

Elisions of *-g-* at an Unusually  
Early Date in TurkicTürk Dillerinde *-g-* Ünsüzünün Erken Düşüşü

Sorumlu Yazar

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## Abstract

This study presents a re-evaluation of certain morphologically problematic words in Turkic languages, such as *yastuk*, *batak*, and *batuk*. It is observed that previous analyses have remained insufficient due to an underestimation of both semantic structure and phonological development. The conventional derivation of *yastuk* from *yasta-* with the suffix *-(O)k* is shown to be problematic on semantic and morphological grounds. Instead, it is proposed that the form derives either from *yasta-gak* (agentive) or *yasta-gOk* (instrumental), both of which align more consistently with expected functional roles. Similarly, *batak* is identified as polysemous, appearing both in the sense of ‘bog’ and ‘diving bird’, and it is demonstrated that these meanings arise from distinct morphological processes. The former is traced to *bat-ig+gak*, indicating resemblance to a sinking place, while the latter is derived from *bat-gak*, with agentive semantics. The early elision of *-g-* in some derivations is discussed, with reference to multiple historical attestations, and is argued to be phonologically regular within specific contexts. Additionally, the origin of *kulak* (‘ear’) is reassessed, and the form *kul-gA+gAk* is proposed, justified through its morphological consistency and phonological variants. It is concluded that several Early Turkic word forms can be more adequately explained when morphological complexity and diachronic sound change are jointly taken into account.

**Keywords:** historical linguistics, morphology, comparative linguistics, structural analysis

## Öz

Bu çalışmada Türk dillerinde *yastuk*, *batak*, *batuk* gibi biçimbilimsel olarak sorunlu kabul edilen bazı sözcüklerin yeniden değerlendirildiği bir analiz sunulmaktadır. Önceki literatürde bu formlara yönelik önerilerin özellikle anlam–biçim uyumsuzluğu ve ses değişimlerinin yeterince dikkate alınmaması nedeniyle yetersiz kaldığı görülmektedir. Örneğin *yastuk* kelimesinin *yasta-* fiiline *-(O)k* eki getirilerek türetildiği yönündeki varsayımın hem semantik hem morfolojik düzeyde sorunlar taşıdığı gösterilmiştir. Bunun yerine, bu formun *yasta-gak* (etken) ya da *yasta-gOk* (araç belirten) biçimlerinden türemiş olması gerektiği ileri sürülmektedir. Benzer biçimde *batak* kelimesinin iki farklı anlamda—‘bataklık’ ve ‘dalıcı kuş’—kullanıldığı ve her birinin ayrı kökenlerden türediği tespit edilmiştir. ‘Bataklık’ anlamı için *bat-ig+gak*, ‘dalıcı kuş’ anlamı için ise *bat-gak* yapısının geçerli olduğu önerilmektedir. *-g-* ünsüzünün bazı türevlerde olağan dışı erken düşüş gösterdiği çeşitli tarihî örneklerle desteklenmiştir. Ayrıca *kulak* kelimesinin kökeni de yeniden ele alınarak *kul-gA+gAk* biçimi önerilmiş ve bu öneri hem biçimbilimsel hem fonolojik varyantlar üzerinden gerekçelendirilmiştir. Sonuç olarak erken dönem Türkçeye ait bazı yapıların önceki analizlere göre daha karmaşık ancak daha tutarlı bir biçimde açıklanabileceği ortaya konulmuştur.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** dil tarihi, biçimbilim, karşılaştırmalı dilbilim, yapısal analiz

Even in the incomparable work of Erdal (*OTWF* 255) you will find no explanation of the **yastuk** form.<sup>1</sup> So, since the experts are otherwise occupied (namely, very very busy all of them ignoring my work to date), I have taken it upon MYSELF to let “*yastok/ yastuk* remain[] a morphological puzzle” no more. There are two fundamental points here. One, linguists sometimes (even often) fail to let the meanings of words guide them, preferring to play with sounds according to rules that are sometimes (and yes even often) also arbitrarily assumed rather than derived from the languages themselves. Two, languages (and that includes sounds as well as meanings) change over time, which apparently has not been noticed to date—at least not by those who think that they are the experts and me just chopped liver. It is of course best if both considerations lead to the same conclusion.

For example, I recently tried to point out to whoever would not listen—and must be right since I received no recognition at all—that the attested **batgak** (also **batak**) ‘bog’ cannot possibly be **\*bat-gak** but must instead be **\*bat-ig+gak** ‘one resembling a *\*batig* (a place of sinking)’. And on the other hand, **\*bat-gak** ‘one habitually sinking’ can only be the source of **batak** (also **batuk**) ‘diving bird’. And that means that the conventionally assumed (there is that word again) ideas of Proto- or just Early Turkic morphology are sometimes (I do not pretend to be able to say how often), too simple—in short, the reconstructed archetypes are too short.

