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Acquisition of English ergative verbs by Turkish students: yesterday and today

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Abstract

This study tries to diagnose the acquisition of a special subclass of intransitive verbs, namely ergatives, by Turkish learners of English by comparing the (partial) results of the study carried out in 2000 (as an MA Thesis) with the results of its replication conducted in 2007. In both studies all the variables were the same. Proficiency levels were determined via a cloze test and a grammaticality judgment test with various subclasses of intransitives was administered. Results of the study have revealed that proficiency levels of the participants have increased in seven years, but paired ergative verbs have remained the most problematic subclass of intransitives in both studies.

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1. Introduction

It is widely accepted that the final goal of language instruction is to train “native-like” speakers of the target language. “A speaker of English knows not just what a word means but also how it fits into sentences and how each word behaves in sentences” (Cook, 1991, p.43). Gass and Selinker state that the major task of second language lexical research is “to discover what second language learners know about the lexicon of second language” (1994, p. 272). As Levelt (1989, p.181) claims “the lexicon is the driving force in sentence production”. Considering the functions of language, “to communicate our ideas” constitutes “the most widely recognized function of language” (Crystal, 1987, p.10), because “it [the language] is the principal medium of human communication” (Clark et al.1998, p.41). This communication takes place chiefly by means of sentences and as Dixon states “verb is the centre of the sentence” (1991, p.9). From this viewpoint, teaching verbs seems to be one of the important areas of language instruction, since it is the verb that establishes the relationship between semantics (*meaning*) and syntax (*structure*), and again it is the verb that determines the number and order (or position) of the obligatory sentence constituents according to the pragmatic function of the sentence.

According to the traditional classification based on complementation, verbs that can occur on its own are called intransitive verbs, and generally they have been defined in contrast to transitive verbs. Studies of Perlmutter (1978)

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and Burzio (1981) revealed that classification of verbs based on complementation within the framework of traditional grammar cannot distinguish between different types of intransitive verbs. Perlmutter (1978) has suggested a further classification of intransitives regarding “the thematic nature of the sole argument that these verbs project”, as well as considering “its [argument’s] initial position in syntactic configuration” (Montrul, 1999, p.191).

Intransitive verbs such as “*laugh*”, “*swim*”, and “*speak*”, as in “*Baby laughed at her mother*”, do not normally take object as in ungrammatical sentence **Her mother laughed the baby* and the subjects of the sentences including these verbs are responsible (or accountable) for the events denoted by these verbs. This subclass of intransitives that take immediate causers as their subjects are called **unergative** verbs in this work.

On the other hand, other subclass of intransitives such as “*appear*”, “*exist*”, and “*fall*” as in “*Clouds appeared on the horizon*”, “*Water does not exist on Mars*”, and “*Leaves fall in autumn*” precede noun phrases that are not the immediate causers of the events denoted by the verbs. In such cases, it might be *the wind* that drifts the clouds to a place where they are visible or *the cosmic conditions* might be responsible for the non-existence of water on the planet or it is *the gravitational force* that moves the leaves. However, these verbs do not allow transitive use with grammatical objects as in the ungrammatical sentence “**Lightning in the sky appeared the dark clouds on the horizon*”. This subclass of intransitives is called **unaccusative** verbs within this work.

The subclass of intransitive verbs “*sell*”, “*read*”, “*cook*” and “*break*” in sentences “*The new Ford is selling badly*” (Swan, 1980, p.457), “*This sentence doesn’t read quite right*” (Eastwood, 1994, p.142), “*The rice cooked [well]*” (Halliday, 1994, p.163) and “*The vase broke*” (Crystal, 1992, p.364) are similar to the unaccusative verbs, for the preceding noun phrases “*The new Ford*”, “*The sentence*”, “*The rice*” and “*The vase*”) which serve as subjects are not the immediate causers of the event denoted by the verbs. In this type of intransitives, “subjects originate as objects, that is, ‘*break*’ in ‘*The vase broke*’ is such a verb, ‘the vase’ being understood in the same way as it is in ‘*John broke the vase*’, where it is an object” (Crystal, 1992, p.364). Contrary to the unaccusatives, these verbs have morphologically identical causative (transitive) alternant and they can appear with object as in “*Mary cooked the rice well*”, and can form passive constructions such as “*The rice was cooked well*”. The subclass of intransitive verbs with causative alternants (e.g., *sell*, *read*, *cook*, and *break*) is called paired ergatives (as a term which covers both inchoative verbs and middle verbs). It should be noted that “*The rice cooked well*” and “*The rice was cooked well*” have different meanings. In the first sentence the success of the event is due to the inherent nature of the object (rice) and the structure cannot include any performer (as in (**The rice cooked well by Mary*)). In the second passive sentence which can include the performer the success of cooking the rice well is due to the one who performs the cooking (“*The rice was cooked well by Mary*”). Argument Structures of these verbs are not the same and the distinctions affect various areas of grammar (Can, 2008).

