991; Wimmer, Mayringer, & Landerl, 1998), phonemic awareness (e.g.
17 Bradley & Bryant, 1978; Griffiths & Snowling, 2002; Morris *et al.*, 1998) or verbal
18 short-term memory (Griffiths & Snowling, 2002; Nelson & Warrington, 1980;
19 Rack, 1985). The persistence of phonological difficulties in well-compensated
20 dyslexic adults (Bruck, 1992; Campbell & Butterworth, 1985; Fawcett & Nicolson,
21 1995; Funnell & Davison, 1989; Howard & Best, 1996; Shaywitz *et al.*, 1999)
22 provides additional support to the phonological hypothesis.

23 Furthermore, studies on normal reading acquisition suggest a causal relation-
24 ship between phonological processing skills and reading abilities: phonological
25 awareness is strongly related to reading progress (Goswami & Bryant, 1990, for a
26 review), children's knowledge of the phonological structure of their language is a
27 good predictor of early reading ability (Bradley & Bryant, 1983; Elbro, 1997; Elbro
28 *et al.*, 1998; Stanovich, Cunningham, & Cramer, 1984) and phonemic awareness
29 training improves learning to read (Bradley & Bryant, 1983; Ehri *et al.*, 2001, for a
30 meta-analysis; Castles & Coltheart, 2004, for a critical review).

31 These findings provide strong support to the phonological deficit hypothesis,
32 but there are problematic data as well. First, several cases of developmental
33 dyslexia and/or dysgraphia with good phonological skills have been reported;
34 these cases show good pseudo-word reading, phonological awareness and verbal
35 short term memory, and the majority of the errors they produce are
36 phonologically plausible (Broom & Doctor, 1995; Castles & Coltheart, 1996;
37 Coltheart, Masterson, Byng, Prior, & Riddoch, 1983; Goulandris & Snowling,
38 1991; Hanley & Gard, 1995; Hanley, Hastie, & Kay, 1992; Job, Sartori, Masterson,
39 & Coltheart, 1984; Romani & Stringer, 1994; Romani, Ward, & Olson, 1999;
40 Temple, 1984). These case studies indicate that not all developmental dyslexics
41 have a phonological deficit, a rather unexpected finding within the phonological
42 hypothesis framework. However, these studies often assessed performance of
43 teenagers or young adults. Accordingly, one could argue that the phonological
44 disorder was present earlier in development but was so well compensated as to
45 become undetectable by the time of testing. In addition, the sensitivity of the
46 phonological tests used in these studies can sometimes be questioned. However,
47 two studies, which compared the performance of dyslexic readers of similar age
48 and reading level on the same phonological tests, provide more convincing
49 evidence for the existence of developmental dyslexia without phonological

1 processing disorders (Hanley & Gard, 1995; Valdois *et al.*, 2003). Each of these
2 studies reported two dyslexic cases with opposite reading patterns and
3 contrasted phonological skills. In each study, one dyslexic participant showed
4 poor phonological awareness and made only a few phonologically accurate
5 errors in reading or spelling (phonological dyslexia pattern) while the other
6 showed good phonological awareness and produced a majority of phonologically
7 accurate errors (surface dyslexia pattern). Thus, cases of developmental dyslexia
8 with normal phonological processing have been documented despite using
9 sensitive enough phonological measures. In other cases however, phonological
10 and surface dyslexia differ only in the degree of severity of the phonological
11 disorder and in the cognitive resources available to compensate for this
12 phonological deficit (Snowling, 2000). Thus, it could be argued that dyslexic
13 children with good phonological skills are exceptional cases and rare syndromes
14 of no theoretical significance.

15 Classification studies have also identified subgroups of dyslexic children who
16 demonstrate distinct, and even opposite patterns of reading disability, relative to
17 patterns of normal reading performance (Castles & Coltheart, 1993; Castles,
18 Datta, Gayan, & Olson, 1999; Genard *et al.*, 1998; Manis, Seidenberg, Doi,
19 McBride-Chang, & Petersen, 1996; Sprenger-Charolles, Colé, Lacert, & Serniclaes,
20 2000; Stanovich, Siegel, & Gottardo, 1997). These studies consistently found that
21 around a third of the dyslexic sample was constituted of individuals for whom
22 only one reading sub skill (pseudo-word or exception word reading) was outside
23 the range of the performance of chronological age matched control children.
24 These studies also emphasised that most dyslexic children showed stronger
25 impairment on one sub skill than the other, thus exhibiting 'soft-signs' of either
26 phonological or surface dyslexia. These findings clearly document the existence
27 of individual differences in the reading behaviour of the dyslexic population, but
28 they provide no insight on the cognitive factors underlying these different
29 behavioural profiles.

30 Extending the phonological hypothesis, the severity hypothesis (Griffiths &
31 Snowling, 2002; Snowling, Goulandris, & Stackhouse, 1994) postulates that
32 differences in the reading profiles of dyslexic children depend on the severity of
33 the phonological deficit, combined with variations in general processing
34 resources, reading experience (print exposure) and compensatory strategies.
35 The severity hypothesis is compatible with data showing that some dyslexic
36 children specifically impaired on irregular words are also mildly impaired in
37 phonological processing (Bailey, Manis, Pedersen & Seidenberg, 2004; Castles
38 *et al.*, 1999; Sprenger-Charolles *et al.*, 2000; Stanovich *et al.*, 1997). However, in
39 addition to the case studies mentioned above, other data are less consistent with
40 this account. For example, Manis *et al.* (1996) and Curtin, Manis, and Seidenberg
41 (2001) found that the phonological dyslexia subgroup had difficulty analysing
42 the phonemic structure of spoken words or pseudo-words whereas the surface
43 dyslexia subgroup did not differ from normal readers matched on chronological
44 age on this task. In addition, Castles *et al.* (1999) showed that their two groups of
45 surface and phonological dyslexics had comparable low scores on the print
46 exposure measure they used (see also Manis, Seidenberg, & Doi, 1999). The
47 authors suggested that low print exposure would result in a phonological
48 dyslexic pattern in poor readers with a severe phonological deficit but in the
49 surface dyslexia pattern in children with a milder phonological deficit. However,

