

THE PROBLEM OF SYNFORMS IN SERBIAN EFL LEARNERS REVISITED

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Abstract: *This paper will explore the issue of similar lexical forms (Laufer 1991) as a potential problem in vocabulary acquisition of Serbian EFL learners. Building on previous research (Kocić 2008), we collected data from two groups of undergraduate students at the Faculty of Philology and Arts in Kragujevac (lower- and upper-intermediate), and attempted to identify the factors that contribute to synform confusions.*

Keywords: *lexical confusions, L2 acquisition, synforms, vocabulary learning*

1. Introduction: Similar Lexical Forms and Their Effect on L2 Acquisition

For the past twenty years or so, the field of L2 vocabulary studies has attracted numerous researchers who have strived to investigate various aspects that the concept of a word encompasses (e.g. form, meaning, use) as well as their contribution to lexical learning. Their findings concerning L2 vocabulary learning difficulties have, inter alia, shown that words which sound and/or look alike are especially prone to causing lexical confusions in foreign learners of English. For instance, on his word-association test, Meara (1982) found that English learners of French as L2 confused the stimulus word ‘béton’ (concrete) with a similarly sounding ‘bête’ (beast). In a recent study involving Serbian EFL learners, Danilović and Grujić (2013) noticed, by means of a word translation test, that *assess* was occasionally misunderstood as *assassinate* or *access*, *publish* as *public*, *color* as *collar*, *tense* as *intense* or *approve* as *improve*. A wealth of evidence (e.g. Dušková 1969; Myint 1971; Henning 1973; Laufer and Sim 1985; Zimmerman 1988; Hulstijn and Tangelder 1991), thus, clearly indicates that not only similarly sounding but also similarly looking word pairs can present a problem in both L2 recognition and production, as learners experience interference – they associate new words or those whose features are not fully familiar to them with the already known ones (Laufer 1997:147).

The first to pay close attention to the existence of similar lexical forms, by conducting a thorough exploration of their effect on both native and non-native speakers of English, was Batia Laufer (1991). She defined synforms as lexical forms which share certain characteristics, such as: (1) the target word and its synform pair often have the same number of syllables (e.g. *industrial/industrious*), or differ in only one (*economic/economical*); (2) most of the forms belong to the same syntactic category, i.e. they are nouns, verbs or adjectives; (3) synforms share most of the phonemes, that is, differ in no more than three (e.g. *passion/compassion*); (4) synform pairs usually have the same stress pattern (e.g. *effect/affect*,

simulate/stimulate). Moreover, lexical confusions are attributable to one of the following modes: substitution, omission or addition of phonemes (vowels and consonants), that is morphemes (prefixes, suffixes). By taking these modes into consideration, Laufer (1991:47-48; 1997:147-148) further classified synforms into ten categories:

Category 1: synforms have the same root, productive in present-day English but different suffixes (e.g. *successful/successive, considerable/considerate*)

Category 2: synforms have the same root, unproductive in present-day English but different suffixes (e.g. *capable/capacious, numerous/numerical*)

Category 3: synforms differ in a suffix, present in only one of the forms (e.g. *historic/historical, project/projection*)

Category 4: synforms have the same root, unproductive in present-day English but different prefixes (e.g. *attribution/contribution/distribution, compress/repress/suppress/oppress*)

Category 5: synforms differ in a prefix, present in only one of the forms (e.g. *fault/default, mission/commission*)

Category 6: synforms are identical in all the phonemes, except one vowel/diphthong (e.g. *launch/lunch, affect/effect*)

Category 7: synforms differ in a vowel, present in only one of the forms (e.g. *quiet/quite, cute/acute*)

Category 8: synforms are identical in all the phonemes, except for one consonant (e.g. *price/prize, extend/extent*)

Category 9: synforms differ in a consonant, present in only one of the forms (e.g. *ledge/pledge, simulate/stimulate*)

Category 10: synforms are identical in consonants but differ in vowels (e.g. *embrace/embarrass, manual/menial*)

