The Recognition of Prefixed Words by Advanced Learners of Italian L2: A First Survey on Frequency Effect

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1. Introduction

This paper presents a preliminary survey on the acquisition of derivational morphology in Italian L2; more specifically, it aims at giving an initial insight into the role played by morphemic frequency on the recognition of the internal structure of prefixed lexemes and on the identification of their global meaning by (very) advanced learners.

Frequency is certainly acknowledged as a significant factor favouring the spontaneous acquisition of a second language lexicon (Ellis 2002, for Italian data Massariello & Dal Maso 2004) and, especially for the basic varieties, it has been shown to interact with other dimensions of language acquisition, such as the communicative and pragmatic usefulness of the lexical item in the non-native speaker interlanguage, the kind of input he / she is exposed to, the influence of his / her L1 (Bernini 2003). Yet, the role of frequency has seldom been investigated in order to describe the development of the derivational competence which takes place in intermediate and advanced stages of second language acquisition and which has generally been accounted for in terms of universal acquisitional principles (Broeder et al. 1988) or of principles of natural morphology (on Italian L2, see Beretta 1986, 1988 and Bozzone Costa 1988, 1994).

On the contrary, psycholinguistic analyses have highlighted the influence of frequency (together with other quantitative variables, like productivity, morphological family size, etc.) on the way morphologically complex words are processed by (native) speakers: semantic and phonological transparency being equal, the probability for a word of being processed through the activation of its morphological constituents (base or affix) is related to the number of combinations in which such a constituent enters (i.e., the greater the number of combinations, the more likely the process through constituents). In the light of these considerations, psycholinguists have proposed models of lexical representation which integrate the hypothesis of whole-word access to lexicon (Manelis & Tharp 1977) and the hypothesis based on morphological decomposition (Taft & Foster 1975). The latter would be activated only for low-frequency words, for neologisms and pseudo-words, i.e. for linguistic stimuli

1 This research is part of a PRIN project coordinated by G. Bernini (Bergamo) on “Lexical structure and textual competence: acquisitional and interactional perspective”. The Verona research group, led by G. Massariello, focuses particularly on “Morpho-semantic relations and the development of lexical competence in Italian L2”.

2 According to Bernini (2003) the development of morphological competence is the third stage of lexical acquisition; in a first phase the learner assigns a certain meaning to a phonetic sequence (which may still be very far from the target form); in a second phase, the word of the interlanguage acquires information on its syntactic category (the distinction between nouns and verbs appears) and on its use in a sentence; finally, the learner recognizes the structure of the word by comparing it with other lexical items where the same morphemes occur. For compounding in Italian as L2, see Valentini (2005).

3 To this extent, however, a distinction should be made between inflectional and derivational morphology, as, while psycholinguistic results converge in suggesting that inflected words are represented in decomposed forms, evidence for derivational affixes is more controversial.

which do not have a global representation and, hence, need to be decoded starting from the representation of their morphemic constituents (Schreuder & Baayen 1995). 4

More specifically, with regard to prefixed words, Taft (1979) supports the decompositional hypothesis (Taft & Foster 1975) and proposes the prefix stripping module: the fact that, in a lexical decision task, prefixed words with a high frequency base (like Eng. reproach) were recognized faster than words with a lower frequency base (like Eng. dissuade) – even though these words were matched for whole-word frequency – has been interpreted as the evidence that prefixed forms are accessed through the lexical base and that, in order to recognize a derivative word, the affix must be “stripped off” from the base. The results obtained by Colé et al. (1989) contradict those of Taft (1979) in that they observe that root frequency facilitates the recognition of suffixed words, like Fr. jardinier ‘gardener’, but not that of prefixed words, like Fr. incomplet ‘incomplete’. In their view, the asymmetry in the role of root frequency is related to the different sequential morphological organization of these two types of derivatives – i.e., Affix + Base versus Base + Affix – and suggests that only suffixed words are accessed via the lexical base. More recently, the prefix stripping hypothesis has been re-evaluated by Schreuder & Baayen (1994), in the light of the results of lexical statistics5 and of the “metrical segmentation” theory proposed by Cutler & Norris (1988).

Interesting data on Italian prefixation are provided by Burani (1990-1991) and Burani et al. (1992), who studied, in a free recall experiment, the effect of the number of prefixed words sharing the same root. The analyses of prefix substitution errors indicates that prefixed derivatives (both with free or bound root) are represented in the lexicon as morphologically related to the other words including the same root.

