



AN ANALYSIS OF CONVERB USE IN TURKISH-SPEAKING PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Converbs are verb forms used to combine two propositions in one sentence. Considered as a subcategory of open adjuncts (Krave, 2010), converbs conjoin the event of the embedded clause with that of the main clause. Çetintaş-Yıldırım (2009) defines converbs as verb forms used to connect two sentences by establishing various semantic relations between them. Converbs used in Turkish serve as adverbial clauses modifying or restricting the main clause in some way. Though interest in overall converb use in different languages has gained momentum, there has been little research (Johanson, 1995; Slobin, 1995) specifically addressing early converb use in Turkish. Hence, the purpose of this study is to make a comparative analysis of converb use in four- and five-year-old Turkish speaking children selected through convenience sampling. The data were collected through children narrations based on four different picture story books. The data were recorded in the kindergarten to which they regularly attended through the collaboration of their teacher. The study revealed that older children made better use of converbs in terms of frequency and type. Also, compared to four-year-old children, the older participants utilized converbs for a broader variety of semantic interpretations. While four-year-old children used three types of converbs merely with temporal interpretations, five-year-olds employed a broader range of converbs to establish different semantic relations.

Key Words: converb, frequency, converb type, semantic interpretation

OKUL ÖNCESİ TÜRK ÇOCUKLARINDA ULAÇ KULLANIMININ İNCELENMESİ

ÖZET

Ulaç, iki önermeyi tek cümle içinde bağlamak için kullanılan fiil yapılarıdır. Krave (2010) tarafından açık belirtecimsilerin bir alt türü olarak da görülen ulaçlar, alt tümcedeki eylemi ana cümledeki eylemine bağlar. Çetintaş-Yıldırım (2009) ise ulaçları, iki cümleciği aralarında çeşitli ilişkiler (zaman, nedensellik, tarz vb.) kurarak bağlamak için kullanılan fiil yapıları olarak tanımlamaktadır. Türkçede ulaçlar, ana cümleyi bir şekilde değiştiren veya bu cümleyi sınırlayan zarf cümleciği görevi görür. Çeşitli dillerde ulaç kullanımına yönelik ilgi giderek

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artarken, özellikle Türkçedeki ulaçların kullanımını konu edinen çok az çalışma (Johanson, 1995; Slobin, 1995) yapılmıştır. Dolayısıyla bu çalışmanın amacı, anadili Türkçe olan dört ve beş yaş gruplarındaki çocuklarda ulaç kullanımının karşılaştırmalı bir incelemesinin yapılmasıdır. Bu çalışmadaki veriler, dört farklı resimli hikâye kitabının uygunluk örnekleme (convenience sampling) yöntemiyle seçilmiş olan çocuklar tarafından anlatılmasıyla toplanmıştır. Verilerin toplanması aşamasında, katılımcılar düzenli olarak gittikleri anaokulunda gözlemlenmiş ve öğretmenlerinin işbirliğiyle ses kaydı yapılarak veriler kaydedilmiştir. Bu çalışma yaşça büyük çocukların, sıklık ve tür bakımından ulaçları daha iyi kullandığını göstermiştir. Ayrıca, dört yaş grubundaki çocuklara oranla, beş yaş grubundaki katılımcıların ulaçları çok daha çeşitli anlamsal yorumlama için kullandıkları gözlemlenmiştir. Dört yaş grubundaki çocuklar sadece zaman ilişkisi bakımından üç tür ulaç kullanırken, beş yaş grubundaki çocuklar çeşitli anlam ilişkileri kurmak için daha fazla ulaç türü kullanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: ulaç, sıklık, ulaç türü, anlamsal yorumlama

1. Introduction

Languages use various tools and structures to link clauses with one another on the basis of different relations. One such tool, converb refers to verb forms used to combine two propositions in one sentence. Converbs basically link the verb of the embedded clause to that of the main clause so that the verb affixed with a converb functions either as a modifier or as a non-modifier of the predicate in the main clause. Çetintaş-Yıldırım (2009, p.27) defines converbs as verb forms that help to make up a complex sentence by conjoining different clauses as well as marking various connectivity relations between them. Krave (2010, p.1) argues that converbs constitute a subcategory of open adjuncts linked to the predication in the main clause at some level. Similarly, Johanson (1995, p.313) suggests that as converbs are nonfinite verb forms, they are structurally subordinated to the main clause.

