

'A Catastrophic Success' Reconsidered: Lexical Evidence From Modern Turkish

"Trajik Başarı" Üzerine Yeni Bir Değerlendirme: Modern Türkçeden Leksikal Buluntular

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ABSTRACT

The Turkish Language Reform, launched in the early years of the Republic, sought to replace Arabic and Persian vocabulary with words of Turkic origin and align the national language with modern, secular, and nationalist ideals. While the reform has long been a subject of debate, most notably criticized by Geoffrey Lewis for being artificial and disruptive, this paper reconsiders its legacy through both historical reflection and quantitative analysis. First, Lewis's major objections are contextualized and examined in light of modern linguistic and sociocultural developments, and counterarguments are offered concerning the reform's long-term coherence and adaptability. Two original quantitative studies are presented: (1) an etymological breakdown of the 1000 most frequent words in written Turkish today, and (2) a diachronic comparison between a 1927 passage from Atatürk's *Nutuk* and its modernized version. Both analyses converge on remarkably similar results, with Turkish-origin words making up approximately two-thirds of the vocabulary in each case, a finding that affirms the reform's success in altering the core lexicon.

Keywords: Catastrophic Success, Turkish Language Reform, Frequency, Corpus, Loanwords, Modern Turkish

ÖZ

Türk Dil Devrimi, Cumhuriyet'in ilk yıllarında başlatılarak Arapça ve Farsça kökenli sözcüklerin yerini Türkçe kökenli sözcüklerle değiştirmeyi ve ulusal dili modern, laik ve milliyetçi ideallerle uyumlu hale getirmeyi amaçlamıştır. Reform uzun süredir tartışma konusu olmuş; özellikle Geoffrey Lewis tarafından yapay ve yıkıcı olmakla eleştirilmiştir. Bu makale, reformun mirasını hem tarihsel bir perspektiften hem de nicel analizler yoluyla yeniden değerlendirmektedir. Öncelikle Lewis'in temel itirazları tarihsel bağlamda ele alınmakta, ardından reformun uzun vadeli tutarlılığı ve uyum yeteneği üzerine karşı argümanlar sunulmaktadır. İki özgün nicel çalışma sunulmuştur: (1) günümüz yazılı Türkçesinde en sık kullanılan 1000 sözcüğün etimolojik dökümü ve (2) 1927 tarihli Atatürk'ün *Nutuk*'undan bir pasaj ile modernleştirilmiş versiyonu arasındaki art zamanlı karşılaştırma. Her iki analizde de benzer sonuçlara ulaşılmış; Türkçe kökenli sözcüklerin yaklaşık üçte ikilik bir oranla temel sözcük dağarcığını oluşturduğu görülmüştür. Bu bulgu, reformun çekirdek söz varlığını dönüştürmedeki başarısını ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Trajik Başarı, Türk Dil Devrimi, Sıklık, Korpus, Ödünçleme Sözcükler, Modern Türkçe

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Introduction

The Turkish Language Reform, initiated in 1928 was a linguistic overhaul aimed at modernizing and more specifically, nationalizing the Turkish language. At its core, the reform sought to sever the Ottoman Turkish linguistic ties to Arabic and Persian, replacing these influences with “pure” Turkish elements. This was achieved through the creation of new words derived from Turkic roots, or borrowing from other Turkic languages, while Arabic and Persian loanwords were systematically purged. By adopting a more phonetic and accessible writing system, namely the Latin alphabet, the reform sought to increase literacy rates across Turkey. The Ottoman Turkish script, which used the Arabic alphabet, was seen as a barrier to mass education due to its complex structure.

The reform aligned with Atatürk’s vision of fostering a sense of Turkish national identity that was distinct from the Ottoman past. By promoting a language that was rooted in Turkic history and culture, the reform aimed to reinforce a unified national consciousness. Language was viewed as a key tool in the creation of a modern, secular, and progressive nation-state. The Turkish Language Association (Türk Dil Kurumu), established in 1932, played a central role in the reform by overseeing the development of new vocabulary and conducting research to revive and standardize the Turkish language. While the reform faced criticism—particularly for the artificiality of some newly coined words and the risk of alienating generations fluent in Ottoman Turkish—its impact has been enduring, shaping the linguistic landscape of modern Turkey.

GEOFFREY LEWIS’S PERSPECTIVE

Geoffrey Lewis, in his influential work *The Turkish Language Reform: A Catastrophic Success* (Lewis, 1999), provides a critical yet nuanced analysis of the Turkish Language Reform. Lewis acknowledges the reform’s far-reaching success in achieving its primary goals, such as increasing literacy and promoting a sense of Turkish national identity. However, he also argues that these achievements came at a significant cultural and linguistic cost, which he describes as “catastrophic.”

According to Lewis, one of the major issues was the radical nature of the reform, which led to the swift purging of Arabic and Persian loanwords that had been deeply embedded in the Turkish lexicon for centuries. This created a linguistic rupture between generations, as older speakers of Ottoman Turkish struggled to adapt to the new, rapidly evolving vocabulary. The reform also introduced neologisms that were perceived as artificial or contrived, making communication difficult and often leading to confusion. Lewis refers to this as “vocabulary engineering,” a process he believes disrupted the organic development of the language. Despite these criticisms, Lewis does not deny the reform’s successes. The title “A Catastrophic Success” reflects his view that while the reform achieved its intended objectives—such as creating a more “Turkish” language and improving literacy—it did so at the expense of linguistic continuity and cultural heritage, leaving behind what he saw as unintended and detrimental consequences.

Modern Turkish demonstrates that the challenges Lewis identified—namely, the artificiality of new vocabulary and lack of organic development, the loss of historical and cultural heritage, practical difficulties and social disruption, and the alleged lack of linguistic soundness—have largely been overcome. First, regarding the artificiality and lack of organic development, Lewis critiques the creation of neologisms during the reform, particularly those derived from archaic or obscure Turkic roots, as being artificial and not organically linked to Turkish linguistic evolution. However, modern Turkish linguistic research shows that many of these “artificial” words have become fully naturalized in the language. Studies of word frequency, such as those by (Göz, 2020) in *Yazılı Türkçenin Kelime Sıklığı Sözlüğü*, demonstrate that a significant percentage of the most commonly used words in contemporary Turkish are the products of the reform. This suggests that while the initial introduction of new vocabulary may have appeared contrived, over time these terms have been integrated into the everyday lexicon. The process of linguistic normalization, facilitated through consistent usage in education, media, and public discourse, has diminished the perceived artificiality of many of these terms.

