Gary Libben , Eva Freiberger, Katharina Korecky-Kröll, Eva Reinisch & Wolfgang U. Dressler

Morphonotactic and phonotactic processing in German-speaking adults

Based on the theoretical framework of Dressler & Dziubalska-Kołaczyk (2006a, b), we will test the Strong Morphonotactic Hypothesis which assumes that phonotactics helps in decomposition of words into morphemes: If a certain sequence occurs only or only by default over a morpheme boundary and is thus a prototypical morphonotactic sequence, it should be acquired earlier and processed faster and more accurately than a purely phonotactic sequence.

Studies on typical and atypical first language acquisition in English, German, Lithuanian and Polish (e.g. Kamandulyte 2006, Freiberger 2007, Zydorowicz 2007; Marshall & van der Lely 2006) have shown significant differences between the acquisition of morphonotactic and phonotactic consonant clusters: Morphonotactic clusters are acquired earlier and faster by typically developing children, but are more problematic for children with Specific Language Impairment.

The focus of our talk is whether and how German-speaking adults differentiate between morphonotactic and phonotactic consonant clusters and vowel-consonant sequences in visual word recognition. We ask whether sub-lexical letter sequences are found faster when the target sequence is separated from the word stem by a morphological boundary than when it is a part of a morphological root (cf. Freiberger et al 2011).

An additional factor that was addressed concerns the position of the target cluster in the word. Due to the bath-tub effect, sequences in peripheral positions in a word are more salient, and thus facilitate processing more than word-internal positions. Moreover, for young children the recency effect most favours word-final position, for adults the primacy effect word-initial position. Thus we can expect also for consonant clusters different relative processing results for young children and adults (absolute differences being self-evident).

We will show and discuss effects of cluster status (phonotactic vs. morphonotactic) and of position within the word.