



## Acquisition of Ditransitive Verbs in Turkish

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### Abstract

In the acquisition of first language, among different word types “verbs” seems to be more challenging because of both the cognitive and linguistic constraints that they require. However, as Naigles & Hoff-Ginsberg (1998: 95) point out the effect of syntactic diversity in addition to frequency and positional salience leads to syntactic bootstrapping, which help children to acquire the meanings of new verbs. Thus, as children start using verbs in different combinations, they start to be aware of the abstract notions verbs denote and learn more new verbs. Within this framework children also acquire syntactic and semantic properties of these verbs such as the number of arguments a verb requires and whether the language in question allow argument ellipses. The aim of this study is to investigate how children acquire ditransitive verbs in Turkish. For this purpose, spontaneous speech data collected from 10 children between the ages of 1;4 and 3;6 and their mothers has been analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Six ditransitive verbs have been chosen for analysis. The results show that among the six verbs investigated, *koy-* (put) and *ver-* ‘give’ have been used more often than the other verbs by the children from the younger group. In the older group, in addition to the six verbs present in the vocabulary of younger children, new verbs have also appeared.

## Türkçede Çiftgeçişli Eylemlerin Edinimi

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### Öz

Anadil edinim sürecinde farklı sözcük türlerinden “eylemler”in edinimi bilişsel ve dilsel özelliklerinden dolayı diğer sözcüklere göre daha zordur. Ancak, Nagles & Hoff-Ginsberg (1998: 95) te belirtildiği gibi sözdizimsel farklılık, sıklık ve eylemin tümede bulunduğu yerin dikkat çekiciliği nedeniyle oluşan sözdizimsel kolaylık çocukların yeni eylemleri edinimlerini kolaylaştırır. Böylece, çocuklar eylemleri farklı bileşimlerde kullanmaya başladıkça eylemlerin ifade ettiği soyut durumların farkında olmaya ve daha fazla eylem edinmeye başlarlar. Bu bağlamda, çocuklar eylemlerin gerektirdiği adlık sayısı, söz konusu dilin dilde eksiltmeye yer verip vermediği gibi sözdizimsel ve anlamsal özelliklerini de edinirler. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Türkçede çiftgeçişli eylemlerin edinim sürecinin incelenmesidir. Bu amaçla, 1;4 ve 3;6 yaş grubu arasında 10 çocuktan toplanan boylamsal veri nicelik ve nitelik açısından incelenmiştir. Bu analiz için altı çiftgeçişli eylem seçilmiştir. Sonuçlar incelenen altı eylem içinde *koy* ve *ver* eylemlerinin küçük yaştaki çocuklar tarafından daha çok kullanıldığını göstermektedir. Yaşça daha büyük olan grup içinde incelenen altı eyleme ek olarak yeni eylemlerin de kullanıldığı gözlenmiştir.

### Introduction

In the field of first language acquisition, acquisition process of different parts of speech such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives has been widely investigated. Among those, the category “verbs” seems to be more challenging because of both the cognitive and linguistic constraints that they require. However,

as Naigles & Hoff-Ginsberg (1998: 95) point out the effect of syntactic diversity in addition to frequency and positional salience leads to syntactic bootstrapping, which help children to acquire the meanings of new verbs. For example, in Turkish, the appearance of verbs and verbal inflections start by 1;6-1;7 and are completed by the age of 2;0 (Aksu-Koç & Slobin, 1985:845).

Ninio (1999: 619) states that the more verbs children already know to combine in a certain pattern, namely VO or SOV combinations, the faster they learn new ones. As children learn to combine individual verbs in various patterns, they also start to consolidate some general or abstract knowledge about the verb form class, about the different complements verbs take, and this facilitates their acquisition in the same positional patterns. In the course of acquisition, children make use of various cues provided by the input. In this respect acquisition of languages where the cues are overtly expressed or widely elapsed, the task has differing challenge for children.

For that reason, how children acquire rules of argument use is a much researched area. On the one hand, children produce non-adult like language where they omit some items due to maturational and performance limitations. On the other hand, they try to figure out the rules of overt use and elision.