Problem

Previous studies (Burt and Kiparsky, 1972; Richards, 1973; Kellerman, 1978; Rutherford, 1987; Hubbard and Hix, 1988; Zobl, 1989; Abdullayeva, 1993; Yip, 1994; Hubbard 1994; Hirakawa, 1995; Ingham, 1996; Oshita, 1997; Montrul, 1997; Karacaer, 1998, Can 2000, Ju 2000) revealed that learners misuse such verbs in the following ways:

- a) They passivise such verbs as in “**He was arrived early*” (Burt and Kiparsky, 1972, p. 47), “**One day it was happened*” (Richards, 1973, p.103).
- b) They reject grammatical sentences in NP-VP order (such as “*The mirror shattered during the earthquake*”) and they correct as (“*mirror was shattered*”) (Yip, 1994, p.129).
- c) They use these verbs transitively as in “**The shortage of fuels occurred the need for economical engine*” (Rutherford, 1987, p.89).
- d) They add a postverbal NP as “**I was just patient until dried my clothes*” (in the sense of “*I was just patient until my clothes had dried*”) (Zobl, 1989, p.204).

Four studies (Abdullayeva (1993), Montrul (1997) Karacaer (1998) and Can (2000)) on acquisition of ergatives by Turkish Learners of English show that **Turkish learners of English avoid ergative structures and mostly prefer passive structures instead**. Abdullayeva’s (1993) analysis has demonstrated that *the rate of avoidance increases as the proficiency level increases*. Kellerman’s (1978) and Karacaer’s (1998) findings supports the case.

Aim of the Study

The aim is to diagnose the status of acquisition of ergative verbs by Turkish learners of English by comparing the (partial) results of the study carried out in 2000 (as MA Thesis) with the results of its replication in 2007. In

both studies the institution, the department, the class level, the number of the students and the research instruments were the same. In both cases, the studies addressed the following research questions.

- 1) Which sub-class of ergative verbs poses more learning difficulties with respect to the other intransitives?
- 2) Is there any connection between the difficulty rate posed by the most problematic intransitives and overall proficiency levels of the learners?
- 3) What might be the cause(s) of the most significant error type concerning intransitive verbs?

Method

Participants of both studies were 50 Turkish speaking learners of English randomly selected among the 1st year students of ELT Department of Faculty of Education at Uludag University, Turkey, in 2000 and in 2007. Their proficiency levels were determined via a cloze test produced by Oshita (1997), for “cloze tests do hold potential for measuring aspects of students’ written grammatical competence consisting of knowledge of vocabulary, morphology, syntax, textual competence and knowledge of the cohesive and rhetorical properties” (Bachman 1990, pp.87-88). The acceptable-word method was used for scoring the cloze test and possible maximum score for the cloze test was 100.

A pilot study on the written compositions of the participants in 2000 indicated that their erroneous usage of ergative verbs fall in “passivisation” and “transitivisation” and on the basis of this observation a Grammaticality Judgment Test was developed. The test aimed to assess the subjects’ perception of ergative verbs in various (both correct and erroneous) structural patterns in order to indicate the relative error rate for each verb in each structure with respect to the other intransitive verbs in the same structural patterns.

To develop the test, first, 10 **paired ergative** verbs (*wash, peel, clean, cut, carry, cook, rent, swallow, read* and *break*) were chosen. That each verb can be used as both “ergative verb” and “transitive verb” was confirmed by grammar books (Dixon, 1991, p.322-34; Palmer, 1965, p.90; Swan, 1980, p.457; Eastwood, 1994, p.142; Halliday, 1994, p.163 and Thewlis 1997, p.57), and for each verb, one ergative (e.g. *The book reads well*) and one passive (*The book was read*) sentences were produced. Finally, 20 test sentences were obtained for 10 paired ergative verbs.

