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# Plural agreement in Turkish

Mark Kirchner

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The following research discusses some previous papers, studies and remarks on 3rd person plural agreement between subject and predicate in Turkish. It is shown that the position of the subject on the scale of agentivity determines, beside length and vicinity factors, the choice of plural agreement. These general agreement conditions can be overruled in specific text types and contexts. The paper closes with some remarks on Turkish-Persian and Turkic similarities in the field of plural agreement.

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Valuable detailed, but less systematic, observations on 3rd person plural agreement between subject and predicate in Turkish were made in Gencan's "Dilbilgisi" ([1966] 1979: 90-95).<sup>1</sup> Lewis' (1967: 246) description is more structured in claiming that inanimate plural subjects take singular verbs, whereas plural verbs are used "with animate subjects or with inanimates personified". An animate plural subject can take a singular verb if it represents "a number of people acting as one". Furthermore Lewis establishes the distance between subject and predicate as a factor that can override non-agreement. This factor was discussed by Göksel (1987). It was shown "that native speakers are reluctant to omit the third person plural agreement marker in sentences where the subject is separated from the verb by embedded clauses or phrases" (Göksel 1987: 71). Sezer's article "Eylemlerin çoğul öznelerle uyumu" (1978) focussed on the semantics of the subject, showing that in addition to the animateness of the subject, its agentivity is a precondition for agreement. Kornfilt (1987: 634-635) treats plural agreement in sentences with overt subject as optional, non-agreement being stylistically preferred. This stylistic preference "strengthens to the point of almost a grammatical prohibition ... when the subject is inanimate." In "Turkish" (1997: 386-387) Kornfilt points to the fact that the acceptability of plural agreement deteriorates according to the animacy scale, that is human, non-human animate, inanimate. The most elaborate study on number-agreement is Schroeder's dissertation on "The Turkish nominal phrase in spoken discourse" (1999) that contains a chapter on "number (non)-agreement" (111-125). Besides treating distinctness

<sup>1</sup> Similar observations in Dizdaroğlu's "Tümcebilgisi" (1976: 68-74).

and humanness in connection with agentivity as factors involved in plural agreement, Schroeder deals with the relationship between discourse topics and subjects and proposes topicality to be of importance for agreement.

In the following I will discuss some of the proposed rules of agreement, in an attempt to arrive at a simplified approach for the understanding of 3rd person plural agreement between subject and predicate in Turkish. After that, it will be shown that there is a considerable variance concerning agreement in different types of spoken and written discourse. This paper will be concluded with some remarks on 3rd person plural agreement from a broader Turcologic and areal perspective.

The point of departure for our discussion is an example quoted by Gencan (1979: 94) and Lewis (1967: 246) that shows plural agreement though its subject is inanimate.

- (1) *Ağaçlar yüzümüze konfeti atıyorlar.*  
 tree-PL face-POSS.1PL-DAT confetti throw-PRS.3PL  
 ‘The trees are throwing confetti into our faces.’

Subjects of this type are considered a personified inanimate (Lewis 1967: 246) or a “metaphorical extension of the ‘humanness’ parameter” (Schroeder 1999: 118). What actually triggers plural agreement in (1) is the fact that the subject *ağaçlar* has the role of an agent. The question whether the subject is human or not is of secondary importance. In the context of religious legends, for instance, “throwing trees” or even “running trees”, which would be conceived as “personified” inanimates actually act on the same level as human beings and should not be discriminated against by grammatical rules (2).

- (2) *Çünkü Âdem kendüyi ol hâlde gördi yürüdü*  
 when Adam REFL-ACC that situation-LOC see-PRT.3SG run-PRT.3SG  
*ki ağaçlardan yapraq ala. Ağaçlar andan*  
 in-order-to tree-PL-ABL leaf take-OPT Tree-PL he-ABL  
*qaçdılar, yapraq vermediler.* (Kıyas-ı Enbiyâ, 131)  
 flee-PRT.3PL leaf give-NEG-PRT.3PL  
 ‘When Adam saw himself in this situation he ran in order to tear off leaves from the trees. The trees fled from him and did not give any leaf.’

In addition, agentivity explains agreement in sentences with subjects such as “planes” or “ships”. Göksel (1987: 70), for instance, needs some additional lines to describe the referent of subjects of that type as “an inanimate entity composed of human beings” or as an entity that “embodies human beings”. Agentivity, especially the position on the scale of agentivity, may also explain plural non-agreement of the second predication in (3).

- (3) *Ekşer gemiler varurlar ol*  
 most ship-PL arrive-AOR.3PL that  
*köyün önünde yatur.* (Piri Reis 1, 298)  
 village front-POSS.3SG-LOC lie-AOR.3SG  
 'Most ships arrive before this village and drop anchor here.'