Second, Lewis’s critique of the loss of historical and cultural heritage is based on the reform’s systematic purging of Arabic and Persian loanwords, which had been integral to Ottoman Turkish. While the reform did indeed

remove a substantial portion of this vocabulary, it is arguable whether this constituted a gross loss of heritage. Historical and cultural elements of the Ottoman era are still preserved in modern Turkish, especially in specialized fields such as law, religion, and literature, where Ottoman Turkish vocabulary continues to be used selectively (Korkmaz, 2009, pp. 142–145). Moreover, many reform-generated words have evolved alongside Ottoman Turkish vocabulary, leading to a hybridization rather than a wholesale replacement. In addition, there has been a revival of interest in Ottoman Turkish in recent decades, reflected in academic programs and public institutions, allowing Turkish speakers to reconnect with their linguistic past (Özmen & Yıldırım, 2017). Thus, the reform’s impact on heritage, while significant, did not result in a total erasure of cultural continuity.

Third, concerning practical difficulties and social disruption, Lewis argues that the abrupt nature of the reform created significant communication barriers, especially between generations. Indeed, during the early years of the reform, older generations fluent in Ottoman Turkish struggled to adapt to the new vocabulary and grammatical structures. However, this disruption was largely a temporary phenomenon. Over the course of several decades, Turkish society adapted to the linguistic reforms through the education system, which consistently reinforced the new language norms. It is well documented (Sayılan & Yıldız, 2009, pp. 736) that literacy rates increased dramatically in the mid-20th century, suggesting that the short-term social disruptions gave way to long-term societal benefits. The standardization of language, combined with the state’s promotion of linguistic unity, helped to bridge the generational gap over time. Lewis’s argument that the abrupt nature of the language reform created significant communication barriers, especially between generations, remains valid. However, it’s important to consider the linguistic landscape of the Ottoman Empire prior to the reforms. While Ottoman Turkish served as the official language of the state and elite classes, the vast majority of the Turkish population, particularly in Anatolia, spoke a variety of Turkish dialects that were significantly different from the standardized Ottoman Turkish. These dialects, often referred to as “simple Turkish” or “folk Turkish,” were characterized by unadorned grammar and vocabulary. The vernacular dialects spoken by the common people, commonly referred to as “kaba Türkçe” (simple Turkish) or “halk Türkçesi” (folk Turkish), were simpler and much more reflective of the Turkic linguistic core. These dialects maintained a more straightforward grammar, relied on a Turkic-based lexicon, and avoided the heavy syntactic influence of Arabic and Persian. This linguistic gap created a situation where much of the population was effectively excluded from the written and administrative aspects of Ottoman society.

Finally, Lewis’s critique of the reform’s lack of linguistic soundness—the idea that some of the reform’s linguistic interventions were not phonologically or morphologically consistent with Turkish—has been a point of contention among scholars. While certain words introduced during the reform did not fit seamlessly into Turkish phonotactics or morphological patterns, this issue has largely been resolved through the natural evolution of the language. For instance, some of the more problematic neologisms have either fallen out of use or have been modified by speakers over time to better fit the phonetic and morphological norms of Turkish (Korkmaz, 2009). This adaptive process illustrates how modern Turkish speakers have been able to correct and refine aspects of the reform that were initially linguistically unsound, thereby ensuring greater cohesion in the language. In conclusion, while Geoffrey Lewis’s critiques of the Turkish Language Reform were valid for the period in which the reform was implemented, modern Turkish has naturally demonstrated resilience and adaptability. The challenges of artificiality, loss of cultural heritage, social disruption, and linguistic inconsistency have largely been overcome through the passage of time, usage, and linguistic evolution. Today, the Turkish language functions as a coherent and stable linguistic system, reflecting both the successes and adjustments of the reform.

COUNTER-ARGUMENTS

To provide a balanced discussion, it is important to address counterarguments to Geoffrey Lewis’s critiques by discussing how the challenges of the Turkish Language Reform have been overcome in various ways. These counterarguments reveal that the reform’s initial disruptions have been largely mitigated through organic adaptation, cultural reappropriation, practical success, and linguistic soundness.

- Organic Development of Modern Turkish: One of Lewis’s primary critiques is the perceived artificiality and lack of organic development in the newly introduced vocabulary during the reform. While it is true that many

neologisms, especially those created from obscure Turkic roots, were met with initial resistance, over time, the language has evolved organically. The principle of linguistic normalization, which is the natural acceptance of unfamiliar terms through consistent usage, has played a significant role in integrating these new words into everyday speech. Speakers have adapted to the reform-produced vocabulary in natural and unconscious ways, allowing these words to enter daily language use. For example, many terms that were initially considered artificial—such as uçak (airplane) and çeviri (translation)—are now indispensable in modern Turkish. These terms have been fully integrated into common discourse, as indicated by studies of lexical frequency and corpus analyses such as *Yazılı Türkçenin Kelime Sıklığı Sözlüğü* (Göz, 2020). This natural integration suggests that while the initial introduction of these words may have appeared forced, over time, their usage has become organic, disproving the case that these words would remain alien to speakers indefinitely.

- **Cultural Reappropriation in Modern Turkish:** Lewis's critique of the reform's impact on Turkey's linguistic and cultural heritage—due to the removal of Arabic and Persian loanwords—must also be reconsidered in light of how modern Turkish has developed a distinct cultural and literary identity. The Turkish Language Reform did indeed break away from the Ottoman linguistic past, but this has allowed modern Turkish to forge a cultural identity more reflective of the contemporary, secular Turkish Republic. In the process, a uniquely modern Turkish literature, music, and public discourse have emerged, embracing new words while still retaining selective elements of Ottoman vocabulary in specialized contexts. Moreover, while some Ottoman terms were removed, the cultural reappropriation of Turkish has led to a vibrant literary and artistic scene that expresses the realities of contemporary Turkish society. Many authors write in modern Turkish, blending the new vocabulary with cultural references that resonate with modern Turkish citizens. This demonstrates that the loss of some historical terms did not result in a diminished cultural identity, but rather in a redefined one that is in line with modern Turkey's values and its forward-looking orientation (Salehi, 2020).