By testing more than 300 foreign learners and circa 200 native speakers on all possible synformic confusions, Laufer (1991) established that synforms presented a factor of difficulty in vocabulary learning for both native and non-native speakers of English. For later result interpretation it is important to mention that the number of participants in her study was, in total, more than 300 (approximately 20-30 per test targeting each synform category), and not that there were 300 participants each from the various tested groups of learners (learners of Germanic, Romance and Semitic L1 backgrounds). She came to the conclusion that the postulated categories induced varying amounts of difficulty for learners: the most problematic were found to be synforms differing in suffixes (categories 1 and 2), as well as synforms differing in vowels (category 10). She also noticed that the L1 of the testees had an effect on the results: of the three tested groups of learners of Germanic, Romance and Semitic L1 background, the Semitic learners were the most susceptible to synform confusions, followed by the Germanic testees and then the Romance. It seems, therefore, that the L1 proved to be a facilitating component in this aspect of L2 acquisition for speakers of German and French, i.e. languages related to English, whereas it was a hindrance for speakers whose L1 was unrelated to it. To improve learners' awareness of confusing lexical forms, as a pedagogical treatment, Laufer (1991:195-196) proposes numerous exercises that could be introduced in the L2 classroom, ranging from multiple choice blank filling to correctness judgment.

It is worth pointing out, nevertheless, that the L2 proficiency level of learners selected for the purpose of Laufer's (1991) seminal study was B2 (CEFR), and that she did not compare their achievement on synform tests with that of either lower-level (e.g. B1 CEFR) or higher-level L2 learners (e.g. C1 CEFR). In other words, the aim of her research was to compare synform confusions between two groups of subjects, young native speakers of

English and foreign language learners, but not L2 learners themselves. It is possible that L2 learners of various proficiency levels would require instructional guidance on different synform categories.

2. Research Background

In 2008, Kocić decided to examine the effects of synforms in the Serbian EFL teaching/learning context. Unlike Laufer (1991), she intentionally selected her sample among students of English language and literature at the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš. These students (N=20) were enrolled in their third year of studies at the university, and thus considered advanced L2 learners. In line with Laufer's research (1990), Kocić intended to verify the notion about the two final phases of the developmental process of vocabulary acquisition: that vocalic synforms (category 10) are likely to cause less confusion than synforms differing in suffixes (categories 1 and 2). Bearing this in mind, she designed two versions of the synform test, targeting 14 category-10 synforms pairs, as well as 14 category-1&2 ones.

Although a detailed account of the results obtained on the two tests is not presented in her paper, Kocić reports that the frequency of errors on synforms belonging to categories 1 and 2 was significantly lower than that observed by Laufer (1991) in her research on native and non-native speakers. However, version B of the tests (no contextual clues provided) did turn out to be more challenging than version A (contextualized sentences offered), as students made more synform errors on it. This was interpreted by the author as another confirmation of the developmental route of vocabulary acquisition—recognizing the correct item in context does not automatically entail the ability to appropriately use it. As far as errors related to synform category 10 are concerned, Kocić found that they were not numerous. In fact, they were comparable to those obtained by Laufer (1991) for native speakers, which Kocić attributes to her learners' advanced knowledge of English. When the results on the errors caused by category-10 and categories 1 and 2 synforms are contrasted, it becomes clear that Serbian EFL learners had more difficulty with the latter. Consequently, suffix synform pairs can indeed be viewed as a potential difficulty factor in L2 acquisition, regardless of the learners' proficiency level. Moreover, this finding suggests that both native speakers and L2 learners could be following a similar path with regard to vocabulary development. As Kocić herself admits, though, more conclusive evidence is needed to prove this point.

3. The Study

Inspired by the work of Laufer (1988, 1991) and the fact that her research was not conducted on B2-level (CEFR) EFL learners of Slavic background, which was acknowledged by Kocić (2008) in her small-scale study of advanced L2 English majors, we sought to further investigate this issue by broadening the number of subjects and varying their L2 proficiency level. Given that Kocić (2008) noted that her participants did not experience serious problems with synforms, probably due to the fact that their L2 competence was nearing the level of native speakers, we expected of our learners to face more difficulties in this regard. Moreover, if Kocić's results are to be interpreted as an indicator that the more advanced L2 knowledge of a learner is, the less susceptible s/he is to lexical confusions, we should be able to detect a difference in lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate learners' achievement on synforms. Building on Kocić's (2008) methodological instruments and findings, we formulated the following research questions:

1. What are the effects of synform categories 1, 2 and 10 on intermediate Serbian L1 English L2 learners?
2. Are lower-level intermediate learners going to experience more difficulty with synforms than upper-level intermediate learners?
3. Are suffixal synforms (categories 1 and 2) going to be more problematic than vocalic synforms (category 10)?

