Mohammad T. Alhawary: Arabic Second Language Learning and Effects of Input, Transfer, and Typology

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Many studies and books have tackled Arabic as L1 and its different dimensions and effects on learning other languages. Sarton (1927) highlighted the primordial role of Arabic when he said that "From the second half of the eighth to the end of the eleventh century, Arabic was the scientific, the progressive language of mankind." (Sarton, 1927: 17). Once again, with the modern changes in the Arabic speaking countries, Arabic is becoming L2 or L3 for many people in a reversed situation, where speakers of different languages are learning Arabic for everyday communication and functioning in the society. From this perspective, Mohammad T. Alhawary's second book in this domain comes to inaugurate the literature highlighting different L1s and their interference and transfer on Arabic as L2.

In the process of learning languages, a human being tends to rely upon the characteristics of the mother tongue and transfers the similar traits of L1 onto the foreign language being learned. The book builds on the underlying concept of *language transfer* (or crosslinguistic influence as a theory-neutral term), which has received the attention of different scholars in the field of linguistics. In her words, Odlin (1989) defines *transfer* as "the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired." (Odlin, 1989: 27). Earlier, Gass and Selinker concluded that "language transfer is the use of native language (or other language) knowledge – in some as yet unclear way – in the acquisition of a second (or additional) language." (Gass and Selinker, 1983: 372)

This well-elaborated book is part of a chain of books (the second in a sequence) tackling the acquisition of Arabic as L2. The book (*Arabic Second Language Learning and Effects of Input, Transfer, and Typology*) is based on Arabic L2 data from Chinese L1 and Russian L1 participants. The author's previous book entitled *Arabic Second Language Acquisition of Morphosyntax* (2009a), provided a data-driven analysis of Arabic as SLA, based on data retrieved from adults with English, French, Spanish, and Japanese as L1s speakers. By doing so, the author is offering a comprehensive overlook for international learners with different L1s who are interested in learning Arabic as L2 or L3.

This book provides sufficient data targeted to a wide and varied range of readers. For students, the book contains many adequate and authentic excerpts from the author's original experiments, which provide specific information exclusive to each L1 throughout the rich chapters of the book. For Arabic as L2 teachers or curriculum developers, the book aims to set adequate learning objectives and a schedule of the process of acquisition meanwhile it lists expectations related to classroom pedagogical awareness for Arabic L2 learners. Alhawary extends the aims of the book to equally include Arabic as L2

proficiency testing. This unique approach is emphasized by Alhawary in his systematic and somehow repetitive style throughout his book.

In order to tap on the actual knowledge of L2, Alhawary based his data retrieving on elicitation techniques and long interviews, which have enriched the book with illustrative examples. Based on these detailed examples and an argumentative language, Alhawary presents samples from case studies in the field of morphosyntax and different effects of input, transfer, and typology - as the title of the book indicates - within two different L1s namely Chinese and Russian.

Written in the form of a research thesis, the book is organized in a unified and repetitive style along its 8 chapters, many of which having an identical inner skeleton that the author ought to follow to guide the readers through the complex parts and contents therein.

The introduction and the discussion of the targeted morphosyntactic structures are assigned separate chapters, which include nominal gender agreement, verbal gender agreement, tense/ aspect, and null subjects (Chapters 3-6). Moreover, the discussion is accessible with explanatory English transcription for Modern Standard Arabic examples comprising the classroom input that the participants were exposed to. Such morphosyntactic forms are considered "among the most basic and regular features to which Arabic L2 learners are exposed to in their first years of learning" (p. 15).

Chapter 1 considers the targeted structures of the participants' L1s and L2s, aiming to reveal whether these structures are shared between the languages or not. Moreover, the chapter is providing sufficient analysis of the distribution of the targeted forms and their frequency in the input received by the participants.

In Chapter 2 the author formulates his main research questions and the methods used for data collection. Across the book, the author attempts to cover all the influencing factors on Arabic as L2, such as proficiency and exposure, meanwhile providing the language background of the participants and their typological constellations. However, the discussion of the data specific to the participants is delayed until Chapter 7, which serves as an overview of the different linguistic structures tackled in the experiments presented in Chapters 3-6.

The experiments bear on the combination of the four languages. Russian and Chinese are present as the L1 of the participants, while Arabic and English are the participants L2. This challenging analysis provided an ideal experimental ground of an uncharted area for investigating different language similarities, differences, and effects of input exposure, L1 and L2 transfer as well as typological and structural proximity between these pairs of languages.

