The Problem of the Grammatical Morpheme-S

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□ ABSTRACT □

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the cause of the learning difficulty of the grammatical morpheme-- s which the Arab learner encounters when he learns the English language. The intended morpheme is what is known as the third person singular morpheme. The study proposed a number of hypothesis in order to account for this difficulty. The hypotheses are: The native language interference, the formal--structural hypothesis, the implementation hypothesis, and finally the markedness hypothesis. It was found that the markedness hypothesis was a plausible and an adequate one because it is associated with the notions of linguistic universals and semantic - functional load.

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قضية المورفيم (الصرفيم) -S

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▢ ملخص ▢

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى البحث في سبب صعوبة تعلم المورفيم (الصرفيم -S) والذي يضاف إلــى المضارع الذي فاعله غائباً مفرداً، التي يواجهها المتعلم العربي عند تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية. طرحت الدراسة عدداً من الفرضيات من أجل تحديد سبب الصعوبة هذه. الفرضيات هي: فرضية تــدخل نظام اللغة الأم، والفرضية الشكلية – التركية، والفرضية التنفيذية، وأخيراً الفرضية المعلّميّــة. ولقد تبين أن الفرضية الأخيرة هي فرضية معقولة وكافية نظراً لارتباطها بفكرتي الكليات اللغوية والعبء المعنوي – الوظيفي.

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I .Introduction

The grammatical morpheme-s which is attached to the present tense verb whose subject is a third person singular as in " He lectures everyday." constitutes a serious learning problem enountering an Arab learner learning[1] English as a foreign language. The problematic nature of the present morpheme lies in the fact that despite its high frequency in the linguistic input and being a simple form, the morpheme is acquired at a late stage, compared to other similar forms such as the plural morpheme-s.

In fact, when I decided to write on this problem. I began thinking back of the considerable amount of time which I used to spend in teaching this morpheme with my young learners almost twenty - five years ago. It was really a difficult experience. The outcome of that intensive effort was a partial mastery of the morpheme by the learners; sometime they used to produce it correctly and some other times incorrectly. At that time I was wondering about what the cause(s) of the difficulty in this particular morpheme might be. But I hardly gave it enough consideration because I, as an English teacher, was instructed to teach the language through using mechanical drills and repetition, and to teach the language not about the language.

My long experience in learning English and teaching it to Arab learners, children, adult beginners with no background whatsoever in English, and currently college students-ι specialized and nonspecialized in English, has convinced me that this morpheme is perhaps the most difficult morpheme to be both learned by or taught to Arab learners. In their study conducted on the grammatical errors encountering Arab learners, Scott and Tucker (1974) reported this type of difficulty. Kharma and Hajjaj(1988) , too, pointed out this type of difficulty. Hanania and Gardman's (1977) findings show that this morpheme was not acquired by an adult Arab following her residence in the U.S for about 18 months although she reached the final stage; that is the sixth stage according to the researchers' classification of acquisition stages. In addition, I did two things in order to ascertian that the difficulty of this morpheme is exceptional. First, I consulted some colleagues in the department of English where I teach and discussed the matter with them. Secondly, I· discussed this case with the college students whom I am

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[1] The two terms " learning " and " acquisition " will be used interchangeably unless they are restricted by certain contexts.

teaching in the first semester, 1997. The colleagues and the students overwhelmingly supported my views regarding the difficulty of this morpheme.

The methodology of the present study is limited in scope in the sense that it will not focus on eliciting data from subjects through conducting experiments or field studies. Instead, it will focus primarily on the various findings reported on the grammatical morphemes especially this morpheme. The purpose of the study is to utilize such findings in speculating about the nature of the problem, its cause(s), and its pedagogical implications. In other words, the study aims at advancing some explanation that may account for the learning difficulty of the morpheme's.. Duskova's (1969: 20) explanation which attributes the cause of difficulty to " the heavy pressure of all other endingless forms" seems to be inadequate because it fails to incorporate more than one dimension of the problem, as it will be shown later, in the discussion. Hanania and Gardman (1977) gave no explanation for the failure of the acquisition of the morpheme. Other morphemes studies have hardly dealt with this morpheme at an explanatory level. The focus of those studies was on the order of acquisition of the morphemes in general.

II. Theoretical Background:

The fact that this morpheme is of a high frequency in the linguistic input ‹through spontaneous speech and controlled exercises, and the fact that it persists as an error in the learner's interlanguage for years and it may not be eradicated at all indicate that the morpheme is exceptional. Such a situation leads one to safely argue that the case of this morpheme is, in fact ‹ a case of fossilization.

