Dissertation Title:
The acquisition of the English causative-inchoative alternation by Arabic native speakers

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Summary:
This study is an investigation of Arabic native speakers’ (ANSs) acquisition of the English causative-inchoative alternation (e.g., Tom broke the vase vs. The vase broke). Emphasis is placed on the relationship between English proficiency, language transfer, and Universal Grammar mechanisms in ANSs’ interlanguage representations. An acceptability judgment and correction task was administered to a total of 119 ANSs (from the Gaza Strip, Palestine) of different English proficiency levels. Additionally, 23 American native speakers of English served as controls.

The results obtained from data analyses indicated that the English causative-inchoative alternation posed a learnability problem for the Arab participants. They exhibited four major non-target behaviors: overpassivization (both ungrammatical and unnatural), overcausativization, underpassivization, and undercausativization. It is argued that these errors can largely be attributed to L1 transfer, since Arabic is substantially different from English in terms of how to encode the causative-inchoative alternation. The results also revealed sensitivity to the unaccusative-unergative distinction in English, which supports the hypothesis that ANSs have access to the innate mechanisms of Universal Grammar. Moreover, while interlanguage development towards target-like behavior was observed across proficiency groups, certain test conditions revealed a strong influence of L1 transfer on even the high proficiency participants.

The findings from the study are inconsistent with the modular view of L1 transfer (Montrul, 2000), but they lend support to the hypothesis that L1 transfer operates not only on morphology, but on lexical argument structure as well (Whong-Barr, 2005).

The study is an attempt to fill a gap in the literature, since no research has specifically investigated the acquisition of the English causative-inchoative alternation by ANSs.
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