

Ling 101, *People and their Language*, Fall 2006

Discussion Sections 1 and 5

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Discussion Section 7

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1 Dialects and dialectal features.

1.1 Review from lecture

What is a *dialect*? How do different dialects differ from languages?

How do dialects differ from each other?

**Useful term to learn and memorize:*

- **isogloss** - the geographical boundary of a certain linguistic feature.

In this definition, linguistic *features* can be instances of all of the more general ways in which dialects (and languages) differ from one another, including:

- the pronunciation of a vowel (phonology)
- the meaning of a word (vocabulary)
- use of a particular syntactic feature (syntax),

> Dialects are often demarcated by *bundles* of isoglosses.

Where should we expect to find the features of the so-called Boston dialect, and why?

1.2 Processing dialect survey

-Form ten groups; each group is responsible for one question on the survey.

-Pick a different symbol to use for every possible answer to your question. For each response, write the appropriate symbol in the place on the map corresponding to the location the respondent is from.

-Keep track of the packets of responses you've already recorded, so you don't record the same answers twice, or miss any.

2 Homework 2

2.1 Experiment design

The most common misunderstanding and source of problems was an incorrect or incomplete understanding of exactly what this experiment was designed to test. It was **not** designed to test any of the following items by themselves.

- speakers' unconscious linguistic knowledge
- speakers' linguistic knowledge of the rules for forming and/or recognizing different classes of plurals
- the oddity or normalness of different classes of singular and plural nouns in sentences, or in general
- speakers' ability to recognize or identify 'correct' versus 'incorrect' forms of different categories of singular and plural nouns

What it **was** designed to test:

- the relative acceptability of different classes of singular and plural nouns *in compound words*.

Pinker uses the acceptability of different types of plurals, when they occur as parts of compound words, as evidence for his theory of the lexicon. He claims that his ideas about the mechanisms for regular and irregular plural formation make certain predictions about how these mechanisms should interact with the compound formation rule.

2.2 Pinker's hypothesis

(1) Model Lexicon

Lexical entries: stem: dog, cat, mouse, mice,

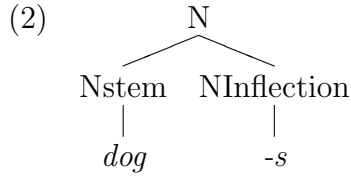
Inflectional endings: -s[plural; attaches to noun stems]

Rules:

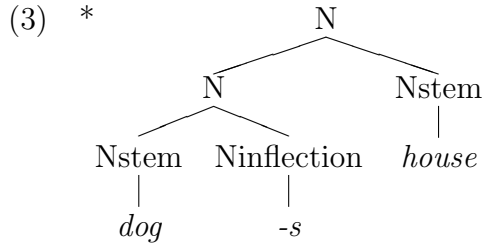
Plural formation rule: $N+s \rightarrow N$ (plural);

Compound Formation Rule: $N_{\text{stem}} + N_{\text{stem}} \rightarrow N$ (compound)

Example. Imagine that we wanted to use these rules to derive a compound word containing a regular plural noun as one of its components. As an example consider the plural noun *dogs* in the (hypothetical) compound noun *dogshouse*. The plural formation rule would attach the inflectional ending *-s* to the stem *dog*, as in (2).

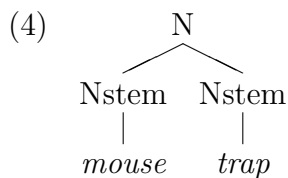


To form a plural with a regular plural noun, this entire tree would have to be embedded into another tree, formed through application of the compound formation rule, as in (3)



But the tree in (3), according to Pinker's system, is ill-formed (as indicated by the star—linguists' symbol for a grammatically unacceptable structure—in the figure above). This is because the compound formation rule applies to noun *stems* only. In the tree above, a word (N) and a stem (house), and a stem (house) are joined together. This is something the compound rule, can't do; hence, *dogshouse* sounds bad.

In the case of compound nouns containing *irregular* plural nouns, on the other hand, there is no such obstacle. Since, as we saw in (2) above, plural irregulars are stored as roots along with singular regulars, the compound formation noun can take one as its input without problem, to a well-resulting in a well-formed tree such as:



To sum up the predictions made by this system:

- Regular plurals should be bad in compounds, because the rule that forms them applies 'after' the rule that makes the compound.
- Irregulars should be good in compounds, because they are accessible to the compound formation rule

2.3 Essays

2.4 Discussing results

In this experiment, we were testing these predictions *as a means of* getting at Pinker's more general hypothesis concerning our knowledge of singular versus plural nouns.

Of course, everyone's data will be different, and the specifics of your particular results will to a large degree shape the discussion of your results. At the very least, though, a good discussion of the essay probably should have considered at least the following components:

- whether or not it supported Pinker's hypothesis, at the most general level; i.e. if regular plurals were worse than irregulars in compounds. If they were (most people's were), that's support for Pinker's hypothesis as stated. If your results were the other way around, that's significantly surprising and warrants comment.
- the behavior of the semi-irregular class in plural formation. The vast majority found these to be very bad, even worse than regulars. As we discussed in class, this is not, strictly speaking, what Pinker's hypothesis predicts. So you should have talked about this, and suggested a way that Pinker's hypothesis might be restated so as to capture that generalization.

Also of interest and relevance:

- the behavior of the different classes of irregular plurals (also something Pinker doesn't discuss)
- patterns of preferences displayed for singular versus plural irregular nouns in compounds. Pinker's hypothesis predicts no particular preference in this regard, so it's interesting to see whether they really are equally accepted by speakers.
>One interesting pattern that emerged from your data in this regard was a preference for foreign irregular plurals over their singular counterparts. (and some of you did a good job of speculating about why this might be.)

2.5 Common errors and general suggestions for improvement

-Introduction: *Explaining* Pinker's hypothesis does not just mean listing the different types of plural classes. It was much better to explain by giving some sort of sketch of the assumptions along the lines of the one I sketched out above.

-It is true that we are assuming that speakers will rely upon unconscious linguistic knowledge in making their judgments, so in providing evidence for this particular prediction made by Pinker's hypothesis we are indirectly also providing support for the more general aspect of

the theory (i.e. that speakers' have unconscious knowledge of the rules for forming plurals), but your explication of the experiment needed to be a bit more subtle than simply to say that we were testing this knowledge.

-There really were no 'correct' or 'incorrect' answers! Some of you wrote that you repeated the instructions to your subjects that there were no right or wrong answers, but then interpreted your subjects' responses as showing an ability to correctly or incorrectly identify correct and incorrect forms. In this experiment, as in linguistics in general, we do not assume *a priori* any prescriptively right or wrong answers; what the speakers find acceptable is 'right', and vice versa.

-In doing this experiment or any other, we never set out to 'prove' a hypothesis. This single experiment is not sufficient to prove Pinker's hypothesis; we can only test it, which might lead to further testing in one direction or another.

-Some of you still included personal beliefs or opinions. There was really no room for that in this assignment, because the point was to discuss your data.

-Discuss what your data shows, even if it seems wrong to you. It's ok to discuss the factors which you feel may have biased or interfered with your results, but you shouldn't describe your data and then completely discount it by concluding that in spite of what your data shows, you still 'think that Pinker is right,' or you nonetheless 'feel that the hypothesis is right.'

-Just because the sample is small doesn't mean that the results are completely uninformative! We wouldn't have assigned this, if we thought you could learn nothing interesting from your results.

-Finally, don't be afraid to disagree with Pinker, or suggest that his proposal might need expanding upon or refining in some respects.