Du Bois (1987:807), in his study on discourse basis of ergativity states that two arguments of a transitive verb are rarely lexical. Semantically A argument representing Agent usually denotes given information, thus it can be pronominal or represented by null argument. On the other hand, O argument represents new information, thus needs to be realized lexically. Giving examples from Sacapultec, he also illustrates that arguments have a semantic and discourse pragmatic dimension.

Some studies on languages with argument ellipses are as follows: Narasimhan, Budwig, and Murty (2005) studied Hindi which has a relatively free word order and arguments are elided. In the language of mothers speaking Hindi transitive verbs rarely appear with two overt arguments. For that reason, children also have to follow the information flow in the discourse. For their purposes, they investigated spontaneous speech data collected from 12 child-mother pairs. The age range of the children is 2;0-4;3. They investigated use of transitive and intransitive verbs by both children and mothers. The results show that there is massive ambiguity in the input. Surface distribution patterns of transitive and intransitive verbs are almost indistinguishable. However, child data shows that child speech is free of confusion. They conclude that children make use of potential cues such as verb morphology, information derived from context, and use of verb as to the number and role of the participants associated with the verb.

Clancy (2004) investigated 13 transcripts of two Korean mother-child pairs (1;8-2;8 and 1;10-2;10). She postulated a discourse-pragmatic prototype for the transitive construction. According to this prototype in line with Preferred Argument Structure, the role of A argument is participant, first or second person, that is usually the given information. It is usually realized as pronominally or elliptically. There is also a third person O argument denoting often new information or non-referential. This prototype is usually an elliptical A and overt O. When O refers to an object in the visual field, it is represented by a deictic pronoun; when it is non-referential, generic referent, it is encoded lexically.

Güranlı, Nakipoğlu, and Özyürek (2007) investigated argument omission in Turkish in an experimental study conducted with 24 adult and 22 children between 3;0 and 4;10 under shared information and unshared information situations. They looked for the answers of four research questions and concluded that adults' rate of omission was not as high as children's which might happen because of experimental conditions. On the other hand, children omitted arguments more in line with cross-linguistic tendency. The researchers have also observed a considerable asymmetry in omission of A arguments and O arguments, which they have related to children's sensitivity to givenness and newness of information. Additionally, the comparison of shared and unshared information condition situations also exhibited considerably different results for children. However, the researchers propose that due to experimental conditions discourse-pragmatic reasons cannot be considered responsible for the results and that there should be another source such as verb semantics.

In this study we limit ourselves to ditransitive verbs which require two internal arguments in the verb phrase, thus pose a more challenging task for children. We focus on the analysis of the cues provided by caregivers and how children make use of these cues in the acquisition process. Additionally, we left omission of A arguments outside the scope of this study, focusing on objects. Overt use and omission of

subjects has been studied by various researchers and the authors of this study previously and the results show that children master the pragmatic factors controlling the use and omission of subjects at a very early age.

In the previous studies methodological aspects seem to be affective on the results, for that reason, we address the following questions using spontaneous data to see whether spontaneous data will yield any different results: how does acquisition of ditransitive verbs happen? What is the nature of argument omission in caregivers' speech to children and does this have influence on children's utterances? For this purpose, we use naturally occurring data collected from spontaneous interactions of two groups of children: five mothers and their monolingual children between the ages of 1;4 and 2;3 and four mothers and their monolingual children aged through 2;0 to 3;6 acquiring Turkish as their mother tongue.

### Word order and ditransitive verb phrase in Turkish

Neutral word order in Turkish is SOV, with frequent deletion of subject pronouns. Even though Turkish is basically verb-final, in conversation, subjects and adverbials are frequently placed after the verb. And children can easily master the various word order within sentences for pragmatic effects (Aksu-Koç & Slobin 1985: 840). Early utterances in Turkish are not ungrammatical or incomplete compared to the adult language and these utterances mark thematic relations such as agent, patient, recipient as case inflections are on the appropriate nominals of the sentence (Göksun & Küntay & Naigles 2008: 292). In general, verbs are divided into categories depending on the number of arguments they require. Thus, the internal structure of a verb phrase depends on the transitivity or intransitivity of the verb (Göksel & Kerslake 2005). And the additional category is ditransitive verbs that require both direct and indirect objects such as 'ver' (give) and 'koy' (put) (Yavuz & Balci & Turan 2000:207).