3.1. Participants

Two groups of students enrolled in the first year of their studies at the Faculty of Philology and Arts in Kragujevac, Serbia, participated in this research:

- 55 English majors, whose level of English proficiency was assessed as B2 (CEFR) by means of the entrance exam which they had successfully passed in June 2012, and
- 40 non-English majors, students of other philological programs (e.g. French, Spanish, German, Serbian), whose level of English proficiency was estimated as B1 (CEFR) by means of an introductory placement test taken in October 2012.

All of the participants were, without exception, native speakers of Serbian, who had been learning English for a minimum of four years prior to enrolling in their studies at the university level.

3.2. Research Instruments

The participants completed two different, multiple choice tasks for the purpose of this study, both of which were either borrowed from Laufer (1991:212-233) or developed in accordance with her guidance. Given that Kocić's work (2008) had focused, following Laufer's findings (1991), only on the influence of synform categories 1, 2 and 10, which were expected to be the most problematic for L2 learners, we also decided to pay heed only to the aforementioned synform categories. To be precise, we included in our tests the following synform pairs:

- categories 1 and 2:

considerable/considerate
capacious/capable
integration/integrity
imaginative/imaginary
credulous/credible
sensible/sensitive
comprehensive/comprehensible

virtually/virtuously
respective/respectable
exhausted/exhaustive
numerous/numerical
tolerable/tolerant
respectable/respectful
industrious/industrial

- category 10:

base/bias
propose/purpose
legible/eligible
manual/menial
merely/merrily
cancel/conceal

morale/moral
fiery/fairy
embrace/embarrass
quit/quite
human/humane
defiance/defence

On one of the tests (version A), synforms were offered alongside contextualized sentences, whereas on the other, the same synforms appeared out of context, in a matching format (version B). In other words, the first test required the participants to select the correct word in order to complete a given sentence, e.g.

Test version A (Laufer 1991:212)

Only a very _____ writer could write in such a beautiful way.

- a. imaginable
- b. imaginative
- c. imaginary
- d. impatient

The second test, on the other hand, required the participants to select the appropriate definition of the provided word, i.e. target synform, e.g.

Test version B (Laufer 1991:215)

IMAGINATIVE

- a. that can be imagined
- b. having imagination
- c. existing only in mind, unreal
- d. having no patience

As we can see, the two tests both contained a combination of 14 items belonging to synform categories 1 and 2, and 14 items pertaining to synform category 10. Moreover, the definitions a-d offered on test B corresponded to the answers which appeared on test A. Thus the same distractors were actually employed twice for each synform, in two different formats. Since not all of the questions could be borrowed from Laufer (1991) in their entirety, we constructed some of them by ourselves. Contextualized sentences, appearing in version A of the tests, were extracted either from Collins Cobuild's *Advanced Learner's English Dictionary* or *Merriam-Webster Online: Dictionary and Thesaurus* so that they would be authentic and representative samples of language use. The same sources were used for short definitions of synforms/distractors featuring on test version B. The distractors for synforms (test version A) were, on the other hand, selected according to the criterion of formal and/or semantic similarity.

It is worth noting that the rationale behind applying two testing instruments (variants A and B) is validity—by providing different elicitation methods, Laufer (1991:60) was hoping to obtain more reliable results. The tests should, therefore, not be viewed as a means of exploring the influence of context on causing synform confusions, but rather as a safeguard against the effect of a particular testing format.

