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Learning sociolinguistically prominent morphological patterns

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Language users have complex morphological representations that they can generalise to unseen words. For example, an English speaker will see the nonce verb *splide* and pick the irregular past tense form *splode* because *splide* looks similar to a set of verbs like *dive* and *ride* that form their past tense this way. With continuing language exposure, these representations shift: *dived* is increasingly accepted as the past tense of *dive* while *snuck* has turned up as a novel, irregular past tense variant of *sneak*. The present study uses nonce verbs in a learning paradigm to test whether more prominent representations shift easier upon exposure to novel forms. Participants played a word matching game with a co-player which exposed them to a morphological pattern. They were then re-tested on the pattern. The results show that participants can adapt a morphological pattern upon relatively short exposure and that this is mediated by the pattern's sociolinguistic prominence. As such, these results shed light on variation and long-term change in morphological patterns.