*Ahmet mektubu kardeşine verdi.*

Ahmet letter-ACC brother-Poss-2SG-DAT give-PAST-3SG

'Ahmet gave the letter to his brother.'

Whether direct and indirect objects are present on surface depends on discourse pragmatic factors. The general principle is that A arguments (usually subject of a verb) can be dropped or maintained for pragmatic purposes. Children are found to be sensitive to this characteristic from early on (Ekmekçi & Sofu 1994). Where the use of null subject cannot be defined as ungrammatical, the ellipsis of object pronoun is only possible when the object is mentioned in the previous discourse since there is no agreement marker that will license the null object (Güranlı & Nakipoğlu & Özyürek 2007). Additionally, if a constituent is more predictable whether from previous mention or from presence in the speech context, it is likely to appear earlier in the sentence (Göksel & Kerslake 2005).

### Method

#### Participants

Children in the two groups were videotaped with their mothers in naturalistic communication situations including cooking, free play, doing puzzle, book reading and playing with toys.

In this study, first group of children aged 1;4-2;3 (Ceylin, Özlem, Zehra, Esin, Serpil) were taped for one hour every three weeks for one year and second group of children aged 2;0-3;6 (Banu, Ekin, İdil, Sinem) were taped for one hour every month for one and a half year. All taping took place during the children's normal daily activities. The setting of the recording sessions was at children's home with their mothers and the researcher. The data collected from spontaneous interactions of mothers and their monolingual children were then transcribed by the researcher.

#### Language coding

Data from all nine children and their mothers were investigated for the cues in the acquisition of ditransitive verbs. The children's utterances produced while interacting with their mother or the researcher were transcribed and coded morphologically according to the CHAT conventions of the CHILDES. The utterances including ditransitive verbs that have an agent as their external argument and have two internal arguments were analyzed within the context. The verbs observed in the utterances were *ver* 'give', *koy* 'put', *getir* 'bring', *götür* 'take away', *tak* 'attach', *göster* 'show', *giydir* 'dress', *dök* 'pour', *yedir* 'feed', *kaldır* 'hold', *yapıştır* 'stick' and *çıkart* 'take off' as causative verb as presented in Ketrez (1999). In addition to the list presented in Ketrez (1999), we have observed *sakla* 'hide' and *as* 'hang' in the utterances. The syntactic structures in which these verbs appear are as follows:

(O) Object

- (1) Mot: *ne koydun içine?*  
 What put-past-2SG in-DAT  
 'What did you put inside?'  
 Ser: *süt* (1;8)  
 'Milk'

(IO) Indirect Object

- (2) Mot: *nereye koyayım?*  
 Where put-opt-1SG  
 'Where shall I put it?'  
 Cey: *buraya* (2;1)  
 here:DAT  
 'Here'

Indirect objects we have observed were mostly pronouns and a noun in one instance denoting the recipient of the action or location depending on the semantic structure of the verb in question. In some instances, in answer to questions all the arguments are omitted and only the verb is used.

(V) Verb

- (3) Mot: *onlar ne? ne yaptın sen onları?*  
 They what what do-past-2SG you they-ACC  
 'What are they? What did you do with them?'  
 Esi: *koydum* (1;10)  
 put:PAST-1SG  
 'I put (them).'

