Salience and definiteness in Turkish children's narratives

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1 Introduction

Von Heusinger has posed definite descriptions as dynamic expressions that (i) pick the most salient entity as their referents and (ii) change the salience hierarchies of the introduced referents and their supersets (von Heusinger 1997; 2003; 2007). With this proposal, he departs from the assumption of the uniqueness attributed to definite expressions in Russel's (1905) Theory of Descriptions, and from the assumption that an expression can either have context dependence or salience changing potential, but not both (e.g., Kamp 1981; Heim 1982; Groenendijk & Stokhof 1991). In this altered dynamic semantics approach, definite descriptions have double dynamics (von Heusinger 2003). First, they do not gain their uniqueness condition via the lexical semantics of the definite article, but dynamically, via the function it has in a discourse, so they are context-dependent. Second, they do have the power to alter the context and update the salience structure of the discourse.

Among others, two of the discourse functions of definite nouns that will be relevant for our purposes are situational salience, where the referent is the most salient entity that is accessible to both interlocuters, as in *the glacier* in (1a), and the anaphoric relation where the referent is introduced with an indefinite article (*a glacier*) in its first mention and is referred with a definite noun in its re-mention (*the glacier*), as in (1b) (von Heusinger 1997). These examples clearly illustrate that the definite expressions tend to refer to the most salient entity and that they gain their meaning by their function in the discourse.

(1)
a. Oh my God! **The glacier** is very steep and almost impossible to climb.
b. There is **a glacier** in our town. **It** is very steep and almost impossible to climb. Even the most advanced climbers need continuous belaying and extreme care and it has caused many injuries in the past. **The ice waterfall route** in the Skyler area is much better though. Despite the dangers, some climbers insist on going for **the glacier**.
c. **The glacier** is very steep and almost impossible to climb. Even the most advanced climbers need continuous belaying and extreme care and it has caused many injuries in the past. Despite this some climbers insist on going for **the route**.

Also, the example in (1b) is a good case where another definite noun (*the ice waterfall route*) shifts the salience from one entity *(the glacier)* to another (*the waterfall*). Furthermore, the re-mentioning of the first definite entity *(the glacier)* after this other entity (*the waterfall*) again shifts the salience back to *the glacier* as the most salient noun in this discourse, which demonstrates the discourse changing potential of the definite referents. Finally, in (1c), *the glacier* is re-mentioned with another relevant noun that includes *the glacier* as its member *the route,* an example of *salience spreading* where the definite expression changes the salience of their supersets as well (von Heusinger 2003).

In this study, we analyze the narratives of Turkish-speaking children focusing on their referential choices for discourse referents and their function, with a special focus on the functions of definite descriptions in children's referential chains.

2 Method

Participants

We tested 21 primary school monolingual Turkish children (12 Females) (M_{age} = 9.56, SD = 0.61). Tested as a control group for another study, these children come from a relatively lower SES.

Materials

We used the *Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives* (Gagarina et al. 2012, 2019). It consists of 4 stories, each two having the same number of story characters: Cat Story/Dog Story and Baby Birds/Baby Goats. We analysed the first stories told by children (i.e., cat story and dog story). These stories contain 3 characters (i.e., cat, butterfly and the child in the "Cat Story" and dog, mouse and child in the "Dog Story"). Reference to the setting, an initiating event, goal, attempt and outcome in an organized manner constitute the story structure.

Procedure

Story pictures were printed out in vivid colours, cut and stuck next to each other as suggested in the manual. Each story was printed 3 times and was put in separate envelopes. Later, the child was asked to choose among the envelopes, although they all contained the same story. This was made in order to make the child believe that the experimenter does not know what story was going to be told. This was crucial to prevent shared knowledge effect between the child and the experimenter (Gagarina et al. 2012). The narration was audio-recorded and transcribed by 2 Turkish native speakers and was checked by the second author.

Coding

Only the animate story characters were coded. Ambiguous and incomprehensible sentences were excluded (N = 3). 372 utterances were coded in total (ungrammatical sentences causing ambiguity and utterances containing no animate reference have not been coded, N = 18). 9 children told the cat story while 12 told the dog story. Introduction refers to the first mention of the story characters. Maintenance is when the story character that is being mentioned is referred to also in the previous utterance. We coded the story characters that re-appeared after being interrupted by the mention of another story character as re-mention.

3 Results and Discussion

While the number of indefinite expressions was greater than the number of definite entities when introducing the referent, the number of definite expressions was greater when maintaining and re-mentioning the already introduced entity [X^2(1, N=372)=208.23, p<.00001] (Table 1).

