An Optimality Approach to Saudi Learners' Production of Regular English Past Tense Verbs

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Abstract
This study provides an Optimality Theory (OT) analysis of morphological variability in Arabic coda productions of second language (L2) English. Previous studies show that L2 learners of English sometimes produce the verb with proper past tense inflectional morphology as in *help[t]* and sometimes repair the cluster, as in *help∅* or hel[pəd]. Complicating matters, these studies focused on L2 learners whose native languages disallowed codas or had very restricted codas. Thus, it is difficult to tell whether any problems in producing past tense morphology are due to L1-transferred coda constraints. To rule out native language syllable structure interference, this paper examines the production of the English regular past tense verb by Saudi learners, a language that allows complex codas. The analysis is done within and OT framework because OT allows possible outputs to be generated by the grammar based on the constraint ranking which one is the optimal candidate. The data come from 22 ESL students at three levels of proficiency. The task was a sentence list eliciting target clusters in past tense contexts fricative + stop ([st], [ft]) vs. stop + stop ([pt], [kt]). Results show that first language (L1) Arabic speakers have difficulty in producing past tense morphology, even though their L1 allows complex codas. The results show that L2 learners in this study do not begin with their native language constraint ranking because lower level learners delete a consonant from the coda cluster. However, the results do show that as the learners progress in the acquisition process, the constraints are re-ranked to reach target productions.

Keywords: English past tense morphology, Optimality Theory, Saudi learner, variable production