

Inverted syntax in early Turkish texts

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Inverted syntax, in Turkish *devrik cümle*, is described by various grammarians and linguists as any of several types of deviation from the normal word order in a sentence. As the Turkic languages are SOV languages, the most frequent and most obvious change in word order is to place some other part of the sentence behind the finite verb, which in a so-called normal sentence should be the last word.

Some Turkologists include under the term *devrik cümle* also other changes of position in the sentence, like, for example, the order OSV. In fact, the possibilities of change of word order are so manifold that virtually all members of a sentence can occur in the position following the finite verb, including an infinite verb.

The situation in the modern language

L. Johanson (1990) remarks: «Fragen der Wortstellung sind deshalb recht intensiv besprochen worden, weil sich in der modernen türkeitürkischen Prosa eine starke Neigung zu Abweichungen von der strikt regressiven Wortfolge bemerkbar macht.» And, indeed, if we examine the literature about *devrik cümle*, authors usually refer to the increasing number of sentences with inverted syntax in modern literature. Thus, G. L. Lewis (1967:242) even speaks of a «*devrik cümle school*», while L. Bazin (1968) devoted an article to this phenomenon, the title of which suggests the same idea: «Tendances nouvelles de la syntaxe de position dans la prose turque (de Turquie) contemporaine».

The number of examples which Bazin gives in his article could be enlarged to any extent from more recent literature.¹ As modern literature is not in the focus of our interest in this paper, we only wish to remark that for some writers of modern literature deviation from normative syntax has rather become the norm. All the different kinds of deviations mentioned above can be found.

We also find considerable agreement in how this situation is normally explained. The standard explanation is that authors are trying to bring the literary language close to the spoken language. K. Acarlar even sees this

as a natural development: «Devrik cümle bugün, yazı dilinin konuşma diline yaklaştırmaya doğru yönelen Türkçemizin gereksediği doğal bir gelişmedir» (Inverted syntax is a natural development, considered necessary for Turkish, the literary language of which tends to get closer to the spoken language). Such explanations typically include two claims: on the one hand, inverted syntax is considered to be a stylistic matter only, while, on the other hand, it is thought to be due to the natural evolution of the language.

The fact is that inverted syntax really seems to involve a phenomenon by which the written language becomes closer to the spoken language. However, although we are all familiar with inverted syntax from our own experience of the spoken language, we would need a corpus in order to prove our claim. Unfortunately, material from the idiom that we may regard as spoken «High Turkish» is very scarce. The situation is better for the dialects thanks to the samples collected and published by various Turcologists. As far as «High Turkish» is concerned, whatever corpus we use, two problems remain:

1. First, we cannot be certain whether a person interviewed in an artificial situation really speaks the same type of language as he would use in everyday communication.

2. Second—the actual linguistic question—we do not know whether the phenomenon of inverted syntax reflects a predisposition in the system of Turkish, or it is due to influence caused by language contact. Certain occurrences of inverted syntax might have different backgrounds depending on geographical and historical factors. To use the formulation of Johanson: certain structures might have been caused by copying from different languages at different points of time.

The situation in the dialects

As far as the individual dialects of *Türkiye türkçesi* are concerned, little work has been done on the problem.² A great achievement in this respect is B. Brendemoen's recent article about word order in some Anatolian dialects. The author comes to the conclusion that in the dialects investigated by him postverbal position of an object may be the result of the influence of non-Turkic languages. Pointing at syntactical similarities between Khalaj and the North Eastern Anatolian dialects, as well as partly Azeri, he argues: «Weil aber postverbale Stellung in den östlichen Türkssprachen viel seltener zu sein scheint, wäre es weniger sinnvoll zu postulieren, daß die Verwendung dieser Stellung für Rhema oder fokussierte Glieder eine ursprüngliche Erscheinung der Türkssprachen sei. Eher könnte man sich denken, daß ein allgemeiner Einfluß des Persischen

auf die Türksprachen innerhalb des iranischen oder des unmittelbar angrenzenden Sprachraumes vorliegt» (Brendemoen 1998.43–44).

Further research will show to what degree the manifestations of inverted syntax in the Turkish dialects may depend on the particular languages they have had contact with.

The situation in early Turkish

It is even more difficult to judge the situation in Old Turkish. Under Old Turkish we understand here the language of the texts that were written before any considerable influence of Arabic and Persian. This definition allows us to include the texts dating from the early Islamic period. Of course, we are still confronted with an extremely heterogeneous corpus. However, if we wished to exclude alien influences as much as possible we would only be left with the Runic texts.

The rich corpus of the classical Uighur literature consists almost exclusively of translations from a number of non-Altaic languages and shows a varying degree of influences of the latter. The very short treatment of word order by A. v. Gabain in her famous *Alttürkische Grammatik* mirrors well the difficulty of the situation. Nevertheless, she mentions that especially in Christian texts the predicate «steht [...] manchmal vor einen Dativ, vor dem Subjekt, oder sogar am Anfang des Satzes» (v. Gabain 1950.186–187).

