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## Araştırma Makalesi • Research Article

### Further Thoughts and Observations About Silent Arguments in Turkish<sup>1</sup>

*Türkçedeki Sessiz Temel Üyeler Üzerine Yeni Görüş ve Gözlemler*

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#### ÖZ

Sessizliğin anadili konuşurları tarafından nasıl yorumlandığı kadar her şeyden önce sessizliğin nasıl mümkün olduğu sorusu sözdizimsel (ve biçim-sözdizimsel) karşılaştırmalı dilbilim çalışmalarının en temel konularından biridir. Bu çalışmada, bu konu üzerinde daha önce Türkçe veriler ile yapılan çalışmalar ve analizler değerlendirilecektir. Daha spesifik olarak, bu çalışmada Türkçede sessiz adılar ve eksilti üzerine yapılan (az sayıdaki) çalışmalarda öne sürülen bazı iddiaların bazı durumlarda geçersiz kalabileceği göz önüne alındığında, sözü geçen çalışmalardaki genellemelerin biraz zayıflatılması gerektiği önerilmektedir.

#### ABSTRACT

The question of how silence is interpreted by native speakers, as well as when silence is possible to begin with, is one of the most basic issues with respect to the syntactic (and morpho-syntactic) investigations cross-linguistically. In these brief remarks, I would like to address some data in Turkish and their analysis to be found in this context in prior studies. More specifically, I would like to suggest that some of the claims made in the (scarce) literature on empty pronouns versus ellipsis in Turkish should be weakened somewhat, given that the generalizations proposed can be overridden in some contexts.

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Meltem Muşlu for inviting me to submit a paper to this journal, and for her help in formatting the text. I am also grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their useful comments. I am further indebted to nine native speakers of Turkish, for sharing their intuitions about the interpretations of the examples in my questionnaire: Akgül Baylav, Demir Dinç, Melek Erbel, Fatma Erkman, Ahmet Kabakçı, Alp Otman, Sözen Özkan, Mehmet Yanılmaz, and Leyla Zidani Eroğlu. Any mistakes or other shortcomings are my responsibility.

## Introduction

The question of how silence is interpreted by native speakers, as well as when silence is possible to begin with, is one of the most basic issues with respect to the syntactic (and morpho-syntactic) investigations cross-linguistically. In these brief remarks, I would like to address some data in Turkish and their analysis to be found in this context in prior studies. More specifically, I would like to suggest that some of the claims made in the (scarce) literature<sup>2</sup> (mainly, Şener & Takahashi 2010) on empty pronouns versus ellipsis in Turkish should be weakened somewhat, given that the generalizations proposed can be overridden in some contexts.

As an introduction to the main issues, let us begin with contrasts between silent arguments that must be interpreted as pronouns, versus silent arguments that can (also) be interpreted as results of ellipsis.

Let us start with overt pronouns. In English, it is not possible to leave out object pronouns; along with this fact, we observe that overt object pronouns in English can only be interpreted under “strict reference”, as illustrated below. (1) illustrates a dialogue, with (1b) uttered after (1a):

- (1) a. Polly loves her mother.  
b. Natasha hates her.

Note that if (1b) is uttered after (1a), the overt pronoun *her* in (1b) is interpreted as Polly’s mother, and not as Natasha’s mother; this interpretation is referred to as the “strict interpretation”, typical of personal pronouns.

This example contrasts with corresponding facts in Japanese, when the direct object corresponding to *her* in (1) is silent:

- (2) a. Taro-wa zibun-no hahaoya-o aisiteiru.  
Taro-NOM self-GEN mother-ACC love  
Lit.: ‘Taro loves self’s mother.’
- b. Hanako-wa *e*<sup>3</sup> nikundeiru.  
Hanako-TOP hate  
Lit.: ‘Hanako hates *e*.’
- (Şener & Takahashi 2010; ex. 1a, b)

Here, when (2b) is uttered after (2a), the silent direct object is ambiguous: Reading 1: A strict reading, just as in the English dialogue in (1), whereby the silent direct object of (2b) is interpreted as Taro’s mother, and Reading 2: A sloppy reading, under which the same silent direct object is interpreted as Hanako’s mother—a reading which is referred to as a “sloppy interpretation”. It is Reading 2 which is not available in English, in dialogs such as (1).

<sup>2</sup> While there is some work on non-argument as well as verbal ellipsis in Turkish, the only study I am aware of that addresses argument ellipsis in Turkish centrally and in detail is Şener & Takahashi (2010).

