

Turkish finite verbs

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0 Introduction

As a student of Turkish, I make these notes in an effort to understand the logic of Turkish **verbs**. This is not the account of an expert. I gathered the information here mainly from the two books [1] and [2].

My account of the verbs will involve some reference to the other **parts of speech**. Being *written*, my account will use the Turkish **alphabet** and will therefore illustrate features like **vowel-harmony** that are reflected in spelling.

1 Alphabet

Like English, modern Turkish (since 1928) uses an alphabet derived from the 23-letter Latin alphabet

A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, V, X, Y, Z.

English gets 3 more letters by introducing:

- the variant J of I, and
- the variants U and W (double-U) of V.

The letter-forms given above are called **upper case**, to distinguish them from the **lower case** (a, b, c and so on).

The 29-letter Turkish alphabet can be derived from the English one by:

- eliminating Q, X and W;
- deriving from C, G, O, S and U the letters Ç, Ğ, Ö, Ş and Ü respectively, by adjoining cedilla, breve or umlaut;
- replacing I with two letters, I and İ (distinguished in both upper and lower case by whether a dot is present: the lower-case forms are therefore ı and i respectively).

The letter Ğ is called *yumuşak ge* (*soft G*), and it never begins a word. The new letters (new to English-writers, that is) can be understood as derived from the old by diacritical marks, but these marks become integral parts of the new letters. It is not the *shape* of the mark, but its *presence* at the top or bottom of the letter that is used to distinguish the letter from its ‘twin’. For example, one Turkish dairy styles itself *Sütaş* (they use a dot instead of a cedilla under the s), and there is a bus company called *Uludağ* (taking their name from the mountain at Bursa, the first capital of the Ottoman Empire; they use a grave accent rather than a breve over the g).

In the alphabetical order, I precedes İ, and the other new letters follow their ‘twins’.

Because of the distinction between the letters ı and i in Turkish, neither of these should be joined in a **ligature** to a preceding f. In English, the other word for a movie is printed *film* rather than *fil*m, but in Turkish, the word is printed as **f**ilm, with four distinct letters. (Also, for example, **f**il means *elephant* or *chess-bishop*, while **f**ındık means *hazelnut*.)

In Turkey, on a license-plate, I have seen a presumably-capital J written with a dot. But j is rare in Turkish anyway, being used only in foreign words.

2 Sounds

The name of a **vowel** is itself, and the name of a **consonant** (besides Ğ) is itself plus e.

The number of vowels is eight, that is, 2^3 , since each vowel is determined by the quality it possesses from each of three pairs: *thick/thin*, *flat/round* and *narrow/wide*. These are literal translations of the usual Turkish terms (*kalın/ince*, *düz/yuvarlak*, *dar/geniş*), but commonly in English the terms are:

- **back/front**,
- **unround/round**,
- **close/open**.

The vowels can then be tabulated:

	open		close	
	back	front	back	front
unround	a	e	ı	i
round	o	ö	u	ü

The sound of **a** can be spelled in English by *uh*; close the mouth more to get **ı**. The **ö** and **ü** are as in German; their sounds are found in French as well.

Further distinctions are possible, mainly because Turkish retains borrowings from Arabic and Persian. A difference from the norm might be shown by a circumflex: so **kar** means *snow*, but **kâr**, sounding something like *kyahr*, means *profit*.

The other 21 letters are consonants. Besides the ‘semi-vowel’ **y**, the consonants might be tabulated:

b/p	v/f		m	
d/t	j/ş	c/ç	n	l
	z/s			
g/k	ğ/h			r

The rows here are intended to correspond to position of the lips and the tip of the tongue; the columns, to the flow of breath used to pronounce the consonant. (This particular table is my own invention though, and is not the result of careful phonological study.) The members of the pairs */* are **voiced** and **unvoiced** respectively, or *soft* and *strong* in Turkish (*yumuşak* and *sert*). The main effect of **ğ** is to lengthen the preceding vowel. (So it functions like *gh* in English in changing *fit* into *fight*.) The letter **j** is pronounced as in French. The sound of **c** is spelled in English by **j** or *dge*; the sounds of **ç** and **ş**, by *ch* and *sh*.

