

ANALYSIS OF *KENDİ*: THE REFLEXIVE PRONOUN ACQUISITION IN TURKISH

Tuba AYDINOĞLU

Abstract: In language acquisition studies reflexive pronouns haven't received much interest and particularly in Turkish language there is a lack of solid findings. Hence, this paper attempts to shed light on the acquisition of the reflexive pronoun 'kendi' in Turkish. Analyzing the speech recordings of Turkish children, taken from CHILDES database, the age of the acquisition and the use of the reflexive pronoun 'kendi' is explored in detail. Despite the lack of sufficient data it is seen that contrary to the previous studies children show competence of 'kendi' from the age of 2. It is also hard to draw a concrete pattern as conflicting usages occur between the children depending on the age and gender. This paper constitutes an example for a profound study focusing on reflexive pronouns in Turkish and highlights the need of it.

Key words: Reflexive pronoun, "Kendi", CHILDES database, Turkish grammar.

Türkçede *Kendi* Dönüşümlü Zamirinin Analizi

Öz: Dil edinimi alanında yapılmış çalışmalar özellikle Türkçe'deki dönüşlülük zamiri 'kendi-' ile ilgili yeterli bilgi sunmamaktadır. Bu çalışmada 'kendi-' zamirinin edinilme sürecini daha detaylı bakabilmek için CHILDES veri tabanından faydalanarak çocuk söylemleri tek tek incelenmiştir. Bu sayede, her ne kadar veriler sayıca yetersiz kalsa da, 'kendi-' yapısının edinilme yaşı ve süreci ortaya çıkarılmaya çalışılmıştır. Sonuçlara göre, daha önceki bulguların aksine dönüşlü yapının bilinçli kullanımı 2 yaşından itibaren gerçekleşmektedir. Fakat veriler aynı zamanda yaş ve cinsiyete göre çelişen söylemler de sunduğundan belirli bir edinim modeli çıkarmak mümkün olmamaktadır. Buna karşın yapılan çalışma alandaki eksikliklerin ortaya çıkarılması ve bir örnek teşkil etmesi açısından önemli çıktılar içermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Dönüşlülük zamiri, "Kendi", CHILDES veritabanı, Türkçe dilbilgisi.

Introduction

Acquisition of reflexives has been studied thoroughly in different languages and acquisition process has been shown to be multi layered and slow. The reflexive pronouns can give away a lot about the child's acquisition of agents and actions together with semantic reasoning of their relationship. Despite this fact, reflexive pronouns covered very briefly within these studies so far. It has been claimed that for languages like English where the reflexive pronouns occur lexically the acquisition may happen in late 3 or 4 years. The reflexive acquisition is predicted to be more complicated for agglutinative languages such as Turkish where the reflexivity is represented morphologically. However there is a lack of recent and profound study focusing on the acquisition of reflexive pronouns in Turkish. The main aim of this paper is to illustrate the individual

usages of Turkish reflexive pronoun *kendi* taken from the CHILDES database¹ in order to observe when and how the reflexive pronouns are acquired. The representative samples are analysed with respect to the ages of 2, 3 and 4. Within the context *kendi* usage is observed as the child's performance indicating their competence.

The organisation of the paper is as follows. In the background section the related terms and lexical units are defined. Earlier studies on reflexive acquisition are gathered in a relevant order. In the methodology section the data is presented and the steps of the analysis are introduced and the existing limitations are stated. The following section, data analysis, explores the samples in detail. Results and Discussion section goes into the link between the results and the earlier findings on reflexives. Finally the results are placed within the acquisition studies and suggestions are given for further studies in the conclusion section.

1. Background

1.1. Definitions

Reflexive pronouns are explained by Huddleson (2002 cited by König) as "... inflectional forms of the personal pronouns, formed morphologically by the compounding of self with another form...". König and Gast (2002) categorize English reflexive pronouns as "(a) one based on the object (originally the dative) forms of the personal pronouns himself, herself, itself, themselves) and (b) one based on the possessive (genitive) forms (myself, yourself, ourselves, yourselves)".

The Turkish reflexive pronoun is given in two usages as **invariable** and **variable** reflexive pronoun. According to Kornfilt (1997, p. 138) the first function (invariable?) of *kendi* is adjectival modifier as in the given example. This usage of *kendi* can occur with all singular and plural forms.

kendi telefon – um
own phone – 1SG
 "my own phone"

Variable reflexive pronouns are given in Kornfilt (1997, p. 139) as follows; *kendim* (myself), *kendin* (yourself), *kendi* (him/herself), *kendimiz* (ourselves), *kendiniz* (yourselves), *kendileri* (themselves). He also states that for third person singular there is no inflection after *kendi* and even though it is rare there is an alternative usage for him/herself as *kendisi*.

