A study of the finite element in subordinate clauses in L3 German by Turkish learners

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Abstract. The main purpose of this study is to contribute to the understanding of a particular language learning problem encountered by Turkish students learning German as a third language after English. More specifically, this study aims to investigate the difficulties that Turkish learners of German experience in positioning the finite element in subordinate clauses. To this end, data have been collected from both pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate level learners studying German as their third language in a Turkish educational setting. In order to study the acquisition patterns of the finite elements, data were gathered in the form of free writings. The findings indicate that the major difficulties that the students face concerns positioning the finite element in the sentence-final position in subordinate clauses. Regarding this finding, this present study intends to provide an explanation for learner mistakes within the Functional Pragmatic framework.

1. Introduction

There has been a great deal of work on the role of cross-linguistic influence in Third Language Acquisition (TLA) research. This body of research is too vast to be summarized comprehensively in this paper, but the findings suggest consistent results. It appears well-documented that the learners' prior linguistic knowledge has a significant impact on the acquisition of a third/target language (Cenoz 2000, 2001; Cenoz, Hufeisen & Jessner 2001; Clyne 1997; Kellerman & Sharwood Smith 1986; Magiste 1984; Ringbom 1987; Sagin Simsek 2006a, 2006b; Williams & Hammarberg 1998). It is also acknowledged that certain factors considerably affect the amount and directionality of cross-linguistic influence (Cenoz 2001; Clyne 1997; De Zarobe 2005; Hammerberg 2001; Kellerman 1992; Magiste 1984; Poulisse & Bongaerts 1994; Weinreich 1953).

Some of these factors are: (1) the linguistic typology of the languages, (2) the perceived linguistic distance of the learners (psychotypology), which is also related to the learners' metalinguistic awareness, (3) length of language exposure, (4) the learners' language proficiency, (5) the learners' age, (6) the status of the languages, and (7) recency. In the present study, the linguistic typologies of the languages will be discussed as one of the possible sources of cross-linguistic influence (CLI) in the acquisition of German subordinate clauses. In addition to providing evidence for cross-linguistic influence in TLA, this study will examine another dimension of the linguistic typologies directing CLI. When linguistic typologies of languages are considered as one of the sources of CLI, prominence is mainly given to the syntactic properties of the languages. However, when utterances are produced, they are not only organized on the basis of their syntactic properties, but they also reflect the speaker's pragmatic intentions – the way in which information is organized and planned to be conveyed in the speaker's mind. In particular, this study will claim that the learners' pragmatic needs together with the functional elements in the learners' available languages affect the forms that they produce in the third language.

This study reports research carried out with university-level students learning German as their third language after English in the Turkish context. To explore the basis for cross-linguistic influence in this context, data were obtained from Turkish learners of German with differing proficiency in the language by collecting samples of their written production in German language classrooms.

2. Background to the study

Under the cover term "cross-linguistic influence", the term "transfer" has traditionally been understood as transfer of surface items from one language code to another, mostly from the mother tongue to the language to be learned, but this is much too narrow a viewpoint. Studies conducted with third-language learners have shown that in the acquisition of a third language, not only does the knowledge of L1 play a significant role, but so does knowledge of L2 (Cenoz 2000; Cenoz, Hufeisen & Jessner 2001; De Angelis & Selinker 2001; Dewaele 1998; Williams & Hammarberg 1998). This finding is reflected in a current definition of transfer as "…the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" by Odlin (1989: 27), recognizing all prior linguistic knowledge as a potential source of language transfer.

The present study will draw attention to the fact that transfer should not be interpreted only within the scope of syntax. Transfer cannot merely be interpreted as a carry-over of surface forms or unanalyzed chunks from one language to another; rather, being an active mental process, it must involve an analysis of all linguistic patterns. Reliance only on the previously learned syntactic patterns which are assumed to be similar in the target language would be a limiting perspective in the explanations of cross-linguistic influences. In addition, there is a

need for a theory of transfer which takes pragmatic motives into account as formulated by Fienemann and Rehbein (2004). In brief, Fienemann and Rehbein (2004) argue that when speakers apply the equivalences of native/prior language patterns of pragmatic intentions in new multilingual settings, the forms of expression which they use in the target language undergo pragmatic transfer. In other words, in the acquisition of a third language previous pragmatic knowledge affects the use and acquisition of the target language.

Since this study will claim that the difficulties facing Turkish learners of German with English language background, while organizing sentence constituents in German, originate from pragmatically motivated cross-linguistic influences, the analyses were carried out within the framework of Functional Pragmatics (FP). Functional Pragmatics was developed by Ehlich and Rehbein in the 1970s, based on Bühler's (1934) contribution to linguistics asserting that language is a complex linguistic phenomenon which takes place between a speaker and a listener in the form of a conversation. FP deals with this complexity of language by uniting structural-linguistic and discourse-analytic approaches. Thus, FP becomes an interactional approach which unites the analyses of linguistic structures and conversational actions of speaker and hearer. To accomplish this objectives, FP offers the following categories: the speaker (S) and the hearer [listener] (H), the knowledge domains of S (: Π^S) and H (: Π^H) with elements of knowledge and lack of knowledge (:π, $^{-}\pi$) together with the knowledge verbalized in the propositional act (: content) and its separate elements (: p, q, r, etc.); the illocutionary and utterance acts (the latter including syntax, morphology, phonology, prosody) and in particular the theory of 'linguistic fields' (operative, expeditive, deictic, symbolic and expressive fields) with the linguistic procedures that go along with them (cited from Rehbein 2002; Rehbein & Karakoç 2004). The linguistic focus of this study – word order – operates on the topology of positioning the finite elements ("verbs" in many grammatical theories) and thus, in the operative field.

Rehbein (1977) proposes that for effective communication to occur in spoken discourse, both speaker and listener pursue a communicative planning process. The discourse type analyzed in this study is mainly written discourse, which is a product of thinking, including a planning process, as well as spoken discourse. Rehbein (2001) explains the difference between discourse and texts as "in a text, knowledge tends to be delivered through lexical (symbolic) means and is presented throughout in propositional structure … in the form of sentences … Texts are the results of a foregoing planning process…" (2). In line with these arguments, it becomes possible to analyze the data of this study from a Functional-Pragmatic point of view.

From the Functional-Pragmatic perspective, instances of cross-linguistic influences can be interpreted as follows. The forms and structures of the target language receive their 'functional potential' from the language which the learner applies as the source language (Rehbein 2006). 'Functional potential' means that the forms and structures of a language activate specific procedural mechanisms

and concepts according to their affiliation with specific functional categories (Bühler 1934). That is, some functional elements in the source language turn into forms in the target language.

In order to mark the sentence constituents as a result of their communicative functions, FP applies the definitions of 'theme' and 'rheme' as proposed by the Prague School of Linguistics. Within this framework, theme refers to an element that is determined in the process of communication and becomes common knowledge shared by both speaker/writer and listener/reader. Rheme, on the other hand, is the knowledge which is added to an already determined theme (Hoffmann 1992; Rehbein 1992). One of the ways to mark a sentence constituent as 'theme' and/or 'rheme' is the organization of sentence constituents, namely word order. Because word order is a device used to arrange knowledge, speakers/writers organize their listeners'/readers' discourse knowledge by means of word order.

In the following section, the basic word order features of the languages involved in this study will be outlined briefly. Then, the difficulties encountered by Turkish speakers learning German as their L3 after English in positioning the finite elements in German subordinate clauses will be discussed from a Functional-Pragmatic perspective.

2. 1 Word order rules for Turkish, English and German finite verbs

Since the linguistic element examined in this study is the position of the finite element in German subordinate clauses, it is necessary to provide information about word order rules in Turkish, English and German.

Typological features of Turkish

Turkish being a member of the Uralic and Altaic language family, it is quite different from European languages like English and German. In terms of language typology, Turkish is an agglutinating language, that is, suffixes are added to an initial stem, each carrying additional meaning. To exemplify, in Turkish, verbs are richly inflected with suffixes marking person, number, tense, aspect, modality, voice, negation and interrogation; and nouns and pronouns are inflected for number, case and possession. Turkish is characterized by vowel harmony, with postpositions instead of prepositions, a regular case marking system, and modifier-head construction. In terms of its word order, which is the focus of this paper, Turkish exhibits the features of an object-verb language and is considered to have a SOV typology (with 'V' to be understood more generally as a "predicate") (Csato′ & Johanson 1998; Göksel & Kerslake 2005; Kornfilt 1997). The information structure in Turkish is organized in the following manner: Generally, Turkish speakers place first the information that links the sentence to the previous context. That is to say, Turkish sentences following SOV order usually start with the theme. Subjects are the unmarked topics that are naturally occupy-

ing the sentence-initial position. Following the theme comes the important and/or new information, the rheme, immediately before the verb. This canonical SOV order is, however, open to variation in actual usage for various communicative functions. Especially in spoken discourse, certain constituents are frequently placed after the predicate, generating Inverted Word Order Constructions. In such cases, information that is either discourse-predictable or -supplementary is given in the postverbal position and considered backgrounded information (Erdal 1999; Erguvanlı 1984).