- **Successful Linguistic and Practical Adaptation:** A central part of Lewis's critique concerns the practical difficulties and social disruption caused by the reform. In the early stages, this disruption was undeniably present, particularly as older generations faced challenges in learning the new vocabulary. However, these difficulties were largely short-lived. Over subsequent decades, post-reform generations have grown up with the reformed language as their native tongue, demonstrating fluency and ease in using the standardized language. Educational reforms that accompanied the linguistic changes ensured that the modified language was taught systematically from primary school onwards, thus avoiding long-term practical barriers. By the mid-20th century, literacy rates in Turkey had significantly increased, reflecting the successful adoption of the language by younger generations. Today, there are no significant difficulties in daily communication, administration, or education, showing that the practical challenges seen by Lewis did not persist beyond the initial phase of the reform. This generational fluency has led to a stable and coherent linguistic environment, where speakers navigate the modern lexicon without significant challenges. The success of the language in educational and administrative settings is a testament to the reform's long-term practical viability.

- **Linguistic Soundness and Systematicity:** Lewis also criticized the reform for introducing changes that, in his view, lacked linguistic soundness, especially where phonological and morphological consistency was concerned. However, this critique can be countered by examining how the reform streamlined Turkish linguistics by reducing the influence of Arabic and Persian phonological and morphological patterns, which were often at odds with the natural structure of Turkish. By eliminating complex Arabic and Persian phonemes and grammatical structures, the reform led to a more systematic and internally consistent language. The removal of non-Turkic grammatical features and inflections has made Turkish more uniform in its use of suffixes and phonotactics, in line with its agglutinative nature (Altun, 2022). In addition, the simplification of pronunciation rules and the standardization of the alphabet have made Turkish a more accessible and regular language, both for native speakers and learners. Examples such as the reform's handling of compound words or verb conjugations show how Turkish has become more streamlined and logical, with fewer exceptions to grammatical rules. This systematicity contrasts with the more irregular nature of Ottoman Turkish, where multiple linguistic systems (Turkic, Arabic, Persian) coexisted. As a result, while some of Lewis's concerns about linguistic soundness were valid at the outset, the long-term effect of the reform has been to make Turkish a more coherent and functionally sound language. The counterarguments to Geoffrey Lewis's critiques show that the Turkish Language Reform, despite its early challenges, has ultimately

succeeded in creating a coherent and functional language that is both culturally relevant and linguistically sound. The initial concerns about artificiality, loss of heritage, practical difficulties, and linguistic inconsistency have been mitigated over time as speakers have adapted to the reformed language. Modern Turkish, as it is used today, reflects an organic development process, a reappropriated cultural identity, successful practical application, and improved linguistic systematicity.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF LEXICAL INTEGRATION

One of the most tangible ways to assess the impact of the Turkish Language Reform is to examine the lexical composition of modern written Turkish. While precise frequency data for the pre-reform period does not exist, several scholarly estimates and historical sources offer insight into the dominance of foreign-origin words—particularly those from Arabic and Persian—within Ottoman Turkish. According to the linguist Ömer Asım Aksoy, who wrote the preface to *Öztürkçe Sözlük* (Püsküllüoğlu, 2002), only about 38% of the words found in pre-1932 Turkish dictionaries were of Turkic origin, with the overwhelming majority coming from Arabic and Persian. This estimate is echoed by other scholars, including Geoffrey Lewis (1999), who emphasized that prior to the reform, Arabic and Persian loanwords constituted the bulk of both literary and bureaucratic vocabulary. Kâmile İmer's lexical count of words (İmer, 1973, s. 181) used in five Turkish newspapers between 1931 and 1965 demonstrates a steady increase in the proportion of Turkic-origin words, rising from 35% in 1931 to 60.5% by 1965. In the same period, the share of Arabic-origin words fell from 51% to 26%. These findings, drawn from news language — a highly visible and widely consumed form of writing — confirm that the reform's goals were not merely ideological, but successfully translated into actual language use.

The present study draws on 'Word Frequency Dictionary of Written Turkish' (Göz, 2020), a corpus-based frequency dictionary that compiles the most common words in modern Turkish from a large collection of contemporary written texts. By identifying the etymological origins of the most frequent 1000 words, this analysis reveals that precisely 66% are of Turkic origin—representing a dramatic shift in the linguistic makeup of everyday Turkish and offering empirical support for the long-term success of the language reform. To further contextualize this lexical transformation, a breakdown of the foreign words among the 1000 most common words in Turkish language is provided below. The data includes each word's etymological classification (Arabic, Persian, European, or other). This breakdown not only highlights the reduction in Arabic and Persian influence but also illustrates how the reform has shaped the core vocabulary of Turkish speakers in the 21st century.

To reiterate; to assess the lexical consequences of the Turkish Language Reform, the 1000 most frequently used words in modern written Turkish have been examined in this paper, using (Göz, 2020) as a reference corpus. Among these high-frequency items, a total of 340 words of foreign origin have been identified and classified according to their etymological roots.

These include: Arabic (178 items): *ve, ama, kadar, insan, şey, zaman, dünya, hál, taraf, adam, bazı, hayat, fazla, an, yani, saat, devlet, sahip, kitap, aile, tam, halk, sokak, tarih, ar, madde, karar, hava, farklı, haber, Allah, şirket, devam (etmek), hareket, hak, tabi, müşteri, zaten, hatta, vücut, fakat, resim, hizmet, ihtiyaç, nokta, aslında, kabul (etmek), dikkat, dakika, hálá, derece, mümkün, sanat, kafa, rağmen, kısım, hissetmek, sabah, merkez, cevap, isim, hesap, davranış, mutfak, bazen, fiyat, hakkında, hazırlamak, sahip (olmak), hayır, hayvan, mal, kaybetmek, sayfa, cadde, sınıf, aşk, tekrar, kelime, bina, sebep, şiir, hükümet, kalp, şart, hazırlanmak, miktar, malzeme, beyaz, izin, meslek, fikir, fark, mahalle, mutlaka, ders, defa, fark (etmek), hedef, asıl, din, cilt, ruh, ifade, beden, hatırlamak, kaza, ciddi, belediye, faaliyet, zarar, seyretmek, mektup, acaba, ilaç, imkan, ceza, mekan, ait, kırmızı, hazır, sahne, adet, sanatçı, tercih (etmek), faiz, hikaye, hücre, hata, eser, sanayi, vatandaş, kere, millet, rahat, dükkan, mücadele, tedavi, cümle, mesele, eşya, tavır, dikkat (etmek), hafif, tehlike, vakit, daire, fırsat, tamamen, elbette, memur, ifade (etmek), cami, etraf, sene, kanun, cumhuriyet, tarz, müdür, zevk, hukuk, silah, talep, asker, basit, lazım, mevcut, mesela, ücret, asla, ticaret, cihaz, kahve, meclis, tamam, hayal, şarap, temiz.*

