VERB CONSTRUCTIONS IN THE SPEECHES OF TURKISH CHILDREN: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

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Abstract

In light of the previous research on verb acquisition of children, this study aims to follow Tomasello's (1992) age ranges and find out the differences between the quantities of verb constructions used by monolingual Turkish children who are 24, 30 and 36 months old. The study also aimed to recognize the most frequently used verb construction types used by these monolingual Turkish children. Within a cross-sectional design of the study, free speeches of 24, 30, and 36-month-old 6 Turkish girls (2 girls in each age range) were recorded while they were playing at a nursery school, and each took nearly. Transcription of the interviews that took 40 minutes for each participant was made, and the results were analyzed according to the structures and types of verbs. The results provided that although the participants use more verb constructions in their speeches as they grow up, the ratio of the verbs uttered by these children decrease in percentage. In addition, the study illustrated that as the children grow up, they begin to use various and more verb construction types. While the participants at the age of 24 months generally use witnessed past and present continuous tense verb constructions, the participants at the age of 30 months mostly used simple present and witnessed past tense, and the participants at the age of 36 months most frequently use witnessed and nonwitnessed past tense in their speeches.

Keywords: Linguistics, verb constructions, verb types, verb island hypothesis, verb island constructions

TÜRK ÇOCUKLARININ KONUŞMALARINDAKİ FİİL YAPILARI: BİR ENİNE KESİT ÇALIŞMASI

Özet

Çocukların fiil edinimi üzerine yapılan önceki araştırmalar ışığında, bu çalışma Tomasello'nun (1992) yaş aralıklarını takip etmeyi ve 24, 30 ve 36 aylık tek dilli Türk çocuklarının kullandığı fiil yapılarının miktarları arasındaki farkları ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma aynı zamanda bu tek dilli Türk çocukları tarafından en sık kullanılan fiil yapı türlerini ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamıştır. Kesitsel bir araştırma olarak düzenlenen çalışma için 24, 30 ve 36 aylık 6 Türk kızının (her yaş aralığında 2 kız) bir anaokulunda oyun oynarken konuşmaları kaydedildi. Her bir katılımcı için 40 dakika süren görüşmeler kağıda döküldü ve sonuçlar fiillerin yapılarına ve türlerine göre analiz edildi. Sonuçlar, katılımcıların büyüdükçe konuşmalarında daha fazla fiil yapısı kullanmalarına rağmen, bu çocuklar tarafından kullanılan fiil oranlarının yüzde olarak azaldığını göstermiştir. Çalışma aynı zamanda katılımcılar büyüdükçe daha fazla ve çeşitli fiil türlerinin kullanılmaya başlandığını göstermiştir. 24 aylık katılımcılar genellikle şahit olunan geçmiş ve şimdiki zaman fiil yapılarını kullanırken, 30 aylık katılımcılar daha çok şimdiki zaman ve tanıklık geçmiş zamanı, 36 aylık katılımcılar ise en çok duyulan ve görülen geçmiş zaman fiil yapılarını kullanmışlardır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dilbilim, fiil yapıları, fiil türleri, fiil adası hipotezi, fiil adası yapıları

INTRODUCTION

Verbs are the most essential constituents of a sentence in various languages. They are the words describing an action or talk about the things that happen. They take many different forms depending on their subjects, the time they refer to and other ideas that are intended to be expressed. There are many different approaches to verb acquisition children in the literature. One of them is Tomasello's (1992) verb island hypothesis that explains how children develop verbal argument structure constructions which are sentential schemas for the expression of a verb. As stated by Ninio (2003), it claims that young children's verbs are islands, each developing its own mini-syntax independently of other verbs. According to 'The Verb Island' hypothesis, there are two stages in developing verbal argument structure constructions. At the first stage, which lasts for a considerable time, children produce verbal argument structure constructions. Their knowledge is completely lexically based on particular verbs during that stage. Children's grammar is narrow and limited; namely, each verb is its own island of organization in an otherwise unorganized system. Verbal grammar is an inventory of independent item-specific verbal argument structure constructions, lacking any measure of generality and connectedness which would make it into a system. Only at a second and later stage do children develop abstract categories and constructions and construct an interconnected verbal system.

As it is identified by Tomasello (1992), verb constructions in the speeches of English children that appear on their own islands help them build schemas according to participant types and pragmatic functions for associated verbs in familiar discourses, and with age, those structures tend to be more and more complicated. This hypothesis was created after the investigation of English-speaking children; thus, the process in which verbs and verb related structures are acquired may follow a different path and pattern in Turkish because there are not enough studies dealing with the verb construction pattern of Turkish speaking children. For this reason, this focal study was conducted to find out the verb constructions in the speeches of Turkish speaking monolingual children and close this gap in the literature.

