The Semantics of –ship and -hood from a Foreign Language Learner's Perspective

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Abstract: *This paper reports on the findings of a large-scale study on how a group of EFL learners at university interact with the semantics of -ship and –hood. The data are elicited through a written task consisting of sixteen sentences, each containing a word that is normally suffixed with –ship or –hood. The subjects are asked to judge whether each sentence is error-free or faulty. If they decide that a certain sentence is erroneous, they are requested to identify the error and then correct it. The findings indicate the subjects do not find the semantics of –ship harder than that of –hood. It seems that the variation in accuracy scores is ascribed to the subjects' familiarity or unfamiliarity with particular items rather than to inherent difficulty associated with the suffix itself. Moreover, the findings suggest that the subjects' correction attempts are not consistent with their attempts to identify errors. Hence, it may be argued that only a high percentage of accurate judgments coupled with a similar high percentage of correction can be taken as an indication of the acquisition of the proposed constraints.*

1. Introduction

This paper explores how Jordanian EFL learners at university level interact with *–ship* and *–hood* suffixed words. While *–ship* attaches to many nouns as in (1a), it does not attach to many other nouns, as in (1b).

(1a) dictatorship, friendship, fellowship, professorship
(1b) ??childship, ??mothership, ??wifeship, ??womanship

On the other hand, *–hood* attaches to all nouns in (1b), but it does not attach to any of the nouns in (1a). However, there is a set of nouns to which both *–ship* and *–hood* can attach, as in (2).

(2)

bachelorship	bachelorhood
fathership	fatherhood
queenship	queenhood

The examples cited above raise an important question on the constraints which *–ship* and *–hood* suffixes impose on the nouns

to which they attach. Aronoff and Cho (2001:167) suggested that 'the English suffix *–ship* is sensitive to the distinction between stage- and individual- level predicates'. Put differently, *-ship* attaches to roots indicating temporary stages or transient features. For instance, *friendship* in (1a) may feature a temporary stage of one's relation with others, but *motherhood* in (1b) marks a permanent phenomenon, i.e., once one becomes a mother, she continues to be so all her life. This implies that *–hood* attaches to individual-level predicates, i.e., to individuals or individual properties with no regard to time. Katamba (1993) proposed a morphological constraint for the *–hood* suffix. He observed (ibid.:76) that *–hood* tends to attach to native (Anglo-Saxon) roots as in *boyhood* and *childhood*, and that it does not co-occur with Latinate (borrowed) roots, e.g., *minister* and *prisoner*. However, Katamba cautioned that 'we should be careful not to press this [constraint] too far' (ibid.:77). In fact, the roots *parent* and *nation* provide counter evidence. Both are borrowed from French, but they attach to *–hood* as in *parenthood* and *nationhood*.

The fact that *–ship* attaches to stage-level roots should not automatically lead to the conclusion that this 'is a fact about morphological processes that have abstract properties – that such processes must always do this, for some general semantic or pragmatic reasons' (Aronoff and Cho 2001:171). Counter evidence comes from *–hood* when it has senses similar to those of *–ship*. For instance, while it is possible to have both *priesthood* and *priestship* since the root denotes a rank, it is only possible to have *wifehood* but not *wifeship*. When both *–ship* and *–hood* are possible, this means that the base can be a stage-level predicate in one reading, and an individual-level predicate in another (ibid.:172). Aronoff and Cho concluded that 'the semantic restriction on the suffix is part of the lexical semantics of *–ship* and not a general fact about suffixes that form abstract nouns from common personal nouns' (ibid.:172).

It seems that Aronoff and Cho (2001) were not very pleased with their proposal. For instance, *childhood* and *wifehood* are not 'stable or enduring properties of an individual' (ibid.:168). Hence, they took the matter a step forward, and suggested a finer distinction between what they called left-side individual-level predicates (LSILPs) and right-side individual-level predicates

(RSILPs). They argued (ibid.:169) that while LSILPs 'denote properties that individuals have at birth and retain until a certain point in time', e.g., *boy*, RSILPs 'denote properties that individuals acquire at a certain point in their lives and retain for the rest of their lives,' e.g., *mother* (see also Musan 1995:23). In other words, John, for instance, is a boy at birth, and ceases to be so at a certain age. In contrast, Mary, say John's mother, is not a *mother* at birth, but becomes so when she delivers her first child, and she remains a *mother* for the rest of her life. Aronoff and Cho (ibid.) suggested that both LSILPs and RSILPs cannot appear with *–ship*. One interesting counter example to this theorizing is that many faculty members acquire *professorship* at 'a certain point in their lives and retain [it] for the rest of their lives'.