1 print exposure is known to primarily affect exception word reading (Griffiths &
2 Snowling, 2002); on the other hand, phonological deficits primarily affect pseudo-
3 word reading, although they also prevent the normal acquisition of lexical
4 orthographic knowledge (Share, 1995, 1999). Accordingly, one would expect that
5 poor print exposure associated with a severe phonological deficit should result in
6 poor reading of both exception words and pseudo-words. Finally, reading
7 theories do not predict that mild phonological impairments should result in
8 specific difficulties in exception word reading. Indeed, in both dual-route
9 (Coltheart, Curtis, Atkins, & Haller, 1993; Coltheart, Rastle, Perry, Langdon, &
10 Ziegler, 2001) and PDP connectionist (Harm and Seidenberg, 1999; Plaut,
11 McClelland, Seidenberg, & Patterson, 1996; Seidenberg & McClelland, 1989)
12 models, phonological deficits have far more impact on pseudo-word reading
13 than on exception word reading. Harm and Seidenberg (1999) clearly showed in
14 a simulation that a mild phonological deficit affected pseudo-word reading but
15 not exception word reading; severe phonological deficits resulted in a mixed
16 profile, with impairments in both pseudo-word and exception word reading.
17 Overall, it appears that neither mild phonological deficits alone nor poor print
18 exposure alone can account for the profile of poorer exception word reading
19 relative to pseudo-word reading. Therefore, the question remains open as to
20 whether the inability of surface dyslexic children to encode the orthographic
21 form of words could be explained by a non-phonological cognitive disorder.

22 However, except for case JAS (Goulandris & Snowling, 1991) whose surface
23 dyslexia was associated with poor visual memory, most case and group studies
24 have failed to find any specific cognitive impairment that may be responsible for
25 a selective disorder in exception word reading. Moreover, the performance of
26 surface dyslexic readers has consistently been found to be similar to that of
27 younger reading-age matched controls. Consequently, it has been assumed that
28 the surface dyslexia profile stems from a general developmental delay in overall
29 reading ability (Manis *et al.*, 1996; Sprenger-Charolles *et al.*, 2000; Stanovich *et al.*,
30 1997). Obviously, this interpretation does not apply to those cases who
31 demonstrate a strict dissociation characterized by poor exception word reading
32 but normal pseudo-word reading. Moreover, although the similarity between the
33 reading performance of dyslexic readers and younger controls was clearly
34 established in terms of accuracy, very few studies have investigated whether
35 dyslexic children and younger controls produce comparable error patterns. Thus,
36 contrary to the delay hypothesis, the performance of dyslexic children may be
37 qualitatively different from that of younger controls. This hypothesis was
38 supported by Martinet and Valdois (1999) who showed that surface dyslexic
39 children produced proportionally more phonologically plausible errors than
40 reading-age matched children, even though their overall scores on exception
41 word spelling did not differ; as a matter of fact, the proportion of phonologically
42 accurate errors produced by these children was comparable to that of
43 chronological age-matched controls (see however Curtin *et al.*, 2001). Moreover,
44 similarity of performance with younger control children tells us 'nothing about
45 the causes of developmental dyslexia' (Bryant & Impey, 1986, p. 124) and does
46 not rule out the possibility that developmental surface dyslexia derives from a
47 specific underlying deficit. In their simulation of this disorder, Harm and
48 Seidenberg (1999) showed that the delay characteristic of surface dyslexia could
49 arise from several causes including a disorder at the level of visual processing

1 (see also, Seidenberg, 1992) or a resource limitation affecting the capacity of the
2 network to encode dependencies that span an appropriate number of letters.
3 Although such interpretations are not entirely supported by empirical data
4 (Valdois *et al.*, 2003), they at least demonstrate that a specific cognitive
5 impairment affecting the normal visual processing of the entire orthographic
6 sequence could in principle result in surface dyslexia. This visual processing
7 deficit hypothesis will be considered in more depth in the following section.

8 In sum, the hypothesis that a specific cognitive deficit affecting phonological
9 processing results in reading acquisition disorders is well supported on both
10 empirical and theoretical grounds. However, the present critical review suggests
11 that the phonological deficit hypothesis cannot account for the surface dyslexia
12 profile characterized by poor exception word reading relative to pseudo-word
13 reading. Neither can it explain reported cases of developmental dyslexia without
14 associated phonological deficits. In addition, the proposal that the surface
15 dyslexia pattern may be the mere consequence of insufficient reading experience
16 or of a general reading delay is not entirely supported empirically. It follows that
17 the surface dyslexia pattern may actually reflect a non-phonological core
18 disorder. In the next section, we will review other deficits which have been
19 found to be associated with developmental dyslexia and will examine whether
20 they could be causally related to reading acquisition disorders.

