

THESIS ABSTRACT

Word final positions are sometimes described as optionally salient, depending on the presence or the absence of bound morphology. In fact, word final positions often incur disruptive phonological processes (such as deletion or assimilation) but these processes are partially blocked in the presence of bound morphology. Some evidence suggests that these effects may also be active in the sublexicon (i.e. with no access to semantics). Investigations of this phenomenon so far focused on monolingual speakers, and little is known about the presence of these effects on speakers with English as their L2. This diploma thesis aims at partially filling this gap by focusing on the perceptual salience of word endings as perceived by second-language learners of English having Czech as their L1.

The methodology is based on Cilibrasi (2015). The subjects tested were adult second-language learners of English of different language levels (B1, B2 and C1). In the experimental part, they were asked to listen to pairs of non-words and decide if the non-words are identical or slightly different by pressing one of two keys. There were three conditions: Condition 1 with non-words containing potential morphological information, condition 2 with non-words with no morphological information and condition 3 as a control condition.

We expected reaction times to reflect the presence of bound morphology, with non-words containing bound morphology taking longer to be discriminated. Further, we expected proficiency in English to be a co-predictor of reaction times, with proficient speakers showing a larger (native-like) effect of morphology.

The study also inevitably attempted to find evidence either for the rule-based or for the whole-word processing of words as regards the perceptual decomposition of inflected verbs

into stems and affixes. Finally, the study compared the results of Cilibrasi's study of word-ending perception in native speakers of English with the results of this thesis and attempted to interpret any potential differences.

The data analysis confirmed that even for second-language learners word-ending effects apply sublexically and that word endings are optionally salient based on the presence or absence of potential morphosyntactic information. The reaction times reflected the presence of bound morphology, with non-words containing bound morphology taking longer to be discriminated in all language levels. The data also confirmed the influence of phonotactic probabilities on reaction times (item-based reaction times correlated with item-based phonotactic probabilities). This led to the conclusion that there might be some frequency effects running parallel to morpheme stripping that might be similarly effective in predicting reaction times recorded in this task.

Contrary to our hypothesis about proficiency, the differences between individual conditions were identical in each language group. This result suggests that second language learners of English having Czech as L1 behave in the same way as monolingual speakers when processing inflectional bound morphemes in English and that the strategy used during perception is the same from a relatively early language level in the process of language learning. This strategy is used implicitly by all subjects and is likely to be a consequence of automatic unconscious processing.