

Duygu Candarli
discusses the Turkish language and its distinctive features.

Turkish

Where is it spoken?
Turkish is the official language of the Republic of Turkey and one of the official languages of Cyprus. According to the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, Turkish is officially recognised as a minority language in Bosnia Herzegovina and Romania. It is also spoken in parts of the Netherlands.

What kind of language is it?
Turkish is a member of the Oghuz group of Turkic languages, which include the Turkic dialects of the Balkans, Azerbaijani, Turkmen, Qashqai and Gagauz. The classification of Turkish is controversial as there are still debates as to whether or not Turkish is a member of an Altaic language family that includes Mongol, Korean and Tunguz.

When did it emerge?
The old Turkish language can be traced back to Orkhon inscriptions found in Mongolia. The migration of the Turkic people brought the language – Oghuz Turkic – to Anatolia during the eleventh century. After the Turks embraced Islam, their language was greatly influenced by Arabic and Persian. During the Ottoman Empire, Ottoman Turkish (or simply Ottoman) was written in the Arabo-Persian alphabet, and was a mixture of Arabic, Persian and Turkic languages. In 1928, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey, introduced the Latin alphabet. Soon after, in 1932 the Turkish Language Association instituted initiatives for language reform and replaced Arabic and Persian words with their Turkish equivalents. However, some Turkish words still coexist with their older counterparts in contemporary Turkish.

Who speaks it?
According to the Turkish Statistical Institute's 2014 report, Turkish is the first language of about 77 million people in the Republic of Turkey. Outside Turkey, it is spoken at home in a number of Balkan countries, including Bosnia Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece, Macedonia and Romania. In addition, a large number of Turkish speakers live in Germany and other European countries, Australia, and the United States of America. There has been a growing interest in learning Turkish as a foreign language, and in 2013 the British Council identified Turkish as one of the ten most important languages for the UK's future on the basis of economic, cultural, geopolitical and educational indicators. Turkish as a foreign language has also been gaining ground as a field of academic study, with several universities establishing graduate programmes.

What is it like?
Turkish has four distinct features that speakers of English may not be familiar with: agglutination, lack of grammatical gender, vowel harmony, and consonant

Turkish in five minutes

Merhaba [mərhaba]	Hello you?
Nasılsın? [ˈnɑsɯɫsɯn]	How are you?
İyiyim [ijijim]	I am fine
Teşekkür ederim [tɛʃɛcːyr ɛderim]	Thank you
Rica ederim [ridʒa ɛderim]	You are welcome
Afiyet olsun [aː fijet oɬsun]	Enjoy your meal
Seni seviyorum [sɛni sevijorum]	I love you
[iji ɟɛdʒɛler] İyi geceler	Good evening

assimilation. Although agglutination does occur in English – as in 'hopelessness' – it is much more common in Turkish, forming words which can correspond to a whole English phrase or sentence. For instance, *evdekiler* means 'the people at home' and *cezalandırılmamalıymış* can correspond to 'they say that she/he should not be punished'. Turkish has a very rich morphology that leads to the formation of very long words. Hence, agglutination may be a challenging feature of Turkish for English speakers.

The main principle of vowel harmony holds that if the first vowel of a word is a back vowel (*/a/, /ɯ/, /o/, /u/*), then any subsequent vowel is also a back vowel; if the first vowel of a word is a front vowel (*/e/, /i/, /ø/, /y/*), then any subsequent vowel is also a front vowel. However, there are four classes that are exceptions to the rule of vowel harmony: a few native Turkish words such as *elma* ('apple'); some compound words like *olağanüstü* (olağan ('ordinary') + *üstü* ('above') = 'extraordinary'); invariable suffixes, e.g. *-daş* and *–yor*, and loanwords such as *mikrop*, which comes from the French for 'microbe'. The principle of consonant assimilation posits that the same voicing feature is shared between the stem consonant and suffix consonant: the past tense suffix *-dı*, for example, is subjected to consonant assimilation, as in *çalış-tı* ('work-past').



Hagia Sophia Museum Istanbul.

Turkish has no grammatical gender, and the sex of a person has no influence on the form of a word. The third personal pronoun *o* in Turkish can correspond to English 'he', 'she' or 'it', so that *o gidiyor* can mean 'he/she/it is going'. Turkish also differs from English in terms of its clause structure, which follows a subject-object-verb pattern – Turkish is a head-final language with free word order. However, inverted sentences are present in informal speech or literary writing, and subject pronouns can be dropped when the verb is fully inflected: for example, the first person singular pronoun *ben* ('I') can be dropped from *ben kitap okuyorum* ('I am reading a book') without any change in meaning. ¶

Find out more

Books

David Pollard and Asuman C. Pollard (2015) *Complete Turkish: Beginner to Intermediate Course, Teach Yourself,* Hodder.

Aslı Göksel and Celia Kerslake (2005) *Turkish: A Comprehensive Grammar*, Routledge.

Online

For information about Turkish and learning materials, visit bbc.co.uk/languages/other/turkish/guide/ (for beginners) and deepapproach.wceruw.org/ (for intermediate learners).

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