

A TYPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO SENTENCE STRUCTURE IN TURKISH

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ÖZET

Bu makalede, katı bir özne-eylem öbeği ikiliğine dayalı Türkçe cümle yapısı anlayışının, bu dilde öznenin eylem öbeği içerisinde yer alabileceği bir anlayış ile değiştirilmesi gerektiğini iddia edeceğiz. Öncelikle, örneklerle ikinci tipteki cümle yapısının birincisinin yetersizliklerinin üstesinden gelebileceğini göstereceğiz. Ardından, soruna dillerin sınıflandırılması açısından yaklaşacağız. Türkçe için önerdiğimiz cümle yapısının Türkçe'nin ait olduğu dil ailesine en uygun cümle yapısı olduğunu göreceğiz.

Anahtar Sözcükler: cümle yapısı, özne, eylem öbeği, sözdizimsel

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we will argue that the view of Turkish sentence structure based on the rigid Subject-Verb Phrase (VP) dichotomy must be replaced with one that allows subjects to occur VP-internally in this language. Firstly, we will demonstrate with examples that a sentence structure of the latter type is capable of overcoming the shortcomings of a sentence structure of the former type. Afterwards, we will approach the problem from the perspective of classification of languages. We will see that the sentence structure which we propose for Turkish is the one that is most appropriate for the family of languages Turkish belongs to.

Key Words: sentence structure, subject, verb phrase, syntactic

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1 Introduction

Some syntactic analyses of Turkish (e.g. Underhill 1976) have been based on the assumption that the core/basic structure of the sentence (i.e. the structure of the sentence not affected by discourse-pragmatic factors) is as follows:

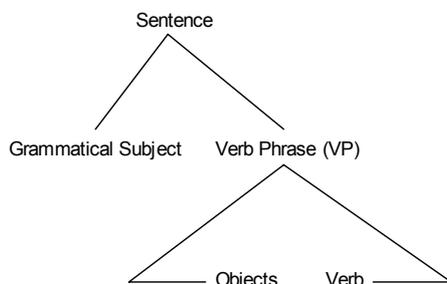


Figure 1. Basic Sentence Structure In Turkish

where, the grammatical subject is the constituent that receives nominative case.¹

It has been (implicitly or explicitly) assumed that the grammatical subject of a Turkish sentence is restricted to a VP-external position. However, hypothesizing such a strict grammatical subject-VP dichotomy does not seem to be granted by linguistic evidence. On the contrary, it appears to be a major theoretical hindrance to give a plausible account of many linguistic phenomena. In the next section, we will provide some evidence that will motivate the rejection of the structure above as the basic sentence structure uniquely available in Turkish. In Section 3, which comprises the gist of that paper, we will show that hypothesizing a rigid (grammatical) subject – VP dichotomy for Turkish is not granted by the typological characteristics of that language.

2 Evidence Against A Strict Subject-VP Dichotomy For Turkish

Obviously, the structure shown in Figure 1 entails that the constituents of a Turkish sentence are arranged in accordance with the Subject-Object-Verb order when interpreted in isolation (i.e. when its structure is intended to be silent to the effects of a particular discourse-context). Consider the sentences in (1) and (2), which are assumed to be uttered out of the blue:

(1) Köpek Oya-yı ısır-dı.
dog Oya-acc bite-pst
'The dog bit Oya.'

(2) Oya-yı köpek ısır-dı.
Oya-acc dog bite-pst
'A dog/dogs bit Oya.'

¹ It is noteworthy that objects without case morphology should not be confused with nominative-case-marked subjects in Turkish sentences. Even though both lack case morphology only the former are strictly restricted to the immediately preverbal position. See Section 3.4 of Kılıçaslan (1998).

The sentence in (1) is organised in the Subject-Object-Verb order and can be considered as a felicitous instance of the template in Figure 1. However, the word order of the sentence in (2) is Object-Subject-Verb. This does not directly fit in the skeleton sketched in Figure 1. One would need to account for the occurrence of the object noun phrase (NP) before the subject NP. With the given interpretation, that is the discourse-neutral organisation of the given sentence. No contextual factor can provide an explanation for the sentence-initial appearance of the object NP.

