Turkish Language

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Introduction

Turkish is the official language of Turkey (formally known as the Republic of Turkey) and is the most widely spoken member of the Turkic language family, with more than 70 million native speakers across western Asia, eastern Europe, and the Middle East. Although Turkish is the largest language in terms of number of speakers in the Turkic language family, it accounts for only about 35 percent to 40 percent of all speakers of Turkic languages. Turkish is also one of the two official languages of Cyprus and has official status in certain districts of Kosovo and the Republic of Macedonia, although the largest number of Turkish speakers outside Turkey can be found in Bulgaria and Germany. Significant Turkish-speaking minorities exist in countries that formerly belonged to the Ottoman Empire, such as Greece, Romania, and Serbia.

The Turkic language family is composed of about forty languages spoken in a vast geographic area from southeastern Europe and the Mediterranean in the West to Siberia and western China in the East (e.g., Azerbaijani, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tatar, Turkmen, Uyghur, Uzbek, Yakut). Although their internal genetic relationship has been well established, their external connection to other languages and language families remains controversial. The most widely accepted affiliation is one that links Turkic languages to Mongolic languages (spoken in Mongolia and parts of China and Russia) and Tungusic languages (spoken in Siberia and northern China),

under the Altaic language family, named after the Altai mountains in Central Asia. Some versions of the Altaic hypothesis also include Japonic and Koreanic languages, and some extend northward to include the Uralic family, although these versions, especially the latter, remain highly controversial.

Turkish is mutually intelligible with many other Turkic languages, especially those belonging to the southwestern (Oghuz) branch of the Turkic language family, which includes Azerbaijani (spoken in Azerbaijan and Iran), Gagauz (spoken in Moldova, Ukraine, and Russia), and Turkmen (spoken in Turkmenistan, Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan). More specifically, Turkish is descended from the Ottoman (i.e., Osman) branch of the southwestern Turkic languages, which represented the variety of Turkish used in the late Ottoman Empire (1299–1922) and, according to some scholars, consisted of three major dialects: Rumelian (spoken in the European parts of the Ottoman Empire), Anatolian (spoken in the Asian parts of the Ottoman Empire), and Crimean (spoken in Crimea). Standard Turkish, as spoken in Turkey today, is based on the Istanbul dialect of Anatolian.

Historical Development

The earliest-known Turkic documents can be found in the memorial installations called the Orkhon inscriptions, erected in the early eighth century in modern Mongolia by the Göktürks (Celestial Turks), the first empire in history with the word Turkish (Türk) in its name. The language of the documents was Old Turkic, and they were written using the Old Turkic script, a runic alphabet that was also used by other Turkic and non-Turkic peoples later, such as by the Turkic Uyghur Empire (eighth to tenth centuries).

With the Turkic expansion between the sixth and eleventh centuries, peoples speaking Turkic languages spread across Central Asia, eventually covering a vast geographic area from Siberia in the north and Europe and the Mediterranean in the west to China in the east, as well as parts of the Middle East. The direct ancestor of modern standard Turkish, the Oghuz Turkic, was brought from Central Asia to Anatolia during the eleventh century by the Seljuqs of the Oghuz Turks, who, after adopting Islam in the tenth century and having defeated the Christian Byzantine Empire, established the first Turkic empire in Anatolia - the Seljuq Empire - which was, in fact, the target of the First Crusade.

Having adopted Islam, a large set of loanwords from Arabic and Persian entered the administrative and literary language of the Seljuq Empire, the ethnic and cultural ancestor of the Ottoman Empire, which, in turn, is the ancestral state for modern Turkey. The Turkish language during the Ottoman period (c. 1299–1922), especially the poetry produced for the Ottoman palace and court circle (i.e., diwan literature), was significantly influenced by Arabic and in particular Persian. This influence was so heavy that the Ottoman language became a mixture of Turkish, Persian, and Arabic to the extent that it was unintelligible to less educated and rural members of the society, who spoke Turkish with a higher percentage of words with Turkic origin and formed the great majority of Ottoman Turks. Thus, the Ottoman language was no longer a medium of communication common to all members of the Ottoman society—at least not to the Turks, although they were the governing ethnicity. Nevertheless, it may have initially played a unifying effect for the Arabic-speaking citizens of the empire, as the empire extended to most of the Middle East and North Africa, areas with predominantly Arabic speakers. Although the

Ottoman diwan literature was not comprehensible to the average Turkish citizen of the Ottoman Empire, parallel to this was the production of folk and mystical literature, which not only was intelligible to Turks at the time but remains comprehensible for speakers of modern Turkish to this date. Examples of the latter literature include the works of the famous folk poet and mystic Yunus Emre of the thirteenth century.

