

THURSDAY INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLOQUIUM

Thursday 08/01/2026

16:15-17:45

Webb 103

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THE ACQUISITION OF WORD MEDIAL CLUSTERS IN PALESTINIAN ARABIC: UNEXPECTED RESULTS

This study addresses the acquisition of word-medial consonant clusters in Palestinian Arabic. Notably, Palestinian Arabic permits a wide range of word-medial clusters of all sonority profiles rendering the Syllable Contact Law (SCL), which gives priority to sonority fall (Fall > Plateau > Rise), violable. Given the hypothesis that universal constraints play a role in language acquisition, *the prediction is that children will be more faithful to the better sonority profiles, i.e. fall*. Additionally, sonority fall is also the most frequent profile in Child Directed Speech (CDS), thus reinforcing our prediction.

To examine this prediction, we analyzed cross-sectional data selected from 43 children (aged 1;4–3;1) acquiring Palestinian Arabic. After excluding various data items, we were left with 1200 words medial clusters.

Unexpectedly, the children were more faithful to target clusters with sonority rise (66%) than with sonority fall (53%), even though they attempted more clusters with sonority fall (51%) than with sonority rise (37%). That is, both, the SCL (a universal constraint) frequency in CDS (language-specific property) fall short in accounting for these results.

Our account for these unexpected results relies on the cluster simplification strategies children employ before producing faithful clusters, mostly C-deletion (e.g. *ʔatʕfá:l* → [ʔafá:l] ‘babies’) and gemination (e.g. *daktó:r* → [dattó:l] ‘doctor’). We argue that two strength hierarchies are involved in the simplification strategies – prosodic strength (onset > coda) and segmental strength (obstruents > sonorants). In clusters with sonority fall the two strength hierarchies overlap: the weak segment is in a weak position and thus often deleted. However, in clusters with sonority rise the two hierarchies cancel each other, giving equal strength to the two consonants in the cluster.

The study demonstrates that salient factors (in our case the SCL and/or frequency) are not necessarily those that shape the acquisition process.

Click [here](#) to see the colloquium program.