Kılıçaslan (1998) offers an account of the variation exemplified by the sentences in (1) and (2) in terms of the *weak/strong* distinction. It is argued that:

- (3) *The grammatical subject of a Turkish sentence:*
- a. *occurs VP-externally, if it receives a strong reading;*
 - b. *occurs VP-internally, if it receives a weak reading.*

NPs interpreted as *partitive* (e.g. ‘one of the dogs’), *definite* (e.g. ‘the dog’), *specific* (e.g. ‘that particular dog’) or *strongly quantified* (e.g. ‘every dog’) are considered to receive strong readings, whereas interpretations assigned to non-specific or weakly quantified NPs (e.g. ‘any dog’) are categorised as weak readings.²

Another claim complementary to (3) (but justified on independent grounds) is that:

- (4) *Except ‘thetic’ sentences (e.g. yağmur yağıyor ‘it is raining’),³ all Turkish sentences must have at least one VP-external constituent that will function as a (logical) subject of predication,*

where a subject of predication is taken to be the subject of a proposition as conceived in the Aristotelean view of logic.⁴

Now, we are equipped with a sufficiently powerful theoretical mechanism to account for the word-order variation displayed by (1) and (2). In (1), the grammatical subject gets a strong (definite) reading. Hence, it is VP-externalised to also function as a subject of predication. In (2), the grammatical subject is assigned a weak (non-specific) reading. Thus, it has to remain within the VP. It is the object NP that is VP-externalised to the sentence-initial position to serve as the subject of predication of that sentence. This explains why the surface word order of this sentence is Object-Subject-Verb.

The proposal on the syntactic position of Turkish subjects stated in (3) makes it possible to come up with a clear-cut depiction of several other linguistic phenomena, too. Kılıçaslan (1998) argues that the pitch accent associated with an all-focus sentence falls on the leftmost constituent of the VP of that sentence. An all-focus sentence is one that encodes entirely new information. The context for such sentences could be set up by questions like ‘What happened when I was gone?’ or ‘What is new?’. For instance, if uttered as a response to (the Turkish equivalent of) a question like this, the focal accent would be placed on the object NP of (1) and the subject NP of (2). Within the theoretical framework established by (3), these NPs are the leftmost constituents of their respective sentences. That is, the proposal stated in (3) is in total harmony with the independently developed account of focus.

² For the characterisation of NP interpretation in terms of the strong vs. weak distinction, see Milsark 1974, de Hoop 1992, Meinunger 1993, Büring 1994 among others.

³ See Kuroda (1972) and Dahl (1974) for discussion of thetic sentences/statements.

⁴ Contrary to the traditional (or Aristotelean) view of logic where propositions are split into a subject and a predicate, in the modern (or Fregean) view propositions are denied to have such a binomial structure where one element functions as the subject and are assigned the structure of a mathematical function: a predicate or functor plus a set of arguments. In this study, we adopt the former view. See Williams (1980) for the syntactic description of the subject-predicate relation.

Another phenomenon that seems relevant to our discussion is the use of the genitive suffix (i.e. *-(n)In*) in subordinate clauses in Turkish. Kılıçaslan (1998) argues that in Turkish the grammatical subject of a subordinate clause must carry the genitive suffix if it is VP-external and it does not carry any case morphology if it is VP-internal. As the following examples show, that is another analysis that provides support to the proposal in (3):

(5) Ali köpeğ-in [_{VP} Oya-y₁ ısır-dığ-ı-nı] söyle-di.
Ali dog-gen Oya-acc bite-ger-poss-acc say-pst

‘Ali said that the dog bit Oya.’

(6) Ali Oya-y₁ [_{VP} köpek ısır-dığ-ı-nı] söyle-di.
Ali Oya-acc dog bite-ger-poss-acc say-pst

‘Ali said that a dog/dogs bit Oya.’

Finally, the variation observed in the syntactic placement of subjects seems also the reason behind the variation displayed by relative clauses in terms of the use of the genitive suffix, as illustrated in the following examples:

(7) Köpeğ-in [_{VP} ısır-dığ-ı] çocuk
dog-gen bite-part-poss child

‘The child who the dog bit’

(8) [_{VP} Köpek ısır-an] çocuk
dog bite-part child

‘The child who a dog/dogs bit’

Apparently, many linguistic phenomena can be given straightforward and reasonable analyses resting on the idea that the grammatical subject may occur VP-internally in Turkish. We will not go into further elaboration or justification of these analyses here. Instead, in the next section we will demonstrate that the typological characterisation of Turkish provides sufficient motivation for the rejection of a rigid (grammatical) subject-VP dichotomy for Turkish but strongly suggest the adoption of a principle like (3) for the syntactic position of (grammatical) subjects in this language.