Haspelmath (1995, p.3), however, defines converbs as “a nonfinite verb form whose main function is to mark adverbial subordination.” Inherent in his definition, there are certain characteristics that distinguish converbs from other devices used to conjoin sentences. Firstly, the term “nonfinite” draws a distinction between converbs and other subordinators with finite verb forms. Secondly, “adverbial” implies that converbs cannot modify nouns or noun phrases. Moreover, the term “subordinator” distinguishes converbs from other structures involving nonfinite verb forms because they are essentially part of a superordinate clause. Nevertheless, Coupe (2006, p.146) criticizes that the diversity in the criteria to define converbs obstructs uniformity and thus, prevents a precise cross-linguistic formulation.

Displaying various language-specific aspects, converbs are not observed in all languages. They are typically used in head-final languages of Eurasia (Coupe, 2006). Thus, this study intends to provide insights about early uses of converbs among speakers of Turkish, a head-final language. Based on children’s narration of picture books, the study investigates differences between 4- and 5-year-olds with regard to their use of converbs. Finally, it sheds light on the frequency and semantic interpretations of the emerging converbs.

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Volume 8/3, Winter 2013

2. Literature Review

Converbs used in Turkish serve as an adverb modifying or restricting the verb in the main clause in some way. Çetintaş-Yıldırım (2004, p.20) argues that Turkish converbs do not form clauses complementing the main clause. That is, they are optional components of complex sentences as they are not complement clauses; rather, they act as a modifying (or non-modifying) clause. Converbs in Turkish appear in two forms. The first group is characterized by affixes that originally intend to form converb clauses. Johanson (1995, p.315) points out that this group of converbs cannot be analyzed morphologically as they are necessarily simple. This group comprises such converbs as –ArAk, -IncA, -Ip, and –ken. The other group includes converbs formed by a nominalizer (i.e. –dIk and –mA) plus an adposition like *beri*, *önce*, *sonra* or *zaman*. Gülsevin (2001, p.128) maintains that though there may be a morphological distinction between the two types, the second group is in no way subordinate to the first in that converbs in both groups are functionally the same. Furthermore, all converbs are directly added to the verb stem. The only exception in Turkish is –ken. Çetintaş-Yıldırım (2004, p.48) highlights that –ken requires use of a tense-aspect marker before it can be added to the verb stem.

Considering the diachronic development of converbs in Turkic languages, Johanson (1995, pp.314-315) asserts that there are four levels of constructing converb clauses. In level 1, both the main clause and converb clause include a full predication as well as subjects of their own.

e.g. “Ali gelince Osman şaşırdı.”

“When Ali came, Osman was surprised.” (Johanson, 1995, pp.314-315)

The main clause and converb clause in level 2 are interdependent as their subject is coreferential.

e.g. “Ali gelince şaşırdı.”

“When Ali came, he was surprised.” (Johanson, 1995, pp.314-315)

Sentences in level 3 are formed by a common verbal phrase, in which insertion of an element between the converb and main verb is heavily restricted.

e.g. “alıp gel-”

“to bring” (Johanson, 1995, pp.314-315)

In the last level, the main clause serves as a periphrastic element grammatically marking durativity.

e.g. “Oq-up tu-r-du”

“He kept reading.” (Johanson, 1995, pp.314-315)

Converbs in head-final languages precede the main clause (Coupe, 2006). Similarly, converbs in Turkish are generally placed before the predicate of the main clause. However, the flexible nature of Turkish makes it possible for converbs to appear in different positions in a complex sentence. Erguvanlı (1984, p. 112) purports that unlike other languages, Turkish converbs may be used as “the topic, focus or background of the main clause”.

e.g. “Ali Ankara’ya gidince ben sizde kalabilirim.”

