

## **Morphology**

By Dr. Elizabeth Platt, Florida State University

### **Acquisition of an Inflectional System**

In order to understand the importance of the acquisition of an inflectional morphological system we need to compare several languages, some of which are spoken by our students. We have already seen that English has a rather simple way of marking nouns, with either a plural or singular form. However, Spanish, Italian, and other Romance languages also gender-mark nouns. For example, in Spanish, table is *mesa*, a feminine form, and book is *libro*, a masculine form. Articles preceding, and adjectives following these nouns must also agree in gender and number with the nouns, as in the following examples:

***El libro rojo est`a en la mesa peque~a.*** (The book red is on the table small)

***Los libros rojos estan en las mesas pequenas.*** (The books red are on the tables small)

Other kinds of noun marking also occur in languages. Many indigenous languages spoken in North and South America use classifier systems according to their shape. Shapes often marked in classifier languages include “round” and “long, cylindrical.” A word like sun would thus include two parts –the classifier and the name of the thing itself. Vietnamese and Chinese also have classifier systems, though the systems include semantic information as well as information about shapes. Other languages, such as the Bantu languages in Eastern and Southern Africa, have concordance systems. For example, Swahili has eight noun classes, most having singular and plural forms. These are basically semantic classes, such as the “*m-*” “*wa-*” class that includes most of the names of animals and humans. When a language has a noun concordance system, adjectives, possessives, locatives, and verbs all carry the concordance markers of the head noun, as in the following sentence whose subject is a “*m-*” “*wa-*” class noun.

***Watu wale wawili walikwenda sokoni***

**People those two 3ps-past-go market-to**

Finally, many European languages, especially those spoken by Slavic people, have case marking on nouns. English carries a remnant of case marking in its pronoun system: *he* when used as sentence subject, *him* as object, *his* as possessive, and *himself* as reflective. Other languages also mark nouns in this way, and may also mark more than just these three cases.

English has a relatively simple system of marking nouns. If we were to study verbs and other lexical categories, we would find similar complexity in systems different from English. Therefore, for native English speakers of those languages, the English system of plural marking should be easy (especially for speakers of languages in the South Pacific that have forms of showing a three-way distinction: singular, two only, and more than two).

However, some languages spoken in Southeast Asia, of which Vietnamese is the best example, have no affixation whatsoever on any word. Thus, plurality can only be shown by specifying number, or using a word like many. When Vietnamese speakers begin learning English, they usually omit the plural endings, as well as the verb tenses (there are also phonological reasons for these omissions). Therefore, acquisition of the English plural form is often problematic for the speakers of Asian languages; the “-s” may not occur regularly, even in the speech of well-advanced learners.

We cannot leave this section with a misperception about the nature of the English inflectional morphology system. Because it lacks the large number of forms that other languages have, one might think it is easy to learn. But it is with these very simple morphological forms that non-native speakers experience the most difficulty. Some researchers (Slobin, 1979 and Jaeggli and Hyams, 1986) have suggested that morphologically complex, but regular, systems are easier for small children to learn than reduced, irregular ones.

Systems in which the same morpheme is used for more than one purpose are also difficult for learners. For example, *do* is both a semantically empty function word (auxiliary) and a verb in its own right. Children learning Turkish or Spanish as their first language may spend less time acquiring their very elaborate, but consistent, system of verb affixes than do children learning English who must learn the “do” support system mentioned earlier. This is apparently also the case for second language learners.