

Ines A. Martin
Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages and Literatures
The Pennsylvania State University

What the German word game *Räubersprache* teaches us about syllabification in German

Evidence from language games can show that speakers of different linguistic backgrounds syllabify words in different manners (Davis, 1994). This very interesting finding was taken as a motivation to look at the structure of syllabification in German on the grounds of a German word game called *Räubersprache* 'language of the thieves'. This popular 20th century word game from Northern Germany forces its speakers to make a decision about syllabification in order to disguise speech according to its rules. That is, to disguise a word in *Räubersprache*, one has to take each individual syllable of a word and reduplicate it twice. The syllable onset is then replaced or inserted by /h/ in the first reduplication and by /f/ in the second reduplication. Moreover, between the reduplications, the syllable /le/ is inserted. In multi-syllabic words, this process is applied to every syllable. The word *Buch.sta.be* 'letter' is thus rendered *Buch.huch.le.fuch.sta.ha.le.fa.be.he.le.fe*. It should be expected then that speakers of *Räubersprache* pick the syllables they reduplicate according to the general rules of syllabification in German. The most pertinent of these rule is the principle of *Onset Maximation*, i.e. all consonants between two vowels should always be attributed to the onset of the second syllable as long as wellformedness constraints are obeyed (Wiese 1996, 2011). The most important wellformedness constraint for German is the *Sonority Sequencing Principle*. This would lead to the word *Konsens* 'agreement' being syllabified as *Kon.sens* rather than *Ko.nsens* since *ns* is not a well-formed onset cluster according to the Sonority Sequencing Principle. Moreover, German exhibits a special case, usually referred to as *ambisyllabicity*, for words like *bitte* [bitə] 'please' in which a medial consonant is preceded by a stressed short lax vowel and followed by another vowel. The medial consonant is then often described as belonging both to the preceding coda and the following onset (Wiese 1996, 2011; Hall 1992).

In our study, four speakers of *Räubersprache*, that had all learned the word game during their child- and early adulthood, were asked to read a 70 word long German text while spontaneously changing it into *Räubersprache*. Results show that while the participants generally agreed on the number of syllables in a given word, they showed difficulties when it comes to the exact syllable boundaries. This finding strengthens Wiese's (1996) claim that, while native speakers of German usually agree on the number of syllables in a word, the precise position of the syllable break is more difficult to determine. Moreover, we found that a single consonant between two vowels was frequently doubled in *Räubersprache* regardless of the length of the preceding vowel, for example *je.mand* 'someone' was frequently realized as *jem.hem.le.fem.mand.hand.le.fand*. This pattern among the participants points towards an overgeneralization of the rule for ambisyllabicity as well as of an inclination for coda maximation while simultaneously keeping the principle of onset maximation.

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