The Mysterious –ml:

A Syntactic Analysis of the Turkish Focus Question Morpheme –ml

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Table of Contents

1.0 Introduction
   1.1 Case Marking
   1.2 Scrambling

2.0 The Turkish Focus Question Morpheme
   2.1 –ml VS. Scrambling
   2.2 Tag Questions
   2.3 Hypothesis

3.0 Complement Clauses

4.0 Relative Clauses
   4.1 Independent/Free Relative Clauses

5.0 Subordinate Nominalization

6.0 Weak Crossover Test

7.0 Future Studies

8.0 Conclusion
   8.1 Limitations

References
Abstract

Turkish is a scrambling agglutinating language that follows the rules of vowel harmony. In order to create yes/no questions in Turkish, the morpheme –ml is used. –ml is added to the end of a questioned constituent and puts it in focus. According to the analysis to be proposed, -ml is a morpheme local to a C [+Q] feature and the constituent associated with it moves at Logical form. The hypothesis was further tested through diagnostics involving islands and weak crossover.

**Keywords:** Turkish, -ml, focus, islands, weak crossover, WH-Questions, syntax, linguistics
The Mysterious \textit{–mI}:

A Syntactic Analysis of the Turkish Focus Question Morpheme \textit{–mI}

1.0 Introduction

Turkish is an agglutinating SOV head final language. It differentiates NPs in the sentence with case marking; this case marking allows for scrambling. In asking yes/no questions, a focus question morpheme \textit{–mI} is attached to the end of the constituent that is in question. This paper serves to illustrate the environments in which insertion of \textit{–mI} is grammatical and ungrammatical and to provide a syntactic analysis of its distribution.

1.1 Case Marking

Turkish uses case marking to distinguish the grammatical functions of NPs in the sentence. This case marking plays an important role in scrambling because without case marking, scrambling would not be possible. The case being assigned to the noun depends on the grammatical roles that are assigned by the verbs; different grammatical roles give different cases. Depending on the type of verb, the case marking changes.

Some may argue that case marking come from the theta roles assigned by the verbs. In certain sentences, it does seem that the case marking are assigned via the theta roles of the verb, but, this seems to only be applicable in verb active sentences. In verb active sentences, the agent is nominative and in passive sentences, the theme takes the nominative cases.

Turkish is strict in terms of marking all its non-nominative NPs with the correct case, with the exceptions of pronouns, which are typically dropped. Nominative cases in Turkish are not marked with cases and are neutral. Table 1 on the following page demonstrates cases with their correct form in Turkish and the grammatical roles they take\(^1\).

\(^1\) Table 1 was obtained from Spring’14 LIN 431, class.
The Mysterious –ml

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Marking</th>
<th>Grammatical Role</th>
<th>Turkish Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nominative</td>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accusative</td>
<td>Direct Object</td>
<td>-((y/n)) I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dative</td>
<td>Indirect Object</td>
<td>-A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genitive</td>
<td>Possessive</td>
<td>-(\text{In/Im})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ablative</td>
<td>Instrument</td>
<td>-(\text{DA})n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locative</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>-(\text{DA})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Turkish case marking and their corresponding grammatical roles

1.2 Scrambling

Turkish is a scrambling SOV language. Scrambling is used for focus in Turkish. The verb of the sentence typically stays situated at the end of the sentence. The focus of the sentence is achieved by scrambling the constituent of focus to the sentence’s preverbal position. Examples (1)&(2) illustrate this phenomenon:

(1) Çoğun pizza-\(\text{yı}\) ye-di
    Joanne.NOM pizza-ACC eat-PAST
    ‘It was pizza that Joanne ate.’

(2) Pizza-\(\text{yı}\) Çoğun ye-di
    Pizza.ACC Joanne.NOM eat-PAST
    ‘It was Joanne who ate pizza.’

In example (1) the focus of sentence is on ‘pizza’ and in example (2) the focus is on ‘Joanne’. In its default form, the object is always the focus of the sentence. The intonation pattern of the two sentences is the same, because the focus of the sentence remains in the same position. Figure 1, on the following page, serves as an illustration of the syntactic tree for example (1). DP\(_1\) moves to spec TP position in order to obtain its nominative case and DP\(_2\), the object and focus of the sentence moves to the spec Foc P position in order to get its focus. It is still undetermined as to how subjects move to that position in order to obtain that focus and have the correct linear structure.
The tree structure was adopted from Selçuk İşsever’s paper, *A syntactic account of wh-in-situ in Turkish*. The focus position is assumed to be in the lower part of the CP, unlike what standard syntax proposes. Unlike Selçuk İşsever’s tree structure, which uses vP, in order to simplify complications in this paper, the vP will not be used and will be ignored.

