Recap: Words and Rules

Human language involves two different kinds of “mental tissue”:
- a finite lexicon of words, stored in and retrieved from memory;
- a finite grammar of rules (productive, abstract, combinatorial);
- these two mechanisms produce an infinite set of sentences;

What is the evidence for dichotomy between words and rules?
The existence of regular and irregular verbs.

Regular Verbs

- Past tense: just add -ed to the end of present tense form.
- Set of regular verbs is open-ended (probably tens of thousands in the mental lexicon of an educated adult).
- New regular verbs enter English every year.

- jog → jogged
- walk → walked
- play → played
- kiss → kissed
- spam → spammed
- snarf → snarfed
- mung → munged
- mosh → moshed

(snarf: to download a file, mung: to damage something, mosh: to dance in a roughhouse fashion)
4–7 year old kids were shown a hand-drawn picture of a bird. The kids generally replied: “These are two wugs”.
75% of the 4–5 year olds, 99% of the 6–7 year-olds
So, kids don’t just repeat words they have heard. They are capable of forming regular plural forms creatively.

Almost all kids replied binged (or ricked, clinged).
So children form regular past tense forms creatively as well.
Even when they have never heard the verb used before!

Some past tense forms don’t just add -ed to the end of the present tense form.
Irregular past tense inflection is chaotic and idiosyncratic.
Irregular verbs are a closed list, of 150–180 members.
There have been no recent additions (not since sneak–snuck arrived during the 19th century).
Kids rarely produce irregular past forms in the wug-test.

Linguists use an asterisk (*) to mark things which are not part of the language, or, at least, which make native speakers uncomfortable, or are meaningless.
A Simple Theory of Regular and Irregular Verbs

Regular past tense forms are formed by a rule.

\[
\begin{align*}
V_{\text{past}} & \quad V_{\text{past}} \\
V - \text{ed} & \quad V - \text{ed}
\end{align*}
\]

sound: hold
meaning: part of speech: V

Irregular past tense forms are stored and retrieved as words.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{sound:} & \quad \text{hold} \\
\text{meaning:} & \quad \text{part of speech:} \quad V
\end{align*}
\]

Blocking

We have two independent mechanisms for past tense formation:

- irregular past tense forms stored as words;
- a productive rule for regular past tense forms;
- Why don’t they get in each other’s way? held vs. *holded, stole vs. *stealed

Simple Answer

If a past tense verb form is stored in memory as a word, the rule is blocked. If no past tense form is stored, then the rule may be applied (e.g., snarfed, moshed, ricked).

Why do Irregular Verbs Exist?

- There aren’t really that many of them.
- Adding 180 words to a lexicon of tens of thousands of words is not such a big deal in terms of memory capacity.
- Rules cut our mental storage needs!
- Retrieving a word from memory is faster than applying a rule.
- Especially for words we hear often (e.g., be, have, do, go, say).

Simple Conclusion

The existence of both words and rules, somewhat counterintuitively, makes human language more efficient.

Two Kinds of Words

Linguistics: word-as-morphological object, as opposed to phrases and sentences
Psychology: word-as-lexical entry, stretch of sound which has been memorized and cannot be produced by a rule
Pinker: calls this a listeme

- Some memorized chunks are smaller than a word in 1st sense.
- Others are larger than a word in the 1st sense.
- The second sense of word covers things which appear only as parts of words in the 1st sense.
Two Kinds of Words

Suffixes
- able (cap-able)
- ed (wak-ed)
- al (refus-al)
- ship (fellow-ship)

Prefixes
un- (un-finished)
ante- (ante-cedent)
co- (co-pilot)
re- (re-claim)

Idioms
piece of cake
when pigs fly
like two peas in a pod
beat around the bush
see eye to eye
once in a blue moon
the last straw
costs an arm and a leg
add insult to injury

Regular English Verbs

- English inflection is very simple.
- Only suffixes; no prefixes
- At most one inflection per verb

One Rule for English Verb Inflection
A verb is composed of a stem and an optional suffix. The stems and suffixes themselves are stored in, and retrieved from, the mental lexicon.

