

Ewa Dabrowska
Department of English Language and Linguistics
University of Sheffield
Sheffield S10 2TN
United Kingdom

e-mail: e.dabrowska@shef.ac.uk

Networks, paradigms, and the dative conspiracy

This paper examines Polish speakers' tacit knowledge about the declension system of their language and compares it with the generalizations proposed in traditional linguistic descriptions. The main focus is on the inflectional endings marking the dative case. Speakers' tacit knowledge of this linguistic subsystem was explored using two nonce word tasks: a production task, in which participants were given a made-up word in the nominative and asked to use it in a sentential context which required the dative case; and a forced choice task, in which participants were asked to choose the best form from an array of four (the nonce word with a masculine, feminine, and neuter ending, and the nominative form).

The dative case in Polish is signalled by one of five endings: *-i*, *-y*, or *-e* with feminine nouns, *-owi* or sometimes *-u* with masculines, and *-u* with neuters. Thus, the neuter inflection is the simplest and most regular part of the system, and one would expect the relevant generalization to be readily available to speakers. This, however, is not the case. Performance on masculine and feminine nouns was very good, with the expected endings being supplied 90-97% of the time. When confronted with morphologically simple neuter nonce words, on the other hand, respondents supplied the expected *-u* ending only about 50% of the time. Thus, it seems that Polish speakers have some kind of a general rule or schema for producing the dative form of masculine and feminine nouns, but have not extracted the same kind of generalization about neuter nouns.

Two explanations for this surprising finding come to mind. The neuters are a fairly small class, and the vast majority of neuter nouns are inanimate. Furthermore, the dative case, because of its meaning, tends to be used primarily with animate nouns. As a result, speakers hear neuter datives relatively infrequently, and so whatever schemas they extract may be too weak to be reliably used in production.

Another possibility is that the statistical characteristics of the neuter class lead speakers to extract local schemas for specific subclasses of neuter nouns. The vast majority of neuter nouns are formed using just one of several highly productive affixes. Thus, it is possible that speakers learn to form e.g. the dative of an action nominalization ending in *-nie*, the dative of diminutives with *-ko*, etc., without extracting a fully general schema.

There is some evidence for both of these scenarios. Performance on action nominalizations with *-nie* was virtually perfect, suggesting that respondents have indeed extracted a fairly specific generalization. Performance on diminutives with *-ko* was also better than performance on simplex neuters, though not as good as on action nominalizations – presumably because diminutives are less frequent, and hence the local schema is less entrenched. On the other hand, the respondents were able to supply the *-u* ending with morphologically simple neuters 50% of the time, which suggests that they have some kind of more abstract knowledge. The tentative conclusion, then, is that speakers extract both local and a high-level schemas for the neuter dative, with the former being more entrenched than the latter.