

OBJECT CASE MARKING: ENGLISH INFLUENCE ON THE USE OF ESTONIAN BY THREE ESTONIAN-ENGLISH BILINGUAL CHILDREN*

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The present paper reports the results of one part of a study conducted on the native language of three Estonian-English bilingual children living in Britain. This part focuses on object case marking. The study found that the native language of these children demonstrated English influence in their systematic overuse of the partitive to mark direct objects in Estonian. The plausibility of regarding this as a transfer effect is supported by two considerations. First, the children have limited exposure to Estonian speakers in England, so that English has become their dominant language. Second, the children's simplification of object marking patterns conforms to the much simpler English pattern. The primary subjects were asked to translate 40 English sentences (with 43 object contexts) into Estonian. A set of Estonian control subjects were given a completion task with the same sentences in Estonian. The results of the study revealed that the primary subjects overwhelmingly used the partitive in marking direct objects, even in contexts where either the genitive or nominative marking was required. The control subjects demonstrated a consistent use of the three object cases in appropriate contexts.

1. Introduction

Studies of the Estonian language used by expatriate Estonians, either in parts of the former Soviet Union or elsewhere outside Estonia, have been conducted since the 1950s (Hennoste 1998). The present paper offers a small contribution in this tradition, by describing and analysing the native language of three Estonian-English bilingual children living in England, and assessing the influence of English on their Estonian. The discussion of object cases in this paper is excerpted from a larger study, which also examines transfer effects in the command of articles, verb government and future marking (Torn 2001). The main conclusion reported here is that these bilingual children overuse the default partitive case in marking objects in Estonian.

A brief discussion of bilingualism and language transfer will provide a context for the discussion of the study and results.

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2. Bilingualism and bilinguals

Bilingualism has long been a focus of study. As Hoffman (1991, 14) notes, the most salient feature of bilingualism is that it is a multi-faceted phenomenon. Whether treated from a social or individual perspective, no clear cut-off points can be distinguished. Hence, providing a definition of bilingualism has always been controversial. According to some authors it is “the native-like control of two languages” (Bloomfield 1935, 56), requiring high proficiency in both languages. Others see bilingualism as the initial stage of the contact between two languages, implying low proficiency in respective languages (Diebold 1964, in Romaine 1989, 10). In fact, both kinds of definitions have been criticised. For instance, Oksaar (1992, 4f) warns against confusing multilingualism (‘having knowledge of two or more languages’) with equilingualism, which is a theoretical-ideal construction. The languages of the bilingual always differ in their emotional and cognitive closeness to the speaker, as their use varies situationally.

There are several interacting factors that determine the nature of a bilingual. One is the age of language acquisition. When a child acquires two languages before the age of three, he/she is considered to do it simultaneously. A child that acquires one language in infancy and the other after three is referred to as a successive or sequential bilingual. Baker (1993, 67) claims that before the age of three, the acquisition of two languages is probably more natural and informal, while after three a shift to acquiring the second language by means of formal instruction is more likely. However, Grosjean (1982, 179) notes that “the degree of bilingualism attained is not related to whether the languages are acquired simultaneously or successively. It is psychosocial factors, such as the use of the language in the family or in the school, that will condition when, to what extent, and for how long a child will be bilingual, not the age of acquisition of the two language”. Thus, as he also claims, “a child can become a bilingual at any age” (ibid., 192). Hence, the dominance of one language over the other is not determined by one, but by several factors. As Grosjean (1992, 55) notes, “the bilingual is NOT the sum of two complete or incomplete monolinguals; rather he or she has a unique and specific linguistic configuration” (emphasis in the original).

3. The phenomenon of transfer

A bilingual may use languages for different purposes; these languages may differ in their degrees of fluency and dominance. Due to these differences, it can be assumed that one language may influence the other and vice versa. The transfer of linguistic elements from one language to another (especially from L1 to L2) has been the object of intensive study, and is especially topical in the second language acquisition. Odlin (1989, 27) defines the phenomenon of transfer as “the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired”. The transfer of linguistic features is regarded as more pronounced in sound system and lexis than in morphology or syntax. However, transfer effects have also been noted in the areas of syntax, such as word order, relative clauses formation, negation, etc. (see Odlin 1989, 85ff).