As seen in the syntactic tree of figure 1, the verb *ye* moves up to T to obtain its tense marking and DP₁ obtains its nominative case marking by moving to spec TP position. There is no movement required for DP₂ in order for it to obtain its case marking because it’s already assigned by the verb. Though, DP₂ moves up into the spec Foc P position in order to obtain its focus property.

Unfortunately, this tree is not sufficient for example (2). There are still many hypotheses regarding the syntactic tree structure for scrambled sentences. But for the majority of this paper, this tree serves to address most of the examples used, and will be adopted.
2.0 The Turkish Focus Question Morpheme

As stated in the introduction, \(-ml\) is used to focus on and question certain constituents of the sentence. In order to question certain constituents, a ml P is created in which takes anything as a compliment. When \(-ml\) is attached to a verb, regardless of the amount of suffixes, \(-ml\) always occurs at the end of that constituent, except for when a conjugation other than that of the third person is applicable. When \(-ml\) is present in a sentence, WH questions are not, and vice versa. For example, in English, it is impossible to ask a WH question and yes/no questions together. This is because it would require two C [+Q] features for both the WH question and the yes/no question. Unless there is am embedded clause within the main clause, it would be impossible for there to be two C [+Q] features.

The \(I\) in \(-ml\) represent any of the four high vowels in Turkish. Because Turkish is a language that undergoes vowel harmony, depending on the vowel preceding it, the pronunciation of the vowel can change. Examples (3)-(5) illustrate simple cases of \(-ml\). ‘QM’ is used in the gloss to represent \(-ml\) and is used to indicate that it’s a question marker. \(-ml\) in all environments is bolded.

(3) Çoğun pizza-ı yedi mi?
Joanne. NOM pizza-ACC eat-PAST QM
‘Joanne ate pizza?’

(4) Çoğun pizza-ı mi yedi?
Joanne. NOM pizza-ACC QM eat-PAST
‘Was it pizza that Joanne ate?’

(5) Çoğun mi pizza-ı yedi?
Joanne. NOM QM pizza-ACC eat-PAST
‘Was it Joanne that ate pizza?’

Example (3) is ambiguous in that it can either be questioning and focusing on just the verb \(yedi\) or the whole sentence. In the surface form, there is no difference in the pronunciation
and intonation of the question, but the syntactic structure is different. Depending on the focus of the question, the mI P can be taking a TP constituent or a VP constituent. For when it is questioning the full sentence, be [Çogün pizzayı yedi] mi and for when it is questioning and focusing on just the verb it would be, [[[Çogün] pizzayı yedi] mi].

2.1 –mI VS. Scrambling

Despite Turkish’s scrambling properties, there are instances in which placement of –mI and scrambling are ungrammatical\(^2\). Examples (6)-(8) are modifications of example (4) serving to illustrate the different cases of ungrammaticality. There are no translations for these sentences because they are ungrammatical.

(6) *Mi Çogün pizza-yı ye-di? QM Joanne. NOM pizza-ACC eat-PAST
(7) *Pizza-yı mi Çogün ye-di? Pizza-ACC QM Joanne.NOM eat-PAST
(8) *Pizza-yı Çogün mi ye-di? Pizza-ACC Joanne.NOM QM eat-PAST

Example (6) is ungrammatical because –mI is an enclitic, a phonologically dependent element. For it to function efficiently, it must attach to something on the left of it. There is also a tree violation because Turkish is head final. If –mI were at the front of the sentence, it would be head initial and violating the tree structure.

Example (7) is ungrammatical because there is a conflict of focus in the sentence. The preverbal subject is in focus due to scrambling and the direct object is in focus because of –mI. The intonation would also not be understandable. Another reason why example (7) is

\(^2\) Depending on the context, certain multiple foci are grammatical. Though, example (6) would never be grammatical.
ungrammatical is that there is only one focus position on the syntactic tree structure, and both constituents being focused would not be able to take the same position.