¹ MacWhinney, B. (2000). The CHILDES Project: Tools for analyzing talk. 3rd edition. Vol. 2: The Database. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

In addition, the uninflected *kendi* is used together with the inflected form in order to stress the reflexive meaning. As seen in the example given by Kornfilt (1997, p. 139) the second one has more emphasized meaning.

- a) (siz) kendi –niz –i tenkit et –me –yin
 You (pl) self –2PL –ACC critique do-NEG-2PL IMP
 “Don't criticize yourselves!”
- b) (siz) **kendi** kendi –niz –i tenkit et- me –yin
 You (pl) **self** self –2PL –ACC critique do-NEG-2PL IMP
 “Don't criticize yourselves (yourselves)!”

In the following example, they illustrate the reference change in the sentence when the reflexive attached to the particle (72a, 72c) and when the reflexive pronoun used together with a reflexive verb (72b, 72d).

- (72) a. Çekirdek tümce: Çocuk kendini yıkadı.
 b. Dönüşmüş tümce: Çocuk yıkandı.
 c. *Özne* *nesne* *yüklem*
 A: [+istem] kendi+[BELİRTME] ← E + {ZAMAN} + {UYUM}
- d. *Özne* *yüklem*
 A: [+istem] ← E + {DÖNÜŞLÜ} + {ZAMAN} + {UYUM}
-

Source: (Kosaner & Otkar, 2005, p. 51).

In the example (72a) “The child washed himself ” the pronoun *kendi* (himself) semantically creates a parallel reference to the subject (72c) while in the example (72b) “The child wash-REF-PAST” reflexive morpheme “n” enables a direct reference to the subject. This explains why the double reflexive usage emphasizes the meaning.

The following sentence inhabits the subject as the object of the action at the same time.

“Cocuk **kendi** yıkandı”

“The child *SELF* wash-REF-PAST”

Their study intends to shed light on the vagueness in what contexts one construction is preferred over the other one. The data extracted from CHILDES database is also explored in this sense in section 5. In this paper, same abbreviations of CHILDES database are used; MOT: mother CHI: child and EXP: investigator.

1.2. Literature Review

Reflexives are generally named as complicated and lately acquired structures. In the case of English, Horgan's research (1978 cited in Slobin, 1985, p. 98) gives multiple layers of passive construction acquisition including reflexives within *non-reversible passives*. It is underlined that when there are two agents in a sentence such as "The lamp was broken by the ball" such passive production is observed within the ages of 2 to 4 but it's shown that sentences such as "The ball bounced by itself" produced rarely and later. Maratos et. al (1979) verifies this through their study, which concludes that the children, who are 4 to 5 years old, despite their correct usage of action passives, they fail to fully understand the *logical subject* and *the logical object*. The reflexives require complex information about the agent and action relation. Clackson et. al (2011) confirms that for children even after the age of 6 the process of rendering the meaning of such sentences takes longer compared to adults. They conducted an eye-tracking test to reach the proportion of children's understanding of reflexive. The study concludes that the children show almost 100% accuracy in understanding and validating the correct meaning of the sentences which include reflexives such as himself/herself. Berman's (1980) reason for this slow production is that children need to understand the abstract relation between the agent and the action in order to be able to acquire the reflexive form. Later in his study on acquisition of Hebrew verbs Berman (1983) gives three stages where the child initially gains the reflexivity among other alterations of a verb, this is followed by the correct selection of the verb-endings depending on the meaning of the sentence. Finally, the children gain a meta linguistic knowledge when they can master the verb choice in the absence of form and meaning relation within complex sentences including multiple agents.

Another experimental study done by Wexler et al. (1985) investigates the acquisition of reflexive and pronouns in English with the children from 2.6 to 6.6. They approve that the acquisition of reflexives occurs in stages. Their study concludes that even the eldest children in the study *violate the principles* of reflexive usage. Depending on their findings where children show high level of understanding from a very early age and have very little progress in production, they claim the process is very slow and gradual.

Rivero and Golezdzinowska (2001) observe the Polish reflexive pronouns acquisition also making use of the CHILDES database. The children show accurate production of reflexive clitic *sie* where it is required after the verb. This is the first one of the three stages of reflexive acquisition according to Rivero and Golezdzinowska. They also show that the accurate usage is found starting from the age of 2. Until this age the children can comprehend the concept of reflexive actions.