Persian (60 items): *her, ki, ya, hiç, hem, çünkü, diğer, para, sadece, hemen, zor, herkes, eğer, renk, parça, duvar, hastalık, can, çeşitli, köy, sanki, hasta, şehir, hafta, yabancı, cam, koca, kağıt, pazar, hız, köşe, meydan, bahçe,*

saye, yardım, hoş, hızlı, pencere, ateş, tane, dost, kenar, henüz, çeşit, canlı, hele, hoca, destek, hastahane, beraber, hızla, meyve, rüzgar, çerçeve, hepsi, paylaşmak, sert, zengin, laf, paşa.

European (predominantly French) (77 items): sıra, sistem, banka, grup, program, gazete, doktor, film, telefon, milyon, temel, kültür, lira, televizyon, masa, müzik, enerji, üniversite, spor, internet, teknik, trafik, otomobil, ekonomik, ekonomi, fotoğraf, teknoloji, sektör, sigara, parti, firma, proje, model, piyasa, polis, tip, numara, sinema, kontrol, plan, elektrik, salon, makine, maç, metre, kalite, kredi, kanal, normal, rol, eleman, politika, roman, sınır, otobüs, reklam, enflasyon, sosyal, gazeteci, problem, servis, milyar, mağaza, medya, sigorta, risk, demokrasi, organ, otel, modern, gaz, site, kilo, adres, marka, vitamin, kriz.

Compound or multi-word items (16 items): nasıl, veya, hiçbir, belki, herhangi bir, her şey, bir şey, her zaman, ağabey, uluslararası, son derece, her gün, cep telefonu, yardımcı olmak, yanı sıra, hareket etmek.

Mongolian (5 items): ülke, sol, üye, yasa, çağ. Sogdian (2 items): akşam, kent. Armenian (1 item): kötü. Chinese (1 item): çay.

The quantitative breakdown is presented in the following table. A full list of the 660 Turkic-origin words identified in the corpus analysis is provided in Appendix A.

Table 1. Quantitative breakdown of foreign etymologies in most frequently used 1000 words in Turkish

Origin	Count	Percentage
Arabic	178	17.8%
Persian	60	6.0%
European	77	7.7%
Mongolian	5	0.5%
Sogdian	2	0.2%
Compound	16	1.6%
Armenian	1	0.1%
Chinese	1	0.1%
Total Foreign	340	34.0%
Turkish	660	66.0%

In order to quantitatively assess the lexical impact of the Turkish Language Reform in actual usage, a diachronic comparison has been conducted between a passage from the original 1927 version of “Nutuk” and its modernized counterpart published in contemporary Turkish. Both passages, recounting the same historical event in nearly identical contexts, offer a suitable basis for a focused etymological analysis. Each lexical item was extracted and classified according to its etymological origin—namely Turkish, Arabic, French (or other European), and Other (including Mongolic or compound derivations)—to identify shifts in the lexical makeup of formal Turkish prose. The two versions of the passage examined are as follows:

Original 1927 text (Gazi Mustafa Kemal, 1934)

“Efendiler(O), fazla(A) mülâhazât-ı(A) sevkü'l-ceyşiyeden(A) ictinâb(A) tarafdârı(A) olmakla(T) beraber(O), Yunan ordusunun(T) bu(T) defaki(A) umumî(A) taarruz(A) plânında(E), nazar-ı(A) dikkati(A) çok(T) câlib(A) bir(T) hatayı(A) işaret(A) etmek(T) isterim(T). Yunan ordusunun Uşak grubu(E), Dumlupınar'dan sonra(T), Eskişehir istikamet-i(A) umumiyesinde yürümek(T) lâzımdı(A). Afyon üzerinden(T) Konya istikamet-i umumiyesinde teveccüh(A) etmesi, asıl(A) netice-i(A) katiye(A) sahasından(A) kuvvetlerini(A) uzaklaştırarak(T), onları(T) atıl(A) ve(A) tehlikeli(A) bir vaziyette(A) bırakmıştır(T). İnönü'nde, muvaffakiyet(A) bizim(T) tarafta(A) kaldıktan(T) sonra, bu kuvvetlerin kendilerini(T) tehlikeden kurtarmak(T) için(T) bir an(A) evvel(A) ve serian(E) ricâtlarını(A) temînden(A) başka(T) bir şey(A) düşünemeyeceklerine(T) şüphe(A) yoktu(T). İnönü'nde muzaffer(A) olan kuvvetlerimizin, Eskişehir, Altıntaş üzerinden Dumlupınar'a teveccüh ederek ve bu mesafenin(A) mühim(A) bir kısmında(A) şimendifer(E) hattından(A) azamî(A) istifade(A) mümkün(A) olduğuna göre(T), Afyonkarahisar'ın şarkında(A) bulunan(T) Yunan

grubunun hatt-ı ricâtını kat'(A) etmesi ve bu suretle(A) o(T) grubu büyük(T) bir felâkete(A) dūcâr(O) eylemesi(T) pek(T) kuvvetli bir ihtimal(A) dahilinde(A) idi. Nitekim(T), bu fikrin(A) tatbikatına(A) geçmekte(T) bir an teehhür(A) edilmemiştir. Derhal(O) Cenup(A) Cephesi(A) Kumandanı(E) Refet Paşa'nın(O) emrine(A), ilk(T) serbest(O) kalan fırkalar(A) verilerek(T) tahrik(A) edilmiştir”.