<sup>3</sup> The italicized *e* stands for “empty category”, i.e. a silent constituent which is assumed to be present in syntax, but is not realized phonologically.

Syntacticians interested in cross-linguistic generalizations concerning such interpretations have tried to predict which languages would allow sloppy readings in similar contexts, and which languages would not, under the assumption that the strict (i.e. the pronominal) reading in such contexts is always available; Şener and Takahashi (2010) is a good example of work that has addressed this question. English obviously does not allow a sloppy interpretation, while Japanese does. At the same time, note that English does not allow silent objects, while Japanese does. Şener and Takahashi (2010), among others, propose that the sloppy reading of the silent direct object in examples such as (2b) is due not to a silent pronoun, but rather to a process of ellipsis; the representation of (2b) under that approach would be as follows:

- (3) Hanako-wa ~~zibun-no hahaoya-o~~ nikundeiru.  
 Hanako-NOM self-GEN mother-ACC hate (Şener & Takahashi 2010; ex. 3b)

The full-fledged direct object in such an example would be present in the syntax and the semantics, allowing for the pronoun to be bound by a local antecedent (here, Hanako), thus giving rise to the *sloppy* reading; the ellipsis would take place only with respect to the phonological component of the language, i.e. PF (Phonological Form)<sup>4</sup>, thus accounting for the silent realization of the elided argument. Co-reference with a non-local antecedent, as seen for the *strict* interpretation of the silent direct object, would be available via the fact that the silent direct object can also be a silent pronoun in a language such as Japanese, and thus be bound non-locally.

Şener & Takahashi (2010) further argue that the silent direct object as in (2b) in Japanese cannot be a silent pronoun, at least under the sloppy reading, given that clear-cut silent pronouns, such as subject pronouns in null-subject languages such as Spanish only allow for strict interpretations; sloppy readings are impossible:

- (4) a. María cree que su propuesta será aceptada.  
 Maria believes that her proposal will-be accepted  
 ‘Maria believes that her proposal will be accepted.’  
 b. Juan también cree que *e* será aceptada.  
 Juan also believes that (it) will-be accepted  
 ‘Juan also believes that it will be accepted.’ (Şener & Takahashi 2010, ex. 4)

Here, the silent subject of the embedded clause in (4b) has only a strict reading, i.e. it can only refer to Maria’s proposal, and not to Juan’s proposal. In other words, the silent subject behaves just like the overt direct object in English, as illustrated in (1b); no sloppy reading is available.

Şener & Takahashi (2010) point out that while Spanish and Japanese have the common property of being a null-subject language (in contrast with English), they differ with respect to scrambling; while Japanese is a scrambling language, Spanish is not. Based on this typological generalization, Şener & Takahashi (2010) propose that only scrambling languages allow for argument ellipsis. They further address this proposal by putting it to the test with respect to Turkish, which is both a null-subject language and a scrambling language. They conclude that

<sup>4</sup> This view is not shared by all syntacticians who have studied ellipsis phenomena in head-final languages, such as Japanese and Korean; see, for example, Saito & An (2010), where ellipsis is claimed to take place at LF (Logical Form). This issue is tangential to the concerns of the present paper and will not be pursued here.

what plays a role is agreement: based on their data in Turkish, where only subjects and possessors trigger overt agreement on a local predicate or a local head noun, respectively, the authors reach the generalization that the language allows for sloppy readings, and thus for ellipsis, with respect to non-subjects such as direct objects: according to their proposal, agreement blocks argument ellipsis.

### Silent arguments in Turkish: Pronominal or elliptical?

#### Observations and generalizations in the literature

Some of the examples that Şener & Takahashi (2010) bring to bear in support of their proposal are as follows:

- (5) a. Can [pro anne-sin]-i eleştir-di.  
Can (his) mother-3SG-ACC criticize-PAST.3SG  
'Can criticized his mother.'
- b. Mete-yse *e* öv-dü.  
Mete-however (it) praise-PAST.3SG  
Lit.: 'Mete, however, praised *e*.' (Adapted from Şener & Takahashi 2010, ex.16)
- (6) a. Can [[pro öneri-sin]-in kabul ed-il-eceğ-in]-i  
Can (his) proposal-3SG-GEN acceptance do-PASS-FUT.NOM-3SG-ACC  
düşün-üyor.  
think-PRES.PROG.3SG  
Lit.: 'Can thinks that his proposal will be accepted.'
- b. Aylin-se [ *e* redded-il-eceğ-in]-i düşün-üyor.  
Aylin-however (it) refusal.do-PASS-FUT.NOM-3SG-ACC think- PRES.PROG.3SG  
Lit.: 'Aylin, however, thinks that (it) will be rejected.' (Adapted from Şener & Takahashi 2010, ex. 22)

