

## Turkic \*kön- ‘to flatten; to stretch, straighten horizontally’

Türkçe \*kön- ‘düzleřtirmek; yatay olarak uzatmak, düzeltmek’

### Abstract

The study delves deeply into the Turkic root “\*kön-,” emphasizing its diverse semantic and pragmatic implications within Turkic historical linguistics. It underscores the plethora of derivatives stemming from this root, shedding light on the evolving recognition and understanding of such derivatives over time. The meanings range from physical interpretations, such as “to straighten” or “to become physically straight,” to metaphorical extensions that imply agreement, reconciliation, or even becoming accustomed to something. The study references Clason’s masterpiece, highlighting the diverse interpretations and translations of this root. The study also reveals the multifaceted nature of language evolution and the wide range of meanings that a single root can encompass.

**Keywords:** \*kön-; Clason; straight and to straighten; meaning field

### Öz

Çalıřma, Türkçe “\*kön-” kökünü derinlemesine incelemekte ve bu kökün Türk tarihseldilbilimindeki çeřitli anlamsal ve pragmatik etkilerini vurgulamaktadır. Bu kökten türeyen çok sayıda türevin altını çizerek bu tür türevlerin zaman içinde deęiřen tanınırlığına ve anlam alanına ışık tutmaktadır. Anlamlar, “düzeltmek” veya “fiziksel olarak düz hale gelmek” gibi fiziksel yorumlardan, anlaşma, uzlaşma ve hatta bir şeye alışma anlamına gelen metaforik uzantılara kadar uzanıyor. Clason’un önemli eserine de atıfta bulunarak bu kökle ilgili çeřitli yorum ve aktarmaları da tekrar gündeme getirmektedir. Çalıřma, dil evriminin çok yönlü doğasını ve tek bir kökün kapsayabileceęi geniş anlam yelpazesini de gözler önüne sermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** \*kön-; Clason; düz ve düzeltmek; anlam alanı

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### Atıf Citation

Manaster-Ramer, Alexis  
(2023). Turkic \*kön- ‘to  
flatten; to stretch,  
straighten horizontally’.  
*Babür*, 2(2), 115-121.

**Yayın Tarihi**  
Publication Date  
08.11.2023

It seems to me that the Turkic root, with many and interesting derivatives that are only gradually becoming identified as such, illustrates nicely a key point of semantics and pragmatics, with implications rather broader and deeper than just the field (no matter how great it considers itself to be) of Turkic historical linguistics. It was a point that it took me time to grasp. At first, as I just found myself puzzling while re-reading (as I constantly do) Clauson's masterpiece, in this case about this root's "embarrassingly wide range of meanings; the basic one was perhaps 'to be, or become (physically) straight', with various metaph. extensions [...] usually meaning 'to agree (with someone, to something); to become reconciled (ditto); to become accustomed to, or put up with (something)'"', most strikingly (to me anyway) said of a thief admitting (and making amends for) his wrongdoing (*EDPT* p. 726), all I knew is that something bothered me, specifically about the English gloss **straight**.

What that something was became a good deal clearer when I re-read I do not know for how manyth time, on the same page, Clauson's definition of **köni** as "'straight, upright', lit. and metaph.>". And it gelled into a definite hypothesis when I once more re-read two more lemmata that had long bothered me too. One said: "**köne**: [= my **könä**] occurs only in the phr. **köne: su:v** 'mercury, quicksilver'; it is unlikely<sup>1</sup> that the Turks had their own word for this exotic product, and this is prob. a l.-w., but it must be an old one since the phr. became a l.-w. in Hungarian *kéneső*" (still on the same page). The other was about "**köndi**: Hap. leg.; morphologically Dev. N./A. in **-di**: fr. \***kön-**, but this should have exactly the opposite meaning" from how Kashgari glosses it, namely, as 'vile, ignoble (Arabic *al-raḍl*)' (*EDPT* 729). It was then that it became pretty clear to me that the problem was not just with **straight** but even more so with the **up** of **upright**.