But transfer need not be manifested only in overt errors. There are also instances of learners finding the differences between their native language and the target language too difficult to reconcile, and consequently opting for various omission strategies. Another possibility is the excessive use of a certain structure that may result from overgeneralisation or transfer, i.e. as a result of the avoidance or underproduction of some difficult structure (Ellis 1995, 97ff). Odlin (ibid., 152f) notes that the

relative distance between languages is also a factor that affects transfer. Here similarities are liable to cause errors involving false cognates, while differences, in their turn, require more time for the acquisition of certain uncommon structures. Typologically common patterns are more likely to be transferred than others.

4. Hypothesis of the present paper

The present paper proposes that the native language of the Estonian-English bilinguals show transfer effects from English, by overusing the partitive case in object marking and thus applying it as the default object case. The claim is supported by the following considerations:

1) Although these Estonian children use both languages daily, the exposure to their native language (Estonian) is limited to home, where it is spoken by their parents and occasional visitors from Estonia. This suggests that English has become more dominant and thus exercises an influence on their native language.

2) Estonian and English are typologically different languages, i.e. the former is a truly inflected language with a clear case system, while the latter lacks these properties. Hence, the differences may cause transfer.

5. Subjects

5.1. Primary subjects and their background

The present study presents data gathered from three Estonian bilingual children who have lived in England for nearly 10 years. There are two boys, Mart (13) and Madis (11), and a girl, Mari (12), who were 4, 2, and 3 years old respectively when they first came to England. The older children spoke some Estonian before coming to England, while the youngest only knew a few words. In Estonia the children did not go to kindergarten but were at home with their mother. During the first years in England the mother stayed home and taught the children Estonian by reading books and poems in Estonian. The home language was Estonian. The children also listened to Estonian tapes, and were all taught to read and write in Estonian.

In England the first real contact with English children occurred when they went to the nursery at the age of 4.5. Before that they did not speak English at all. However, living in an English-speaking society guaranteed exposure to English outside the home. From the age of four the two languages were taught simultaneously: Estonian at home and English at school. The parents also used English textbooks and films to teach the children English. As the children's exposure to Estonian is limited to the home environment, the second language, English, has become more dominant. Thus, there has been a clear shift in the language of dominance¹.

5.2. Control subjects

Four native Estonian children (marked with the letters A, B, C, D) were used as control subjects. Three children were 12, one 11. There was one boy in the control group.

¹ For discussion of the phenomenon of shift of language dominance see Grosjean (1982, 237f).

6. Object case marking

The present section examines the transfer effects English may have on the marking of object cases in Estonian. It is known that object cases cause problems not only for learners of Estonian as a second language but also for Estonians who live abroad and are to a greater or lesser extent deprived of the reinforcing presence of the larger Estonian language community, thus often becoming influenced by the language(s) spoken in the country of residence (cf. Raag 1985; Klaas and Laagus 1998; Lehist and Kitching 1998). This paper claims that where Estonian exhibit richer grammatical realisations, i.e. shows an alternation in object cases between the partitive, genitive and nominative, the three Estonian bilinguals when speaking Estonian will overwhelmingly use the partitive as a general default. This overuse of the partitive shows the influence of the default strategy in English, in which all direct objects are unmarked and implicitly interpreted as accusative².

6.1. English

Morphological case receives comparatively little attention in English grammars, which is not unreasonable as Modern English does not in general retain distinctive case forms. Whereas nouns in Old English had four noun cases: nominative, accusative, dative and genitive, the first three have since been lost in the noun system, and the genitive is only realised by a phrasal 's marker (Jespersen 1949, 282). The modern system is sometimes analysed as retaining two cases, common and genitive, in nouns, and three cases, nominative, genitive and accusative³ in pronouns. However, Quirk et al. (1985, 318) notes that it is questionable whether the distinction between common and genitive is really a case distinction. The same question can be raised for the contrast between pronouns like *I* and *me*, since forms like *I* behave more like subject clitics, such as French *je*, than like nominative pronouns in other Germanic languages (and earlier stages of English). In effect, the case system of English has contracted to a binary opposition between subject pronouns (*I*, *we*, etc.), and general or default forms, which occurs in all other positions. In particular, this unmarked form realises the direct object in English.