Although establishing constraints for the *–ship* and *–hood* suffixes goes beyond the scope of this paper, a major problem with Aronoff and Cho's constraints is that it has not been shown yet that they do really exist. Following Pinker's (1989:53) logic, while trying to establish semantic constraints on verb argument structure, one needs to know if 'adults respect them [the constraints], and that children are in the process of coming to respect them'. In this context, suppose Aronoff and Cho's constraints, or any other more conclusive ones, are available to the native speaker of English, one may wish to know the extent to which, say, a group of advanced EFL learners have acquired such constraints, particularly in the absence of explicit and relevant teaching/learning materials. Such learners should be able to demonstrate their (partial or complete) acquisition of these constraints through their interaction with a set of *–ship* and *–hood* suffixed words.

Studies which have investigated how EFL learners acquire the morphology of the target language are mainly concerned with inflectional or grammatical morphemes (e.g., Larsen-Freeman 1978; Zalewski 1993; Douglas 1998). Studies on the acquisition of derivational morphemes are still limited both in number and scope. Hamdan (2002) stands as a contribution in this regard. The study concluded that the subjects encountered considerable problems in the formation of nationality words; however, they did not find the morphs involved equally difficult. Hamdan suggested that words ending in *–ian* were acquired first, followed by words ending in *–i*, *-ese*, *-ish*, *-an* and *–er* (ibid.:74). The study

concluded that these difficulties might imply that the subjects were not fully aware of the constraints that govern the behavior of the nationality morpheme.

Felix (qtd. in Bley–Vroman 1990:31) argued that advanced adult learners often can judge whether something in the foreign language (FL) sounds right or wrong without necessarily being able to justify their judgment. In the same vein, the study reported here is designed to investigate the extent to which a group of advanced Jordanian EFL learners (who have almost completed all language requirements for a bachelor's degree in English) can judge the acceptability of a set of *–ship* and *–hood* suffixed words, and the extent to which they can fix what they 'feel wrong'.

2. Methodology

2.1. Subjects

The subjects were 100 fourth-year EFL learners (94 females and 6 males) in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Jordan, with a mean age of 21.6 years. Prior to university, they received eight years of formal instruction in EFL at school. At the time of data collection, they had taken around 24 three-credit hour courses almost equally distributed between literature and language/linguistics. However, it is useful to observe that the language/linguistics component did not include any independent courses in morphology or vocabulary development. Morphology in general and suffixation in particular are addressed, though briefly, in one of the two syntax courses offered by the Department. All the subjects were native speakers of Jordanian Arabic, who also had some working knowledge of Modern Standard Arabic. None of the subjects lived in an English-speaking country for more than three months.

2.2. Data collection

2.2.1. Background

Before exploring how EFL learners interact with words suffixed with *–ship* and *–hood*, the researchers identified the various senses of *–ship* and *–hood* in three online dictionaries, viz. *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, *Oxford Advanced*

Learner's Dictionary of Current English, and *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. This step was felt necessary to ensure the inclusion of all possible senses in the data collection tool. Below is a list of the various senses of each suffix (see also Aronoff and Cho 2001).

