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Asymmetries in the Production of Regular and Irregular Verbs

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Abstract

Humans, despite limited cognitive capacity, can generate an infinite variety of sentences thanks to regularities in language, though irregularities also exist (e.g., English past tense). We explore the mechanisms underlying the production of regular and irregular verbs and the role of domain-general processes, offering novel insights from a non-Indo-European language and both L1 and L2. Forty-seven adults conjugated verbs in L1 (Turkish) or L2 (English), and reaction time (RT) was analyzed to assess (1) the cost of switching between regulars and irregulars, and (2) whether individual differences in inhibitory control and working memory predict performance. RT for regular production differed depending on the preceding (N-2) trials (irregular-irregular-regular > regular-irregular-regular), indicating the difficulty in retrieving a regular verb after repeated suppression. This pattern was absent for L1 irregulars or L2, suggesting regulars and irregulars rely on asymmetrical, distinct mechanisms, but only in L1. Neither inhibition nor working memory predicted RT.