Discourse Structuring Potential of Optional Object Marking in Turkish

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Introduction

Differential (Optional) Object Marking in Turkish
- Turkish is an agglutinating language with rich case system.
- Indefinite direct objects are marked in two distinct ways: overt accusative marking versus zero marking.
- This has certain interpretative effects as in (1) and (2).

Research Objective
- Only 14% of the accusative-marked indefinites in 20M-word news-corpus
- ‘Two girls’ in (2b) is interpreted as belonging to the set introduced in (2a) only when marked with the accusative case.

Present Study

Issues with Backward D-Linking Effects
- Various contexts do not produce the Backward D-Linking effects (von Heusinger & Kornfilt, 2005; U. Özge, 2011):
- Only 14% of the accusative-marked indefinites in 20M-word news-corpus has backward D-Linking (U. Özge & von Heusinger, in prep).

A Hypothesis: Discourse Structuring Potential
- Romanian pe-marking on direct objects increases the likelihood of their re-mention and being topic in the subsequent discourse (Chiriacescu & von Heusinger, 2011; similar findings for German indefinite dies, Deichsel & von Heusinger, 2011, English indefinite this, Chiriacescu, 2011).

Research Objective
- To investigate whether optional accusative marking in Turkish have any forward-looking discourse effects similar to Romanian pe-marking.

Production Study

Research Question: Does accusative case increase the likelihood of the object NP to be re-mentioned in the upcoming discourse?
- Participants: 33 Turkish speakers.
- Materials: 30 made-up news-scripts (12 critical items & 18 fillers).
- Procedure: Story-completion task as shown below.

Comprehension Study

Research Question: Does accusative case increase the likelihood of the object NP to be interpreted as the Agent in an ambiguous follow-up sentence?
- Participants: 79 Turkish speakers.
- Materials: Same materials as in the production task with an additional third sentence, ambiguous with respect to the Agent.
- Procedure: Forced-choice comprehension task, as shown below.

Results
- There was an NP2-bias in production but an NP1-bias in comprehension (for similar findings see, Arnold, 2001).
- Individual items behaved differently in terms of the effect of Case Marking on the prominence of the object NP (NP2) (for similar findings see, von Heusinger & Kaiser, 2011).
- For some items, NP2 was more likely to be prominent when marked in accusative case (Accusative-favoring items) whereas for others NP2 was more prominent when zero-marked (Zero-favoring items), shown in Table below, which shows the Accusative Bias (i.e., Reference to NP2 (%) in Accusative Condition minus Zero Condition).

Discussion

Base function of case marking is to index arguments.
- When indexing is undertaken by other means (e.g., word-order, semantic reversibility, world knowledge, causality), case marking is “free” to realize other functions.
- In accusative-favoring items, the referents are semi-\n- reversible so accusative is free to increase the discourse prominence of the object referent.
- In zero-favoring and neutral items, base-function of the accusative case might be more strongly required since the arguments are more reversible. We need the marker to better differentiate the subject from the object rather than its discourse function.
- Thus, discourse effect of optional object marking is not absolute but it seems to depend on other factors such as semantic reversibility.
- Ongoing work corroborates the present findings in an eye-tracking study, and investigates whether there is also any frequency effect behind the observed pattern.

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