The Language Characteristics of Arabic Speakers with Specific Language Impairment (SLI)

Areej Balilah and Lisa Archibald
Western University
larchiba@uwo.ca

Introduction

- Children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI) unexpectedly fail to develop language.

- Examining data from children with SLI in a specific language (Arabic) can inform theoretical perspectives of this disorder.

- Several theories have been advanced to explain the observation of disproportionate deficits in grammar among English speakers of SLI.

- Consideration of the extent to which such theories are consistent with observations of SLI groups speaking languages other than English may help to identify potential universal deficits in SLI.

Purpose of the Study

This study provides a review of available data on the characteristics of Arabic speakers with SLI, and critically evaluates the findings in light of current theories of SLI.

Arabic Language

- Arabic is a Semitic language
- Root and pattern language
- Complex interaction between syntax, morphology, and phonology
- Rich bound morphology
- Intricate verb system
- Null subject prosperities
- Lack of an infinitival form

Table 1. Verb paradigm for **r-s-m** (draw)

Person	Gender	Present	Past	Imperative
First	Sing.	ʔarsum	rasmt	
	Plur.	nirsum	rasamna	
Second	Masc. sing.	tirsum	rasamt	ʔrsum
	Fem. sing.	tirsumi	rasmti	ʔrsumi
	Plur.	tirsumu	rasamtu	ʔrsumu
Third	Masc. sing.	yrsum	rasm	
	Fem. sing	tirsum	rasamt	
	Plur.	yirsumu	rasamu	

Common Error Type observed in Arabic-speaking children with SLI

Tense

Substitution:

a) Tense / Imperative errors
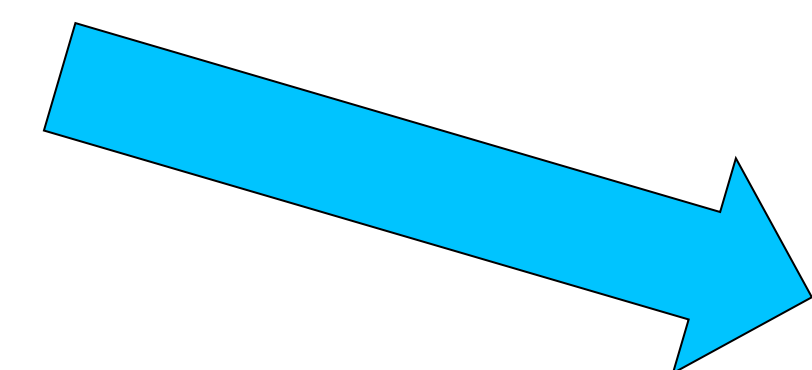
katab
He wrote
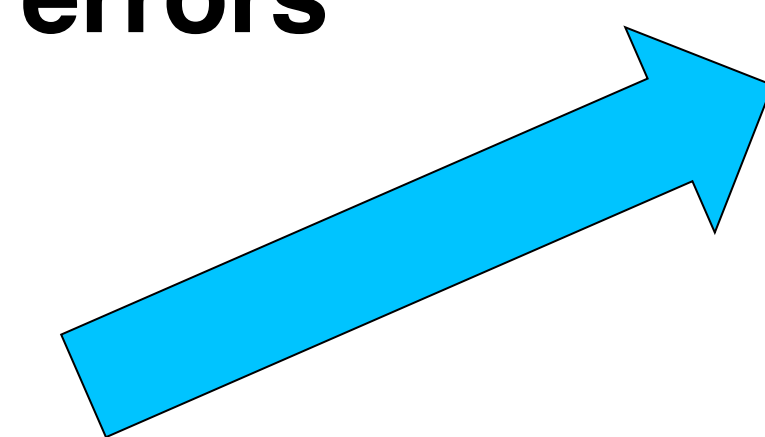
→ **ʔuktub** Write! [He]

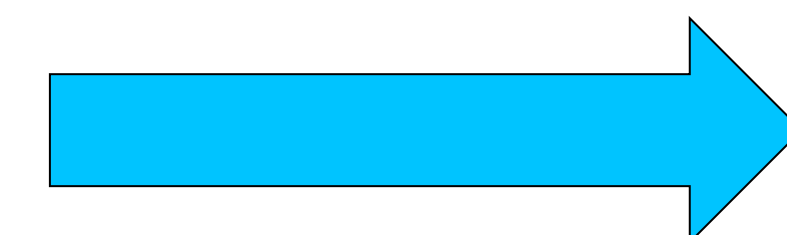→ **ʔuktubi** Write! [She]

→ **ʔuktubu** Write! [They]

b) First person singular present / Imperative errors (homophonous forms)
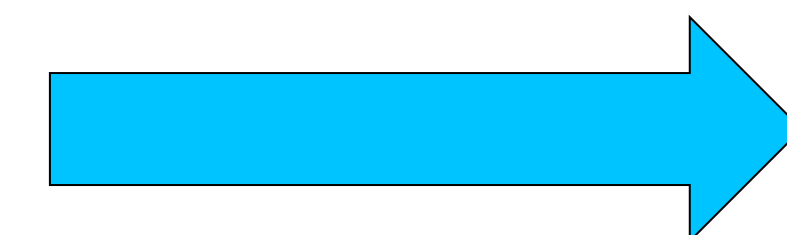
ʔaktub
I am writing