21

23 CURRENT ALTERNATIVE HYPOTHESES

25 **Low-Level Auditory Deficits**

27 Several alternative hypotheses have been proposed as an attempt to identify the
28 cognitive or biological bases of specific reading disability. At the cognitive level, a
29 general non-linguistic auditory temporal deficit was proposed by Tallal and her
30 colleagues. This hypothesis was supported by studies showing that dyslexics
31 performed below normal readers on auditory temporal order perception tasks
32 (Tallal, 1980; Tallal *et al.*, 1996; Tallal, Miller, & Fitch, 1993). However, the
33 hypothesis of a general non-linguistic auditory deficit is highly debated
34 (Vellutino *et al.*, 2004, for a review). One potential problem is that the auditory
35 impairment of dyslexic children seems limited to the perception of speech
36 sounds (Breier, Fletcher, Foorman, & Gray, 2002; Farmer & Klein, 1995; Merzenich
37 *et al.*, 1996; Mody, Studdert-Kennedy, & Brady, 1997; Serniclaes, Sprenger-
38 Charolles, Carré, & Démonet, 2001); this raises the possibility that impairments in
39 speech perception tasks may be the consequence rather than the cause of a
40 phonological deficit (Ramus, 2004). In addition, even though poor auditory
41 processing skills are frequently associated with poor phonological awareness in
42 dyslexia, this is not always the case; that is, some dyslexic individuals have
43 phonological deficits without auditory processing deficits (Ramus *et al.*, 2003).
44 This casts doubts as to whether the auditory processing hypothesis can be seen as
45 a core deficit responsible for developmental dyslexia independently of the
46 phonological disorder. Be this as it may, the auditory processing deficit
47 hypothesis does not seem to be any more suited to account for developmental
48 surface dyslexia than the phonological deficit hypothesis. Although poor
49 auditory processing skills affect pseudo-word reading (Witton *et al.*, 1998), they

1 do not seem to contribute to the performance in exception word reading
(Baldeweg, Richardson, Watkins, Foale, & Gruzelier, 1999).

3

5 Low-Level Visual Deficits

7 Low-level visual processing deficits have also been reported in developmental
dyslexia and they have been viewed as potential sources of reading acquisition
9 disorders. In particular, many studies of developmental dyslexia have reported
associated deficits in the transient visual system, manifesting themselves by
11 impaired contrast sensitivity (Livingstone, Rosen, Drislane, & Galaburda, 1991;
Lovegrove, Garzia, & Nicholson, 1990; Lovegrove, Martin, & Slaghuis, 1986;
13 Stein, 2003; Stein & Fowler, 1993) and motion perception (Cornelissen,
Richardson, Mason, Fowler, & Stein, 1995; Demb, Boynton, & Heeger, 1998;
15 Eden *et al.*, 1996; Talcott, Hansen, Assoku, & Stein, 2000). These visual deficits in
dyslexia have been linked to functional anomalies in the magnocellular visual
17 subsystem (Livingstone *et al.*, 1991; Lovegrove *et al.*, 1986; Eden *et al.*, 1996; see
Skottun, 2000 for a critical review). Several models stress the importance of the
19 visual magnocellular system in text reading (Breitmeyer, 1980; Chase, 1996;
Chase, Ashourzadeh, Kelly, Monfette, & Kinsey, 2003; see also Skottun & Parke,
21 1999, for a critical review). Furthermore, performance on magnocellular low-level
visual tasks is correlated to pseudo-word reading (Talcott, Hansen, & Stein, 1998;
23 Witton *et al.*, 1998) and is typically associated to phonological disorders (Slaghuis,
Lovegrove, & Davidson, 1993; Van Ingelghem, Van Wieringen, Wouters,
25 Vandebussche, & Onghena, 2001; Witton *et al.*, 1998). To account for the co-
occurrence of phonological and low-level visual deficits, Stein and collaborators
27 later proposed a more general amodal version of the magnocellular theory (Stein
& Walsh, 1997; Stein & Talcott, 1999; Stein, 2001, 2003). This theory postulates that
29 magnocellular temporal processing deficits result in basic visual and auditory
processing impairments. The impairment in low level auditory transient
31 processing would entail problems with phonological analysis which remains
the proximal source of the reading problem. In sum, although some data suggest
33 that a visual magnocellular disorder might contribute to poor reading
performance (Chase *et al.*, 2003; Vidyasagar, 1999), there is no evidence showing
35 that low-level visual processing problems contribute to the reading outcome of
dyslexic children, independently of their phonological skills. In addition,
37 magnocellular deficits have been reported in the context of phonological dyslexia
but not in surface dyslexia (Borsting *et al.*, 1996; Cestnick, 2001; Cestnick &
39 Coltheart, 1999; Spinelli *et al.*, 1997), which leaves open the question of the origin
of reading difficulties in this dyslexia sub-type.

41

43 Cerebellar Deficits

45 Similarly, the cerebellar theory of dyslexia (Nicolson & Fawcett, 1990; Fawcett &
Nicolson, 2004; Nicolson, Fawcett, & Dean, 2001) postulates a close link between
47 phonological disorders and reading acquisition disorders. Given the role of the
cerebellum in motor control and automatisation, a cerebellar dysfunction would
affect speech articulation; this would lead to poor phonological representations
49 and poor phonological skills which would be directly responsible for reading

1 acquisition disorders. The cerebellar deficit hypothesis is thus presented as a
2 biological explanation of the co-occurrence of cognitive phonological deficits and
3 low-level motor impairments in developmental dyslexia. As there is no evidence
4 for a specific contribution of motor or automatised problems to developmental
5 dyslexia, the causal nature of the link between cerebellar dysfunctions and
6 reading disorders is now widely debated (Wimmer, Mayringer, & Landerl, 1998;
7 Wimmer, Mayringer, & Raberger, 1999; Ramus, Pidgeon, & Frith, 2003).