Example (8) is ungrammatical because the subject is double focused; the focus from the question marker and the focus from scrambling. Double focusing is not necessary because it’s redundant. It is important to note here though, that examples (7) and (8) may be grammatical in the correct context. The context required for these to be grammatical, though, would require very precise details and are only grammatical in those contexts alone.

2.2 Tag Questions

Tag questions are achieved through adding değil mi (negation and –ml) to the end of a standard sentence. When tag questions are asked, the –ml can not be attached to any other constituent. Examples (9)-(13) are illustrations of tag questions and violations of movement of –ml. Here I assume that the tag, değil mi is a separate CP.

(9) Çoğun öregs mi değildir mi?
   Joanne.NOM student is not QM
   ‘Joanne is a student, isn’t she?’

(10) *Çoğun mi değil mi?
    Joanne.NOM student QM is not

(11) *Çoğun mi değil mi?
    Joanne.NOM student QM is not

(12) *Çoğun mi değil mi?
    Joanne.NOM student QM is not

(13) Çoğun pizza-yı ye-di değil mi?
    Joanne.NOM pizza-ACC eat-PAST is not QM
    ‘Joanne ate the pizza, didn’t she?’

Example (10) is ungrammatical because of reasons mentioned behind the ungrammaticality of example (6) regarding head final branching and clitics. Examples (11) and
(12) are ungrammatical because of locality violations. Here, \(-mI\) is not in the same CP as \(\text{degil}\), which is the CP that carries the [+Q] feature.

2.3 Hypothesis

The hypothesis of this paper is that \(-mI\) is a morpheme local to a C [+Q] feature and despite it being in-situ in the surface form, at Logical Form, it and its host move together to the Spec CP position in order to acquire the C [+Q] feature. When something is blocking it from reaching that position, the sentence is ungrammatical. Also, because of the ungrammaticality seen in examples (6)-(8), it is safe to assume that the focus of \(-mI\) and the focus achieved from preverbal scrambling can conflict with each other. Only one or the other can exist; therefore, when there is \(-mI\), the focus achieved through preverbal scrambling is disfavored.

3.0 Complement Clauses

\(-mI\) may attach to constituents of different categories and sizes. This can be shown by examples with clausal complements with \(\text{diye}\), ‘that’, of category C. Examples (14)-(18 show examples of \(\text{diye}\) being used to reiterate sentences that were heard, usage of direct quotations.

\[
\begin{align*}
(14) & \quad \text{Aydoğan} & \text{Çoğen} & \text{hasta} & \text{diye} & \text{sor-du} \text{ mu?} \\
& \text{Aydogan.NOM} & \text{Joanne.NOM} & \text{sick} & \text{that} & \text{ask-PAST QM} \\
& \text{‘Did Aydogan ask ‘is Joanne sick’?’} \\
(15) & \quad ?\text{Aydoğan} & \text{Çoğen} & \text{hasta} & \text{diye} & \text{mi} & \text{sor-du?} \\
& \text{Aydogan.NOM} & \text{Joanne.NOM} & \text{sick} & \text{that} & \text{QM} & \text{ask-PAST} \\
& \text{‘Was it ‘is Joanne sick’ that Aydogan asked?’} \\
(16) & \quad \text{Aydoğan} & \text{Çoğen} & \text{hasta} & \text{mi} & \text{diye} & \text{sor-du?} \\
& \text{Aydogan.NOM} & \text{Joanne.NOM} & \text{sick} & \text{QM} & \text{that} & \text{ask-PAST} \\
& \text{‘Aydogan asked ‘is Joanne sick?’’} \\
(17) & \quad \text{Aydoğan} & \text{Çoğen} & \text{mi} & \text{hasta} & \text{diye} & \text{sor-du?} \\
& \text{Aydogan.NOM} & \text{Joanne.NOM} & \text{QM} & \text{sick} & \text{that} & \text{ask-PAST} \\
& \text{‘Aydogan asked ‘was it Joanne that is sick?’’}
\end{align*}
\]
When these examples were presented to a native speaker on paper, example (15) was ruled as ungrammatical. When it was read by another native speaker in the correct intonation, after a few moments of thoughts after hearing the sentence, he decided it was grammatical. The native speaker thought it was ungrammatical at first because of the placement of –mi. Depending on the syntactic tree structure, there could be a branching and enclitic violation as discussed in the reasoning of ungrammaticality in example (6). If one was confused as to the grammaticality of (15), another way of testing is it through the phonological aspect of –mi.

