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Paradigms: Learning, representation, change

Abstract

Paradigms are a characteristic of languages with complex morphological systems. In such languages, the speaker often needs to produce novel words that they have never heard or produced before. This production process is usefully thought of as blending activated representations into a novel production plan. In this process, the speaker needs to make use of both semantic cues (the meaning they want to express) and cues present in related wordforms to incorporate just the right parts of the activated forms into the blend. Reproducing the paradigmatic structure of a language is a formidable learning task, and one that is not accomplished by all native speakers of a language. As a result, paradigms are somewhat unstable diachronically. In particular, paradigmatic mappings that involve large changes are often leveled. In this talk, I present what is known about this process of paradigm leveling, and argue that it is best explained by error inherent to the production of a low-frequency, relatively inaccessible wordform.