Examples with one or more arguments:

(O+V) Object+Verb

- (4) Mot: *domates koyayım mı?*  
 Tomato put-opt\_1SG Q  
 'Shall I put a tomato (in it)?'  
 Ser: *domates koy* (2;0)  
 tomato put  
 'Put tomato'

(IO+V) Indirect Object+Verb

- (5) Mot: *fincanlar nerede? Nereye bıraktın?*  
 Cup-pl where LOC where-DAT put-past-2SG  
 'Where are the cups? Where did you put them?'  
 Ban: *buraya koydum* (2;0)  
 here:DAT put:PAST-1SG  
 'I put (them) here'

(S+V) Subject+Verb

- (6) Mot: *kim koydu arabayı içine?*  
 Who put-past 3SG car-ACC in-DAT  
 'Who put the car inside?'  
 İdi: *abim koydu* (2;4)  
 brother:Poss1SG put:PAST-3SG  
 'My brother put (it) (there)'

(S+IO+O+V) Subject+Indirect Object+Object+Verb

- (7) Sin: *yastığı şimdi buraya koyuyorlar* (3;2)  
 pillow:ACC now here:DAT put:PRES-CONT-3PL  
 'They are putting the pillow here now'

### Results

According to the analysis of ditransitive verbs, we observed six common verbs that both groups of children produced in their spontaneous interaction with their mothers. These six verbs *koy-* 'put', *ver-* 'give', *getir-* 'bring', *götür-* 'take away', *tak-* 'attach', *göster-* 'show' were produced in different syntactic structures. Table 1 demonstrates the diversity of syntactic environments used with ditransitive verbs.

As illustrated in Table 1, the verbs mostly used by children from both groups are action verbs "put", "give", and "bring" which children use to express what they want from their mothers. These verbs are utilized in structures with more ellipsis by children from the younger group. For example, we observe 10 instances of only V use and 6 instances of single use of O to indicate subject, recipient or the location. On the other hand, children from the older group use structures with either direct object or indirect object or both (30 instances of S+O+IO+V).

Another frequently used verb is *ver-* 'give'. Parallel to the most frequent verb *koy-* 'put' there are striking differences between the two groups. The younger group used it omitting all arguments in 10 instances and with an indirect object in 11 instances whereas, children from Group 2 use it in S+V (13 instances) and in S+O+V (25 instances) structures.

The third verb frequently used, *getir-* 'bring' is also used in different structures by children from both groups. Children from Group 1 use it in only O structure, O+V structure and S+IO+O+V structure. Children from Group 2 use them in similar structures but more times.

Table 1.  
Diversity of syntactic environments used with ditransitive verbs

Verbs	Argument structure realization	Group 1 Children 1;4-2;3	Group 2 Children 2;0-3;6
<i>koy-</i> 'put'	O -	6	2
	IO -	6	3
	- - V	10	5
	O + V	3	14
	IO + V	11	26
	S + V -	2	1
	S + IO + O + V	1	30
<i>ver-</i> 'give'	O -	8	2
	S -	2	4
	-- V	3	3
	IO + V	4	8
	S+V -	1	13
	S + O+ V	1	25
<i>getir-</i> 'bring'	O -	6	3
	IO -	1	4
	-- V	1	1
	O + V	2	13
	IO + V	1	6
	S+V -	-	9
	S + IO+ O + V	6	16
<i>götür-</i> 'take away'	O -	-	1
	IO -	1	5
	S -	-	4
	-- V	1	4
	O+V	-	3
	IO+ V	1	3
	S + V	-	4
	S + IO+ O + V	-	6
	<i>tak-</i> 'attach'	O -	1
S -		-	1
-- V		2	1
O+V		-	-
IO +V		1	3
IO+V		-	-
<i>göster-</i> 'show'	S+ IO+O+V	-	2
	O -	1	1
	-- V	1	3
	IO+V	-	2
	S+V	1	2
S + IO+ O + V	-	2	

Although used infrequently, we have observed correct use of *götür-* 'take away' as well, as early as 1;10:

- (8) Mot: *peki o zaman bunları Zeynep'e götür*  
 OK then these-ACC Zeynep-DAT take-PRE-2SG  
 'Well, take these to Zeynep then'  
 Cey: *götürsün* (1;10)  
 take away: PRE-3SG  
 'let her take (it) away'

In the two word utterances, children produced utterances with O+V, IO+V, S+V combinations omitting one of the arguments but keeping A argument which is necessary pragmatically.