Typological features of English and German

For this study, the formation of subordinate clauses was chosen as an area of investigation because the two languages exhibit some interesting divergences in this area. The contrasting word order rules for English and German, briefly, are:

a. English, having a grammatically determined word order, is described as a rigid SVO language in main and subordinate clauses. This strict order holds true for main as well as subordinate clauses (Eppler 1999). English lacks considerable freedom of arrangement in comparison with German and Turkish. Consequently, English word order provides fewer alternatives to indicate communicative functions like pointing to the theme and rheme (de Villers 1985; König 1987). In the primary SVO order of English, the subject – in sentence-initial position in most cases – occupies the position before the verb as the natural topic, the theme. The theme, then, determines the process of communication and sets the common ground for the speaker/writer and listener/reader. The main function of the verb in English is therefore to signal the theme in sentence-initial position and to prepare the listener/reader for the rheme, which is the knowledge added to an already determined theme (Hoffmann 1992; Rehbein 1992).

b. In comparison to English, German word order is relatively free. The primary feature of German word order is that it is a V2 language, which means that in main clauses the finite verb occupies the second position. Whatever element occupies the first position, the finite verb stays in the second position (V2 word order). When a constituent other than the subject is topicalized in the first position, the subject follows the verb, resulting in the order X-V-subject. However, basic word order in German is not so straightforward because the verb moves to the sentence-initial position in interrogative sentences, to verb-second position in main clauses, and to clause-final position in subordinate clauses. SOV order – verb-final order – is typical of the majority of subordinate clauses in German. For instance, lexical complementizers/subordinators like *dass* (that) and *weil* (because) require the verb to be used in sentence-final position (examples a. and b.). Though the main focus of the present paper will be on verb- final position in subordinate clauses, it should be noted that in German not all subordinate clauses have a verb-final position (Fox 1990).

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a. Ich weiß, daß er keine Kinder *hat*.
   I know that he no children has
   (I know that he doesn't have any children.)

b. Er kommt nicht, weil seine Frau krank *ist*.
   He come not because his wife sick is
   (He is not coming because his wife is sick.)

3. The participants, data and the method

In this study, data were obtained from university-level students ranging in age between 19 and 23 who had Turkish as their native language and had learned English as their second language and German as their third language. Being students of Middle East Technical University (METU), an English-medium university, English is the language used for educational purposes. As for German, during the data collection period, the students were all attending elective German courses relevant to their proficiency levels. The first group of data was obtained in the first school semester when the students (20) were pre-intermediate level learners taking German II. The second group of data was obtained in the second school semester when the students (15) were regarded as upper-intermediate level learners taking German III. As these German courses were elective courses, five of the students who took German II did not take German III, thus reducing the number of participants in the second phase of data collection.

In order to investigate how the students position the finite elements in German subordinate clauses, qualitative data were collected in the form of written classroom texts. The objective being to identify cross-linguistic influences in written production, the students were asked to write about certain topics in German, but were deliberately not guided by any specific instructions.

4. Results and discussion

This section provides the results of the linguistic data collected in the two semesters. First, the results obtained from these two groups are presented. Subsequently, the possible bases for learner errors in positioning the finite element are discussed with reference to the tenets of Functional Pragmatics.

Table 1 shows a brief summary of the data obtained from the pre-intermediate level learners. The procedures followed during the analysis were these: First, all texts were examined, and subordinate clauses which required the use of the finite element in clause-final position were identified. The students produced 146 complex sentences, mainly using the conjunctions *wenn*, *nachdem*, *als* and *während*. Then these sentences were analyzed focusing on the position of the finite element in subordinate clauses. The clauses in which the students failed to position the finite element accurately are marked as "ungrammatical" in Table 1.

(It should be noted that all other types of errors present in the participants' papers were ignored.) As shown, from among the total of 146 subordinate clauses, the finite element was used accurately in the clause-final position in 90 instances. However, in the remaining 56 cases – accounting for nearly 38% of the total number of subordinate clauses – the students failed to position the finite element in the required position. The examples provided below show that while forming these subordinate clauses the participants had the tendency to follow English SVO order rather than German SOV order.

Table 1. Overview of the data obtained from pre-intermediate level learners.

