

# Inappropriate use of definites in Turkish-German bilinguals

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## Introduction

Definite noun phrases (NPs) require a referent that is uniquely identifiable from the current discourse. The contextually appropriate use of (in-)definite NPs can be difficult for children (e.g. Maratsos, 1976), second language (L2) learners (e.g. Ionin et al., 2004) and heritage language speakers (HSs) (e.g. De Groot, 2005; Montrul & Ionin, 2010). HSs' lack of target-like sensitivity to definiteness distinctions may reflect incomplete grammatical acquisition (e.g. Montrul, 2008) or divergent attainment due to L2 dominance and/or reduced input conditions (e.g. Pascual y Cabo & Rothman, 2012). A recent study by Kupisch et al. (2016), however, showed that Turkish-German bilinguals have no difficulty applying syntactic restrictions on the use of definites in either Turkish and German.

**Research question:** Is the ability to use contextual-pragmatic cues to (in-)definiteness compromised in Turkish-German bilinguals who acquired a societally dominant second language alongside their home language during childhood?

## Definiteness in Turkish and German

NPs are marked for definiteness in both Turkish and German. In German, definiteness distinctions are marked by prenominal articles. Turkish is a differential object marking (DOM) language that lacks a definite article but uses the prenominal determiner *bir* ('one') to indicate indefiniteness.

Table 1. Definiteness distinctions in Turkish

	Definite	Indefinite
Non-specific		Bir kitap 'a book'
Specific	Kitabı 'the book <sub>ACC</sub> '	Bir kitabı 'one of the books <sub>ACC</sub> '

Table 2. Definiteness distinctions in German

	Definite	Indefinite
Singular	der / den Baum 'the <sub>NOM</sub> / the <sub>ACC</sub> tree'	ein / einen Baum 'a <sub>NOM</sub> / a <sub>ACC</sub> tree'

## Method

- Untimed multiple-choice discourse-completion tasks
- **Experiment 1 (Turkish):** Three context types (i) Definite, (ii) Indefinite Nonspecific, (iii) Indefinite Specific; three answer choices
- **Experiment 2 (German):** Three context types (i) Definite, (ii) Indefinite Plural, (iii) Indefinite Quantified; two answer choices
- **Experiment 3 (German):** Neutral context; choice of morphosyntactically correct vs. incorrect determiner (*definite* vs. *indefinite*) – adjective – noun concord

### Example, Experiment 1:

DEFINITE CONTEXT: *Masada bir kitap vardı. Ayşe'nin başka bir işi yoktu. \_\_\_\_\_.*  
'There was a book on the table. Ayşe had nothing else to do.'

EXPECTED ANSWER: *Ayşe kitabı okudu.*  
'Ayşe read the book.'

### Example, Experiment 2:

DEFINITE CONTEXT: *Auf dem Tisch liegt ein Brief. \_\_\_\_\_.*  
'There is a letter on the table.'

EXPECTED ANSWER: *Nina öffnet den Brief.*  
'Nina opens the letter.'

Table 3. Demographic details of our participants

Participants	N	Age	AoA (min/max)		Language proficiency (0/10)		Daily language use (%)	
			Turkish	German	Turkish	German	Turkish	German
Turkish Monolinguals	25	23.80 (21-26)	0/1	NA	-	-	-	-
German Monolinguals	25	27.17 (18-35)	NA	0/1	-	-	-	-
Late bilinguals	21	19.28 (18-32)	0/1	14/19	9.30 (7.25-10)	5.52 (4.5-9)	77.38 (50-100)	29.44 (0-100)
Heritage speakers	20	29.20 (17-45)	0/1	0/14	8.31 (3.5-10)	8.57 (3-10)	62.5 (25-100)	60.58 (50-100)

## Results

Table 4. Participants' responses in Experiment 1

Condition / answer	MONOLINGUAL			LATE BILINGUAL			HERITAGE		
	Definite Specific	Indefinite Nonspecific	Indefinite Specific	Definite Specific	Indefinite Nonspecific	Indefinite Specific	Definite Specific	Indefinite Nonspecific	Indefinite Specific
Definite NP	90%	11,5%	12%	81,5%	14,8%	8,3%	78,7%	22,5%	21,8%
Indefinite NP	8,5%	67%	68,5%	12,5%	73,8%	72,7%	15,6%	56,2%	57,5%
Indef. Specific NP	1,5%	21,5%	19,5%	5,9%	11,3%	19%	5,6%	21,3%	20,6%

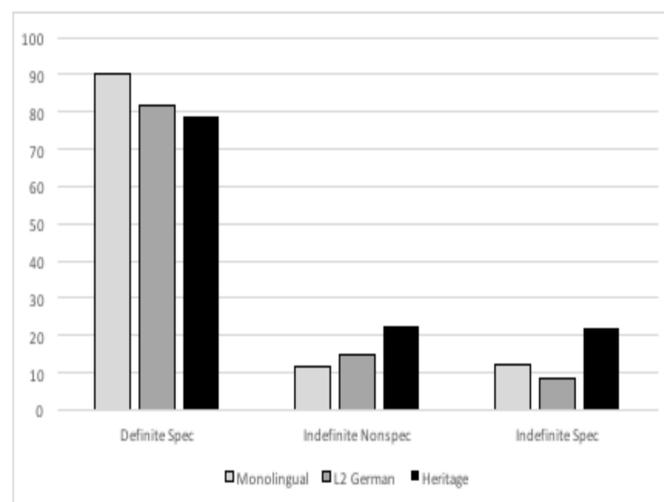


Figure 1. Percentages of "definite" responses across conditions in Experiment 1

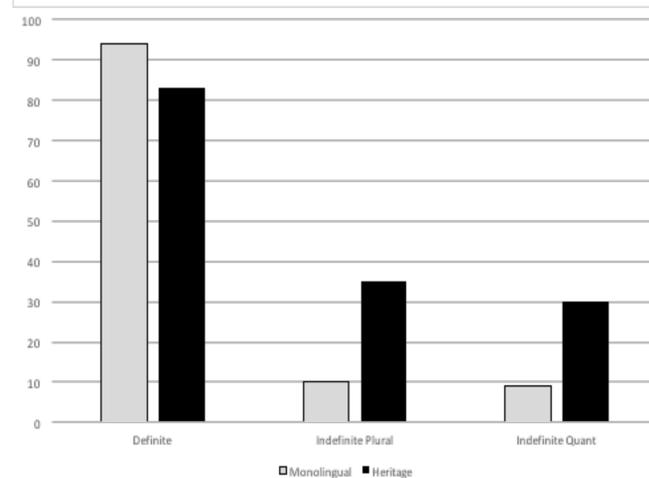


Figure 2. Percentages of "definite" responses across conditions in Experiment 2

## Summary

- HSs over-extend the use of definites to pragmatic contexts where an indefinite answer option would normally be appropriate in both Turkish (Experiment 1) and German (Experiment 2).
- Experiment 3: HSs are highly accurate; no difference between definite (84% correct) and indefinite determiners (87% correct)

## Discussion

- Our results indicate divergent attainment in both of our heritage bilinguals' languages, with the 'uniqueness' requirement on definites possibly being weakened.
- Our findings are in line with the hypothesis that language structures that require the integration of syntactic and semantic/pragmatic features are particularly vulnerable in both heritage and L2 grammars (e.g. Sorace, 2011).

Scan QR code for our abstract



## References

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