3 A Typological Characterisation of Turkish

As Kiss (1995) points out, as a consequence of the fact that linguistic research focused on English for a long time, and as a consequence of the assumption that the grammars of all languages are instantiations of one and the same universal grammar,⁵ it has been hypothesised that the phrase structure of every language is similar to that of English, at least, in terms of the configurational arrangement of the subject and the VP. Apparently, the same reasons have led some linguists to adopt the structure sketched out in Figure 1 as the uniquely available core structure for Turkish sentences. However, Turkish is not in the same family of languages as English. It is an Altaic language like Japanese and Korean. Let us now see what the typological classification of Turkish implies in terms of its sentence structure.

In the studies of the volume *Subject and Topic* (Li & Thompson 1976), it is proposed that languages can be ranked along an axis of *subject prominence* vs. *topic prominence*. Li & Thompson argue that there are four basic types of languages:

⁵ For general discussion of this latter assumption see Chomsky (1972, 1975, 1980, and 1986).

1. languages that are subject-prominent;
2. languages that are topic-prominent;
3. languages that are both subject-prominent and topic-prominent;
4. languages that are neither subject-prominent nor topic-prominent.

In a subject-prominent language, the sentence structure is derived by (VP-)externalising the grammatical subject. In other words, the grammatical subject-VP dichotomy characterises the basic structure of the sentence. In a topic prominent language, on the other hand, the sentence structure is derived by (VP-)externalising an ‘arbitrary’ argument. That is, a distinguishing feature of topic-prominent languages is that they may have grammatical subjects occurring within the VP. Let us evaluate Turkish with respect to this criterion:

On the one hand, we have argued that in some cases a grammatical subject may appear VP-internally (cf. Example (2)). In such cases, another argument is taken out of the VP. This amounts to saying that we have presupposed that Turkish has a topic-prominent side. On the other hand, our account has been based on the claim that the process of externalising an argument is not totally arbitrary in Turkish. If the grammatical subject receives a strong reading, it must appear VP-externally (cf. Example (1)). That is to say, we have also recognised a subject-prominent side to Turkish.

Apparently, if Turkish is a language of the third type, then our account seems to be based on plausible assumptions about the configurational relations between the arguments and the VP. In fact, Li & Thompson’s other observations on the typological classification of languages with respect to the given criterion provide further evidence that Turkish is of the third type of languages. Li & Thompson identify some grammatical implications of topic-prominence and subject-prominence. Below are three of these, where Tp and Sp are abbreviations for ‘topic-prominent’ and ‘subject-prominent’, respectively:

1. *Surface coding.* In Tp languages, there will be a surface coding for the topic, but not necessarily for the subject ...
2. *The passive construction.* The passive construction is common among Sp languages. Among Tp languages, on the other hand, passivization either does not occur at all ... or appears as a marginal construction, rarely used in speech ... or carries a special meaning ...
3. *“Dummy” subjects.* “Dummy” or “empty” subjects, such as the English it and there, the German es, the French il and ce, may be found in an Sp language but not in a Tp language ... In a Tp language there is no need for “dummy” subjects. In cases where no subject is called for, the sentence in a Tp language can simply do without a subject. (Li & Thompson 1976, pp. 466-470)

Let us evaluate Turkish with respect to each of these criteria:

In Turkish, there exist syntactic and morphological strategies to mark topics and subjects. In this language, the topic always occupies a certain syntactic position by being left- or right-detached to clause external positions (cf. Chapter 5 of Kılıçaslan (1998)). In other words, the topic has to appear either before the focus of the sentence or, in certain cases, after the verb. The grammatical subject, on the other hand, is marked by the case it receives, which is nominative, and by its agreement with the verb. Thus, Turkish seems to manifest grammatical implications of both topic-prominence and subject-prominence with respect to the criterion of *surface coding*.

Turkish has both an active construction and a passive one in its grammatical repertoire. However, in many cases the passive alternative of a construction is rather of marginal status. The two sentences below are synonymous in terms of both their truth-conditional meaning and their discourse-pragmatic implications. Nonetheless, in everyday language the active sentence will be much preferable to the passive one.