Irregular Verbs and Broken Telephones

- All irregular past tense verb forms used to be regular!
- They were formed by productive rules (e.g., sing → sang).
- Language acquisition has slightly imperfect fidelity.
- Your language is slightly different from your parents' language, a little bit more different from your grandparents', etc.
- The "broken telephone" metaphor (a.k.a. Chinese Whispers)

Hypothesis
For any irregular past tense form in Modern English, some past generation of English speakers must have failed to grasp the relevant rule; they memorized the forms as separate words, then passed the new version of the language on to their children; Once a past tense form has been stored as a word, it can become more and more irregular down the generations!
Irregular Inflection is Semi-systematic

- blow-blew, grow-grew, know-knew, ...
- bind-bound, find-found, grind-ground, ...
- drink-drank, shrink-shrank, sink-sank, ...
- bear-bore, wear-wore, swear-sware, ...

Irregular verbs seems to display some patterns!
Suppletion (e.g., go → went) is exception rather than rule.
These patterns are the fossils of rules that lived in the minds of Old English speakers.
But, evidence suggests that these patterns are represented, in some way, in the minds of modern-day English speakers.

Evidence from Children

- Errors preschool children make in their spontaneous speech!
  - It was neat – you should have sawn it!
  - Doggie bat me [bit].
  - The cheerios got aten by the Marky.
  - I know how to do that. I truck myself [tricked].
  - This is the best place I ever sot [sat].

- 8 out of 9 children make at least one error of this kind.
- Such errors persist well into their school-age years.
- Children have never heard adults using past tense forms like swang or shuck. Must be constructing these forms creatively, by analogy with other verbs they already know.

The Moral

- Irregular verbs cannot simply be memorized by rote.
- They show evidence of patterning even in minds of modern-day English speakers!
- Thus, the distinction between regular and irregular verbs, and hence between words and rules, is not so clear anymore.

Hypothesis A

Irregular past tense forms are also generated by rules.

Hypothesis B

There are no rules, only a general associative mechanism for recognising patterns.

500 year old debate about the nature of the human mind.

The Knowledge Acquisition Problem

- Questions examples of nature-nurture debate.
- Debate centers on relative contributions of biology and experience in determining any particular capacity.
- Nature: traits that are genetically or biologically determined.
- Nurture: traits that are learned through experience and interaction with the environment.

Q1: How do we acquire knowledge? Clearly, we are not born knowing everything! Else we wouldn’t have to go to school!
Q2: But are we born knowing anything at all?
Q3: Is the mind completely blank or do we start with some rudimentary understanding of the world?
**Rationalism versus Empiricism**

### Rationalism
- Intelligence arises from the manipulation of symbols by rules.
- Associated with Leibniz and Descartes, Noam Chomsky.
- The human mind has lots of innate structure.
- Knowledge comes from logical deduction (i.e., "calculation").

### Empiricism
- Intelligence arises from the mind connecting together things that were experienced together or that look alike.
- Associated with John Locke and David Hume.
- More recently with behaviourism (Ivan Pavlov, B.F. Skinner) and even more recently with connectionism.
- The human mind starts out as a "blank slate".
- Knowledge comes by generalising from observations.

**Evaluating the Knowledge Acquisition Debate**

- Grasping reflex
- Sucking reflex
- Step reflex

- Some forms of procedural knowledge are innate.
- Newborn infants come into the world with a variety of different skills; reflexes are important for survival.
- Innate abilities are domain-specific, i.e., attuned to perform special operations only on a certain type of information.
- Nature constrains or limits on environmental influence.

**Summary**

Can the study of regular and irregular English verbs address one of the most important controversies in philosophy?

- Irregular verbs display some patterns, which sheds doubt on the words and rules theory.
- Perhaps there exist rules for irregular verbs too, we just haven’t thought of them yet.
- Or, there are no rules, all we need is a mechanism for recognising patterns.
- Rationalism vs empiricism.

Next lecture: more on words & rules and language development.