3.3. Procedure

The two tests were administered by one of the researchers in her regular classes during the month of March 2013. To minimize the possibility of the participants guessing that the same words appeared on both tests, the testing sessions were held two weeks apart. The same students first completed version A of the test, and then version B. At the beginning of each session, they received a brief explanation in Serbian about the contents of the test, followed

by a few examples illustrating the manner in which the blanks should be filled (i.e. teacher's demo). No dictionaries or other helpful sources or explanations were provided during the testing. It was pointed out to the participants that the data were being collected solely for research purposes, and that the results would in no way affect their course grades. Though there was no time limit for the completion of the tests, the students managed to complete them in 15 minutes' time in both testing sessions. Subsequent quantitative analyses were performed by means of the statistical program SPSS 21.0.

4. Results and Discussion

Once all of the participants had completed both tests, the data were coded for correct/incorrect answers by the researchers. The data were further analyzed using descriptive statistics/frequencies and an independent sample t-test, in order to test for any possible statistically significant differences between the two groups. For the purpose of clarity, the results that both groups achieved are given in table form in Tables 1 and 2. The percentages shown in the tables represent the percentage of incorrect answers provided for the second word in the pair of synforms, i.e. the synform that was not the target form in that task.

Table 1. Synform error frequencies for categories 1 and 2

Correct answer	Expected synform error	% of synform errors Test version A		% of synform errors Test version B	
		Upper-intermediate Group	Lower-intermediate group	upper-intermediate group	Lower-intermediate group
considerable	considerate	5.6%	0%	27.8%	52.6%
integrity	integration	1.8%	7.5%	28.3%	27%
credulous	credible	20.8%	32.5%	66.7%	64.9%
comprehensive	comprehensible	17.3%	28.2%	88.7%	76.9%
respective	respectable	28.8%	33.3%	35.2%	40%
tolerant	tolerable	31.5%	20.5%	23.6%	32.5%
industrious	industrial	19.2%	25%	41.5%	41%
capacious	capable	13.2%	17.5%	27.8%	25.6%
imaginative	imaginary	1.8%	2.5%	25.5%	25%
sensible	sensitive	44.4%	66.7%	29.6%	30.8%
virtually	virtuously	11.8%	12.8%	30.2%	34.3%
exhaustive	exhausted	16.4%	40%	59.3%	38.5%
numerous	numerical	0%	5%	1.8%	7.5%
gracious	graceful	52.8%	38.5%	33.3%	45%

Table 2. Synform error frequencies for category 10

Correct answer	Expected synform error	% of synform errors Test version A		% of synform errors Test version B	
		upper-intermediate group	Lower-intermediate group	upper-intermediate Group	Lower-intermediate group
fiery	fairy	22.9%	13.5%	22.6%	21.6%
morale	moral	56.9%	35.9%	24.1%	3.5%
defense	defiance	3.8%	0%	5.5%	2.5%
split	spilt	9.8%	7.7%	0%	13.2%
conceal	cancel	4%	28.2%	0%	5%
menial	manual	28.9%	22.2%	57.7%	65.8%
propose	purpose	3.8%	10%	5.5%	15%
quiet	quit	0%	5.1%	0%	0%
humane	human	16.3%	43.6%	7.3%	27.5%
embarrass	embrace	3.7%	7.5%	10.9%	27.5%
dairy	diary	39.6%	53.8%	1.9%	13.9%
merely	memily	11.8%	23.7%	3.7%	16.7%
eligible	legible	7%	10.8%	11.3%	23.1%
bias	base	39.5%	7.7%	27.3%	40%

The percentage of correct answers for both groups of participants on both test A and B, according to the types of synforms, is shown in the following table (Table 3).

Table 3. Percentage of correct answers on both versions of the test

Group	Categories 1 & 2		Category 10	
	Version A	Version B	Version A	Version B
Upper-intermediate	66%	47%	63%	62%
Lower-intermediate	31%	30%	35%	33%

Prior to proceeding with an account of the participants' performance, it is important to comment on the data distribution as determined during the course of the data coding. Namely, in the case of the results offered by the lower-intermediate participants, a greater diversity in terms of possible solutions provided for each individual task was found. In other words, the upper-intermediate group of participants usually opted for either the target synform or its pair. However, the lower-intermediate group often chose one of the distractors included in the task, which would account for the occasional 0% of incorrect answers that are noted in the preceding tables. For the purpose of this study, these answers were not deemed relevant and will therefore not be commented upon. The lower-intermediate students were, accordingly, not less susceptible to synform confusions but, in line with their general lexical knowledge, less confident in the choices they made – given that they were probably less familiar with the offered items, they opted for the answers which seemed appropriate to them. This is further corroborated by the discrepancy between the number of correct answers scored by the two groups on both versions of the test which we will comment on now.