3 Writing

As in English, written Turkish is divided into **sentences**, and these into **words**. Some words are **enclitic**, being unaccented, but causing the previous syllable to be accented. (Syllabic accents are not very strong in Turkish though.) The vowel in an enclitic may also change according to the preceding vowel. This same vowel harmony is shown by many **suffixes**.

I shall indicate the variability of vowels with the following symbols:

- @ for an open unround vowel (a or e);
- # for a close vowel (ı, i, u or ü).

I have not seen such symbols used elsewhere in this way. (Perhaps using æ instead of @ would be more logical, but its appearance seems more confusing.) Each symbol resolves to a vowel agreeing as far as possible with the preceding vowel. In particular, after @, the only possibilities for # are ı and i.

The variability in consonants will not be indicated. However, when it begins a suffix appended to a word ending in an unvoiced (that is, strong) consonant, the letter d is unvoiced ('strengthened') to t. Also, terminal k changes to ğ when a suffix beginning with a vowel is added. (These changes affect the suffix -d#r and the termination -k mentioned below. Other such changes can occur.)

Example. The question Avrupa + l# + l@ğ + d#r + @m@ + d#k + l@r + #m#z + d@n m# + s#n#z? resolves to *Avrupalılılaştıramadıklarımızdan mısınız?* meaning *Are you one of those whom we could not Europeanize?*

The symbol # may resolve to zero (nothing) when it begins a suffix placed after a vowel; alternatively, a consonant may be interposed, n, s or y, depending on the situation. Sometimes the y narrows the preceding @ to #.

4 Words

Not every word appears in a dictionary, even if the word is well-formed; the word may be **inflected** (or otherwise derived) from a dictionary-word according to standard rules. Otherwise, we might say that the *same* word may be used in many forms, only one or a few of which appear in the dictionary. For example, in English, we can say that *man* and *men* are two words, or else that they are two forms of the same word. Inflected forms are few in English; in Turkish they are many.

Turkish words fall into some of the same classes (parts of speech) as English words: **noun**, **pronoun**, **adjective**, **verb** and **verbal noun**, and **adjective**. Instead of prepositions, but fulfilling some of the same functions, Turkish has **postpositions**.

Example. The postposition *gibi* corresponds to the preposition *like*. With the noun *buz ice* is formed the phrase *buz gibi like ice*, that is, *ice cold* (a slogan on signs in Turkey advertising a certain American soft drink marketed all over the world).

This reversal of order in passing from the one language to the other occurs in other ways. A Turkish word (as in the earlier example) may have parts which, in English, would appear as separate words in the opposite order. As in English though, adjectives generally precede the nouns they modify.

5 Verbs: Stems

The dictionary-form of a verb is usually the **infinitive**, analyzed as

stem + m@k;

otherwise, the stem itself is the dictionary head-word.

All verbs are **regular**, except the **defective** verb with stem *i-* corresponding to the English *be* when used as a **copula** (as in ‘Socrates is a man’). The verb is defective because it does not have as many inflexions as a regular verb; it *can’t* have as many inflexions, because all of its inflexions are *used* in inflexions of regular verbs. Where there is no inflexion of *i-*, but the corresponding *meaning* is needed, then the stem *ol-* supplies the inflexion. Otherwise, *olmak* is a regular verb meaning *to become*. (An exception will be noted later; it is connected to the absence in Turkish of a verb meaning *have*.)

Every regular stem can stand by itself as a **second-person singular imperative** verb.

Example. The infinitives *gelmek to come* and *çıkmaq to come out or up* reveal the stems *gəl-* and *çık-*, hence the commands *Gəl! Come!* and *Çık! Come out!* The command *Be quick!* is given by *Çabuk ol!*

The stem of a regular verb can be understood as a **simple** stem together with one or more (or no) **extensions**. A simple verb-stem might be a verbal **root**, or it might be a noun or adjective with a verbal suffix, often *-l@*.

Example. In addition to those in the preceding example, some verbal roots include *uyu-* *sleep* and *kalk-* *get up*. Also:

- from *baş* *head* comes the stem *başla-* *begin* (make a head);
- from *temiz* *clean* comes *temizle-* *clean* (make clean);
- from *köpek* *dog* comes *köpekle-* *cringe* (make like a dog).

Extensions in a verb-stem can be seen to indicate distinctions of **voice** (though this means that Turkish has more voices than the **active** and **passive** of English; English does have other ways of conveying the additional distinctions of voice in Turkish).

