

The acquisition of reflexives and anticausatives by young heritage bilingual German-Turkish and German-Russian children

There is much discussion in the literature about whether cross-linguistic transfer due to typological/structural similarities and/or differences occurs in bilingual acquisition (for an overview see, Serratrice et al. 2012). However, it is not always clear-cut how to measure typological/structural similarity as opposed to distinctness. While certainly membership to the same language family plays a role, often languages show typological similarities even if they are not members of the same language group. Thus one additional value that could be used to measure similarity is that of the containment of identical structures.

A case in point is German versus Turkish/Russian as far as the syntax of their respective reflexives and anticausatives is concerned. On the one hand, the two groups of languages are typologically/structurally similar because (a) they morphologically mark reflexives and anticausatives (the anaphor *sich* in German, the suffixes *-(i)n/l* and *-sja* (and *-s'*) in Turkish and Russian respectively), (b) reflexives and anticausatives are syncretic and, (c) they show two types of anticausatives, those which are not marked (anticausatives I) and those which are by the aforementioned markers (anticausatives II). On the other hand, German differs from both Turkish and Russian in that (a) German forms reflexives and anticausatives II by a SE-anaphor, i.e. *sich* carries an independent theta-role and case whereas the Turkish and Russian reflexive suffixes do not; this results to a different syntactic structure: German unlike Turkish/Russian reflexives and anticausatives II are syntactically transitive structures. (b) Although reflexives and anticausatives are morphologically marked in all three languages, they are not always equally distributed, in the sense that there are verbal items which are morphologically marked for reflexives (e.g. *sich waschen* 'wash oneself') and anticausatives (e.g. *verbrennen* 'burn') in German and Turkish/Russian whereas others are marked in German but not in Turkish/Russian (e.g. *sich rasieren* 'shave oneself' & *zerbrechen* 'break'), and vice versa.

We investigated the acquisition of reflexives and anticausatives by bilingual German-Turkish and German-Russian children and raised the question whether these typological/structural similarities but also differences between the two languages influence the bilingual acquisition, as compared to L1-German acquisition. More specifically, we tested sequential bilingual typically developing German-Turkish (n=6) and German-Russian (n=6) children, aged 3;1-4;7 (av. 4;0) and 3;10-4;9 (av. 4;0) respectively, with regard to the acquisition of reflexives (n=8), anticausatives I (n=8) and anticausatives II (n=5) in an elicited production experiment. All tested children grow up with Turkish and Russian at home respectively. Both parents are native speakers of Turkish and Russian and communicate with and address the children in Turkish and Russian respectively. The children came to contact with German mainly when they went to the kindergarten (main time of exposure to German: 2;3-3;3 (av. 2;8) for the German-Turkish children, and 2;0-4;1 (av. 2;6) for the German-Russian children. The same experiment we run with thirteen monolingual typically developing German speaking children aged 3;0-4;3 (av. 3;6).

The results showed that (a) 92% of the German-Russian and 94% of the German-Turkish children omitted the reflexive anaphor *sich* with the reflexive verbs (1a) or they avoided to use the reflexive anaphor *sich* by producing an external object when this was possible (1b). (b) 100% of the German-Russian and 97% of the German-Turkish children omitted the reflexive anaphor *sich* with anticausatives II (1c), or they produced synonym verbs which do not require the reflexive anaphor *sich* (1d). (c) None of the bilingual children produced pleonastically the anaphor *sich* with anticausatives I, i.e. structures as in (1e) did not occur (cf. figure 1). Similar performance was shown by the L1-German children, as illustrated in figure 2.

- (1) a. *Versteckt (= sie versteckt sich) '(She) hides herself'
 b. Kämt ihr Haar (= sie kämt ihr Haar) '(She) combs her hair'
 c. *Drehen (= sie dreht sich) '(It) turns'
 d. Die Tür geht zu (instead of *schließt sich*) 'The door closes'
 e. *Das Eis schmelzt sich 'The ice-cream melts'

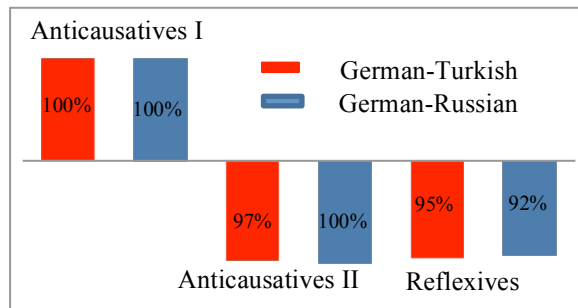


Figure 1: German-Turkish/Russian results

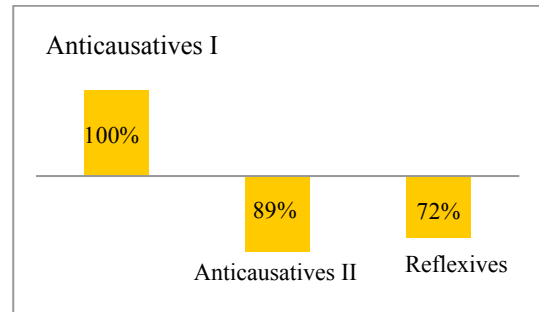


Figure 2: L1-German results

The monolinguals and bilinguals showed the same performance in (a) omitting the anaphor *sich* with reflexives and anticausatives II, (b) not overusing the anaphor *sich* with anticausatives I and, (c) scoring better with reflexives than anticausatives II. The points in (a)-(c) suggest that the monolinguals and bilinguals follow the same path of development in acquiring reflexives and anticausatives in German. We explained this performance in terms of complexity of syntactic computation (Alexiadou 2010; Jakubowicz & Nash 2001), for both monolinguals and bilinguals.

However, although it is true that the bilinguals performed qualitatively similarly to their monolingual peers, the former group performed quantitatively worse than the latter (cf. figures 1 and 2). Trying to explain this quantitative difference we first excluded language transfer from Turkish/Russian to German. If transfer would occur, different patterns of production should occur due to typological/structural similarities/differences mentioned above. We explained this quantitative difference on the basis of input. The tested children are sequential bilinguals who are exposed to German later than their L1 peers. Such age-of-onset effects are often associated with restricted input and, of course, less amounts of input as compared to their L1 peers (Nicoladis et al. 2012, and references therein).

In conclusion, our results suggest that the specific test-setting in our experiment, i.e. age of testing (av. 4;0), age-of-onset (av. 2;6-2;8), time of exposure to German until the testing time (av. 1;2-1;4 years) and complex structures such as Voice, which are shown to be acquired late in life anyway (Borer & Wexler 1987; cf. very high target-deviant scores also by L1s) are responsible for the quantitative difference between bilinguals and monolinguals, rather than typological/structural similarities/differences.

Selected references

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