6.2. Estonian

Estonian has a complicated system of object marking involving alternations between the partitive, genitive and nominative. The basic rules determining case choice are outlined below. Negative clauses present the simplest pattern, as they require a partitive object. In affirmative sentences, the partitive is associated with a partial object, while the genitive and nominative mark a total object. The total object usually occurs in the genitive in the singular, and in the nominative in the plural, as shown in the following examples:

- (1) *Mary pani klaasi lauale.*
Mary put-IMP glass-SG-GEN table-ALL
'Mary put the glass at the table'.

² Unmarked objects in English correspond to the Estonian partitive in the sense that the partitive, too, is the default object case.

³ Jespersen (1949, 220) uses the term of an oblique case, while Quirk et al. (1985, 336) make a distinction between subjective and objective case

- (2) *Mary pani klaasid lauale.*
 Mary put-IMP glass-PL-NOM table-ALL
 Mary put the glasses at the table.

However, a singular total object occurs in the nominative when it is used in the impersonal, the imperative or where it modifies a *da*-infinitive (see Erelt et al. 2000, 379f). According to Erelt et al. (ibid., 377) the partitive is the main object case⁴, followed by the genitive as the next frequent alternative. The use of the nominative is the most restricted. Thus, the object cases in Estonian can be organised into the following hierarchy, in which the partitive is the first and the default case.

partitive
 genitive
 nominative

This hierarchy suggests the possibility that the partitive, as the default object case, might be acquired before other cases in the object position. Since there are yet no studies conducted on this in Estonian, it must remain a hypothesis to be tested in the future.

The rules outlined above interact with other conditions that determine the choice of object case. First, the choice may be determined by the nature of the verb. In the Estonian grammatical tradition verbs are divided into partitive and aspectual verbs. The partitive verbs (e.g. *armastama* 'love', *kartma* 'fear'.) always take an object in the partitive, while the aspectual verbs (e.g. *ostma* 'buy', *ehitama* 'build'), which are sometimes called, 'three-object' verbs (Rätsep 1978), take either the partitive, genitive or nominative object in the affirmative. As noted above, this alternation occurs only in the affirmative, as negative clauses require an object in the partitive. The partitive verbs denote an action that has no certain boundaries, where no result is achieved, and no duration boundaries implied (Erelt et al. 2000, 377). The use of a total object with aspectual verbs (in genitive or nominative) implies the completion of the action (3), while the use of a partial object, in turn, implies an ongoing process, or the uncompleted status of the task (4).

- (3) *Malle kirjutas luuletuse.*
 Malle write-IMP poem-SG-GEN.
 'Malle wrote a poem.'

- (4) *Malle kirjutas luuletust.*
 Malle write-IMP poem-SG-PART
 'Malle was writing a poem.'

Another factor that influences the choice of object case is the semantics of the object noun itself, i.e. its quantitative characteristics. The partial object is used when reference is made to an undetermined amount of something or a part of something, while the total object is used when the object noun implies wholeness or a precisely defined part of it. However, Rajandi and Metslang (1979, 6) note that the distinction between the indefinite part and the whole in the partial and total object definitions is imprecise. They point out that the difference between substance (*aine*) and thing (*asi*) determines the choice of case. If the object noun denotes a substance, as in (5), it is in the partitive. If the object noun refers to a thing, as in (6), the choice of an object depends on the aspect of the action, i.e. on an imperfect reading it is partitive, while on a perfective reading it requires a total object case.

- (5) *Ta kirjutas luulet/*luule.*
 he write-IMP poetry-PART/*GEN
 'He wrote poetry.'

⁴ The same is claimed about Finnish: Vainikka (1993, 129) notes that "the partitive case is structural default case of the object position."

- (6) *Ta kirjutas luuletust/luuletuse*
 he wrote-IMP poem-PART/GEN
 'He was writing/wrote a poem'

Partial and total objects always encode direct objects, and thus correspond to direct objects in English.