(3) -ship senses
- (i) particular rank or position of job, status or office of, or the time during which you have it, e.g., professorship, premiership, citizenship
- (ii) state or condition or quality of, e.g., friendship, ownership, companionship
- (iii) particular art or skill, e.g., musicianship, scholarship, horsemanship
- (iv) all the people in a particular group, e.g., readership, listenership

(4) – hood senses
- (i) period of time: during his childhood (= when he was a child), boyhood, virginhood
- (ii) condition, state or quality of, e.g., parenthood, widowerhood, motherhood
- (iii) instance of specified state or quality, e.g., falsehood, lustihood, jealoushood
- (iv) all the people who belong to a particular group, e.g., the priesthood (= all the people who are priests), brotherhood, neighborhood

As is clear, senses 2 and 4 of *–ship* and *–hood* are very similar, if not identical. However, *friendhood*, *parentship*, *readerhood*, and *brothership* sound quite odd. Aronoff and Cho's (2001) constraints aside, this shows that senses cannot qualify as a helpful base to guide the acquisition or learning process. Whether this implies a subtle difference in constraints stipulated by the base form remains to be explored.

2.2.2. Data collection

Having presented and highlighted the basic senses of the two suffixes, the researchers prepared a data collection tool consisting of sixteen stimulus sentences, each containing a word that is normally suffixed with *–ship* or *–hood*. The sentences were kept as simple as possible in terms of structure and vocabulary. Each of the four senses of *–ship* and *–hood* was represented by two tokens; the first displays the normal use of the suffix, while the

second shows a mismatch between the suffix and the base (see Appendices 1 and 2). In addition, the tool included eight sentences, each containing a word that is normally suffixed with –*ism* or –*ity*, (but the faulty ones appeared with –*ship* or –*hood*); these sentences were meant to minimize the visibility of the task focus (see Appendix 2). To ensure the validity of the collection tool, it was given to twenty native speakers of English (British and American, aged 20-23 years) who were enrolled in an Arabic language course at the Language Centre, University of Jordan. They were in 95% to 100% agreement in their judgments and corrections of the stimulus sentences.

The subjects were asked to decide whether each sentence contained an error or not. If they thought that a certain sentence was erroneous, they were requested to identify the error and then correct it. No time limit was set for the task; however, most of the subjects completed it in less than forty minutes.

3. Results and discussion

The findings will be reported and discussed in light of the subjects' overall performance on each stimulus sentence, judging it either as error-free or erroneous, in which case an error has to be identified and corrected. First, we focus on judgments, then we proceed to the correction attempts. Table 1 provides a complete list of the percentages of accurate responses in terms of error identification (or error-free confirmation) and correction. As is clear, the rate of accurate judgments (column before last) varied across the target items, ranging from 30% for *falsehood* to 94% for *childhood*, with an overall rate amounting to 73%. In light of this, an attempt will be made to answer the following questions:

1. Which items are more difficult to acquire, the –*ship* or the –*hood* items? Difficulty is assumed to show up in a consistent low percentage of accurate judgments and corrections.
2. Which senses within each suffix are more difficult to acquire?
3. Is a relatively high percentage of accurate judgments an indication of the acquisition of constraints?

Table 1: Percentage of accurate judgments and corrections[1]

Stimulus item	Status	Sense	Correct form	Judgment	Correction	
				%	No.	%
1. premierhood	X	-ship sense 1	premiership	59	31	53
2. citizenship	√	-ship sense 1	NA	71	NA	NA
3. companionhood	X	-ship sense 2	companionship	89	77	87
4. ownership	√	-ship sense 2	NA	87	NA	NA
5. musicianhood	X	-ship sense 3	musicianship	79	11	14
6. horsemanship	√	-ship sense 3	NA	48	NA	NA
7. memberhood	X	-ship sense 4	membership	82	77	94
8. readership	√	-ship sense 4	NA	60	NA	NA
Mean				**72**		
9. adultship	X	-hood sense 1	adulthood	84	75	89
10. childhood	√	-hood sense 1	NA	94	NA	NA
11. manship	X	-hood sense 2	manhood	91	87	97
12. motherhood	√	-hood sense 2	NA	79	NA	NA
13. likeliship	X	-hood sense 3	likelihood	65	20	31
14. falsehood	√	-hood sense 3	NA	30	NA	NA
15. priestship	X	-hood sense 4	priesthood	67	38	57
16. neighborhood	√	-hood sense 4	NA	83	NA	NA
Mean				**74**		
Overall Mean				**73**		

