

The limits to variation in Turkish nominal morphosyntax

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Abstract

Some kinds of morphological marking are optional under certain circumstances in contemporary Turkish. For example, when one noun modifies another, prescriptively the modified noun usually must bear what looks like third-person possession marking, but in reality this ending is often omitted. However, there are contexts in which it is rarely or never left out, and some of these contexts are quite similar to those in which it is optional, for example in names of avenues (as opposed to those of streets). Similarly, there are postpositions which prescriptively require their objects to be in the genitive if the latter are certain pronouns, but in fact at least some of these pronouns can appear without the genitive suffix, that is in the nominative. As for the plural marker, it does not occur in many situations when it would be required in English, but it must be present in some contexts. In this paper I account for the main restrictions on Turkish nominal morphosyntactic variation. Several factors must be invoked but I shall argue that a major determinant is the type of information contained by an affix (in a particular use): those conveying only grammatical information are omissible, those with semantic content are not unless that content is present elsewhere.

1. Introduction

In some syntactic contexts overt morphological marking is optional, or varies, in contemporary Turkish, as in many other languages. In this paper I present some types of variation in Turkish nominal morphology, specifically variation between the presence or absence of a marker, and offer an account for the limits on it. Turkish nouns can be marked for several categories: number, case, possession, and the related category *izafet*. The account is largely based on the idea that inflectional marking which has semantic content cannot be omitted unless that content is available elsewhere. Of course this is not a new idea, see for example Chomsky & Lasnik's (1977: 446-7) "recoverability principle for deletion". However, to my knowledge it has not been tested or applied in a general treatment of Turkish nominal inflectional morphology.

Crucial here is the notion of semantic content. Abney (1987: 65-6) gives the following definition (using the term *descriptive content* rather than *semantic content*):¹

“Descriptive content” – what functional elements lack – is a phrase’s link to the world. If someone utters the word “ball”, and there is a ball in view, the default assumption is that the ball is being described by the utterance. This is the sense in which the noun ball has descriptive content. [...] On the other hand, with the utterance of a functional element – say the modal *will*, or the complementizer *if* – it is not possible to pick out a piece of the world in the same way.

Even with such a definition, it is sometimes far from easy to determine whether an inflectional affix (or other linguistic item) has semantic content, that is whether it is lexical or functional. For example, contrary to Abney’s view, it seems to me that *will* could be seen to have semantic content since it does play a role in describing an event, locating it in the future relative to the moment of speaking rather than before or at the time of speaking.² Arguably all of the Turkish nominal inflectional markers which prove to be omissible even if non-redundant lack semantic content in the relevant uses, as we shall see.³

There is a general avoidance of redundant (i.e. recoverable) marking of inflectional categories in Turkish; thus adjectives do not show agreement with the nouns that they modify, and there is what Lewis (1988: 41) calls the “principle of suspended affixation”, meaning that “one grammatical ending serves two or more parallel words” (1988: 35). The example that he gives is in (1):

- (1) *sihhat ve afiyet-te*
 health and health-LOC
 ‘in health and well-being’

Here we can see that the locative ending only appears on the second noun, but both nouns are interpreted as having locative case. It is possible to have locative suffixes on both nouns, but, as Lewis (1988: 35) says, ‘this is less usual’. I shall not be dealing with variation in marking due to suspended affixation; for limitations on it see Kabak (2007).

¹ One could also see semantic content as content contributing to or affecting the truth conditions of a proposition. This notion of semantic content does not (necessarily) contradict Abney’s definition.

² Sezer (2001: 4) considers that tense involves “lexical descriptive content”. He also notes that “The clear-cut distinction between substantive and functional categories is not unproblematic” (2001: 39).

³ It is necessary to speak of particular uses of affixes, because some affixes, notably case affixes, have two or more quite different functions, and some of these functions may have semantic content while others lack it. Perhaps the clearest example is the accusative of Latin, which can mark direct objects, a grammatical function, but also extent of time or space, which, I would argue, involves semantic content. As already noted, the question of whether an affix has semantic content (in a certain use) can be quite difficult; see Libert (1992) for several syntactic tests for the presence/absence of semantic content of case markers in particular functions, e.g. the ability to mark a predicative phrase.