As stated earlier, -mi is a phonologically dependent enclitic and undergoes vowel harmony; depending on the vowel preceding it its pronunciation can change. In example (15), if –mi was focusing and questioning sor-du, its correct pronunciation would be –mu and not –mi. Vowel harmony in Turkish runs left to right, so phonological checking of –mi also checks out through that. Of course, the phonology is not always dependable if the vowels of the two words can lead to the same pronunciation of –mi, but example (15) is a good illustration of how the phonological aspect of –mi works.

Because there are two Cs in these examples, a high C and a lower C, the examples show how locality of C is important. Constituents in the main clauses of examples (14), (15) and (18) are looking up at the higher C for their C [+Q] features. Examples (16)-(17) illustrate –mi looking up to a lower C because it’s focusing and questioning the complement clause.

Examples (18)-(25) shown below, are examples of another usage of diye in which direct quotation marks are not used. The examples are modifications of the sentence Bu oda ders için
The Mysterious $-mI$  

$\text{çok uygun diye düşünüyorum}$ (Kerslake, 2007)$^3$. In these examples, there is a focus shift in which mi and its host is moving to the C [+] feature offered by the main clause.

(18)  
Bu oda ders için çok uygun diye düşün-iyor **mu**-yum?  
This room.NOM lesson for very suitable that Think-IMPF QM-1SG  
‘Do I think this room is very suitable for teaching?’

(19)  
Bu oda ders için çok uygun diye **mi** düşün-iyor-um?  
This room.NOM lesson for very suitable that QM Think-IMPF-1SG  
‘I thought that this room is very suitable for teaching?’

(20)  
Bu oda ders için çok **mu** uygun diye düşün-iyor-um?  
This room.NOM lesson for very suitable QM that Think-IMPF-1SG  
‘It was very **suitable** for teaching that I thought this room was for?’

(21)  
Bu oda ders için çok **mu** uygun diye düşün-iyor-um?  
This room.NOM lesson for very suitable QM that Think-IMPF-1SG  
‘It was very **suitable** for teaching that I thought this room was for?’

(22)  
Bu oda ders için **mi** çok uygun diye düşün-iyor-um?  
This room.NOM lesson for QM very suitable that Think-IMPF-1SG  
‘For teaching I thought this room was very suitable?’

(23)  
Bu oda ders **mi** için çok uygun diye düşün-iyor-um?  
This room.NOM lesson QM for very suitable that Think-IMPF-1SG  
‘Teaching I thought this room was very suitable for?’

(24)  
Bu oda **mu** ders için çok uygun diye düşün-iyor-um?  
This room.NOM QM lesson for very suitable that Think-IMPF-1SG  
‘This room I thought was very suitable for teaching?’

(25)  
*Bu **mu** oda ders için çok uygun diye düşün-iyor-um?  
This QM room.NOM lesson for very suitable that Think-IMPF-1SG

Example (18) illustrates an example of how $-mI$ is added before the subject-verb agreement. Example (25) is ungrammatical because $Bu oda$ is a full DP constituent, and DPs form strong islands. When $-mI$ tries to break into such strong islands, these islands form barriers that do not allow for the transparent ceiling that allows $-mI$ to look up at and obtain its C $[+Q]$

$^3$ Translations of these sentences may be slightly off.
feature. If one wanted to question ‘this was the room I thought was suitable for teaching’, oda would have to be dropped in order to break the DP island.

The other sentences are all grammatical because of the ability for –ml to obtain it’s C [+Q] feature. As in examples (14)-(18), each of the –mls in examples (18)-(25) obtain its required features through either the main C or the embedded C. Examples (18) and (24) are questioning the main clause, therefore it is obtaining its feature through the main C (higher C), and examples (19)-(23) are obtaining their features from the lower C because the question focus of the sentence is in the embedded clause.

4.0 Relative Clauses

Genitive case, which is typically used for possessives, plays an important role in relative clauses in Turkish because it marks the embedded subject. When using genitive subject in a relative clause, an agreement marker must be used at the end of the embedded verb. Relative clauses form islands, and similar to the DP islands, -ml is unable to break into it. Examples (26)-(30) are examples of constructions of –ml in sentences with relative clauses.

