

Turkish Vowel Harmony and Syllables

Stefano Canalis
University of Padova

Vowel harmony has standardly been represented as a spreading relation among vocalic segments. An alternative view (similar in spirit to the one proposed in van der Hulst and van de Weijer [1995]) is to consider harmony as a relation between syllables, with harmonic features spreading from syllabic node to syllabic node; then they percolate to vocalic nuclei, and, in case, to the consonants which can receive them. In favour of this hypothesis several facts of Turkish vowel harmony can be brought forward, which can also provide arguments for an alternative explanation of consonant harmony of velar stops.

In Turkish vowel harmony, velar stops (and the lateral) are in general palatalized in words with [–back] vowels, and are plain velars in [+back] words. At least since Clements and Sezer (1982) the domain of consonant harmony has been recognized in the syllable, mainly because in words containing disharmonic vowel sequences, consonants harmonize with their tautosyllabic vowel (cf. for example the two different behaviours of /k/ in [va.kit] and [i.kon]). But consonant harmony has remained partially separated from vowel harmony, mainly due to some cases of consonants disharmonic with their tautosyllabic vowels. Yet the proposal that the harmonic features be first of all syllabic, and only indirectly percolate to any tautosyllabic segments capable of receiving them, can account for apparent contradictions and cut down several instances of disharmonic consonants.

First, in words with both a geminate velar stop and disharmonic vowels (e.g. *dikkat*), the two halves of the geminate behave differently: only one is palatalized, i.e. a half takes the [αback] value of the syllable of which it is coda, while the other takes the feature value of the syllable of which it is onset (yielding [dik^hkat]). In a model representing harmony as a segment-to-segment relation, and taking for granted integrity and inalterability of geminates, a geminate can be predicted to be either wholly palatalized or not palatalized at all, because it is linked to only one melodic unit (fig. 1). If, on the contrary, the licenser of [αback] to the segmental slots is the syllable, the harmonic feature value can diverge within a geminate (fig. 2).

Second, some words (most of Arabic origin) as *idrak*, *imsak*, *ittifak* – although their last root vowel is [+back] – in suffixes have [–back] vowels, while their root final velar stop becomes palatalized (e.g. [idrak] vs. [idra:k^hi]). It has usually been considered an idiosyncratic exception to vowel harmony, but in many of these words there is also vowel shortening: after suffixation, the last vowel of many of these words is long (*ittif*[a:]*ki*, *idr*[a:]*ki*, etc.), and as in Turkish syllables with both a long nucleus and a coda are not allowed (Clements and Keyser [1983: 59-61], Kabak and Vogel [2001: 347-9]), this alternation has been usually explained as vowel degemination in closed syllables, assuming underlyingly a root with a long vowel and an extrasyllabic final consonant (e.g. /id.raa.kⁱ/). To account for the suffix front vowels, we assume that segments not dominated by a syllable are never allowed, but there are syllables with possibly empty constituents; so the last consonant of *idrak* is the onset of a [–back] syllable with an empty nucleus. Whenever the nucleus is filled up, it must be realized as [–back] and start a new harmonic span (fig. 3).

Third, in Turkish consonant clusters are not allowed in onset position: at least in a colloquial pronunciation, in borrowings containing such clusters an epenthetic high vowel is inserted, and it harmonizes with the [αback] value of the following vowel. But words beginning with a velar stop (e.g. *grip* [g^hirip], *kredi* [k^hiredi]) regularly show a back velar and an epenthetic back vowel, even when the following vowel is front. In this case too we assume a [+back] syllable, with an empty nucleus dominating /k/ or /g/ (fig. 4).