So far, the data obtained by psycholinguists on the representation of the morphologically complex lexicon and on the morphological competence of native speakers have rarely been compared to those of non-native speakers (Zareva 2005). The present study aims at filling this gap, by attempting a first description of the development of lexical-morphological competence in non-native speakers. The analysis of the extent to which the recognition and interpretation of prefixed words is related to their frequency and to the frequency of their constituents, indicates how the quantitative characteristics of the morphemic components act on the non-native speakers’ awareness of the L2 words structure. On the other hand, when these characteristics fail to predict lexical acquisition, the observation of other factors of linguistic information processing, namely at the phonological-morphological interface, could provide useful insights on the way a second language lexicon is acquired.

2. Subjects and method

Our survey considers 11 spontaneous learners of Italian L2 with an advanced or near-native competence. Most speakers have been living in Italy for many years or have spent long periods of time there (the average time of residence in Italy is 7.9 years) for professional or academic reasons, using Italian for their everyday communication.

The L1s of the learners are different: Romanian (2), French (1), German (2), English (1), Polish (1), Croat (1), Japanese (1), Ilokano (1), Yoruba (1). Two Italian native speakers also participated in the research, functioning as a sort of control group.

The data on prefixed words have been elicited through a questionnaire created in cooperation with Giovanna Massariello6. The subjects have been asked to explain the meaning of prefixed words, e.g. inutile (‘useless’), following the model proposed by the interviewer which correlates the prefixed

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4 The quantitative characteristics of morphological units affect also the interpretability of pseudo-words (Dovetto et al. 1998) and their perceived familiarity; following Burani & Thornton (2003) a low-frequency derived word, like it. acquario ‘aquarium’, composed of a high-frequency base and a high-frequency affix, is perceived as more familiar than an analogous low-frequency word like it. querceto ‘oakwood’, composed of low-frequency base and affix. See Lo Duca (1990) and Bimonte & Burani (2005) for the acquisition of morphological competence in Italian L1.

5 A study of Italian prefixation in a quantitative approach is provided by Gaeta & Ricca (2003).

6 Other aspects on the acquisition of prefixed words are investigated on a larger corpus by Massariello & Dal Maso, eds. (in press).
lexeme to its lexical base, e.g. inutile è qualcosa che non è utile (‘something is useless when it is not useful’), or addolcire (‘sweeten’), rendere qualcosa dolce o più dolce (‘make something sweet or sweeter’).7

The questionnaire contains 62 prefixed Italian words, and focuses on 15 prefixes of different semantic categories, namely: 9

- Change-of-state meaning: a(d)- arricchire (‘enrich’); in- innervosire (‘make/get nervous’)
- Negative meaning: a(n)- asimmetrico (‘asymmetric’); de- decaffeinato (‘decaffeinated’); dis- disonesto (‘dishonest’); in- incerto (‘uncertain’); s- smacchiare (‘clean, remove a stain’)
- Modal meaning: co(n)- concittadino (‘fellow-citizen’); ri- ritenare (‘try again’)
- Evaluative meaning: arcì- arciistufo (‘extremely bored, fed up with something’); iper- iperattivo (‘hyperactive’); stra- stravincere (‘overwin, win hands down’); super- supereroe (‘superhero’); ultra- ultramoderno (‘ultra-modern’)
- Spatial and temporal localization: pre- preannunciare (‘foretell’)

In order to investigate the role of frequency on the recognition of derivative word meaning, prefixed lexical items have been selected both in relation to their frequency and to that of their base. The frequency of the items has been defined following the GRADIT (De Mauro 2003), further checked against the LIP (De Mauro et al. 1993) and considered four main categories:

- **FO (fondamentale):** fundamental. Lexemes whose occurrence contributes to about 90% of Italian spoken and written texts, e.g. richiedere (‘demand, request’);
- **AU (alto uso):** high frequency. High frequency lexemes whose occurrence constitutes about 6% of Italian spoken and written texts, e.g. spiacevole (‘unpleasant’);
- **AD (alta disponibilità):** high availability. Relatively rare lexemes referring to everyday objects or actions and thus well known to speakers, e.g. scoperchiare (‘take off a lid’);
- **CO (comune):** common. Lexemes which are not part of the basic lexicon but are known to speakers regardless their social or regional background: e.g. disomogeneo (‘non-homogeneous’).