Contemporary version (Gazi Mustafa Kemal (eds. Bayramoğlu, Kurtuluş), 2015)

“Efendiler(O), askerî(A) strateji(E) konusunda(T) fazla(A) düşünce(T) ileri(T) sürmekten(T) kaçınma(T) taraftarı(A) olmakla(T) birlikte(T) Yunan ordusunun(T) bu(T) defaki(A) genel(T) taarruz(A) plânında(E) göze(T) çarpan(T) bir(T) yanılmaya(T) işaret(A) etmek(T) isterim(T). Yunan ordusunun Uşak grubunun(E), Dumlupınar'dan sonra(T), Eskişehir'e doğru(T) yürümesi(T) gerekirdi(T). Afyon üzerinden(T) Konya'ya doğru yönelmesi(T), kuvvetlerini(A) asıl(A) kesin(T) sonuç(T) alacağı(T) alandan(T) uzaklaştırarak(T), işe(T) yaramaz(T) ve(A) tehlikeli(A) bir durumda(T) bırakmıştır(T). İnönü'ndeki başarı(T) bizim(T) tarafta(A) kaldıktan(T) sonra, bu kuvvetlerin, kendilerini(T) tehlikeden kurtarmak(T) için(T) bir an(A) önce(T) süratle(A) geri(T) çekilmelerini(T) sağlamaktan(T) başka(T) bir şey(A) düşünmeyeceklerine şüphe(A) yoktu(T). İnönü'nde zafer(A) kazanan(T) kuvvetlerimiz, Eskişehir, Altıntaş üzerinden Dumlupınar'a yönelerek bu mesafenin(A) önemli(T) bir kısmında(A) demiryolundan(T) fazlasıyla yararlanma(T) imkânı(A) bulunduğu(T) göre(T), Afyonkarahisar'ın doğusunda(T) bulunan Yunan grubu geri çekilme hattını kesebilir(T) ve böylece(T), pek(T) büyük(T) bir ihtimalle(A) o(T) grubu büyük bir felâkete(A) uğratabilirdi(T). Nitekim(T), bu düşüncenin uygulanmasına(T) geçmekte(T) bir an gecikilmemiştir(T). İlk(T) serbest(O) kalan tümenler(T) derhal(O) Güney(T) Cephesi(A) Komutanı(T) Refet Paşa'nın(O) emrine(A) verilerek(T) harekete(A) geçirilmiştir”.

A full lexical analysis of both passages has been conducted, in which lexically significant items (excluding syntactic particles, auxiliary verbs, and proper nouns) were examined and categorized according to their etymological origins. The findings are summarized below: In the original 1927 text (97 lexical items), 56.7% of the words are of Arabic origin, 32% are of Turkish origin, 5.2% are derived from French or other European languages, and 6.2% are categorized as Other (including hybrid formations). In the modern version (96 lexical items), 67.7% are of Turkish origin, 25% are of Arabic origin, 3.1% remain of French/European origin, and 4.2% are Other.

Table 2. Original vs Contemporary etymology of a small passage from Nutuk

Etymological Origin	1927 Version	Modern Version	Change
Turkish	32%	67.7%	+35.7%
Arabic	56.7%	25%	-31.7%
French/European	5.2%	3.1%	-2.1%
Other	6.2%	4.2%	-2%

The transformation evidenced in this comparison illustrates the practical outcome of the reform's lexicon-planning efforts. Not only has Arabic-origin vocabulary been largely replaced, but the Turkish lexicon has expanded to accommodate formerly borrowed concepts. French-origin vocabulary, predominantly derived from 19th-century borrowings during the Tanzimat and post-Tanzimat periods, remains relatively stable.

An important nuance regarding the diachronic comparison of the Nutuk passage is that the modern version analyzed in this study does not reflect any deliberate effort to maximize linguistic purity or eliminate non-Turkish elements. It was not produced as a purist rewriting but simply as an accessible version of the original text, adapted into contemporary 21st-century Turkish for optimal clarity and comprehension. Had the goal been to consciously maximize the use of purely Turkic roots, the percentage would likely have been much higher.

Conclusion

The frequent critique that the Turkish Language Reform made the language less nuanced or “poorer” overlooks a foundational principle in modern linguistics: no natural language is inherently richer or more expressive than another (Sapir 1921; McWhorter 2001; Crystal 2010). The loss of Arabic or Persian-origin vocabulary does not equate to a loss in expressive potential. Turkish, like all living languages, adapts to the communicative needs of its

speakers. When needed, new words are coined, borrowed, or semantically expanded. In this sense, the reform did not impoverish Turkish, it catalyzed a shift in its expressive resources, aligned with national and ideological goals.

The important observation arising from this study is the internal coherence between the two quantitative analyses presented. Both the frequency-based corpus analysis of the 1000 most common words in modern Turkish and the diachronic comparison between the 1927 and modern versions of *Nutuk* arrive at strikingly similar conclusions. In both cases, the percentage of Turkic-origin vocabulary stabilizes around 66–68%, while Arabic-origin words have been significantly reduced. The consistency of these findings across two very different textual sources — one based on aggregated contemporary written texts and the other on a historical speech passage — reinforces the reliability of the overall argument. Together, they demonstrate that the lexical consequences of the reform were not limited to ideological intentions or selective registers, but have become firmly embedded in the core vocabulary of written Turkish.

It must be emphasized that the quantitative findings presented in this study do not, in themselves, constitute a full refutation of Geoffrey Lewis's critique. Indeed, many of Lewis's remarks — particularly those concerning the abruptness, social disruption, and artificiality of certain early reform efforts — remain valid when considered in their historical context. However, what the present analysis demonstrates is that the long-term outcomes of the reform are not as catastrophic as once feared. Over time, the language reform has been nativized: its neologisms have stabilized, its structural tendencies have been internalized by successive generations, and its originally controversial vocabulary has become normalized in both official and everyday discourse. Rather than collapsing under the weight of engineered change, modern Turkish has emerged as a linguistically functional and culturally resonant medium — one whose core vocabulary now reflects both a break from, and an adaptation of, its Ottoman past.

While this paper focuses on written language, future research could expand these findings by investigating spoken Turkish. A comparative etymological analysis of spontaneous speech, such as conversational corpora, television dialogue, or social media language, would further illuminate whether the reform's impact extends equally into the domain of informal or colloquial Turkish. Unlike written language, spoken language tends to evolve more freely and can retain older forms or introduce new borrowings more rapidly. It would be valuable to examine whether the high proportion of Turkic-origin vocabulary observed in written texts also characterizes speech, or whether a different lexical profile emerges. Such a study would offer a fuller picture of the reform's linguistic reach and highlight the dynamic interface between official language policy and actual language use in everyday life. Another promising line of inquiry could involve regional dialects or non-standard varieties of Turkish. Given that many Anatolian dialects were already more Turkic in nature before the reform, as discussed earlier, a regional comparison might reveal whether the reform merely formalized existing tendencies or introduced radical change into the standard language. Likewise, corpus-based studies on Turkish as spoken by different generations could help quantify the pace and depth of lexical integration over time.

