The effects of homophony on verbal inflection in L1 and L2 Danish

Abstract:

In written Danish, there is a clear distinction between regular verbs in the present tense (inflected with the suffix -er) and the infinitive (inflected with the suffix -e). In spoken Danish, however, the two word forms are sometimes homophone e.g. kør-e ‘to drive’ and kør-er ‘drive/driving’; both pronounced [ˈkʰøːɐ]. Previous research has shown that Danish middle schoolers as well as university students have difficulties with inflection of such homophone verb forms (e.g. Blom et al. 2017, Jervelund & Schack 2016). When the difference between present tense and infinitive was audible, middle schoolers showed almost no difficulties (Jervelund & Schack 2016).

As the homophone verb forms seem most problematic, we investigated the frequency of errors in the written production of present tense and infinitive verbs in cases of homophony vs. heterophony. To examine whether difficulties with homophone variants are specific to native speakers of Danish, we compared texts from native Danish speakers (L1 texts) to texts from nonnative speakers whose native language was English (L2 texts). L1 texts were 36 high school essays (61,803 words in total) and L2 texts were written by 28 students at a Danish language school (5,685 words in total). For L1 texts, we expected more errors when present tense and infinitive were homophone. For L2 texts, we expected anomalous inflection to correlate with other factors than homophony, e.g. the frequency or context of the verb (e.g. after modal verb).

Overall, we found more inflection errors in L2 texts than in L1 texts. However, homophony-related errors were more pronounced in L1 texts than L2 texts: a potential error analysis (Thewissen 2015) showed an error rate of 21.6% in L1 texts in cases of homophony compared to 0.4% in cases of heterophony. L2 texts had an error rate of 3.5% in cases of homophony compared to 8.0% in cases of heterophony. The L1 results indicate that L1 speakers of Danish predominantly utilize their phonemic knowledge in writing rather than their morphological knowledge, which is consistent with other findings (Jervelund & Schack 2016, Juul 2005).

We discuss these results further and account for other factors that correlate with the L2 errors. Additionally, we discuss how the results from both groups can be used as point of reference for psycholinguistic studies of grammar anomalies.
References:


