

The Place of Turkish among The World Languages

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the genetic and typological classifications of the world languages and states the place of the Turkish language in these classifications. In genetic classification Altay, Ural-Altay, Nostratic and Eurasiatic theories are considered and the relationship between the Turkish and other languages are analyzed. In typological classification “word building” and “word order” criteria are considered in relation to Turkish language. In the end, some categorical, syntactic, morphological and phonetic characteristics of Turkish are mentioned and these characteristics are compared with other world languages.

Key words: Turkish, World Languages, Nostratic, Eurasiatic, Classification

Türkçenin Dünya Dilleri Arasındaki Yeri

Özet: Bu çalışmada dünya dillerinin genetik ve tipolojik sınıflandırmaları ele alınmış, bu sınıflandırmalar içinde Türkçenin yeri gösterilmiştir. Genetik sınıflandırmalarda Altay, Ural-Altay, Nostratik ve Avrasyatik teorileri üzerinde durulmuş; bu teorilerde Türkçenin yeri belirtilmiştir. Tipolojik sınıflandırmalarda “kelime yapımı” ve “kelime sırası” ölçütlerine göre yapılan sınıflandırmalar ve bu sınıflandırmalar içinde Türkçenin yeri ortaya konmuştur. Çalışmanın sonunda Türkçenin kategorik, sentaktik, morfolojik ve fonetik bazı özellikleri maddeler hâlinde belirtilerek Türkçenin bu açılardan diğer dünya dilleriyle olan benzerlik veya farklılıkları gösterilmeye çalışılmıştır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Türkçe, Dünya Dilleri, Nostratik, Avrasyatik, Sınıflandırma

The term “Turkish” has two meanings in Turkey: the narrow meaning and the wide one.

The narrow meaning points out the language that is used in Turkey, and in the remains of the former Ottoman Empire, such as Turkish Republic of Cyprus,

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Balkan Peninsula, Iraq, Syria, etc. The language of immigrant Turks from this region to Europe, America and Australia is also included in this narrow meaning. This meaning denotes a population more than 70 million.

The wide meaning points out the language of all Turkic peoples. Thus, we use the term Turkish for Azeri, Turkmen, Uzbek, Uygur, Kirgiz, Kazakh, Tatar, Bashkir languages. In fact, the English term “Turkish” had the same meaning before the invention of the term “Turkic”. This wide meaning denotes a population close to 200 million people.

In this paper, I used the term Turkish with its wide meaning.

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There are two main classifications of the world languages: 1. Genetic 2. Typological

According to genetic classification, Turkish belongs to Altay languages. These languages also include Mongolian and Manchu-Tungus languages. Some Altaists include Korean and Japanese to this language family. Altaists think that all these languages have a common ancestor. Among this family, the closest language to Turkish is Mongolian. However, some of the Turcologists don't believe the common ancestor between Altay languages and they explain the similarities by mutual affection.

Some of the comparative linguists placed Turkish into the Ural-Altay language family in the 19th century. This family mainly composed of an Ural branch and an Altay branch. According to this theory, Turkish was a far relative to Ural languages such as Hungarian and Finnish.

During the second half of the 20th century two more theories placed Turkish even in larger language families. The first theory, Nostratic theory, developed in Moscow in the beginning of 1960s. According to this theory which was formulated by Vladimir Illich-Svitich there are 6 language families which are related to each other genetically and they comprise one macro-family. These language families are: 1. Hamito-Semitic, 2. Kartvelian, 3. Indo-European, 4. Ural, 5. Dravidian, 6. Altay (Illich-Svitich 1971). Another advocate of the Nostratic theory is Aharon Dolgopolsky and he includes Eskimo-Aleut family instead of Dravidian family (Greenberg 2000: 8). According to this theory, Turkish belongs to Nostratic macro-family and Altay family. This means that it is close relative with Altaic languages such as Mongolian and Tungusic languages, and it is far relative with other languages such as Arabic, Georgian, English, Finnish, Tamil or Eskimo. In this theory, Korean is considered inside the Altaic family whereas Japanese considered outside of it.

Another macro-family theory is formulated by Joseph H. Greenberg in the USA during 1960s. However, his Works were published in 2000 and 2002.

He formulated a Eurasiatic macro-family which comprises from 8 language families which are relatives of each other: 1. Etruscan, 2. Indo-European, 3. Ural-Yukaghir, 4. Altay, 5. Korean-Japanese-Ainu, 6. Gilyak, 7. Chukchi-Kamchatka, 8. Eskimo-Aleut (Greenberg 2002: 193-195). According to this theory Turkish belongs to Altay family which is under the Eurasiatic macro-family. It is obvious that Greenberg considered Japanese and Korean as a distinct language family from Altay family.