6.3. Material and Procedure

The task that tested the bilingual Estonians' command of object cases presented a translation of 40 English sentences that contained 43 contexts in which an object occurred (Appendix 1⁵). The Estonian control subjects were presented with a completion task with the same sentences but in Estonian. The partitive case was required in 16 contexts (5 of 16 of these were negative), the genitive was required in 10, and the nominative in 11 (5 for the nominative total object and 6 for the imperative). There were 6 sentences that did not test object case marking. To increase the difficulty in the Estonian task, control subjects were asked to mark also the indirect object in 4 contexts, though the results of this sub-task will not be discussed here. Both tasks were conducted orally and recorded.

6.4. Results

Table 1 below presents the overall use of the object cases both by the primary subjects and by the Estonian control subjects.

Table 1. Summary of the marking of object cases

Total Contexts	PARTITIVE		GENITIVE		NOMINATIVE	
	16		10		11	
	correct	wrong	correct	wrong	correct	wrong
Primary						
Mart	15	1	2	8	1?	10
Mari	12	4	5	5	1?	10
Madis	13	3	4	6	2?	9
Control						
A	16	0	9	1*	11	0
B	16	0	8	2*	11	0
C	16	0	8	2*	11	0
D	16	0	9	1*	11	0

All of the primary subjects strongly associate the partitive as the main object case and perform well in nearly all contexts where the partitive is required. The only instance where Mart did not use the partitive was in 1A:10⁶. This was, however, due to his interpreting it in a way that is compatible with the nominative:

- (7) *Kui kaua võttis sul, et lugeda need raamatud?* (1A:10)
 how long took you that read-DA:INF these books-NOM
 'How long did it take you to read these books?'

⁵ Only the task given to the primary subjects is presented in Appendix 1.

⁶ 1A refers to the English task in Appendix 1, 1B to the Estonian task.

Here, the nominative is correct as *need raamatud* modifies the *da*-infinitive. However, the more idiomatic in Estonian is to use *lugema läbi* 'read completely'

Mart demonstrated a very unsure command of genitive marking on the object. The only two instances where all primary subjects correctly marked the genitive were 1A:7 and 1A:19. It could be argued that the verbs *find* and *take* are frequent and often heard in the genitive context as it implies completion. However, no primary subject realised the plural total object in the nominative with *find*, as required in 1A:40.

Each of the case errors that Mart made in contexts that require genitive or nominative involved the use of the partitive. This pattern strongly suggests that he associates the partitive with the direct object and also applies it to contexts where different cases are required. He evidently does not base his judgements on aspect either, as in English 1A:37, which implies the completion of the activity and thus requires the genitive, Mart again uses the partitive.

Mari, too, used the partitive most of the time; however, she employed genitive marking as well. Moreover, when translating, she always rendered English indefinite article as *ühe* 'one' (genitive), declining the following noun in genitive on most occasions (except 1A:11). Each of her correct 5 instances of the genitive marked the completion of the action. She can be said to recognise the genitive as an object case, however, she is not consistent in its use. Madis, like Mari, uses both the partitive and genitive marking on objects. Nevertheless, the partitive is the predominant case in both the correct and incorrect instances.

The data revealed that the primary subjects do not identify nominative as an object case. The instances marked with a question mark ? in the table refer to the sentence 1A:30 where *two* in *two children* was translated in the nominative as required. However, it remains doubtful whether the subjects actually knew that the plural total object takes the nominative. As none of them declined *three* in *three small mice* in 1A:33, where the partitive marking is required on *three*, it can be assumed that they simply did not decline numerals. Madis did use *books* in the nominative in 1A:23; nevertheless, even in this example it is unclear whether the nominative was consciously used.

The control subjects were consistent in using the partitive and nominative as required by the contexts. However, the instances considered erroneous (marked with *) under the genitive head remain open to question. As the choice of object is influenced by the aspect of the activity, subjects simply impose different interpretations. Thus, sentence 1B:28 (*Ma püüdsin ... eile. SININE, LIBLIKAS?* 'I caught a blue butterfly yesterday') was conceived by B and C as implying an uncompleted task. This interpretation is compatible with the use of the partitive. Sentence 1B:34 (*Kolm aednikku kasvatasid SUUR, ARBUUS* 'The three gardeners grew a big watermelon') was likewise analysed as a process by A, B, and D. C also gave a process reading to 1B:37 (*Ta õmbles endale ... UUS, PUNANE, SEELIK* 'She sewed herself a new red skirt'). Strictly speaking, the partitive would not be wrong here; however, in the limited context of the sentences only the genitive reading was considered correct. Where there was no indeterminacy in aspectual choices, the control subjects always used correct cases.

