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CASE MARKING IN TURKISH
INDEFINITE OBJECT CONSTRUCTIONS

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In terms of the parameters of definiteness and specificity, we can distinguish four different direct object constructions in Turkish:

1) definite direct objects (henceforth DOs), as in (1), where the head noun of the object NP is marked with the accusative suffix -(y)I

(1) Ali her gün gazeteyi okuyor.
   'Ali reads the newspaper every day.'

2) indefinite DOs with the indefinite article bir (homophonous with the numeral ‘one’) and with accusative marking on the head noun, as in (2)

(2) Ali her gün bir gazeteyi okuyor.
   'Ali reads a newspaper every day.'

3) indefinite DOs with the indefinite article bir and no case marking on the head noun, as in (3)

(3) Ali her gün bir gazete okuyor.
   'Ali reads a newspaper every day.'

4) indefinite DOs with neither an indefinite article nor any case marking on the head noun, as in (4). Such DOs, which obligatorily appear in immediately pre-verbal position, are often referred to as incorporated objects. For count nouns the singular/plural distinction is neutralized in this construction.

(4) Ali her gün gazete okuyor.
   'Ali reads a newspaper/newspapers every day.'

In what follows we shall be principally concerned with the distinction between types 2) and 3).2

What appears to us to be the primary factor in favoring the appearance of the accusative suffix is what we shall call ‘individuation’, without attempting at this point a precise definition of the term.3 Rather imprecisely, we can characterize it as a focussing on a particular entity as such rather than on its being primarily of interest as a member of such-and-such a class. Some cases in point are the following:

Specific indefinites almost invariably are case-marked. Thus (5) implies that I am looking for a specific doctor, whereas (6) conveys that I am looking for anyone who is a member of the class of doctors.
(5) Bir doktoru arıyorum.  
   a doctor I am seeking  
   'I'm looking for a doctor.'

(6) Bir doktor arıyorum.  
   'I'm looking for a doctor.' (i.e. any doctor)

(2) above might be understood as implying that Ali reads the daily edition of the same paper every day (cf. Lewis 1967:248), or that he reads a paper from beginning to end every day, or that the paper is going to be topical in the continuation of the discourse, while (3) has no such implications.

An indefinite DO modified by bütün will generally be case-marked, while the corresponding DO without bütün may preferentially not be marked, as in (7) and (8):

(7) Kahvaltudan sonra bütün bir karpuzu yedim. 
    breakfast after whole a watermelon I ate 
    'I ate a whole watermelon after breakfast.'

(8) Kahvaltudan sonra bir karpuz yedim. 
    'I ate a watermelon after breakfast.'

There can be little doubt that the great majority of indefinite DOs that one comes across in Turkish are not case-marked. Nilsson notes that in a text sample taken from a collection of short stories the ratio of accusative-marked indefinite DOs to non-marked ones is about 1:8 (Nilsson 1985:55). In spite of this fact it appears that in certain instances the case-marked alternative is the preferred one. We shall attempt to give some explanations for this, and for contrary instances--i.e. cases where, given our hypothesis that individuation correlates with the use of the accusative suffix, one might have expected case-marking, but speakers prefer bir Noun-Ø DOs. Our focus in doing so will be upon subclasses of transitive verbs. We should note that in most instances the speaker judgments we shall be discussing involve preferred versions in what seem like the least presuppositionally loaded contexts versus dispreferred versions, rather than anything one would be tempted to call grammatical vs. ungrammatical contrasts; the dispreferred versions can usually be made more acceptable by specifying one or another feature of the context. To keep as many potentially confusing parameters as possible out of the picture, we are confining our presentation principally to affirmative statements involving DOs that refer to individuals (for some observations on generic objects, see in particular Nilsson 1979 and 1985).

One class of verbs that has a preference for case-marked DOs is that of causatives formed from intransitive bases. With such causatives the grammatical subject represents the causer, the grammatical DO the causee:

(9) Hasan guildi.  ‘Hasan laughed.’


