



What is French for déjà vu? Descriptions of déjà vu in native French and English speakers



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 September 2014

Revised 30 April 2015

Accepted 17 May 2015

Keywords:

Déjà vu

Familiarity

On-line questionnaire

Français

ABSTRACT

Little is known about how people characterise and classify the experience of déjà vu. The term déjà vu might capture a range of different phenomena and people may use it differently. We examined the description of déjà vu in two languages: French and English, hypothesising that the use of déjà vu would vary between the two languages. In French, the phrase déjà vu can be used to indicate a veridical experience of recognition – as in “I have already seen this face before”. However, the same is not true in English. In an online questionnaire, we found equal rates of déjà vu amongst French and English speakers, and key differences in how the experience was described. As expected, the French group described the experience as being more frequent, but there was the unexpected finding that they found it to be more troubling.

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1. Introduction

Following reviews of déjà vu in healthy (e.g. [Brown, 2003](#)) and pathological groups ([O'Connor and Moulin, 2010](#)), the scientific literature has converged on a definition of the déjà vu phenomenon that highlights an erroneous feeling of familiarity. According to this view, déjà vu arises when there is a conflict in evaluations for a stimulus or event that feels familiar but is known not to be familiar. This interpretation of déjà vu means that it can now be seen as a memory phenomenon, and research into déjà vu may therefore fit into existing memory theory and lend itself to laboratory paradigms ([O'Connor and Moulin, 2013](#)).

In an extensive programme of research, Cleary and colleagues (e.g. [Cleary, 2008](#); [Cleary & Reyes, 2009](#); [Cleary, Ryals, & Nomi, 2009](#); [Cleary et al., 2012](#)) have examined déjà vu in the context of the *recognition without identification* (RWI) paradigm, which is where it is possible to make a stimulus familiar in such a way that the participant is not aware of the source of the familiarity. Cleary's experiments demonstrate overwhelmingly that a déjà vu – like experience can be produced in the laboratory. For example, participants 'study' rooms in a virtual reality environment in the context of one label, (e.g. 'bedroom'). Participants then encounter similar and dissimilar rooms in a test ([Cleary et al., 2012](#), Exp. 1; or similar, dissimilar and identical rooms, Exp. 2). Participants report whether they can recall the label or not, followed by a rating of familiarity for the room and finally a report (yes/no) as to whether they are experiencing déjà vu for each test item. In Experiment 1, they report that participants can recall the label of nearly half the configurally similar rooms, leaving a set of rooms which are similar in some way, but where the similarity is undetected. These similar rooms can be compared to the rooms which do not resemble previously encountered rooms. Déjà vu for these similar rooms was 27%, significantly higher than for the

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dissimilar rooms (17%). Experiment 2 produced similar results, with again participants reporting déjà vu experiences on about a third of items. Cleary's account is, however, an explanation of at least some déjà vu experiences: people find a stimulus familiar but cannot remember the source of the familiarity, leading to the clash of evaluations described above.

We have voiced concern elsewhere (O'Connor and Moulin, 2010) that these reports of déjà vu seem very high compared to how infrequent the experience is in daily life. Experiment 2, where identical images were represented to participants, is of interest to us here because it provokes a concern about what participants 'mean' when they make the subjective report of déjà vu. Because Experiment 2 re-presented participants with rooms at test which were identical to studied rooms, this part can be just thought of as a standard recognition memory paradigm. Naturally, because these test items actually are a repetition of a previous stimulus, we should not normally expect them to generate a feeling of déjà vu – in the recognition memory literature, we are not aware of any studies which report participants having déjà vu. Cleary et al. (2012; p. 973) state that 'we defined déjà vu as a simultaneous recognition of newness alongside a feeling of familiarity' and report that two participants gave déjà vu responses for 100% of old items.

One concern is that when asked about déjà vu, we do not know what the reference is for participants – how they may define the experience, according to their beliefs, general knowledge or even suggestibility. Participants' responses may actually reflect uncertainty about what the experience is, or – despite attempts to provide a clear definition of déjà vu – use a definition of déjà vu which emphasises repetition of experiences rather than the clash of two evaluations (familiarity and newness) which the scientific literature is now emphasising. This concern about déjà vu just meaning any form of repetition is supported by linguistic studies of déjà vu, and by the definition on-line given in on-line dictionaries. For instance, the Miriam Webster (2014) online dictionary gives two definitions of déjà vu:

1. *The feeling that you have already experienced something that is actually happening for the first time.*
2. *Something that has happened many times before: something that is very familiar.*

Lazerson (1994) reviews the use of déjà vu as a term in common parlance in American English, noting that first dictionary definitions emphasise an illusory feeling, and that the term in this manner entered the lexicon (appearing in dictionary definitions) in 1903. Lazerson argues that in the 1950s the term entered non-technical English, where its usage was largely perjorative and where it acquired the meaning 'tiresome familiarity' (p. 285), giving the example: "Two can lurch on dreary déjà vu for \$47 in our town's temples of serious French cooking" collected in 1975 in New York.¹

The shift in meaning for the term in time may explain how there have been increases in déjà vu experience over time: Gallup and Newport (1991) reported that from 1978 to 1990 people who had experienced déjà vu increased from 30% of the population to 55%. We have previously noted (Moulin et al., 2014) a significant trend in the rate of déjà vu experience by publication year ($r(41) = .50$), showing that more of the population have experienced déjà vu as time goes on. In terms of a change in the brain or memory systems of these participants, this is a difficult result to explain. Instead we think that this reflects changes in the knowledge of the term and its popularity.

The change over time in the usage and meaning of déjà vu, may be matched by cultural differences in how the term is used, which is what we focus on here. Both changes over time, and across languages and or cultures would point to there being difficulties in how it is defined and characterised. In the current study, instead of comparing across cohorts based on date at which the study was carried out, we compare cohorts based on language. The understanding of the term déjà vu is of particular interest in French, since in French, it can be both used to describe the infrequent memory error, but also in everyday language to literally mean 'already seen' (and English speakers are likely to be unaware of this etymology, or draw upon it when using the term). Thus in addition to the dual meanings in English given above, in French there is the suggestion that déjà vu sometimes may actually be the act of seeing something again, and at that the term déjà vu is not nearly so unusual or interesting.

The goal of the current research was therefore to explore the meaning of déjà vu in the general population, amongst those who report it. In particular, we took advantage of the fact that déjà vu is a French term. Our concern is that subjective report of déjà vu is influenced by cultural shifts and variability in its definition, and our hypothesis is that people who speak French will be less likely to describe the experience as strange, or as emanating from a clash in evaluations, since déjà vu is used in common parlance to refer to information/stimuli that have already been seen and encountered. As a result, English descriptions of the experience should be that it is more unreal and we might expect them to question the experience, and perhaps its definition more than the French group. It would of course be of interest to compare cultures which are very much different in terms of the linguistic structure and knowledge of the term, but for this study we concentrate on English and French – French because it is the origin of the term, and English, because it has been the language used for most experimental and questionnaire studies of déjà vu.

Because we consider déjà vu to be a memory phenomenon, we do not expect baseline differences in what the experience is, or how it is experienced, but that the reporting of the experience is biased by the language that is used. In particular, in English, we might expect that déjà vu is seen as something a little more exotic than in French. Whilst this is not a direct test of the idea that many people use the term déjà vu in the 'boring repetition' sense when carrying out our experiments and

¹ This meaning reflecting actual repetition possibly derives from the famous tautological expression coined by the baseball commentator, Yogi Berra: "It's déjà vu all over again."

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