



The Quality of Second-Language Writing (Hebrew) among Arab Students in Israel

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Abstract

The paper deals with the level of syntactic complexity of subordinate clauses in argument texts spontaneously produced in Hebrew by Arab female freshmen specializing in the teaching of Hebrew at Academic College of Education in Israel.

Syntactic complexity is examined by means of the relationships between main clauses and various types of subordinate clauses; by categorizing types of logical connections encoded; and by determining the complexity of the subordinate clause itself.

Our research revealed three categories of subordinate clauses arranged by their level of syntactic complexity: a. content clauses indicating a low level of complexity due to their role as mere providers of necessary information; b. Descriptive clauses indicating a high complexity level due to their free main clause placement; c. relative clauses expanding the nominal phrase and creating a high degree of compression.

We found that the types of logical connections encoded by the clauses are few, unvaried and at times lexically wrong or completely absent due to first language interference, or are repeated so as to validate the addressor's position in an argument text. Furthermore their subordinate clauses contained many contents units pointing to undeveloped segments of thought: a kind of brain storm the writer conducts with himself.

1. The status of Hebrew among Israel's Arab students

The State of Israel has two official languages, Hebrew and Arabic. Hebrew is the language of the majority and enjoys a position of clear dominance and preference (Shohami & Spolski 2002) while Arabic is considered the language of the Arab minority, which constitutes about twenty percent of the country's populace.

In Israel's Arab school system Hebrew has been taught as a second language whose study is compulsory between the third and the twelfth grades. Hebrew is also acquired in informal settings such as work places, public institutions.

2. Writing an argumentation text

Argumentation is one of the most basic linguistic discourse structures. Argumentative writing is one of the main genres of theoretical discourse required of students.

The logical structure of the argument text according to the Aristotelian philosophical tradition is the product of a thinking process consisting of a number of stages through which the addresser goes: Claim – argumentation – conclusion.

3. Study objectives and research question

The study aimed to examine the academic competence of Arabic-writing students in Hebrew by measuring syntactic complexity of their academic writing.

The research questions are:

What is the logical-semantic relation between the main clause and the type of subordinate clause?

What characterizes the subordinate clause in terms of complexity in writing syntactically of Arab students?

4. Method

The subject population consisted of twenty Arab female freshmen specializing in the teaching of Hebrew at Academic College of Education in Israel.

The instruction the students were given was as follows: "Whether the psychometric exam should be retained or abolished is an issue that adults are debating. Everyone has their own views on the matter. Think about this subject, the causes and the results, and write a composition that presents your position on it". The students were given forty-five minutes to complete the task, about one-half of a lesson.

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We thus possess twenty handwritten texts, each between one-half and one folio page. We got all the subordinate clauses; classified the types of logical connections encoded by the clauses; Checked the lexical aspect of the connecting word and characterized the complexity of the subordinate clause itself for the purpose of creating a convincing and cohesive text in the second language.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 The relationship between the main clause and the type of subordinate clause

In Hebrew the subordinating conjunction between the main clause and the subordinate clause is usually **she-** (that).

Below three types of subordinate clauses: Descriptive clauses, relative clauses and content clauses. In many cases the production of subordinate clauses that begin with logico-semantic connectors are unnecessary in accordance to the rules of Hebrew main clause syntax and that syntactic errors are made under the influence of the writer's native language-Arabic.

5.1.1 Descriptive clauses

Such clauses by their very nature represent a high degree of complexity, reflecting as they do a logical relationship with the main clause.

Below are examples of descriptive clauses whose production fails to materialize this.

Causal clause

Causal clauses connect the two parts of the clause with a causal connection. Here is an example in which a causal connector is used instead of one denoting result:

1. Yesh anashim she-ovrim oto bli qashot, ve-aherim lo ya'aviru oto **biglal she-**hu lo me'afsher otam livhor et ha-miqtsot she-hem hashvu oto mat'im lahem.

Some people pass it without any difficulty and others will not pass it **because** it does not enable them to choose the profession which they think is fitting for them.

Purpose clause

There is no thematic connection between the main clause and the clause that begins with the subordinating particle kedey she ("in order for").

1. Ani madgisha she-ha-mivhan ha-psikhometri hu tsarikh lihyot batul **kedey she-**ha-avira normalit uzeman tov lahshov lifney lesamen teshuva

I stress that the psychometric test should be abolished **in order for** the climate to be normal and plenty of time to think before putting down an answer.

5.1.2 Relative and other complement clauses

In Hebrew a relative clause qualifies a nominal head, which may consist of a noun phrase, a noun or a pronoun. It can be connected to the head by means of a relative pronoun: she-, asher.

In many cases what the student wants to say is not consistent with use of the subordinating particle **she-**, since the following clause does not expand on the noun phrase. Here are a number of examples:

A. She- (=that) used instead of another complementizer to begin a clause

She- instead of the proper particle that introduces a causal clause (mi-peney she-) (because)

1. Mivhan ha-psykhometri hashuv me'od le-khol ha-talimidim ha-mathilim et ha-limud ha-aqademi, **she-**hu mehaleq otam le-fi ha-rama shelahem

The psychometric test is very important for all students who begin their university studies, **that** it divides them according to their level.