Şener and Takahashi (2010) claim that the silent argument (i.e. the direct object) in (5b) can have both a strict and sloppy reading, while the silent argument (i.e. the subject of the embedded clause) in (6b) can only have a strict reading. They further claim that the contrast between (5b) and (6b) with respect to the availability of the sloppy reading in the latter follows from their approach, because the subject – predicate agreement in the embedded clause in (6b) blocks argument ellipsis, and thus a sloppy reading; in (5b), given that direct objects do not trigger (overt) agreement in Turkish, argument ellipsis, and thus a sloppy reading, are *not* blocked.

#### Questions that arise and further observations

In this short paper, I would like to address a few questions that arise based on Şener and Takahashi (2010), and their conclusions that concern Turkish facts:

1. Is the pronominal/strict reading always possible?
2. The sloppy (ellipsis-based) reading is not always possible, as we have seen. When is it possible, and when is it not? Does agreement really always block ellipsis? Does the absence of agreement ensure the possibility of ellipsis?

3. Does a scrambling language really always allow ellipsis (insofar as other constraints don't block it), and if so, why should this be? Note that Şener and Takahashi (2010) don't address this last question, while stating that scrambling is centrally important for a language in order to make ellipsis possible.

In order to address these questions, I have conducted an informal poll in the form of a brief questionnaire with relevant examples, which I distributed via e-mail<sup>5</sup>. Given the brief nature of the list of examples as well as of the list of participants, my conclusions are only preliminary; however, they are sufficient for questioning the black-or-white nature of Şener and Takahashi's (2010) claims, and for suggesting avenues of further research.

I now turn to each one of the questions listed above.

1. Is the pronominal/strict reading always possible?

This is an assumption that is made in Şener and Takahashi (2010), as well as some other research, based on that work, and on other relevant studies in this area, e.g., Saito (2023).

However, while my informal poll did point in this direction, as well, there were instances where a given example allowed for only the sloppy/ellipsis reading, at least for a majority of the native speakers of Turkish whom I consulted. For a minority of speakers, such examples had the sloppy reading as the favored, much stronger reading:

(7) Can, öneri-sin-i                      herkes-le              paylaş-tı,              Aylin-se              e  
Can proposal-POSS.3SG-ACC everyone-with share-PAST.3SG Aylin-however (it)

kimse-ye              oku-t-ma-dı.

nobody- DAT read-CAUS-NEG-PAST.3SG

'Can shared his proposal with everybody, but Aylin didn't let anyone read (it).'

In this example, the approach of Şener and Takahashi (2010) predicts ambiguity of the silent direct object in the second sentence. In my informal survey of nine native speakers of Turkish, seven reported that the proposal which Aylin did not let anybody read was her own, and that this was the only reading. Two speakers reported the same reading as the much stronger one, allowing for the reading with Can's proposal being a possible, but weaker interpretation, which might be made possible in certain contexts.

With respect to the question addressed here, we see that the pronominal/strict reading is not always possible; this situation emerges when a competing reading, i.e. a sloppy/elliptical reading is stronger—possibly due to reasons of pragmatics. In (7), the sloppy reading is indeed made stronger, due to the negative predicate of the second sentence and the negative polarity item *kimse* 'nobody', which convey a strong agency reading to Aylin, along with the probability that she has most likely control over her own proposal, rather than over Can's proposal, with respect to sharing or not sharing it. The strength of this interpretation either eliminates the

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<sup>5</sup> Most of the examples in the questionnaire are to be found in this paper; they were taken, in part, from Şener and Takahashi (2010); some additional examples were constructed in parallel to those. All of the examples consisted of dialogues of the type offered in this paper, with the second part of the dialogue containing a silent argument. After each dialogue, there was a question that was intended to trigger the participants' intuitions about the interpretation of the silent argument. For example, in (7), one of the examples added to those taken from the literature, the question (in Turkish) was: "Did Aylin not let anyone read her own proposal, or Can's proposal? Or are both interpretations possible?" All of the participants have at least a college degree; five have doctorates. Seven participants are in their seventies; one is in his fifties, and one is in her thirties.

strict/pronominal reading altogether (for the majority of the native consultants in my survey), or it weakens the strict/pronominal reading considerably (for a minority of my native consultants).