3.1 Difficulty dichotomy: –ship versus –hood

A look at the mean responses for the *–ship*-based items and the *–hood*-based items displayed in Table 1 shows that the percentage of accurate responses for each set was 72% and 74%, respectively. The difference between the two means is negligible. Hence, one can conclude that the subjects did not find the semantics of *–ship* harder than that of *–hood*. Nonetheless, in order to account for the difference in accuracy rates within and across the two sets, one may wish to examine the difficulty status of the individual items comprising each set. An examination of the *–ship* items shows that the percentage of accuracy ranged

from 48% for *horsemanship* to 89% for *companionship*. Obviously, two items namely, *horsemanship* (48%) and *premiership* (59%) were primarily responsible for the slightly lower mean of accuracy of this set. In contrast, the accuracy rates for the *–hood* items ranged from 30% for *falsehood* to 94% for *childhood*. It seems that the slightly higher mean of accuracy of this set is caused by two items, namely, *childhood* (94%) and *manhood* (91%). In sum, the mean difference within and between the two sets is more likely to be ascribed to certain individual items, rather than to inherent difficulty associated with a particular set.

3.2 Difficulty in terms of sense within each suffix

Table 2 shows that the percentage of accurate judgments in terms of sense within the *–ship* set ranged between 64%-65% for senses 3 and 1 on the one hand, and 71%-88% for senses 4 and 2 on the other. As is clear, the differences between senses 3 and 1 are too small to warrant a specific interpretation. Put another way, the subjects seemed to have found the stimulus items of these two senses of *–ship* equally difficult/easy to judge either as error free or erroneous. On the other hand, the differences between senses 4 and 2 may be ascribed to the belief that the subjects are more familiar with the items representing sense 2 than with those representing sense 4. Whether the subjects' familiarity of a certain item here correlates with its frequency of occurrence in immediate English language teaching (ELT) materials or in the language as one whole requires further research. In contrast, the percentage of accurate judgments of the *–hood* senses ranged between 48% for sense 4 and 89% for sense 1. It seems that the subjects found the third sense of *–hood* the most difficult, probably because the two exemplars of this sense, that is, *falsehood* (30%) and *likelihood* (65%) are less salient to the subjects than the exemplars of the other senses in the ELT material to which the subjects are exposed. Finally, it is worth noting that sense 4 of *–ship* and sense 4 of *–hood* are almost identical, which may explain why the subjects judged the acceptability status of the sentences containing the items representing each suffix with approximately the same level of accuracy, that is, 71% and 75%, respectively.

Table 2: Percentage of accurate judgments in terms of sense within each suffix

Suffix	Sense	Stimulus item	Status in the task	% of judgment accuracy
-ship	1	premierhood	X	65
	١	citizenship	√	
	2	companionhood	X	88
	2	ownership	√	
	3	musicianhood	X	64
	3	horsemanship	√	
	4	memberhood	X	71
	4	readership	√	
-hood	1	adultship	X	89
	١	childhood	√	
	2	manship	X	85
	2	motherhood	√	
	3	likeliship	X	48
	3	falsehood	√	
	4	priestship	X	75
	4	neighborhood	√	

3.3 Accurate judgments as an indicator of acquisition

A basic feature of native or native-like competence is the speaker's intuitive ability to provide accurate and consistent acceptability judgments for a set of given items, and to suggest corrections for those judged as unacceptable. Obviously, the relatively non-high and inconsistent percentage of accurate judgments within each set of suffixes and across the two sets does not indicate that the subjects have acquired the proposed constraints or any other constraints that govern the attachment of these suffixes to the respective base forms. But to what extent does this finding motivate a more humble conclusion that the two thirds of the subjects or so (i.e., 73%) who successfully judged the acceptability or unacceptability of the stimulus items have acquired or were about to acquire the proposed constrains? One way to answer this question is to examine the percentage of the

subjects who were able to provide the correct form among those who made accurate judgments with regard to the faulty items.
A careful examination of the last two columns in Table 1 suggests that the percentage of correct form providers among error finders tends to be low. For instance, only 14% of the subjects who were able to identify *musicianhood* as faulty were also able to provide the correct form. A similar low percentage of correction marked the performance of the subjects who managed to identify the faulty item *likelishiр*; only 31% of them supplied the correct form. Further low correction percentages are associated with the faulty items *premierhood* and *priestship*. In contrast, one can cite some instances of a high percentage of subjects who were able to provide correct forms for the items they successfully identified as erroneous. For instance, 97% of those who were able to identify *manship* as faulty succeeded in providing the correct form. Other high correction percentages are associated with the faulty items *memberhood*, *companionhood* and *adultship*.