- (9) Mot: *kim getirdi oyuncağı?*  
 Who bring-PAST toy-ACC  
 'Who brought the toy?'  
 İdi: *sen getirdin* (2;2)  
 you bring:PAST-2SG  
 "you brought it"

Although there were omissions in the utterances, instances having two arguments were also observed. In the following example, the child used both the direct object and the subject argument emphasizing the agent being herself.

- (10) Eki: *hediyeyi ben veriyorum Simaya* (2;8)  
 Gift-ACC I give-PROG-1SG Sima-DAT  
 'I'm giving the gift to Sima.'

The one word utterances, two word utterances and multi-word utterances with various word orders were observed in both groups of children. However, multi-word utterances with ditransitive verbs of first group children were much fewer than the second group of children.

Table 2 shows the additional ditransitive verbs that second group children produced. The verbs observed were *çıkarmak* 'take off', *giydirmek* 'dress', *saklamak* 'hide', *aslamak* 'hang', *yedirmek* 'feed', *yapıştırmak* 'stick', *dökmek* 'pour', and *kaldırmak* 'hold'. However, the frequencies of these verbs are fewer in children's utterances than the other ditransitive verbs.

Table 2.  
*Additional ditransitive verbs used by second group of children*

Verbs	Usage	Total
<i>çıkarmak</i>	O -	1
'take off'	-- V	2
	O+V	3
	S+O+V	2
<i>giydirmek</i>	O+V	1
'dress'	S+V	2
	S+O+V	1
<i>saklamak</i>	O+V	1
'hide'	IO+V	1
	S+O+V	1
<i>aslamak</i>	S+V	1
'hang'	S+IO+O+V	1
<i>yedirmek</i>	O -	1
'feed'	O+V	1
	S+V	1
<i>yapıştırmak</i>	S+V	1
'stick'	S+IO+O+V	1
<i>dökmek</i>	O+V	2
'pour'		

*kaldır-* S+V 1  
 'hold'

For example, in two consecutive utterances a child uses either A argument or O argument completing her utterance.

- (11) İdi: *küçük bebeği sakladım* (3;0)  
 little doll-ACC hide-PAST-1SG  
 'I hid the little doll'  
 Mot: *nolmuş Zehra teyze'ye?*  
 What happen-past Zehra aunt-DAT  
 'What happened to aunt Zehra?'  
 İdi: *ben bebeği sakladım*  
 I doll-ACC hide-PAST-1SG  
 'I hid the doll'

Children's utterances varied in different orders of S, V and O showing object focusing or subject focusing.

- (12) Eki: *buraya kediler yapıştırdı annem* (3;6)  
 Here-DAT cat-PL stick-PAST-3SG mother-POSS  
 'My mother stuck cats here'

In this study we also analysed the caregivers' speech to their children in respect to ditransitive verb use. We have compared the use of the six verbs found both in child utterances and mother's utterances. However, we focus on the three verbs *koy-* 'put', *ver-* 'give', and *getir-* 'bring' since they are more frequently used. Table 3 shows the measures of the verb use of first group children and their caregivers' speech.

Table 3.  
 Comparison of Group 1 children's and mothers' structures.

Verbs	Argument structure realization	Group 1 Children 1;4-2;3	Their mothers
<i>koy-</i> 'put'	O -	6	-
	IO -	6	-
	- - V	10	2
	O + V	3	9
	IO + V	11	11
	S + V -	2	2
	S + IO + O + V	1	14
<i>ver-</i> 'give'	O -	8	-
	S -	2	-
	-- V	3	2
	IO + V	4	7
	S+V -	1	3
	S + O+ V	1	15
<i>getir-</i> 'bring'	O -	6	-
	IO -	1	-
	-- V	1	-
	O + V	2	4
	IO + V	1	2

S+V -	-	1
S + IO+ O + V	6	5

In the first group, children use more one word utterances as answer to their mothers' questions and mothers seem to use utterances with more arguments. In an instruction to the child for bringing the ball, the mother omits the recipient of the action since it is apparent from the context that the child and the mother are playing together and the recipient can be one or the other or both.

