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Storing morphologically complex forms: convergent evidence from grammar and psycholinguistics

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Linguistic theory affords several ways of using grammatical evidence in support of the lexical storage of morphologically complex forms. These theoretical lines of argument are particularly persuasive when they converge with the results of independent psycholinguistic experiments.

One type of evidence comes from allomorphic locality. Assume that allomorphy involves competition between lexically stored exponents and that exponence proceeds cyclically. If so, one can infer the size of listed allomorphs from the size of the cyclic domain in which they compete for selection. Bermúdez-Otero (2013, 2016) applies this method to Spanish, where most stems can be decomposed into a root and a theme vowel: e.g. am-a 'love-th', beb-e 'drink-th'. Since the choice of theme vowel is syntactically and phonologically unpredictable, this raises the question whether the Spanish lexicon stores bare roots specified with class features or full stems complete with their theme vowels.

Allomorphic patterns such as the diphthongal and raising alternations support the option of stem storage. In the diphthongal alternation, for example, allomorphs containing stressed [jé] and [wé] alternate with allomorphs containing unstressed [e] and [o]: e.g. cuént-a-Æ 'count-th-3sg'~ cont-á-mos 'count-th-1pl'. Now consider a derivative like the deverbal adjective [A [V contá] ble] 'countable'. Assuming competition between two root allomorphs /kont-/ and /kwent-/ in the first cycle, when stress is on the initial syllable, yields ungrammatical *cuentable. This instance of allomorphy must therefore involve competition between two stems /kont-a-/ and /kwent-a-/. These are listed exponents of the lexeme contar 'count'and compete in the second cycle, in which stress moves to the second syllable.
Psycholinguistic evidence confirms this conclusion. Domínguez et al. (1999, 2000) studied lexemes like ciego 'blind', which has two stems (cieg-o m and cieg-a f) and four fully inflected forms. Recognition latencies were found to depend on the token frequency of each stem, rather than on the frequency of the lexeme or of individual wordforms.

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