“Ben sizde Ali Ankara’ya gidince kalabilirim.”

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“Ben sizde kalabilirim Ali Ankara’ya gidince.” (Erguvanlı, 1984, pp.100-102)

In addition, Çetintaş-Yıldırım (2004, p.78) suggests that backgrounding may also be observed in the converb clause itself.

e.g. “Oğlunu öpüp yatağına yattı.”

“ Öpüp oğlunu yatağına yattı.” (Çetintaş-Yıldırım, 2004 p.78)

As to the semantic interpretations of converbs, Nedjalkov (1995, pp.111-112) puts forth that there are three types of converbs. Specialized converbs include only one proposition such as manner, time or reason (Nedjalkov, 1995, p.111). Contextual converbs convey a range of propositions which can be derived from the context in which they are used (Nedjalkov, 1995, p.112). Narrative converbs, on the other hand, combine a set of successive events so as to advance the plot. Based on this distinction, one can claim that Turkish converbs are basically contextual in that as Çetintaş-Yıldırım (2004, p.161) states, the semantic interpretations of a converb clause is revealed through its interactions with the main clause. In other words, Turkish converbs may communicate a broad range of meanings including temporality, manner, condition, cause-effect and concession. Finally, Johanson (1995, p.316) draws a general framework of Turkic converbs as he argues that converb clauses take no markers of modality, no tense markers, a limited number of aspect markers and rarely person and number markers.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

A total of six children speaking Turkish as their first language participated in this study. They were divided into two groups with three subjects in each. The first group was named as “Group A” while the second group was called “Group B” on the basis of the participants’ age. Their ages were 4;1, 4;2, 4;3 in Group A and 5;0, 5;1, 5;2, in Group B respectively. Thus, the mean age was 4;2 for Group A while it was 5;1 in Group B. Finally, the participants in each group were given a number as A1, A2, A3 and B1, B2, B3 due to confidentiality concerns.

3.2. Data Collection and Transcription

The data in this study were collected through narration. The study used picture books as they were expected to encourage the subjects to make up sentences including the target forms i.e. converbs. Each participant was given four picture books and asked to tell the story in each book. The data from each participant were collected in different sessions, since the participants might easily get bored of doing the same task for a long time. The participants were contacted in the kindergarten to which they were regularly attending. The samples of each participant, which were approximately 15 minutes in length, were recorded in their classroom so that the risk that the participants might feel embarrassed in the presence of the researcher could be eliminated. All the samples were transcribed by the researcher. The sentences including the target forms were underlined and counted. The occurrences of the same converb form by the participants in the same group were organized such that their number of occurrence and percentage for each group could be calculated. Eventually, samples of one group were compared to those of the other group.

4. Findings

Analyses of the samples elicited through the participants’ narrations yielded interesting findings with regard to their use of converb forms. Analyses of the samples collected from Group A revealed that the ratio of converb use among 4-year-olds was relatively low. A close examination of all the samples collected from this group indicated that there were only eleven cases in which a

converbial clause occurred (See Table 1). Contrary to the numerous converb types used in Turkish, 4-year-old children utilized only three different types. While –ken was the most commonly employed converb with 8 occurrences, –InCA was used twice and –Ip was used only once. As Figure 1 illustrates, the use of –ken constituted % 73 of the total converb use in Group A. While –InCA made up % 18 of the overall converb use, the rate of –Ip was only % 9. With respect to the semantic

Table 1. Converb use by Turkish children

	4-year-olds	5-year-olds
Ip	1	19
InCA	2	8
dİğİndA	-	8
ken	8	7
ArAk	-	7
dİğİndA	-	1
dİktAn sonra	-	1
Total	11	51

function these converbs served, one can claim that 4-year-olds used converbs merely to communicate temporality. More specifically, all occurrences of –ken intended to convey simultaneity.