Overall, the data in tables 1-3 show that the lower-intermediate group consistently had a higher error frequency rate than the upper-intermediate group. Translated into their respective production on tests A and B, the former had a distinctly higher percentage of errors

on test A, while the latter scored a higher error percentage on test B for category 1 & 2 synforms. The discrepancy in the performance of our group of upper-intermediate students in the case of suffix synforms could be accounted for by the conclusions provided by Kocić (2008): that knowledge of a particular word form is not directly indicative of the participants' ability to use it correctly. The results also indicate that while the upper-intermediate group performed better when contextual clues were provided on the test, the lower-intermediate group, on average, scored the same percentage of errors on both tests, irrespective of whether any contextual clues were provided.

Furthermore, the results indicate that certain pairs of synforms should be set apart for potential additional work in the EFL classroom. In the case of suffix synforms, the *numerous/numerical* pair was the least confusing one for the participants whereas error frequencies were highest for the *respective/respectable*, *comprehensive/comprehensible*, *sensible/sensitive*, *gracious/graceful* and *credible/credulous* pairs of synforms. In the case of vocalic synforms, the participants as a whole did not frequently confuse *quit/quite* as well as *defense/defiance*, and had the highest error frequency for the *menial/manual* and *bias/base* pair of synforms (see Tables 1 and 2).

The performance of the participants viewed as two separate groups seems to indicate that the groups are internally relatively unified in regard to their respective levels of knowledge of English (see Table 3). In the case of the type of synforms (categories 1 & 2 or 10), on average both groups performed better on the tests involving synforms belonging to category 10. In terms of the type of test, that is, the presence or absence of contextual clues, while the performance of the lower-intermediate group was on average consistent, the upper-intermediate group of participants performed better on the tests that provided contextual clues. The performance of the upper-intermediate group of participants on test B involving synform categories 1 & 2 seems to offer further support for both claims.

However, the differences between the two groups were extensive, with the upper-intermediate group outperforming lower-intermediate group by almost 2:1. It would therefore seem that the difference in the level of L2 proficiency (lower vs. upper intermediate) has an undeniable impact on knowledge of synforms, irrespective of the fact that the members of a more proficient group did not score perfect results on all of the synform tests. Thus, it was necessary to determine whether the determined difference was not only great but also statistically significant.

The obtained results were further processed using an independent-sample t-test ($p=.05$). The results indicated a statistically significant difference in the student responses for 16 out of the 28 pairs of synforms in favor of the upper-intermediate group, in terms of the correct answers.

Nine of the pairs of synforms in question were found on the test which offered contextual clues, and the rest were on the tests without them. In addition, the majority of these pairs belonged to category 10 synforms. Moreover, certain pairs of synforms proved to be difficult for our lower-intermediate group of learners, irrespective of whether contextual clues were present on the test or not. These pairs include the category 10 synforms *morale/moral*, *conceal/cancel*, and *humane/human*, where the differences between the two groups were, for the most part, statistically significant on tests A and B in favor of the group of upper-intermediate students (.000 and .035; .000 and .13; .002 and .001 respectively). The other significant differences ranged from values of .000 (*quiet/quit*) to .050 (*credulous/credible*) and included the following pairs: *capacious/capable*, *sensible/sensitive*, *exhaustive/exhausted*, *bias/base*, *propose/purpose*, *dairy/diary*, *considerable/considerate* and *eligible/legible*.

These findings are comparable with the results obtained by Kocić (2008), even though the participants in her research were classified as advanced learners of English, and

irrespective of the fact that the participants in the current research made significantly more mistakes on both versions of the test due to their lower level of L2 knowledge. The similarity lies in the fact that synform pairs from categories 1 and 2 tended to be more problematic than synform pairs from category 10 in both studies. In addition, both groups of participants performed better on the tests providing contextual clues, which may, as suggested in Kocić (2008), have influenced the participants' sense of confidence, as opposed to the tasks where the target forms were viewed 'in isolation'.