Beyond quantitative measures, several broader considerations also deserve attention when evaluating the long-term consequences of the Turkish Language Reform. One key dimension is sociolinguistic: despite the lexical shifts documented in this study, language users may still perceive reform-generated words and pre-reform (often Arabic or Persian) words differently. For example, older speakers or individuals from more religiously conservative backgrounds may retain a preference for Arabic-based forms, particularly in domains such as religion, philosophy, or law. This divergence in lexical preference raises important questions about the social embeddedness of lexical change and the potential stratification of vocabulary use across demographic groups. Additionally, the issue of lexical productivity is relevant: the reformed Turkish lexicon is not static but continues to evolve, with native Turkic morphemes such as *-lik*, *-sal*, and *-ci* frequently used to coin new expressions in scientific, technological, and political discourse. This productive use of Turkish roots and affixes is a sign of linguistic vitality and suggests that the reform did not merely purge foreign elements but fostered conditions for internal creativity and expansion. Semantic field analysis could further enrich this picture, as certain areas of vocabulary — especially scientific or academic terminology — still tend to rely more heavily on European or international borrowings, while everyday language and administrative terminology are more consistently Turkified. Finally, the pedagogical implications of the reform cannot be overlooked: the simplification and systematization of Turkish vocabulary have made the

language more accessible in formal education settings, likely contributing to higher literacy and facilitating language acquisition for both native speakers and learners of Turkish as a foreign language. Together, these perspectives offer a richer understanding of the reform's legacy, extending beyond lexical counts into domains of identity, education, and linguistic innovation.

In conclusion, the findings of this study support the view that the Turkish Language Reform achieved much of what it set out to do in terms of lexical restructuring. The significant increase in Turkish-origin vocabulary observed across both corpus-based frequency analysis and historical text comparison demonstrates not only the success of language policy but also the degree to which these reforms have become embedded in everyday written usage. While criticisms of artificiality and disruption are not unfounded, the long-term effects reveal a lexicon that is functionally robust, internally generative, and widely embraced across registers. Further research into spoken Turkish, generational variation, and regional dialects would complement these findings and allow for a fuller picture of the reform's sociolinguistic impact. Ultimately, the Turkish case illustrates how deliberate language reform, when sustained over time and coupled with educational and institutional support, can lead to a deep and lasting transformation in national linguistic identity.

Discussion

Language is never neutral. The Turkish Language Reform was not only a top-down lexical intervention but also a radical act of language ideology—a set of beliefs about what language should be, and what kind of society it should support. As scholars like Woolard (1998) and Silverstein (1979) have emphasized, language ideology plays a central role in shaping how languages are evaluated, restructured, and legitimized, especially in post-imperial or nation-building contexts.

In the case of Turkey, the reform was driven by an ideology that saw Arabic and Persian influences not simply as foreign linguistic elements, but as remnants of a religious and imperial past incompatible with the secular, modernist vision of the Republic. What emerged was a new linguistic hierarchy: Turkic roots were valorized as pure and indigenous, while Arabic and Persian were devalued as corrupting or regressive. This ideological orientation was not hidden; it was central to the reform's discourse, often expressed in the language of purification (*özleştirme*), modernization, and national rebirth.

Blommaert (1999) reminds us that language ideologies are not abstract constructs; they are embedded in institutions and reproduced through everyday practices—education, media, publishing, and state policy. In this light, the Turkish Language Association (TDK) functioned as more than a scholarly body. It was an institutional engine of ideological production, shaping not only vocabulary but also the moral and political significance attached to words. It encouraged speakers to internalize the idea that choosing certain words over others was a patriotic act—a stance that continues to influence how some speakers navigate Turkish today.

Moreover, the internalization of reform-generated vocabulary over time can be seen not just as a triumph of policy, but also as an index of ideological success. As modern Turkish speakers use neologisms without second thought, they are participating in a language ideology that has become naturalized, even invisible. This echoes Silverstein's notion of the "indexical order" of language—how forms carry with them not only meaning, but social positioning. In Turkish, certain lexical choices still mark one's political identity, educational background, or ideological leanings, suggesting that the effects of language reform are far from over.

The Turkish Language Reform stands as one of the most ambitious cases of language engineering in modern history. Far from being a mere lexical update, it was a project of linguistic nationalism—a deliberate effort to redefine national identity through the medium of language. In this sense, it shares important conceptual ground with other 20th-century efforts such as the revival of Hebrew in Israel, the Sanskritization of Hindi in India, or post-Soviet language policies in Central Asia.

Language engineering, as a concept, involves the deliberate manipulation of linguistic forms to achieve political, cultural, or ideological goals. This typically includes script changes, lexical purification, standardization, and the promotion of new language norms through state institutions. As Schiffman (1996) and others have noted, such

projects are rarely about language alone—they are about who belongs, whose history is valued, and what kind of nation is being imagined.

In Turkey, the reform aimed to sever the symbolic and structural ties between the language and its Ottoman past. By replacing loanwords with Turkic neologisms, and by shifting to the Latin alphabet, the reform did not just change how Turkish looked and sounded—it altered what it meant to be Turkish. Language became a proxy battlefield for competing visions of modernity, secularism, and historical continuity. In this respect, the reform was not just a tool of modernization but a mechanism of identity construction.

The ideological underpinnings of the reform were also distinctly monoglossic: one language, one nation, one people. This model of linguistic nationalism, rooted in European romantic ideals but filtered through Kemalist pragmatism, regrettably left little room for multilingualism or linguistic hybridity. The language was to be standardized, centralized, and Turkified—a vision that marginalized not only Arabic and Persian, but also minority languages like Kurdish, Armenian, and Greek.

Yet, engineered languages often evolve in ways that escape or exceed the intentions of their architects. Over time, the Turkish lexicon has reabsorbed certain foreign terms, adapted others, and generated new forms through productive derivation. In this way, Turkish continues to be both a product of planning and a site of vernacular creativity. The tension between top-down reform and bottom-up usage is not a failure of the policy, but a feature of how language works as a living system.

