

Agreement and Plural features in Heritage Arabic Speakers

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Studies of heritage speakers of Spanish and Russian have reported that verbal and nominal morphology are vulnerable areas for L1 loss and incomplete acquisition. In this paper, we will report on on-going experimental research on the vulnerability of nominal and verbal agreement in Heritage Arabic speakers, since Arabic presents complex agreement patterns.

Root and pattern morphology and subject verb agreement have been at the centre of debates on Arabic morphology and syntax. Arabic morphology deploys both concatenative or string compositional morphology and non-concatenative or non-string compositional morphology. Thus, the plural of “maktab” (office) and mudarris (teacher) opt for different options, the former opting for a non-concatenative pattern and the latter only allowed a non-concatenative pattern as illustrated in (1) and (2) respectively:

(1) maktab <> makaatib (offices)

(2) mudarris <> mudarrissun (teachers).

The situation is complicated by the fact that there are a number of broken plural templates (3):

(3) a. kitaab <> kutub (books)

 b. film <> ?aflaam (films)

It is a matter of intense debate as to whether the mental representation of the so-called broken plurals, and the root and pattern morphology in general, involves an association between a root and a template and mechanisms for mapping the roots onto the templates or whether it involves direct association between words via processes that may access the internal structure those words (McCarthy and Prince 1990, Prunet, Béland and Idrissi 2000, 2008). Moreover, the templates differ in their frequency and productivity, which raises important issues with regard to the notion of default or unmarked forms in such context.

This experimental study focuses on two population groups, heritage speakers of Egyptian Arabic and heritage speakers of Palestinian/Jordanian Arabic, in addition to control groups of fully fluent native speakers of the same dialects. Results from two tasks targeting spontaneous and elicited oral production indicate that heritage speakers can use the broken plural, though they may use the “wrong” pattern, which in turn raises questions about the nature of the non-string compositional pattern(s) they opt for. The use of the broken plural implies that the speakers have internalized the notion of root but we will show that the notion of root in this context is more narrowly defined than the notion of root that native speakers have. The results also confirm previous findings in the context of the acquisition of Arabic plurals by native speakers, particularly with regard to the distribution of the sound feminine plural pattern.