

## Adjectives in the Acquisition of Turkish: A Developmental Profile

### Türkçe'nin Ediniminde Sıfatların Gelişim Profili

Assoc. Prof. Dr. F. Hülya Özcan

#### Abstract

Acquisition of adjectives have been touched upon in a number of research in Turkish. These studies have shown that, although acquired after nouns and verbs, children use both attributive and predicative adjectives at early ages (Ekmekçi 1979; Sofu 1995; Sofu and Türkay 2010; Tribushinina et al. 2010). Taking the findings of these studies as a starting point, this study aims to draw a developmental profile regarding the form, function and frequency of adjectives used in the conversations of monolingual Turkish speaking children and to reveal whether age and gender have any effect on the use of adjectives. For this present study, longitudinal data were used and all grades from the 1st to 8th grade were included. In each grade, there were two subgroups, a boys-only group and a girls-only group, The results showed that simple adjectives are more common than derivational and complex adjectives. The gender difference is seen on the form, variety and function of adjectives.

**Keywords:** Acquisition of Adjectives, Simple Adjectives, Complex Adjectives, Derivational Adjectives, Attributive Adjectives, Predicative Adjectives

#### Öz

Türkçe'nin ediniminde, sıfatların edinimi bir takım çalışmalarda ele alınmıştır. Bu çalışmalar, sıfatların isim ve yüklemlerden sonra edinilmesine rağmen, erken yaşlarda edinildiğini göstermiştir. Edinilen sıfatlar

hem niteleyici hem de yüklem sıfatları olarak belirlenmiştir (Ekmekçi 1979; Sofu 1995; Sofu and Türkay 2010; Tribushinina et al. 2010). Bu çalışmanın amacı, sıfatların edinimini biçim ve işlev bakımından inceleyerek gelişimsel bir profil ortaya koymaktır. Bu amaç doğrultusunda, Türkçeyi ana dili olarak edinen tek dilli çocukların söyleşileri incelenmiştir. Uzunlamasına düzenlenen bu çalışmada, 1., 3., 5., 7., ve 8 sınıf çocukları ele alınmış ve olası cinsiyet farklılıklarını ortaya çıkarmak için ise, her yaş gurubunda sadece kızlardan ve sadece erkeklerden oluşan iki alt gurup da çalışmaya dahil edilmiştir. Bulgularımız, basit sıfatların daha fazla olduğunu, karmaşık ve türetilmiş sıfatların ise daha seyrek kullanıldığını ortaya çıkarmıştır. Sıfatlar, biçim, işlev ve çeşitlilik açısından cinsiyet farklılığı göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Sıfat Edinimi, Basit Sıfatlar, Karmaşık Sıfatlar, Türetilmiş Sıfatlar, Niteleyici Sıfatlar, Yüklem Sıfatları

#### Introduction

“Adjectives do not get the attention they deserve”. This was the starting point of this study. Why don't adjectives get the attention they deserve? Most acquisition studies focus on the nouns and verbs because children's early language is shaped first with the objects around them and then with the activities going on; therefore, nouns and verbs are acquired faster and earlier than the adjectives.