In contrast to English and Polish, reflexives studied under lexical acquisition, Turkish reflexives categorized as morphemic and lexical acquisition do not occur gradually and slowly. On the contrary it happens rather quickly. As Aksu (1985) states, Turkish children do not rely on the word order to assign the suitable reflexive, their production depends on the acquisition of individual morphemes. Ketrez (1999) shows that the reflexive suffixes or *lexicalized reflexives* (Berman, 1980) such as the *n* in the example of *yika-n-iyor-*, Ø (wash-REFL-PR. PROG-3SG) emerges on the third stage of the development which starts with the age of 1. They observe the production of multiple reflexive verbs by 3 different female children within ages of 1 to 2. So clearly the understanding of agent required action is present in the child's mind from a very early age. When it comes to the pronoun *kendi* there are limited references to the stages of its acquisition. The existing literature refers to the different stages of reflexive acquisition. Studying the reflexive pronouns in isolation may help to observe the understanding and the production of these units in parallelism to child's ability to manage abstract knowledge given by the form.

2. Methodology

The data is taken from the CHILDES database. The Turkish datasets in the *other* section of the database are used. All existing samples of *kendi* is collected from 34 children of Aksu's collection, which was taken from 17 boys and 17 girls between 2:00 to 4:4. In this dataset only 13 children have been found to use the reflexive pronouns. 4 children from Kern's collection are taken as well although there was a lack of child use of reflexive pronoun *kendi*. The data couldn't be taken evenly regarding the number of the male and female children from Turkish data. The data was collected through a very limited period of time and didn't show equality in the number of the years that each child was observed. There are 53 sentences including reflexives produced by children extracted from the data of Aksu. The study is shaped as a snapshot representation of when and how Turkish children use reflexive pronouns. In the Turkish dataset from Aksu there are nearly 30.600 child sentences and only 39 sample sentences of reflexive pronouns was found within those. The representative examples are semantically analysed with respect to the ages of 2, 3 and 4 where the data is available for each child within these ages. The study aimed at answering the questions of whether the children acquire the pronouns gradually, which types of *kendi* is observed at what age and what are the possible reasons of certain usages. As a result some hints about the overall acquisition process of reflexive pronouns in Turkish is concluded.

2.1. Limitations

The data is couldn't be retrieved evenly with regards to the gender and the age due to the restricted availability of samples on CHILDES database. Since

Turkish *kendi* reflexive pronoun is a very rarely used in daily language, it is harder to reach a generalizations based on existing data. It was also taken in different time periods having months of breaks. This affects the probability of sampling the reflexive pronouns in the actual chronology and frequency. It is also taken for various purposes representing mostly non-grammatical features within inconsistent contexts such as home and pre-school. Due to the recurring stimulus, same context and type of interactions the data shrinks in reflecting the natural production of the child. Moreover these interactions in the data are restricted to the parent(s) -child or the researcher- child talks where the deliberate interference impairs the nature of the child's language as well. All these affect the possibility of reflecting the actual usage of the reflexive pronouns. Therefore especially in the case of working on such rare constructions as reflexives, the reliability of the results in this study decreases. More importantly there is the question to what degree the production can be counted as an evidence to prove the language acquisition. The consistent samples of one child can be a reference to the level of her/his communicative competence. Still, it is not provable to what extend the taken samples are child-initiated or simple mimicking (15). The children maybe simply repeating the adult speech especially at the very early stages of acquisition.

Finally, it is not possible to draw a concrete picture of acquisition process of these pronouns because each child has their individual acquisition experiences with these constructions. That's why to make a generalization about the concrete age of reflexive pronoun acquisition is impossible depending on the present findings. Nevertheless, this study gives a detailed explanation of reflexive pronoun usage individually within the context it's used. In addition the effect of age and gender variables on acquisition of *kendi* is presented. The results help to identify the most significant aspects of Turkish reflexive acquisition to be studied in the future.

