

Theories of exceptionality

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Synopsis

We usually imagine that linguistic rules—whether in phonology, morphology, and syntax—apply if and only if their structural description is met. But some rules unexpectedly fail to apply in specific contexts and are said to have **negative exceptions**. For example, the word *ob[i]sity* fails to undergo a rule of trisyllabic laxing (*ob[i]se/*ob[ε]sity*; cf. *ser[i]ne/ser[ε]nity*). Other rules apply in contexts where it seems they shouldn't, and are said to have **positive exceptions**. For instance, *wh*-movement out of verbal complements is generally unacceptable in English but well-formed with *say* and *think*; e.g., *who_i did you (say/think/*whisper/*ponder) that Luigi shot t_i?* Both patterns have proved difficult to integrate into the theory of grammar.

One approach to apparent exceptionality attributes it to properties of rules (or constraints) by conditioning the application of the rule on the lexical or morphosyntactic context (e.g., Embick 2012). A second approach derives exceptionality from word- or morpheme-level (“diacritic”) features which prevent or trigger rule application (e.g., Lightner 1965, Gouskova 2012). A third approach, specific to morphophonology, derives exceptionality from the underlying representations of exceptional items with prosodic and/or featural pre- and/or under-specification so that positive exceptions meet the rule's structural description and negative ones do not (e.g., Inkelas and Cho 1993, Gorman and Reiss 2024). Is one account preferable to the other, or are they equivalent, or are both needed to generate the observed patterns?

Schedule (always subject to change)

Monday:	Rule exceptionality 1 Chomsky and Halle 1968:§4.4.2, §8.7 (Lakoff 1970: ch. 2)
Tuesday:	Rule exceptionality 2 Kisseberth 1970 (Zonneveld 1978: ch. 3)
Wednesday:	Morphophonology Embick 2012
Thursday:	Exceptionality via representation Gorman and Reiss 2024
Friday:	Morpheme-specific constraints Gouskova 2012, Rubach 2013, Schütze 2005:§3 (Gouskova and Becker 2013, Becker and Gouskova 2016, Scheer 2019)

Select references

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