(26) Mişel Çögen-in pişir-di-ği pizza-yı ye-di mi?
Michelle.NOM Joanne-GEN cook-PAST-AGR pizza-ACC eat-PAST QM
‘Michelle ate the pizza that Joanne cooked?’

(27) Mişel Çögen-in pişir-di-ği pizza-yı mi ye-di?
Michelle.NOM Joanne-GEN cook-PAST-AGR pizza-ACC QM eat-PAST
‘It was the pizza that Joanne made that Michelle ate?’

(28) *Mişel Çögen-in pişir-di-ği mi pizza-yı ye-di?
Michelle.NOM Joanne-GEN cook-PAST-AGR QM pizza-ACC eat-PAST

(29) *Mişel Çögen-in mi pişir-di-ği pizza-yı ye-di?
Michelle.NOM Joanne-GEN QM cook-PAST-AGR pizza-ACC eat-PAST

(30) Mişel mi Çögen-in pişir-di-ği pizza-yı ye-di?
Michelle.NOM QM Joanne-GEN cook-PAST-AGR pizza-ACC eat-PAST
‘It was Michelle that ate the pizza that Joanne cooked?’
The relative is an island even if there is a lower C in this structure, it is not a C [+Q] and so –ml is still unable to obtain its required features.

In this cause of the relative clasue, the attachment of –ml to a constituent within the relative clause would cause for difficulty in movement. This violation is better illustrated in section 4.1 where the relative clause is expanded and modifications of –ml show this ungrammaticality.

### 4.1 Independent/Free Relative Clauses

Examples (31)-(35) another focus-type construction, in which a free relative forms the first major constituent, preceding ‘Joanne’. This constituent is also an island, as shown in (32)-(35).

```
(31) Aydoğan-in hasta diye sor-du-ğu Çögen mi?
    Aydogan-GEN sick that ask-PAST-AGR Joanne.NOM QM
    ‘Is it Joanne who Aydogan asked was sick.’

(32) *Aydoğan-in hasta diye sor-du-ğu mu Çögen?
    Aydogan-GEN sick that ask-PAST-AGR QM Joanne.NOM

(33) *Aydoğan-in hasta diye mi sor-du-ğu Çögen?
    Aydogan-GEN sick that QM ask-PAST-AGR Joanne.NOM

(34) *Aydoğan-in hasta mu diye sor-du-ğu Çögen?
    Aydogan-GEN sick QM that ask-PAST-AGR Joanne.NOM

(35) *Aydoğan-in mu hasta diye sor-du-ğu Çögen?
    Aydogan-GEN QM sick that ask-PAST-AGR Joanne.NOM
```

Examples (32)-(35) are all ungrammatical because of the island formed by the relative clause. Despite diye being used in these examples and despite the presence of a lower C (as seen in the examples of section 3.0), -ml is within the relative clause island and for that reason –ml can not be looking up for a C [+Q] feature.
5.0 Subordinate Nominalization

Subordinate nominalizations in Turkish contrast with the structures already discussed. Subordinate nominalizations are formed through the usage of genitives and agreement in Turkish, similar to what was seen in the relative clause. Depending on the verb used in the main clause, the verb of the embedded clause takes on case marking assigned by the main verb. The main verb *duydu* in this case assigns accusative case marking to the embedded verb. Examples (36) and (37) are cases in which insertion of –*mI* in a subordinate normalization leads to ungrammaticality.


Examples (36) and (37) are both ungrammatical because of similar reasons as the ungrammatical relative clause examples. Despite there being more than one C, there is no C local to that of –*mI*. And because of this missing local C and the breaking of islands, the two examples are ungrammatical.

6.0 Weak Crossover Test

Thus far, all the examples have supported the hypothesis of this paper that –*mI* is very localized to a C [+Q] feature, and when something is interfering with that locality, such an island boundary, any placement of –*mI* within that island is ungrammatical. It has also been suggested that the relation between –*mI* and the C [+Q] is created by the movement. In order to test the second part of the hypothesis, violations of weak crossovers were tested.

If the –*mI* phrase moves, we’d expect to find weak crossover violations. Examples (38)-(41) test this, but the results are inconclusive, since (39) is grammatical. *Onun* is a lexicalized


form of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} SING pronoun and the GEN case marking, \textit{o-nun} in its morphological form.