She- instead of the proper particle that introduces a temporal clause (ka-asher) (when)

2. Le-da'ati ze basis halash **she-**aqadema'i mithayev ve-livnot he-'atid shelo me'alav ve-lilmod mashehu she-lo ohev.

In my opinion this is a weak base **that** a college graduate commits himself and to build his future on it and to learn something that he does not like.

B. She- (=that) after a parenthetical phrase

The subordinating particle **she-** often appears in student compositions after an expressed opinion. This is due to the fact that in the students' native language, Arabic, the construction **parenthetical + subordinating conjunction + noun phrase + verb** is quite common.

In fact, in Arabic the subordinating conjunctions inna and its "sisters" can begin a main clause in order to stress it in its entirety (Margolin & Ezer 2014:171). In Hebrew the use of the subordinating conjunction she- in this context is a syntactic error.

1. Le-tsa'ari ha-rav **she-**harbe talimidim lo matslihim ba-mivhan ha-ze



Unfortunately **that** many students do not succeed in this exam.

5.1.3 Content clauses

The simplest kinds of subordinate clauses are content clauses that function as object. Such content clauses have a low complexity level due to their syntactic function, which merely conveys subcategorized complements needed for understanding the idea that the main clause communicates.. Their production was not marked by any particular difficulties.

1. Ani **ro'e she**-kol ha-mivhan ha-ze eno meshaqef ramat ha-yeda' etsel ha-talmid .

I see that this entire test does not reflect the student's level of knowledge.

5.2 Complexity of the subordinate clause

Subordinate clauses may themselves consist of more than one clause which are subordinate or conjoined.

Subordinate clauses are indicative of complex and complicated mental structures. The advantage of subordination is that it expresses thoughts with greater precision (Fruchtman 1971:29). However, when subordinate clauses are long, clumsy and very wordy, they do not of necessity express exactly what the writer wants to say, and may in fact also contain grammatical errors. Too much verbiage is not always a sign of linguistic ability; it may indicate a pragmatic failure due to the writer's distrust of his or her own communicative skills or to the influence of one's native language when writing in a target language.

In our case specifically, Arab students when writing in Hebrew are affected by their native language, whose discourse is built of combinations of parallel lines with very flexible mutual connections (Margolin & Ezer 2014). They repeat connectives in order to validate their arguments, and so create disconnected parallel lines. Between these parallel lines there are missing links, which must be filled in by the addressee if he is to understand the discourse and recognize the conclusions that are to be derived from it.

Below are a number of examples for the complexity of subordinate clauses, arranged according to various structures that were found in the students' compositions:

A. Sequence of subordinate clauses: Subordination instead of coordination

The complementizer **she-** instead of coordination (logico-semantic linking connector)

1. Yesh ha-yom harbe qursim ve-hadrakhot **she**-yekholim la'azor le-talmidenu leshaper et ha-tsiyum **she**-olim harbe kesef .

There are many courses and instructions today **that** can help our students improve their grade **that** cost a lot of money.

The complementizer **she-** instead of coordination (logico-semantic contrasting connector)

2. Psikhometri ze ha-delet ha-rishona le-limudim aqadema'iyim **she**-yakhol lihyot mikhshol le-hemshkhiyut **she**-yakhol laharos ve-lishbor talmidim.

B. Parallel subordinate clauses

In the following main clauses there are sequences of subordinate clauses, each of which is linked to the same main clause through a repetition of the complementizer.

In the examples below we find relative clauses that expand a noun phrase functioning as the subject of the main clause (harbe talmidim "many students"), following which the student skips the predicate and continues on to a new main clause.

1. Harbe **talmidim she**-nisu la'asot oto kama pe'amim **she**-bizbezu shanim bishvil lehagia' la-miqtsa' **she**-ratsu lilmod ba-mikhla u-va-sof nishberu ve-lo himshikhu ve-halkhu le-miqtsa'ot **she**-lo ratsu otam az le-da'ati ...

Many students who tried to do it a number of times **who** wasted years in order to be accepted into the subject **that** they wanted study at college and in the end they gave up and did not continue and went into subjects **that** they did not want, so in my opinion ...

6. Conclusion

Our study thus describes the connection between the argumentative genre and syntactic characteristics from a developmental perspective. It takes considerable experience and cognitive effort to produce an argumentation text that is coherent, and containing well-developed logical thoughts.

In many cases the production of subordinate clauses that begin with logico-semantic connectors seems at first glance to create a high degree of syntactic complexity. However, an examination of the subordinate clauses shows that they are unnecessary in accordance to the rules of Hebrew main clause syntax and that syntactic errors are made under the influence of the writer's native language.



As for the subordinate clauses themselves, they were found to contain structures of several content units, but the ideas in these units are not well developed, consisting of unfinished and partial ideas, some quite repetitive, reflecting a kind of brainstorming which the student carries out with him/herself. The Arab freshmen students of the Department of Hebrew Language and Linguistics at the Beit Berl Academic College may be said to be at an advanced stage of acquisition of Hebrew as a second language.

References

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