(9) a. Oya-yı Fido ısır-dı.

Oya-acc Fido bite-pst

‘Fido bit Oya.’

b. Oya Fido tarafından ısır-ıl-dı.

Oya Fido by bite-pass-pst

‘Fido bit Oya.’

Taking such examples into consideration, Turkish could be argued to be more like a topic-prominent language. Yet, Turkish behaves also like a subject-prominent language in that it allows a certain type of passive sentences to be used quite frequently. These are so-called *impersonal passive sentences*, which appear to be passivized versions of intransitive clauses. An important feature of impersonal passive sentences in Turkish is that their underlying subjects must be understood to be human. Each of the (a) sentences in the following examples is necessarily synonymous with the respective (b) sentence:

(10) a. Bu şehir-de pazar gün-ler-i uyu-n-ur.

this town-loc sunday day-pl-poss sleep-pass-aor

b. Bu şehir-de pazar gün-ler-i insan-lar uyu-r.

this town-loc sunday day-pl-poss people sleep-aor

‘People sleep in this town on Sundays.’

(11) a. Uçak-tan paraşüt-süz atla-n-maz.

plane-abl parachute-without jump-pass-aor.neg

b. İnsan-lar uçak-tan paraşüt-süz atla-maz.

People plane-abl parachute-without jump-aor.neg

‘People do not jump from an aeroplane without a parachute.’

The passive versions of the given sentences (i.e. the (a) ones) are likely to be preferred to the active ones in a possible occasion of utterance.

As for the third criterion, Turkish does not have a “dummy” subject. In that respect, it seems to be similar to a topic-prominent language. But, unlike a purely topic-prominent language, a Turkish sentence cannot do without a subject. It must have a grammatical indication of an overt or covert subject. In that respect, it comes closer to a subject-prominent language. Mandarin is one of the languages that is classified as topic-prominent by Li & Thompson. The following Mandarin sentence, for example, is said not to have a grammatical subject:

(12) Zhèr hěn rè.

here very hot

‘It is not hot in here.’

The Turkish translation of this sentence, however, must have a grammatical subject. More specifically, the NP referring to the location in question must be nominative marked, and thereby, it must be rendered the grammatical subject of the sentence. If it is locative marked, the result is total ungrammaticality:

(13) a. Bu yer çok sıcak.

this place very hot

‘This place is very hot.’

b. *Bu yer-de çok sıcak.

this place-loc very hot

What follows from these observations is that Turkish displays both some of those characteristics peculiar to topic-prominent languages and some of those borne by subject-prominent languages. In other words, Turkish is of the type of languages that are both subject-prominent and topic-prominent. It is worth noting that Li & Thompson include Japanese and Korean in the set of languages that are both subject-prominent and topic-prominent and leave this set open for a possible addition. What is of particular interest is that, as already stated, Turkish is in the same family of languages as Japanese and Korean. This fact provides further suggestive evidence for our characterisation of Turkish with respect to the typological classification proposed by Li & Thompson, and thereby, for the sentence structure proposed in the preceding section for this language.

4 Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that the structure based on the rigid subject-VP dichotomy is not the uniquely available sentence structure for Turkish. In Section 2, we have shown that several linguistic phenomena (lacking, in fact, a satisfactory precedent account) can be given a straightforward and reasonable analysis resting on the idea that the grammatical subject may occur VP-internally in Turkish. In Section 3, we have shown that the sentence structure proposed for Turkish in this paper is also justified by the typological classification of Turkish.

We hold the view that the direct application of linguistic structures derived from the analysis of English to the languages in other families is a major source of confusion in the understanding of these languages. A typological classification of world languages under the light of recent developments in the linguistic theory appears to be an urgent task for contemporary researchers working in the field of linguistics or in other related disciplines (such as computational linguistics, cognitive science, artificial intelligence, etc.).

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APPENDIX

Abbreviations

abl	ablative
acc	accusative
aor	aorist
gen	genitive
ger	gerund
loc	locative
neg	negative
NP	noun phrase
part	particle
pass	passive
pl	plural
poss	possessive
pst	past
Sp	subject-prominent
Tp	topic-prominent
VP	verb phrase