- a) Sonra balık yüzer**ken** denizkızı gelmiş.

swim-AORIST-converb

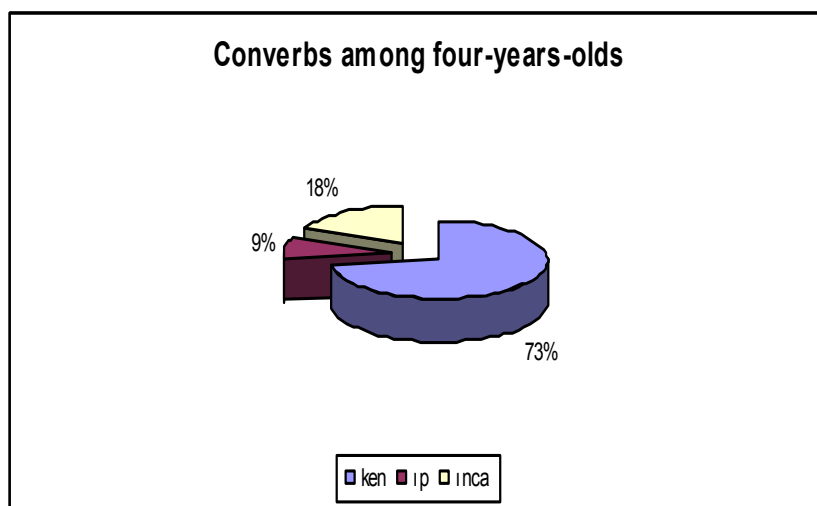
(Then, while the fish was swimming, the mermaid came.)

- b) Yunus balığı arkadaşlarıyla oynar**ken** hasta olmuş.

play-AORIST-converb

(While the dolphin was playing with its friends, it got sick.)

Figure 1. Converb use among 4-year-old children



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Similarly, the only occurrence of –Ip was observed to establish anteriority relation between the converb clause and the main clause. That is, the use -Ip indicated that the event in the converb clause preceded the one in the main clause.

c) Sonra dünyanın içine çıkı**ıp** kuş görmüş.

exit-converb

(Then, she went into the world and saw a bird.)

Likewise, -IncA was used to mark anteriority of the converb clause to the event in the main clause.

d) Çok acıkan Baran daha fazla olduğunu gör**ünce** o hariç diğerlerinin hepsini atıyla kovalamış.

see-converb

(Having seen that there was a lot, Baran who was very hungry chased them all with his horse.)

Nevertheless, the other use of –IncA was intended to signal causality. More specifically, it revealed that the event in the converb clause led to the event in the main clause.

e) Onlar kıskan**ınca** o bizden aldı.

get jealous-converb

(Since they got jealous, he took it from us.)

As for Group B, there was a drastic increase in the number of converb use. Analyses of the samples revealed that there were a total of 51 occurrences of converb use (Table 1). More interestingly, types of converbs and their semantic interpretations showed considerable variation. Of the seven distinct types of converbs employed by 5-year-olds, -Ip was by far the most commonly used one with a rate of % 36 (See Figure 2). Given that Slobin (1995, p.356) referred to –Ip as a “neutral or empty” converb which could be used for several semantic functions, this finding was not surprising. Though –IncA and –dİğIndA were used eight times each, -ken and –ArAk appeared seven times. The remaining two forms, namely -dİktAn sonra and -mAdAn were used only once. The sentences f-l represent examples derived from the samples of Group B.

f) Biz hep kahvaltımızı yiy**ip** jimnastiğe gidiyoruz.

eat-converb

(We always eat our breakfast and go to the gym.)

g) Tatilleri bit**ince** eve dönerler.

finish-converb

(When their holiday finishes, they return home.)

h) Dedesi onu öpmüş uyand**ığında**.

wake up-converb

(His grandfather kissed him when he woke up.)

i) Mıy mıy miyavlar**ken** annesi martıları izliyormuş.

meow-AORIST-converb

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Volume 8/3, Winter 2013

(While it was meowing my my, its mother was watching seagulls.)

j) Sonra örtünün altına saklanarak onu görmek istememiş.

hide-converb

(Then, having hidden under the sheet, he did not want to see him.)

k) Yeni alınan kıyafetleri yıkadıktan sonra annemiz giyin der.

