

MA thesis report

Lucie Jiráňková completed a experimental thesis in psycholinguistic investigating the perception of bound morphemes in speakers of English as L2. The student tested a total of 60 subjects, belonging to 3 different groups. Group belonging was established in relation to 3 different levels of proficiency in English (B1, B2 and C1). The study was performed with great attention to detail and the results are very interesting. The thesis is well written and incredibly clear, not only in terms of writing style but also in terms of formatting. In fact, the document is pleasurable to see, not only to read. The theoretical issues relevant to the experiment are discussed in detail and the candidate's findings have a relevance to the theoretical debate and add new information to the literature. I am very satisfied with the work of Lucie Jiráňková.

Below I will discuss in more detail the different parts of the thesis:

Introduction:

In this section of the thesis the candidate summarises the theoretical reasons that led to the decision of conducting this research. In the final part she sketches the hypotheses that will then be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. I believe that having this section in the thesis was a great decision, since it significantly helped in clarifying the reasons behind this work. In this section (and in the abstract) the candidate gives a good example of her ability to explain complex problems succinctly.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses:

The theoretical part is a detailed description of the theoretical environment in which the thesis is developed. This section mirrors relatively faithfully the theoretical discussion of my PhD thesis. This is a reasonable choice since the test that the candidate is using for her thesis is a test I developed during my PhD.

Methodology:

In this chapter the candidate described in impressive detail the experiment performed. Her rigour and precision are particularly striking in this section. The candidate showed a strong scientific sensibility, since her explanations are detailed enough so that a new researcher interested in replicating her study would be able to do it by reading her methods.

Research part:

In February Ms Jiráňková came for a two days visit in Cambridge. In that occasion I introduced her to the basic principles of statistical analysis. In just two days we covered hypothesis testing, the meaning of statistical tests and p-values, as well as t-tests, correlations and Anova. With this little amount of training the candidate was able to analyse her data and make sense of it. Furthermore, I am quite impressed by the quality of the graphs she produced. Once again, clarity is something that positively impressed me in her work.

Conclusion:

The candidate's results partly confirm the hypotheses and partly don't. This is a good ground then to show one's ability to re-evaluate expectations and draw meaningful conclusions from the data. I believe Ms Jiráňková succeeded in that: her conclusions are reasonable and well thought. Her data seem to confirm the speakers' sensibility to inflectional morphemes, but in the mean time it appears that phonotactic probabilities are also predicting RTs, suggesting that the hypotheses are not in opposition, and, as the candidate says, that the morphological stripping system may be redundant.

Surprisingly, the candidate did not find any difference between language groups. The student successfully discusses this finding, concluding that there could be two possible explanations for the result. One is the morphological richness of Czech, which may make speakers very sensible to morphological decomposition also in L2. The other is the explicitness with which morphological decomposition is taught in many English classes, which may make students proficient from an early stage of L2 acquisition.

Final comment:

This thesis is of good quality for a number of reasons: The topic is interesting and well discussed, and the results are relevant for the wider research community. The most striking traits emerging from the candidate's work are a solid rigour in performing the experiments and a strong clarity in explaining and presenting her ideas and her results. These traits make her work very valuable and make the future research of the candidate quite promising. The thesis complies with the requirements for MA theses, I recommend it for the defence, and I propose the grade "výborný" as the final result.

Questions for the candidate:

1. You offer two possible explanations for the pattern of unexpected results obtained. Can you think of any way to find out which of the two may be correct?
2. The thesis deals extensively with the phonotactic constraints of English (since the test was with English-like nonwords). Do you think that the phonotactic constraints of Czech could have influenced your result? If so, in what way?
3. Given your results, what pattern would you expect if the test was administered to L2 speakers with an A1 level of proficiency?

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