The inaccessibility of the standard court/palace language to average people led some scholars and writers to call for the "purification" of the Turkish language. As a result, during the final two centuries of the Ottoman Empire, a movement started toward using a language with local (i.e., native Turkic) features, rather than one embellished with foreign elements. This movement intensified during the last few decades of the empire, parallel to the process of the rapid loss of Ottoman lands with majority non-Turks (Arabs, Bulgarians, Greeks, Serbians, etc.). It was perhaps at its height when the Republic of Turkey, the successor of the Ottoman Empire, was founded in 1923 on what remained from the lost lands of empire - the predominantly Turkish-speaking areas. The culmination of the purification process was reached when, in 1928, a Latin alphabet was introduced by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), the founder of modern Turkey, to replace the Perso-Arabic-based Ottoman Turkish alphabet, as one of Atatürk's reforms.

Soon thereafter, in 1932, the Turkish Language Association (Türk Dil Kurumu) was founded under the patronage of Atatürk. One of the missions assigned to this association was to initiate a language reform in order to replace loanwords of Arabic and Persian origin with their native Turkish or Turkic equivalents. As a result, countless Turkish words of foreign origin were banned from the press and books, and new words were introduced by the association to replace

them, some of which were derived from existing Turkish words using existing rules of Turkish morphology, whereas others were simple revivals of Old Turkic words that had not been used for centuries. The association continues to coin new Turkish words, especially as new concepts and technologies enter the life of modern Turks, along with borrowed words from foreign languages, especially English. Although some of the association's work has not met with success in that some coined words were found to sound "artificial" by the general public, most of the words coined by the association have received widespread acceptance and led to incredible success, as indicated by the fact that modern Turkish is one of the few languages in the world using native vocabulary even for such technological terms as 'computer' (*bilgisayar*) i.e., "knowledge calculator" in Turkish.

Linguistic Features

In terms of its grammatical features - that is, its phonology, morphology, and syntax—Turkish is often cited as a prime example with regard to certain features. First, regarding its phonology, it has a perfectly symmetric vowel inventory of eight phonemes, four of them back and four front, four unrounded and four rounded, and four high and four non-high (see Table 1).

Table 1. Turkish vowels

	Front vowels		Back vowels	
	Unround	Round	Unround	Round
High	/i/ <i>	/y/ <ü>	/ɨ/ <ı>	/u/ <u>
Low	/e/ <e>	/ø/ <ö>	/a / <a>	/o/ <o>

Turkish is often the textbook example case for vowel harmony; it has both "backness" and "rounding" harmony, meaning that vowels agree with respect to these features with the preceding vowels in a word. For example, the plural suffix alternates between two forms, -ler and -lar, depending on whether the preceding vowel is front or back, as in *göl-ler* ("lakes") versus *kol-lar* ("arms"). The suffix with the front vowel /e/ follows words ending in a front vowel (i.e., /i, e, y, ø/), and the suffix with the back vowel /a/ follows words ending in a back vowel (i.e., /ɨ , a, u, o/).

With respect to its morphology, Turkish is a prime example of an agglutinative language in which there are many suffixes and each additional suffix contributes a meaning to the utterance. It can thus have rather long words to express complex meanings. For example, the following is just one word in Turkish (separated into its morphemes/suffixes by hyphens) and corresponds to the English sentence "Are you one of those whom we were not able to Turkify?"

Türk-leş-tir-eme-dik-ler-im-iz-den-mi-sin-iz?

Syntactically, Turkish is a subject-object-verb (SOV) language, and as with the great majority of SOV languages of the world, it has postpositions instead of prepositions. These are illustrated in the following example. Note that the verb "come" is at the end of the sentence and that postpositional phrases such as "donkey with" are used, instead of prepositional phrases as in English such as "with the donkey"

Ben eşek   ile   ev-e   gel-di-m

I   donkey with home-to come-Past-1sg

 "I came home with the donkey."

Additionally, Turkish is a null-subject language, meaning that pronouns can optionally be dropped, and the meaning can still be kept, as the person agreement markers attached to the verb already indicate what the subject is. The subject "ben" in the example above is, thus, optional.

All these grammatical features are shared by other Turkic languages. Thus, because of its striking similarity to other Turkic languages, both structurally and in terms of lexicon, speaking Turkish opens the way to communication with people from a vast geographic area extending west to east from eastern Europe to the northern and western frontiers of China, as well as northward to Siberia.

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