In this talk I treat three phenomena in Portuguese morphology in an effort to see how lexical trends and morphophonological generalizations interact with productivity and learners’ extension of these patterns beyond their initial dataset. The overall strategy is to conduct extensive theoretical modelling of lexical trends first, in order to see their potential significance, and then to test their productivity experimentally, thereby feeding back into the development of models of how learners biases may be shaped by the interplay between robustness of data and specific theoretical constructs.

The first case is the so-called ‘L-shaped morphome’ found in Portuguese, Italian, and Spanish, in which the stem forms of the 1st person singular indicative are identical to those of the entire subjunctive (e.g. *ouç-o, ouves ‘hear-1sg.ind, hear-2sg.ind’, *ouç-a, ouç-as ‘hear-1sg.sbjn, hear-2sg.sbjn’). In an experimental study conducted with Cilene Rodrigues (PUC, Rio) it was found that this pattern is no longer productively extended to novel forms in a wug task, and that learners actually prefer a more morphosyntactically ‘natural’ identity between the 2sg subjunctive and the 2sg indicative. The looming question that comes to mind is, why was this pattern productive in the earlier history of the language (e.g. up through the 16th century; Maiden 2005: 151), and what changed? The results of a corpus comparison, conducted with Kevin Tang (UCL), reveal that the ratio of verbs in the first conjugation relative to those of the second and third conjugation has drastically increased since the 16th century. As a consequence, the salience of the second and third conjugation (where all of these morphomic verbs reside) is reduced for learners. The overall outcome, therefore, is that when the distribution of irregular alternations is overshadowed in the lexicon (cf. Yang 2005), even a seeming ‘island of reliability’ based on morphophonological generalizations may cease to be productive.

This line of reasoning can be extended to the longstanding question of so-called ‘ineffable’ forms in Portuguese, whereby the 1sg indicative of verbs such as *colorir ‘to color’ are said to lack any acceptable surface output. In a recent study examining the morphophonological properties of the 40 such verb stems canonically listed as defective, Postma (2013) discovered that 87% of them have a coronal sonorant (e.g. r,n,l,ñ) following the stem-final vowel. Before establishing the theoretical underpinnings that may provide an explanation for Postma’s generalization, however, we must determine whether in fact the phonological regularity is internalized by native speakers, as work such as Becker, Ketrez & Nevins (2011) has found that not all vowel-consonant interactions in morphophonologically are picked up on by learners. Determining the productivity of an ‘ineffable’ pattern, however, presents certain methodological challenges (cf. Albright 2003), and I will report on a pilot intended to measure speakers’ uncertainty of the 1sg of novel verb forms either with or without the coronal sonorant.

The final case study comes from derivational morphology and regards the two verbal nominalizers –ção and –mento, which show a competition somewhat similar to –ity and –ness in English (cf. Anshen & Aronoff 1988). In a corpus study conducted by Maria Luisa Freitas (Univ. Campinas), it was found that while –ção is vastly more productive than –mento across 2000 verb forms, verbs of the second conjugation show an unusual reversal in their preference for –mento. This is all the more surprising as the latter suffix causes a particular morphophonological change in the theme vowel of the stem, e.g. *receber / recebimento. This affix-specific change, however, enforces a neutralization of the theme vowel between the 2nd/3rd conjugation in derivational morphology, also found with derived participle, adjectival, and agentive forms, thereby suggesting a natural class grouping between these conjugations. We will report on experimental findings designed to determine whether speakers extend the reversal preference for –mento with the 2nd conjugation for this ‘conspiratorial’ reason or not.