FO, AU, AD lexical items constitute the basic lexicon of the Italian language; hence, here they are considered as high-frequency lexemes; in turn, CO items are considered as (relatively) lower-frequency lexemes. Although all possible combinations of derivative and base frequency have been included in the questionnaire, the largest group of derivatives is represented by low-frequency prefixed words (CO) with a high-frequency base (FO, AU, AD), in accordance with the distribution in the Italian lexicon.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prefixed word frequency</th>
<th>Base frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CO i.e. incartare (‘wrap in paper’)</td>
<td>FO i.e. carta (‘paper’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO i.e. reimpiegare (‘employ again’)</td>
<td>AU i.e. impiegare (‘employ’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO i.e. scoperchiare (‘take off a lid’)</td>
<td>AD i.e. coperchio (‘lid’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO i.e. neoassunto (‘newly-hired, in the sense of an employee’)</td>
<td>CO i.e. assunto (‘hired’)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only few instances do not follow this condition; in the case of cortese (‘kind’) (CO) / scortese (‘unkind’) (AD) the derivative is more frequent than the base, whereas for intascare, the frequency depends on the different meaning assigned to the derivative. Thus, the compositional, more transparent

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7 This is only a part of the questionnaire, which aims to test also the productive competence of the non-native speakers.
8 Parasynthetic words have also been included, especially deadjectival verbs, in accordance with Beretta (1987), who considered these forms as cases of conversion, e.g. It. zitto (‘quiet’) – zittire (‘quiten someone down’). Our results, however, suggest that further research on this distinction is needed in relation to recognition processes.
9 The GRADIT records 52 prefixes. For a discussion on what can be considered as a prefix and for a description of the Italian prefix system, see Iacobini (1999, 2004b) and Montermini (2008).
meaning (‘put into one’s pocket, pocket’) has a low frequency (CO), while the figurative, more opaque meaning (‘earn or receive money or other valuables, esp. dishonestly’), has a very high frequency (FO).

In all these cases, the learner’s performance may be due to his / her lexical-semantic competence, rather than to the purely derivational one (in this sense, our method needs further refinement). Nevertheless, the fact that a prefixed word like it. sfamare (‘feed’, literally ‘PREF-hunger’) is defined as toglie la fame (‘remove hunger’), or that a word like ammucchiare (‘pile’, literally ‘PREF-pile’) is explained as fare un mucchio (‘make a pile’), can be interpreted as the evidence that the morphological relationship between the base and the derived word has been recognized by the learner. Moreover, the morphological processes activated by the learner during the interpretation task are often made explicit by his / her metalinguistic comments, especially when the prefixed word is not familiar to the non-native speaker, so that its meaning has to be inferred through the decomposition of the basic morphologic components, as in (1):

(1) arcicontento (‘very glad’) → arci mi fa pensare a qualcosa che è già passato + ma contento + lo stato d’animo + ma non so (‘arci makes me think to something past + but glad + the mood + but I don’t know’) (TED 1)

incartare (‘wrap in paper’) → non so + scrivere su carta visto che c’è carta ma +++ (‘I don’t know + to write on paper since there is “paper” but +++’) (TED 1)

rincretinire (‘become idiot’) → rincratinire +cri + crit + la parola cretina+è di essere cretina (‘the word idiot + is to be idiot’) (FIL)

neodeputato (‘new deputy, MP’) → allora + appena + ma deputato? (‘so + newly + but deputato’ [the respondent does not know the meaning of the word deputato]) (TED 2)

As the above examples illustrate, ‘wrong’ interpretations are often more revealing than the ‘correct’ ones. In some cases, the learners’ answer, consisting in a synthetic synonym of the proposed prefixed word, as in (2), does not allow to determine whether the input word has been morphologically analyzed and the relationship between the base and the derivative has been identified. Indeed, the synonymic answer may respond to the learner’s need to avoid repetition, as is often the case for native speakers:

(2) sfamare (‘feed’) → saziare qualcuno (‘satiate’) (ROM 2)

predire (‘foretell’) → profetizzare (‘prophesy) (FIL)

sbarbare (‘shave’) → rasarsi (‘shave’) (ROM 2)

Bearing in mind these methodological issues, the next section discusses the results.