9 *Rapid automatised naming deficits*

10 Contrary to the hypotheses discussed above, the double-deficit hypothesis
11 explicitly postulates that a phonological deficit and a deficit in rapid automatised
12 naming of letters or symbols represent two independent sources of reading
13 disability (Wolf & Bowers, 1999; Wolf *et al.*, 2002). A growing number of data
14 point to naming speed deficits in developmental dyslexia (e.g., Denckla & Rudel,
15 1976; Ho, Chan, Tsang, & Lee, 2002; Wimmer, Mayringer, & Landerl, 2000; Wolf &
16 Bowers, 1999) and suggest that rapid naming abilities contribute to reading
17 acquisition even after controlling for phonological skills (Manis, Doi, & Bhadha,
18 2000; Manis *et al.*, 1999; Ho, Chan, Lee, Tsang, & Luan, 2004; see Wolf & Bowers,
19 1999, for a review; Torgesen, Wagner, Rashotte, Burgess, & Hecht, 1997, for a
20 methodological critique). Moreover, rapid naming appears to be more strongly
21 related to reading speed and measures of orthographic knowledge than
22 phonological skills (Manis *et al.*, 1999; Bowers, Sunseth, & Golden, 1999).
23 However, rapid naming measures and phonological skills measures are
24 significantly correlated (Bowers, Sunseth, & Newby-Clark, 1998) and, contrary
25 to the independence hypothesis, dyslexic children tend to exhibit both a
26 phonological and a naming speed disorder (Wolf *et al.*, 2002). It remains however
27 that some dyslexic children exhibit a selective deficit in naming speed and that
28 naming speed makes a specific contribution to reading acquisition disorders,
29 particularly with respect to the acquisition of lexical orthographic knowledge.
30 Thus, the rapid naming deficit hypothesis appears as a plausible alternative
31 candidate to explain cases of developmental dyslexia without associated
32 phonological disorders and with selective exception word reading (and spelling)
33 disorders. However, further investigations are required to specify the impaired
34 mechanism(s) which could underlie both naming speed deficits and reading
35 acquisition disability. The hypothesis that inadequate temporal integration of
36 letter identities might be responsible for this co-occurrence of disorders is under
37 debate (Vellutino *et al.*, 2004) and will be discussed below in relation with the
38 visual attentional hypothesis.

41 VISUAL ATTENTIONAL DISORDERS IN DEVELOPMENTAL 42 DYSLEXIA

43 Several lines of evidence indicate that visual attentional difficulties are correlated
44 with developmental dyslexia. First, several studies have shown that dyslexic
45 children are impaired in tasks in which they have to search for a target among
46 distracters. More specifically, Marendaz, Valdois, and Walch (1996) showed that
47 dyslexic children were impaired when the task required serial attentional search
48

1 but unimpaired in parallel search. Marendaz *et al.* (1996) proposed that this visual
2 search deficit could result either from a perceptive grouping dysfunction
3 (reducing the number of items simultaneously processed during serial search)
4 or from a problem in the shifting of attention. Similar findings were reported by
5 Iles, Walsh, and Richardson (2000), who were also able to show that the visual
6 attentional deficit was restricted to a subgroup of dyslexic children with
7 associated magnocellular visual processing difficulties. Severe serial search
8 disorders were also reported in a case of surface dyslexia without associated
9 phonological problems (Valdois, 1996). In addition, several studies have shown
10 that dyslexic children have a defective spatial orienting of visual attention
11 (Brannan & Williams, 1981; Facoett *et al.*, 2003; Facoetti & Molteni, 2001; Facoetti,
12 Turatto, Lorusso, & Mascetti, 2001; Facoetti, Paganoni, & Lorusso, 2000). They
13 demonstrate an asymmetric distribution of attentional resources across the visual
14 field, as shown by mild left inattention in cue-target reaction time tasks and
15 abnormally high sensitivity in the right visual field (Facoetti & Molteni, 2001;
16 Facoetti & Turatto, 2000; Hari, Renvall, & Tanskanen, 2001). In line with these
17 findings, Valdois, Gerard, Vanault, and Dugas (1995) described a case of
18 developmental visual dyslexia who demonstrated a right attentional bias when
19 processing briefly presented pseudo-words. Geiger, Lettvin, and Zegarra-Moran
20 (1992) also showed that dyslexic children were abnormally good at processing
21 eccentrically located letters in the right visual field, suggesting a difficulty in
22 inhibiting peripheral information (in the direction of reading) and focus attention
23 in the centre of the gaze (see also, Rayner, Murphy, Henderson, & Pollatsek,
24 1989). Accordingly, recent data suggest that dyslexic people distribute attentional
25 resources more diffusely because of difficulties in narrowing their attentional
26 focus (Facoetti *et al.*, 2000); they display slower capture of attention (Facoetti *et al.*,
27 2003) but once their attention is engaged it cannot easily disengage (Hari, Valta, &
28 Utela, 1999). A growing number of data therefore point to a visual attentional
29 disorder which could contribute to the reading impairment of dyslexic children.
30 Attentional disorders affecting speed in parallel processing (Yap & van der Leij,
31 1993) might interfere with letter order encoding, leading to letter sequence errors
32 and confusions between visually similar words. Indeed, there are case reports of
33 dyslexic children without phonological deficits who are more prone to such
34 localisation errors (McCloskey & Rapp, 2000; Romani *et al.*, 1999). The relation
35 between visual attention and reading acquisition was further explored by Casco,
36 Tressoldi, and Dellantonio (1998) in non selected children engaged in a
37 cancellation task. They found that the lowest the performance in the cancellation
38 task, the slower the reading rate and the higher the number of visual errors. Thus,
39 children's performance in a search task involving selective attention appears to
40 be related to their reading performance. However, this relation was established
41 without controlling for the influence of phonological skills, thus undermining the
42 specific role of selective attention in reading acquisition. This is all the more
43 detrimental that other data suggest that the spatial attention deficit in dyslexia is
44 not restricted to the visual modality but also extends to auditory information
45 processing (Facoetti *et al.*, 2003; Hari & Kiesilä, 1996). Accordingly, Hari and
46 Renvall (2001) proposed the 'sluggish attentional shifting' (SAS) theory of
47 dyslexia according to which sluggish attentional capture and prolonged
48 attentional dwell time would impair processing of rapid stimulus sequences in
49 all sensory modalities. According to the SAS theory, visual attentional deficits

1 should typically co-occur with phonological processing and phonological
2 awareness deficits in developmental dyslexia. Although the nature of the visual
3 attention deficit highlighted in the previous studies should affect reading
4 performance, it remains to be shown that this deficit does contribute to the
5 reading performance of dyslexic children, independently of their phonological
6 skills.

