

The Incorporation of Foreign Words into Turkish Morphology:
Evidence from Slang

Turkish is a language with on the one hand a productive agglutinative morphology and on the other a long history of contact and borrowing from foreign languages. This paper aims to investigate the intersection of the two, or the ways in which relatively recent foreign borrowings have been incorporated into the morphology. In particular, we will look at three Turkish noun and adjective suffixes and examine at the ways they have been combined with foreign bases, and to what effect,

Before examining at the contemporary examples, it is useful to briefly discuss the two characteristics of Turkish mentioned above. As an agglutinating language, Turkish forms words by adding affixes, primarily suffixes, to a base morpheme. Long words are common in Turkish as each affixational morpheme represents one grammatical meaning and the morphemes can be added in strings one after another. Because it is possible to make nouns and adjectives from other nouns and adjectives, as well as deverbal substantives and denominal verbs using suffixes in this way, it is theoretically entirely possible to take a foreign base and form morphologically Turkish words.

The two primary languages with influence on Turkish have traditionally been Arabic and Persian. At the height of Arabic and Persian influence during the Ottoman period, the Ottoman Turkish language used in government, literature and science borrowed both vocabulary and grammatical structures so extensively that native Turkish morphemes were rare. The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimates that in 1932 only 35-40% of the Ottoman lexicon consisted of native Turkish words. With Atatürk's language reforms of the 1920s-30s, the government of the new republic attempted to purge the language of foreign influence. These measures met with great success, and the Turkish language of today is based on native words and grammatical structures. However, the measures did not stop the influence of other languages on Turkish. Since the early 20th

century, European borrowings have found their way into the language, first French, and increasingly since the 1960s, English.

I have chosen to focus my attention on borrowings appearing in slang usage for a number of practical reasons. First, slang changes rapidly [O'Grady 541], reflecting the current influences on a language. I expected that a relatively recent [1990] slang dictionary could provide a large corpus of foreign borrowings for my study. Secondly, I not only wanted examples of foreign borrowings, but instances where the foreign word was incorporated into Turkish morphology. Of course, I could have done this by finding sentences with the foreign words included. There the borrowings would be marked by affixes indicating their grammatical function. However, investigating slang usage provides a novel, simpler way to obtain the same evidence. Many of the slang terms formed from foreign borrowings appeared in already inflected forms. Although the evidence I have gathered does not indicate all the ways foreign words may be made into hybrid words using Turkish morphology, it does suggest some trends in how this process happens.

The first point worth noting on word formation using foreign bases is that it seems that only a limited number of word-forming suffixes are productive with foreign roots. Lewis lists sixteen suffixes used to derive nouns and adjectives from other nouns and adjectives. [ix] In my research, I found only three commonly used with European bases. [What are they?](#) Although some of the suffixes in Lewis' list are no longer productive even for native Turkish words, this nevertheless indicates a significantly reduced inventory suffixes available for use with foreign words. Furthermore, although verbs formed from a foreign base and an auxiliary verb [such as *etmek* – 'to do', *olmak* – 'to be, become', *gelmek* – 'to come'] are relatively common, only one basic verbal suffix of the ten listed by Lewis [xvi] is commonly used to make denominal verbs not of the compound type. The productivity of Turkish suffixes in word formation using foreign words as roots seems to be restricted to nouns and adjectives. I found none of Lewis' eighteen deverbal substantives [xvi] used with European bases. [That's a striking observation. Any idea why?](#)

Now that we understand the limitations of the applications of Turkish morphology to foreign bases, we can turn to the evidence of the three noun and adjective suffixes *-ci*, *-li*, and *-lik*. My focus here is twofold. First, there is the foundational question of what form of the suffix is added to the base. This includes whether or not the word in its final form obeys the rules of Turkish vowel harmony. Then there are functional questions of the meanings of the resulting words, particularly the registers in which they fall.