Thus, what appears on the surface as a successful language reform is, on closer inspection, a complex negotiation between ideology, identity, and the unpredictable trajectories of linguistic change. The Turkish experience offers a particularly vivid case study of how deeply entwined language and nationhood can be—and how enduring the effects of linguistic engineering are, even decades after the policy moment has passed.

Summary

The Turkish Language Reform, launched in 1928 under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, aimed to modernize and nationalize the Turkish language by replacing the Arabic script with a modified Latin alphabet and eliminating Arabic and Persian loanwords in favor of terms derived from Turkic roots or other Turkic languages. It was driven by a broader ideological ambition to sever cultural ties with the Ottoman-Islamic past and construct a secular, unified, and modern national identity. The Turkish Language Association, established in 1932, spearheaded this linguistic transformation through systematic vocabulary creation and standardization.

Geoffrey Lewis, in his influential critique titled *The Turkish Language Reform: A Catastrophic Success*, acknowledges the reform's technical achievements, such as increased literacy and modernization, but he argues that it caused a severe rupture in cultural continuity. According to Lewis, the abrupt imposition of neologisms, the loss of rich inherited vocabulary, and the difficulty of intergenerational communication rendered the reform "catastrophic," even if it met its formal objectives. He laments the "vocabulary engineering" that replaced organically evolved words with artificial constructs and sees it as a disruption of Turkey's intellectual and literary heritage.

However, recent linguistic scholarship and corpus-based studies contest many of Lewis's conclusions. While the reform did introduce artificial words, many of them have since become fully naturalized and are widely used in contemporary Turkish without any perceived awkwardness. Words like *bilgisayar* (computer) or *çeviri* (translation), once seen as forced, are now central to Turkish vocabulary. Frequency analysis of modern written Turkish shows that the majority of commonly used words today are of Turkic origin, suggesting that the lexical shift has been not only accepted but internalized by speakers over generations.

The fear of cultural erasure also appears overstated. While the reform did eliminate many Arabic and Persian terms from everyday use, much of the Ottoman vocabulary remains preserved in specialized registers, such as law, religion, and classical literature. Furthermore, public interest in Ottoman Turkish has grown in recent years, and educational initiatives have attempted to bridge the historical gap. Rather than a total break, the reform has led to a hybrid linguistic identity in which modern Turkish maintains select connections to its past while asserting its own character.

Lewis's concern about disrupted intergenerational communication was relevant in the early decades of the reform, but this was a transitional problem. As the reformed Turkish was systematically taught through the education system, younger generations quickly adapted to the new norms. Today, the standard language is consistent, functional, and widely used across all social domains. Rather than creating lasting fragmentation, the reform ultimately facilitated mass literacy and linguistic cohesion.

Another of Lewis's criticisms—that the reform introduced inconsistency into Turkish's phonology and morphology—has also been challenged. While some early neologisms were poorly integrated, the language gradually regularized itself. Today's Turkish is more structurally consistent than its Ottoman predecessor, whose mixed Arabic-Persian elements often conflicted with Turkish grammar. The reform reinstated the agglutinative core of Turkish, promoting internal systematicity and expanding productive affixation for word formation.

Historical context further weakens the idea that the reform imposed an alien tongue. Ottoman Turkish had already diverged significantly from the spoken vernaculars of Anatolia, which retained a more Turkic character. In that sense, the reform elevated "folk Turkish" to the level of official discourse rather than replacing a native language with something new. The move to purify vocabulary reflected not only top-down ideology but also grassroots linguistic intuition.

Quantitative evidence supports the scope and durability of lexical change. Comparative analysis of Atatürk's 1927 *Nutuk* with its modernized version shows a dramatic decline in Arabic-derived vocabulary and a corresponding rise in Turkic-origin words. A 2019 corpus analysis confirms that two-thirds of the 1,000 most frequent words in contemporary Turkish are Turkic in origin, with Arabic and Persian terms now forming a small minority. These shifts, consistent across sources, indicate that the reform achieved deep structural change, not merely surface-level adjustments.

Ideologically, the reform was part of a nationalist project that viewed language as a vehicle for constructing identity. The elimination of Arabic script and vocabulary symbolized Turkey's turn away from Islamic civilization and toward Western modernity. This nationalist vision prioritized monolingualism, standardization, and linguistic purity, often at the expense of regional dialects and minority languages. Yet over time, this rigidity gave way to more pragmatic adaptations, with the language evolving in response to real-world usage.

Despite its origins in centralized authority, the long-term success of the reform was driven by ordinary speakers who adapted and contributed to its evolution. The reformed Turkish language has proven dynamic and resilient, capable of generating new vocabulary through native affixes and integrating foreign terms as needed. In contrast to predictions of impoverishment, modern Turkish is lexically rich and semantically versatile. While the reform undoubtedly entailed loss—especially in terms of literary heritage—it also opened new possibilities for mass education, political discourse, and scientific development.

In sum, the Turkish Language Reform was a radical and ideologically charged intervention that ultimately succeeded in reconfiguring the linguistic landscape. While early criticisms such as those by Lewis captured genuine tensions, they underestimated the adaptive capacity of language and its speakers. Over time, Turkish has not only stabilized but flourished, evolving into a cohesive national language that reflects both historical rupture and creative renewal.

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Appendix: A full list of the 660 Turkic-origin words identified in the corpus analysis

Appendix A

bir	olmak	bu	için	o
ben	demek	çok	yapmak	ne
gibi	daha	almak	var	kendi
gelmek	ile	vermek	sonra	yer
en	değil	istemek	yıl	çıkmaq
görmek	gün	biz	götmek	iş
ara	bilmek	el	çocuk	iki
bakmak	çalışmak	içinde	büyük	yok
başlamak	yol	kalmak	neden	siz
konu	yapılmak	iyi	kadın	ev
ise	diye	bulunmak	söylemek	göz
gerekmek	dünya	baş	durum	yan
geçmek	sen	onlar	yeni	önce
başka	orta	su	girmek	yemek
bile	bütün	karşı	bulmak	böyle
yaşamak	düşünmek	iç	ancak	kişi
bunlar	ilk	göre	ön	son
biri	önemli	yüz	göstermek	etmek
alt	getirmek	kullanmak	şimdi	onun
artık	üzerinde	ses	hep	doğru
durmak	kız	tüm	çekmek	konuşmak
anlamak	anne	az	baba	küçük
bilgi	sormak	bunun	öyle	yine
sağlamak	sonuç	kullanılmak	dış	ad
süre	dönmek	açmak	oturmak	anlatmak
bırakmak	yaş	sorun	yazmak	yüzde
ay	atmak	tutmak	bunu	olay
düşmek	duymak	söz	güzel	sevmek
biraz	çıkarmak	şu	koymak	tek
birlikte	verilmek	kim	alınmak	genç
kapı	üzerine	burada	gece	alan
birbiri	işte	beklemek	uzun	bugün
dönem	arkadaş	ürün	üç	okumak
erkek	güç	gerçek	ilgili	ilişki
çevre	eski	aramak	yaşam	yakın
bey	özellik	bölüm	özel	kimse
pek	gerek	özellikle	anlam	yüksek
kez	ayak	taşımak	geri	toplum
araç	tür	görölmek	sayı	oda