Another reason is that adjectives form a rather small proportion of child lexicon (Bates, Bretherton & Snyder, 1988; Dromi, 1993). Although studies show that children are aware of adjectives as a word category and are able to figure out the meanings of novel adjectives in laboratory settings (Mesterheim, 2007; Sandhofer and Smith, 2007), adjectives are sparse in child speech. Mintz and Gleitman (2002: 270) explain this issue saying "... *adjective learning should be hard: all candidate lexical items suffer in so far as they are not nouns and do not label whole objects*". Another reason is that input children get in everyday language learning environment lack cues which might help children distinguish adjectives from nouns and therefore, children confuse adjectives with nouns. Sandhofer & Smith (2007) indicated that adults tend to use adjectives and the nouns in a larger connected discourse and noun labels of adjectives do not appear together in adult speech. This impedes or rather slows down adjective acquisition since children mostly rely upon syntactic cues (Ibid: 249). Adjectives have been touched upon in a number of acquisition studies in Turkish. Within the scope of this study, only the studies with monolingual Turkish children have been included. Acquisition studies indicate that Turkish-speaking children show a fast developmental trend in adjectives. Ekmekçi (1979) reported that, in her data, adjectives were used in attributive expressions as early as 1;7 and predicative adjectives were productive at the age of 2;0. Derivational adjectives, on the other hand, adjectives with the suffix -II first appeared as error-free around the age of 2 (Ekmekçi, 1986). Alpöge (1991) studied on the order of the adjectives and young children order the adjectives from general to specific and this finding is parallel to the cognitive development of children. Sofu (1995) studied the emergence and the frequency of word classes in Turkish-speaking children and concluded that adjectives are acquired after nouns and verbs. Although adjectives form the third group of word classes in the acquisition of Turkish, children use both attributive and predicative adjectives at early ages. Sofu and Türkay (2010) studied the semantic composition and syntactic position of early adjectives in the speeches of 4 children followed longitudinally between the ages of 2;00 and 3;06. The results indicated that predicative adjectives are followed by nominal adjectives and elliptical use of adjectives, which is a language specific characteristic in Turkish (p. 359). Children use

adjectives to express dimension, age, colour, physical property and human propensity. Around the age of 2, they can express similarity and difference using adjectives and after the age of 3, there were adjectives which express abstract concepts such as truth and reality. Turkish-speaking children show a fast increase in the use of adjectives with the increasing age (Tribushinina, 2013: 605). These studies focus on the early acquisition and indicate a need for a more comprehensive study to generalize the results. This study, therefore, is motivated with the results and the suggestions of the previous studies and was designed to reveal the use of adjectives in the conversations of monolingual Turkish speaking children. The aim of this study is to draw a developmental profile of adjectives regarding;

- form (simple vs. derivational or complex);
- function (predicative vs. attributive)
- whether age has any effect on the use of adjectives,
- whether gender has any effect on the use of adjectives.

### Adjectives in Turkish<sup>1</sup>

In Turkish, adjectives are categorized into 3 categories of types as simple, derivational and complex adjectives. Simple adjectives, similar to the other languages which have an adjective class, consist of single word. (1) (2)

- (1) Güzel ev  
'(A) beautiful house'
- (2) Büyük bahçe  
'(A) big garden'

Derivational adjectives are derived from nominal stems by means of a productive suffix. The most common suffixes that derive adjectives from nominal stems are -CA, -CI, -II, -IIk, -sAl and -sIz. (3) (4)

- (3) Kız -gın kedi  
'(An) angry cat'

<sup>1</sup> Information on adjectives and the examples (5)-(16) are quoted from Göksel&Kerslake, 2005: 191-196

(4) Başarı -lı öğrenci

‘(A) successful student’

Complex adjectives, as illustrated with the examples from (5) to (10), consist of;

- adjective+noun combinations,
- noun phrases marked with derivational suffixes,
- noun phrases marked with case markers,
- noun phrases+adverbial combinations,
- postpositional phrases+adverbials,
- truncated relative clauses.

(5) Küçük boy mobilya

‘(A) small size furniture’

(6) Dört yaş-ın-da bir çocuk

‘a 4-year-old child’

(7) sarı saç -lı kız

‘(A) blonde-haired girl’

(8) Bizim mahallede Güneş Gıda diye  
bir market var.

‘In our neighborhood, there is a self-service shop called Güneş Gıda.’

(9) sapları kopuk çanta

‘(A) bag with broken handles’

(10) Senin kadar bir çocuk

‘a child at the same age/size (with you)’

## The study

This study is a part of a large-scale project, Anadolu Project, which is designed both as a cross sectional and a longitudinal study in cooperation with the University of Copenhagen, Denmark. The Anadolu Project was started to collect spoken data from monolingual Turkish-speaking school children living in Eskişehir, Turkey, in order to provide a control group for the data collected in the Køge Project to allow comparative analysis.

## Participants

The longitudinal data, which was collected from the same children when they were in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, 5<sup>th</sup> grade, 7<sup>th</sup> grade and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, were used for this study. All grades from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade were included in order to be able to see the developmental profile. In each grade, two subgroups, a boys-only group and a girls-only group were included in the analysis in order to reveal any possible gender differences in the data. Therefore, we have 10 groups, 40 participants in total.

