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Processing differences among irregular inflection classes

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Abstract

Theories of inflectional morphology differ in terms of how they treat semi-productive inflection types, that is, inflections that apply to multiple words but are not completely productive (e.g. grow-grew, know-knew, but not clow-clowed). How such semi-regular classes generalize may help distinguish theories, but little work has explored this question due to the difficulty of finding overgeneralized uses of these inflectional classes in naturalistic corpora. We address this issue by conducting a prompted lexical decision study on English past tenses. Participants were shown a regular or irregular verb in the infinitive form (to snow, to grow) and then presented with either a correct inflection (snowed, grew) or an overgeneralization (snew, grewed) and asked to indicate whether it is the correct past tense form. We compare how various overgeneralized types (snow-snew, sneeze-snoze) differ in terms of reaction times and accuracy rates finding differences between classes which may inform future theoretical comparisons.