Types of conjunctions	(N) Sub. clauses	(N) Gramm.	(N) Ungramm.	(%) Incorrect verb-final position
dass	16	5	11	68
wenn	36	20	16	44
nachdem	20	16	4	20
während	30	21	9	30
als	26	16	10	38
weil	18	12	6	33
Total	**146**	**90**	**56**	**38**

Sample sentences produced by pre-intermediate level learners

1. Wir können nur dann kommen, <u>wenn meine Schwester kommt aus der schule.</u>
2. Ich höre music, <u>als sie geöffne die Radio.</u>
3. Als <u>sie kam nach Hause</u>, ging er mit seiner Freundin.
4. Während <u>er höre Musik</u>, tanzte er mit seiner Freundin.
5. Wenn, <u>sie habe eine Probleme</u>, muβ er an sie denken.
6. Der Film war so langweilig, <u>daβ ich ging aus.</u>

It is not reasonable to classify all learner errors as the result of cross-linguistic influence because there might also be some developmental errors reflecting the characteristics of the language acquisition process, or overgeneralizations. As stated by Kellerman (1992) the distinction between an overgeneralization and a transfer error in any case is a vacuous one, since it is logically possible for one and the same form to have multiple psychological origins which to some extent reinforce each other. For this reason, a second group of data was collected from the same students in the second school semester, when they were regarded as upper-intermediate level learners, to determine whether the number of their errors had declined over time (Table 2). In this phase, the students were again asked to write a text in German. Since the students had learned new conjunctions in the course of education in the second semester, a greater variety in their use of conjunctions was observed. Among the ones requiring verb final usage were *weil* (because)*, dass* (that)*, obwohl* (although) and *wenn* (when/if)*.* Table 2 shows that a total of 212 subordinate clauses were produced; 64 of them included an ungrammaticality concerning the position of the finite element.

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Table 2: Overview of the data obtained from upper-intermediate level learners.

Types of Conjunctions	(N) Sub. clauses	(N) Gramm.	(N) Ungramm.	(%) Incorrect verb-final position
weil	84	58	26	30
dass	44	34	10	22
obwohl	32	22	10	31
wenn	29	21	8	27
während	8	6	2	25
anstatt	7	5	5	71
als	6	4	2	33
nachdem	2	1	1	50
Total	**212**	**151**	**64**	**30**

Sample sentences produced by upper-intermediate level learners

1. Ich studiere an der ODTU, weil ich möchte gute Karriere haben.
2. Obwohl es regnet, ich will gehe ins Kino.
3. Ich bin müde, obwohl ich laufe nicht schnell.
4. Es ist besser für Kinder wenn sie nimmt eine S-Bahn oder eine U-Bahn.
5. Die Jungen arbeiten an Tankstelle an, weil sie interessieren sich für die Autos.

The data presented in Tables 1 and 2 show that – although there was a slight decrease in the percentage of incorrect verb-final positioning (from 36% to 30%) – this decrease was not significant. It may be concluded that – although the students had received more German input, had more learning opportunities and were considered to be better at German in comparison to the state of knowledge in the previous semester – they still had difficulties in putting the finite element in clause-final position.

To help explain how these finite elements in English become incorrect forms in German, the following sentence produced by a pre-intermediate level learner will be examined.

(1) Wir können nur   dann kommen, <u>wenn</u> meine Schwester <u>kommt</u> aus   der schule.
  we can   only then come   when my   sister   comes from the   school
  (We can come only when my sister comes from the school)

In this sentence, with the main clause **Wir können nur dann kommen** the writer sets out the common knowledge between the writer and the reader by informing the reader that "their coming" is subject to a condition. With the conjunction **wenn** the writer indicates that a new sentence which is contextually bound to the previous one will be forthcoming soon. **Mein schwester,** the subject of the subordinate clause, is the theme or topic of the clause, and it informs the readers that the condition stated in the main clause is about "their sister". In this example, following the theme, the writer positions the finite element although it should be positioned in clause-final position. Here, **kommt** as the German finite element is used with an English function which is to signal the

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element carrying the most information, the rheme (**aus der schule**). That is, the condition is explained and therefore it is known by the reader that *the writer will come only when his sister comes from school*. In this example, the function of the finite element which is identifying the theme and rheme in English is executed as a form in German. Thus, this example should be considered as an outcome of cross-linguistic influence.

