Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi Buca Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi 21: 108-114 (2007)

The Importance of Genitive in Assigning Markedness Degrees to English Relative Clauses

İngilizce İlgi Tümcelerinde Belirtilik Derecesini Belirleyen İyelik Ekinin Önemi

Aynur Yürekli*

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to seek alternative or complementary explanations for the markedness degrees assigned to relative clauses. The basic factor has usually been the function of the relative pronoun within the relative clause that determines the difficulty level of the relative clause construction, which in turn has been claimed to define the acquisition order for these clause types. The genitive in the accessibility hierarchy for noun clauses has been highlighted as one of the structures that deviates from the so far accepted Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy. Thus, this study claims that genitive should be kept apart from this hierarchy as it has a nature of its own. The findings are compared to the suggested hierarchy by Jones (cited in Ellis 2003), and the results indicate that the difficulty level for relative clauses is not only determined by the function of the headnoun, but also by the genitive nature of the headnoun.

Keywords Relative Clauses, Accessibility Hierarchy, Difficulty Level

ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın amacı ilgi tümcelerine verilen belirtilik derecesine alternatif bir açıklama getirmektir. Genellikle ilgi tümcelerinin zorluk derecesini ve buna bağlı olarak yabancı dili İngilizce olarak öğrenen öğrencilerdeki öğrenme sırasını tayin etmede etken olan ögenin, bağıntılı zamirin ilgi tümcesindeki görevi olarak gösterilmiştir. Ancak, iyelik eki tümcesinin, belirtilen iddialar doğrultusunda oluşturulan "Ad Öbekleri Erişim Sıralaması"dan (NPAH) ayrıldığı gözlemlenmiştir. Bu çalışma, iyelik eki tümcesinin bu sıralamanın dışında tutulmasını, kendi içinde ayrı bir sıralaması olduğunu göstermeyi hedeflemektedir. Elde edilen sonuçlar, Jones (2003) tarafından önerilen Ad Öbekleri Erişimlik Sıralaması ile karşılaşırılmıştır.Bu sıralamanın sadece bağıntılı zamirin ilgi tümcesi içindeki görevinden değil, aynı zamanda bu zamirin iyelik gösterip göstermediği ile ilgili olduğu tespit edilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İlgi Tümceleri, Erişim Sıralaması, Zorluk Derecesi

Introduction

Markedness has always been the center of discussion by SLA (Second Language Acquisition) researchers as one of the concepts explaining the order of language acquisition. The basic assumption about language acquisition and interlanguage development regarding markedness is that marked structures are more difficult to learn than unmarked structures, thus unmarked structures emerge earlier and with a higher rate of accuracy than marked structures (White 1989). One such case where the unmarked - marked distinction is obvious are the Relative Clauses; set of sentence constructions interacting as implicational universals, with varying degrees of markedness (Comrie, 1981).

When first suggested by Keenan and Comrie (1977) as the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy (NPAH), relative clauses, depending on their head noun functions, were ordered within a chain of complexity, frequency of occurrence, thus markedness degree. However, studies focusing on the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy, which aim at testifying its explanatory force in language acquisition,

* Aynur Yürekli Ekonomi Üniversitesi, Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu, Mütercim_Tercümanlık Bölümü, İzmir

have made the claims on the order of acquisition questionnable. Especially, the genitive construction has faced a lot of criticism regarding its place in the hierarchy. Even though it was claimed as one of the most marked structures of relativization, study results have borne out inconsistencies with respect to error rates exhibited by students. In fact, students learning English were found to do much better in genitive relativization than expected. Such controversial results led to a discussion, which in turn made the genitive construction the center of studies as far as the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy is concerned. The genitive construction is either less marked than suggested by Keenan and Comrie, or it is different in nature than the others, namely Subject, Direct Object, Indirect Object and Oblique relativization structures.

Especially the studies of Gass (1980) and Hansen-Strain and Strain (1989) refer to contradictory results. Jones (cited in Ellis 2003: 419) goes as far as claiming that the hierarchy for relative clauses should be divided into two so that constructions requiring genitive can be completely separated from the exisiting hierarchy, and have their own accessibility and degrees of markedness (see Table 1). This was later supported by Hamilton (1995) and Baysal (2001) in their studies with subjects from various native languages, and Turkish learners of English, respectively.

Table 1
Jones' suggested Hierarchy

Function	- Genitive	+ Genitive
Subject (S)	The man who came...	The man whose wife came...
DirectObject (DO)	The man (whom) I saw...	The man whose wife I saw...
IndirectObject (IO)	The man (whom) I gave the book to...	The man whose wife I gave the book to...
Obligue (OBL)	The man whom I looked at...	The man whose wife I looked at....