Accodring to Selinker(1972: 215) , fossilized items are those "linguistic items, rules, and subsystems which speakers of a particular NL ‹will tend to keep in their IL, relative to a particular TL ‹no matter what the age of learner or amount of explanation and instruction he receives in the TL " .He further asserts that " a crucial fact ‹perhaps the most crucial fact, which any adequate theory of second language learning will have to explain' is his

regular reappearance or reemergence in TL productive performance of linguistic structures which were thought to be eradicated. "

I think that this theoretical characterization of the problem as a fossilized case can have some explanatory implications because such a step will help in focusing on this aspect of the problem. It will also help in distinguishing this case from other formally similar cases such as the case of the plural morpheme-s which cannot be considered a case of fossilization in the Arab learner's interlanguage system.

Learning the rule of this morpheme represents an important addition to the learner's evolving language system, known as interlanguage. It is known that learning the interlanguage system passes through developmental stages and it undergoes continuous changes and modification in the light of the evidence provided by the environment .It is believed that the learning process is very much triggered partially by the innate Universal Grammar which plays an important role in the process itself (Cook, 1985).

III. Findings of Grammatical Morphemes Studies:

Brown's (1973) longitudinal study of the acquisition of 14 English grammatical morphemes such as the present progressive, the prepositions 'in ' and' on', the plural, past irregular, possessive, past regular, third person singular, contractible auxiliary (arranged here according to the order of acquisition (by native children seems to have encouraged a good number of researchers in the field of second language teaching to try to find out about whether the findings in the first language studies are similar to their counterparts in second language studies. Some of the studies were conducted on children and others on adults learning English as a second language. The subject matter of the studies was the order of the acquisition of the morphemes.

Dulay and Burt (1973,1974) conducted studies on children and reported that the children of different language backgrounds acquired the grammatical morphemes in almost the same natural order. Hakuta(1978)

Rosanky (1976) and Kessler and Idar (1977) reported similar results about the order of acquisition. They, in other words, confirmed Dulay and Burl's results.

In addition to the studies referred to earlier ‹the studies conducted on adults acquiring English as a second language include the studies of Bailey et al (1974), Larsen – Freeman(1975) , Anderson‹ (1976) Krashen et al (1977(, Henning(1978) , and Brown (1980(. Generally speaking, the studies, apart from minor variations, confirmed the invariant order of acquisition of the grammatical morphemes reported by earlier studies.

IV .Discussion:

All of the above studies, with the exception of minor differences‹ agree on the fact that the acquisition of the morphemes follows a natural order regardless of the learner's age‹ his language background or amount of formal instructions he receives. Furthermore, the studies point to the fact that the morpheme under study is acquired at a late stage ⸴ almost in the final stage according to some given studies. This. of course, cannot be interpreted as a matter of coincidence. Rather, such acquisition seems to be controled by human innate mechanism in which the level of cognitive development probably plays a minimum role. This innate mechanism must be universal in nature.

The questions that arise here may be stated as follows : Why is this morpheme acquired so late ⸮ Why does it constitute a learning difficulty⸮ And why does it persist in the learner's interlanguage and keep reemerging in the learner's performance ⸮ One weakness of the aforementioned studies lies in their ignoring of advancing answers to these questions. One reasonable strategy to seek an explanation for the case of this morpheme is to study the case through proposing a number of tentative answers in forms of hypotheses. The hypotheses are⸴

1) The Interference Hypothesis:

As it is well-known in the field of second language learning, the native language might play a negative role in learning the system of the target language. This is, of course, made through what is called negative transfer (interference). The question is : Could the difficulty of acquiring the morpheme be attributed to linguistic interference ⸮ The answer is simply " No" due to some ample evidence gathered from various studies conducted

on learners of different ages and language backgrounds such as Czech, Japanese, Spanish and Chinese) Duskova ؛ 1969، Hakuta, ؛ 1978Dulay and Burt(1974 ،. The findings indicate that those learners faced almost a similar degree of difficulty with this morpheme, and that the morpheme was acquired at a late stage. Therefore, it is listed in the bottom of the rank orders of the morphemes according to the tables provided by the studies.