Because, while **straight** is ambiguous, it is the wrong one of its two basic meanings that is forced on us when we say **upright**. It seems to me a relatively Modern (Western) idea to admire a man who is VERTICALLY straight—or rather to pretend to admire him.<sup>2</sup> To the ancient and prehistoric Turks, such a one would surely have seemed a defiant, arrogant, hostile person (as is the case today, too, except we are taught to pretend the reverse). The man to trust would have been (as is the case today too, though we deceive others and ourselves about this, of course) not literally UPRIGHT but rather literally<sup>3</sup> FORTHRIGHT, in other words, one who reaches out to you,

<sup>1</sup> This is of course possible. However, I am rather struck by how relatively FEW of the names for this substance in various languages (unlike silver, say) seem to be prehistoric *Wanderwörter* and how MANY are native neologisms instead, e.g., **argentum vivum**, ὑδράργυρος, Slavic \***рѣтѣть** (\***retōtē**), and so on. Even the etymology of Persian **sīmāb** < **sīm** 'silver' (<< Greek ἄσημος) + **āb** 'water' (native) is not a good analogue, because there is no Turkic word \***könä** 'silviev' the way that Persian **sīm** is attested. The idea that the prehistoric Turks borrowed **könä** in some unknown meaning from an unknown language so that mercury would end up as ?\***könä** liquid' is certainly no likelier than the idea that they called it something that made sense in their own language at the time (as I suggest below), namely, \*'liquid that forms beads'.

<sup>2</sup> I keep writing about our culture's fundamental hypocrisy of pretending to admire the independent free-thinking man, who speaks his mind, etc. etc., especially in the educational system, in academia, where conformism is the rule of the day—as shown among many other things by the fact that the word **daring** is misused (contrary to the everyday language) as a term of opprobrium. Just think: if we really lived in the freest corner of a free world, why should one have to DARE to utter or write (or even to think) UNCONVENTIONAL thoughts, anyway? And, even more basic, why should there even be such concepts as scholarly **consensus**, **communis opinio**, and so on? In a truly free corner of a truly free world there would be no room for such concepts at all. And indeed here at 66 they do not exist.

<sup>3</sup> As I point out below, absolutely not in the currently prevalent (metaphorical) sense of this word.

straight yes but HORIZONTALLY straight, showing not INDEPENDENCE (which in that culture would not have been, and in ours too is not, no matter what we pretend, considered a desirable quality at all) but rather agreeableness and even submissiveness (or of course pretended agreeableness and submissiveness, since one can lie about that too). Not a man who would come STRAIGHT OUT and tell you STRAIGHT UP what he thought about you, but precisely a “team player” who one would tell you just the opposite.

Of course, the custom of putting on friendliness as an elementary form of politeness seems pretty universal, and the more extreme variations on this theme of, where we pretend submission, are ones that has left some traces even today (hence, the head nod that was once a low bow, hence **Yours truly** and **Yours sincerely** at the ends of letters, relics of explicitly submissive, self-abasing formulas, and much much else). But the point is just that different cultures do this to very different degrees.

Not at all irrelevant here is the fact all that this leads to an explanation of the OTHER sense attested by Kashgari for **köndi**, too, namely: “when you cannot think of the right word, it is used until the right word comes to mind” (EDPT 729). I submit that it was the same word but used of oneself, the speaker pretend-humbling himself, perhaps as a way of apologizing to the listener for wasting his valuable time by not spitting out the required word right away. And not entirely unlike our **(I) beg your pardon** or the Turkish **efendim**, literally ‘My lord’. Those are used (typically) as a request for the addressee to repeat something we did not catch, but the basic idea of the speaker humbling himself is the same as that of glorifying the addressee, since pretending one or the other helps maintain communication that might otherwise lapse. In short, **köndi** meant something like ‘(one) showing submission by holding himself horizontally straight > humble, lowly’. Instead of humbling myself by BEGGING (or by calling YOU ‘lord’) I do so by calling myself ‘low(ly)’. It is basically the same thing as our old-fashioned **Your Most Humble and Obedient Servant**.