The main difference between these resembling two theories is the difference in Hamito-Semitic, Dravidian and Kartvelian families. These families are considered as the members of the Nostratic macro-family. On the other hand, Eurasiatic macro-family contains Japanese-Ainu, Gilyak and Chukchi-Kamchatka families which are not included in the Nostratic theory.

Illich-Svitich, the founder of the Nostratic theory, compared 378 words from these six language families and claimed a common origin for them.

Greenberg published his Lexicon in 2002 and compared 437 words.

Nostratic theory gained some defenders in the US after 1990s. Allan R. Bomhard and John C. Kerns published their work named *The Nostratic Macrofamily* in 1994, and they compared 601 words. They also included the Sumerian into the Nostratic macro-family.

The reason of flourishing the macro-family theories in the US after 1990s is the developments in genetics. According to these developments, all humanity can be considered as the descendants of one common ancestor. Merritt Ruhlen, student of Greenberg and John D. Bengston published a large paper named *Global Etymologies*. They found 27 common words in various languages which are belong to different language families. For example they formulated an ancient word **tik* which has a general meaning that contains the sub-meanings such as “finger, hand, one, five, ten”. They found examples from 167 languages which have a word similar in sound and meaning. These 167 languages include Native American, African, Semitic, Altay etc. languages. For example:

Language	Word	Meaning
Turkish	<i>Tek</i>	One, alone
Latin	<i>Dig</i>	Finger
Ancient Korean	<i>Ték</i>	Ten
Japanese	<i>Te</i>	Hand
Aynu	<i>Tek</i>	Hand
Ancient Chinese	<i>T'iek</i>	One, alone
Tonga language (under the Bantu family)	<i>Tiho</i>	Finger
Manguean language (a native American language)	<i>Tike</i>	One

Source: Ruhlen 1994: 322-323.

Nowadays a plenty of linguists are against to the macro-family theories. On the other hand, these theories can find more defenders when there are more developments in genetics and comparative linguistics.

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Another classification depends on the typology. There are some of criteria in this classification. The most common one is the criteria of the word-building. According to this criteria world languages are classified under three different types: 1. Isolating / analytic languages, 2. Agglutinating languages, 3. Inflectional / fusional languages.

There are no endings in isolating / analytic languages and the words can not be conjugated. There is a tone system which has been fully developed. Tones in the words have the characteristic of differentiating the meaning. New words can also be formulated by combining different words. Chinese, Tibetan, Burmese, Thai and Vietnamese belong to isolating / analytic languages.

The main characteristic of inflectional / fusional languages is the ablaut system. This can be explained as internal change. Words are formulated from the changes in the root vowels. For example, the English word, *sing*, has a change in its vowel sound in *sang* and *sung* forms. In Arabic, *ketebe* means “he wrote”, *kutibe* means “it was written”, *kitâb* means “book” and *kütüb* means “books”. Indo-European and Semitic languages are inflectional / fusional languages.

In agglutinating languages, words are formulated by adding the morphemes with each other. The relations between the words also depend on endings. There is no ablaut. For example, one can not formulate a word by changing the vowel in *kış* (winter). *Kış* (winter) and *kuş* (bird) are completely different words. The root vowel can be used as a grammatical element in inflectional / fusional languages while this is impossible in the agglutinating languages. Altaic languages are agglutinating languages, including Turkish. Other agglutinating languages are:

Ural languages, Kartvelian languages, Northwestern Caucasian languages, Northeastern Caucasian languages, Dravidian languages, Eskimo-Aleut languages, Chukchi-Kamchatka languages, Austronesian languages, Bantu languages, Athabaskan languages, Sioux languages and Maya languages.

Some more:

Bask, Swahili, Cheyenne, Cherokee, Zulu.

From ancient languages:

Sumerian, Elamite, Hattian, Hurrian and Urartian languages.

Agglutinating or inflectional / fusional characteristics don't denote a kinship between languages. There are a lot of languages which are unrelated with each other and are classified as agglutinating languages. Also inflectional /

fusional languages include both Indo-European and Semitic languages. Yet, we should note that the languages which belong to the same family have the same characteristics.

Another criterion in typological classification is the word order. There are six different types of languages according to their word order:

SVO	VOS
SOV	OVS
VSO	OSV
(S: Subject, V: Verb, O: Object)	

In fact, there cannot be more than six possibilities mathematically.

Most of the world languages have the SVO word order: Arabic, English, Italian, Spanish, Swahili, Thai, Vietnamese, etc.

Turkish is a SOV language. Other Altay languages have the same order, too. Ancient Chinese also has this order. Indian, Persian, Armenian and some other Indo-European languages, as well as some ancient languages such as Sumerian, Hittite and Elam have the same word order.

There are fewer languages in other types. Welsh, Hawaiian and Maori languages are VSO; Austronesian languages are VOS; Hixkaryana language in Amazon is OVS; Apurina in the same region is OSV language.