While the ship's approach of the harbour is a volitional action, riding at anchor has less actionality and control and is therefore low on the scale of agentivity (cf. Givón 1984: 88-89). Agentivity helps to explain several restrictions on plural agreement which are hard to explain on the basis of the humanness-feature. Schroeder points to that and notes that passive sentences in spoken Turkish "never show agreement" because "the subject expresses the patient of the action" (Schroeder 1999: 118):

- (4) *Bu arkadaşlar ... Karaköy*  
 this friend-PL Karaköy  
*piyasasında ... kandırılıyor.* (Schroeder 1999: 118)  
 market-POSS.3SG-LOC cheat-PASS-PRS.3SG  
 'These friends are cheated in the Karaköy market.'

The agentivity claim is strengthened by the fact that petrified passives such as *katılmak*, derived from *katmak*, do not fit this rule:

- (5) *Çocuklar kampanyaya katıldılar.*  
 child-PL campaign-DAT take-part(PASS)-PRT.3PL  
 'The children took part in the campaign.'

On the other hand the reflexive verb *görünmek* causes a less agentive interpretation of the following sentence from a novel by Yakup Kadri and leads to plural non-agreement:

- (6) *Bütün gezinenler, hattâ eşekler üstünde*  
 all stroll-PART-PL even donkey-PL top-POSS.3SG-LOC  
*koşuşanlar bile mahzun görünüyordu.* (Kıralık konak, 62-63)  
 ride-PART-PL even sad look(REFL)-PRS.PRT.3SG  
 'All those people who were strolling and even those riding donkeys looked sad.'

Plural agreement can be blocked or restricted in sentences without verbal predicate. This is caused by the fact that the subject of these sentences is in most cases a patient-of-state, even when it is animate or human (Givón 1984: 91).

- (7) *Kızlar çalışkan.*<sup>2</sup>  
 girl-PL hardworking  
 'The girls are hardworking.'

In the discussion of "tense/aspect and mood affinities with respect to agreement and non-agreement", Schroeder (1999: 119) noticed that the negated aorist has a propensity to non-agreement.<sup>3</sup> This is more likely a result of the low agentivity of a subject that does not act than an influence of tense, aspect or mood (8).

- (8) *Velî büyük barçalar girmez.* (Piri Reis 1, 291)<sup>4</sup>  
 but large bargia-PL enter-NEG.AOR.3SG  
 'Large bargias cannot enter it.'

Generally, agentivity is more suitable for explaining plural agreement on the predicate than the humanness- or animateness-feature. Apart from that, several "exceptions" to the agreement rules for passive and nominal clauses, etc. can be explained in a more adequate way using agentivity as the central criterion.

However, it should not be forgotten that the intended interpretation of the plural-marked subject as consisting of distinct referents is a prerequisite for the application of the agentivity rule. While in (9) the referents of the subject may be interpreted as acting collectively, they can be interpreted as acting individually in (10):

- (9) *Lokantacılar zam istiyor.* (Gencan 1979, 94)  
 restaurant-keeper-PL mark-up want-PRS.3SG  
 'The restaurant keepers are calling for a mark-up.'

- (10) *Lokantacılar zam istiyorlar.*  
 restaurant-keeper-PL mark-up want-PRS.3PL  
 Cf. (9).

Length factors were included in the agreement rules by Lewis (1967) and Göksel (1987), but are not mentioned in recent grammars or studies (Kornfilt 1997, Schroeder 1999). Johanson (1998: 37) refers to a related phenomenon, mentioning "the

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion cf. Underhill (1976: 33) and Göksel (1987: 73). In this context it should be noted that the existential and non-existential adjectives *var* and *yok* behave differently with regard to plural marking. While *var* generally does not take plural suffixes even when there is no overt subject, this is possible in some contexts for *yok*.

<sup>3</sup> In this context Schroeder mentions an "opposition between a tense/aspect marker expressing no definite time space vs. a tense/aspect marker expressing a definite time space". The proposed opposition may result from a literal understanding of the term "aorist", but has little to do with the Turkish system of tense and aspect.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. (3): ... *gemiler varurlar* ...

typical feature” of Turkic languages “to use morphological devices economically and avoid redundancy”. This leads to a “tendency to avoid two plural markers very close to each other” (Johanson 1998: 53).<sup>5</sup> Vicinity of subject and predicate can be caused, among other things, by a marked constituent order. For instance:

- (11) *Deriyi en çok Romenler alıyor.* (Schroeder 1999: 116)  
 leather-ACC SUP much Romanian-PL buy-PRS.3SG  
 ‘It’s the Romanians who buy most leather.’

In (11) “the accusative-marked object *deri* ... is the topic. The new information is contained in the subject.” Sentences like this may suggest the interpretation that there is no agreement when “topic and subject do not coincide”, as proposed by Schroeder (1999: 115). In the same way, plural agreement in the following sentence is not supported by the fact that the subject is established “as the discourse topic” (116).

