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Regular and irregular inflection in the acquisition of German noun plurals $\hat{a}\sim\ddagger$

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Abstract

In this paper we study the acquisition of German noun plurals in relation to the question of how children represent regular and irregular inflection. Pinker and Prince (1992) have demonstrated several dissociations between regular and irregular inflection in the English past tense system. However, in English, the default status of -ed is confounded with its high frequency; therefore inflectional systems other than English past tense formation must be examined. The noun plural system in German is particularly interesting, because most nouns have irregular plurals in German and the regular (default) plural is less frequent than several of the irregular plurals. Thus it is unclear how a language learner determines whether German even has a regular plural, and if so what form it takes. Based on longitudinal data from impaired and unimpaired monolingual German-speaking children, we find a striking, statistically significant correlation: plural affixes that are used in overregularizations, namely -n or -s, are left out within compounds. This correlation

shows that even impaired children are sensitive to the distinction between regular and irregular morphology. We propose a linguistic analysis of the correlation in terms of Kiparsky's (1982, 1985) level-ordering model plus an additional ordering condition on affixes: default (regular) affixes cannot serve as input to compounding processes.



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