Secondly, 10 **unergative verbs** (*dance, joke, laugh, smile, speak, talk, sleep, swim* and *shout*) were chosen. Besides a grammatical test sentence for each unergative verb (e.g. *She sleeps*), considering the possible erroneous uses of these verb revealed in the pilot study, two ungrammatical sentences for each verb, one in transitive use (e.g. **Mother sleeps her baby*) and one in passive use (**The baby was slept*) were produced. Consequently, 30 test sentences were produced for 10 unergative verbs.

Thirdly, 10 **unaccusative verbs**, (*appear, arise, arrive, die, exist, fall, happen, occur, rise* and *emerge*) were chosen. Following the same procedure, three test sentences for each verb (a grammatical one: e.g. *The accident happened*, an ungrammatical (transitive) one: e.g. **Slippery road happened the accident*, and an ungrammatical (passive) one **The accident was happened by him*) were produced. Consequently 30 test sentences were produced for 10 unaccusative verbs. Finally, adding 5 irrelevant distracting sentences, total of 85 test sentences were produced. To provide contextual information, additional sentences were added to some of the test sentences when necessary, but the parts that the participants were asked to judge were underlined. Grammatical correctness of each underlined clause was judged on a 3-scale measure: *correct, not correct* and *cannot decide*. Grammaticality Judgment test was given to 6 native speakers of English (who are 5 English teachers² and a linguist³) and they were informed of *the purpose of the study, instructions for the test, time allowed, item groups to be scored independently, grouping criteria for the test items* and *deliberate grammatical errors in the test*. Practical aspects of administering the test, such as time required and clarity of the instructions were checked by a pilot study in 2000. In both studies, cloze tests and Grammaticality Judgment tests were administered in regular class hours with the interval of one week. In both studies, participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation and guaranteed anonymity of their responses. The grammaticality judgment test was scored on the basis of the correspondence between the participants’ answers and **predetermined expected answers**. For the expected response one point was given and the others were not scored. The possible maximum score for each sub-group of verbs was 10 and overall score was 80.

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3 Brian Wistner

Results and Discussion

In previous study the mean score for cloze test was 65.84 out of 100 (Max: 90, Min: 38, Std. Dev: 11.34) and the mean score for the latter study is 74.20 (Max: 88, Min: 42, Std. Dev: 9.21). The result of the t-test comparing proficiency levels of both studies indicates that the average proficiency level of the participants of the latter study is significantly higher than the average score of previous study [$t_{(98)} = -4.045$, $p < 0.01$]. This shows that the overall proficiency levels of the learners significantly increased in seven years. Enormous development in communication and information technologies seems to provide the learners with great exposure to English along with the developments in language teaching curriculum.

The following table includes the results of the Grammaticality Judgment Test based on certain intransitive verb types in particular structures. Possible maximum score for each verb group is 10

Table 1 Grammaticality Judgment Test Results

VERBS AND STRUCTURES		Mean	Max Score	Min Score	Median	Mode	Std Dev
Paired Ergative verbs in NP-VP	In 2000	2,08	9	0	1	1	2,12
<i>The book reads easily</i>	In 2007	2,04	7	0	2	1	1,78
Paired Ergative verbs in Passive Structure	In 2000	9,76	10	7	10	10	0,55
<i>The bag is carried easily</i>	In 2007	6,96	10	0	7	7	1,94
Unergative verbs in NP-VP word order	In 2000	9,76	10	6	10	10	0,71
<i>The baby cries</i>	In 2007	8,54	10	4	9	9	1,24
Passivised Unergative Verbs	In 2000	7,54	10	3	8	7	1,69
<i>*The baby was cried</i>	In 2007	6,82	10	2	7	7	1,85
Transitivised Unergatives in NP-VP-NP	In 2000	7,28	10	2	8	8	2,22
<i>*He cried the baby</i>	In 2007	7,80	10	3	8	8	1,61
Unaccusative verbs in NP-VP	In 2000	9,16	10	6	9	9	0,88
<i>Dark clouds appeared</i>	In 2007	7,44	9	2	8	9	1,65
Passivised Unaccusative verbs	In 2000	6,38	10	0	7	8	2,24
<i>*The ship was appeared.</i>	In 2007	5,36	9	1	6	6	2,07
Transitivised Unaccusatives in NP-VP-NP	In 2000	5,90	10	0	5	5	2,38
<i>*The sun appeared the ship</i>	In 2007	6,22	10	2	7	7	1,94