Moreover, in her study, Laufer (1991) found category 10 synforms, or synforms that differed in more than one vowel but had the same consonants, significantly problematic for non-native learners. In the current study, and that of Kocić (2008), however, synforms belonging to this category did not represent a major difficulty factor for Serbian advanced or, in this case, intermediate learners. The inconsistency between these studies may be accounted for by the acquisition order of synform categories or the influence of L1. Namely, the results could be conditioned by the participants' learning to distinguish between synformic contrasts following different patterns. On the other hand, we could speculate that the difference could be accounted through the L1 of our participants (Serbian), a language not taken into account in Laufer's research.

The conclusions we have drawn regarding synforms belonging to category 10 could further be investigated by a comparison of our results and those published by Laufer (1991:147). We compared the average percentage of synform errors obtained on both test A and test B for vocalic synforms only, in relation to the participants' L1 background. As we can see, the differences are significant and the results of the participants with a Slavic L1 background differ from the other groups of NNS included in Laufer's study. Given that Serbian is, etymologically speaking, only distantly related to English, one would expect the results of Serbian EFL learners to be similar to those obtained from learners of Semitic L1 background. We must, therefore, assume that L1 cannot account for the remarkable discrepancy between Laufer's results and ours. The percentage of synform errors on the tests are shown in Table 4 below. For comparability, the percentages are averages that were obtained from Laufer's population of participants with various backgrounds (synform category 10 test was solved by 18 participants of Semitic L1 background, 5 of Germanic L1 background and 5 of Romance L1 background) and our population of participants whose L1 was a Slavic language (in total, 95 speakers of Serbian). Admittedly, our sample did contain a larger number of English L2 learners which only lends credibility to the obtained results.

Table 4. Percentage of synform errors according to L1 groups

L1 background		% of synform errors Test version A	% of synform errors Test version B
Semitic		35%	34%
Germanic		33%	25%
Romance		34%	42%
Slavic		18.5%	16.5%
Slavic	B2-level group	18%	13%
	B1-level group	19%	20%

5. Conclusions

In view of the research questions we started out to answer, the following should be highlighted as the main conclusions of our research:

- the type of synform category (namely be it 1, 2 or 10) does have an effect on the production of Serbian L1 English L2 learners in the sense that their performance was better on tests containing vocalic or category 10 synforms.
- the lower-level intermediate learners as a unified group experience more difficulty with the pairs of synforms included in the research than the upper-level intermediate learners, who scored a significantly smaller percentage of errors for most of the pairs of synforms.
- suffixal synforms in general were more problematic than vocalic synforms for our unified group of intermediate learners of English.

Overall, the test results provided both by our intermediate students and the advanced students in Kocić's research (2008) indicate persisting problems in terms of synform use. The fact that high percentages of correct answers were generally rare (occurring less than ten times on both tests), and did not persist over the two types of tests (with participants scoring differences in the percentage of correct results as great as 75% vs. 7.5%, or ten times less, on some of the synform pairs) indicates the need for further practice regarding these easily confused pairs. We could also put forward the claim that knowledge of a particular lexical item is precarious – knowing the word receptively, that is being able to recognize its meaning, is quite different from knowing it productively, that is being able to use the item correctly, as based on the presented results from tests A and B.

Furthermore, we could conclude that synforms should receive special treatment in the EFL classroom in the Serbian linguistic environment since they do pose a problem to NNS. One of the difficulties facing a project implementation of this kind is the lack of additional research that could further help in shedding light on the matter. In situations such as this, teachers themselves will have to take on the most important role in the implementation process, as their practice would show which synform pairs are most likely to be confused by the learners. It seems that Laufer's (1991) findings on the difficulty of individual categories of synforms should be tested in a particular L2 learning context as they may prove to be more/less problematic. The obvious recommendation would be that as English teachers in the EFL classroom, we should devote more time to suffix synforms (categories 1 and 2) as opposed to vocalic synforms (category 10) as they seem to be the most challenging for L1 Serbian/L2 English speakers and could be considered a part of the final phase of vocabulary acquisition among NNS of English.

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