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In search of good data:
Past tense and past participle forms from a variationist/phonetic point of view

Various studies in corpus linguistics (e.g. Levin 2009, De Clerck & Vanopstal 2015) examine verb regularisation processes in different varieties of English. In fact, forms such as *learned/learnt* or *burned/burnt* are one of the most frequently cited grammatical differences between (Standard) American English and British English, with *–ed* being regarded as more American and *–t* as typically British. In his detailed study, Levin (2009) shows that certain syntactic and semantic factors have contributed to the maintenance of the variation in British English, for example the transitive or intransitive use of the verbs or a difference in aspect (durative vs. punctual). As the variation between *learned/learnt* or *burned/burnt* is based on a phonological difference in the spoken language (voiced vs. voiceless ending) it is rather important to ascertain whether the forms to be found in the different corpora reliably represent the pronunciation of the verb-forms. Rather surprisingly, studies of this type generally do not include a phonetic analysis, but merely rely on written forms. Therefore, it will be a major aim of this paper to explore the relationship between the written verb-forms and their actual pronunciation in the spoken language.

To test the influence of the phonetic environment, I carried out a study with 20 American speakers (undergraduate students). The results clearly reveal such an influence. In a frequent syntactic structure such as *learned* plus *to*-infinitive (e.g. *Joe only learned to swim when he was a teenager*), the most usual realization by the speakers was an amalgamation of the final sound of *learned* with the initial /t/ of the infinitive marker *to*, with the result that the /t/ constitutes the onset of the unstressed syllable /tə/. Apart from presenting the findings of this study, the paper will generally consider the complex relationship between spelling and pronunciation that may cause problems in the analysis of verb-forms. By examining different varieties of English (both standard and nonstandard, traditional and modern), it can equally be demonstrated that a phonetic analysis is mandatory.

Finally, I will also examine an interesting and innovative technique to collect spoken corpus data. UCLA's *NewsScape Library of Digital TV News* provides a large dataset of TV news that allows linguists to carry out full text searches on the basis of the subtitles broadcast together with the news programmes (cf. Uhrig 2018).

References:

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