The acquisition of the Dholuo Plural
Peter Avery

York University - Canada

In this paper we report on ongoing research on the acquisition of Dholuo plural morphology. We provide a description of the complex nominal morphology of Dholuo and report the results of a study of Dholuo-speaking school children.

Results of a preliminary study of 100 common nouns with primary school and high school students revealed a wide range of variation in the reported plural forms for these nouns, with the variation decreasing as a function of age. Our analysis reveals that younger children (6-11) display a wide range of variants for most of the nouns, including several forms not predicted by the synchronic grammar. However, this variation decreases as children grow older (13-17), reflecting the emergence of a community standard, though a significant amount of variation remains.

A further study with 24 actual words and 25 nonsense words was then conducted. Nonsense items were constructed that would have the greatest possibility for some of the morphophonemic changes that are prevalent in the ambient language. In this study, we found that the morphophonemic alternations are slowly learned for the real words but that the nonsense words do not pattern in the same way. Stem-final consonant alternations that are commonly found among the real words were very rare with the nonsense words. Younger children often provided no plural form or defaulted to a '–ni' or '–e' suffix in the nonsense words, even though they controlled a significant number of similar high frequency plurals that display stem-final consonant alternations in the real words. The most common morphophonemic alternations provided in the nonsense words involve a change from a stem-final nasal to a prenasalized stop. The choice of a 'default' plural marker in the nonsense words reveals the emergence of subtle knowledge of the phonological structure of words.

We conclude with a discussion of additional research questions we are currently investigating.