



A COMPREHENSIVE GRAMMAR OF TURKISH

VOLUME 1

Dr. Hikmet ŞAHİNER

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Hikmet ŞAHİNER

<https://www.hikmetsahiner.com>

Born in Ankara, Dr. Hikmet ŞAHİNER graduated as valedictorian (with a score of 94/100) from the Faculty of Languages, History, and Geography at Ankara University in 1993. Between 1991 and 1993, he worked as an English translator and interpreter for various companies and organizations in Ankara.

He received his Master's degree from The University of Texas at Austin in 1997. He earned his PhD from The Johns Hopkins University in 2002.

Since 2004, Dr. Hikmet Şahiner has been developing English exam questions, course books, and related materials and offering Online ESL Courses.

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PREFACE

Title: Your Journey into the Heart of Turkish

Welcome, aspiring speaker, dedicated student, and curious traveler, to *A Comprehensive Grammar of Turkish*. If you are holding this book, you have likely already been captivated by the unique beauty of the Turkish language—its rhythmic vowel harmony, its puzzle-like agglutinative nature, and its profound capacity for expression. You have also likely realized that to truly master this language, a superficial glance is not enough. You need a map, a guide, and a trusted companion. This two-volume work was written to be that companion.

For too long, learners of Turkish have had to piece together their understanding from scattered resources, academic papers not intended for students, and coursebooks that often raise more questions than they answer. Why does one suffix change its vowels? When do you use the *-dik* form versus the *-miş* form? How do you chain nouns together to say "the color of the corner of my mother's car key"?

A Comprehensive Grammar of Turkish demystifies the language by providing everything you need in one place. We designed this work with a single mission: to be the clearest, most detailed, and most reliable resource for any foreigner learning Turkish, from the tentative beginner to the advanced student seeking fluency.

How is this grammar different?

A Logical Path to Mastery: We don't just list rules; we guide you. Volume 1: The Fundamentals builds your foundation, starting with the very sounds of Turkish and moving methodically through nouns, adjectives, and the intricate verb system. By the end of this volume, you will have a rock-solid command of the core mechanics of the language. Volume 2: Advanced Structures and Usage takes you to the next level, showing you how to build complex, nuanced sentences using verbal nouns, participles, and conjunctions, empowering you to express yourself with sophistication and precision.

Clarity Above All: Complex concepts are broken down into simple, digestible steps. Every rule is explained in plain English and immediately illustrated with numerous real-world examples. We have avoided overly academic jargon wherever possible, but for accuracy, we provide both the English and Turkish grammatical terms (e.g., "Accusative Case" and "*Belirtme Hâli*"), preparing you to use other Turkish-language resources with confidence.

Comprehensive and Complete: From the subtle rules of consonant softening to the complex architecture of compound sentences, no stone is left unturned. This is not just a grammar book; it is a complete reference work. The appendices contain invaluable charts of every major affix and a thorough guide to Turkish spelling and punctuation.

Learning Turkish is a rewarding journey, and every new grammatical structure you master unlocks a new way of seeing the world. This book is your key. Use it to build your knowledge, to answer your questions, and to return to again and again as you progress.

We are thrilled to accompany you on this adventure.

Başarılar dileriz! (We wish you success!)

PART I

THE SOUNDS AND BUILDING BLOCKS OF TURKISH

UNIT 1. PHONETICS AND PRONUNCIATION (SES BİLGİSİ)**SOUNDS AND LETTERS (Ses ve Harf)**

It is necessary to clearly distinguish between two concepts: sounds and letters. We perceive sounds by hearing, and we read letters.

Sounds appeared first. Later, with the invention of writing, sounds began to be represented in writing in the form of letters. The same language can be written in different ways. An example is the Turkish language, which throughout its history was written with the letters of four alphabets: Old Turkic, Uyghur, Arabic, and Latin.

LETTERS AND THE ALPHABET (Harf ve Alfabe)

The Turkish alphabet, based on the Latin script, consists of 29 letters. Of these, 21 are consonants and 8 are vowels.

The modern Turkish alphabet provides a one-to-one correspondence between letters and sounds: each sound corresponds to a separate letter, and each letter denotes a separate sound. That is why words in the Turkish language are read as they are written and written as they are read.