## Data Collection

Language samples of the participants were produced during problem-solving tasks. For the group conversations, the students gathered in a separate room at the school. In the mixed- gender groups, they were seated in order to match diagonally according to their sexes. The students had the small microphones pinned on their clothes and the recording was done by mini disc recorders.

1<sup>st</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders were asked to furnish a house. They were given a large sheet of a cardboard and a stack of furniture catalogs. For each group, 3 pairs of scissors, 3 marker pens and 3 glue sticks were given. The number of the scissors and the glue sticks and marker pens were less than the number of the participants in the group. The instructions were given in Turkish by the native speakers of Turkish. The students were told that they were to prepare a furnished house on the white cardboard by cutting out the furniture pictures from the catalogue in order to furnish the house and were asked to decide together how to furnish. 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders were asked to prepare a collage on either a topic they chose or to illustrate a day they spent together in Eskişehir. They were given a stack of pictures too and were told that they were free to write or to draw on the poster. While preparing the collage, they had to decide together and negotiate on the suggestions each of them made. Each data collection session lasted for 45 minutes including attaching the mikes and explaining the task.

## Data Analysis

The conversations were transcribed in compliance with the CHILDES conventions (MacWhinney 1995). Data from monolingual group was transcribed

by a native speaker of Turkish and then reviewed by a bilingual Danish-Turkish speaker. The data for this study were analyzed in terms of the adjectives. The adjectives in the conversations were identified first and then categorized in terms of;

- form (simple, derivational, complex adjectives).
- function (attributive and predicative functions).

### Categories Excluded in the Analysis

1. phrases in which the head noun is deleted and adjective is inflected are excluded in the analysis. (11a, b)

(11) a. Küçük çocuk -lar gitti.

‘Small children went.’

b. Küçük -ler gitti.

‘Small (ones) went.’

In (11a), “küçük” is adjective and “çocuklar” is the noun. Depending on the nature of Turkish, when the head noun “çocuk” is deleted, the PLU marker is added to the adjective and it becomes “küçükler” (little ones) as in example (11b). There has been a debate going on on this issue, some linguists saying that although the head noun is deleted, it is still an adjective (Demircan 1999) while others claim that adjectives are not inflected in number or case, therefore; in such a case, they lose their adjective identity and become a noun (Göksel and Kerslake 2005; Banguoğlu 2004).

2. utterance with adjectives such as *büyük* ‘big’ or *küçük* ‘small’ where the verb is deleted were excluded since it was not possible to decide whether the verb is *olur* ‘be’ or *gelmek* ‘become’. The verb will change the word class. (12a, b, c)

(12) 1<sup>st</sup> grade girl

a. ILK: ay onu yapıştırmayacağız o eve çok büyük.

‘We won’t glue it; it is too big for the house.’

b. ILK: ay onu yapıştırmayacağız o eve çok büyük (gelir)

‘We won’t glue it; it becomes too big for the house.’

c. ILK: ay onu yapıştırmayacağız o eve çok büyük (olur)

‘We won’t glue it; it is too big for the house.’

3. When adjectives are used to address others such as *salak* ‘idiot’, *stupid* ‘aptal’ etc. they are counted as adjectives although they are perceived as nouns. (13)

(13) 3<sup>rd</sup> grade boy

HAL: salak! Adam gelirse ne olacak.

‘Idiot! What if the man comes?’

However, when the same adjective is accompanied with the noun *tek* ‘one’, it definitely becomes a noun as it is inflected, it, therefore, is excluded in the analysis. (14)

(14) 3<sup>rd</sup> grade boy

FAT: salakın teki lan bu.

‘He is one of an idiot, man.’

## Results

### An Overview

A general look at the number of adjectives across the grades shows that there is a substantial increase in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and a decrease in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Numbers of adjectives used in each grade (age group) are 57, 75, 57, 39 and 56 respectively. Children employ more adjectives in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and least in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade.