7

9 ARE VISUAL ATTENTIONAL AND PHONOLOGICAL DEFICITS 10 INDEPENDENT PREDICTORS OF READING ACQUISITION 11 DISORDERS?

12 We now turn to our own research which aims to demonstrate that visual
13 attentional and phonological disorders can dissociate, that visuo-attentional skills
14 predict reading performance independently of phonological skills, and that a
15 visuo-attentional deficit thus constitutes a plausible alternative core disorder in
16 developmental dyslexia. We first present two case studies which show a
17 remarkable dissociation in their phonological versus visuo-attentional skills. We
18 later demonstrate that the results observed in these case studies generalise to a
19 larger sample of French- and English-speaking children. But, beforehand, we
20 present some details of the tests that we used to assess dyslexic children, in
21 particular with respect to their visuo-attentional abilities.

22

23 **Assessment of Phonological and Visuo-Attentional Deficits**

24 Our general methodology has been to submit dyslexic children, chronological-
25 age (CA) matched controls and reading-age (RA) matched controls to a
26 comprehensive battery of tests aimed to assess reading and spelling abilities,
27 phonological skills and visuo-attentional skills. We present the visuo-attentional
28 tasks in more detail here, because, to our knowledge, they have not been used
29 before to assess visuo-attentional processing in developmental dyslexia.

30 To assess visuo-attentional abilities, we used two tasks of whole and partial
31 letter-string report that were created by Averbach and his colleagues (Averbach &
32 Coriell, 1961; Averbach & Sperling, 1968) to study the processing of letter
33 information perceived during a single fixation. Since then, the whole and partial
34 report procedures have been used in a wide range of visual attention studies and
35 with several variants to assess both normal (Dixon, Gordon, Leung, & Di Lollo,
36 1997; Giesbrecht & Dixon, 1999; Hagenaar & Van der Heijden, 1995; Mewhort,
37 Campbell, Marchetti, & Campbell, 1981) and impaired (Arguin & Bub, 1993;
38 Duncan *et al.*, 1999; Duncan *et al.*, 2003; Habekost & Bundesen, 2003; Rapp &
39 Caramazza, 1991) visual attention processing. In our studies, the whole report
40 task consisted in showing the participants arrays of five letters (e.g., R H S D M)
41 and asking them to report the identities (not locations) of as many letters as they
42 could. To avoid eye movements, each horizontally centred letter string remained
43 on the screen for only 200 ms. In the partial report condition, the participants
44 were shown similar arrays of five letters but were asked to report a single cued
45 letter on each trial. The cue, a vertical bar, appeared at the offset of the letter
46 string for 50 ms and indicated the location of the letter to be reported.

47

1 The whole report task is a classical experimental procedure in the study of
2 attentional capacity. It provides an estimate of the total amount of information
3 that can be extracted from a brief visual display and encoded in visual short-term
4 memory (Bundesen, 1998). The partial report task measures how the total
5 attentional capacity is distributed across letters in the string. The exogenous
6 attentional system is used to select relevant information. When the cue is
7 presented for a short time immediately after the letter display, as in our studies,
8 performance essentially reflects visual feature information processing before
9 decay in iconic memory. Even though they both involve reporting verbal
10 material, the whole and partial report tasks cannot be considered as verbal or
11 verbal short-term memory tasks. Consistent with this view, it has been shown
12 that performance in the whole report task is barely affected by a concurrent
13 verbal short-term memory task (Scarborough, 1972). In addition, the patterns of
14 errors produced in the whole report task reflects visual rather than verbal
15 confusions (Wolford, 1975). In partial report, a single letter has to be reported, so
16 it is unlikely that verbal short term memory is a major factor. Indeed, Dixon and
17 Shedden (1993) showed that partial report is only minimally affected by
18 articulatory suppression. Thus, whole and partial report tasks are considered
19 as primarily reflecting visual attention and visual short-term memory compo-
20 nents. An extensive use of these tasks allowed Sperling to propose a theory of
21 visual-information processing (Sperling, 1970) and, more recently, a computa-
22 tional model of attention dynamics (Shih & Sperling, 2002). These tasks were also
23 used to validate theories specifying visual attention mechanisms and their timing
24 (Bundesen, 1990; 1998; for a review, see Gegenfurtner & Sperling, 1993). The
25 whole and partial report tasks therefore appear quite appropriate to investigate
26 visual attention skills in developmental dyslexia.

