
Hearing morphology through the L1 filter: Morpho-graphic spelling in Chinese and German learners of English

Vera Heyer

TU Braunschweig

v.heyer@tu-braunschweig.de

The English spelling system is ‘morpho-graphic’ (Berg & Aronoff 2017) in that affixes are distinguished orthographically from homophonous word endings without grammatical function (e.g., <ous> in *famous* vs. <us> in *bonus*). Previous research has shown that native English spellers and advanced German learners of English are aware of these implicit spelling regularities and apply them to novel words (Ulicheva et al. 2020; Heyer 2021). As German and English share several features with respect to their writing and morphological systems, the present study expands to a group of learners whose native language uses a different script and lacks productive affixation, investigating whether spelling regularities in a second language (L2) are influenced by the first language (L1) or generally learned from the L2 input.

In a novel word spelling task, 28 Chinese late learners of English living in the USA were compared to a subset of 34 German learners from Heyer (2021) that was matched on age of acquisition, years of exposure and vocabulary size. Participants spelt novel words ending in /əs/ presented orally in either an adjective context (i.e., biasing towards the affix spelling <ous>, see (1a)) or a noun context (i.e., biasing towards an alternative spelling such as <us>, see (1b)).

- (1) a. *She is very /krædəs/* → expected spelling: <cradous>
 b. *She is a /krædəs/* → expected spelling: e.g., <cradus>

The results show that the two groups of learners differ with respect to their general phoneme-to-grapheme mapping ability and their sensitivity to implicit morpho-graphic spelling regularities. While the Chinese participants are aware that <ous> is a common spelling for word-final /əs/ but do not connect this to word category, the German group supplied more affix spellings in the adjective context, suggesting that learners with a similar script and morphological system develop knowledge of morpho-graphic spelling regularities more easily because they are already familiar with the graphemes and can transfer some phoneme-to-grapheme correspondences from their L1. Additionally, they know from their L1 that recurring word-final segments are likely to contain meaningful morphological information.

References: • Berg, K., & M. Aronoff (2017). Self-organization in the spelling of English suffixes: The emergence of culture out of anarchy. *Language* 93(1), 37–64. • Heyer, V. (2021). Below the surface: The application of implicit morpho-graphic regularities to novel word spelling. *Morphology* 31(3), 243–260. • Ulicheva, A., Harvey, H., Aronoff, M., & K. Rastle (2020). Skilled readers’ sensitivity to meaningful regularities in English writing. *Cognition* 195, 103810.