The suffix *-ci* is added primarily to the singular of nouns to “denote persons who are professionally or habitually concerned with...the basic word.” [Lewis 56] The denoting of profession is one very common usage in long-attested forms.

iş	work	işçi	workman
süt	milk	sütçü	milkman
diş	tooth	dişçi	dentist

[Lewis 56]

This suffix is also one of the most productive with European borrowings. In slang usage it also can denote profession, but because many of the slang forms deal with illegal or questionable activities, the words often have ironic overtones. For example, *jiletçi* -‘pickpocket’ is formed from the base *jilet* -‘razor blade’ borrowed from Gillette, the brand of men’s razor. The suffix uses the voiceless variant *-ç-* to match the final voiceless consonant of *jilet*, and observes the rules of vowel harmony.¹ This form uses the tool of the trade to identify a ‘profession’, in this case a type of pickpocket who uses a razor to get his victims’ wallets. Similarly, a *telefoncu* is a call-girl or pimp. The same principle applies to the formation of *spamci*, a person who sends spam emails, one of the newest forms I have found. [*Hürriyet*] [? is that the source?](#) Other words for types of criminals made using *-ci* use the place frequented by the individual as the defining characteristic. A *pilajcı* [fr. Italian *spiaggia* ‘beach’] is a thief who works on beaches,² while a *wagoncu* [fr. English *wagon*, [surely not](#)

¹ In the majority of cases the forms observe rules of vowel harmony. Only exceptions will be noted from this point forward.

² The transformation of *spiaggia* to *pilaj* was done according to the preference for alternation [alternation?](#) of consonants and vowels in Turkish. However, in the description the form *plajlarda* -‘on the beaches’ is used, reflecting the tendency to allow consecutive consonants initially in some foreign words [cf. *spor*, *tren*, *fren*].

from English, but from one of the several European languages that use a cognate of this for train-car: cf French “wagon-lit”, train-car for sleeping in beds, etc.] is a thief who works on trains.

The suffix *-li* is used to make nouns or adjectives which denote “possessing the object of quality indicated by the basic word.” [Lewis 57] When the suffix is used with foreign bases, the resulting form can have two meanings, the standard one following Lewis’ description and a second, quite idiomatic and tenuously related to the meaning of the base form. For example, *akortlu* [fr. French *accord*] has a standard meaning of ‘in tune’ and an idiomatic meaning used with the dative /a/ ‘immune (to).’ *Vanilyalı* [fr. Spanish *vanilla*] can mean either ‘full of, or containing vanilla’ or ‘pleasant, good.’

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The suffix *-lik* makes abstract nouns out of nouns or adjectives. Words formed from a foreign base can have meanings in two registers like the examples with *-li* above, but where the literal meaning is also expressed by an older well-attested form, the slang usage is the most common one. For instance, *artistlik* [fr. French *artiste*] could be taken to mean ‘the state of being an artist, artisthood’, but the native Turkish form *sanatçılık* is traditionally used to express this. Therefore, the slang meaning ‘liar, someone who does everything as if putting on an act’ is the primary meaning. In some cases, the abstracting quality of *-lik* can make a specific term apply to a whole category of activity expressed by a native word. However, a user would choose the term derived from the slang form for a particular effect or possibly to create ambiguity. For example, *karmanyolacılık* [fr. Italian *carmagnola*] denotes armed robberies that generally happen during the day in cities. *Karmanyolacılık* can mean either this type of robbery or robbery in general. In some cases an abstract noun is adopted directly from a foreign language, for instance *transandantalizm*. This naturally eliminates the need for a word formed using *-lik*. However, when additional suffixes are added to an abstract foreign noun, *-lik* can be added to the end of the string to form a new abstract noun. *Uydurmasyonculuk*, ‘the

Although I do not currently have a theory why consecutive consonants were allowed in the second example and not the first, the restriction against consecutive consonants initially has relaxed considerably since 1990, when the slang dictionary I used was published.

condition of being a liar or bull-shitter,’ is an example of a word formed in this way, although this case is complicated by the fact that *uydurmasyon* is not in fact an entirely foreign word, but a composite of Turkish base [*uydurma* ‘making up things, inventing’] and a Turkish adaptation of the French abstract noun morpheme *-tion*. *Uydurmasyoncu*, therefore is someone who makes up or invents things, and *-luk* creates the abstract noun of the condition of being such a person.

We have seen from the evidence above that despite the limited inventory of Turkish word-forming suffixes for foreign borrowings, those that are in use are quite productive and can carry meanings in both standard and slang registers. It is interesting to note that the three suffixes examined here, which I found to be the most productive according to forms cited in Aktunç, are also cited by Friedman as three of the four productive Turkish suffixes assimilated into Macedonian. [133] Further study is needed to determine what characteristics make these suffixes suitable for both borrowing and affixing to borrowed words. However, it must again be stressed that although these suffixes appear to be the most productive, they are not the only suffixes used in word formation from foreign bases. Although restricting this brief study to slang usage proved a helpful technique to begin examination of these phenomena, it also undoubtedly excluded many types of language use. More study is needed to determine the precise limits of incorporation of foreign words into Turkish morphology.

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