3. Data Analysis

Kern's data is very restricted because Ozge (f) is observed from 1:1 to 1:11 for this reason the sample of *kendi* is found in mother's speech. The tokens showed that from a very early age the mother uses the first person reflexive pronoun as follows :

- (1) *MOT: atma kendini kızım
 “Don't throw yourself my daughter”

It is seen that the child as in the examples below is able to gain various usages from the mother's speech when she refers to the child as third person or when she refers to the toys while playing together:

- (2) *MOT: benim kızım kendi yiyebilir

- “My daughter can eat on her own”
- (3) *MOT: aferin kızım artık kendi ee yapıyor.
“Well done my daughter, now that she =sleeps herself”
- (4) *Mot: kendi kendine sallansın
“(the horse toy) let it rock itself”
- (5) *Mot: kendinden hiç hoşlanmadı bebek
“(the doll) it didn't like itself at all”

3.1. Age 2

At the early stages of the age two the children show understanding of *kendi* (6) and they start to use these forms before they turn 3 (7);

- (6) *EXP: kendi oyuncakların var mı?
“Do you have your own toys”
*CHI: var.
“I do”
- (7) *EXP: şimdi kapatabilirim
“Now I can close”
*CHI: kendi kendi kendi
“herself, herself, herself”

In the example (7) he child wants to do the “closing” action herself and says *kendi* (herself) instead of *kendim* (myself). This may be possible due to the parents’ frequent use of third person singular while addressing to the child as seen in the examples above in 2 and 3. The child here may be imitating the most frequently heard version saying *kendi* while meaning *kendim*. Another child before 3 is able to understand and produce the reflexive verbs and pronouns grammatically (8) and in addition it is possible to see the invariable reflexive pronoun twice to stress the meaning (9).

- (8) a) *EXP: süsleniyor mu anne bazen?
“Does your Mum get smarten up sometimes?”
*CHI: süsleniyor.
Smarten-REFL-P.PROG-Ø (3SNG)
- b) *EXP: neresini süslüyor?
“What place she gets smartened up?”
*CHI: kendisini
“Herself” (she smartens up herself)

- (9) *CHI: kendi kendine gidiyor.
"It's going on its own."

3.2. Age 3

As the data was very limited, no example of production could be found for some children as in the case of Murat (m). In comparison to the very early understandings given above, Murat has one example from the age of mid-3. However the reliability of this example is questionable. Because even when the reflexive pronoun *kendi is removed* from the experimenter's question (10), the child could still answer the same (var = *same*). This example is not sufficient to gain an insight about the comprehension of reflexive pronoun *kendi*.

- (10) a) *EXP: senin paran varmı kendi paran?
"Do you have money, your own money?"
 *CHI: var.
"I do"
- b) *EXP: senin kendi kalemin varmı?
"Do you have your own pencil?"
 *CHI: yok.
"I don't"

The data includes child initiated production of reflexives together with reflexive pronoun as follows;

- (11) a) *EXP: kim yıkıyor seni?
"Who is washing you?"
 *CHI: kendim. (*kendim kendimi yikiyorum*)
"Myself" (I am washing myself)
- b) *CHI: Funda **kendisi** yıkamıyor mu?
 Funda herself wash-REF-P.PROG- INTR.
"Is Funda washing herself on her own?"

Interestingly, despite having and error-free production at the age of (8) the same female child has error in one reflexive requiring sentence (12) where she mistakes the third person singular invariable reflexive *kendisi* with third person plural one *kendileri*.

- (12) *EXP: sen oynuyor musun onlarla?
"Are you playing with them?"
 *CHI: kendisi oynuyor. = kendileri oynuyorlar
"(It) plays itself" = "(they) play themselves"

In the same sequence of conversation, she uses the appropriate pronoun:

- (13) *EXP: *sen mi çağırдын?*
“did you call(the bird)”
 *CHI: *kendisi geliyor.*
“(It) is coming itself”

3.3. Age 4

At the age of 4, predictably, the children have smoother sentences with no error in invariable reflexive while giving the meaning of my/your/his-her own. They use various variable reflexive pronouns as well. The sample sentences are very limited but the following example can illustrate the competence of Omer (m) in emphasizing the meaning with double pronoun.

- (14) *EXP: *kiminle oynar o çocuklar?*
“With whom do those kids play?”
 *CHI: *kendi kendileriyle oynar.*
“They play themselves together with themselves”
 *CHI: *biz kendi kendimizle oynuyoruz.*
“We play ourselves together with ourselves”

On other hand, Isil in the following example answers to the experimenter with a repetition of reflexive pronoun. This can be either an example of mimicking or as the child's successful extract of aimed information out of experimenter's question.

- (15) *EXP: *kendi evinde mi?*
“In her/his own home?”
 *CHI: *kendi evinde.*

4. Results and Discussion

In the given literature English children have found to gain the reflexive pronouns later than reflexive verbs and they tend to confuse the pronouns (him) with reflexive pronouns (himself). Turkish children are found in the given analysis to acquire the reflexive pronouns as early as 2 years old and they tend to reach the competence by the age of 5. However this process is seen to be not consistent for each child.

