

French Word Transformations: a Comparison of Native Speaker and L2 Learner Judgments

This paper presents results of a psycholinguistic study comparing native speaker and L2 learner judgments of word transformations in French. While it is well attested that L2 phonological production is rarely native-like, no previous research has investigated whether L2 intuitions regarding phonotactics in the target language are similar to native intuitions. For the purposes of this study, the term *phonotactics* refers to restrictions that languages place on the phonological shape of words. In the experimental design, phonotactic differences between French and English are exploited, namely that French allows only 1 consonant in syllable codas while English allows 3 or more. This can be seen in cognate alternations such as English ‘calmly’ versus French *calmement* [kalməmã].

The French syllable restrictions are also illustrated in a rare (ludling) word transformation known as re-suffixation. In this argotic word game, a diminutive suffix combines with an original root word without changing the meaning or category. Re-suffixation allomorphy is complex but systematic, revealing sonority and OCP constraints as well as maximal syllable constraints on the final re-suffixed word. When the suffix [-zɛ̃g] is applied to the word *escargot* (‘snail’) the consonant of the suffix deletes, yielding [ɛskaʁgɛ̃g] and never *[ɛskaʁgzɛ̃g]. While native French speakers and advanced learners may know of a few re-suffixed words, they know nothing of the linguistic patterning, nor are they aware of constraints on consonant clusters in French. Moreover, the French lexicon contains numerous apparent examples of heavier syllable codas, particularly word-finally (such as the word for ‘marble’ *marbre* [maʁbʁ]). Thus, re-suffixation is a suitable tool for testing speaker intuitions, given the lack of explicit knowledge about the phenomena.

For this experiment, a series of invented (unattested) re-suffixed French words was devised using common French root words. A native speaker group and 3 learner groups (advanced, intermediate and beginner) were presented aurally with re-suffixed words and asked to judge the acceptability in a forced-choice yes/no prompt followed by a confidence scale. An English monolingual control group was presented with similar test items and asked to judge the acceptability in English. Because the invented re-suffixed items have lexical status, frequency effects on acceptability judgments, such as neighborhood effect, are minimized, and systematic judgments result more clearly from phonological grammar. The results show that, with the exception of beginning learners of French, both native speakers and learners of French show significant judgment tendencies. They tended to reject the well-formedness ‘heavy’ re-suffixed items (items like *[ɛskaʁgzɛ̃g]) while accepting the well-formedness of counterpart items such as [ɛskaʁgɛ̃g]. While English monolinguals rejected ‘heavy’ items more frequently than other items, there was no significant effect, and the proportions were diminished compared to the French test. Experimental results also show strong preferences for sonorant assimilation and continuency dissimilation in the derived words among native speakers and L2 learners. In addition, the results show awareness of word sub-units (i.e. root and affix) and sensitivity to constraints protecting morphological roots in derivation.