In the same way, first, semantically and morphologically, I do not grant (though the Gentle Reader is free to ignore me not granting) that **yastuk** ‘pillow’ (or maybe **yastok** because the early attestation are in scripts that do not tell us which) “should be the object noun of *yasta-* ‘to prop up on a pillow’”<sup>2</sup> (Erdal again) and therefore should (a word I try not to use because who am I to tell a language what it should do, much less HAVE done centuries or millennia ago) end in the **-(O)k** suffix. It should (oops, I do sometimes slip up) in fact be and do no such thing, since a pillow is the instrument or agent and not the object. Nor did it, and as a result we need not puzzle over the fact that (quoting Erdal again) “*-Ok* is not otherwise a dominant suffix” (and so did not replace the final vowel of **yasta-** with its own vowel the way Erdal assumed) and that “we don’t know of *yasta-* to have had a variant ‘*yastw-*’ (his notation for either **\*yasto-** or **\*yastu-**).

So, because the form UNDER ALL THESE ASSUMPTIONS “remains a morphological puzzle” and because the meaning is also wrong, it follows that it is these very assumptions that were wrong. In short, we are not dealing with **\*yasta-** (or a hypothetical variant of this ending in a back rounded vowel) plus **-(O)k**. I submit instead (and am fully prepared

<sup>1</sup> Please note the convention whereby deverbal suffixes are marked with the hyphen (-) but denominal ones with the plus sign (+). Elsewhere, I use the plus/minus sign for those suffixes that apparently had both functions and a long dash to separate parts of compounds.

<sup>2</sup> While the verb does denote that sort of action, it does not refer to JUST that. We can see the basic meaning in “hint orally [...] but [...] not speak clearly” and “hit the side [...] of the target” (Clauson *EDPT* 974). The propping pillows were quite obviously used to prop a person up from the SIDE.

to be once again ignored while thus submitting instead) that **yastuk** is either **\*yasta-gak** ‘agent that *habitually* props (people) up’ or **\*yasta-gOk** ‘instrument for propping (people) up’, and that whichever it was is what gave **yastuk**.<sup>3</sup> I do not claim to know for sure which one (or even whether there might not be more than one source, with either accidental or perhaps deliberate, paronomastic ambiguity) or just how the sound changes worked out exactly so as to give at least one of these derivations, only that they did—and leave that part as an exercise to the reader, the reader who surely knows far more Turkic than I do and, realizing he does not always know what I know, actually reads and learns something from what follows—including but not limited to the fact that **batuk** derives from **\*bat-gak**—and not because it “should” but just because it entirely obvious does.

As for me, then, I would now like to discuss how I came to see that all this is both possible and necessary. It happened because I quite by chance read and learned a vast amount in a very short amount of time from the relatively short article by Işık (2021). The small refinement which I then felt compelled to offer in return to one etymology he discusses is what led next to a massive clean-up of Turkic etymology and phonology that I will keep presenting and that the Gentle Reader will presumably continue to ignore till long after I am dead.

The small refinement that started it all involved the **batak** part of **kara batak** ‘cormorant’, a term found in Karaim, Turkish, and Azeri, and the **batuk** that occurs by itself (without the **kara**) in the same meaning in 14<sup>th</sup>-cent. Kipchak. Işık (p. 356) certainly is right that these terms “might refer to the cormorant diving for its prey”, being derived from the root **bat-**, which is attested in the specific sense of (a bird) diving (for food) by Kashgari, while its more usual meaning is given as ‘to sink’.

However, these bird names cannot, as Işık suggests, “most probably go[] back to *batıĝ/batu* ‘act of sinking’”. One of the reasons is morphology/semantics, which should be self-evident: the bird names must be agent nominals, and not *nomina actionis* or *loci* or the like. The other is phonology: the final **-k** cannot come from **\*-g**, which would have disappeared (presumably the very reason why Işık himself wrote “*batıĝ/batu*”, which I am very sorry but I have to say is just confusion).

In short, **\*bat-ig** CAN be, and is, the source of words like Turkish **batı** (< **batu**) ‘west’ (where the sun sinks below the horizon). But this cannot be the source of **batak**, **batuk** ‘diver’, as noted. The latter words must be from **\*bat-gak**, with the same root but with the **-gAk** agent suffix, sometimes said to be “connoting habitual or repeated action” (Clauson *EDPT* xlv), though this does not seem quite so clear or simple (Erdal *OWTF* 394 and *passim*). The loss of the **\*-g-** in this formation has several parallels all the way back to Middle Turkic (p. 395 esp. n. 463), and anyway is phonologically pretty regular.

<sup>3</sup> Or, just possibly, it might be that the source was more complex: **\*yasta-gV+gAk** or **\*yasta-(I/U)g+gAk** or the like. The basic point remains.

The high back rounded **-u-** vowel found in one of the attestations may even be a reflex of this very **\*-g-**.