One more criterion in typological classification is the order in the adjective and noun compounds. In these compounds the main element is placed at the end in Turkish, and the secondary element is in the beginning. On the contrary, the secondary element is at the end in the Indo-European and Semitic languages.

I can mention some other typological characteristics of Turkish which are different from other languages, so that it would be easier to understand the place of Turkish among the world languages:

1. Turkish is a post-positional language. Relations between the words are made by the word endings or post-positional words. On the other hand, Indo-European and Semitic languages are pre-positional languages.

2. Turkish doesn't have the secondary clause – main clause system that is formulated by conjunctives such as *ki* in Persian, *that* and *which* in English, *que* and *que* in French, and *ellezî* in Arabic languages. Turkish has participles and gerunds instead of this system.

3. There is not an article in Turkish in contrast to Semitic languages and most of the Indo-European languages. In Turkish nouns don't denote one thing, but they denote a genre. It is formed by accusative in the objects. In other cases

it can be understood only from the context.

4. Turkish doesn't have the grammatical gender whereas some Indo-European languages and Arabic have this characteristic.

5. Turkish, as most of the world languages, has the singular and plural forms. It doesn't have the dual form whereas Arabic has it.

6. Most of the languages can use the same word as the root of noun and verb. In Turkish noun and verb roots are different words. The ones which are seen as the same word either are not the roots or are formed later.

7. The question which has the answer of yes or no is formed by the ending *-mi* in Turkish. It is formed by changing the word order in some of Indo-European languages and by prefix in Arabic.

8. Like most of the languages Turkish has decimal number system. The number system is based on twenty in some of the Caucasian languages and Bask language. The most important characteristic that differentiate Turkish from other languages is that the numbers such as *yirmi*, *otuz*, *kırk*, *elli* (twenty, thirty, forty, fifty) are not related with the numbers such as *iki*, *üç*, *dört*, *beş* (one, two, three, four, five). Comparison with other languages:

Turkish	<i>iki-yirmi</i>	2-20
	<i>üç-otuz</i>	3-30
	<i>dört-kırk</i>	4-40
	<i>beş-elli</i>	5-50
English	<i>two-twenty</i>	2-20
	<i>three-thirty</i>	3-30
	<i>four-forty</i>	4-40
	<i>five-fifty</i>	5-50
Russian	<i>dva-dvadtsat</i>	2-20
	<i>tri-tridtsat</i>	3-30
	<i>çitiri-sorok</i>	4-40
	<i>pyat 'pyat 'desyat</i>	5-50
Arabic	<i>isneyn- 'aşrûn</i>	2-20
	<i>selâse-selâsûn</i>	3-30
	<i>erba 'a-erba 'ûn</i>	4-40
	<i>xamse-xamsûn</i>	5-50
Mongol	<i>hoyar-horin</i>	2-20
	<i>gurban-guçin</i>	3-30
	<i>dörben-döçin</i>	4-40
	<i>tabun-tabin</i>	5-50

As it is seen from the table although there are some exceptions, all pairs

in other languages come from the same root. On the contrary, Turkish *kırk* has no relation with Turkish *dört*, etc.

Now, let me give some phonetic characteristics:

1. Turkish has the vowel harmony. Other Altay Languages and Ural languages also have this characteristic, but Semitic and Indo-European languages don't have it.

2. Turkish usually has more vowels than other languages: Generally eight and even nine in some dialects. For example Arabic has only three vowels.

3. Vowels *o* and *ö* can be only found in the first syllable although there are some exceptions such as the Kirgiz and Altay dialects. Other vowels can be found in every syllable.

4. Turkish has labial, labiodental, alveolar, palatal and velar consonants. It doesn't have click consonants (in Hoysan languages, Southern Africa), retroflex consonants (in Dravidian languages), uvular consonants (such as *r* in French), pharyngeal and glottal consonants (both in Arabic).

5. There are many consonants that cannot be found in the beginning: *c*, *f*, *ğ*, *h*, *l*, *m*, *n*, *r*, *v*, *z*. There are some consonants that cannot be found in the ending both in Turkey and in some other dialects: *b*, *c*, *d*, *g*.

6. There is no cluster in Turkish. Syllables cannot begin or end with two or more consonants. Indo-European and Semitic languages have cluster. For example: *kral*, *klasik*, *stress* and *sfenks* in Indo-European languages; *ilm*, *vecd* and *fkr* in Arabic.

7. Syllables cannot end with a consonant in some languages such as Chinese, Japanese and some Native American languages. Turkish as well as most of the world languages has both open and close syllables.

8. Consonants in a word form a syllable with a vowel which comes afterwards. For example the word *a-ra-da-ki* (intermediate) cannot be separated as *ar-ad-ak-i*.

There are also some other characteristics. Those I mentioned above are the most important and distinct ones. These characteristics haven't been changed since the 8th century when the first known texts in Turkish had been written.

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