All these examples seem to point to one conclusion, that is, the subjects' correction attempts were not consistent with their attempts to identify errors. Put differently, both judgments and corrections here are far from being based on well-established intuitive knowledge. Hence, it may be argued that only a high percentage of accurate judgments coupled with a similar high percentage of corrections can be taken as an indication of the acquisition of the proposed constraints. Such a condition was not met by the subjects. Again, it seems that the subjects were at ease or at odds with *–ship* and *–hood* relative to their familiarity or otherwise with the target item. The more familiar with the item the subjects are, the more likely they are to get it right.

As reported earlier, the subjects of the study had almost completed the coursework requirements for a bachelor's degree in English, but they still encountered serious difficulty with the semantics of *–ship* and *–hood*. For a clearer picture as to where they fit on the acquisition continuum, one may wish to examine the errors they made while providing correction to the stimulus items they judged as faulty. Table 3 provides a complete list of the errors made by five subjects (10%) or more; errors made by less than five subjects are considered infrequent or sporadic, and thus did not appear here.

The data in Table 3 motivate an interesting observation; the majority of the errors end in *–ship* or *–hood*. This implies that the subjects have developed some general awareness of the morphosemantic function of these two suffixes. They have already started the march along the acquisition path. Their major problem resides in deciding which of the two suffixes goes with which base forms. It seems that this problem shows up more clearly in the subjects' interaction with those items that are infrequently used in the ELT materials to which they have been exposed. Further research may investigate whether more advanced EFL learners who supposedly have had more exposure to English are in a better position with regard to *–ship* and *–hood* suffixation. Hamdan (1997) reported that systematic training in error analysis and error correction was very useful in improving Jordanian EFL teachers' ability to identify and correct lexical errors. The extent to which EFL learners may benefit from similar training in improving their interaction with derivational morphology is still open for research.

Table 3: Faulty corrections for the targeted items

Stimulus item	**Target item**	**Errors made by at least 5 (5%) subjects**
*premierhood	premiership	premierhood (25); premierity (7); not attempted (21)
citizenship	citizenship	citizenhood (24); citizenism (5); not attempted (8)
*companionho	companionshi	companionhood (7)
ownership	ownership	not attempted (6)
*musicianhood	musicianship	musicianhood (21); musicianity (7); musicianism (8), not attempted (6)
horsemanship	horsemanship	horsemanship (21); horsemanity (6); horseman (5); not attempted (6)
*memberhood	membership	memberhood (12); members (6)
readership	readership	readers (22); readerhood (7)
*adultship	adulthood	adultship (13)
childhood	childhood	
*manship	manhood	manship (9)
motherhood	motherhood	mothership (6); mothers (6)
* likeliship	likelihood	likeliship (25); likelity (8); likeliness (6)

falsehood	falsehood	false (32); falsity (24); falseship (8)
*priestship	priesthood	priestship (24); priestism (5); not attempted (17)
neighborhood	neighborhood	neighbors (11)

4. Implications and recommendations

The results of the study motivate the researchers to share the following implications and recommendations with their specialist colleagues.

4.1. Acceptability judgments and language acquisition

The findings of the study indicated that the EFL learner's accurate judgment of the acceptability status of a particular construction is not always a guarantee of his/her ability to 'fix' it. This provides further support to the claim that the intuitive language knowledge of adult learners, native and non-native alike, may be better explored and revealed if such learners are also challenged to fix what they thought to be faulty or unacceptable (Hamdan 1997). The proposed corrections, even if inaccurate, may provide researchers with some useful, and probably insightful data, in their endless endeavor to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the process of language acquisition. Further research may target the possible relationship between the stimulus items, whether judged as acceptable or unacceptable, and the proposed corrections in terms of morphology and semantics.

