What do Children’s Errors in Object Relative Clauses in Turkish Reveal about Language Acquisition?

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Recently, Özcan, 2000; Kornfilt, Hermon, and Öztürk (2009); and Özge, Marinis, and Zeyrek (2009) reported data from different production tasks eliciting RCs in Turkish children. In these studies, while children presented significantly better performance in subject-RCs they used a greater number of avoidance strategies and made more errors in object-RCs (see also Ekmekçi, 1990 and Slobin, 1986).

In the present study, we present a detailed qualitative analysis of children’s errors derived from these studies to provide insights about the difficulty in the acquisition of object-RCs. We illustrate that erroneous responses involve consistent changes, reflecting children’s attempts to avoid difficult structures and to approximate towards adult-grammar.

In their ungrammatical responses, children adapt -YAN as an object-relativizer and assign nominative-case rather than genitive-case to the subject NP (1). This pattern shows -YAN is a better choice as a relativizer and nominative-case is a better choice as a subject-marker, so they avoid -DIK and genitive-case in line with Özge et al. (2009). We will show this is not simply a processing effect since children actually hear "NP1-NOM verb-YAN NP2-NOM" in adult-grammar with different meanings (2).

Another modification they make is to insert a pronoun or full NP-ACC in the extraction-site in addition to changing the participle and the case-marking (3). In adult-grammar, one finds object-RCs with -YAN rather than -DIK and with a resumptive-pronoun “kendisi” (4a and 5a) but not the ones in 4b-4c and 5b. Children wrongly replace the resumptive-pronoun ‘kendisi’ with a personal-pronoun ‘o’ and change the word-order into SOV. Thus, their utterances are mirroring, albeit incorrectly, classical resumption in adult Turkish.

We argue children’s errors reflect the process of sorting out a very complex input (i.e., utterances for which there is positive evidence in the environment) and matching which lexical/morphological items can be used to express which meanings.
Appendix

(1)
Target:
Köpeğ-ı in kovala-diğ-ı kedi
dog-gen chase-DIK-Poss3sg cat-null
“The cat that the dog was chasing”
Response:
Köpek kovala-yan kedi
dog-NOM chase-YAN cat-NOM

(2)
a.
Arı sok-an kız hastane-de.
bee-NOM sting-YAN girl-NOM hospital-LOC
‘The girl whom a bee stung is in the hospital.’
b.
Kedi kovala-yan köpeğ-i hiç sev-me-m.
Cat chase-YAN dog-ACC at all lile-NEG-1sg
‘I do not like dogs that chase cats at all.’

(3)
Target:
Köpeğ-ı in kovala-diğ-ı kedi
dog-gen chase-DIK-Poss3sg cat-null
“The cat that the dog was chasing”
Response:
*Köpek o-nu/kedi-yi kovala-yan kedi
*dog-NOM 3sgpron-ACC/cat-ACC chase-YAN cat-NOM
“The cat that the dog is chasing the cat/him”
(4) 

a. 
Kendisi-ni köpek ısr-an adam
Himself-ACC dog-NOM bite-YAN man-NOM
“The man, whom the dog bit him,“

b. 
*O-nu köpek ısr-an adam
*3sgPron-ACC dog-NOM bite-YAN man-NOM
“The man, whom the dog bit him,“

(5) 

a. 
Köpeğ-in kendi-si-ni kovala-diğ-i adam
dog-gen kendi-3sg-ACC chase-DIK-Poss3sg man-NOM
“The cat that the dog was chasing him“

b. 
*köpek kendi-si-ni ısr-an adam
*dog-NOM kendi-3sg-ACC bite-YAN man-NOM
*“The man, whom the dog him, bit”

c. 
*Köpeğ-in o-nu kovala-diğ-i adam
*dog-gen Pron3sg-ACC chase-DIK-Poss3sg man-NOM
“The cat that the dog was chasing him“
References


Kornfilt, Hermon, and Öztürk (2009). Asymmetries in the First-Language Acquisition of Subject and Non-Subject Head-Final Relative Clauses in Turkish. To appear in the *Proceedings of the Sixth Workshop on Altaic Formal Linguistics (WAFL 6)*, Nagoya University, Japan.