When extensions are present, they appear in the following order:

1. **reflexive**: *-#n*;
2. **reciprocal**: *-#ş*;
3. **causative**:
 - *-t* after polysyllabic stems in *-l*, *-r* or a vowel, and
 - *-d#r* in other cases, except:
 - *-#r*, *-@r* or *-#t* occur after some monosyllabic stems, and
 - some exceptional forms occur as well;
4. **passive**: *-#l*, after stems ending in a consonant other than *-l* (otherwise it has the same form as the reflexive).

The significance of an extension is not always obvious from its name.

Like the ancient-Greek **middle** voice, the reflexive extension may suggest a doing *for* and not just *to* oneself, and it may have the same effect (and even the same form) as a passive extension (although these two kinds of extensions can be used together as well).

Used together, the reciprocal and causative extensions make the **repetitive** extension *-#st#r* (other suffixes are used to the same effect in a few cases).

Sometimes the same verbal root can be used **transitively** or **intransitively**: *gez-* can mean either *tour* and *inspect*, or *walk*. Also, the causative extension can make an intransitive stem transitive: *öl-* means *die*, while *öldür-* means *kill*, and *kayna-* and *kaynat-* mean *boil*: respectively, what water does in a pot on the stove, and what I do when I put the pot there.

Used with a transitive stem, the causative extension could be called **fac-titive**: *öldürt-* means *have [somebody] killed*. As here, more than one causative extension can be used.

Here are some more examples of distinctions of voice:

Example. We have *bulaşık yıka-* *wash dishes*, but *yıkan-* *wash oneself* or *be washed*; the latter meaning is also expressed by *yıkanıl-*. Also:

- from *bul-* *find* come *buluş-* *meet* and *bulun-* *be present*;
- from *ara-* *seek* comes *araştır-* *investigate*;
- *uyan-* *awake*, *uyandır-* *awaken*, *uyandırıl-* *be awakened*.

The two-fold distinction in English between affirmation and denial (between *I did it* and *I didn't do it*) can in Turkish be seen as three-fold. Depending on the presence of the indicated suffixes, a stem can be:

- **positive**: —;
- **negative**: -m@;
- **impotential**: -@m@.

In any of these cases, the stem can be further rendered **potential** with -@bil. These suffixes all come *after* any extensions.

Example. The defectiveness (in particular, the lack of infinitives) of the English modal auxiliaries gives various possibilities for translation. The second column below gives English infinitives without *to* (as might follow the words *I shall*); the third column gives a finite form (as might follow *I*).

gel-	<i>come</i>	
gelme-	<i>not come</i>	<i>do not come</i>
geleme-	<i>not be able to come</i>	<i>cannot come</i>
gelebil-	<i>be able to come</i>	<i>can come</i>
gelmiyebil-	<i>be able not to come</i>	<i>may not come</i>
gelemiyebil-	<i>possibly be unable to come</i>	<i>may be unable to come</i>

The potential form can be considered as a compound with the verb *bil-*, meaning *know*. Other compounds, less common, are possible; for example, compounds with *dur-* *stop* or *gel-* indicate continuous action. Such compounding might be said to indicate distinctions of **aspect**.

Moreover, simple negation is achieved, as noted, with -m@. The impotential suffix is the negation of the obsolete verb *u-* *be powerful* or *able*.

The Turkish verb does not make the distinction between permission and ability that English can make with *may* and *can*.

6 Verbs: bases

To a stem is added one (or sometimes more) of several **characteristics** (including the ‘empty’ characteristic, used, as noted, to form imperatives). The result is a **base**. To a base can be added **personal** verb-endings, or more complicated forms.

The characteristics can be classified according to:

- which of the four series of personal endings they can take, and
- whether they can be attached to the stem *i-*.

Their names will suggest their use in indicating distinctions of **tense**, **aspect** and **mood**.

Like English, Turkish has three **persons** and two **numbers**. In Turkish, these features are displayed by pronouns and verbs—also by nouns, in the sense that nouns can be given **possessive suffixes** that display these features.