Each children show individual differences in and production as represented in the Appendix 1. They show the ability to master these complicated variety of constructions at the age of 2. The examples (8, 9, 10) indicates that the children understand reflexives as early as 2. Observing the children individually, the

earliest productions most frequently is? The first person singular in both invariable and variable *kendi*.

The data was unequal regarding the gender of the children, still it's seen that the male children tend to start using *kendi* in both senses own and self, earlier than female ones do. This can be a cause of the unbalanced data collection or the belief that male children tend to be less sociable than female children. In the taken examples the male children express their own actions and belongings more than the female children does. Likewise the female children show more frequent usage of second and third person plural reflexive pronouns in the cases of expressing a common belonging or action. This is predictable as many children express actions such as eating themselves or playing on their own.

Parent talk surely is a big factor in acquisition but it can be inferred from the examples such as (11b) that the children are not merely repeating the adult speech. According to Aksu-Koç (1998) the distribution of mother's usage of morphological particles such as reflexives morphemes in Turkish *n* and *l* the child's are equal in quantity and parallel in the choice of construction. In the examples such as (11b) where the child successfully and grammatically brings reflexives together. Thus it can be inferred that he child is in the position of making the deductions depending on the respectively restricted sample of the language.

In the given Turkish samples above, the data collected from Ozge, there are only examples of *kendi* which is produced by the mother. It's shown for this case, disregarding the deficits of data in representativeness of the actual language of the child, the input from the mother is very limited both in number and in aspect. In the examples (1, 2, 3, 4, 5) from Ozge in CHILDES database, it can be observed that within a limited usage, parent may refer to various reflective constructions. Considering the limited input that Isil had until the age of 3, it is inferred from the data that she could managed the complex production of reflexives (11b) with a limited earlier exposure. This case could verify the *Lexical Learning Hypothesis* (Eisenbeiss et. al, 2009), which explains that the children acquired the grammar through the lexical entities. In a way, each reflexive pronoun that the child hears matters in constructing the syntactic acquisition of reflexives.

On the contrary it is a inconsistent acquisition process to explain in steps. The data shows that the same child produces the reflexive pronoun in a grammatical way at the age of early 2 (9), on the contrary, fails to produce the correct reflexive pronoun at the age of late 3.8 (12). On the other hand, the children are found to be capable in comprehension and production of even the emphasized (double) reflexivity *kendi kendi(n,m-)* at the age of early two. This should be regarded as a fact that the children may not be

going through gradual and slow stages in acquisition of reflexives in Turkish. It is not possible to isolate the types of constructions of reflexive pronoun acquisition with regards to age. The data verifies that every child progresses distinctively and individually.

The given invariable and variable reflexives require the knowledge of the agent action relation. Therefore these children seems to be able to realize the semantic relation and fulfil the syntactic requirements of reflexive structures from the age of 2 (9). When the children are 3 years old they are observed to be in an “testing” period where they try to match the meaning with the correct form as shown in the example (12). At the age of 4 adult like complex and emphasized usages are observed.

Conclusion

There has been great deal of studies on the reflexive acquisition within lexical and morphemic acquisition, and child production. Very limited resources are available on Turkish reflexive pronoun acquisition process. This study attempted to give insights about the acquisition of reflexive pronouns observing the Turkish child usages taken from the CHILDES database. As Berman (1983) stated; Hebrew language children are firstly able to understand and use the verbal reflexive morphemes, which corresponds to *n* and *l* in Turkish. Then the abstract link and emphasising the meaning with another reflexive pronoun is gained later. According to the findings of this study, despite it is limitation, such a clear stage wasn't observed which may support this view. It should be underlined that the data supports the argument of *poverty of stimulus* (Chomsky, 1980). The children with a very little amount of the given pronouns could construct various grammatical reflexives.

Several inferences have been made about the effects of age, gender and the context on the reflexive pronoun acquisition. There were clues on the possibility of mimicking vs authentic production of the child. Many more could possibly be observed within the represented examples, However, a contemporary and large corpus is needed to verify these implications.

Further studies can be conducted together with a more recently collected larger corpus of Turkish child language. It would be possible to make generalizations and analyse the possible stages of reflexive pronoun acquisition together with the morphological reflexives. For instance, with a child like Ozge who didn't show any production, more frequent data could be taken in the later stages of acquisition in order to compare the pronouns that she was exposed to and the ones that she uses.

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