2. When is the sloppy (ellipsis-based) reading possible, and when is it not? Does agreement really always block ellipsis? Does the absence of agreement ensure the possibility of ellipsis?

Let us start with the last sub-question, and with one of Şener and Takahashi's examples which we have seen earlier:

(5) a. Can [pro anne-sin]-i eleştir-di.  
Can (his) mother-3SG-ACC criticize-PAST.3SG  
'Can criticized his mother.'

b. Mete-yse *e* öv-dü.  
Mete-however praise-PAST.3SG  
Lit.: 'Mete, however, praised *e*.'

As mentioned above, Şener and Takahashi report that the silent direct object in the second part of this dialogue is ambiguous, and, crucially, allows for the sloppy, elliptical reading. This judgment is, indeed, shared by the majority of my consultants: seven out of nine. However, two consultants did not allow for the sloppy reading. This judgment was made particularly clear, via another dialogue, where the silent argument was a subject rather than a direct object:

(8) a. [pro anne-si], Can tarafından eleştir-il-di.  
(his) mother-3SG Can by criticize-PASS-PAST.3SG  
'His mother was criticized by Can.'

b. *e* Mete tarafından-sa öv-ül-dü.  
Mete by-however praise-PASS-PAST.3SG  
'But *e* was praised by Mete.'

While all consultants disallowed a sloppy reading for (8b), whereby the silent subject would have been interpreted as Mete's mother, the two consultants who also disallowed such a reading for (5b) did not see any difference between (5b) and (8b) in this regard; the sloppy reading was ruled out, no matter whether the silent argument agreed with the predicate, as in (8b), or did not, as in (5b).

Thus, so far, it appears that for the sloppy reading for a silent argument to be blocked, agreement is a necessary, but not sufficient condition.

However, even this weakened part of Şener and Takahashi's approach is challenged by some of the results of my survey. In a similar minimal pair, the difference between an agreeing and a non-agreeing silent argument with respect to a sloppy reading is even smaller than that between (5b) and (8b). To see this, (6) is repeated, and it is contrasted with a new example, namely (9):

(6) a. Can [[pro öneri-sin]-in kabul ed-il-eceğ-in]-i  
Can (his) proposal-3SG-GEN acceptance do-PASS-FUT.NOM-3SG-ACC  
düşün-üyor.  
think-PRES.PROG.3SG  
Lit.: 'Can thinks that his proposal will be accepted.'

- b. Aylin-se [ *e* redded-il-eceğ-in]-i düşün-üyor.  
 Aylin-however refusal.do-PASS-FUT.NOM-3SG-ACC think-PRES.PROG.3SG  
 Lit.: 'Aylin, however, thinks that (it) will be rejected.'
- (9) a. Can [komisyon-un [pro öneri-sin]-i kabul ed-eceğ-in]-i  
 Can committee-GEN (his) proposal-3SG-ACC acceptance do-FUT.NOM-3SG-ACC  
 düşün-üyor.  
 think-PRES.PROG.3SG  
 Lit.: 'Can thinks that the committee will accept his proposal.'
- b. Aylin-se [pro *e* redded-eceğ-in]-i düşün-üyor.  
 Aylin-however (they) (it) refusal.do-FUT.NOM-3SG-ACC think- PRES.PROG.3SG  
 Lit.: 'Aylin, however, thinks that (they) will reject (it).'

Out of my nine consultants, four did accept a sloppy reading for the silent subject in (6b), while stating that it was a weaker reading than a strict reading. Two of those four did not perceive a difference between (6b) and (9b) in this regard: for them, the sloppy reading for a silent argument did exist, but was weaker than a strict reading, for both a silent subject (which, of course, agrees with the local predicate in Turkish), and a silent direct object (which does not agree with the predicate in Turkish). Hence, at least for such speakers, agreement does not trigger any blocking effect with respect to argument ellipsis, thus allowing a sloppy reading.

In summary, with respect to the second and third sub-questions of question 2, we have to conclude that agreement does not always block ellipsis, and that the absence of agreement does not always ensure the possibility of ellipsis.