Listed in the order *1st, 2d, 3d person singular; 1st, 2d, 3d person plural*, the personal pronouns, possessive suffixes, and verb-endings of the four types are as follows.

pronoun	ben	sen	o	biz	siz	onlar
suffix	-#m	-#n	-(s)i	-#m#z	-#n#z	-l@r#
type I	-#m	-s#n	(-d#r)	-#z	-s#n#z	-(d#r)l@r
type II	-m	-n	—	-k	-n#z	-l@r
type III	-@y#m	-@s#n	-@	-@l#m	-@s#n#z	-@l@r
type IV		—	-s#n		-#n, -#n#z	-s#nl@r

The type-I suffixes are said to come from the possessive suffixes (except for the parenthetical *d#r*, discussed below). The possessive suffixes drop the initial vowel after a vowel, and in the third-person singular, the *s* is dropped after a consonant.

After the possessive suffix if it is present, a noun takes a **case**-ending, namely one of the following:

- **absolute**: —,
- **definite-accusative**: -(y)#;
- **genitive**: -(n)#n;
- **dative**: -(y)@;

- **locative:** -d@;
- **ablative:** -d@n.

The parenthetical consonants are used after vowels. The absolute case is used for **subjects** and **indefinite direct objects**.

Example. From the (originally Arabic) *kitap book*, and from *oku- read*, we can form *Kitap oku Read a book*, but *Kitabı oku Read the book*.

Any noun indicating something that is possessed needs a possessive suffix, even if the possessor is also expressed by another noun.

Example. Since *mother* is *anne* and *father* is *baba*, *my mother's father* is *annemin babası*.

Since there is no Turkish verb for *have*, the fact of possession is indicated by the (uninflected) word **var** *existent*, and in some instances by *ol-*.

To a noun (or pronoun or adjective) with a case-ending, a type-I ending can be added as a copula.

Example. The second-person plural here can be used (as in French) for a polite singular:

ev	<i>house</i>
eviniz	<i>your house</i>
evinizde	<i>at your house</i>
Evinizdeyim.	<i>I am at your house.</i>

As proper English despises a double negative, so Turkish (at least sometimes) avoids a double plural. The ending **-l@r** is appended (before a possessive suffix or case-ending) to nouns, to adjectives acting as nouns, and to third-person verbs to indicate a plural; but if plurality is indicated by a number, say, then the noun remains singular in form; and a third-person verb with a plural subject might remain singular, especially if the subject is inanimate.

Example. *başlar heads*, *beş five*, so *beş baş five heads* (or *head*).

Parenthetical in the table of pronouns and endings, the suffix **-d#r**, unrelated to the causative extension, is said to come, as early as the 11th century, from the aorist verb *turur stands*. Its use is imprecisely summarized this way: in can be left out if ambiguity will not result, and it can be used for emphasis (even in persons besides the third).

Example. *Türkler* or *Türktürler* *They are Turkish*, but *Türklerdir* *They are the Turks*.

The characteristics are:

- (used with type-I endings)
 - **present**: -#yör (from the ancient aorist *yorır* *go* or *walk*);
 - **future**: -@c@k;
 - **aorist** (not used with negative stems):
 - * positive: -@r, -#r or -r;
 - * negative: -m@z;
 - **inferential past**: -m#ş;
 - **necessitative**: -m@l# (the verbal-noun suffix -m@ with the adjectival ending -l#);
- (used with type-II endings)
 - **simple past**: -d#;
 - **conditional**: -s@;
- (used with type-III endings)
 - **subjunctive**: -@ (this is given as the characteristic so that the subjunctive base will be identical with the third-person singular verb; but this vowel is just the vowel that begins each of the type-III endings);
- (used with type-IV endings)
 - **imperative**: —.

As noted, strictly the subjunctive has no characteristic. Let us now be strict. Then the presence of a characteristic can be said to distinguish the **indicative** moods from the non-indicative. (By this account then, a conditional verb is indicative; this makes sense if, with the symbolic-logicians, one takes *If A then B* to mean just *B* or *not-A*. That the subjunctive and the imperative should be considered as allied in Turkish is suggested also by the claim that the first-plural subjunctive (type-III) ending is historically an imperative ending.)

A **regular** verb-base is a combination

regular verb-stem + (characteristic).

A complete finite verb *can* be obtained from such a base by affixing an appropriate personal ending. In particular, the indicative bases can stand alone as third-singular verbs (as the non-indicative base can stand alone as a second-singular imperative).