3. Results and discussion

Our analysis considered the answers given by learners in connection with the expected ones, according to the interpretation model proposed by the interviewer, which relates the derivative to its

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10 The inference process activated by the learner in the interpretation of derivative words is not dissimilar, to this extent, from those observed for French native speakers faced with the interpretation of suffixed neologisms (Meunier et al. 2007). The variety of different interpretations provided by the native speakers for the -ET suffixed words in French gives interesting hints at the way unknown complex lexemes are processed by native speakers and at the way the relationship between the morphological form(s) and the semantic function(s) is mapped whenever it is not (yet) lexicalized in the language. Interestingly, the authors discuss the methodological question: the psycholinguistic approach (lexical decision task) can be integrated by metalinguistic tasks (i.e. give the definition of a lexeme): “Un va et vient entre différentes approches peut permettre de mieux circonscrire l’utilisation et la comprehension des règles de construction des lexèmes d’un langue” (Meunier et al. 2007: 309).

11 The relationship between word frequency and synonym availability has not been verified thoroughly, but, at present, it does not seem to influence learners’ responses significantly.
base. Nevertheless, as explained in 2, this does not imply that what we considered to be a non-expected answer is necessarily a wrong interpretation of the derivative (see the examples in 2).

As illustrated in Table 1, our data show a considerable frequency effect for prefixed words, since high-frequency prefixed lexemes are correctly interpreted and related to their base more often than low-frequency ones:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prefixed frequency</th>
<th>% Expected answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FO</td>
<td>100 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AU</td>
<td>89 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD</td>
<td>86 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO</td>
<td>70 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Frequency effect of the prefixed word

In presence of analogous semantic values of the prefix and of comparable frequencies of the base, the high-frequency parasynthetic verb *sbiancare* (‘white’) is recognized more easily (91%) than the low-frequency one *sradicare* (‘uproot’) (63%).

In contrast, the frequency of the base does not seem to facilitate the interpretation of the derivative; indeed, prefixed words with a high-frequency base are not interpreted significantly better than prefixed words with a low-frequency base:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Base frequency</th>
<th>% Expected answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FO</td>
<td>87 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AU</td>
<td>70 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD</td>
<td>56 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO</td>
<td>77 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Frequency effect of the base

According to the results shown in Table 2, the high frequency of the base (FO, AU, and most of all AD) does not seem to be a crucial factor in the recognition of the global meaning of the prefixed word. It is debatable whether this result indicates that non-native speakers access the derived lexicon through the whole word form and do not decompose the L2 input into morphological constituents. In fact, this hypothesis seems to conflict with the results obtained for native speakers and, even more significantly, is contradicted by the learners’ on-line comments and by their attempt to identify the lexical base of the derivative forms: e.g. for *rincasare* (‘come back home’), the base *casare* (ENG), and for *reimbarcare* (‘re-embark’), the base *barcare* (TED 2) have been suggested.

A closer observation of learners’ linguistic productions reveals that, while they always try to get the base of the derivative, its identification may still be problematic because of its formal characteristics. Although other dimensions are certainly involved in the identification process and need to be further investigated12, here we will focus on cases where non-native speakers are unsuccessful in recognizing the morphological base of the derivative lexeme or in segmenting the derivative word in spite of their high frequency.

A first finding indicates that non-native speakers fail to recognize a high-frequency lexical base when it is phonetically similar to another base with the same (or even a lower) frequency. In (3), for example, the parasynthetic verb *defogliare* (‘defoliate’) is erroneously assumed to be related to *foglio* (‘sheet of paper’) rather than to the actual base *foglia* (‘leaf’), both of which are very high-frequency lexemes (FO). This happens because the two bases share the same root, i.e. *fogl-*, and because in the parasynthetic derivative the verbal suffixation (in *-are*) does not allow the speaker to catch the morphological ending.