- (12) *İnsanlar sabah kahvaltısının hangi saatte  
 person-PL morning breakfast-POSS.3SG-GEN which time-LOC  
 olduğunu çok iyi biliyorlardı.* (Schroeder 1999: 117)  
 be-NR-POSS.3SG-ACC very good know-PRS.PL.PRT  
 ‘The people knew very well at what time breakfast was.’

It is more likely that agreement in (12) is supported by the fact that subject and predicate are separated by an extensive embedded clause (cf. Göksel 1987: 71). However, length and vicinity factors are motivated by the limitation of human memory and by the general tendency of communication systems to avoid an excess of redundancy (and repetition of the same marking devices) and should therefore not be introduced on the same level as the distinctness and agentivity parameter (cf. the discussion in Göksel 1987: 79).

Beside these general tendencies for plural agreement, individual stylistic preferences and text types play an important role in the choice of plural marking on the predicate.<sup>6</sup> The general agreement conditions can be overruled in specific contexts. Generally speaking, there is a trend toward abundant plural agreement in formal written discourse as compared to informal oral discourse. Turkish dialect texts are a rich source for informal discourse. When we investigate the materials from Kütahya, for example, it becomes evident that plural non-agreement of the predicate with an agentive subject does not automatically imply the interpretation of the referent of the agent as consisting of distinct entities, but still the system functions roughly according to the general rule.

<sup>5</sup> For Turkish cf. Csató & Johanson (1998: 226).

<sup>6</sup> According to Kornfilt (1997: 387), “overt plural agreement with non-human third person plural subjects is rejected by many speakers (although not by all)”.

- (13) *Türklē bunū bizden sormaa gelir.* (Kütahya, 151)  
 turk-PL this-ACC we-ABL ask-ANOM-DAT come-AOR.3SG  
 'The Turks came to ask this from us.'

Conversely, in formal written discourse the opposition between distinctness and non-distinctness can be neutralized, all relevant contexts being marked with the plural marker.

- (14) *İkide bir askere gel*  
 two-LOC one soldier-DAT come(IMP)  
*derler ve Türkler giderlerdi.* (Tek adam, 162)  
 say-AOR.3PL and Turk-PL go-AOR.PL.PRT  
 'Every now and then they wanted them to join the army  
 and the Turks joined it.'

In the same sense, plural agreement in the elaborate language of a conversation about music is not necessarily a means to signal distinctness of the referents of the subject, as argued by Schroeder (1999: 122); it is more likely a strategy that signals formal oral discourse in a marked social context.

- (15) *Aile büyüklerim Türk musikisine*  
 family elder-PL-POSS.1SG Turkish music-POSS.3SG-DAT  
*yatknlığını üç*  
 devotion-POSS.1SG-ACC three  
*yaşıma götürürler.* (Schroeder 199: 122)  
 age-POSS.1SG-DAT lead-AOR.3PL  
 'My elders attribute my devotion to Turkish music to the time  
 when I was three years old.'

A novel by Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu (Kıralık konak) shows some further peculiarities concerning plural agreement. In this text direct vicinity of plural subject and predicate does not block agreement (16) and some types of nominal sentences are subject to agreement, too (17).

- (16) *Fakat onlar konuşuyorlar ...* (Kıralık konak, 63)  
 but he-PL talk-PRS.3PL  
 'But they talked together.'

- (17) *Onlar, her şeyden evvel, zamanın icabatına*  
 he-PL every thing-ABL before time-GEN requirement-POSS.3SG-DAT  
*uymaya mecburdurlar.* (Kiralık konak, 48)  
 conform-ANOM-DAT forced-COP-PL  
 ‘They are, first of all, forced to conform to the requirements of present life.’

It is not hard to find texts that even show plural marking with inanimate non-agentive subjects. (18)-(20) are quotations from a cookbook (*Sofra nimetleri*) and from a book about the Turkish language reform (*Dil bahisleri*). Both have in common that inanimate entities are in the foreground of discourse.

- (18) *Bu şekilde kireçli su ile*  
 this manner-LOC chalky water with  
*yapılan kayısılar daha diri, taneli*  
 make-PASS-PART apricot-PL more fresh full  
*ve güzel görünümlü olurlar.* (*Sofra Nimetleri*, 415)  
 and beautiful looking become-AOR-PL  
 ‘In this way, apricots prepared with chalky water get a fresher, fuller and more beautiful appearance.’
- (19) *Arapçadan gelen partisipler çok defa*  
 Arabic-ABL come-PART participle-PL many time  
*mânâca gelişerek müstakil*  
 meaning-ADV develop-CONV independent  
*isimler ve sıfatlar olmuşlardır.*<sup>7</sup> (*Dil bahisleri*, 168)  
 noun-PL and adjective-PL become-PERF-PL-COP  
 ‘Participles originating from Arabic have often developed  
 in respect of their meaning and become independent nouns and adjectives.’