4.2. Explicit instruction and semantic constraints

Research has shown that English-speaking teenagers and EFL learners tend to encounter considerable difficulty while interacting with certain structures. Among these structures are the dative alternation (White 1984; Hamdan 1994), the locative alternation (Al-Wahaib 2004) and the nationality morpheme (Hamdan 2002). What these structures have in common is that they are governed by semantic an/or morphological constraints that are not fully transparent to the learner. More often than not, EFL learners do not have direct access to these constraints through prescribed textbooks or ELT materials. These constraints, even when linguists think they have captured them, are presented and discussed in specialist materials (e.g., journal articles) using

linguistic jargon which seems to be unintelligible to a large sector of EFL learners. In this context, it may turn out that explicit presentation and teaching of such structures will raise the students' awareness of these linguistic phenomena. This may serve as a self-monitoring step towards making further progress along the acquisition path. To validate this, further research is needed.

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Appendices:

Appendix 1

Distribution of –ship and –hood items in terms of sense

Stimulus item	Status in the task	Sense
1. premierhood	X	-ship sense 1
2. citizenship	√	-ship sense 1
3. companionhood	X	-ship sense 2
4. ownership	√	-ship sense 2
5. musicianhood	X	-ship sense 3
6. horsemanship	√	-ship sense 3
7. memberhood	X	-ship sense 4
8. readership	√	-ship sense 4
9. adultship	X	-hood sense 1
10. childhood	√	-hood sense 1
11. manship	X	-hood sense 2
12. motherhood	√	-hood sense 2
13. likeliship	X	-hood_sense 3
14. falsehood	√	-hood_sense 3
15. priestship	X	-hood_sense 4
١٦. neighborhood	√	-hood sense 4

Appendix 2

Read each of the following sentences carefully. If you think that any of them contains an error, underline it, and then correct it in the space provided. Ignore tense and spelling problems, if any.[2]

1. I didn't visit the United Kingdom during Blair's *premierhood*. (premiership)
2. You can apply for *citizenship* now but you may not get it. (√)
3. If you want to know how the restaurant succeeded, talk to its new *ownership*. (√)
4. When Ali left for Norway I missed his *companionhood*. (companionship)
5. The skill involved in riding horses is *horsemanship*. (√)
6. My parents admire Abdul-Wahab's *musicianhood*, i.e. his art and skill in performing music. (musicianship)
7. The new magazine has a *readership* of around 2000. (√)
8. The club has a *memberhood* of 500, but we expect it to double soon. (membership)
9. It is a challenge to combine a career with *motherhood*. (√)
10. Why did he feel he had to prove his *manship* in the company of women? (manhood)
11. My friend Peter had a very happy *childhood*. (√)
12. In *adultship*, John moved from job to job without settling. (adulthood)
13. Using a seatbelt will most likely reduce the *likeliship* of serious injury. (likelihood)
14. Most people believe in right and wrong, truth and *falsehood*. (√)
15. Be quiet! You will wake up the whole *neighborhood*! (√)
16. It's not easy to reduce the influence of the *priestship* in the country. (priesthood)
17. He claims that he accepts constructive *criticism* of his work. (√)
18. Many people have to deal with the serious problem of *alcoholism*. (√)
19. Many countries still believe in *socialhood* as a way of life. (socialism)
20. Believing that one race is better or worse than another is the heart of *raceship*. (racism)

21. She does everything with great regularity. (√)
22. His *stupidhood* is unbelievable. It shows in what he does or says. (stupidity)
23. Most employees expect *flexibility* in the workplace. (√)
24. John was criticized for blocking the *creativeship* in his students. (creativity)

[1] For the reader's convenience, the – *hood* and – *ship* items are not reshuffled here. In terms of status, X = error, √ = correct.

[2] For the reader's convenience, potential targets are italicized, errors are underlined and corrections are bracketed. Items 17-24 are included to minimize the visibility of the task; the subjects' responses to these items are not reported.