

Beyond affix-stripping: Generalisation and processing of 'pure morphology'

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The 'classical' approach to morphology ascribes productivity to knowledge of rules: categorical, context-free operations which create structured representations. Alternatively, within analogical, connectionist, and stochastic approaches, it has been proposed that the mechanisms that generalise and process complex forms are inherently graded, as well as frequency- and similarity-sensitive. In this talk, I will review work conducted in Romance languages aimed at adjudicating between these two broad theoretical positions.

We have made use of a number of experimental techniques (elicited production and judgement tasks, masked and cross-modal priming, and computational simulations) to examine the generalisation and processing of conjugation classes in Portuguese and Italian. Conjugation classes are instances of 'pure morphology', abstract features that do not express meaning or syntax beyond their morphological properties. With these properties, such phenomena may be particularly suited to examine speaker's knowledge of morphology beyond the phonological-to-semantic mappings that necessarily characterise inflectional and derivational morphemes.

The results from these studies indicate that speakers partition the space of conjugation classes by distinguishing between: i) a default class, which generalises in a context-free manner and forms structured stems (i.e., [root + class marker] representations); and ii) 'exceptional' classes, which are generalised in a graded manner on the basis of phonological similarity and comprise stems that display no internal structure.

We conclude that the investigation of more abstract phenomenon than the more commonly studied processes of morpheme decomposition holds promise for illuminating long-standing theoretical controversies. In particular, the results have implications for the debate between rule-based and associative approaches to language, as well as for the status of morphological classes in the theory of morphology.

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