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**English Interlanguage  
Morphology**  
Irregular Verbs in Young  
Austrian EL2 Learners—  
Psycholinguistic Evidence  
and Implications for the  
Classroom

**Thomas Wagner**

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Irregular Verbs in Young Austrian EL2  
Learners—Psycholinguistic Evidence and  
Implications for the Classroom

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## PREFACE

At the start of the new millennium, a chapter in an edited volume (Plag, 2000) reported a small-scale but pioneering study on the potentially similarity-based organisation of irregular L2<sup>1</sup> verb morphology in German-speaking learners of English. Only two years later, a special issue of *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* presented state-of-the-art reviews on the general role of exemplars and their frequency (N. C. Ellis, 2002), grammar teaching (Biber & Reppen, 2002), and the potential of form-focussed instruction for the acquisition of implicit knowledge (R. Ellis, 2002). Eight years later, building on these insights, a monograph on irregular EL2 verb morphology in English and German further developed these ideas and looked into cross-linguistic differences and similarities (Wagner, 2010). The present volume builds on these publications and

<sup>1</sup> L2 here refers to any language learned in addition to a person's first language(s), regardless of whether it is a second, third, fourth, or any subsequent one. Analogous to the still prevalent concept of SLA, L2 is used here because it still is conventionally employed in the pertinent discourse. L2 thus pertains to what elsewhere is labelled L2s, non-native language, EAL/GAL, LX, or language learning and acquisition. There is similar disagreement as to the adequate name for the overarching research field, too, with labels ranging from second and foreign language acquisition, multiple language acquisition, multilingual acquisition, and third language acquisition to additional language acquisition. To this day, none of these terms, however, seem to have fully established itself, probably reflecting some general discord about their scope and limits (De Angelis, 2007). That is why SLA is used in the present volume.

expands them in two ways. First, it addresses verb morphology in young EL2 learners, and second, it attempts to outline concrete ramifications for EL2 teaching and learning in a theory-guided, principled fashion.

Exploring EL2 verb morphology in young learners is a timely and relevant contribution to psycholinguistics, and grounding the empirical findings in both a general and an SLA-specific learning theory marks a significant attempt at bridging the notorious gap between acquisitional research and its potential ramifications for the classroom. This volume thereby also contributes to R. Ellis' (2002) proposal of explicit form-focussed teaching facilitating implicit knowledge acquisition.

The idea for such an expansion was developed at the 48th annual meeting of BAAL, the British Association for Applied Linguistics, at Aston University, Birmingham, in 2015. It was after a paper presentation there and then that Palgrave Macmillan suggested turning all of this into a monograph. At the time, Palgrave's new Pivot series, offering outlets for research published at its 'natural length', had just been into its third year, and with a digital version as the primary format, this prospect seemed truly exciting. Although data collection and first analyses were finished two years after (many thanks go to Christiane Dalton-Puffer, Monika Boniecki and Ulrike Podar, University of Vienna, for their invaluable help), the project had then been dormant for quite a while. Thanks to Palgrave's executive linguistics editor Cathy Scott as well as her colleague Bhavya Rattan—but interrupted by COVID-19—the project came back into full swing about three years ago.

I am indebted to Palgrave's editors, whose tremendous help in shaping initial ideas as well as finalising the book's structure eventually made this all possible. I am also indebted to the many young EL2 learners who courageously took part in the experiments and thus contributed stimulating and, at times, funny data. I very much appreciated comments on earlier versions of this text from Elizabeth Erling, Erwin Gierlinger, Gudrun Keplinger, and Harald Spann, as well as from the commissioned reviewers, whose critical comments and suggestions helped me strengthen my arguments and improve the manuscript. Special thanks also go to three dedicated students of mine, Elisabeth Frank, Hannah Schneeberger, and Jasmin Stadler, who helped with proofreading and the literature. And, of course, I extend the most heartfelt thanks to my family for their unconditional support. As usual, all remaining errors are mine.

One objective of this BAAL conference in 2015, where it all started, was to engage the research community in creating new ways of imagining,

theorising, and practising applied linguistics. I hope that, many years later, the present volume will serve as a contribution to this endeavour and merit further psycholinguistic as well as pedagogical work. This volume is dedicated to all language learners.

Linz, Austria  
October 2023

Thomas Wagner

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## ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book combines an in-depth examination of L2 verbal morphology with a comprehensive discussion of its relevance for instructed EL2 teaching and learning. The first part of the book presents behavioural evidence for a similarity-based organisation of English irregular verbs in the mental lexicon of young Austrian EL2 learners. Based on two well-established experiments and comprehensive data analyses, a remarkable sensitivity of young Austrian learners to the morphophonological make-up of English irregular verbs can be illustrated. This psycholinguistic evidence is then discussed against potential accounts of L1 and L2 verbal morphology in the pertinent literature. In the second part of the book, ramifications for instructed EL2 teaching and learning are discussed, with reference to Processing Instruction and Variation Theory. This book thus tries to bridge the notorious gap between SLA research and EL2 classroom applications. It will therefore appeal to postgraduate students in Applied Linguistics and EL2, advanced level undergraduates as well as researchers, but also to teacher trainers across various disciplines.

### DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

Materials, data, and statistical analyses are available at <https://osf.io/24n35/>.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Thomas Wagner** is a professor of Applied Linguistics and EFL at the University College of Education Upper Austria. Prior to his academic career, he had been a full-time teacher at a secondary school for ten years, where he taught English across many proficiency levels, and therefore became intimately familiar with the many facets as well as limitations of teaching English as a foreign language in instructed contexts. His current research interests, including grammar acquisition, foreign language aptitude as well as Variation Theory, are co-determined by his personal history as a language learner, language teacher, teacher educator, applied linguist, and father of two children who bring home, quite plainly, the seemingly never-ending challenges that come with instructed EL2 today.

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## Introduction

**Abstract** This chapter introduces the reader to a long-standing debate about the cognitive status of verb inflection. Numerous psycholinguistic studies have shown that, under experimental conditions, speakers and learners can extend irregular inflectional patterns to new words, an overgeneralisation strategy also observable in spontaneous L1 and L2 language production. On the one hand, such research gave rise to competing cognitive models, also known as the past tense debate, on the other, it has ramifications for EL2 teaching and learning of inflectional paradigms. The introduction outlines how, building on previous studies, the present volume extends existing EL2 empirical research to young learners at the European waystage level A2, and how the present empirical findings can be harvested for a principled approach to explicit grammar instruction.

**Keywords** Irregular verb morphology · Mental lexicon · Past tense debate · Symbolic rule processing · Similarity-based processing · Analogy

*The bane of every language student* (Neubauer & Clahsen, 2009; Pinker, 1999) is what English irregular verbs have often been called in the context of teaching and learning. Although many of them are high-frequency tokens, denoting central human activities, their seemingly unpredictable