7. Conclusion

The study summarised above shows that the bilingual Estonian children overwhelmingly used the partitive in marking direct object, despite the fact that Estonian exhibits an alternation between the partitive, genitive and nominative, depending on different contexts and factors. It is evident that

⁷ The sentence is taken from the task (1B) of the control subject; the words in the capital were to put in the correct object case. The translation is the respective sentence in 1A.

greater exposure to English has made English their dominant language. These children have thus transferred onto Estonian the simpler English system, in which objects are consistently realised by the default form of a noun. It is equally apparent that the primary subjects associated the partitive as the default object case, and used partitive overwhelmingly to mark direct objects in Estonian. Although Mari and Madis also use the genitive as an object case, they were inconsistent in applying it. All of the bilinguals failed to recognise the nominative as the object case. In Mart's case, aspect played no role in determining case. The control group showed a generally coherent pattern of marking object cases. The fluctuation in their choice results probably from the different interpretations available for the aspect of the action, which may have been due to ambiguity in the sentences themselves.

In summary, the data supported the initial hypothesis of the paper by showing that the primary subjects overgeneralised the use of the partitive for direct objects. Although the free speech samples⁹ showed that the primary subjects retain both genitive and nominative case, they clearly see the partitive as the object case.

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⁹ In the course of study the subjects' free speech was also recorded to assess their general command of Estonian.

Appendix 1. Marking of the object cases⁹

IA English task: Translate the following sentences into Estonian!

1. The girl bought a newspaper.	21. I don't need scissors, I need a hammer.
2. They were watching a film on TV.	22. Well, take another book!
3. The plane will arrive soon.	23. Mary put the books on the table.
4. She finished that book.	24. Have you seen a big black spider?
5. Give me the newspaper!	25. Two small boys were playing in the garden.
6. Why don't you read the article?	26. I'm afraid of spiders.
7. Lisa found a golden ring.	27. The book was written by an old man.
8. There was no bread on the table.	28. I caught a blue butterfly yesterday.
9. I was reading the newspaper when Sally came.	29. I'll boil ten potatoes.
10. How long did you read these books?	30. Father took two children to the swimming pool and one to the dancing class.
11. Write her a letter!	31. Susan didn't buy an ice cream.
12. The girl gave the newspaper to a boy.	32. Take your toys away!
13. The two boys did not give their toys to the girl.	33. He noticed a rat and three small mice in the corner.
14. Put the glasses on the table!	34. The three gardeners grew a big watermelon.
15. You should not catch butterflies!	35. There are mushrooms and lots of berries in the forest.
16. She finished her article.	36. Would you like some tea?
17. The house will be painted red by the workers.	37. She sewed herself a new red skirt.
18. The three men took the rings from the drawer.	38. Put your new brown coat on!
19. I myself took a book.	39. He bought some bread.
20. She's wearing her new blue shoes.	40. She found her gloves on the ground.

PAPILDINIO LINKSNIS: ANGLŲ KALBOS ĮTAKA TRIJŲ DVIKALBIŲ ESTŲ VAIKŲ GIMTAJAI KALBAI

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje apžvelgiami kai kurie atlikto tyrimo rezultatai, kurie buvo gauti stebint, kokią įtaką anglų kalba turi trijų dvikalbių estų vaikų gimtajai kalbai jiems gyvenant Didžiojoje Britanijoje. Šiame darbe yra nagrinėjama tik papildinio linksnio raiška. Surinkti duomenys rodo, kad tiesioginis papildinys šių vaikų kalboje žymiai dažniau buvo reiškiamas partityvo linksniu, nežiūrint į tai, kad estų kalboje egzistuoja trys alternatyvos: partityvas, genityvas ir nominatyvas.

⁹ Sentences 3, 8, 17, 25, 27, 35 do not test the object cases. Other sentences in IA have the exact equivalents in IB.