

From wugged to wug: Reverse generalisation of stems from novel past tense verbs

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Abstract

When native and non-native English speakers inflect novel verb forms for the past tense, non-natives are more likely to produce irregular (non -ed) forms than natives (Cuskley et al., 2015). We test whether participants can reverse-engineer the correct present tense stem from regular and irregular past tense forms of novel verbs. All participants are better able to identify the stem of regularly inflected forms than irregular forms, but we find no difference between native and non-native speakers. Phonological similarity to existing irregulars interferes with recognition of regularly inflected non-verbs (e.g., proximity of *sleened* to *slung/slung* makes it more difficult than *drocked*). While non-natives are more likely to produce irregular past tense forms, they are not better than native speakers at interpreting them. Non-native over-production of irregulars may reflect statistical patterns in their more limited input, but these factors do not seem to affect the process of inferring stems.