When we look at the gender differences, we see that girls use more adjectives than boys.

**Table 1. Number of Adjectives Across Age Groups**

1 <sup>st</sup> grade		3 <sup>rd</sup> grade		5 <sup>th</sup> grade		7 <sup>th</sup> grade		8 <sup>th</sup> grade	
52		75		57		39		55	
Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
37	15	47	28	43	14	26	13	36	19

Choice of adjectives is shaped by the context the conversation takes place and conversational turn takings.

(15) ESR: hey bu güzel olur mu? (3<sup>rd</sup> grade, girls)

(hey, is that good?)

ILK: evet o da güzel.

(yes, that one is good, too)

CIĞ: a çok hoş.

( very pretty)

AYL: kartlar çok hoş.

(the cards are very pretty)

As illustrated in example (16), one of the participants initiate an episode asking their opinion related to the immediate context and each of the participants answer to the initiated episode.

Descriptions also require use of adjectives.

(16) (3<sup>rd</sup> grader boys)

CEM: bunu kes bence bu küçük; hem kocaman bu. Sıgmaz açılmıyor...

(cut this one; this one is small (the other one) is very big; it won't fit in it; it doesn't open)

UFU: hi hi salak öyle açılmaz.

(idiot, it doesn't open like that)

CEM: seksi seksi

(sexy sexy)

CEM: hey küçük bir şey buldum.

(I found sth. small)

Unlike girls, boys do not follow up what their conversation partner tells but they describe what they see and what they want to use.

In the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, girls use fewer adjectives because they spend most of the conversation around planning the day and do not describe much.

(17) ILK: ne yapardık. (7<sup>th</sup> grade girls)

(what would we do?)

ESR: yapsak yapsak

(we do...)

AYL: Önce yemek yemeye gidelim.

(Let's go and eat first)

HAT: bence de yemeksiz olmaz.

(I second that we should eat)

Boys, on the other hand, spend the conversations on their wishes and dreams which do not require little description.

(29) UFU: Yılmaz ilerde aktör olmayı mı düşünüyorsun. (7<sup>th</sup> grade boys)

(Yılmaz, are you planning to be an actor in future?)

CEM: evet. Hey

(yes)

UFU: sen olsan olsan artist olursun.

(you would be an actress if you become anything)

CEM: Adidas Nike olsaydı daha iyiydi # Matrix gören var mı.

(It would be better if there Adidas or Nike. Has anybody seen Matrix?)

### Form of the Adjectives

Having a general outlook on the use of adjectives, we take a closer look at the form of adjectives.

**Table 2. Form of Adjectives Across Age Groups**

1 <sup>st</sup> grade		3 <sup>rd</sup> grade		5 <sup>th</sup> grade		7 <sup>th</sup> grade		8 <sup>th</sup> grade	
Simple	Drvtnl+ complex	Simple	Drvtnl+ complex	Simple	Drvtnl+ complex	Simple	Drvtnl+ complex	Simple	Drvtnl+ complex
49	4	74	1	52	5	35	4	47	8

Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Simple	Simple	Simple	SIMPLE	SIMPLE	SIMPLE	SIMPLE	SIMPLE	SIMPLE	SIMPLE
36	13	46	28	38	14	25	10	32	15
Drvtnl	Drvtnl			Drvtnl			Drvtnl	Drvtnl	Drvtnl
2	1			5			3	4	4
		Complex				Complex			
		1				1			

Simple adjectives are used intensively in both groups. Derivational adjectives, although few in number, are used and complex adjectives are scarce in the conversations.

(18) ILK: evi yapmamız *gerek -li* ama .... (1<sup>st</sup> grade girl)

We need to make a house but ...

(19) ZAF:o *sihir -li* koltuk galiba (1<sup>st</sup> grade boy)

(that is a magic chair, I guess)

(20) AYL:... siyah kalemle çizsem önem -li mi önem -siz mi? (5<sup>th</sup> grade girl)

(if I draw it with a black marker, is it important or unimportant?)