Within relative clause formation, there are two distinct features that account for the complexity and thus the markedness degree of the structure. One is the function of the headnoun within the relative clause, the second, the position of the relative clause within the matrix. Right embedded relative clauses in English are always easier to process and produce than center-embedded ones, both for learners of English and native speakers of English (Ellis, 2003). An alternative or complementary feature that might affect the structure complexity of relative clauses can be claimed to be the genitive nature of the relative pronoun, namely "whose".

Based on Jones' suggestion of having a separate hierarchy for genitive constructions, this study focuses on the difficulty levels of Subject, Direct Object, Indirect Object and Oblique relativization where the constructions require the genitive pronoun "whose". To account for the consistency in difficulty levels other than the one imposed by the function of the headnoun, all relative clauses used in data collection require center-embedded constructions. Another factor that might have an impact on error rates is the native language of the learners, which in this case, is Turkish. As Turkish is a language which allows all relativization types on the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy (Baysal, 2001), it can be said that native language interference is expected to be at a minimum level. Having controlled the factors of structure difficulty level and native language-target language intervention, the aim is to test whether Turkish learners of English follow Jones' suggested order of acquisition while forming relative clauses which are genitive in nature.

Method

Subjects

The subjects of this study were 80 adult Turkish learners of English with two different levels of proficiency. 40 (n=40) of the subjects were enrolled at the English preparatory program (intermediate level) of İzmir University of Economics and the other 40 (advanced, n= 40) were enrolled at the department of English Interpretation and Translation of the same University. While assigning students to different proficiency levels, the proficiency exam results administered in the University of Economics were taken as basis. The ones who got between 40-52 in the exam were assigned to Intermediate, whereas the advanced group consisted of students who were exempted from preparatory English programme with a score above 65. The subjects share the same native language, Turkish, and were all instructed in relative clauses prior to data collection. The reason why these two levels were chosen was to see cross-sectionally whether genitive relativization with four different functions of the headnoun show consistency between different levels of proficiency when error rates are taken into consideration.

Tasks and Administration

Usually, in studies related to NPAH, Grammaticality Judgement Tests and Sentence Combining Tasks are used. However, discussions on the data validity of Grammaticality Judgement tests has led the researcher to design a Translation task instead, which does not allow for a high degree of "chance factor" in getting the correct answer. Two tasks were designed to elicit the accuracy level of genitive formation. Both tasks consisted of 16 items that required the students to produce genitive construction based on Subject (4 items), Direct Object (4 items), Indirect Object (4 items) and Obligue (4 items) relativization. First, the Translation task was administered during class-time, later the Sentence combining task was given, during another class time.

a) Translation Task

During the administration of the Translation Task, students were provided with unknown vocabulary items when the need arose, as the aim was to elicit correct structures rather than vocabulary. The Turkish sentences given all required a center-embedded relative clause for the English corresponding answer to be accurate. This task required the students to comprehend the given sentence in Turkish and produce the same meaning and structure equivalent to English. Examples of these items and their corresponding item numbers in the Translation Task are listed below:

Table 2
Sample Items in the Translation Task

Function	Sample Item (Turkish)	Corresponding English Version	Items
Subject (S)	Anne-babası öğretmen olan çocuklar...	The children whose parents are teachers...	2-4-10-14
Direct Object (DO)	Raporunu geç aldığım öğrenci...	The student whose report I took late...	5-6-11-16
Indirect Object (IO)	Kızına çiçekler verdiğim adam...	The man whose daughter I gave flowers to....	1-8-12-15
Obligue (OBL)	Çantanı sandalyesinin üzerinde unuttuğun adam...	The man whose desk you forgot your purse on...	3-7-9-13

b) Sentence Combining Task

The sentence combining task was administered after the translation task. To account for equal level of sentence difficulty, the same sentences were given in their separated form. In this task, two independent sentences were given and students were asked to combine them into one by using a relative clause with "whose". This task required students to correctly do the following operations:

1. Relativization of a particular constituent which is co-referential with a constituent in the first sentence.
2. Movement of the relativized constituent within the second sentence.

There are three types of movements, depending on the function of the relative pronoun: vacuous movement, short movement, long movement.

3. Insertion of the second sentence into the first sentence.

(taken from Aarts& Shills, 1995)

Table 3 shows examples from the translation task and the corresponding items in the task.