This is on one hand, and on the other ،the verb, in some languages such as Arabic, may somtimes agree with the subject in terms of number, person and gender. For example ،the verb " Kataba " " wrote" in " Katabat albintu aldarsa "The girl wrote the lesson " agrees with the subject that comes after the verb (Arabic is a VSO type). Another example which serves the same purpose is the given verb which occurs in a nominal sentence such as " Al-Awladu yaktubuna durusahum " " The   boys   write) are   writing (their lessons ."It is worth noting that Arabic is sometimes classified typologically as an inflectional language in which the inflections play an important role in the grammar of the language. On the basis of the above discussion, one is led to dismiss the interference hypothesis.

2) The Fomral – Structural Hypothesis:

This hypothesis stales that the form of the morpheme could be an important factor that determines, in one way or another ،its complexity and therefore its order of acquisition as being a late one.

It is known that this morpheme has three positional variants (allomorphs) {s}, {Z}, and {∂z}, which are attached to final voiceless sounds, final voiced sounds and final hissing sounds respectively. The same thing may be said about the plural morpheme-s. In this sense, the two morphemes are not different. Nevertheless, the plural morpheme is acquired early and more rapidly. Is h reasonable to judge the two morphemes as being simple and easy as far as their form is concered? Hatch's (1983 :55) remark on this issue sound unacceptable. She states that " If the form is naturally easy, it may be acquired early even though its function is not known ."Krashen (1985:1)tends to disagree with some scholars on this issue. He states that "

the order (of morpheme acquisition) does not appear to be determined solely by formal simplicity and there is evidence that it is independent of the order in which rules are taught in language classes."

Related to this hypothesis is Duskova's (1969: 20) claim that " the heavy pressure of all other endingless forms " is the cause of the recurring error. This is an inadequate explanation because it seems to focus solely on the formal aspects of the morpheme and its relation with other forms in the same paradigm.

3) The Implementation Hypothesis:

This hypothesis was originally proposed by Mitleb and Port (1983) to account for a phonological phonetic problem ꞉ namely the problem of the English] P[, which, too, poses a serious learning difficulty for the Arab learner. Due to the similarities between the two cases as being fossilized ones, the hypothesis may be thought of and extended to account for the case of the present morpheme.

According to this hypothesis, the following claim may be advanced: The whole problem of this morpheme centers on the execution or implementation aspect. That is,the learner knows the rule of the morpheme but for some physiological and articulatory reasons, the learner fails to apply it regularly. Therefore, he sometimes produces a correct,sentence such as ꞉

"He plays football once a week" and sometimes an incorrect one such as " He play football once a week" . The question remains, however, as : Why is this type of fluctuation in execution? The hypothesis provides no answer.

4) The Markedness Hypothesis

The markedness hypothesis is closely related to the theory of universal grammar as proposed by Noam Chomsky (1965). In his writings, Chomsky uses Universal grammar to account for the logical problem of native language acquisition. Later on. the theory was extended to second language learning (Cook, 1985). It is believed that linguistic universals can place certain constraints on interlanguage. Therefore, a distinction has to be made between marked and unmarked features as far as the order of acquisition of second language rules is concerned (Ellis, 1985).

Although the notion of markedness is still a controverisal issue both in theoretical linguistics and allied disciplines because of the difficulty of establishing a good definition of the concepts of " marked " and" unmarked ‹"there is no doubt that the notion can be employed effectively to account for a considerable number of theoretical as well as applied cases. As far as the rule acquisition of this morpheme is concerned, the hypothesis simply states that less marked rules will be acquired early whereas more marked rules will be acquired later.

Essentially, the addition of an element to the original form of the linguistic item will automatically add to it a feature of markedness and the morpheme will, therefore, become marked or specifically more marked. For example, the singular form of a noun is less marked whereas the plural form is more marked because the singular is taken to be the basic form. Another example Is the verb form " liberate " which is considered less marked, whereas its form " liberates " is more marked. In other words, the morpheme-s in the verb " liberate" is more marked as opposed to its zero counterpart which is presumbly attached to the original form of the verb occurring with other persons. Following Greenberg's (1966) view in this regard, it is obvious, then, that additional morphemes are expected to result In more complex items. It is known also that in terms of cognitive processing, the unmarked item requires less time (Rutherford, (1982. However, one should be cautious about this generalization because it implies the notion of lumping all similar marked forms in one category without any consideration of a hierarchical order of such forms in terms of " more marked " and " less marked" . Both this morpheme and the plural morpheme are additional morphemes, but it seems that the former is more marked.