Table 1: Function of definite and indefinite expressions in children's narratives

	# of total occurrences	# of definite occurrences	# of indefinite occurrences
Introduction	61	21	39 (4 generic)
Re-mention	104	102	1
Maintenance	207	205	2
Total	372	328	42

Despite this pattern, the number of using bare definite nouns while introducing a subject referent was still at a remarkable rate (%43). This is an example of using the definites for situational salience (von Heusinger 2003). This is in line with previous studies in Turkish children's narratives (Küntay 2002; Aksu-Koç & Nicolopoulou 2015). However, different from previous studies, our participants did not have a shared visual narrative context with their interlocutors but they were still treating the subject entities as the situationally the obvious and shared character. This may be due to limited Theory of Mind skills, so further studies should address this possible correlation. We also see that the number of subject mentions was also greater than the number of object mentions [X^2(1, N=285)=10.58, p=.005] (Table 2). This also concurs with previous studies underlying the subject-bias in referential chains (for a summary, Schumacher & von Heusinger 2019).

Table 2: The number of subject and object roles depending on the function of the entity

Character function	# of total subjects	# of total objects
Introduction ($N = 61$)	43	14
Re-mention ($N = 104$)	86	4
Maintenance ($N = 207$)	128	21
Total ($N = 372$)	257	39

We then examined the percentage of definite nouns and their morphosyntactic realizations in different word orders within subject and object referents separately. The pattern for the definiteness (i.e., greater indefinites for introduction, greater definites for maintenance and re-mention) and the subject-bias persisted in this analysis. Analyzing the word order for subject referents, we found that the number of SV utterances was greater than that of SOV when introducing a referent while we observed just the opposite pattern for character re-mention [X^2(1, N=236)=111.64, p<.00001]. Furthermore, OV and V orders were greater for maintaining the reference while there was no difference between SOV and SV orders. Hence, the subject is more likely to be introduced with the verb without any other referents to establish the salience of this initial entity and once this is done, an additional referent (i.e., object) is introduced in an SOV order. For object referents, the word order did not differ by the function of the referent [X^2(1, N=42)=5.99, p=.42]. This may be due to the smaller number of object mentions in total. We then looked at the morphosyntactic realization of the referents in subject mentions as the majority of the cases. A greater number of indefinite referents were introduced by an indefinite article, as in (2a) (Aksu-Koç & Nicolopoulou 2015), whereas all of the definite subject referents were introduced by a bare noun in SOV and SV order while they were all introduced by a null pronoun in V order (2b). All referents were definite during the re-mention and maintenance, and they were mentioned by a null pronoun in OV and V and by a bare noun, demonstrative noun and pronoun in SOV and SV. Finally, there were also some examples of definite expressions referring the supersets of the main entity, as in (2b), a la von Heusinger's (2003) observation of salience spreading.

(2) a. **Bir tane** kedi varmış. (There was **a** cat)
         O sırada **bir tane** çocuk gelmiş. (Meanwhile **a** boy came)

     b. Şimdi **bir tane fare** varmış. Böyle ağacın deliğinden girmiş. (SV order)
         (Now there is **a** mouse. (**The** mouse) passed through the hole in the tree.)

     c. Bir tane **köpek** varmış burada. Fareyi kovalıyormuş. Yakalamış. Fareyi kovalarken içine girmiş. Kaçmaya çalışıyormuş. Ondan sonra **hayvan** kafasını vurmuş.

(There is **a dog** here. (It: dog) is chasing the mouse. (It: dog) caught (it: mouse). As (it: dog) was chasing the mouse, (it: dog) got into it. (It: mouse) was trying to run away. Then the **animal** (i.e., dog) hit his head.)

In conclusion, the analysis of Turkish 9-year-olds' referential chains in their narratives indicates that the subject is the most salient entity and although the characters are generally introduced by an indefinite noun, they are oddly and frequently introduced by a bare definite noun, which is supposed to mark the situationally salient entity. Children are adultlike in using more definite expressions for character maintenance and re-mention. The morphological realization of these nouns (i.e., bare nouns, (null)pronouns, demonstratives) interacted with the word order/information structure and the discourse function of these entities. Although infrequently observed, children's use of definite expressions for salience spreading is also adultlike at age 9. Therefore, for children just like adults, definite expressions are dynamic expressions marking the salience and updating the salience hierarchies of the referents and their supersets (von Heusinger 1997). The only developing feature at this age seems to be situational salience that may be related to other socio-cognitive abilities, which we intend to investigate in future studies.

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