    ACC  CAUS PAST
Looking at examples with indefinite DOs we find that speakers generally prefer case-marked versions. Thus (11) and (12) are preferred to versions in which the noun in the bir-phrase appears without the accusative suffix:

(11) Hoğa bugün gine sımtta bir öğrenciyi ağla-t-ti.
    teacher today again in class a student cry CAUS
    ‘Today the teacher again made a student cry in class.’

(12) Hoğa bugün gine bir öğrenciyi koş-tur-du.
    run CAUS
    ‘Today the teacher again made a student run.’ (e.g. as a punishment)

While no comparable data are available for the causatives of most transitive verbs, in which the causee appears as an indirect object marked with the dative suffix, the object slot already being occupied by the DO of the base verb, there is a small class of verbs which are lexically marked as taking dative objects and in the causatives of which the causee can thus appear as accusative-marked DO (for some further observations on certain interesting case-assignment properties of these verbs see Erguvanlı 1979). One such verb is bin- ‘to get on (a horse, a bus etc.), to ride’. If we imagine an animal trainer in a circus who has an act where various people ride on a horse and an elephant, we might announce his intentions for a new version of this act as:

(13) Fil-e bir çocuk bin-dir-eşek.
    elephant DAT a child ride CAUS FUT
    ‘He’s going to have a child ride on the elephant.’

with the case-marked bir çocuk preferred over the unmarked bir çocuk.4

Our explanation for why it is that causatives exhibit a preference for case-marked DOs, thus running counter to the general tendency noted above, appeals to the parameter of individuation: we find it plausible that NPs denoting causees, which are typically also agents, are inherently more prone to score high on individuation than DOs in general, in that they focus, at least secondarily, on the individual made to perform some action. We do not claim, of course, that we would have predicted this property of causatives in Turkish; we do assert, however, that if we had to assign probabilities for various subclasses of verbs selecting case-marked DOs, we would have assigned a relatively high probability for such behavior to causatives.

We shall next take a look at some relatively high-transitivity verbs which one might a priori expect to have DOs that would score high on an individuation scale. One such verb is kir- ‘to break’; we find, somewhat unexpectedly, that speakers prefer non-case-marked DO nouns in such sentences as (14)

(14) Temizlik yaparken bir vazı kirdım.
    cleaning while doing a vase I broke
    ‘I broke a vase as I was cleaning up.’
in neutral situations, i.e. in the absence of any contextual feature that favors case-marking. We find furthermore that with what may be the prototypical high-transitivity verb, öldür- ‘to kill’ (the causative form of ölü- ‘to die’) the situation is similar; (15) is the preferred way of reporting that our neighbor killed a child:

(15) Komşumuz bir çocuk öldürdü.
our neighbor a child he killed

(We attribute the un-causative-like behavior of öldür- to the fact that it is lexicalized.) What seems to be happening here is that there is a tendency in the case of many transitive verbs to treat the object not as a figure, but as part of the ground (cf. Jackendoff 1983), so that (15) can be regarded as an assertion that our neighbor engaged in an act of child-killing (notice that çiftik can easily be treated as a formal incorporated object of öldür-, as in (16):

(16) Çocuk öldürmek gınahtur.
child to kill is a sin
‘To kill a child is a sin.’

Interestingly, we seem more likely to get case-marking if some more restricted (and non-biological?) subclass of humans is involved, as in (17) and (18):

(17) Komşumuz bir doktor öldürdü.
‘Our neighbor killed a doctor.’

(18) Komşumuz bir İngiliz öldürdü.
‘Our neighbor killed an Englishman.’

Presumably doktor and İngiliz are not as readily absorbable into the ground as çocuk, adam ‘man, person’, kadın ‘woman’, etc. We note further that not all violent activities are treated similarly in this respect. Thus if our neighbor had merely stabbed or wounded the child instead of killing him, the patient noun would preferentially be case-marked, as in (19):

(19) Komşumuz bir çocuğun bıçakladı (yaraladı).
he stabbed he wounded
‘Our neighbor stabbed (wounded) a child.’