The aim of this study is to find out the differences between the quantities of verb constructions used by monolingual Turkish children who are 24, 30 and 36 months old. In addition, the study aimed to identify the most frequently used verb construction types in child speech of these monolingual Turkish children. The researcher sought answers to the following research questions.

1. Are there any significant differences between the quantities of verb constructions used by monolingual Turkish children who are 24, 30 and 36 months old?

2. What are the most frequently used verb construction types in child speech of monolingual Turkish children who are 24, 30 and 36 months old?

There exist potential limitations in the findings of the current study due to several aspects. First of all, a cross-sectional framework used because of time restriction might prevent the generalizability of the results as individual differences might create significant nuances. Moreover, detailed lexical and semantic analysis of constructions and their categorizations might be needed besides the structural analysis, which could not have been applied in the present study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Starting from the one-word stage at about 12 months old, children acquire their first language in a bottom-up process during which they also develop cognitively. Tomasello and Brooks (1999) explain this process by dividing them into four categories; (1) holophrases (12 months), (2) word combinations (18 months), (3) verb island constructions (24 months), (4) adult-like constructions (36+ months). Within the third stage of this process, which is called verb island construction, Tomasello (1992) introduces 'The Verb Island' hypothesis. It explains how children develop verbal argument structure constructions which are sentential

schemas for the expression of a verb and its valiancy-required lexical complements or elaborators (Hudson, 1990). Thanks to those structures, children start to construct a basis of relational knowledge between words and verbs. Apparently, children learn new combinatorial rules first for a few verbs in a partial way but immediately begin transferring some more general and abstract principles to other verbs so that applying the same combinatory principle to new verbs becomes progressively easier. As stated by Tomasello and Brooks (1999), children first learn syntactic symbols, expressing the role being played by several participants in particular scenes, in which the verbs appear like in their own islands of the organization. By being exposed to rich discourse involved multiple participant types and pragmatic functions for associated verbs, children seem to produce those familiar verbs in a highly correct way (Tomasello and Brooks, 1999). Therefore, children's early grammars could be characterized as an inventory of verb-island constructions (utterance schemas revolving around verbs) between the age of 24 months and 36.

Turkish is an agglutinative language which has some advantages for earlier acquisition of structures. Because of its organizational properties, the description of word structure is mostly a matter of identifying the different categories of suffixes and the rules determining what kinds of stem they may attach to and in what order. As stated by Ketrez (1999), most suffixes in Turkish are variable in form according to the rules of vowel harmony and consonant alternation. Nevertheless, semantic transparency and limited plurifuntionality of the morphological system make it easier for Turkish children to produce their speech as they follow those principles mentioned by Slobin (1973). The appearance of the inflectional system is earlier than the derivational one, and by the age of 24 months, gradual linguistic units become available in speech such as case markers, numbers, some tense aspects (past result, ongoing process), person, negation, interrogation. In addition, as they highly depend on case inflections as signals of grammatical relations, Turkish children employ gradual induction of pragmatic word-order rules. Bittner et al. (2011) list some characteristics of advantageous structures for earlier acquisition such as; (1) constructional iconicity (no modifications such as umlaut, ablaut or palatalization), (2) morhpotactic transparency (no morphological rules making inflections less transparent), (3) biuniqueness (no allomorphy or cumulative morphology), (4) neuter grammar (no grammatical marking of gender). Bittner et al. (2011) also state that thanks to the extreme regularity and transparency of the morphological system, Turkish child speech is almost entirely free of error. The semantic transparency and limited plurifuntionality of the morphological system make it easier for Turkish children to produce their speech. It is possible to describe Turkish as 'verb-friendly' because subject omission is possible while verbs have a regular morphology and appear consistently in the salient sentence-final position due to the canonical SOV word order. Thus, children are sensitive to the standard SVO order of language. The overall characteristics of Turkish are exhibited in Table 1 as follows.