Each chapter (from 3 to 6) contains subsections about typological pairings, previous findings, results, input frequency and a summary. Across these chapters, the author refers to findings from his previous book (2009) in order to ensure a general understanding of different L1s origins and their features in comparison with the Arabic language.

In each of these four chapters, Alhawary devotes a sub-section called *input frequency* to provide information about the participants' previous instructed exposure to Arabic and English as L2s, in addition to a brief discussion of their language proficiency level and the material learned so far. The aim of this section is to explain the oscillation of the results between the study groups for both L1s. The author emphasizes that such a strategy also helps in uncovering the participants' linguistic repertoire and the capacities that affect the transfer process among languages or the lack of it thereof. To support his findings, in these chapters Alhawary provides a statistical analysis of the retrieved data while stressing the importance of the language exposure that led to fluctuations in the results between the different groups of L1s.

In Chapter 3, Alhawary sets forth the selected structures of the acquisition of nominal gender with details concerning the opposite typological pairings of the two investigated L1s in terms of how similar they are to Arabic as L2 and what nuanced differences they have. In this chapter, the author presents four main findings which revolve around the difficulty raised by gender assignment on nouns.

In Chapter 4, the focus is on the verbal gender agreement. The author exploits the duality between the two L1s and Arabic as L2. Three languages are discussed – Arabic, Chinese, and Russian – detailing how they resemble one another in manifesting only gender distinction between singular masculine and singular feminine verbal agreement in the past tense but not in non-past/ present tense. Accordingly, compared to Arabic, Chinese does not exhibit agreement in either case. The findings of this chapter reveal that learners of Arabic as L2 with different L1s – and across all groups – show higher accuracy in masculine gender than feminine gender agreement, which might be due to the default form of masculine used in instructions across the groups. Alhawary concludes this chapter with observations concerning the exposure time and the input frequency differences between the two L1s and the performance of all the participants.

Chapter 5 considers the acquisition of tense/ aspect focusing on past/ perfective and present/ perfective tenses for both third-person singular masculine and feminine. The main observation elicited from this chapter is that, contrary to the situation with a nominal or verbal agreement, the participants do not have the tendency to employ third-person singular masculine as the default form for either the past or the present tense. The author claims that the asymmetry in the performance in this aspect is likely due to instructional input effects since possible (positive) effects of tense from L1 transfer are the same across all groups.

In Chapter 6 the author discussed the acquisition of null subjects in the main clause type of target structure in both present and past tense inflected for both third-person singular masculine and feminine. The typological pairings underpinned in this chapter are somewhat different according to each L1. For this matter, Alhawary refers to some literature that has contrasted opinions about each L1 and their internal typologies.

The author dedicates Chapter 7 to the implications of language transfer, among other factors, in light of the preceding data and arguments from Chapters 3-6. He also focuses on other language acquisition factors such as *input frequency*, *L2 proficiency level*, and the *typological and structural proximity* for which he specifies certain sub-chapters. Alhawary also considers the question of L2 or L1 transfer since the participants were all exposed to other L2 linguistic systems besides the Arabic one. This phenomenon is a relatively new area in SLA and is referred to as L3 transfer, which adds more value to the book. The chapter concludes with a summary of all the findings and future research ideas for those interested in this field of study.

In Chapter 8 the author closes the book with arguments discussing the implications and the practical applications of the findings that can be useful for other subfields of Arabic applied linguistics, such as Arabic L2 curriculum design and Arabic proficiency testing. Hence, Alhawary starts with a discussion about specific Arabic SLA tendencies that can enrich Arabic SLA findings. He refers to previously discussed acquisition factors and highlights their roles in Arabic SLA acquisition. This chapter and the entire book conclude with a summary of the discussed topics and notes about proposed future research possibilities.

The overall style of the book is technical and narrative with rich references and appendixes for all the experiments and their results. Technical and statistical jargon and details are kept to a minimum whenever possible.

Altogether the book provides consistent examples of the tackled linguistic structures, nevertheless a few Arabic sentences are left untranscribed into English. The book misses to address the future tense in the experiment, which can be understandable in light of the students' proficiency level.

The value of the book springs from its importance in introducing the Arabic language to a variety of L1s learners and interested audience. This unique initiative not only introduces the different aspects and features of Arabic but also delves into the linguistic features of transfer and interference across languages.

References

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