Despite the fact that agreement is usually blocked in these texts in passive sentences, this condition can be overridden, too (20).

- (20) ... **nazır, kâtip gibi kelimeler**  
 nazır kâtip like word-PL

<sup>7</sup> Schroeder (1999: 120) believes the “factitive marker *-dir*, which ... seems to lay more emphasis on the actional character of the event” to be the motivating factor for agreement. The affinity between (*-mly*)-*dir* and plural agreement is more likely a result of their co-occurrence in formal oral or written discourse (Johanson 1998: 214-215).



*partisip olarak kullanılmazlar.* (Dil Bahisleri, 168)  
 participle be-CONV use-PASS-NEG.AOR.3PL  
 ‘Words like *nazır* and *kâtip* are not employed as participles.’

The above-mentioned exceptions are restricted to particular text types and do not affect the agreement rules. Thus agreement of the predicate is generally triggered if the referent of the subject is interpreted as consisting of distinct entities and has the role of an agent. However, agreement can be suppressed in the case of direct vicinity of the plural marked predicate and subject or it can be triggered in cases where the subject is separated from the verb by embedded clauses.

It might be interesting to note that the rules for plural agreement on the predicate in contemporary Persian as described by Lazard are very similar to the Turkish rules, though the wording is different. According to Lazard (1992: 178-179): “... the verb is placed in the plural or in the singular according as the subject designates persons or things. With persons, or, more usually, animated beings having will or feeling, the verb is in the plural. ... However, when the subject designates things which are conceived as endowed with a certain activity, or such that there is cause to insist on ... the individuality of each of them, the verb is in the plural. ... Inversely when one speaks of animated beings which are not conceived as the agents of the process or as affected by it ... the verb is readily put in the singular. This happens particularly with verbs of existence”. It becomes evident from this explanation that in Persian also distinctness and agentivity are the relevant factors for agreement. (21) has an inanimate agentive subject and shows agreement; in (22) the non-agentive subject does not trigger agreement on the predicate:

- (21) *In ḥararathā-ye moxtalef ... tağyirāt-e*  
 this heat-PL-AT different changes-AT  
  
*mohemme toulid mikonand.*  
 important production make-PRS.3PL  
 ‘These different kinds of heat produce important changes ...’
- (22) *Čerāghā xāmuš šod.* (Lazard 1992: 179)  
 lamp-PL extinct become-PFT.3SG  
 ‘The lamps went out.’

This is not the place for the discussion of whether these similarities between the Persian and the Turkish systems are due to one-sided or to mutual language contact or whether both systems have developed plural agreement according to universal principles of agreement that predict that definite agentive human subjects are more likely to develop grammatical agreement than others (Givón 1984: 364). However, the rules of plural agreement between subject and predicate in the 3rd person plural and the morphemes involved show some variability within the Turkic languages. While some Turkic languages do not show plural agreement at all, e. g. Yellow Uyghur and Kazakh, in Kirghiz plural agreement is marked on the verbal

predicate with the common Turkic reciprocal suffix or with allomorphs of *-lar* on nominal predicates (Gadžieva & Serebrennikov 1986: 90-93). Despite these morphological differences, the rules of agreement show great resemblance to the Turkish system. Thus, the distinctness parameter is coded with the reciprocal suffix (23) and agreement is blocked in passive sentences (24):

(23) *Baldar kelišti.*  
 child-PL come-PL-PRT.3SG  
 'The children came (as individuals).'

vs. *Baldar keldi.* (Žapar 1992, 83)  
 child-PL come-PRT.3SG  
 '... (as a group)'

(24) *Ğařtar Biřekke ğiberilgen.*  
 youth-PL Bishkek-DAT send-PASS-PRF.3SG  
 'The young people were sent to Bishkek.'

Imart (1981: 804-806) notes the tendency towards the generalisation of plural agreement in sentences with plural subjects for Kirghiz under the influence of Russian, especially in translated texts. It would be interesting to examine whether the increased use of plural agreement in Turkish formal written discourse is the result of an analogous influence of French / English on Turkish.

#### List of abbreviations

ABL	ablative	NR	nominalizer
ACC	accusative	OPT	optative
ADV	adverbializer	PFT	perfect
ANOM	action nominal	PART	participle
AOR	aorist	PASS	passive
AT	attributizer	PERF	perfect
CONV	converb	PL	plural
COP	copula	POSS	possessive
DAT	dative	PRS	present
GEN	genitive	PRT	preterite
IMP	imperative	REFL	reflexive
INF	infinitive	SG	singular
LOC	locative	SUP	superlative
NEG	negative		

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