Although rare, complex adjectives used are;

(21) Adjective+noun

ILK: hikaye tarzında güzel olur. (3rd grade girl)

(a narrative style will be good)

(22) Noun phrase marked with -ilk

Xxx: bir *dağ -lık bir yer*. (7th grade girl)

(a mountain area)

Let's have a look at the simple adjectives used in the conversations. Although the same task and the same visuals are used in all groups, different age groups and different genders prefer different adjectives.

**Table 3. Simple Adjectives Used in the Conversations**

1 <sup>st</sup> grade girls	3 <sup>rd</sup> grade girls	5 <sup>th</sup> grade girls	7 <sup>th</sup> grade girls	8 <sup>th</sup> grade girls
Sert (hard), Kalın (thick), Büyük (big) Küçük(small), Güzel (beautiful), Harika (wonderful), Iyi (good), Salak (idiot)	Iyi (good) Güzel (beautiful) Hoş (pretty) İnce (thin) Kalın (thick) Mavi (blue) Manyak (maniac)	Küçük(small), Güzel (beautiful), Harika (wonderful), Iyi (good), Sade (simple) Komik (funny)	Güzel (beautiful) Hoş(pretty) Boş (empty) Fazla (too much) Harika(wonderful) Bayağı (common) Soğuk (cold) Erken (early)	Güzel (beautiful) Geveze (chatterbox) Aç (hungry) Acaip (strange) Kötü (bad) Sağlam (strong) Özel (private)
1 <sup>st</sup> grade boys	3 <sup>rd</sup> grade boys	5 <sup>th</sup> grade boys	7 <sup>th</sup> grade boys	8 <sup>th</sup> grade boys
Salak (idiot) Güzel (beautiful) Çirkin (ugly) Küçük (small) Uzun (long)	Çıplak (naked) Kayıp (lost) Seksi (sexy) Salak (idiot) Kocaman (big)	Güzel (beautiful) Kırmızı (red) Iyi (good)	Sessiz (quiet) Özgür (free) Ciddi (serious) Seksi (sexy) Super(super)	Fıstıkgibi(superb) Güzel (beautiful) Zor (hard)

Adjectives are used either to describe the objects and pictures in the extralinguistic environment or to attribute certain characteristics to each other. Girls show their liking with the adjectives such as güzel 'beautiful', hoş 'pretty', Harika (wonderful), 'iyi 'good'. Boys, on the other hand, use fewer adjectives to show their liking such as seksi 'sexy', super 'super', fıstık gibi 'superb', güzel 'beautiful'. Both boys and girls use the same adjectives to describe each other, which are salak 'idiot'. Girls use manyak 'maniac' additionally.

### Function of Adjectives

When we look at the function of the adjectives used in the conversations, we see that until the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, predicative adjectives are used more extensively than the attributive adjectives. At later ages, attributive function is more frequently used than the predicative function. Especially in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, the percentage of predicative use is higher. Then again, in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, although both functions are quite close in number, attributive function is preferred more (Table 4).

**Table 4. Frequency of Attributive and Predicative Functions Across Age Group**

1 <sup>st</sup> grade		3 <sup>rd</sup> grade		5 <sup>th</sup> grade		7 <sup>th</sup> grade		8 <sup>th</sup> grade	
Attr	Pred	Attr	Pred	Attr	Pred	Attr	Pred	Attr	Pred
42%	58%	39%	61%	33%	67%	77%	23%	52%	(48%)
(22)	(30)	(29)	(46)	(19)	(38)	(30)	(9)	(29)	27

The fact that predicative adjectives can be used in almost any situation and are effective in renaming or describing the subject of the sentence may affect the adjective use in the conversations since the participants dealt with a task in which they chose pictures and objects, and introduce these objects to the other members of the group. They also confirm the choices of the other members as well. On the other hand,

attributive adjectives express the characteristics assigned to the nouns; younger children may have refrain from assigning characteristics to the people and objects in the extralinguistic environment.

Then, we look into the gender difference in the function of adjectives.