1.1. THE TURKISH ALPHABET (Türk Alfabeti)

No.	Uppercase	Lowercase	English Approx.	Letter Name
1	A	a	a	Ah
2	B	b	b	Beh
3	C	c	j	Jeh
4	Ç	ç	ch	Cheh
5	D	d	d	Deh
6	E	e	e	Eh
7	F	f	f	Feh
8	G	g	g (hard)	Geh
9	Ğ	ğ	(soft g)	Yumuşak “g”
10	H	h	h	Heh
11	I	ı	uh/i	Ih
12	İ	i	i	Ee
13	J	j	zh	Jeh
14	K	k	k	Keh
15	L	l	l	Leh
16	M	m	m	Meh
17	N	n	n	Neh
18	O	o	o	Oh
19	Ö	ö	(like German ö)	Öh
20	P	p	p	Peh
21	R	r	r	Reh
22	S	s	s	Seh
23	Ş	ş	sh	Sheh
24	T	t	t	Teh
25	U	u	oo	Oo

26	Ü	ü	(like German ü)	Üh
27	V	v	v	Veh
28	Y	y	y	Yeh
29	Z	z	z	Zeh

- ❖ **C - c:** The name of this letter is “Jeh”. It is pronounced like the **j** in **jam**.

cam, cevap, civciv, cımbız, coşku, cuma, cömert, cüzdan; sac, gece etc.

- ❖ **E - e:** The name of this letter is “Eh”. This letter at the beginning of a word is read like the **e** in **egg**, and in the middle and at the end of a word like the **e** in **bed**.

emir, dev, ne, ekmek, sevgi, ders, kemer, elma, ekin, erik etc.

- ❖ **Ğ - ğ:** This letter is called “Yumuşak G” (soft g). In most cases, this letter is not pronounced, but only lengthens the preceding vowel. Sometimes it is pronounced very softly, almost like the letter **Y**. No word in the Turkish language begins with this letter.

ağ, değer, iğne, iğdir, oğul, öğle, uğur, düğme etc.

ATTENTION! Although this letter is practically unpronounced, it is important to pay attention to it. Incorrect reading can lead to mistakes.

dağ (mountain) — **da** (and, also); **ağrı** (pain) — **arı** (bee); **eğlenmek** (to have fun) — **elenmek** (to be eliminated) etc.

- ❖ **Ö - ö:** This letter denotes a sound that is intermediate between the sounds of **o** in **or** and **e** in **urn**. The lips are rounded and pushed forward (slightly narrower than when pronouncing the letter “o”), and the tongue is motionless. This letter never appears at the end of words.

örnek, öpmek, özlem, Ömer, ötmek, övmek, ölmek; göz, göl, börek, bölmek...

- ❖ **Ü - ü:** When pronouncing this sound, the lips are also pushed forward in a tube (even narrower than when pronouncing **ö**); the tongue is also motionless. The main difference between pronouncing the sounds **ö** and **ü** is that when pronouncing **ü**, the lips are pushed further forward and are almost closed. This sound is similar to the German **ü** or the French **u**.

üç, ün, ülke, ümit, üst, üye, üstat; gül, tül, kül, Betül, güven, ütü, üzüm, gürültü...

- ❖ **Y - y:** This letter is called “Yeh”. It is read differently depending on the letters surrounding it. **Y** is a consonant letter. Below are examples of words where it stands next to various vowel letters.

- 1) **...-y (...-y):** bay, bey, tay, rey, ney, çay, köy, toy, duy...
- 2) **Ya... (ya...):** yatak, yan, yalan, yarım, yastık, yarış...
- 3) **Ye... (ye...):** yemek, yem, yelek, yetenek, yer, yeşil...
- 4) **Yı... (yuh...):** yılan, yırtık, yıkık, yıldırım, yıldız, yıkamak...
- 5) **Yi... (yee...):** yine, yirmi, yiyecek, yiğit...
- 6) **Yo... (yo...):** yol, yok, yorgun, yorgan, yoksul, yokuş...
7. **Yö... (yö...):** yön, yöntem, yöre, yönetmen, yörunge...
- 8) **Yu... (yu...):** yurt, yuva, yukarı, yulaf, yumruk, yumurta...
- 9) **Yü... (yü...):** yün, yüzük, yük, yüksek, yürek, yüz...