Example. On *oku-* *read* are formed the following indicative bases:

okuyor-	(<i>is</i>) <i>reading</i>
okuyacak-	<i>will read</i>
okur-	<i>read(s)</i>
okumaz-	<i>do(es) not read</i>
okumuş-	[<i>they say that</i>]... <i>w(as) reading</i>
okumalı-	<i>must read</i>
okudu-	[<i>I saw that</i>]... <i>did read</i>
okusa-	<i>if ... read(s)</i>

In the absence of a verb, the type-I personal endings can, as noted, be suffixed to nouns, pronouns, adjectives—also to the word *değil*, which **negates** a sentence that lacks a regular verb.

Example. From *uzun long, tall* come *Uzunum I am tall* and *Uzun değilsin You are not tall*.

The bases formed on the stem *i-* are **simple** or **compound**. The simple bases result from suffixing a characteristic *-m#ş*, *-d#* or *-s@* only. The non-conditional simple bases can be rendered conditional by being compounded with that simple base. Thus the bases in *i-* are five:

imiş-	imişse
idi-	idiyse-
ise-	

All verb-bases have now been described. The bases formed on *i-* must be completed with personal endings. Personal endings *may* be attached to regular bases, as noted. Alternatively, a complete verb formed on a simple base in *i-* can follow or be suffixed to a regular verb-base.

Example. By appending bases in *i-* to indicative stems in *oku-*, these forms can be produced:

okuyormuş	okuyordu	okuyorsa	okuyormuşsa	okuyorduysa
okuyacakmış	okuyacaktı	okuyacaksa	okuyacakmışsa	okuyacaktıysa
okumuş	okurdu	okursa	okumuşsa	okurduysa
okumazmış	okumazdı	okumazsa	okumazmışsa	okumazdıysa
okumuş imiş	okumuştü	okumuşsa	okumuş imişsa	okumuş idiyse
okumalıymış	okumalıydı			
	okuduydu	okuduysa		okudu idiyse
okusaymış	okusaydı			

If it is not associated in this way with a regular verb-base, then a complete verb in *i-* must follow or be suffixed to a noun, pronoun, adjective or *değil*.

In a verb with two characteristics, the second being conditional, the personal ending may *precede* this.

The distinction between the present and the aorist characteristics is of aspect. The aorist indicates habitual action; the present, an action ongoing or envisaged. A third way to indicate a present tense is by appending type-I endings or a verb in *i-* to an infinitive in the locative case: the result indicates ongoing action only.

Example. From *yaz-* *write* we can form:

- Romanlar *yazarım*, *I write novels*;
- Roman *yazıyorum*, *I am writing a novel [now, or in the future]*;
- Roman *yazmaktayım*, *I am engaged in writing a novel*.

The inferential characteristic is originally a past-participial ending. Used in a *regular* base, it indicates past action. This action is inferred from present appearances, or reported by somebody else—unless the regular base is followed by *-d#r* or a verb in *i-*, in which case no suggestion of hearsay or inference is meant. In particular, the ending *-m#şt#r* has the same force as *-d#*. The form *imiş-* may not indicate past time at all, but only hearsay.

Example. *Barış* means *peace*; so:

- A newspaper headline could read *Barış geldi*;
- The story under that head might say *Barış gelmiştir*;
- Somebody who read the story might report *Barış gelmiş*, or possibly *Barış gelmiş imiş*, *Peace is said to have come*.

The **pluperfect** tense is usually formed with **-m#ş** (+) **idi-**, more rarely with **-d#** (+) **idi**.

The **interrogative** particle is **m#**; it always starts a new word. It makes a sentence into a question with a **evet/hayır** (*yes/no*) answer, and it follows the word that could also be an answer to the question. If this word is the verb, then the *base* is what is followed by **m#**; the personal ending, or the form of **i-** in use, is attached to this.

Exceptions include the following. If the personal ending is **-l@r**, then **m#** follows this, unless **-d#r** is also used. The characteristic **d#** of the simple past is inseparable from an attached personal ending, so if there is one, then **m#** must follow this.

References

- [1] G. L. Lewis, *Turkish Grammar*, Oxford, 1967.
- [2] Mehmet Hengirmen, *Turkish Grammar For Foreign Students*, Ankara: Engin, 2000.