In order to obtain a better understanding of the cause(s) of the problem of this morpheme, it is useful *to* place it in a broader perspective ; that is, to turn to the acquisition status of the morpheme in the first language and how it is acquired by native children. We believe that such an attempt will provide some more insights into its learning difficulty. As stated earlier . Brown (1973), in an important study of 14 English grammatical morphemes acquired by native children, reports that this morpheme is a late - acquired one. Therefore, it is listed as the tenth morpheme according to the author's sequence of rank order of acquisition. The morpheme is ranked after the article, copula‹ progressive, plural ‹auxiliary, regular and irregular past and possessive. Brown' s findings are supported by those reported by de Villiers and de Villiers(1973) . It is note worthy that Bellugi (1964) was the first to

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conduct a short study on the acquisition of grammatical morphemes. The study focused on 5 morphemes including the plural and the third person singular morphemes. Bellugi pointed out two things concerning this morpheme. One is that there was no significant correlation between the emergence of the morpheme and its frequency in parents 'speech. And the other is that despite its frequency, the morpheme was the last to emerge in the children's speech. It is evident then, that this morpheme is late acquired by native children despite the fact that it is formally simple and it is one of the most frequent among the 14 morphemes in parents' speech (Brown, 1973)

Interestingly enough, the findings of the studies made in the context of second language acquisition, alluded to earlier, suggest, generally speaking, an invariant order of acquisition of the English grammatical morphemes. So,to use Felix's (1978 :65) words in this regard, "Despite certain individual variation there is a core of developmental regularities in common to all learners and all types of acquisition." In addition, the studies reported that the morpheme is late acquired. Accordingly, it is believed that this morpheme poses a serious learning difficulty.

Brown's (1973) account of the order of acquisition of the morphemes derives mostly from grammatical and semantic complexity. Following his modification of the derivational theory of complexity and the adoption of what he calls " cumulative complexity", Brown made some speculations about the order of acquisition. Unfortunately, he did not commit himself entirely to the modified form of the derivational theory of complexity because he continued to rely, somehow, on the number of the transformational rules involved in producing the surface structure of the morpheme in order to determine its complexity – The number of the rules was apparently considered a determinant of grammatical complexity. But, the fact of the matter is that not only the number of transformational rules involved which can determine the level of complexity but the nature of the rules themselves, too.

Furthermore, the inadequancy of Brown's (1973) account is manifested in its failure to incorporate the notion of markedness as an essential component in the account .However, it should be admitted that he did not ignore this notion completely and he referred to it occasionally. I believe that the notion of markedness is a requisite to the notion of complexity and that it should be used in order to determine the meaning of complexity. That is, it is difficult to obtain a reliable explanation of complexity without incorporating the notion of markedness into the concept of complexity in general.

At any rate, I think that Brown's (1973)account of complexity may be extended to second language acquisition, but with more emphasis that should be laid on the semantic complexity as being the decisive factor which contributes to the difficully of this morpheme. However, it is very important to take into account the fact that although the native learner and the foreign learner follow similar strategies in acquiring this morpheme sometimes, they differ somehow with regard to the competence stages established to master adult grammar.

I begin by stating that this morpheme is both grammatically and semantically more marked and therefore a late- acquired morpheme .According to Brown (1973), the surface form of the morpheme is the output of three transformations ! the auxiliary agreement transformation! the verbal agreement transformation, and the verb suffix transformation. But, according to the grammar of the 14 morphemes adopted by Jacobs and Rosenbaum (1968), the same number of transformation is required to produce the surface forms of some other morphemes such as the plural and the uncontractible copula. Nevertheless, the latter morphemes are acquired at early stages. Furthermore, the grammatical complexity seems to derive partially from the fact that the morpheme occurs with one person i .e .the third person singular in the same paradigm. In this case, the degree of markedness increases. Although, Brown (1973) did not seem to rely entirely on the number of rules in order to determine the complexity of the morpheme, he provided no criteria to verify his " cumulative complexity." A more plausible account of the problem of this morpheme may be found within the theory of markedness and semantic complexity. A reasonable approach in this regard is to view the morpheme as being semantically more marked and therefore more complex. Here, we disagree with Brown (1973) on the source of semantic complexity. He suggests that this morpheme involves two unitary meanings ! namely number and earliemess which make it complex. It is our contention that these meanings are not essential in this case because the meanings of number, for example, overlaps with other morphemes such as the plural morpheme. Not only that, but both types of meanings are applicable to other morphemes such as the uncontractible copula which is acquired at an early stage.

Alternatively, we believe that this morpheme is semantically complex because it is semantically and functionally empty. This type of paradox concerning this morpheme, as being empty and at the same time complex, is cognitively justified as it will become clear shortly. Therefore, it is not a matter of the number of concepts conveyed by this morpheme as implied in the argument. Rather, it is the type of concept involved in this case.