27

29 **Case Studies Showing a Dissociation Between Phonological and 30 Visuo-Attentional Skills**

31 Valdois *et al.* (2003) assessed the phonological and visual attentional skills of two
32 teenagers who exhibited contrasted reading profiles: Laurent had a phonological
33 dyslexia profile and Nicolas a surface dyslexia profile. They were submitted to a
34 comprehensive battery of metaphonological tasks including sound categorisa-
35 tion, phoneme and syllable deletion, phoneme segmentation and spoonerisms.
36 When compared to CA matched controls, Laurent performed outside the normal
37 range on all phonological awareness tasks. His performance was low even as
38 compared to children matched on reading age. Laurent also showed poor formal
39 verbal fluency and poor verbal short-term memory. Thus, Laurent's dyslexia was
40 clearly accompanied by a general phonological deficit. In marked contrast,
41 Nicolas's performance was above average as compared to children of the same
42 chronological age. Nicolas's excellent metaphonological skills, his good pseudo-
43 word reading and spelling, his phonologically accurate reading and spelling
44 errors, his good verbal fluency and verbal short-term memory provided strong
45 evidence that his difficulties in exception word reading and spelling were not
46 due to an underlying phonological disorder.

47 In addition, Laurent and Nicolas were submitted to the whole and partial
48 report tasks described above. In both tasks, Laurent's performance was well
49 within the normal range of CA controls, whatever the position of the letters in the

1 string. Thus, Laurent showed good visual attentional skills despite poor
2 phonological processing skills. In sharp contrast, Nicolas was able to report
3 none of the 5-letter strings as a whole in the whole report condition, a score
4 outside the range of both CA and RA controls. He further demonstrated a
5 strong positional effect on this task. His ability to report the last two letters of the
6 string was particularly impaired and his performance on these two positions was
7 even worse than that of younger children matched on reading age. A quite
8 similar pattern emerged in partial report with a lower performance than
9 RA controls on the two last letters of the string. Nicolas's poor performance
10 in both the whole report and partial report tasks provide evidence that he
11 suffered from a visual attentional impairment despite good phonological
12 skills. Valdois *et al.* (2003) also demonstrated that Nicolas exhibited similar
13 positional effects when reading briefly presented real words, thus suggesting a
14 relationship between the visual attentional disorder revealed in the report tasks
15 and his reading performance. This study shows that phonological and visual
16 attentional disorders can dissociate in developmental dyslexia. It further suggests
17 that both disorders might independently contribute to impaired reading
18 performance.

19

20

21 **Generalizing the Findings to Larger Samples in Different Languages**

22

23 To support the hypothesis that phonological and visual attentional disorders
24 constitute two independent sources of reading impairment, Bosse, Tainturier, and
25 Valdois (2004; see also Valdois & Bosse, 2004; Bosse, Tainturier, & Valdois,
26 submitted) conducted two group studies on large samples of French and British
27 developmental dyslexic children. The French study assessed 68 dyslexic children,
28 whose performance was compared to that of two control groups matched on
29 chronological age and reading age. All the participants were administered tasks
30 of regular word, exception word and pseudo-word reading, tasks of phoneme
31 awareness (phoneme deletion, phoneme segmentation and acronym) and the two
32 visual-attentional tasks of whole and partial report. Both correlation and factor
33 analyses showed that phonological and visual attentional scores were unrelated
34 measures tapping independent cognitive mechanisms. Using the factorial scores
35 derived from the principal component analysis in a hierarchical regression
36 analysis, Bosse *et al.* (2004) found that both the phonological and visual
37 attentional processing skills were significant and independent predictors of the
38 dyslexic children reading scores. In addition, attentional processing skills
39 accounted for a substantial amount of unique variance in both irregular word
40 and pseudo-word reading, as did phonological skills.

41

42 Furthermore, the analysis of the distribution of phonological and visual
43 attentional factorial coefficients revealed that dyslexic participants could belong
44 to one of four distinct subgroups: a selective phonological deficit subgroup, a
45 selective visual attentional deficit subgroup, a mixed subgroup showing both
46 deficits, and finally a group of children who did not show abnormal performance
47 on either phonological or visuo-attentional measures. More interestingly, most
48 French dyslexic children (63%) were classified as having a selective phonological
49 or visuo-attentional cognitive disorder, as expected under the hypothesis that the
50 two deficits are independent sources of reading acquisition disorders.

1 A replication of the French study was conducted with British children in order
 2 to confirm previous findings while controlling for additional potentially
 3 confounded variables. The British participants were administered tests of
 4 intellectual efficiency, semantic verbal fluency and vocabulary level, in addition
 5 to the reading, metaphonological and visual attentional tasks. The results
 6 revealed that the contribution of visual attentional skills to reading performance
 7 remained even after controlling for the children's level of intellectual efficiency,
 8 verbal fluency, and vocabulary in addition to metaphonological skills. Further-
 9 more and as previously, most English dyslexic children (60%) were found to
 10 exhibit a single phonological or visual attentional disorder.

11 Overall, these data show that visual attentional disorders and phonological
 12 disorders dissociate in a good number of dyslexic children. Critically, they also
 13 demonstrate that phonological and visual attentional abilities make independent
 14 contributions to dyslexic reading performance. Thus, the visual attentional
 15 disorder appears as a plausible second core deficit in developmental dyslexia
 16 since it can predict dyslexic reading in the absence of a phonological deficit. In
 17 the next section, we will see that the hypothesis of a causal relationship between
 18 visual attentional problems and reading acquisition disability also has theoretical
 19 support.

21

22 A THEORETICAL ACCOUNT OF THE ROLE OF VISUAL 23 ATTENTIONAL PROCESSING IN SKILLED READING AND 24 READING ACQUISITION

25

26 Although models of eye movement control in reading (Reichle, Rayner, &
 27 Pollatsek, 2003) and some models of word recognition (Behrmann, Moscovitch, &
 28 Mozer, 1991; Laberge & Samuels 1974; Laberge & Brown, 1989) emphasise the
 29 role of visual attention, most reading theories do not specify the attentional
 30 processes involved in the visual analysis of letter strings, assuming that they are
 31 peripheral mechanisms that are not an integral part of the reading process
 32 (Coltheart *et al.*, 1993; Coltheart *et al.*, 2001; Harm & Seidenberg, 1999; Plaut *et al.*,
 33 1996; Seidenberg & McClelland, 1989).