→ **ʔaktub**
Write!

c) Present / past errors

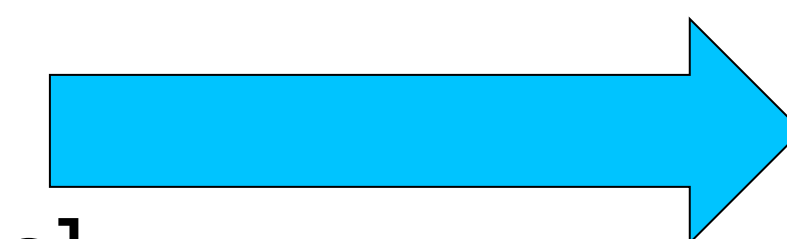**yiktub**
He is writing

→ **katab**
He wrote

Subject-verb agreement

a) Person agreement errors:

Hua yakul
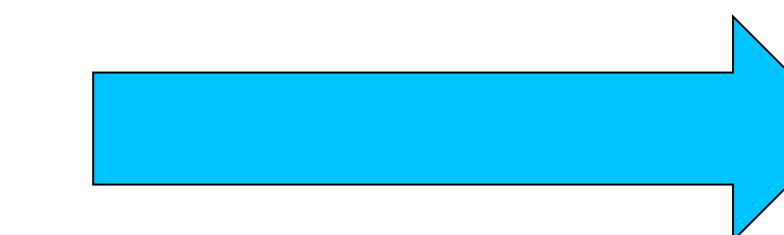He is "eating" [He is]
(3 person sing.)

→ **Hua ʔakul**
He is "eating" [I am]
(1 person. sing.)

b) Number agreement errors: (singular for plural)

Huma yaklu
They are "eating" [They are]

→ **Huma yakul**
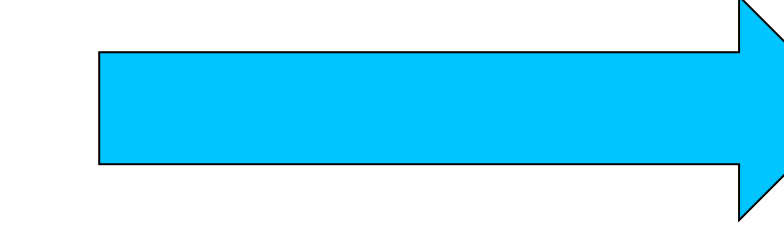They are "eating" [He is]

c) Gender agreement errors

Hya yakul
She is "eating" [He]

Hua takul
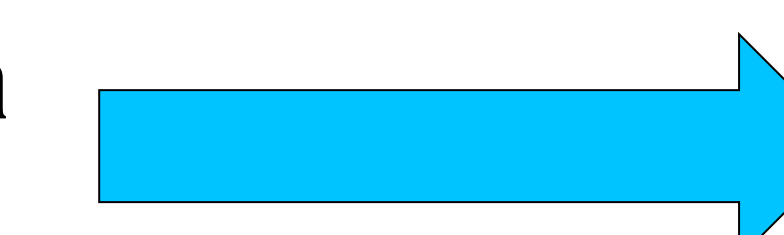He is "eating" [She]

Definite article (omission)

Al madrasah
The   school

→ **madrasah**
school

Prepositions (omission / substitution)

ħalyb bi shukulata
Milk with chocolate
(Chocolate milk)

→ **ħalyb Ø shukulata**
Milk chocolate

Conclusions

- SLI errors in Arabic occur in several parts of speech: verb tense and agreement, articles, prepositions
- Patterns requiring more marking are reduced to fewer and/or more frequently occurring patterns
- Grammatical complexity of pattern predicts most SLI errors in Arabic
- Error types differ from English, however, complexity of the form accounts for many errors across languages

References

1) Abdalla, F. (2000). Verbal inflection in Arabic-speaking children with specific language impairment. *Unpublished manuscript, McGill University, Montreal .* 2) Abdalla, F. (2002). Specific language impairment in Arabic-speaking children: deficits in morphosyntax. *Ph.D. dissertation, McGill University.* 3) Abdalla, F., & Aljenaie, K. (2011). Plural noun inflection in Kuwaiti Arabic-speaking children with and without Specific Language Impairment. *J. Child Lang.* 40 (2013), 139–168. 4) Abdalla, F., Crago, M. (2008). Verb Morphology Deficits in Arabic-Speaking Children with Specific Language Impairment. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, v29 n2 p315-340. 5) Shaalan, S. (2010) Investigating Grammatical Complexity in Gulf Arabic Speaking Children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI). University College London.