As shown in the above tables, difficulties in positioning the finite element are limited to the initial stages of learning, but are also evident in the data obtained from upper-intermediate level learners. The extract below is taken from a composition written by an upper-intermediate level learner. It can be seen clearly that the students became better at German in comparison to their proficiency levels in their previous semester although it might well be argued that the typological similarities between English and German might have helped them develop their German. However, as also becomes clear in the text below, typological similarities between languages do not always serve to the learners' benefit. Failing to see the differences in complex sentence formation of English and German, the writer sometimes failed to position the finite element in German correctly.

(1) Ich möchte mein Deutsch verbessern, weil ich Deutsch liebe.
(2) Das ist erster Grund.
(3) In unserem Welt bedeutet eine neue Fähigkeit.
(4) Aus diesem Grund können wir sagen <u>dass</u> Deutsch <u>macht</u> dir glücklich in Arbeitsmöglichkeiten.
(5) Heutzutage bedeutet nur English nichts im Europa, weil jeder man <u>kann</u> Englisch.
(6) Dann geht es um die Frage weil wir Deutsch lernen sollen.

In the example above, the student explains his/her reasons to learn German. In sentence (1), the writer states that he wants to improve his German because he likes German. The sentence is formed with a complex structure with the conjunction **weil**. In the main clause the writer announces that he wants to improve his German, and in the subordinate clause positioning the theme (ich) and the rheme (Deutsch) in the right order, the finite element is accurately placed in clause-final position.

In sentence (4), the writer attempts to form another complex sentence with the conjunction **dass**. In this case, although subordinate clauses with **dass** sentences have the finite element in clause-final position, the writer uses the finite element right after the theme in order to indicate the rheme. The theme of the clause is **Deutsch,** which is the topic of the composition itself. Thus, it does not carry and new/important information. However, positioning the finite element after the subject theme, the writer signals that the rest of the clause presents new/important information which is **dir glücklich in Arbeitsmöglichkeiten.**

The same type of mistake is made in the fifth sentence in an attempt to form a complex sentence with the conjunction **weil** following the same procedure.

As elucidated in the analysis of the examples, this study shows that cross-linguistic influence should not only be interpreted within the scope of syntactic theories. Since cross-linguistic influence is an active mental process, its analysis should involve analysis of all linguistic patterns, particularly the pragmatic intentions of the speakers/writers.

The results of this study reveal that the participants who have English background often fail to, or forget to, position the finite element in clause-final position following the SOV order of German. Such instances can be considered evidence of cross-linguistic influence. It is apparent that, taking English as the source language, the students were inclined to rely on some English forms as functional elements when they produced utterances in German.

This finding is important for two reasons. First, the results of this study confirm that in the case of L3 learning, the linguistic typologies of the previously learned languages play a significant role (Cenoz 2000; Cenoz, Hufeisen & Jessner 2001; Clyne 1997; Dewaele 1998; Ringbom 1987; Sagin Simsek 2006a, 2006b; Williams & Hammarberg 1998;). Recognizing the syntactic and pragmatic similarities between English and German and the differences between these languages and Turkish, while learning German, the participants had a tendency to refer to their knowledge of English as a typologically close language to German rather than relying on their native language Turkish. To be precise, the linguistic typology of the languages can be regarded as a prominent factor affecting their L3 learning process. Secondly, the results of this study validate the argument that in L3 acquisition L2 is taken as the source language since it is easily accessed, especially when L2 is frequently in use (Cenoz 2001; Williams & Hammarberg 1998). To state it explicitly, the social setting in which the source and the target languages are used affects the direction of cross-linguistic influence. The social context in Turkey perceives English as an important language which intrinsically and extrinsically affects and motivates the students. In Turkey, English is the first foreign language taught at school. The importance of English on the future lives of the students is emphasized in all phases of their educational lives. Such a conviction might lead the students to accept the functions and forms of English as proper in all other foreign languages.

5. Conclusion

The main purpose of this study is to contribute to a better understanding of a particular language learning problem encountered by Turkish students when learning German as a third language after English. The topic investigated in this study was based on the observation that the students who studied English as their L2 had difficulties in learning the positioning of the finite elements in German. Particularly, in subordinate clauses which require the use of the finite

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element in clause-final position (SOV), the students had the tendency to follow SVO order. Intending to provide an explanation within the Functional Pragmatic framework, this paper has argued that the functions of the finite elements in English, signaling the rheme after the theme, are turned into forms in German. In other words, rather than the surface-typological similarities between the languages, as suggested by many others in TLA research, it is the functional similarities between English and German that mislead the students while learning German and prevent them from recognizing the functional differences between them.

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