ATTENTION! In Turkish, each of the letters “**g**”, “**k**”, and “**l**” corresponds to two sounds: a soft (palatal) and a hard (velar) one. However, they are not distinguished in writing.

1.2. THE CIRCUMFLEX ACCENT (SIGN OF LENGTHENING AND PALATALIZATION) (Düzeltilme İşareti)

- ❖ This diacritic was used in words of non-Turkish origin. It used to indicate either the lengthening of the vowel it was placed over, or the palatalization (softening) of the preceding consonant. Only three consonants are palatalized: **g**, **k**, and **l**. In other cases, the circumflex over the letters **a**, **i**, and **u** indicates vowel length. This diacritic, unfortunately, is used no more, and learners are encouraged to memorize the correct pronunciation of the words where this sign occurs.

A. PALATALIZATION OF THE PRECEDING CONSONANT

- ❖ In some borrowed words, the letters **g**, **k**, **l** are read softly. To indicate this in writing, a diacritical mark “**^**” is placed over the letters “**a**” and “**u**” that follow these consonants: “**â**”, “**û**”. This allows for the correct reading of words with such letter combinations and for distinguishing by meaning words with similar spellings (**kar** — snow, **kâr** — profit).

- 1) **-gâ** → dergâh, ordugâh, tezgâh, yadigâr, rüzgâr, yegâne...
- 2) **-kâ** → bekâr, dükkân, hikâye, kâğıt, kâr, kâtip, mekân...
- 3) **-kû** → mahkûm, sükûn, sükût...

4) **-lâ** → ahlâk, evlât, felâket, hâlâ, hilâl, ilâç, ilân, ilâve, iflâs, ihtilâl, istiklâl, kelâm, lâkin, lâle, lâzım, mahlâs, selâm, sülâle, telâş, villâ, vilâyet...

5) **-lû** → billûr, üslûp...

❖ Here are a few examples of words borrowed from Western languages.

Plâj, plân, plâk, klâsik, lâhana, lâik (“a” is read short), **lâmba, Lâtin, melânkoli, reklâm**...

❖ In onomatopoeic words, this diacritic is also used to soften the preceding consonant.

Lâklâk, lâpa lâpa, lâp lâp, lâkırdı, lâppadak...

B. VOWEL LENGTH

❖ There are no long vowels in native Turkish words. However, to indicate vowel length in words borrowed into Turkish from Arabic and Persian, the circumflex accent (^) is used. This accent, unfortunately, is used no more, and learners are encouraged to memorize the correct pronunciation of the words where it occurs.

❖ Vowel length is indicated in three cases:

❖ **First:** Primarily, the circumflex accent is used to distinguish between native Turkish words and loanwords that are spelled identically. Omitting this accent can lead to a misunderstanding of the text.

With Circumflex (Loanword)	Meaning	Without Circumflex (Turkish)	Meaning
âdet	custom, habit	adet	number, piece/item
yâr	beloved	yar	cliff, precipice
âlem	world, universe	alem	flag
şûra	council	şura	this place
hâlâ	still	hala	aunt, father's sister

ama (but, however) — **âmâ** (blind)

kar (snow) — **kâr** (profit)

aşık (knucklebones) — **âşık** (in love, a lover)

dahi (even) — **dâhi** (genius)

ala (hazel) — **âlâ** (excellent)

nar (pomegranate) — **nâr** (fire)
tabi (natural; of course) — **tâbi** (dependent)
vakıf (foundation) — **vâkıf** (aware of, knowledgeable)

- ❖ **Second:** The second case involves the circumflex over the final vowel **i**, which is a suffix in Arabic that forms adjectives from nouns. In Turkish, the same final **i** can be the 3rd person singular possessive suffix or the accusative case suffix. To avoid confusion, the "i" inherited from Arabic is marked with a circumflex.

askerî (military) — **askeri** (his soldier, the soldier [acc.])
bedenî (physical) — **bedeni** (his/her body, the body [acc.])

edebî — **edebi**
ilmî — **ilmi**
kalbî — **kalbi**
tarihî — **tarihi**
zihnî — **zihni...**

- ❖ If the accent is omitted in such words, it can lead to misunderstanding.

askerî elbise (military uniform) — **Türk askeri** (Turkish soldier)
ilmî konular (scientific topics) — **Ahmet'in ilmi** (Ahmet's knowledge)
tarihî eserler (historical works) — **Türk tarihi** (Turkish history)

- ❖ In cases where the Arabic **i** is pronounced short, the accent is not used because there is no risk of confusing it with an inflectional suffix.

