

Sound correspondence patterns as cross-linguistic knowledge

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Being exposed to input from different languages or varieties is a common experience for most speakers across the globe. Linguistic approaches committing themselves to psychological realism and adopting a usage-based perspective thus need to make allowance for multilingual (and multilectal) input as forming part of speakers' experience with language.

A common type of multilingual experience involves that speakers are exposed to structures from a language or variety that is closely related to their L1 (or another language they already know). Input like this is special in that it often shows great formal similarities to the speaker's L1, especially lexical similarities in the form of cognates, which is why many closely related languages are said to be mutually intelligible. The Continental Scandinavian languages Danish, Norwegian and Swedish, e.g., are so similar that speakers are – to a certain extent – able to communicate across the language boundaries. At the same time, however, cognates often also show more or less extreme formal differences that can jeopardize their recognizability. This can also be observed in Interscandinavian communication, where spoken Danish in particular presents a challenge for untrained listeners due to special pronunciation features that can bring about a considerable linguistic distance to the cognate equivalents in Norwegian and Swedish (Gooskens & van Bezooijen 2013, Delsing & Lundin Åkesson 2005). While these differences do have the potential to lead to a communication breakdown, it is being reported that speakers in Interscandinavian communication rather quickly identify systematic differences as regular sound correspondence patterns and exploit this knowledge when decoding input from their neighbouring languages (Höder 2019, Braunmüller 1995, Bannert 1981). However, it has not yet been investigated how this acquisition actually takes place.

The PhD project presented in this paper explores in a series of psycholinguistic experiments how much and which kind of spoken Danish input speakers of Swedish need to process in order to identify a number of specific sound correspondences during a priming phase and successfully apply them when decoding new input in a subsequent translation task. Since there are several correspondences between Danish and Swedish that have certain features in common (e.g., a lenis-fortis difference in the pronunciation of all 'voiceless' plosives /p/, /k/, /t/), they offer some potential for abstraction. Therefore, the project does not just aim at finding out if certain sound correspondence patterns are acquired at all, it also explores how much speakers generalize in that case. The project explores this question from a usage-based constructionist perspective; more specifically, it adopts the approach of Diasystematic Construction Grammar (cf., e.g., Höder 2019), which postulates that speakers organize all of their linguistic knowledge in one integrated system. This entails the possibility of cross-linguistic links and abstractions and can help to explain the acquisition of sound correspondence patterns.

The paper explains the experimental design, the underlying constructionist and cognitivist assumptions, and discusses first results from online and on-site testing.

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