Table 1. *Characteristics of Turkish language*

Morphology	Agglutinated
Noun morphology	No definite articles no gender (number) case
Verb morphology	Person, tense, mode, number, negation, aspect, genus verbi
Word order	subject and verb congruent Canonical SOV other word orders for pragmatic effects
Subject-drop	No obligatory subject
Word formation	Conversion, function overlap between nouns and verbs (in predicate position)

Source: Kauschke, 2007

As it is summarized in Table 1, Turkish has some flexibility within-subject use and no differences for genders. As it is identified by Aksu and Slobin (1985), the fact that Turkish captures thematic roles via nominal case morphology and allows for frequent null arguments leads us to examine the syntactic bootstrapping hypothesis which explains why children gradually depend on case inflections as signals of grammatical relations. The syntactic bootstrapping hypothesis proposes that children use the syntactic frame surrounding a verb as a cue to that verb's meaning (Landau & Gleitman, 1985). That is to say, verbs neither can be acquired without their surroundings, nor they appear in isolation of different structures. Different verbs have different argument structures, and syntactic bootstrapping introduces the fact that the learner relies on the differential analysis of verb argument structures to figure out the meanings of different verbs (Göksun et al., 2008). For example, one might expect the causative morpheme to be the source of information for children to determine the meanings of sentences that include unfamiliar verbs. Regarding the order of verb tenses, witnessed past tense *(-dI)* and continuous tense for present events *(-Iyor)* follow a highly imperative one-word stage. This is followed by the differentiation between witnessed past tense *(-dI)* and nonwitnessed *(-mIş)*. Other verb structures also present in 2-year-olds speeches with simple conditional verb affix *(-sE)* and agentless passive interfix *(-Il)* (Aksu and Slobin, 1985:846).

In a nutshell, the Turkish child's utterances at first are simple but remarkably correct. In later stages, the syntactic principle in which new forms express old functions, and new functions are first expressed by old forms is employed by the child. Therefore, Turkish holds the evidence to the fact that grammatically relevant notions are accessible to relatively young children if the means of expression are sufficiently salient and analyzable. (Aksu-Koç and Slobin, 1985).

METHODOLOGY
Research Design and Participants
This is a cross-sectional study in which 6 monolingual Turkish children were chosen purposively from a private daycare center in one of the southeastern cities of Turkey. For each age range, namely, 24, 30- and 36-months, 2 participants were chosen. The administration of the daycare center was willing to fulfill the consent form while they informed parents about the details of the study. Girls were deliberately chosen not to include gender influences in the study. All participants belong to the middle-class of the society with a working mother; thus, these participants generally socialize in their daycare center on weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. The speeches of 6 children were recorded while they were playing with the same kind of toys in the shape of a vegetable, fruit and some kitchen materials like forks and knives. The interviews took nearly 40 minutes for each participant.

Data Collection Tools
In the current study, observation and interview methods were applied to collect the intended data from children. The recorded speeches were transcribed and analyzed with regard to the structures and types of verbs used by the participants within the mentioned age ranges.

Data Collection Procedure
Firstly, with the help of the teacher in the daycare center, the researcher explained to each child what to do. After the children got used to the presence of the researcher, she directed some questions as prompts while the children were playing with the toys. The researcher recorded all the speeches and transcribed them to reveal the percentages of verb constructions.

Data Analysis
After the transcription of the collected data, the researchers focused on verb constructions in detail. Table 2 shows the data collection tools and analysis for targeted research questions as follows;

Table 2. *Research questions, data collection tools and analysis*

Research Questions	Data Collection Tools	Analysis Method
1. Are there any significant differences between the quantities of verb constructions used by monolingual Turkish children who are 24, 30 and 36 months old?	Child-directed interview	Descriptive
2. What are the most frequently used verb construction types in child speech of monolingual Turkish children who are 24, 30 and 36 months old?	Child-directed interview	Descriptive

As it is evident in Table 2, the researcher collected the data via child-directed interviews with the participants to find answers to the research questions, and the interviews were recorded and transcribed for the analysis. All structures of verbs were counted, analyzed and tabulated to make a clear ending for the examining procedure.

FINDINGS
Findings of the First Research Question

In order to answer the first research question, the data obtained through child-directed interviews were analyzed and tabulated by the researcher descriptively. After the data collection process, the researcher divided the participant children into three groups considering their ages. In each age group, there were two participant children. Table 3 illustrates the findings of the descriptive statistics of the child-directed interviews.

Table 3. *Overall percentages of verb constructions in the speeches of children*

Age Ranges	Numbers of Words in Total	Number of Verbs in Total	Percentages of Verbs in Total
24m	47	17	36,17%
30m	275	57	20,72%
36m	366	84	22,95%

As it is given in Table 3, while the children at the age of 24 months used 17 verbs in their speeches, the children at the age of 30 months used 57 verbs, and children at the age of 36 months uttered 84 verbs in total. On the other hand, the highest percentage (36,17%) of verb use belongs to the youngest age range. This could be explained by the fact that most of their utterances include imperatives and intransitive verbs with agent-action structures. There is a decline in verb use percentages at 30 and 36 months. While 30 months old children use 20,72% verbs, 36 months old children use 22,95% verbs during the child-directed interviews.