Now, obviously, the thief confessing and making amends did not stand tall, upright, holding his head high, did he? Rather I see him as hanging his head low, slinking, and the like. Kashgari’s “vile man”, while perhaps not acting EXACTLY the same, must be visualized doing something similar. Of course, the details are not accessible to us. I do not see that we can even know whether the “vile” man was one that for whatever reason the society had come to despise and so he was forced to act particularly submissive to be able to survive at all, or whether he was someone who was overdoing the ordinary shows of sincerity to the point where it was OBVIOUS that he was FAKING—and that THIS is what earned him the opprobrium. Nor can we tell what exactly the difference was between how these two held themselves in contrast to people who had not been caught stealing or were considered “vile”.<sup>4</sup> But one would have to be from another galaxy not to guess that the latter two categories must have acted more submissive than the average. That is, that regardless of the details, in both these cases we are not dealing with a man holding himself UPRIGHT, vertically straight, but only with someone STRETCHING FORWARD in the direction of his interlocutor (likely bowing down), with his head, neck, and indeed the whole upper body—if not fully parallel to the ground (i.e., straight HORIZONTALLY)—as close to

<sup>4</sup> But that there is a connection is made clear by, f.ex., the word **alçak** “‘gentle, mild, humble’ in a laudatory sense [...] but in SW Osm. and Krim it has (recently?) acquired a pejorative meaning ‘low (in stature or character), base, vile’” (EDPT 129).

that as anatomy and physics allow. Certainly not UPRIGHT.<sup>5</sup>

All this then is clear evidence (and there are many other sorts, too)<sup>6</sup> that all members of society would have spoken and acted (i.e., held their bodies) in what we might find a strangely<sup>7</sup> humble and submissive manner—though perhaps some of our manners might have seemed like that to them. So that is how the world worked then—and by and large still does, even though we are taught to say and apparently even believe (whether on the so-called Left or the so-called Right, i.e., in one or another self-appointed “Mainstreams”) quite the opposite and, just to prove it, keep creating whole new conventions for what one may not say or do and imposing them on the rest of the world, too—all of which surely is not unrelated to our ongoing invention of more and more glaring forms of human inequality (e.g., the whole new social class of INFLUENCERS).

The hypothesis explains not just the world, though. It is also good for some more linguistics, too, f.ex., the derived verbs **könit-** ‘to straighten’ (both literally and of one’s conduct, except that Clauson’s “make your conduct upright” is again misleading), **köndür-** ‘to straighten’ (again with extended meanings, and notably ‘to show (s.o.) the right road, to direct (s.o.)’), and above all **köndgär-**<sup>8</sup> where the older senses ‘to straighten’ and ‘to make (a thief) confess’ tend to yield to that of ‘to guide (s.o.) to the right road’ and finally ‘to send (off)’ (EDPT 730). In all of these cases, we are dealing with HORIZONTAL straightness, notably, with making a miscreant SUBMIT but also with going (or sending people) on some path along the surface of the planet, so again horizontally, again FORTH and not UP! Absolutely positively never ‘UP’!

The term for quicksilver is now also seen as describing a ‘liquid moving horizontally’, describing very well the of BEADING of mercury (which must have been very striking to people who were seeing this strange phenomenon for the first time).

<sup>5</sup> This does not exist the topic by any means. For one thing, consider the English terms **forthright** and (**to tell someone**) **flat** (or **flat out**). These refer to acting (speaking) in ways that Modern society pretends to admire, and I ask myself what the difference is between the imagery (these being metaphors) here on the one hand vs. the presumed meaning of \***kön-** on the other. Following my overall approach to linguistic semantics and pragmatics, I am tempted to hypothesize that the difference lies in the corresponding NONlinguistic semantics and pragmatics, i.e., in BODY language, such as for example (and at present this is just an inchoate idea) between in the former cases extending horizontally one’s arm and hand horizontally towards the addressee (in a way that may be or be perceived as threatening) and in the latter holding horizontally one’s whole upper body (bowing) or even the whole body (prostration).

