Pronouncing the Zs

EPENTHESIS IN ENGLISH PLURAL POSSESSIVES

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Plurals and possessives

• Both underlyingly /z/
  • I like the boys
  • I like the boy’s kite

• When co-occurring, only one /z/ is realized
  • I like the boys’ kite

• POSS is suppressed; why?

The big picture

• How much structural information is retained between (apparent) stages of a derivation?

  None
  Bracketing Erasure
  (Pesetsky, 1979)

  All
  Optimality Theory
  (Prince & Smolensky, 2004)
POSS-suppression accounts

What conditions POSS-suppression?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HOST</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Morphophonological composition of the host word</td>
<td>• Morphosyntactic features of (the head of) the possessor phrase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• All structural information required</td>
<td>• No structural information required</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Host-based account

- POSS inspects its host
  - If host ends in PL /z/, POSS is suppressed
  - Otherwise, POSS is realized as /z/
- Epenthesis separates adjacent sibilants

(Stemberger, 1981)
Head-based account

• The form of POSS is determined by the number feature of (the head of) the possessor phrase
  • Singular possessor: POSS = /z/
  • Plural possessor: POSS = ∅

• POSS is akin to number-marking in verbs
  the boy’s kite ~ the boy plays
  the boys’∅ kite ~ the boys play∅

(Bernstein & Tortora, 2005)
Predictions of accounts (hard)

Where can POSS be realized?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the boys’s kite</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one of the boys’s kite</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>two of the boys’s kite</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the blue-eyed boys’s kite</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Predictions of accounts (soft)

**Embedded (E)**  
(E1) one of the boys’s kite  
(E2) two of the boys’s kite

**Unembedded (U)**  
(US) the boys’s kite  
(UL) the blue-eyed boys’s kite

Where is POSS-realization more preferred?

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<td>US _ UL</td>
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Testing predictions

• Must explore embedded PL+POSS
  • But must ensure the intended parse
  • And must overcome rarity of construction
  • → Experiment

• Question: how natural is a pronunciation featuring POSS-suppression relative to one featuring POSS-realization (via epenthesis)?
Procedure

In the playground, you see a group of boys. Two boys among this group are together holding onto a single kite with a long string. The string of this kite is longer than the string of the kite that a nearby woman is holding onto.

You will describe this situation as follows:

*Two of the boys' kite has a longer string than the woman's one.*

Indicate with the slider the relative naturalness of the following two pronunciations of the phrase *two of the boys' kite*:

A. tuw ahv THah boyz kaiyt
B. tuw ahv THah boyz-ahz kaiyt
Procedure

(Following Bresnan, 2007)
Data

• 61 participants, via Amazon Mechanical Turk
• 36 responses each
• Excluded:
  • Participants who took < 5min (9)
  • Participants with invariant responses (12)
  • Isolated outlier responses (19)
• Final data: 1416 responses, 40 participants
Results
Predictions of accounts (soft)

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Results

Embedded (E)
(E1) one of the boys’s kite
(E2) two of the boys’s kite

Unembedded (U)
(US) the boys’s kite
(UL) the blue-eyed boys’s kite
## Discussion

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<td>=</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
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A sketch

• Idea: generalize host-based account to create variable sensitivity to syntactic distance

[the [boys]]’s kite

[one of [the [boys]]’s kite

[the [blue-eyed [boys]]]’s kite

(Abney, 1987)
A sketch

- Upon attaching, POSS inspects its host
- If POSS sees the host ends in PL /z/, it is suppressed
- Intervening syntactic brackets partially obscure the internal structure of the host
- If a host ending in /z/ has its structure obscured, POSS cannot see if /z/ is PL, and is not suppressed
- Epenthesis separates adjacent sibilants
- Variation: inspection is stochastic & sometimes fails
The big picture: implications

• How much structural information is retained between (apparent) stages of a derivation?

  None ← Bracketing Erasure (Pesetsky, 1979) → All
  Optimal Theory (Prince & Smolensky, 2004)

• Results suggest **intermediate** position: information from previous stages is available, but may be successively weakened
Thank you!

Thanks to:

• Arto Anttila
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• Paul Kiparsky
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References