Findings of the Second Research Question

In order to answer the second research question, the data obtained through Child-Directed Interviews were counted, analyzed and tabulated by the researcher descriptively. Table 4 provides information about the types and numbers of verb constructions at 24 months age range.

Table 4. *Verb constructions at 24 months' age range*

VERB CONSTRUCTIONS	Azra	Gülten	N	f
Past Tense (witnessed)	düştü, çıktı, oldu	çıktı, oturdum, açtım, buldum	7	41,16%
Pre. Continuous Tense	yiyorum, içiyor	tutuyor, pişiyor, oluyor	5	29,4%
Imperative	bak, koy	aç, bak	4	23,52%
Optative		oynayalım	1	5,88%
TOTAL			17	100%

Table 4 illustrated that children at this age mostly used witnessed past tense with a percentage of 41,16%. These participants also used present continuous tense with a percentage of 29,4%. The other verb construction types used by the participants are imperatives (23,52%)

and optatives (5,88). As the participants in this group had not acquired the vocabulary spurt yet, they were not able to use other verb construction types in their speeches.

Table 5 below illustrates the types and numbers of verb constructions at 30 months age range.

Table 5. *Verb constructions at 30 months' age range*

VERB CONSTRUCTIONS	Alya	Arya	N	f
Simple Present Tense	yer, olmaz **(-)**	yerim, severim, yaparım, yeriz, fırçalarız, der, yer, yapar, gelir, korkar, olur, olmaz **(-)**	14	34,02%
Past Tense (witnessed)	attım, unuttum, aldım, kaldı	buldum, almadı **(-)**	6	14,58%
Optative	pişsin (diye), ötsün (diye)	yapalım, koyalım, olsun	5	12,15%
Derivational	ederken, canlandı	yenilir, korkulmaz, açılır	5	12,15%
Pre. Continuous Tense	seçiyor, istemiyor(-)	korkmuyorum (-), kuruluyoruz	4	9,72%
Compound verbs (contingent)		içebilirim, yiyebiliyoruz, ağrıyabilir	3	7,29%
Past Tense (nonwitnessed)	olmuş	çıkmış	2	4,86%
Pluperfect past	konmuştu		1	2,43%
Imperative	bak		1	2,43%
TOTAL			**41**	**100%**

It is clear from table 5 that the participants in this group were able to use more complex and various verb construction types than the ones at 24 months old. The participants in this group mostly used simple present tense (34,02) and witnessed past tense (14,58%). While 12,15% of the participants' utterances were formed in optative verb construction, the same number of them were produced in derivational verb construction. The participants at the age of 30 months old could perform present continuous verb constructions (9,72%) and compound verb constructions (7,29%). In addition, children in this age group were able to use notwitnessed past tense (4,86%) unlike the ones at 24 months old. As it is stated by Aksu and Slobin (1985), nonwitnessed past tense can be acquired nearly six months later than witnessed past tense. Moreover, there is a spurt in the number of total words at this age. While the total number of words uttered by children was 47 at 24 months, this number increased nearly five times at 30 months with 275 words in total.

Table 6 below demonstrates the types and numbers of verb constructions at 36 months age range.

Table 6. *Verb constructions at 36 months' age range*

VERB CONSTRUCTIONS	*Ayşe Gökçe*	*Işıl*	N	f
Past tense (witnessed)		*geldim, yaktım, yedim, döktü, ağladı, aktı, kızdı, güldü koktu, geldi, oturdu oldu, pişti, pişmedi (-), yemedi (-), yanmadı (-) pişirdiler*	17	22,95%
Past Tense (nonwitnessed)	*kaybolmuş, yemiş, yapmış, bağırmış, gelmiş, almış, yutmuş, koparmış, demiş (ki), acımış, korkmuş*	*olmuş, görmüş*	13	17,55%
Simple Present Tense	*severim, yeriz, keser, olur, sever, kesmez (-), severler,*	*ederim, ağlamam (-) gelir, alır, götürür, yemezler (-)*	13	17,55%
Pre. Continuous Tense	*yiyoruz, tadıyor, alıyor, yapıyor, yapışıyor, akıyor*	*seviyorum, gerekiyor, pişiyor, kokuyor*	10	13,5%
Optative	*düşünelim, bakalım, oynayalım*	*yapalım, yiyelim, pişirelim, kapatalım, açalım, bakalım*	9	12,15%
Imperative	*bak*	*ye, al*	3	4,05%
Derivational	*sevmeyen*	*bulmamız, yememiz*	3	4,05%
Compound verbs (contingent)	*bilemedim*	*gelebilirsin, olabilir*	3	4,05%
Pluperfect past		*gelmişti, kokmuştu*	2	2,7%
Necessitative		*açmalısın*	1	1,35%
TOTAL			74	100%

