CHAPTER TWO

ACQUISITION OF ARABIC AS A NATIVE LANGUAGE: IMPLICATIONS FOR LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

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I. Introduction

All grammars aim to formulate rules that are adequate, general, and, to the extent possible, linguistically elegant. Traditional grammars are typically considered satisfactory when and if they achieve adequacy and generality. Grammars conceived in the framework of some modern linguistic theory, e.g. speech production theories, go one step further and aspire to formulate grammatical rules that not only meet those criteria, but also reflect or approximate cognitive processes. This is the case because one goal of these theories is to identify the core of grammatical principles that is common to all languages. Substantiation for the supposition that there is such a core of principles comes from two domains of linguistics: Language acquisition and language typology.

Set in the context of both domains, this paper attempts to show that findings from studying the acquisition of Arabic as a native language may have implications for linguistic analysis. First, they can corroborate our selection between competing grammatical descriptions, for if we find that one description matches processes discerned from first language acquisition while others do not, we can adopt that description based on its cognitive relevance. Second, these findings, being based on discerning actual cognitive data, fit immediately and naturally with the psycholinguistic framework of speech production modern theory, thereby rendering our “adequate and general” grammatical rules also equally cognitively sound. Third, they contribute to the general pool of information on linguistic features used to formulate assumptions about language typology and language universals.

To illustrate, this paper contrasts competing linguistic analyses of certain features in the phonology of the Arabic variety of Cairo, commonly known as Egyptian Colloquial Arabic (henceforth, ECA).
ECA is spoken as a native language by approximately twenty million Egyptians and widely understood by a majority of the other two hundred million Arabic-speaking peoples. The paper then considers if information gleaned from studying the acquisition of ECA as a first language can guide our selection from the competing analyses to the one that best meets the criteria of adequacy, generality, and cognitive relevance, as well.

II. ECA Phonology

There is general consensus among linguists on the analysis of most features of the phonological system of ECA. Thus, all linguists of Arabic, as Table I shows, agree on the independent phonemic status of at least twenty-one consonant segments in ECA. These consonant phonemes are /b, t, d, k, g, s, f, s, z, h, l, m, n, w, y, r, ?, x, G, H, and c/.

However, some issues of disagreement persist as to how best to analyze four categories; namely, emphatic consonants and vowels, long vowels, syllable types, and stress assignment rules. The first issue concerns whether emphasis in ECA is rule generated or not. The second has to do with whether long vowels are best treated as single phonemes or as sequences of two identical, short phonemes. The third issue is whether ECA has syllable structures with a VV nucleus, and the final issue concerns the environment for stress assigning rules. The latter three issues are in fact inter-dependent, as will become evident in the ensuing discussion. In the following sections, the traditional analysis of ECA will be contrasted to alternate alternative ones, if any, and results from acquisition of ECA as a first language will be incorporated in the discussion. We begin by discussing the issue of emphasis, which involves emphatic consonants and vowels.

III. Emphasis

To the undisputed twenty-one consonant phonemes, many linguists, e.g. Mitchell (1956) and Omar (1973), follow the traditional analysis of Arabic phonology by adding four other consonantal segments (D, T, Z, and S) as phonemes that are integral to the sound system of ECA. All four ECA segments are said to be emphatic Two more