34 On the contrary, the connectionist multi-trace model of polysyllabic word
 35 reading (Ans, Carbonnel, & Valdois, 1998) provides a theoretical description of
 36 how visual attentional processes operate in reading and how they can lead to
 37 specific reading disorders when damaged. The model postulates that reading can
 38 take place through two types of reading procedures, a global and an analytic one.
 39 The two procedures differ in the kind of visual attentional and phonological
 40 processing they involve. Global processing always proceeds first, the analytic
 41 procedure only coming into play if global processing has failed. An essential
 42 feature of this model is the inclusion of a visual attentional window (VAW)
 43 through which information from the orthographic input is extracted. The two
 44 reading procedures differ in the size of the VAW involved. In global reading
 45 mode, the VAW extends over the whole sequence of the input letter-string. When
 46 shifting in analytic mode, the VAW narrows down to focus attention on the first
 47 part of the orthographic input. Analytic processing then proceeds through a
 48 narrow VAW which shifts from left to right, focalising attention on the different
 49 parts of the input successively. Letters within the VAW are maximally activated

1 and processed in parallel whereas letters outside the window are only minimally
2 activated or not at all. In the analytic mode, a phonological output is generated
3 for each group of letters that fall within the VAW, and this process is sequentially
4 reiterated until the VAW has reached the end of the letter string.

5 The two reading procedures also differ with respect to phonological
6 processing. In global processing, the entire phonological output is generated in
7 a single step. In analytic processing, phonological outputs corresponding to each
8 focal sequence (i.e. letters within the VAW) are successively generated and have
9 to be maintained in short-term memory in order to remain available at the end of
10 processing. In global mode, phonological information emerges from the
11 activation of word traces in memory whereas sublexical memory traces are
12 recruited in the analytic mode. Although the two procedures are not *a priori*
13 dedicated to the processing of a particular type of letter string (real word or
14 pseudo-word), most familiar words are processed as a whole by the network,
15 whereas global processing typically fails for pseudo-words which are analytically
16 processed.

17 The network was tested for its ability to account for acquired dyslexia
18 following specific damage. Ans, Carbonnel, and Valdois (1998) demonstrated
19 that a moderate reduction of the VAW size prevents reading in global mode. This
20 reduction simulated a surface dyslexia profile, with a selective disruption of
21 irregular word reading giving rise to regularization errors. Performance was
22 more severely impaired following a more severe reduction of the VAW. Irregular
23 words continued to be the most affected class of items, but the number of errors
24 increased on both regular words and pseudo-words. It was further assumed that
25 a very severe reduction of the VAW would result in the profile of letter by letter
26 reading thus affecting the network ability to read all types of letter-strings. In
27 contrast, acquired phonological dyslexia was interpreted as resulting from an
28 independent disorder affecting phonological processing.

29 The multi-trace model has not yet been adapted to simulate reading acquisition
30 and developmental dyslexia. Nonetheless, it provides new insights on the way
31 selective visual attentional or phonological deficits might impact on reading
32 acquisition and result in patterns of developmental surface or phonological
33 dyslexia. In the network, each new word is learned in both global and analytic
34 mode. In global mode, a new word memory trace is created during reading each
35 time the entire orthographic input and the entire phonological output of the input
36 item are simultaneously available. It follows that a new word trace can be created
37 either following global processing (typically with a supervisor) or when the
38 assembled phonology of the letter string is maintained in short term memory at
39 the end of analytic processing. Thus, we propose that normally developing
40 beginning readers acquire new lexical knowledge in two situations: (1) when
41 they are provided with the entire phonological correspondence of the
42 orthographic sequence or (2) after having generated the phonological sequence
43 themselves through analytic processing, provided that they can also relate the
44 entire phonological sequence with the entire input orthographic sequence.
45 Hence, reading in analytic mode would also contribute to the development of
46 lexical knowledge, an hypothesis which is in line with the self-teaching
47 hypothesis proposed by Share (1995, 1999, 2004). In the model, learning in
48 analytic mode also consists in creating memory traces which encode the
49 relationship between simultaneously presented orthographic and phonological

1 sublexical segments. Similarly, it can be assumed that beginning readers acquire
2 sublexical knowledge each time they are able to parse a whole phonological
3 sequence into relevant phonological units together with processing in parallel the
4 letters of the corresponding sublexical orthographic units.

5 Within this theoretical framework, a phonological deficit affecting the
6 acquisition of sublexical knowledge and/or the maintenance of phonological
7 information in short-term memory should affect analytic processing more than
8 global processing. Thus, phonological deficits are expected to interfere primarily
9 with pseudo-word reading (developmental phonological dyslexia profile).
10 However, a purely phonological disorder could also interfere with the self-
11 teaching mechanism which contributes to the acquisition of new word traces.
12 This could in turn affect global processing, leading to a mixed dyslexia pattern
13 characterized by poor pseudo-word and irregular word reading.

14 Furthermore, the model predicts that a visual attentional disorder reducing the
15 number of letters that can be identified in parallel could also lead to
16 developmental dyslexia, albeit of a different type. Indeed, a reduction of the
17 VAW through which information from the orthographic input is extracted should
18 result in an inability to create word traces, interfering with the normal
19 development of the global reading procedure. This difficulty to establish lexical
20 knowledge should be primarily detrimental to irregular word reading, leading to
21 a pattern of developmental surface dyslexia. Regular word and pseudo-word
22 reading should remain unaffected as far as the VAW is large enough to process
23 groups of letters that correspond to relevant orthographic units. A more severe
24 reduction in the size of the VAW would end up affecting regular word and
25 pseudo-word reading as well. The model therefore predicts that a selective visual
26 attentional impairment should result in a selective exception word reading
27 disorder or in a mixed disorder affecting both exception word and pseudo-word
28 reading, depending on the severity of the visuo-attentional deficit.