It can be inferred from Table 6 that children at this age tend to use more words and various verb constructions as a result of their language development process. The participants in this group mostly used witnessed past tense with a percentage of 22,9. It was followed by witnessed past and simple present tense verb constructions with the percentage of 17,55 for both. The participant children could also use present continuous tense (13,5%), optative (12,15%) and imperative (4,05%) verb constructions in their speeches. These participants were also able to use pluperfect tense (2,7%) and necessitative (1,35%) verb constructions which are not included in the speeches of 24- and 30-months old participants. It is also possible to say that children's mental lexicon and cognitive developments allow them to construct more complex structures in their languages as they grow up. However, there is an explicit decline in imperative usage in child-speeches.

In addition, as far as the data revealed, there are no errors in negation in the speeches of children at any age range. Increasing numbers in derivational and compound verbs are also promising. It is clear how vital even 3 month-period is for language development. On the other hand, the data did not include any simple conditional verb construction use even if there is plenty of evidence in the literature.

Besides, children at this age tend to be highly sensitive to structures adults employ as in the example between the researcher and one of the 36 months' old children. Within the second meeting, the opening dialogue by the researcher follows:

Researcher: Merhaba, senin adın Işıl mıydı?

        Hello, was your name Işıl?

Child: Evet, Işıl - dı

        Yes, Işıl+PAST2SG

        Yes, it was Işıl.

Even if her name is still Işıl, as she tends to follow the structures of the speeches directed to her, she imitates the same structure with the past suffix –dI.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study aimed to determine the differences between the quantities of verb constructions used by monolingual Turkish children who are 24, 30 and 36 months old. Another aim of the study was to identify the most frequently used verb construction types in child speech of these monolingual Turkish children.

The findings of the study demonstrated that despite the fact that the participants use more verb constructions in their speeches as they grow up, the percentage of the verbs uttered by these children decreases. As the children flourish, their lexicon develops, and they begin to use various words that belong to a different part of speech. This finding of the study goes parallel with the ones conducted by Tomasello (1992) and Tomasello and Brooks (1999) in which it was found that there is a major increase in the varieties of parts of speech with age in child language. This outcome of the study is also supported by Ekinci (2020) that identified that children begin to use various word types as they grow up.

The study also illustrated that as the children grow up, they begin to use various and more verb construction types. It is proved by the study that while the participants at the age of 24 months were able to use witnessed past tense, present continuous tense, imperative and optative verb constructions in their speeches, 30 months old participants can use simple present tense, derivational, compound verb, nonwitnessed past tense and pluperfect past verb constructions in addition to the ones used by 24 months old participants. On the other hand, participants at the age of 36 months old increased their verb construction repertoires and added necessitative verb construction into their utterances in Turkish. It can be said that children's mental lexicon and cognitive developments allow them to construct more complex structures in their languages as they grow older. When the specific age groups are considered, the participants at the age of 24 months mostly use witnessed past and present continuous tense verb constructions. While the participants at the age of 30 months mostly used simple present and witnessed past tense, the participants at the age of 36 generally use witnessed and nonwitnessed past tense in their speeches. This outcome of the study has some common points with the study of Fenson et al. (1994), who found out that, on average, the production of verbs and verb constructions demonstrate a rapid increase towards the end of the third year in child language. This result of the research is also supported by the one conducted by Aksu-Koç and Slobin (1985) that identifies that nonwitnessed past tense is acquired nearly six months later than the witnessed past tense in child language.

Another finding of the current study is that the participants made no errors in negation while speaking in Turkish at any age range. As it is stated by Aksu and Slobin (2000), even quite young children get access to grammatically relevant notions if the means of expression are sufficiently salient and analyzable as in Turkish. The structure and prosodic features of the Turkish language may have a laborsaving effect on the correct use of negation by the participants. As it is illustrated in the study of Emeksiz (2010), monolingual Turkish children have the advantage of learning the negation rule earlier than their counterparts speaking other languages because of the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features of the Turkish language.

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