Testing the role of prosody in the realization of grammatical NUMBER in contemporary Pennsylvania Dutch

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Pennsylvania Dutch (PD), a German variety spoken in the US for over 300 years, differs from other (European) German varieties in many ways, raising interesting questions about the maintenance of German linguistic features. We explore whether plural allomorphy, which has been considered in previous research (e.g., Reed 1948), maintains an association between plural formation and prosody. Thus far, this topic has only been explored by Fisher et al. (2022), whose speakers came from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Specifically, the trochaic foot structure – defined by Wiese (2009: 145) as "a binary syllabic structure with the stress pattern strong-weak" – has been shown to condition plural allomorphy in Standard German and in some (but not all) non-standard German dialects (e.g., Wiese 2009). Our research question is: To what extent does the trochaic template condition plural formation in contemporary PD?

We examine the effects of the trochaic template on plural morphology in PD using two experimental tasks: a Wug task (Gleason 1958) and an acceptability judgment task, which were completed by 16 Amish PD speakers (mostly from Holmes County, Ohio). Both tasks employ 50 nonce words, modeled on PD phonotactics. In the former, participants are presented the 50 (ostensibly singular) nonce words and asked to give the plural form. In the latter, participants are presented with 50 different singular-nonce-word/pluralized-nonce-word pairs in a carrier phrase and are asked to rate on a Likert scale of 1-10 how well-formed the pluralized nonce word is. Five of the six plural allomorphs ({-e}, {-er}, {-s}, {-ø}, and umlaut) are represented in the acceptability judgment task. {-e} and {-er}, when attached to monosyllabic singular forms, create trochaic plurals, while {-s}, {-ø}, and umlaut create non-trochaic plurals unless they are applied to disyllabic singular forms.

The Wug test produced many plural forms including some that are not typically found in PD. However, in this talk, we focus primarily on adherence to the trochaic template, so all elicited forms except those that are real words are included in our analysis. Of 583 elicited plural nonce words, 82.5% were trochaic. In response to the non-trochaic singular stimuli, which made up the majority of the stimuli, 79.95% (of n=394) were pluralized with a trochaic form. In the acceptability judgment task, the median rating across all participants for trochaic plural forms (n=289) was 8 and for non-trochaic plural forms (n=354) was 3. Interestingly, umlauted non-trochaic plural forms had a higher median rating (5) than the other non-trochaic plural suffixes, {-s} and null {-ø}, both of which had a median rating of 3.

We conclude that plural morphology in PD is largely conditioned by the trochaic template and that prosody does play a role in plural declension even in non-terrestrial German varieties like PD. Furthermore, umlaut is potentially even more salient as a plural exponent than {-s} since its use even in non-trochaic plural forms is more acceptable to speakers.

References

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