biçim	oluşmak	ayrıca	gelen	birkaç
soru	arka	kazanmak	yazı	okul
açık	öğrenmek	sürmek	dil	kaynak
bitmek	açılmak	inanmak	çalışma	açı
oluşturmak	değer	tanımak	yapı	gelir
görev	amaç	bölge	üzere	eğitim
deniz	ikinci	kalkmak	etki	gelişmek
geçen	düşünce	oynamak	değişmek	yaratmak
ulaşmak	sanmak	geçirmek	kurmak	buna
ışık	içmek	hanım	yön	evet
oyun	artmak	yeniden	işlem	kısa
kolay	hangi	oran	orada	uzak
bilgisayar	gelecek	görünmek	örneğin	oğul
dinlemek	uygun	üretim	unutmak	yürümek
böylece	araba	ağız	duygu	uygulamak
birçok	izlemek	şöyle	on	ana
öğrenci	yöntem	ölmek	takım	üst
ayrılmak	türlü	ölüm	sürekli	sağlık
bundan	oysa	dışarı	ortam	yerine
düzey	yönetim	aşağı	yatmak	toprak
araştırma	götürmek	katılmak	yoksa	kurulmak
ödemek	kan	inmek	sunmak	bilinmek
belli	ayrı	kaldırmak	kol	yalnız
sonunda	yavaş	gerekli	önem	yanlış
varlık	art	ilgi	sana	satış
içeri	doğal	acı	korumak	kat
genel	belirtmek	savaş	saç	kalan
değiştirmek	dört	gerçekten	kurum	beş
geniş	koku	sağ	sıcak	yüzyıl
sürdürmek	kullanım	doğmak	ağır	güneş
ağaç	eş	kaçmak	yatak	yazar
kulak	öğretmen	peki	yağ	yüzden
anlaşılmak	varmak	gülmek	kural	satmak
göndermek	başarı	kesmek	vurmak	balık
görüş	bura	birinci	ölçü	seçmek
uygulanmak	sevgi	ekmek	boyunca	koşmak
dolu	kuruluş	korkmak	karşılaşmak	köpek
ünlü	büyüme	dolaşmak	oldukça	üstelik
yaşanmak	istek	öte	denmek	kardeş
çekilmek	nerede	çalmak	korku	yalnızca
açıklamak	uğramak	taş	yetmek	çoğu
kimi	koşul	üretmek	üstüne	dayanmak

ince	kaç	ortak	görüntü	beri
başkan	karşılık	kurtulmak	edilmek	batı
değişik	uyumak	yanmak	anlayış	basmak
çevirmek	güçlü	beyin	karı	üstünde
et	sağlanmak	söylenmek	çizgi	uç
sevgili	yaklaşmak	süreç	bakış	bilim
ileri	iyice	dağ	kapatmak	adım
çözüm	etkilemek	gelişme	seçim	ağlamak
bağlı	kavram	artırmak	derin	kesilmek
birden	içermek	sayılmak	toplamak	aşmak
bağırmak	sorumluluk	davranmak	soğuk	idi
yararlanmak	yaşlı	boş	yönetici	getirilmek
tutulmak	bitki	değişiklik	başarılı	birer
incelemek	top	uzman	doldurmak	uymak
yıllık	dolayısıyla	yazılmak	parmak	saymak
atılmak	belirlemek	ilke	şarkı	benzemek
boy	günlük	suç	niye	sokmak
koltuk	kurtarmak	uzanmak	aşama	eklemek
orman	ayırmak	düzen	genellikle	ora
vergi	yakmak	basın	giymek	birlik
karşılama	yarı	yeterli	birey	karanlık
bebek	bakan	yükselmek	boyut	dergi
birisi	geçmiş	olma	toplantı	içerisi
inanç	nitelik	üzeri	bitirmek	gerçekleşmek
giriş	toplam	gizli	benzer	deri
dönüşmek	yeşil	bakanlık	baskı	tepki
dilemek	özgürlük	gene	kimlik	üçüncü
belirlenmek	değerlendirmek	ilginç	sürücü	süt
yakalamak	aday	ağırlık	sağlıklı	sıkıntı
tanrı	toplumsal	yayın	toplanmak	yatırım
karışmak	işlemek	karıştırmak	katkı	öykü
uçak	yanıt	doğa	evlenmek	burun
çıkart	işçi	işletme	kısaca	yüzünden
artış	çıkartılmak	kamu	yaz	yürek
belge	çaba	söz etmek	sözcük	tuz
düşük	olanak	öldürmek	öteki	bozulmak
ilgilenmek	meyve	takılmak	tatlı	bacak
değişim	geliştirmek	yedi	azalmak	bağlamak
iletişim	yayımlanmak	binmek	güvenlik	kılmak
okur	yıldız	yoğun	denilmek	uygulama
üretilmek	bayan	besin	dün	görüştük
yaklaşık	alışveriş	bilinç	tüketici	uzatmak

yönelik	at	bağlanmak	neredeysse	abla
çiçek	saygı	yetenek	gider	kesin
örgüt	yaptırmak	boyun	denge	giderek
sırt	dolayı	kas	önceki	uğraşmak
belirtilmek	sıcaklık	güven	yaprak	yarar
yayılmak	akmak	çizmek	düşünölmek	gönöl
ilerlemek	yukarıda	altın	düzenlemek	satın almak
sunulmak	ek	geç	yumurta	aşırı
eylem	istenmek	kesim	birim	kapanmak