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Authors

Heitmeier, Maria
Frank, Stella

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Exploring the influence of semantics on the German plural system: a wug study

Maria Heitmeier

Eberhard-Karls-Universität, Tübingen, Germany

Stella Frank

University of Trento, Rovereto, TN, Italy

Abstract

The role of semantics in inflectional morphology has long been debated (Huang & Pinker, 2010; Pinker & Prince, 1988; Ramscar, 2002) with most of the focus on the English past tense. This paper explores whether an effect of semantics can be found for German noun plural generalisation, a system as yet only poorly understood. German speakers were asked to first freely produce and then rate plural forms of 24 new wug words, presented in a semantically manipulated context. We expected that the German plural class ending in -n should be used more frequently with nouns presented as persons than as objects (Gaeta, 2008). While this hypothesis was not confirmed, the post-hoc discovery of other semantic influences prevents us from completely rejecting the original hypothesis. In light of these results we discuss possible sources of the observed pattern of plural classes and stress the importance of replicating wug studies with novel sets of wug words. We conclude that generalisation of the German plural system cannot easily be explained by phonological nor semantic influences.