wash-converb

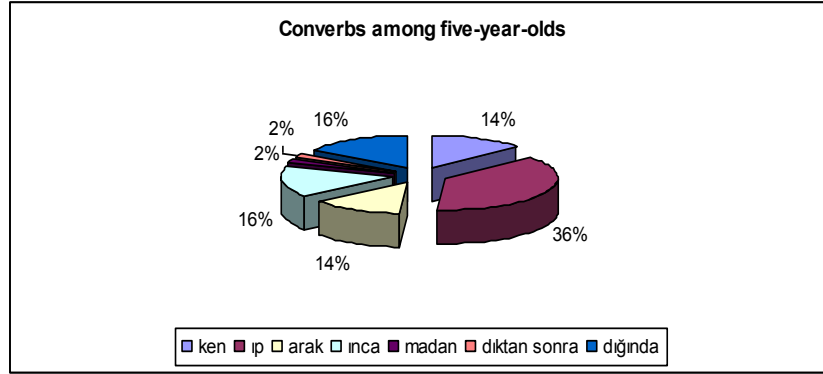
(After she washes the new clothes, our mother tells us to wear them.)

l) Sonra tırtıl elini yüzünü yıkamadan yemeğini yemiş.

wash-converb

(Then, the larva ate its meal before washing its face.)

Figure 2. Converb use among 5-year-old children



As mentioned before, semantic interpretation of converbs employed by five-year-old children varied notably. The range of interpretations included causality, manner and temporality. Samples f-l given above have exemplified temporal use of converbs by five-year-old children. The following examples, however, illustrate how five-year-old children utilized converbs to mark causality and manner relations.

m) Meyve yiyip sağlıklı oluruz. (causality)

eat-converb

(We become healthy by eating fruit.)

n) Dedecim seni çok özledim diyerek, bağıarak kucaklarına koşmuş. (manner)

say-converb cry-converb

(Saying and crying Grandpa I missed you so much, he ran to his arms.)

The analyses of the samples elicited from Group B also revealed two language-specific features of Turkish converbs. Though the unmarked position for converb clauses is sentence-initial,

the participants have been observed to change the order and use converbs in background position. Sentence “h” given above signifies that the converb –İğİndA is used as backgrounding element. Similarly, the participants utilized backgrounding as an operator within the converb clause itself.

o) Dönünce annem bi yere gidiyo.

return-converb

(When we return, my mother goes somewhere.)

Furthermore, the samples of five-year-olds indicated that they were aware of structural characteristics of converbs they used. As a prerequisite, the converb –ken requires a tense-aspect marker and number marker (if necessary) before it can be added to the verb stem. Accordingly, 5-year-olds were found to place the tense-aspect and number markers between the converb and verb stem.

p) Martılar mıy mıy dinliyorlar**ken** annesi martıları izliyormuş.

listen-PROG-PL-converb

(While seagulls were listening mıy mıy, its mother was watching seagulls.)

5. Discussion

Converb use is a common phenomenon in Turkish. Aksu-Koç (1994, p.374) posits that it starts as early as three years of age. It incrementally becomes more common in line with one’s linguistic and cognitive development (Slobin, 1995). This section of the study provides a brief discussion of the differences observed between four- and five-year-old children with regard to their converb use. The two groups showed considerable variance in the frequency, semantic interpretation and type of converbs they used. On the one hand, four-year-olds used converbs merely to establish temporality relations between the converb clause and main clause. The only exception was that of –IncA where it was used to communicate causality (See sentence e). This finding is particularly salient as it takes Slobin’s proposition one step further. Examining the use of Turkish converbs in different age groups, Slobin (1995) reported that converbs appearing in his study were mainly used to convey temporality. However, this study indicates that children as young as 4 years of age can use converbs to express causality. Additionally, the type of converbs employed by four-year-olds was fairly restricted. For, they were observed to use only three different types of converbs. In a study investigating compound converb types (i.e. those consisting of a nominalizer + an adposition), Gülsevin (2001, p.142) unraveled that there were 91 types of compound converbs in Turkish. Considering this variety in Turkish converb forms, one may assert that 4-year-old children in this study used converbs only at the beginning level.