çini, tiryaki, zenci, Kutsi, Necmi...

- ❖ **Third:** The third case for using the circumflex involves words borrowed from Arabic and Persian that begin with the syllable **bî**. In Persian, the prefix **bî-** signifies the absence of something (in Turkish, this is marked with a circumflex). In Arabic, the same letter combination is equivalent to the Turkish **ile** ('with'), and in this case, no accent is used.

Persian "**bî**": **bîçare** (helpless), **bîvefa** (unfaithful), **bîtaraf** (neutral)...

Arabic "**bi**": **bihakkın** (rightfully), **bizatihi** (personally), **bilumum** (all)...

CLASSIFICATION OF SOUNDS

First and foremost, all sounds in a language are divided into **vowels** (**ünlü, sesli**) and **consonants** (**ünsüz, sessiz**). For simplicity, we will use the terms **vowels** and **consonants** to refer to the letters that represent these sounds.

Vowels: a, e, ı, i, o, ö, u, ü

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

1.3. VOWELS (SESLİ HARFLER)

- ❖ Vowels are sounds produced with an open mouth, where the airflow from the lungs is not blocked by any part of the mouth. They can be pronounced long or short.
- ❖ There are eight vowels in Turkish: **a, e, ı, i, o, ö, u, ü**

1.3.1. CHARACTERISTICS OF VOWELS

- ❖ Vowels are classified according to the following three features:

Place of articulation and tongue position: distinguishes between **front vowels** (*ince ünlüler*) and **back vowels** (*kalin ünlüler*).

Degree of mouth opening: distinguishes between **open vowels** (*geniş ünlüler*) and **close vowels** (*dar ünlüler*).

Degree of lip rounding: distinguishes between **rounded vowels** (*yuvarlak ünlüler*) and **unrounded vowels** (*düz ünlüler*).

- ❖ When pronouncing back vowels, the tongue is pulled back. For front vowels, it is pushed forward. Unrounded vowels are produced with the lips in a neutral position, while rounded vowels are produced with the lips pursed. Open vowels are pronounced with the mouth wide open, while close vowels are pronounced with the mouth semi-closed.
- ❖ According to this classification, each vowel can be described by three parameters.

Tongue Position	Unrounded	Rounded
	Open	Close
Back	A	ı
Front	E	i

- ❖ Let's look at the characteristics of each vowel:

A: unrounded, open, back

E: unrounded, open, front

ı: unrounded, close, back

i: unrounded, close, front

O: rounded, open, back

Ö: rounded, open, front

U: rounded, close, back

Ü: rounded, close, front

Back Vowels: (tongue is pulled back)

A, I, O, U

Front Vowels: (tongue is pushed forward)

E, İ, Ö, Ü

Unrounded Vowels: (lips are in a neutral position)

A, E, I, İ

Rounded Vowels: (lips are pursed forward)

O, Ö, U, Ü

Open Vowels: (mouth is wide open)

A, E, O, Ö

Close Vowels: (mouth is semi-closed)

I, İ, U, Ü

Long Vowels: long â, long î, long û

- ❖ These vowel features will be important when discussing the rules of vowel harmony and other linguistic phenomena.

Some Rules

- ❖ In native Turkish words, two vowels do not appear consecutively. All words with two consecutive vowels are loanwords.

saat, kanaat, cemaat, aile, kaide, dair, Siirt, fiil...

- ❖ There are also no long vowels in native Turkish words. If a word contains a long vowel, it is a loanword (usually from Arabic or Persian).

şair, numune, iman... (pronounced: şa:ir, numu:ne, i:man)

- ❖ However, many loanwords have gradually lost their vowel length, and currently, all their vowels are pronounced short (even though they were originally long in their source languages).

beyaz, hiç, rahat, esas, hayat, kanun...

- ❖ Sometimes, vowel length reappears when a suffix is added to a word.

esas — esası, hayat — hayatı, kanun — kanunen... (pronounced: esa:sı, haya:tı, kanu:nen)

- ❖ In some such words, however, length does not reappear even with a suffix.

beyaz — beyazı, can — canım...