What about the first sub-question? When is ellipsis possible, and when not? It looks like there are no black-or-white answers, but tendencies which are of varying strength for different native speakers. Agreement does play an important role in blocking ellipsis, but not in an absolute fashion; this tendency for ellipsis to be blocked by agreement is presumably due to another strong tendency: when a silent argument is licensed and identified by overt, morphological agreement, that argument tends to be *pro*, i.e., a pronominal. Given the general strength of this tendency, the pronominal, i.e., strict reading weakens a potential elliptical, i.e., sloppy reading. These tendencies appear to be integrated into the individual grammars of native speakers in varying strengths.

Let us now turn to the third, and last, question this paper addresses:

3. Does a scrambling language really always allow ellipsis (insofar as other constraints don't block it), and if so, why should this be?

While it is not clear why a *language* which allows scrambling constructions should also allow ellipsis, it is plausible that a scrambling *construction* would allow ellipsis. This is because scrambling is typically applied for purposes of information structure, i.e., of topicalization, which tends to move constituents to the left periphery of a clause, thus leaving a (typically silent-unless it is resumptive and thus overt) variable in its place. The sloppy interpretation of silent arguments is also a variable-like interpretation (see, for example, Kornfilt 2007).

I would therefore like to reformulate the relevant typological generalization proposed in Şener & Takahashi (2010) in terms of scrambling that has actually applied in a particular construction, rather than in terms of a "scrambling language" in general. Some results of my

survey are very suggestive in this regard. Two of my nine consultants allowed sloppy readings for silent arguments, when the corresponding overt constituent in the first clause had been topicalized, for two original examples in which they had excluded a sloppy interpretation, i.e., for corresponding examples *without* scrambling. More specifically, these two speakers had excluded a sloppy/elliptical reading for (5b) and (6b). However, they both volunteered their intuition that a sloppy reading would be possible, if the constituent corresponding to the silent argument in these examples had been topicalized:

(5) a'. [pro anne-sin]-i<sub>i</sub> Can t<sub>i</sub> eleştir-di.<sup>6</sup>  
 (his) mother-3SG-ACC Can criticize-PAST.3SG  
 Lit. 'His mother, CAN criticized.'

b'. e<sub>i</sub> Mete-yse t<sub>i</sub> öv-dü.  
 Mete-however praise- PAST.3SG  
 Lit.: 'Mete, however, praised e.'

(6) a'. [pro öneri-sin]-in<sub>i</sub> Can [t<sub>i</sub> kabul ed-il-eceğ-in]-i  
 (his) proposal-3SG-GEN Can acceptance do-PASS-FUT.NOM-3SG-ACC  
 düşün-üyor.  
 think-PRES.PROG.3SG  
 Lit.: 'Can thinks that his proposal will be accepted.'

b'. e<sub>i</sub> Aylin-se [ t<sub>i</sub> redded-il-eceğ-in]-i düşün-üyor.  
 Aylin-however refusal.do-PASS-FUT.NOM-3SG-ACC think-PRES.PROG.3SG  
 Lit.: 'Aylin, however, thinks that e will be rejected.'

The example in (6b') is particularly instructive, since there, the silent argument is a subject (in the embedded clause) and thus agrees with the local predicate. Agreement is overridden by scrambling/topicalization.

It is possible that the elided constituent is not the subject in these examples, but rather the topic, and that what looks like an elided subject in (6b') is actually a trace rather than an elided argument. I leave the answer to this question for future research.

### Conclusions

This paper has addressed generalizations and proposals previously advanced about silent pronouns versus elided arguments in Turkish. Based on an informal, brief survey of nine native speakers of Turkish, we have seen that while previous proposals about the importance of agreement and scrambling for the possibility of argument ellipsis have to be weakened, but not totally rejected. There is some speaker variation, and what had been proposed as absolute conditions (in particular with respect to potential blocking effects of agreement) appear to be strong tendencies that can be overridden by lexical choices about predicates and other contextual variables. The importance of scrambling is supported, but not with respect to

<sup>6</sup> I use the symbol *t* for trace, in an informal way, just to make clear where the original position of a scrambled/topicalized constituent is.

scrambling *languages* in general; instead, we have seen that scrambling is important with respect to scrambling/topicalization *constructions*.

### Abbreviations

3	Third person
Acc	Accusative
Caus	Causative
Dat	Dative
Fut.Nom	Future Nominalization
Gen	Genitive
Neg	Negative
Nom	Nominative
Pass	Passive
Pres.Prog	Present Progressive
Sg	Singular
Top	Topic marker

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