12 These dimensions include quantitative (i.e. the frequency and the productivity of the prefixes) as well as qualitative ones (i.e. the semantic transparency of the derivative word, the word-category involved in the derivational process, the prototypical characteristics of the prefix, Montermini 2008).
(3) defogliare (‘defoliate’)
→ sarebbe ehmm ++ rovinare un foglio (FR) (‘it would be ehmm ++ to spoil a sheet of paper’)
→ sfogliare ++ privare di fogli (CRO) (‘++ to strip the pages off’)
→ non conosco la parola però + girare pagina tanto (GIAP)¹³ (‘I don’t know the word but ++ to turn the page a lot’)

A very similar case is represented by (4), where the base of the parasynthetic appuntire (‘sharpen’), i.e. punt-, is associated with punto (‘point, dot, full stop’) instead of punta (‘tip’). Here again the two bases have the same high frequency (FO):

(4) appuntire (‘sharpen’)
→ fare dei punti (TED 2) (‘make some points’)
→ essere puntuale (TED 1) (‘be punctual’)

In these cases, the failure of the learners’ interpretative hypothesis seems to be caused by the ambiguity of the mapping between form and meaning of the root in the target language: foglio vs. foglia and punto vs. punta are two competing forms activated during the process of recognition, and their selection is not facilitated by divergent frequencies.¹⁴

The competition between similar forms can be activated by the derivative lexemes as well. In this sense, the interpretations given for appuntire in (5) may be due to the speaker’s difficulty in discriminating between the proposed derivative form appuntire and the competing form appuntare (‘make a note’).

(5) appuntire (‘sharpen’)
→ prendere appunti (FR) (‘take notes’)
→ fare + segnalare appuntamento + non so comunque deve ricordare qualcosa + appunto (GIAP)¹⁵ (‘make + to mark an appointment + I don’t konw anyway it must remind something + note’)

The interpretations in (5) could also result from a wrong segmentation of the derivative lexeme, so that the base is assumed to be appunto (AU) (‘note’), the prefix is probably not recognized by the speaker who perceives the beginning of the word as part of the base.¹⁵

The difficulty in recognizing the morpheme boundaries can also be caused by the morpho-tactic opacity of assimilated forms¹⁶, as attested in (6). Here the identification of the base robusto (‘robust’) is complicated by the assimilation of the nasal phoneme of the prefix to the following vibrant (/in/ > /ir/), so that the base perceived by the learner is busto (‘bust’). In this case, again, the high frequency of the base (robusto is FO) neither assures its easier recognition, nor facilitates its selection against the competing less frequent form (busto is AD). It is worth noticing, however, that the speaker correctly infers the meaning of the derivative word, but re-interprets the derivational process which leads to that meaning (via the misunderstanding of the lexical base).

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¹³ This interpretation might derive from the interference with the parasynthetic sfogliare (whose base is foglio, ‘sheet of paper’), which means, indeed, ‘leaf through, turn over pages’.
¹⁴ Difference in frequency reveals to be a determinant factor in the recognition of similar lexical items. Because of similarity effects, a whole neighbourhood of words is activated during the recognition process of low- and high-frequency words, but listeners are slower in recognizing low-frequency words with high frequency neighbours because competitors are more difficult to exclude (Lively et al. 1994).
¹⁵ The resolution of the ambiguity between foglio / foglia and punto / punta seems hardly explainable in terms of morphological family size but, to this respect, further research is needed.
¹⁶ For a survey on the degrees of integration of the prefix to the base in a single phonological word see Montermerini (2008), who considers phonological integration one of the parameters related to the prefix prototypicality.
(6) **irrobustire** (‘fortify, make stronger’)
→ *diventa + busta* [indicates her bust] *ingrassare insomma + diventare grande* (GIAP) (‘become bust + to take weight in sum + to become big’)

In other cases, the failure in the recognition of the base is motivated by purely perceptual difficulties. In (7) the discrimination between the base *mucchio* (‘pile, heap’) and *mucca* (‘cow’) is linked to the correct perception of the glide [j] of the root of the proposed word [‘mukkj- vs. ‘mukk-’]:

(7) **ammucchiare** (‘pile up’)
→ *prendere latte da una mucca* (‘take milk from a cow’) (INGL)

Similarly, in (8) the high-frequency base (i.e. the word *casa* [‘ka:za], ‘home’) is mistakenly identified with *cassa* [‘kas:a] (‘cash’), although the latter has a much lower frequency:

(8) **rincasare** (‘come back home’)
→ *Incasare rincassare + la parola cassa* (‘cash to encash + the word cash’) (FIL)

In (9), the misinterpretation of *volare* (‘fly’) with *volere* (‘want’) – facilitated by the suffixation process, which makes the thematic vowel unavailable – occurs between lexemes of the same high frequency (both FO)

(9) **svolazzare** (‘flutter’)
→ *questo non lo so + svolazzare + ah è la parola volontà secondo me* (‘I don’t know this one + svolazzare + ah there’s the word volontà [‘will’] in my opinion’) (FIL)