- (13) Mot: *git topu getir*  
 Go: PRES-3SG ball-ACC bring-PRES-3SG  
 'Go bring the ball'  
 Esi: *top* (1;4)  
 'ball'

The mothers also use utterances with full arguments frequently. At this stage, it is the mothers who initiate conversation and children trying to contribute to the dialogue. For example, in the following dialogue the mother is using an utterance with full arguments while the mother and the child are engaged in pretend play.

- (14) Mot: *dolaba koyacak mısın sütü?*  
 Refrigerator-DAT put-fut-Q-2SG milk-ACC  
 'will you put the milk in the refrigerator?'  
 Cey: *dolaba* (1:9)  
 refrigerator-DAT  
 'in the refrigerator'

As children grow up, the length and frequency of ditransitive verb use increases both in caregiver speech and in child speech (Table 4) . However, we have observed that children are more talkative and overpass mothers in the use of similar structures. For example, the verbs *koy-* 'put' and *getir-* 'bring' have been used twice as much by children compared to their mothers. This seems to be a stage when children take the initiative and start conversation and direct their mothers' activities. Their utterances with full arguments also increase compared to the children in the first group.

Table 4.  
 Comparison of Group 2 children's and mothers' structures.

Verbs	Argument structure realization	Group 2 Children 2;0-3;6	Their mothers
<i>koy-</i> 'put'	O -	2	-
	IO -	3	2
	- - V	5	2
	O + V	14	8
	IO + V	26	11
	S + V -	1	1
	S + IO + O + V	30	21
<i>ver-</i> 'give'	O -	2	-
	S -	4	1
	-- V	3	1
	IO + V	8	5

	S+V -	13	6
	S +O+IO+ V	25	13
<i>getir-</i>	O -	3	1
'bring'	IO -	4	1
	-- V	1	1
	O + V	13	3
	IO + V	6	4
	S+V -	9	5
	S + IO+ O + V	16	14

For example, one of the children, expresses both direct object and location using pronouns and drops the A argument properly as early as 2;2.

(15) Mot: *noldu şişeye?*

What happen-past bottle-DAT  
'What happened to the bottle?'

İdi: *oraya koydum onu* (2;2)

There-DAT put-PAST-1SG it-ACC  
'I put it there'

(16) Eki: *odamı göstereyim mi sana?* (3;6)

Room-POSS -ACC show-OPT-1SG Q you-DAT  
'Shall I show my room to you?'

Mot: *hadi göster.*

'Show it to me'

The above example illustrates that the child (3;6) is able to utilize an utterance with full arguments as she is initiating an activity. The mother responds with an utterance with ellipsis.

### Conclusion

Ditransitive verbs require two internal arguments in the verb phrase, thus pose a more challenging task for children. In this study we investigated how children make use of the cues provided by caregivers in the acquisition of these verbs. For this purpose, we have used naturally occurring data collected from spontaneous interactions of two groups of five children and their mothers. The results show that mothers use utterances with omission of arguments and also with full arguments. As for children, among the six verbs investigated, *koy-* (put) and *ver-* 'give' have been used more often than the other verbs by the children from the younger group. In the older group, in addition to the six verbs present in the vocabulary of younger children, new verbs have also appeared. When the productions of children from both groups are compared with their mothers', we have seen that *koy-* 'put' is used frequently by mothers and children alike. On the other hand, *ver-* 'give' is frequently used by mothers but not by children. As for the frequency of different structures, mothers of children from Group 1 use fewer utterances with ellipsis since the aim of their utterances is initiating conversation and directing children. Mothers of children from Group 2 also use fewer utterances with ellipsis. However, at this stage children use utterances with or without ellipsis properly, which leads us to think that the frequency of use by mothers cannot be considered as the only source of ellipsis in child speech.

In this study, the context in which these spontaneous speech samples are obtained may have played an important role because it is shared by the mother and the child. Thus, this outcome can be considered as a natural result of free play session since in such situations mothers and children play with toys and give instructions as to placing objects in certain locations. This factor can also explain the use of elliptic use of arguments. While mothers and children are playing together they focus on the same objects and actions, thus, joint attention can solve the problem posed by the elliptic structure. Additionally, argument structures produced by children older than 3;6 years may also be studied in the future to investigate how argument structures are composed regarding other verbs.

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