The story of the OTHER **batak**, meaning ‘bog’, is of course not unrelated but different from both the ‘west’ and the ‘diver’. Clauson derives THIS from **batgak**, which is apparently attested as such in Chagatay (*EDPT* 361). But, obviously, the two words (‘diver’ vs. ‘act or place of sinking > bog’) cannot represent one and the same morphological formation.

Now, as we already know, **batak** ‘bog’ (where we might sink) also cannot possibly be the same word as **batu** ‘west’ (where the sun sinks). So, if **batu** is from **\*bat-ig** and **batak**, **batuk** ‘diver’ is from **\*bat-gak**, then **batgak**, **batak** ‘bog’ can only be from **\*bat-ig+gak**, where we have the same root with the same deverbal suffix **-ig** as in **batu** but then followed by the DENOMINAL **+gAk** suffix, which denoted similitude or the like (see Erdal *OTWF* again, pp. 74-76). In other words, a bog was literally **\*‘that which is LIKE a place of sinking’**, I would think alluding to a place of PARTIAL—as opposed to total—immersion. Which would be pragmatically exactly right. The sun disappears completely from view in the evening (hence **\*bat-ig**), but one hopes (and usually manages) to survive crossing a bog without drowning (hence this is only **\*bat-ig+gak**).

Note here how we must carefully distinguish different chronologies: the prehistoric **\*bat-gak** is never found as such in the available texts, while the attested medieval **batgak** must come from an earlier (again, only reconstructed) **\*bat-ig+gak**. As Inspector Clouzeau famously says in *The Return of the Pink Panther*, “Wax is not wax”, and so too **batgak** is not **\*bat-gak**! Larry David might have said in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* that **batgak** is not ALL **\*bat-gak**, and what I say is, it is not AT all **\*bat-gak**.

And standing on these, completely solid, results I hope very soon to release a surprising number of still other Turkic words that have hitherto been etymologized rather confusedly precisely because these distinctions of morphology and chronology were NOT observed. These will include a variety of forms not explained hitherto, including but not limited to some the body part vocabulary ending in **+Ak** that Erdal (*OTWF* 75-76) took to involve a mysterious “alternant” of the **+gAk** suffix. A rather obvious example, which I will just discuss briefly here, is the word for ‘ear’, which can only be **\*kul-gA+gAk** ‘one resembling a sprout’. This of course involves me standing firmly on the broad shoulders of Stachowski 2010, with whom I would never have even known the word he writes **kulka** but which must be from **\*kul-ga**, but only via my modification of his work can we explain **kulak**, **kulkak**, **kulgak**, and above all the completely mysterious **kulxak** (with **-x-** < **\*-gg-** < **\*-gag-**) as well as the long vowel in Yakut **kulgāx**. While Erdal opines that “[t]hese forms cannot be phonetic variants of original **+gAk** derivatives, as this is not regular for Qarakhanid”, they in fact must be scattered relics of what once was a set of phonological processes (regular or not, I do not know and actually do not care). It is obvious, and has long been documented, that the dogma of regularity of sound change

cannot possibly be true (though it has an element of truth in it, which however cannot be discussed so long as there is no forum in which such a discussion could take place but which I am willing to discuss if such a forum is provided). But, of course, even if it were true, its most die-hard advocates have always admitted that what we actually observe in languages and dialects is not such regularity but rather what they take to be its results overlaid by other, supposedly later, processes (but what I, like the earlier opponents, have always argued are processes that co-occur in real time)—and so (no matter who is right about how it happens), what we observe is not always regular (as every Turcologist knows even better than some other specialists). When, f.ex., we read “**kergek** [...] fr. **kerge-**; ‘necessity, necessary’. Became **kerək** by elision of the -g- at an unusually early date”, we see that Clauson (*EDPT* 742) realized just this. Whether we accept that such things happen within a given dialect (and indeed idiolect) or whether we insist (with orthodox Neogrammarians) that they must be borrowings from a hypothetical other dialect or some other untestable hypothesis, the observable fact remains that we do find such “elision[s] of the -g- at an unusually early date” (see also Erdal *OTWF* 235)—and this is true of many sound changes.

Of course, all I have managed to build is just a little superstructure on top of the much bigger foundations and structures laid down by others, such as Bang, Clauson, Erdal, Stachowski, and others; course not JUST Işık. So, while the Nomenklatura continues to ignore my work, I ignore no one, not even those who have been openly rude or dismissive of my efforts. And THAT is why and how Turkic (and not only Turkic) gets DONE better here at Soixante-six than elsewhere. Of course, whether, when I build, they come or just sneeringly ignore my results as usual, is not up to me. Nor does it matter quite so much to me (since I have pretty much given up and it is anyway very late) as much as it should to you all, you who purport to have devoted your lives to the pursuit of exactly the results that you have proven not so totally able to find ... without me. Details. Bygones. In the end we all die. Me anyway.

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