- ❖ Vowel length is not marked with a circumflex in words that do not have similarly spelled native Turkish words with which they could be confused.

adalet, badem, beraber, şive, şube...

- ❖ When a similar Turkish word exists, the length is marked with a circumflex.

âdet, yâr, âlem, şûra, hâla...

VOWEL HARMONY LAWS

The law of vowel harmony in Turkish is expressed through two principles:

Major (Palatal) Vowel Harmony (büyük ünlü uyumu)

Minor (Labial) Vowel Harmony (küçük ünlü uyumu)

1.3.2. THE LAW OF MAJOR (PALATAL) VOWEL HARMONY (Büyük Ünlü Uyumu)

- ❖ This principle states that front vowels (**e, i, ö, ü**) can only be followed by other front vowels, and back vowels (**a, ı, o, u**) can only be followed by other back vowels. Thus, all vowels in a native Turkish word must be of the same type: either all front or all back.

Words with only front vowels (e, i, ö, ü):

sevmek, ince, denizden, kelebekler, göstermelik...

Words with only back vowels (a, ı, o, u):

satılık, kalın, oyun, uçurtma, aşağı, sorular...

- ❖ However, there are some native Turkish words that do not follow this principle. Originally, they did conform to vowel harmony (the original forms are shown in parentheses), but they have changed over time.

anne (from ana), **elma** (from alma), **kardeş** (from kardaş), **hangi** (from kangı), **inanmak** (though it contains both ı and a, it is an exception), **dahi** (from dakı), **hadi, şişman...**

- ❖ This principle is also often not followed in compound words.

karabiber, başkent, Karadeniz, akciğer, gecekondü, hanımeli...

- ❖ Loanwords and proper nouns do not have to obey major vowel harmony.

kalem, cihan, insan, merhamet, asayiş, afiyet, İstanbul, Erzurum...

- ❖ But some loanwords were altered to conform to this principle.

divar → **duvar**, **kalib** → **kalıp**, **brillante** → **pırlanta**, **suret** → **surat...**

- ❖ Most Turkish suffixes obey major vowel harmony.

tuzlu (tuz + lu), **şekerli** (şeker + li), **tuzsuz** (tuz + suz), **şekersiz** (şeker + siz), **çiçeklik** (çiçek + lik), **ayakkabılık** (ayakkabı + lık)...

- ❖ The following seven suffixes do not change according to major vowel harmony:

-yor (present continuous tense suffix):

bitiyor, gülüyor, istiyor...

-ken (adverbial suffix, 'while'):

koşarken, ağlarken, bakarken...

-leyin (adverbial suffix for time):

sabahleyin, akşamleyin...

-(ı)mtırak (suffix creating adjectives, '-ish'):

yeşilimtırak, ekşimtırak...

-ki (suffix creating adjectives or possessive pronouns):

onunki, yukarıdaki, akşamki...

-daş (suffix creating nouns, 'fellow-'):

gönüldaş, ülküdaş...

-gil (suffix creating family nouns):

halamgil, dayımgil, baklagiller...

- ❖ When adding suffixes to words that violate vowel harmony, the vowel of the new suffix is determined by the last vowel of the word.

annesiymiş (anne + si + y + miş), **kardeşçe** (kardeş + çe), **elmalık** (elma + lık),
veriyordunuz (ver + i + yor + du + nuz)...

- ❖ However, these suffixes don't *always* violate vowel harmony. If the word's vowels match the suffix's vowel, the principle is upheld.

öğleleyin, gelirken, sarımtırak, seninki, arkadaş, eniştemgil...

- ❖ Violation of vowel harmony is also common when adding suffixes to loanwords. This is because such words can end in a "back vowel + soft consonant" combination, which takes a front-vowel suffix, formally breaking the rule.

dikkatli, emsalsiz, harfler, metaller, hali, saatçi, golcü, finaller, süratli, alkollü, kalpler...

1.3.3. LAW OF MINOR (LABIAL) VOWEL HARMONY (Küçük Ünlü Uyumu)

- ❖ This principle governs the sequence of rounded and unrounded vowels.
- ❖ After unrounded vowels (**a, e, ı, i**), only unrounded vowels (**a, e, ı, i**) can follow.
- ❖ After rounded vowels (**o, ö, u, ü**), only close rounded vowels (**u, ü**) or open unrounded vowels (**a, e**) can follow.

a - e - ı - i → a - e - ı - i

kardeş, tazelik, sıcak, yara, sarı, ilgi, vergi, sargı...

o - ö - u - ü → a - e or u - ü

kolay, sürmek, yoklamak, korku, oturmak, yorgunluk, çocuk, yumurta...