The language learner is required to learn a " zero " morpheme represented phonetically as{s}, {z}, or {∂z} which in this case make it different from other zero morphemes such as the zero morpheme which is attached to the word " sheep ." Compared to the zero plural morpheme presumbly attached to the word " sheep" , the morpheme under study is physically present but functionally absent or with no semantic-functional load. According to Gleason (1961 :156) function words such as this morpheme " contribute little or nothing to meaning but function as pure structural signals" . This morpheme does contribute nothing. In fact ‹the function of the morpheme is redundant because the mere presence of the subject and verb will serve the required function.

Once again, it seems that the complexity of this morpheme has a universal dimension. Native learners and foreign learners face the same type of complextiy. It is not a matter of coincidence, but of universality in which markedness represents a central principle. In this regard, Wode (1984 : 42) correctly states that:

The developmental sequences seem *to* reflect the internal complexity of the structure or the structural system to be learned, hence the degree of markedness. it seems that the unmarked or the less marked items are learned early, and the more marked ones later.

V. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implicotions:

The previous discussion revealed a number of important points about the problematic nature of this morpheme. Despite the strong criticism levelled against Krashen's theory in general by Mclaughlin ‹(1987)Krashen's (1981,1982) remarkable distinction between the notion of acquisition and learning is quite relevant here. This morpheme is actually learned by Arab learners but not acquired. It specifically belongs to what is known as " learned competence " rather than what is known as " acquired competence " (Krashen and Terrell, .1983) Accodring to Krashen (1982: 99)" There are rules that have been learned but have not been acquired. They are, in all cases, what appear to be late - acquired and formally simple rules. "

The source of difficulty in learning this morpheme derives partially from the fact that it is grammatically complex and partially but more importantly from the fact that it is semantically and functionally empty. This is true for both the native acquirer and the foreign learner. While using the foreign language for communication, the learner focuses his attention on among other things, the content of the structure, which carries the message, along

with the linguistic and structural elements that contribute to conveying the message appropriately and effectively. So‹ psycholinguistically speaking, the learner is always more attentive to such elements but less attentive to function words in general. The situation becomes even more complicated with regard to this morpheme due to its exceptional nature as being empty. It is evident, then, that the problem of this morpheme has a universal dimenstion .Crosslinguistic studies have suggested this dimension. Therefore, it is not a problem of native language interference, formal complexity, or even implementation. It is true that this is a performance error but it is at the same time linked to learned not acquired competence. Due to its marked nature and its semantic and functional load, the morpheme escapes the learner's attention and control during the acquisition and production processes.

The present study may suggest some implications to second language acquisition. The implications are:

1) Some of the rules of the second language are acquired while others are learned. A language teacher has to be aware of this fact and act accordingly. Pushing the learner too hard to acquire certain rules in formal settings such as the classroom could end up in wasting time and effort besides causing disencouragement in the learner. It is fruitless to insist ‹from the very beginning, on the learner's correct production of this morpheme. In fact, as Dulay and Burt1973) recommend the teacher should leave syntax to children to take care of.

2) Acquiring a second language is achieved effectively through focusing on the content and meaning, rather than on form. The learner internalizes first the language rules which are semantically and functionally more salient and less marked.

3) First and second language acquisition may follow, under the influence of universal grammar similar routes and strategies. The teacher is‹ therefore, encouraged to broaden his knowledge about first language acquisition literature in order to tackle problematic cases of second language more effectively and realistically.

4) The case of this morpheme should be taken as forceful evidence against the behaviouristic approach upon which some teaching methods such as the audio - lingual method and others are based. That is, the behaviouristic techniques of repetition, conditioning‹ reinforcement and mechanical drills are unproductive in dealing with this problem. Instead, the teacher is required to provide learners with comprehensible input.

5) Delaying the correction of the learner's errors is advisable and recommended. Communicating ideas should be given priority in the

classroom. By doing so, the learner will internalize the formal rules‹ including this rule, unconsiously, that is, acquiring them.

6) Mastering certain grammatical rules such as this in second language may have predictive value of revealing the learner's level of competence in that language. Using this morpheme regularly in all communicative situations indicates that the learner has reached a high level of competence in second language.

7) A language learner's performance reflects both types of competence‹ acquired and learned. Acquired competence always provides the learner with good basis for performance, whereas learned competence a provides one with fluctuated basis for performance, provided that the performance is monitor - free.

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