2. Number marking

Perhaps the most noticeable fact about plural marking in Turkish is that it is not always present when it would be in, for example, English and French.⁴ A noun usually only has a plural suffix when the plurality of the NP it heads is not indicated elsewhere, for example by a cardinal numeral, as shown in (2):

- (2) *on iki ada*
 ten two island
 ‘twelve islands’ (Lewis 1988: 26)

Nouns with the plural suffix can follow cardinal numerals: Lewis (1988: 26) says that this “shows that the persons or things in question form a particularly well-known and distinct entity: ... *on iki adalar* ‘the Dodecanese’”.

Kornfilt (1997: 211) states that “Other quantifiers [i.e. other than cardinal numerals] ... do not show uniform behavior with respect to syntactic and morphological properties (e.g. triggering plural marking on the head noun they modify ...)”.

According to Lewis (1988: 74) *bazı* and *kimi* ‘some’ only take plural in the meaning ‘several’, for example *bazı/kimi adamlar* ‘some men’; compare *bazı/kimi adam* ‘some man’. He says (1988: 75) that *birtakım* ‘some, a number of’ “always qualifies plural nouns” and gives the example *birtakım köylüler* ‘a number of villagers’. Göksel & Kerslake (2005: 165) say that these quantifiers, as well as *bir kısım* ‘some’, “normally” require the plural affix on the noun phrases in which they are found.⁵

Birkaç ‘a few, several’ requires nouns in the singular, for example *birkaç gün* ‘several days’ (Lewis 1988: 76). The same is true of *kaç* ‘how many’, for example *kaç vilâyet?* ‘how many provinces?’ (Lewis 1988: 74). Göksel & Kerslake (2005: 166) cite these and several other quantifiers which behave the same way in this respect, including *fazla* ‘too many’, *az* ‘not many’, *bir miktar* ‘some’, *her* ‘every’, and *çok* ‘a lot of, many’. However, according to Lewis (1988: 75) *çok* can take singular or plural nouns when it has the meaning ‘many’, for example *çok kişi* ‘many persons’, *çok yerler* ‘many places’ (Lewis 1988: 75). Two native speakers whom I consulted found *Çok yerler gördüm* ‘I saw many places’ to be grammatical. A third speaker stated that *cok yer gördüm* “is grammatical [sic] correct but in spoken language you can say *Çok yerler gördüm*”. On the other hand another native speaker said, “I prefer to say *Çok yer gezmek* (or ‘*görmek*’) *istiyorum*” (‘I want to visit (see) many places’).

⁴ Singular forms occur in more situations in Turkic languages than in English: as Johanson (1998: 51) says, “The singular has a broad, partly number-indifferent range of use, which also includes collective or generic reference, e.g. Turkish *Elma aldım* ‘I bought apples.’” Concerning Turkish Csató & Johanson (1998: 209) state, “Forms not marked for plurality are ambiguous between singular and generic readings unless the context excludes one of the two interpretations.”

⁵ Göksel & Kerslake (2005: 165) say that “there are some fixed expressions in which singular nouns do occur with these determiners [*kimi, bazı, bir kısım, and birtakım*], e.g. *kimi/bazı zaman* ‘sometimes’, *bazı kimse* ‘some people’”. Deny (1921: 222) states that “in principle” Ottoman Turkish *ba^czî* (= Modern Turkish *bazı*) is limited to taking plural nouns, but it does occur with singular ones, “notably” in expressions of time; he gives the examples *ba^czî kerre* ‘sometimes’ and *ba^czî g’eğ-e(-ler)* ‘certain nights’.

There is variation in marking with *birçok* ‘a good deal of, many’: according to Lewis (1988: 75) it “is followed by a noun in singular or plural; pedants say singular only”.⁶ Göksel & Kerslake (2005: 166) say that it “sometimes occurs with a plural-marked head noun, although the non-marked form is generally preferred, and is obligatory in the case of *kişi* ‘person’: *birçok kadın(lar)* ‘many women’ *birçok kişi* ‘many people’.

