

Language in Performance



Thomas Wagner

Interlanguage Morphology

Irregular Verbs in the Mental Lexicon of
German-English Interlanguage Speakers

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Language in Performance **42**

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*Mazes intricate,
Eccentric, intervolv'd, yet regular
Then most, when most irregular they seem.*

John Milton (1608-1674): *Paradise Lost*, v. 622-4

To my parents

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Linz, Austria, December 2009

Thomas Wagner

Preface

At the turn of the millennium, Ingo Plag, the supervisor of this thesis, presented a paper on the topic of irregular past tense formation in German-English interlanguage. Tentative and brief as the discussion of the results was, the paper constituted pioneering work in an area that had been given rather little attention by linguists so far, namely the cognitive representation of irregular inflectional paradigms in interlanguages. Plag's results were remarkable and thought-provoking. They did, however, remain inconclusive to a considerable extent, and he closed his presentation summarising that

the present study seems to raise more questions than it answers, but I hope to have shown that these questions are sufficiently interesting to merit further investigation [...]. (Plag 2000:148)

In 2004, I embarked on some of these *further investigations*, the results of which are presented in this book. No sooner, though, did I start familiarising myself with the intricacies of irregular verb morphology and its organisation in the mental lexicon in English and German, than it became evident that this research area had practically exploded into what is now known as the so-called 'past tense debate'. For a great number of linguists, psychologists, biologists and cognitive scientists alike, regular and irregular verb morphology, mostly but not exclusively in English, had become the prime object of investigation. One consequence was a massive and quickly growing body of evidence and counterevidence for the theories put forward. The other was that my further investigations turned out to be a much bigger challenge than assumed at the outset. In retrospect, though, the work in this area of research provided a stimulating, enriching, and more often than not indeed challenging experience.

Overall, I hope that despite the abundance of ever more complex and challenging theories and models, the present work will contribute to the debate and prove to be sufficiently interesting to merit even further investigations.

1 Introduction

English irregular verb morphology constitutes a rather pertinacious problem both in the area of linguistics and language acquisition. In language acquisition, irregular verbs, *the bane of every language student* (Pinker 1999:xi), have long been dreaded by learners because of their seemingly erratic and thus error-prone patterning. Generations of students across the world have met irregular verbs as an alphabetically arranged succession of notoriously unpredictable exceptions, which demanded to be rote-learned in a monotonous and tedious fashion.

In linguistics, English irregular verbs have long been assumed to be cognitively represented as a complex list of idiosyncratic, *atomic* items (Marcus 1995, cf. Bloomfield 1933, Chomsky 1968), rote-learned, and stored separately and individually in the mental lexicon in early childhood.

Such a rather simple and static view of irregular verb morphology, however, not only shows a charming disregard for the internal morphological patterning within this word class, but also for a learner's as well as speaker's ability to generalise from existing patterns to novel, unknown forms. It has been repeatedly observed that adult speakers (Bybee and Moder 1983) as well as children (Bybee and Slobin 1982) overgeneralise irregular verbs. Such processes occur far too frequently to be simply classified as careless slips by children or linguistically ignorant speakers. What kind of mechanism, then, could be responsible for such productivity?

Over the last two decades, the internal organisation of irregular verb morphology has been addressed in a great number of publications (for overviews see Pinker 1991, Tomasello 1995, Pinker 1999, Westermann 2000, Ullman 2001a). Numerous theories and models have been put forward, refined, and revised in rapid succession. In fact, research concerned with irregular verb morphology has assumed such a prominent place in cognitive linguistics, that it is now known as the 'past tense debate'. And yet, up to the present, it appears as though a number of fundamental problems still need further investigation.

The current approaches in this research area can be roughly broken down into three camps. The first is the 'all-rules-camp'. Within this framework English irregular verb morphology is perceived as strictly rule-like in nature. In the classical version of such an approach, Chomsky and Halle (1968) proposed that all unpredictable and idiosyncratic information, such as irregular plurals or past tense formations, were stored as exceptions in the mental lexicon, and that past tenses were derived by a fixed set of input-output-oriented ablaut rules. In a more recent approach, Albright and Hayes (2003) claimed that both regular and irregular verbs could be ac-