<sup>6</sup> Consider, f.ex. the implications of the verb **kay-** (originally \***kad-**), where the sense of showing respect is derived from some sort of bending or turning (not necessarily, I would add, bowing as we understand that concept but perhaps turning aside in such a way as to avoid looking the other person in the eye) and especially the derived reciprocal stem **kayış-**, which implies that people showed this sort of respect to each other (see Clauson, EDPT 674, 679). Another relevant datum: whereas in our culture we admire (or rather pretend too, since I again say that this is all eyewash) the PLAIN-speaking man, in medieval Turkic **yavgän**, while literally meaning “‘plain, dry (food) without fat or oil’ [...] without seasonings”, when applied to people, “seems to mean ‘coarse, unsympathetic’, or the like” (EDPT 874). Because politeness required circumlocution and/or verbosity. There is of course much more along these lines, from Ibn Faḍlān’s description of prostration as a gesture of politeness to the use of the word **ārki** as a way (similar to some other, unrelated languages) of (pretending that one is) not asking for a DEFINITE response, the taking of a STAND (see EDPT 223)—the very things I hope to witness before I die.

<sup>7</sup> Not because we are any less so in fact but because we are educated to PRETEND otherwise. If I am right, then this a higher-level pretense. We learn first to pretend humility vis-à-vis other people, and then to pretend just the reverse.

<sup>8</sup> For the morphology of all these words but especially this one, see Erdal (OTWF 341, 665-6, 744, 807). However, the topic does not seem to be exhausted.

I would add that I find it hard not see a connection between these beads of mercury and the beads that surely would have made up an archaic Turkic **köndägi** 'necklace', which I simply cannot make myself see as the single piece of leather tentatively proposed by Zieme (1995) on the basis of an etymology not entirely unrelated but interpreted by him in a very different way (a topic I hope to return to). However, precisely because this word (incidentally, obscure to Clauson) has been discussed at such considerable length (though I HOPE not conclusively) by Zieme, and because he provides us with such rich data bearing on a wide range of other words such as, notably, **könän-** 'to be decorated', **könändi** 'decoration' (a word, it seems, newly identified by Zieme himself) but also ones with such divergent meanings as 'breast/chest', 'breast pocket(s)', and even (the result of processing of hide into) 'leather', I propose to defer all this to another time (along with my little *pièce de résistance*, the title of the Magyar khagan, **kende**, **kundu**, or whatever),<sup>9</sup> though I CANNOT QUITE resist saying that I hope to be able to claim that this term alludes directly to the famous custom among some Turkic tribes (crucially including the Khazars) of putting a scarf around the neck of, and pulling it tight so as to almost strangle, a newly enthroned khagan, in such a way that the sputtering noises he would make while trying to offer resistance could be interpreted by his attendants as whatever piece they (and not he) would have wanted him to say—whereas the title of the **gyula** or the like (the *numero due*, or, as we might say in plain ENGLISH, the shogun) symmetrically alludes to another famous Khazar custom, the one where THIS worthy was required to hold a burning piece of firewood in his hands every time he came to pay respects to the *numero uno* (see Manaster Ramer to appear/2023 for several other titles, attested in the Greek, Arabic, Hebrew, etc., sources on Khazar itself that allude to precisely these two practices).

But what I have already proposed may have done more than enough damage to the *communis opinio*. So, let us take a break here. Only, before concluding even this small part of it, I must address a complication that may seem at first glance to represent a fatal objection to my whole theory. The so-called "Old Uyghur Book of the Dead" (Zieme & Kara 1978, l. 1017, pp. 162-164) describes the basic meditation position<sup>10</sup> where one sits cross-legged, with the neck slightly bent (like the neck of a peacock!), hands on the knees with the partly cupped palms facing up, tongue pressed firmly against the palate, eyes focused on the tip of the nose—and **uça-ni köndürüp**. This latter phrase, Erdal (*OTWF* 807) finds "not quite as translated", wishing to correct the editors' "das Rückgrat strecken" to "straightening the back". This would be very bad, because this would seem to be referring (contrary to what I am saying) to VERTICAL straightness. Bad for me. Good, of course, for those who regard with silent horror the increasingly frequent intrusions of an amateur into a field they had learned to think of as their PROPERTY. For, was it not Evetts (2013), and not me, who wrote:

<sup>9</sup> The real forms of both this and of the other title (**gyula**), of course, never been properly determined (to the extent, which need not be 100%, that this is even possible, given the available sources, Greek and Arabo-Persian). They have instead (as is not rarely the custom in this field) been questioned-begged, and that for quite a long time. Maybe for long enough so that it might be time for something new?