We confess that we do not have a very convincing explanation for this state of affairs. We suspect that specificity (in the sense that stab is more specific than kill in terms of instrumentality) and/or newsworthiness counteracts the tendency to absorb the object into the ground (a tendency which might be regarded as a kind of quasi-compound formation), but we are far from convinced that we can thereby account for the behavior of yarala-.

We would finally like to discuss briefly the case-marking propensities of the verbs öv- ‘to praise’ and eleştir- ‘to criticize’. They both show a strong preference for case-marked indefinite DOs; thus (20) is judged far more acceptable than a counterpart with an accusative-less DO:
Can we make sense of this in terms of our explanation of case-marking as related to individuation? It seems to us that such an explanation is in fact possible; verbs like praise appear to focus on individual properties of the object being praised which render it praiseworthy in ways in which many other transitive verbs do not.

To sum up: there exists, in the Turkish treatment of direct objects, an intermediate area between the highest degree of specificity, represented by definite objects as in (1), and complete lack of specificity, represented by incorporated objects as in (4). In this intermediate area, where NPs with the indefinite article bir appear, case-marking or the lack of it indicate where on the specificity scale a particular object falls. In our view individuation is the parameter that most appropriately describes the contrasts that are expressed formally by the device of case-marking, and we find that the use of this formal device provides intriguing insights into verb semantics.

We are fully aware that much work remains to be done in this area. More verbs need to be looked at, and other constructions (e.g. negatives, generics) need to be investigated. It would also be interesting to study the phenomena we have described from the point of view of acquisition; it has frequently struck the second co-author of the present paper, whose Turkish is fluent but by no means native-like, that his tentative judgments on some of the examples discussed here differed widely from those of native speakers, who, although they did not always agree with each other completely, nevertheless exhibited general consensus. The only explanation for this that we have been able to come up with is that the ability to form 'correct' judgments on these matters is innate, but that it requires for its appropriate development exposure to relevant data at a critical period (a critical period which had passed for KZ when he began to learn Turkish), but we have been persuaded by a number of more cautious colleagues that we should probably abandon this hypothesis.

1The values of the archiphoneme /l/ in a given context—namely i, ü, i (=i), u— are determined by the rules of vowel harmony which refer to the relevant features of the preceding vowel. The /-yl/ allomorph of the accusative appears after an immediately preceding vowel, the /-l/ allomorph after a consonant. The accusative suffix is underlined in all the examples.

2The examples are given in a close-to-phonemic transcription, which differs minimally from standard Turkish orthography. The symbol g, the so called 'soft g', can be considered to correspond to phonetic zero in our examples, except that it indicates length on a preceding vowel in the context V_C; it appears in our transcription for morphophonemic reasons only.

3For relevant discussions see Tura (1973), Johanson (1977), and especially Nilsson (1979) and Nilsson (1985). The latter is the most thoroughgoing discussion we are familiar with; we have profited from it greatly. Nilsson discusses the role of such factors as specificity, individuation, and topicality, and reaches the general conclusion that case-marked DOs are in a number of ways more independent of the predicate than ones without case-marking, a conclusion with which our analysis in the present paper is fully compatible.

4We note that what we refer to as individuation is intended to be scalar, and is not identical with the property called Individualität ([IND]) in Johanson (1977). Johanson characterizes both indefinites with bir and plurals as [+IND], and bare-stem nouns as [-IND].
There is some evidence that an animacy hierarchy may also play a role here: some speakers find no case-marking for non-human objects (causees), e.g. bir arslan ‘a lion’ (‘He’s going to have a lion ride on the elephant’), as acceptable as or more acceptable than the case-marked version (bir arslanı).

REFERENCES


