



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

# Journal of Experimental Child Psychology

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jecp](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jecp)



## Variation and repetition in the spelling of young children



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 1 October 2014

Revised 20 December 2014

Available online 28 January 2015

#### Keywords:

Spelling

Writing

Phonology

Between-word variation

Priming

Repetition

### ABSTRACT

A number of investigators have suggested that young children, even those who do not yet represent the phonological forms of words in their spellings, tend to use different strings of letters for different words. However, empirical evidence that children possess a concept of between-word variation has been weak. In a study by Pollo, Kessler, and Treiman (2009), in fact, prephonological spellers were more likely to write different words in the same way than would be expected on the basis of chance, not less likely. In the current study, preschool-age prephonological and phonological spellers showed a tendency to repeat spellings and parts of spellings that they had recently used. However, even prephonological spellers (mean age ~ 4 years 8 months) showed more repetition when spelling the same word twice in succession than when spelling different words. The results suggest that children who have not yet learned to use writing to represent the sounds of speech show some knowledge that writing represents words and, thus, should vary to show differences between them. The results further suggest that in spelling, as in other domains, children have a tendency to repeat recent behaviors.

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### Introduction

Human behavior, in language and other domains, includes both repetition and variation. People have a tendency to repeat what they have done before, as when they use a syntactic form they have

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used recently (Pickering & Ferreira, 2008). But people must also vary their output, for example, using different linguistic expressions to express different meanings. The current study was designed to examine repetition and variation in one domain of language, spelling production, and in one age group, preschool-age children. Before describing the possible roles of repetition and variation in this domain, we provide a brief overview of the development of spelling skill.

Spelling development, for learners of alphabetic writing systems, is often described in terms of the ability to map sounds that are heard in words onto phonologically appropriate letters (Treiman & Kessler, 2014). A 4-year-old who is asked to write a word may produce a string of letters that seems to lack all phonological plausibility such as <geirar> for *took*. Such children have been called *prealphabetic* (Ehri, 1997) or *prephonological* (Pollo, Kessler, & Treiman, 2009) writers. Children who are more advanced in spelling symbolize some sounds in words in plausible ways, omitting or producing implausible spellings of others. Examples include <sa> for *stay* and <ghioc> for *gum*. Such spellings, which are common in U.S. children at around 6 years of age, are often labeled *partial alphabetic* (Ehri, 1997). Later, during what has been called the *full alphabetic* phase (Ehri, 1997), children represent all of the phonemes in words with correct or phonologically plausible letters. For example, they may write <gum> for *gum* or <tuck> for *took*.

Writing systems generally use different written forms for different words, helping to distinguish words and convey meaning. We refer to this property of writing as *between-word variation*. A number of investigators have suggested that learners of alphabetic writing systems grasp the concept of between-word variation before they learn that the letters in printed words symbolize elements of words' phonological forms (Clay, 1979; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Kamii, Long, Manning, Manning, & Manning, 1990; Tolchinsky, 2003). According to this view, therefore, even prephonological spellers have some understanding of an important feature of writing. Although the idea that children possess the concept of between-word variation from an early age is widespread in the literature, empirical support for this idea is rather weak. Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) cited evidence such as the case of a 4-year-old Spanish speaker who wrote *sapo* 'toad' as <Aron>, *pato* 'duck' as <Aorn>, and *casa* 'house' as <IAon>. Ferreiro and Teberosky suggested that this child had a small stock of graphic forms that she used for writing and that she used these forms in different orders and combinations to convey different meanings. However, anecdotal evidence of this kind does not support strong conclusions.

At first glance, stronger evidence that prephonological spellers deliberately arrange letters in different combinations so as to represent different words comes from data mentioned by Silva, Almeida, and Alves Martins (2010). These researchers stated that 50 of the 87 Portuguese preaders (mean age ~ 5½ years) who they screened for inclusion in a training study initially used different combinations of letters when asked to write different words but did not use phonologically plausible letters. These numbers appear to indicate that the majority of prephonological spellers deliberately use letters in different orders to write different words. However, a child who spelled words as a sequence of 4 letters drawn at random from the 15 letters she knew—numbers that appear to be typical in the study of Silva and colleagues—could produce 15<sup>4</sup>, or 50,625, words with different spellings. Chance alone would make it highly unlikely that a random speller would repeat the same spelling twice unless the child were making many hundreds of attempts; thus, there is no need to appeal to any preference for avoiding repetition. Moreover, Silva and colleagues appeared to classify children as prephonological spellers if they produced no spellings in which all of the letters were phonologically plausible. However, these children's spellings may have included some phonologically plausible letters even if not all letters were phonologically plausible. If the children had some understanding of sound-to-letter correspondence, this would cause them to use different spellings for words that sound different.

In a study of Brazilian and U.S. preschoolers, Pollo and colleagues (2009) addressed these issues pertaining to classification of prephonological spellers and number of repeated spellings that would be expected by chance. These researchers asked children to write 36 different items over the course of 3 days of testing, telling the children that they were not concerned with the correctness of their spellings. Quantitative procedures were used to identify 35 Brazilian and 23 U.S. children (mean age ~ 4 years 8 months) who were prephonological spellers. In one analysis, Pollo and colleagues counted the number of times that prephonological spellers wrote different items exactly alike on

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