A speaker may fail to recognize a high-frequency base also for reasons of L1 interference, as it is probably the case in (10) where the English-L1 speaker selects the low-frequency word *coperta* (‘blanket’) as the base, instead of the more frequent *coperchio* AD (‘lid’), probably because of the similarity with the English form *cover*, and the corresponding derivative *to uncover*:

(10) **scoperchiare** (‘take the lid off’)
→ *togliere la coperta* (ENG) (‘take the blanket off, uncover’)

The examples discussed above show that one of the reasons for the limited frequency effect of the base is that advanced learners fail to recognize even high-frequency bases because of persisting difficulties in segmenting the L2 input and in recognizing the functional morphological components. Problems in the recognition process mainly occur when the morphological information is carried by little phonological distinctions, as is the cases of *foglio / foglia*, *punto / punta* or *appuntire / appuntare*. During the recognition process, formal similarity activates competing forms with the same frequency and non-native speakers do not succeed in selecting the adequate form (out of context). In this sense, less frequent bases are more easily recognized than frequent ones when the former are formally less ambiguous. Indeed, *omogeneo* (‘homogeneous’) in *disomogeneo* (‘non-homogeneous’), *eccitato* (‘excited’) in *iper eccitato* (‘very excited’) are recognized without any hesitation, in spite of their relatively low frequency (CO)\(^{17}\). In some cases, the recognition of a high-frequency lexical base is complicated by merely perceptive difficulties, when phonological features are not perceived, so that the discrimination between lexical competing forms does not succeed (as for *mucchio / mucca, casa / cassa*). While the unsuccessful recognition of the base is often linked to the suffixation process of the

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\(^{17}\) The length of the lexemes should also be considered since it can be assumed that more physically consistent words are less exposed to ambiguous interpretation because of lexical competition. For English, however, results on longer words (bisyllabic) do not seem to diverge from those obtained on shorter words (monosyllabic); indeed, in the perceptual identification task, longer words with sparse neighbourhoods are more accurately identified that words with dense neighbourhoods (Vitevich et al. in press).
parasynthetic forms\textsuperscript{18}, prefixation is more likely to cause segmentation difficulties since non-native speakers may not be able to correctly identify the prefix at the beginning of the word (like in \textit{appunto} for \textit{punto}) or the morpheme boundary (as in \textit{busto} per \textit{robusto}).

Non-native speakers’ productions reveal a general attempt at segmenting the phonetic \textit{continuum} of the L2 input, although the complexity and the delicacy of the task expose even advanced learners to misinterpretation. In this sense, examples of re-interpretation (as seen for \textit{irrobustire} and for \textit{rincasare}) attest the speakers’ need to identify the lexical base and to motivate the derivational relationship between the base and the derivative lexemes.

4. Conclusion

This first survey on the acquisition of derivational morphology confirms the frequency-effect of the derivative word but reveals a less clear frequency-effect of the base. Nevertheless, these data do not indicate that non-native speakers are unaware of the structure of lexical items in the L2, or that access to the derivative meaning is not made via the lexical base. On the contrary, non-native speakers’ productions reveal the need for learners to identify the base but this process can be complicated by formal ambiguity, even for high-frequency bases. This phenomenon, which is highly specific to non-native competence, seems to support Simone’s assumption about the ‘fragility’ of the morphological system\textsuperscript{19}. Indeed, because of the ‘physical’ exiguity of morphological units and, on the other hand, because of the importance of their role in the system, the recognition of the functional entities is often critical for the non-native speakers but crucial in the acquisition and in the use of a L2 language morphological system.

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\textsuperscript{18} This type of difficulty does not seem to occur with prefixed adjectives, such as \textit{sleale} (‘disloyal’), \textit{illeggibile} (‘unreadable’), etc.

\textsuperscript{19} According to Simone, the acquisition of a second language (especially in a natural setting) is a case of “troubled context” (“contesto turbato”) where morphology exhibits its “fragility”: “Ora “contesto turbato” è precisamente un contesto in cui l’apprendimento e il comportamento linguistico hanno luogo in condizioni di incertezza (da parte dell’utente) e di limitazioni (anche percettive). […] Il contesto turbato assume quindi la tipica caratterizzazione di un “filtro”, che lascia passare alcuni tratti della struttura linguistica, inibendo il passaggio di altri” (Simone 1988: 92).
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