In his grammar of Ottoman Turkish, Deny (1921: 740-1) gives an explanation for at least some such variation in marking, speaking of “a plural of amplification”, by which I assume he means emphasis; earlier (p. 152) he brings up this “plural of exaggeration or of amplification”. That is, in circumstances when a singular noun would normally occur, a plural noun can be used for emphasis. The examples that he gives are *bir çok kimse-ler* ‘a lot of people’ and *kaç k’erre-ler* ‘how many times!’ (1921: 741).

The basic facts about plural marking with some of the above-mentioned quantifiers when a plural meaning is involved are given in (3):

(3)	<u>usual singular-plural marking requirements of some quantifiers</u>	
	<i>bazı, kimi</i> ‘some’	plural
	<i>birtakım</i> ‘some, a number of’	plural
	<i>bir kısım</i> ‘some’	plural
	<i>birkaç</i> ‘a few, several’	singular
	<i>kaç</i> ‘how many’	singular
	<i>çok</i> ‘a lot of, many’	singular or plural
	<i>birçok</i> ‘a good deal of, many’	singular or plural

Of course it may be with those quantifiers which can take either singular or plural particular contexts favour or demand one of these forms.

It would appear that certain quantifiers require plural nouns because otherwise they would have a different (non-plural) meaning. For example, *bazı* requires nouns with plural marking if it is to mean ‘some = several’; if it occurs with singular marking it is interpreted as ‘some = a certain’. (The English word *some* is similarly ambiguous between a singular and plural type meaning, while other words such as *several* has only a plural type meaning.) In other words, in such contexts the plural meaning is not recoverable or redundant in the absence of plural marking, and thus such marking is required. *Birtakım* only takes plural nouns, perhaps for a similar reason: the sequence of words *bir takım* with singular nouns means ‘a set’, for example *bir takım kitap* ‘a set of books’ (Lewis 1988: 75), thus the presence of plural marking clearly indicates that the meaning ‘some, a number of’ is involved. Such factors (as well as the general avoidance of redundant marking) thus seem to play a major role in limits on variation in plural marking.

⁶ Kornfilt (1997: 544) says in response to this statement, “If so, I am willing to shoulder the charge of being a pedant.” A native speaker gave *Birçok yerler gördüm* ‘I saw many places’ a rating of ?. Another native speaker stated that this sentence occurred but “it’s not grammatically correct” and that “people often say so [= say it] but if it’s [in] an essay it’s not nice”.

3. Case marking

Turning now to case, we find that there is also optionality in some situations. This appears to be true with accusative marking of direct objects, because many direct objects do not bear such marking, but in fact this might be a misleading statement of the situation: in Turkish only definite (or rather, specific; Enç 1991) direct objects receive accusative case marking; if they are definite, this marking is not optional.⁷

A situation where there is clearly optionality is with objects of some (and only some) postpositions. Different postpositions assign different cases in Turkish (as in Latin and German). The dative and ablative assigned by some postpositions must be marked, as shown in (4)-(6):

- (4a) *Mert-e göre*
Mert-DAT according.to
'according to Mert'
- (4b) **Mert göre* (Kabak 2006: 38)
- (5a) *İzmir-e doğru*
Izmir- DAT towards
'towards Izmir'
- (5b) **İzmir doğru* (Kabak 2006: 38)
- (6a) *yağmur-dan önce*
rain-ABL before
'before the rain'
- (6b) **yağmur önce* (Kabak 2006: 38)⁸

However, the genitive suffix that appears on some types of objects of some postpositions is optional, at least sometimes, as we see in (7):

- (7) *siz(-in) gibi*
you.PL(-GEN) like
'like you(PL)' (Kabak 2006: 38)

(One should note that the nominative is not marked by an overt affix; thus on the surface one cannot distinguish the omission of a case from a genitive-nominative alternation.) The conditions under which the genitive is left out in such situations are complex. As far as I know, the only time in which a case ending can be omitted from a NP which is a postpositional object is when there is already a case alternation involving the nominative (or the lack of overt case marking). One

⁷ This is a simplified description of the situation. For a more detailed account, see von Heusinger & Kornfilt (2005).