31 CONCLUSION

32 Notwithstanding the obvious importance of phonological abilities in reading
33 acquisition and the clear relationship between phonological disorders and
34 dyslexia, the phonological hypothesis fails to give a fully satisfactory account of
35 the variability in dyslexic reading profile and associated deficits. In this paper, we
36 have argued that a visual attentional deficit constitutes a plausible second core
37 deficit in dyslexia. Using data from both single case and group studies, we have
38 endeavoured to demonstrate that phonological and visual attentional deficits are
39 independent sources of reading acquisition disorders. Our case studies further
40 showed that a visual attentional disorder without a phonological disorder can
41 produce the pattern of developmental surface dyslexia, which has been
42 particularly difficult to account for within the phonological hypothesis. In
43 contrast, the pattern of phonological dyslexia was found to be associated with a
44 phonological disorder in the absence of visual attentional problems suggesting
45 that a phonological disorder primarily affects pseudo-word reading.

46 The multi-trace memory model of polysyllabic word reading (Ans *et al.*, 1998)
47 provides a useful framework to try to explain the respective roles of phonological
48 and visual attentional disorders on reading acquisition difficulties. Surface
49

1 dyslexia may be seen as arising from a reduction of the size of a visual attentional
2 window through which information is extracted from the orthographic sequence
3 to be read. Irregular words are particularly vulnerable to such a reduction
4 because disambiguating their pronunciation requires distributing attention over
5 the whole orthographic sequence. As for selective disorders in pseudo-word
6 reading (phonological dyslexia profile), the multi-trace model proposes that they
7 result from an independent phonological disorder affecting the establishment of
8 sublexical memory traces and/or the maintenance of phonological information in
9 verbal short term memory. However, the model further predicts that mixed
10 reading profiles can result from either a selective phonological deficit, a selective
11 visual attentional deficit, or a combination of both. Indeed, although less
12 orthographic information is required for accurate pseudo-words processing, a
13 severe visual attentional impairment that would limit orthographic encoding to,
14 say, one or two letters at time would clearly affect the ability of the system to
15 process multi-letter graphemes and contextual graphemes, thus affecting
16 pseudo-word reading as well, at least in languages with relatively deep
17 orthographies such as English or French. In line with the self-teaching theory
18 of Share (1995), a phonological impairment is also expected to affect the
19 establishment of lexical orthographic knowledge on top of pseudo-word reading
20 abilities. Obviously, a double deficit would result in poor performance on both
21 irregular words and pseudo-words. Accordingly, the multi-trace memory model
22 provides a straightforward explanation of the preponderance of mixed reading
23 profiles in developmental dyslexia.

24 At this stage, it is important to ask how our proposal of a visual attentional
25 disorder as a core deficit in dyslexia relates to other alternative accounts put
26 forward in the literature. As mentioned earlier, rapid naming speed disorders
27 might also provide an explanation of cases of developmental dyslexia without
28 associated phonological disorders. However, the rapid automatised naming task
29 for letters, which involves the rapid naming of visually presented non-
30 pronounceable letter strings, no doubt shares common processes with the global
31 report task we have been using to investigate visual attentional abilities. The two
32 tasks probably assess a number of shared visual (or visual attentional) and
33 phonological processes, although the report task alone evaluates the contribution
34 of visual attentional skills to encoding of information in visual short term
35 memory. We believe that this specific role of visual attentional processing is of the
36 utmost importance in the establishment of lexical orthographic knowledge in
37 long term memory. Further research is required to evaluate the relative
38 contribution of performance on letter report tasks versus naming speed tasks
39 to reading performance. Our prediction is that the visual attentional abilities
40 assessed in the report tasks should be stronger predictors of irregular word
41 reading accuracy and speed than performance in rapid naming tasks.

42 In addition, we have seen earlier that several other studies have argued for the
43 existence of a visuo-attentional disorder in dyslexia, although they did not
44 establish the specific contribution of this disorder to reading performance over
45 and above that of associated phonological skills. At this stage, it is not entirely
46 clear to what extent the report tasks that we have been using tap on the same
47 mechanisms as other tasks used in the literature to investigate visual attentional
48 skills. It can be assumed that left mini-neglect and preferential processing of
49 stimuli in the right visual field should affect performance in the global and

1 partial report tasks. In the same way, difficulties to focalize attention might
 2 prevent the normal shifting of selective attention in global report or the selective
 3 processing of the cued letter in partial report. However, in supporting the
 4 hypothesis of a visual attentional disorder dissociated from phonological
 5 problems, our approach dissociates from the sluggish attention shifting theory
 6 which assumes problems in processing rapid stimulus sequences in all sensory
 7 modalities.

8 In conclusion, it seems increasingly unlikely that a phonological disorder is
 9 the sole cause of reading acquisition difficulties in developmental dyslexia.
 10 Indeed, several hypotheses for alternative deficits have been proposed in the
 11 last few years to try to account for the variability in dyslexic reading profiles
 12 and associated deficits. We have argued that a visual attentional disorder
 13 is the underlying cause of reading acquisition disorders in a non-negligible
 14 number of dyslexia cases. Importantly, we provided evidence that visual
 15 attentional skills contribute to reading performance independently of phonolo-
 16 gical skills.

17

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