Table 3
Sample Items in the Sentence Combining Task

Function	Sentences given	Accepted answer	Items
Subject (S)	a.The little girl is from Hawaii. b.The little girl's hat is extraordinary.	The little girl whose hat is extraordinary is from Hawaii.	1-4-10-13
Direct Object (DO)	a. The journalist died yesterday. b.I watched the journalist's interview on TV.	The journalist whose interview I watched on TV died yesterday.	5-6-9-14
Indirect Object (IO)	a. The man is the manager. b. I gave these flowers to the manager's daughter.	The man whose daughter I gave these flowers to is the manager.	2-8-12-15
Obligue (OBL)	a. The woman got mad at me. b. I spilt some water on the woman's dress.	The woman whose dress I spilt some water on got mad at me.	3-7-11-16

Task Evaluation

In both tasks, the scoring has been done according to the evaluation criteria outlined below. If one of those errors has been committed, their sentence was labelled as incorrect, thus given the score of (0). If not, it was labelled correct and given a score of (1).

a) Beginning with sentence B rather than A (violating the direction and results in the non-use of a genitive structure)
   e.g. a. The journalist died yesterday.
   b. I watched the journalist's interview on TV.
   * I watched the journalist's interview on TV who died yesterday.
b) The passivization of the NP target of relativization. This is a form of avoidance because it always results in the relativization of the subject, the most easily relativizable NP type.
   e.g. a. The man is the manager.
   b. I gave these flowers to the manager's daughter.
   * The man whose daughter was given these flowers by me is the manager.
c) The ommision of the preposition
   e.g. * The woman whose dress I split some water got mad at me.
d) The substitution of a different preposition for the target preposition. This involves a change in meaning, in violation of direction
   e.g. * The woman at/under whose dress I split some water got mad at me.
e) The use of resumptive pronoun or noun
   e.g. * The little girl whose her hat is extraordinary is from Hawaii.
f) A non-relative clause like an adverbial clause using where, when...
   (no instance of this error was found)
g) A relative clause without "whose"
   e.g. * The student who/whom report I took late....
h) An incomplete response or no response

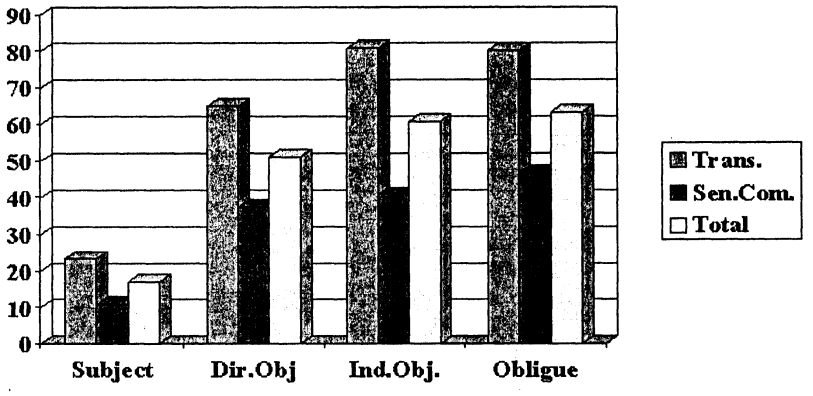
(adapted from Baysal, 2001)

Results and Discussions

The scores obtained at the end of the data collection phase were grouped according to the two levels of students and the two tasks used to elicit the data. Thus one set of results concerns the scores of the translation and sentence combining tasks for the intermediate group, and the second set concerns the results of both tasks for the advanced group (both n=30). The error rates for each group of students with respect to the four structures under study were calculated. Depending on the rate of errors, it was tested against the hierarchy suggested by Jones (cited in Ellis 2003).

Chart 1 shows the results for the intermediate group. The error percentages and the ranking that the hierarchy refers to is given below.

Task Results for Intermediate Group



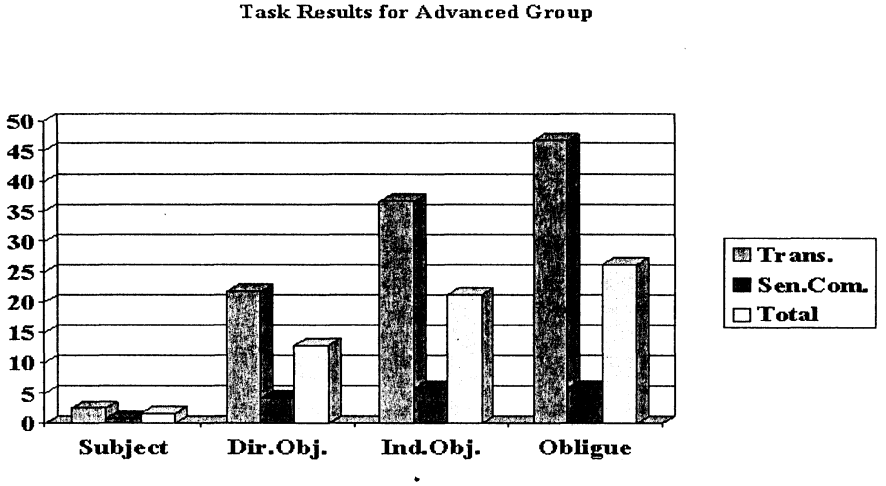
In terms of total error rates of the intermediate group, error percentages show that genitive relativization on the subject was 17.08%, direct object 51.25%, indirect object 60.83%, and obligue 63.33%. (Task results support the order of total scores to a great extend in that the translation task results are 23.33% < 65% < 80.83% < 80%, Subject, Direct Object, Indirect Object and Obligue, respectively. Likewise the results for sentence combining are 10.83% < 37.5% < 40.83 < and 46.66%, Subject, Direct Object, Indirect Object and Obligue, respectively). When expressed in the form of a hierarchy, it can be said that the error rates refer to the one suggested by Jones.