⁸ *Sonra* 'after', which as a postposition takes the ablative (e.g. *toplantı-dan sonra* 'after the meeting' (Lewis 1988: 89)) does not have to be viewed as an exception to this when it occurs in contexts such as *üç gün sonra* 'three days later' (Lewis 1988: 89), since in such phrases it is an adverb and one could see *üç gün* as modifying it rather than being its object.

optional in certain situations, then its omissibility can be seen as linked to its lack of semantic content in those situations – we could say more generally that syntactic cases (or rather cases being used for a syntactic function) have the potential (not always realized) to be omitted, while semantic cases (or cases in a semantic use) do not.

Subject markers would also appear to be syntactic in nature and thus lack semantic content. Since, as noted, the Turkish nominative marker is a null affix, we cannot test it for omissibility. However, the subjects of Turkish participial constructions which are equivalent to relative clauses and indirect statements in a language such as English can be in the genitive, or in the nominative if they are adjacent to the participle; that is, this is another context in which genitive marking could be seen as omissible. An example is given in (9).

(9a) [*Yol-dan bir araba geç-tiğ-in*]-i gör-dü-m.
road-ABL a car pass-FNOM-3SG-ACC see-PAST-1SG
'I saw that a car [non-specific, non-referential] went by on the road.'

(9b) [*Yol-dan bir araba-nun geç-tiğ-in*]-i gör-dü-m.
road-ABL a car-GEN pass-FNOM-3SG-ACC see-PAST-1SG
'I saw that a car [indefinite, but specific] went by on the road.' (von Heusingen & Kornfilt 2005: 15)

However, as can be seen from the translation, specificity is involved, so, as with the accusative, one might rather state that the genitive is not optional in this construction, but required if a specific meaning is to be expressed.

4. Possession marking

Turkish indicates possessors by means of affixes on the possessum, although it also uses genitive forms of pronouns and nouns for this purpose. One might have the intuition that such affixes have semantic content, as they add to the truth conditions of a proposition asserted by a sentence in which they occur. Note that the semantic content that I mean here is not only the fact of possession, but also the person of the possessor, for example 'my book' as opposed to 'your book'. If there is a connection between the lack of semantic content and omissibility, we would expect them not to be able to be left out (when their meaning is intended), and as far as I know, this is the case, unless that meaning is indicated elsewhere. If it is, then possessive marking is at least sometimes optional: Underhill (1976: 96) says, "In colloquial speech, it is possible to omit the possessive suffix if there is a noun in the genitive present. For example, the title of the popular book *Bizim Köy* 'Our Village' ought to be (*Bizim Köyümüz* [we-GEN village-1PL] according to our rules."¹¹

¹¹ As shown by his example he clearly should have said "if there is a pronoun or noun in the genitive". Shortly after this he states, "Students should remember that when a native Turk omits the possessive suffix, it is assumed that he is speaking colloquially; but when a foreigner omits the suffix, it is assumed that he is making a mistake."

5. Izafet marking

Underhill says, “The possessive is also frequently omitted from place names, when the place name is used as a unit and its grammatical structure has been forgotten: *Çengelköy* ‘Village of the Hook’ (we should [expect] *Çengelköyü*) *Ankara Sokak* ‘Ankara Street’ (we should expect *Ankara Sokağı*)” (1976: 96). This statement is basically correct, but it is too narrow and I would use different terminology. The *-ü* and *-ı* in the “expected” *Çengelköyü* and *Ankara Sokağı* (the different forms being due to vowel harmony) are at least homophonous with the 3rd person singular possession marker, and can be seen as the same marker, but it is not exactly a possession marker; it is the izafet marker, which marks a relation between two nominals (or nominal projections). It is thus similar to the genitive marker, but one difference is that the genitive suffix is dependent marking while the izafet marker is head marking (using the terms of Nichols (1986)). Lewis (1988), following others, distinguishes between definite izafet, which is basically a construction in which the possessed marking goes on a noun to show that it is possessed (in a broad sense) by someone/thing else, and the latter is marked genitive, and the indefinite izafet, which is similar, but in which there is no genitive marking on the modifying noun (one might compare the English *Newcastle’s university* with *Newcastle University*). Lewis (1988: 42) states:

The indefinite izafet is used when the relationship between the two elements is merely qualificatory and not so intimate or possessive as that indicated by the definite izafet. ... As a working rule, an indefinite izafet group can be turned into intelligible (though not necessarily normal) English by the use of a hyphen: *Ankara şehir-i* ‘Ankara-city’; *seçim kurul-u* ‘election committee’; *Türkiye Cumhuriyet-i* ‘the Turkey Republic’.

As Underhill indicates, this indefinite izafet marker can be omitted, but it is not only with place names where this occurs, and the conditions when it can be omitted are rather complex. I have examined many occurrences of Turkish street names consisting of two nouns (often on street signs) and have not come up with a definitive set of rules for when they can occur without the izafet suffix on the second noun. However, I have made some observations, for example, although with street names in a narrow sense the marker is often left out, I have never seen it omitted with names of avenues, that is, the form is always as in (10):

- (10) *Atatürk Cadde-si*
 Atatürk avenue-3SG
 ‘Atatürk Avenue’ (an avenue in several cities in Turkey)

Possible explanations (perhaps neither of which is original to me) include that avenues are larger and more important than streets, and so less likely to have a suffix omitted, and that the addition of the izafet suffix to *cadde* is a simpler process than it is to *sokak*: in the former case the suffix is just attached, while in the latter there is also a change to the root – *sokak* becomes *sokağ-*. However, even if we only look at *sokak* ‘street’ there is variation which is complex. The only city in which I have seen the ending consistently on it in street signs is Ankara; in Istanbul and

other cities *sokak* without the ending is common. Perhaps this is because Ankara is the capital and hence a sort of showpiece for the country.

As I have said, this does not only happen with place names. For example one can easily find variation such as the following:

(11a) *mantar çorba*
 mushroom soup
 ‘mushroom soup’
 (<http://turkish-media.com/yemektarifleri/print.php?id=3522>, 8 Jan 2009)

(11b) *mantar çorba-sı*
 (<http://www.yemek-tarifleri.gen.tr/lezzet/corbalar/mantar-corbasi.php>,
 8 Jan 2009)

Again the factors involved in the possibility of omission may be difficult to determine; it has been suggested to me that it has to do with whether the food in question is a native Turkish one.

In any case the general point is that the *izafet* marker (whether or not we see it as the same marker as the 3rd person singular possession marker) can be left out under some circumstances. This affix is arguably a syntactic marker, and has no semantic content.

6. Conclusion

On the basis of the data presented, we might conclude that a requirement for being omissible is not having semantic content; that is, affixes with semantic content must be overtly present (unless their content is already indicated elsewhere, as with the plural with quantifiers). This does not mean that all affixes without semantic content can be left out (since, for example, the accusative cannot be omitted when it marks definite/specific direct objects), but the possession of semantic content prevents an affix from being omissible. This should not be a surprise – it is what one would expect, but that does not mean that it is necessarily the case.

Although I know of no clear instances of inflectional markers with non-recoverable semantic content being deleted in Turkish, we should look at other languages to see whether it can happen in them. For example, are there any languages in which the ablative, which (to me at least) clearly has semantic content in its canonical use, is optional? If so, my claim would be falsified, if I am asserting a cross-linguistic principle. As we have seen, there are other factors which play a role in whether an inflectional affix can be omitted, but the lack of semantic content is a necessary condition for the deletion of non-redundant inflectional marking.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations have been used in the glosses in this paper: 1 First person; 3 Third person; ABL Ablative; ACC Accusative; DAT Dative; FNOM Factive nominal; GEN Genitive; LOC Locative; PAST Past tense; PL Plural; SG Singular.

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