Differences

- ❖ The difference between major and minor vowel harmony is as follows:
- ❖ Major vowel harmony requires every vowel in a word to match all other vowels in being either front or back. Minor vowel harmony only requires each vowel to harmonize with the *immediately preceding* vowel.
- ❖ In the word **kolaylık**, the vowel **ı** is preceded by **a**, which is preceded by **o**. The sequence **o → a → ı** does not violate minor vowel harmony (**o→a** is valid, **a→ı** is valid). However, the word as a whole contains both back (**o, a, ı**) and front vowels (none in this case, but a different word could), so this example focuses only on the rounding sequence. The key is that **o** is not followed by **ı** directly. This feature is clear in words where a rounded vowel is followed by an open unrounded one.

ufaklık, uzaklık, olası, önemli, üzerinde...

- ❖ There are also native Turkish words that violate minor vowel harmony.

çamur, yağmur, tavuk, kabuk, kavun, avuç, avurt, kavurmak, savurmak...

- ❖ And there are loanwords that do not follow this principle.

alkol, daktilo, mönü, akordeon, rötar, radyo, tiyatro, otobüs, televizyon...

- ❖ Some loanwords were modified to conform to minor vowel harmony.

müdür → **müdü**r, **mü**mkın → **mü**mkün, **mü**şkil → **mü**şkül...

- ❖ In native Turkish words, the vowels **o** and **ö** can only appear in the first syllable. Words with **o** or **ö** in subsequent syllables are loanwords.

radio, **tiyatro**, **otobüs**, **televizyon**, **horoz**, **alkol**, **konsolos**...

- ❖ The present continuous tense suffix **-yor** violates minor vowel harmony. Regardless of the preceding vowels in the stem, suffixes that follow **-yor** will harmonize with its vowel **o**.

okuyorum, **geliyorsun**, **bilmiyorum**...

- ❖ The vowel preceding the **-yor** suffix must harmonize with it. If the verb stem ends in an open vowel (**a/e**), it narrows to a close vowel before **-yor** (see Vowel Narrowing).

anlamak → anla + yor → (a / ı) → **anlıyor**

beklemek → bekle + yor → (e / i) → **bekliyor**

- ❖ When adding suffixes to words (both native and loanwords) that violate minor vowel harmony, the suffix harmonizes with the last vowel of the stem.

kavun + u, **yağmur** + luk, **çamur** + luk, **mü**zik + çı...

- ❖ Minor vowel harmony is only relevant for words with at least two syllables. It does not apply to single-syllable words or compound words.

Summary of Vowel Harmony Rules

- ❖ If we combine both principles into a single table, we get a list of which vowels can follow which:

If the preceding vowel is:	The next vowel can be:
A	a, ı
E	e, i
İ	ı, a
İ	i, e
O	u, a
Ö	ü, e
U	u, a
Ü	ü, e

RULES FOR SUFFIX ATTACHMENT

ATTENTION! As mentioned earlier, Turkish is an agglutinative language where grammatical meaning is expressed through suffixes added to a word's stem. Therefore, when adding a suffix, it must follow vowel harmony.

- ❖ That is, a word whose last vowel is a back vowel takes a suffix with a back vowel, and a word whose last vowel is a front vowel takes a suffix with a front vowel.
- ❖ There are three types of suffixes in Turkish based on vowel harmony:
- ❖ **Fixed Suffixes:** These suffixes have no phonetic variants and do not change. There are seven of them, which we listed earlier as "Suffixes that violate major vowel harmony" (-yor, -ken, -leyin, -(ı)mtrak, -ki, -daş, -gil).

yürüyor, okurken, akşamleyin, yeşilimtrak, sabahki, dindaş, amcamgil...

- ❖ **Two-Way Harmony Suffixes:** These suffixes have two variants, one with **e** (for front-vowel words) and one with **a** (for back-vowel words).

Negative verb suffix: **-ma, -me**

Locative case suffix: **-da, -de**

Ablative case suffix: **-dan, -den**

Plural suffix: **-lar, -ler...**