S < DO < IO < OBL

(+ genitive for all structures)

It is interesting to note that the error rates for Indirect Object and Obligue are quite close to each other. As both structures require the use of a preposition, students seem to be equally sensitive to the use of it in the relative clause.

In Chart 2, we can see the results obtained from the advanced group.



In terms of error rates of the advanced group, total error percentages show that genitive relativization on the subject was 1.66%, direct object 12.91%, indirect object 21.25%, and obligue 26.25%. (Task results support the order of total scores to a great extend in that the translation task results are 2.5% < 21.66% < 36.66% < 46.66%, Subject, Direct Object, Indirect Object and Obligue, respectively. Likewise the results for sentence combining are 0.8% < 4.16% < 5.83 < and 5.83%, Subject, Direct Object, Indirect Object and Obligue, respectively.) Expressed in the form of a hierarchy, the error rates refer to the hierarchy below.

S < DO < IO < OBL

(+ genitive for all structures)

As it is the case with the intermediate group, the advanced students also exhibited similar error rates for the Indirect Object and Obligue relativizations.

Summary and Conclusions

This study reports the findings of two tasks administered to two groups of students with the aim to identify whether the genitive construction in English relative clauses follows an order of acquisition apart from the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy suggested by Keenan and Comrie (1977). To be able to see the developmental route of students from different levels, groups of intermediate (n = 40) and advanced (n = 40) were chosen as the subject group.

The claim that Jones' (cited in Ellis 2003) suggested hierarchy on genitive relative clause formation is followed by Turkish learners of English was confirmed. Based on error rates, both tasks for both groups indicate a hierarchy starting with Subject, followed by Direct Object, Indirect Object and finally Obligue relativizations. These results indicate that markedness degrees of relative clause formation in English do not only depend on the function of the headnoun in the relative clause but also the +/- genitive nature of the headnoun. Thus, the suggestion that the Genitive construction should not be included in the NPAH, or should be indicated as a sub-implicational universal of the exisiting hierarchy finds support.

However, these results do not necessarily challange the hierarchy based on headnoun functions.The fact that, despite its genitive nature, Subject relativization produces fewer errors than Direct Object, which produces less errors than Indirect Object and Obligue indicates that the function of the headnoun determines the difficulty level more than the genitive construction itself. In other words, learners are sensitive to both headnoun functions and genitive constructions in the relative clause.

In terms of defining markedness criteria, relative clauses seem to have three basic structural factors:

a) the function of the headnoun

b) the position of the relative clause within the matrix

c) the +/- genitive nature of the headnoun

Whether these factors have equal affects on structure complexity or perceived difficulty on the side of the students certainly requires further studies.

An interesting finding regards the way Indirect Object and Obligue are perceived and produced by students. Depending on error rates, there does not

seem to be a significant difference between the number of errors produced for these two types in both tasks. Thus, rather than putting Indirect Object < Obligue, it could take the form of "either/or", as [Indirect Object/Obligue].

When looked cross-sectioanlly, it was expected that the number of errors would fall as proficiency level rises. Without changing the order of the hierarchy, students in the advanced group produced less errors than the students in the intermediate group. Developmentally, this suggests that the accuracy order follows the route of the hierarchy. Regardless of students' levels, error rates remained the same.

For further research, a study that combines items eliciting all three factors of markedness (headnoun function, the position of the relative clause, and +/- genitive of the headnoun) would give more convincing support on the factors which assign markedness degrees to relative clauses in English. Investigating one aspect each time might lead to wrong interpretations regarding all factors involved in determining difficulty levels. In addition, a longitudinal study looking at one group of learners over a long period of time would also be descriptive in how developmentally rather than cross-sectionally this set of clauses are acquired

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