The mean scores for the verb groups indicate that paired *ergative verbs in NP-VP word order* (*The book reads easily*) [$\bar{X}_{\text{previous}} = 2.08$ and $\bar{X}_{\text{latter}} = 2.04$] is the most problematic sub-class of intransitive verbs [$\bar{X}_{\text{Overall}} = 2.06$]. The result of Friedman test showed that there are significant differences among the average scores of the learners in various verb groups both in the previous study [$\chi^2_{(7)} = 242.39$, $p < 0.01$] and in the latter study [$\chi^2_{(7)} = 184.94$, $p < 0.01$]. Pairwise comparisons by Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test revealed that there is a significant performance differences between the lowest score ($\bar{X}_{\text{in 2000}} = 2,08$ / $\bar{X}_{\text{in 2007}} = 2,04$ [both are in *paired ergative verbs in NP-VP* (*The book reads easily*))] and the rest 7 scores ($p < 0.01$, [z values are not included here]). In both studies, although not significant, **the only negative correlation** between proficiency is observed for *paired ergative verbs in NP-VP* (*The book reads easily*) ($r_{\text{in 2000}} = -0,05$, $p = 0.75$ and $r_{\text{in 2007}} = -0,1$, $p = 0.49$). This finding is consistent with the previous studies in literature (Kellerman 1978, Abdullayeva 1993, Yip 1994, Montrul 1997, Karacaer 1998). The only significant positive correlations were observed between proficiency and Transitivised Unergatives in NP-VP-NP (**He cried the baby*) [$r = 0.518$, $p < 0.01$] and Passivised Unaccusative verbs (**The ship was appeared.*) [$r = 0.427$, $p < 0.01$] in the latter study.

Conclusion

Results of the both studies reveal that paired ergative verbs still pose challenging acquisition problems for learners of English. In both studies learners reject the grammaticality of the following sentences

Porcelain sinks *clean* easily. (Dixon 1991, pp.322-34).

The rice *cooked*. (Halliday, 1994, p.163).

The window *broke*. (Palmer 1965 p.90).

Your report *reads* well. (Swan, 1980 p.457).

The singer's latest record is *selling* like hot cakes. (Eastwood 1994, p.142).

The previous study in 2000 revealed that learners passivised the paired ergatives in NP-VP word order when they avoid (Can 2000, p.122). Studies in literature show that the problem seems to be language universal rather than language specific because the nature of the passivisation phenomenon have indicated that the problem is not related to the insufficient language mastery (not input) in L2 English (Kellerman, 1978; Zobl, 1989; Abdullayeva, 1993; Yip, 1994; Ju 2000). Although not significant, the negative correlation between proficiency level and learners' rejections of grammatical paired ergatives in NP-V word order shows the case that *the more learners know about syntactic positions of grammatical units and the semantic roles that they can bear, the more they avoid the ergative structure and favor the passive.*

Confirming Yip (1994, p.130), great majority of the participants of both studies were “reluctant to believe that any change of state occurs spontaneously without external causation”, and consequently the *theme* argument tends, by default, to be understood as the agent that causes the change of state. In English the usual relation between semantic roles and syntactic functions is SUBJECT-AGENT and OBJECT-THEME. “This correlation is overwhelmingly regular and forms the part of the semantic component of a grammar of English (Anderson, 1977, cited in Zobl, 1989, p.205). Contrary to the above generalization, the relation between semantic roles and syntactic functions appears to be SUBJECT-THEME in English. In such a contradictory case, in the minds of the learners another configurational mapping appears to be an alternative solution. This alternative mapping can assign the semantic role *theme* to the *subject* position but with a morphological marking of the verb phrase into passive. For a learner who acquired passive structure and who can make associations between syntactic functions and semantic roles, the passive structure constitutes the most reasonable alternative, and whenever the *theme* is in subject position, learner marks the verb with passive morphology.

As Dixon (1991, p.328) notes “this structure is not a very common phenomenon” and Juff (1998) has indicated that the frequency of ergative verbs in English Teaching materials is very low. In the previous experiment, only three learners (6%) reported that they had been taught the ergative structure (with few verbs.)

Referring to a number of research findings, Yip (1994, p.125) states that comprehensible input is certainly necessary, but not sufficient for successful acquisition. As White (1988, p.3) claims, in some situations it is necessary to draw the learners' attention to the fact that certain forms are non-occurring, or ungrammatical in the target language.

Both studies have revealed that problem still exists and in teaching grammar it seems to be necessary to draw the learners' attention towards this different mapping in language learning. Exposure to the structure with the elaboration of the existing language schemata relevant to the ergative structure seems to be starting point of the solution to the problem.

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