On the other hand, five-year-old children were observed to make more sophisticated use of converbs. The samples collected from 5-year-olds indicated that they use converb forms much more often than 4-year-olds. Though there was roughly one year of age between the two groups, five-year-olds used converbs almost five times more than 4-year-olds. Likewise, their converb use represented more complex semantic functions in that they used converbs not only for temporality and causality but also for establishing manner relations. One should also notice that 5-year-old children made extensive use of variety in converb forms as they utilized seven distinct types of converbs. Therefore, it can easily be concluded that five-year-olds were better aware of the potential converb forms held in combining and conjoining different events.

Another intriguing finding is the common use of –ArAk by five-year-old children. Indeed, Slobin (1995, p.360) argued that the ability to conjoin two events as phases of one superordinate

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event was hardly attainable by five years of age and that is why, children at this age could not use the converb -ArAk in their sentences. He (1995, p.364) purported that five-year-old children would utilize -Ip to make up for this deficiency. In contrast, the current study demonstrated that five-year-old children could successfully use -ArAk in their sentences as -ArAk was found to be the third most frequent converb in this group. Yet, the observation that five-year-olds used -ArAk merely for temporality and manner relations supports Slobin's (1995, p.365) assertion that -ArAk is hard to acquire.

Apart from the abovementioned differences, analyses of the samples gleaned from both groups highlighted that the older group represented language-specific aspects of Turkish converbs more successfully. The study pointed out that five-year-olds could place converbs in different positions of a complex sentence (See sentence h). Furthermore, their use of -ken illustrated that five-year-old children were sensitive to structural requirements of different converbs because they were observed to add tense-aspect marker and number marker between -ken and the verb stem (See sentence p). Eventually, their samples revealed evidence about the overlapping use of -ArAk and -Ip. The following example coheres with Johanson's (1995, p.334) proposition that -ArAk can be used as a substitute for -Ip in accordance with one's linguistic development.

r) Ve bi annesi çiçeği **alarak** vazonun üstüne indirdi.

take-converb

(And taking the flower, her mother put it on the vase.)

Part of the reason for the perceived differences between the two groups of children in this study with respect to their converb use may be explained by Slobin's reflections on Turkish converbs. He (1995, p.364) postulates that the ability to use specific converbs appropriately requires some amount of linguistic and cognitive maturity. In other words, children need to have acquired flexibility in their narrative perspective while at the same time they should conceptually be able to recognize different phases of a more global event. Considering the differences observed in the participants' converb use, one may lay the claim that these differences fundamentally arise from their language and cognitive development levels. As older participants naturally had more experience with language, five-year-old children in this study proved to make more frequent use of several converb forms. Furthermore, they evidently benefitted from different semantic interpretations of converb forms better than their four-year-old counterparts did. Overall, this study has contributed to the conclusion that as children proceed through different stages of development, their converb use become more sophisticated in terms of frequency, type and semantic functions (Aksu-Koç, 1994; Johanson, 1995).

6. Conclusion

The more individualized converb forms a language has to express a semantic function, the more complex its converb system is perceived to be (Coupe, 2006). Johanson (1995, p.320) argues that in their further development, Turkic languages comprise an increasingly larger number of converbs signifying several relations (e.g. manner, sequence and condition). Accordingly, this study investigated early use of converbs in modern Turkish. It compared converb use in four- and five-year-old children with a focus on the frequency of converb use, variety of converb forms and semantic interpretations. The study proved that the older participants could use converbs more aptly, since they were observed to employ several converb forms more frequently than the four-year-old participants. The study also found that five-year-olds could more successfully benefit from converbs as a device to conjoin different propositions on the basis various semantic relations.

Eventually, it should be underlined that there were certain limitations on the findings emerging from this study. Firstly, the study included a relatively small number of participants, which might restrict generalizability of the results. Secondly, the length of sample recordings i.e. approximately 15 minutes for each participant might be too short to yield a precise portrayal of the use of target forms. Finally, the type of picture books might be another factor interfering with the results as they might have privileged the use of certain converb forms whereas discouraging others.

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