<sup>10</sup> There is room for confusion here because the names of the poses are not consistent over the millennia. The term Zieme & Kara use here (**paryaŋka-**) is not incorrect for the time at issue, but it could mislead the unwary reader, since it is nowadays used for a different pose entirely, where one bends over backwards, ending up with one's whole back and the back of the head flat on the floor.

The ideology of professionalism that is so appealing to occupational groups and their practitioners includes aspects such as exclusive ownership of an area of expertise and knowledge, and the power to define the nature of problems in that area as well as the control of access to potential solutions,

stating what is as much of a commonplace in sociology as it is a top secret (subject to *omertà* even from oneself it seems) in fields such as historical linguistics (or so I am constantly assured by such of its practitioners as speak to me at all)?

Whereas, of course, my quixotic goal for half a century has been precisely to break this oligopoly, achieving peace via superior firepower, the power of a slightly different approach. An approach of which, instead of a crashing burn, here comes one MORE confirmation. Namely, if I am not utterly mistaken, the original translation of the phrase at issue was actually more correct than Erdal's correction, and now can be made even more so! The text is referring precisely to STRETCHING the back (just as Zieme & Kara wrote) and NOT merely making it (vertically) straight<sup>11</sup>—and not only because the back is pretty vertical ALREADY when one begins. Rather, the proof of the pudding is that an elementary point of yogic practice is to stretch or indeed (as I am used to hearing yoga instructors say in their peculiar jargon of English, which, like all professional jargons I avoid as much as possible,<sup>12</sup> but it is not always possible—and here we see that it would not have been advantageous to) to “FLATTEN” the spine.<sup>13</sup> What is, if I am still not wrong, captured with excruciating exactitude by the Old Uyghur is exactly this: the difference between the excruciating demands of yogic meditation and mere ordinary sitting straight while being excruciatingly bored by whatever social convention requires one to listen to and pretend to agree (or worse to actually agree). I apologize for flooring the Gentle Reader flat with the facts, but, quite simply, Zieme & Kara were right enough, though ‘flattening the spine (or the back)’ would be even righter—in English. For, I do not pretend to know what German-speaking yoga instructors say. But I do pretend to know that this is exactly parallel (sorry, could not resist) to **yerig köntürüp** ‘flattening the ground’ (cited by Erdal *ibid.* from another text, and this time translated exactly right). Or are we to suppose that the ground is being made to stand upright, too?

<sup>11</sup> The problem is that English **straighten** is ambiguous.

<sup>12</sup> It is not just me. Listen not to me but to Oreskes (2021), Professor of the History of Science and Affiliated Professor of Earth and Planetary Sciences at an institution the Gentle Reader will surely be more familiar with than I am (having only lectured there twice, to audiences so small I felt honored thinking they must have been “select”), yes, Harvard.

<sup>13</sup> Once more I beg indulgence for calling attention to typological facts. In English, when we tell someone to go STRAIGHT, he will never think of moving up but only of moving forward. If we are standing in front of a set of stairs or in mountainous terrain, we will not say ‘straight’, certainly not without at least adding ‘up’. On the other hand, when we talk (with Gilbert & Sullivan) about flooring someone flat, we mean horizontally. As noted, too, we (or some of us) do talk of straightening the back when we mean sitting up. But never flat! This tiny detail, the fact that we CAN FLATTEN our spines, but we CANNOT SIT FLAT, is thus crucially important.

<sup>14</sup> I say this because the few scholars who stoop to even discussing this topic with me, which is to say, refusing to discuss it beyond telling me that I am wrong, when they run out of other excuses, concede that in the abstract I might be right that things are bad, but nothing can be done about it, so why worry? Let the cattle cars keep rolling. And so I waste year after year showing that something can—and in hundreds of cases if not more, has been.

Of course, there are all details, but telling ones, showing how everything comes together with (as science demands even more than does yoga) excruciating exactitude—and how it all (in yoga, but above all in science) should—and surprisingly, can<sup>14</sup>—be done, namely, with “painful simpl”icity (Olsen, 2009) The choice is indeed simple: between an approach that may at times floor you flat with cheerful new results (factual or logical) and one that just seeks to cheerlessly flatten everything and above all anybody who refuses, even in the unlikely event he were to be invited, to join the assorted juggernaut of sullen, turf-protecting error.

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