**Table 5. Frequency of Predicative and Attributive Functions Across Genders**

1 <sup>st</sup> grade				3 <sup>rd</sup> grade				5 <sup>th</sup> grade				7 <sup>th</sup> grade				8 <sup>th</sup> grade			
Attr		Pred		Attr		Pred		Attr		Pred		Attr		Pred		Attr		Pred	
G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B
13	9	24	6	8	21	39	7	12	7	31	7	21	9	5	4	18	11	18	9
%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%

In the younger age groups, girls use predicative adjectives more while boys prefer attributive adjectives more frequently. In the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, the profile changes and girls use adjectives more in the attributive function. Boys are consistent in their preferences and prefer attributive adjectives at all ages. Predicative adjectives, apart from describing the subject of the sentence, make a central statement or thought. This characteristic of predicative adjectives suggests that girls are concerned with expressing the central statement or thought until the 7<sup>th</sup> grade and start considering the properties ascribed to the nouns with older age. This may be attributed to the girls’ desire to hold the power in the group. Boys, on the other hand, look more concerned with expressing the characteristics assigned to the nouns as they use attributive adjectives more.

### Concluding Remarks

Adjectives are employed to describe people and situations in the conversations and simple adjectives are more common than the complex adjectives. Derivational adjectives are seldom used. Adjective variation gradually increases.

Gender differences are seen in terms of the adjectives preferred. Boys tend to use adjectives expressing outer look they see in the pictures.

We should note that the use of adjectives may be task-dependent as revealed in this study. Adjectives vary according to the purpose of the use. Task-dependent entities are described with adjectives denoting positive characteristics. On the other hand, when adjectives are used to identify or describe objects and participants unrelated to the task, different range of adjectives are used.

Adjectives are used both attributively and predicatively. Attributive and predicative uses, however, show changes with the gender and with age. In order to bring a plausible explanation to the different tendencies in the choice of functions of adjectives, the context of each occurrence of attributive and predicative adjective should be analyzed in detail.

Gender differences have an effect on the function of the adjectives. We have looked into the gender differences between all-boy and all-girl groups. Adjective preferences in the mixed groups in terms of function may hold a light on the different preferences of boys and girls.



**References**

- Alpöge, G. (1991). *Çocuk ve Dil: Türkçe'de Sıfatların Kullanımı ve Çocuğun Gelişimi Açısından İncelenmesi*. İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları.
- Bates, E., Bretherton, I. & Snyder, L. (1988). *From first words to grammar: individual differences and dissociable mechanisms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dromi, E. (1993). The mysteries of early lexical development: underlying cognitive and linguistic processes in meaning acquisition. In Esther Dromi (Ed.), *Language and cognition: a developmental perspective* (Vol. 5, pp. 32-60). New Jersey: Ablex Publishing.
- Ekmekçi, F. Ö. (1979). *Acquisition of Turkish: A longitudinal study on the early language development of a Turkish child*. Unpublished PhD dissertation. Austin: University of Texas.
- Mesterheim, M. J. (2007). *On children's acquisition of adjectives in English*. Unpublished MA thesis. The University of Iowa.
- Mintz, T. H. & L. R. Gleitman (2002). Adjectives really do modify nouns: The incremental and restricted nature of early adjective acquisition. *Cognition*, 84, 267-293.
- Sandhofer, C. & Smith, L. (2007). Learning adjectives in the real world: How learning nouns impedes learning adjectives. *Language learning and development* 3(3), 233-267.
- Sofu, H. (1995) *Acquisition of lexicon in Turkish*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Adana, Turkey: Çukurova University.
- Sofu, H. and N. Türkay, F. A. (2010) Acquisition of Turkish adjectives in children's early lexicon. In Sıla Ay, Özgür Aydın, İclal Ergenç, Seda Gökmen (eds.), *Essays on Turkish linguistics; proceedings of the 14<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Turkish Linguistics. Turcologica 79*. Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag.
- Tribushinina, E., Van den Bergh, H., Kilani-Schoch, M., Aksu-Koç, A., Dabasinskeine, I., Hrzica, G., Korecky-Kröll,, Noccetti, K. S., Dressler, W. (2013). The role of explicit contrast in adjective acquisition: A cross linguistic study of adjective production in spontaneous child speech and parental input. *First Language*. 33 (6), 594-616.