

Comparison of sensitivity to case violations across native and nonnative speakers of Turkish

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This study examines the extent to which native speakers (NSs) and advanced nonnative speakers (NNSs) of a highly-inflected language, Turkish, are sensitive to case markers as morphosyntactic cues to detect syntactic complexity and case violations. Self-paced reading (SPR) and grammaticality judgment tasks (GJT) were employed to test the degree of sensitivity to the substitution of accusative or dative for one another on the embedded nominalized verb, or to the omission of genitive case, resulting in unmarked nominative, on the embedded subject (e.g., Loudly the auntie's snoring tolerated[I] during the bus trip, where auntie is inflected with genitive, while snoring is inflected with dative in Turkish, as determined by the matrix verb, tolerated). Participants were 36 NSs and 38 advanced NNSs of Turkish. Overall, NNSs were significantly slower than NSs in reading complex sentences in SPR and were less accurate at detecting case violations in GJT. However, both groups were better at recognizing substitution than omission errors, although this trend was more pronounced in NNSs. In SPR, reaction times (RTs), measured on the matrix verb, did not differ across substitution vs. omission errors in either group, but a significant slowdown to ungrammatical sentences was observed only in NSs. Yet, NNSs demonstrated extremely long RTs to embedded subjects with genitive case relative to their ungrammatical counterparts in nominative case, and to the subsequent nominalized verb with dative case. This early sensitivity to syntactic complexity and to less frequent and marked dative case was not present in NSs. To conclude, advanced NNSs of Turkish displayed a nonnative pattern of sensitivity to case violations, along with greater processing effort than NSs, but they were still sensitive to case marking, albeit only at certain points, which flagged complex sentence structure, such as embedded subject and verb, rather than matrix verb.

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