Examples (38) and (40) are declaratives of (39) and (41) respectively.

(38) Onun anne-si John-u seviyor.
     His mom-AGR John-ACC love-PRESENT
     ‘His mom loves John.’

(39) Onun anne-si John-u \textbf{mu} seviyor?
     His mom-AGR John-ACC QM love-PRESENT
     ‘His mom loves John?’

(40) John-u onun anne-si seviyor.
     John-ACC his mom-AGR love-PRESENT
     ‘It is John his mom loves.’

(41) ??John-u \textbf{mu} onun anne-si seviyor?
     John-ACC QM his mom-AGR love-PRESENT

Examples (38) and (40) are grammatical because they are scrambled sentences. Example (40) illustrates a local scrambling without breaking out of the TP, and typically, in local scrambling, weak crossover is allowed. Example (38) is the default form of the sentence. Figure 2, below, illustrates a syntactic tree structure of the surface representation of example (39).

\textbf{Figure 2:} Syntactic tree of the surface representation of example (39).
In the surface form, it is unclear if the \(-ml\) phrase moves up to spec Foc P position, because the linear order would remain the same. For that reason, we will assume that \(-ml\) looks up for its focus feature and C [+Q] feature. At the Logical Form, though, the \(-ml\) constituent moves up to spec Foc P position for its focus feature and then again to spec CP position for its [+Q] feature.

If \(-ml\) moves, the tree structure at logical form of example (39) and (41) should be comparable. Figure 3, illustrates both examples (39) and (41) at its Logical Form, as well as what may be assumed to be the syntactic tree of example (41) at its surface form.

![Figure 3: Examples (39) and (41) at LF](image)

And there should be a weak crossover violation triggered by the binding by ‘John’ of its trance and the pronoun ‘his’ in ‘his mother’. Example (41) shows that this overt movement is ungrammatical, though this could also be because of what might cause the ungrammaticality in
example (7). WH-Questions were used for the weak crossover violation test as well because they have similar properties to –ml, at least for their focusing properties.

   (42)  Onun anne-si kim-i seviyor?  
         His mom-AGR who-ACC love-PRESENT  
         ‘Who does his mom love?’

   (43)  *Kim-i onun anne-si seviyor?  
         Who-ACC his mom-AGR love-PRESENT

Example (43) is parallel to example (41) in that they are both ungrammatical because of the overt movement. Again, this ungrammaticality could be caused by the focus conflict caused by the utility of –ml and preverbal scrambling. In any case, wh in situ and –ml behave similarly with respect by crossover, although we’d expect to see ungrammaticality.

7.0 Future Studies

Because of the time constraints, there were aspects of –ml that were not further investigated for this paper. One of these aspects is multiple usage of –ml in a sentence. Doubling of –ml is typically used for either-or questions. An example is shown below.

   (44)  Çok en mi Mişel mi uydu?  
         Joanne.NOM QM Michelle.nom QM sleep-PAST  
         ‘Was it Joanne or was it Michelle that slept?’

In order for multiple –mls to be grammatical, all the items in question must have the same grammatical function, for example both must be subjects, objects or verbs.

Hypothetically speaking, multiple –mls are similar to conjunct ‘or’ in English. Though how two different –ml phrases take on one focus position is still a puzzle. There is always the possibility of a larger constituent that branches off into two smaller ones, but more research is required.
8.0 Conclusion

Turkish is an agglutinating SOV language. \textit{–ml} is used as a focus yes/no question morpheme and attaches to the end of the constituent in question. Through analysis of grammatical and ungrammatical sentences, it is safe to conclude that \textit{–ml} requires a local C [+Q] feature, and when this feature is blocked from its vision, it leads to ungrammaticality. It is still a puzzle regarding the movement hypothesis of \textit{–ml} because the weak crossover violation dataset left us with an inconclusive conclusion.

8.1 Limitations

Because of the time limitation of this project, many aspects of \textit{–ml} have not yet been investigated. If more time permits, these aspects should be examined for a more conclusive analysis of \textit{–ml}. Also, because the perceptions of grammaticality depended on solely one person, other perceptions would allow for a more accurate sample set. The research and analysis done on this paper was preliminary but with more time and availability of native speakers, the project can lead to a better understanding of this important focus question morpheme in Turkish.
References