We find good examples for this in a Christian fragment from Turfan, of which I wish to quote only one sentence: *ohşayur sän sän yalnguq oğlu ol ingäk-kä kim iraqın üntädi öz bozagusinga kim azıp barmış ärdi* 'You resemble, man, that cow which from far had shouted to her own calf, which had gone astray'. This text obviously copied the syntax of the original including the construction of relative clauses.

When it comes to the vast corpus of non-Christian texts, v. Gabain confines herself to a short remark: «Die regelmäßige Wortfolge ist: Satzeinleitung, Satzbestimmung, Subjekt, Objekt, Prädikat» (v. Gabain 1950.187). The reason that no more is said lies apparently in the fact that every text of the many that have been found would actually have to be treated separately depending on from what original language it was translated, and also on its genre (of which there is a great variety), and its time (which can only be estimated).

However, the lack of a description of the phenomenon of inverted syntax does not mean that there are no relevant examples in the texts. An interesting example is offered by the well-known Buddhist story of the Hungry Tigress. In this text the events are told in prose while most of the conversation of the protagonists is in verse. In the prose sections we

almost exclusively find the classical word order, with all sentences ending in a finite verb. But in the verse sections we find a remarkable number of postverbal objects. As these verses are based on metre, but not on rhyme, the postverbal words are not placed in their exceptional position because of their morphological structure. Moreover, since the great majority of all sentences in the text—including the verse sections—do end in the verb and show the SOV structure, the occurrences of inverted syntax seem not to be copied from the Chinese original.

V. Drimba dedicated a complete study to the syntax of another early Turkish non-Muslim text, the *Codex Comanicus*. However, the author himself asks the question: «Étant donné que le Codex Comanicus a été composé par des non-Turcs, comment faut-il apprécier l'authenticité de la syntaxe?» After discussing probable influences caused by the translating of these texts from Latin he comes to the conclusion that «...dans le stade actuel des recherches dans le domaine de la syntaxe des langues turques, il est très difficile de préciser ce qui est véritablement turc et ce qui ne l'est pas dans la syntaxe de la langue du Codex Comanicus. Tout ce que nous pouvons dire pour le moment, c'est que toutes (ou presque toutes) les constructions syntaxiques qui semblent insolites, aberrantes, non-turques—pouvant donc être attribuées à l'influence de la syntaxe latine (éventuellement aussi à la syntaxe de la langue maternelle des traducteurs allemands des textes du code)—se retrouvent dans diverses langues turques anciennes et modernes» (Drimba 1973.184–185).

Before coming to the Runic inscriptions we shall cast a short glance on the *Dede Korkut Kitabı*. Dizdaroğlu (1976.250) gives the number of sentences with inverted syntax as 61 excluding repetitions. Among them we find variations of different kinds as mentioned above. Even if we do not take into consideration the cases occurring in verses, which might simply be due to the requirements of prosody, the number of examples in the text is still considerable. A typical example of a verse with inverted word order would be: *Han kızı, sebebi nedür, degil manga; katı kazab ederüm şimdi sanga* 'Daughter of the Khan, what is the the reason, tell me; I am terribly annoyed at you!'. An example from prose is the following:

[After the son of Dirse Khan had fought and killed a bull, Dede Korkut asks the boy's father to give him various things: a *beglig* (a leadership), arab horses, ten thousand sheep, red camels, etc. etc., in recognition of the fact that he proved to be mature.] The first time Dede Korkut mentions the son, the corresponding word stands in the dative case in preverbal position. After this topic has been introduced by Dede Korkut, the word for 'son' stands in postverbal position, while the donations to be given are still placed in preverbal position: *Hey Dirse*

Xan, oğlana beglik vergil, taht vergil, erdemlidir. Boynu uzun bidevi at vergil, biner olsun, hünerlidir. [And now the syntax switches to being inverted:] *Ağıldan tümen koyun vergil bu oğlana, şişlik olsun, erdemlidir...* and thus it continues.

In this example the son, after being introduced, clearly moves out of the focus, which lies now on all the presents that ought to be given to him and which now make the themas. This is also a good example demonstrating how difficult it might be to make a clear distinction between backgrounding as a part of normal, daily conversation and its stylistic function in literature. These facts do not, in my opinion, speak for a structure that has been copied from another language. Since, however, the Dede Korkut epic, in the form in which it was written down, does show some, though not very many, Iranian influences,³ we will now draw our attention to the oldest Turkic documents known to us: the Runic inscriptions.

Making clear statements about the Runic inscriptions is often difficult, sometimes impossible, and not seldom dangerous. Though they have been studied for about a hundred years now, their correct reading still involves many disputable issues. One important reason is that their incomplete state of preservation makes decisions difficult. This, of course, also refers to syntax.

Dizdaroğlu, who, as was mentioned before, understands under the term *devrik cümle* only sentences in which the finite verb does not finish the sentence, mentions two occurrences from the Orkhon inscriptions (Dizdaroğlu 1976.250). Personally, I cannot find *any* examples, which may mean that I read some sentences in a different way. Nevertheless we do have some cases in which the word order is not the one that we regard as normal.

T. Tekin's remarks on word order in his *Grammar of Orkhon Turkish* are as short as v. Gabain's in her work. Tekin says: «The normal order is: subject + predicate» and gives three examples. After giving one example of a sentence with an object in the normal position he states that an emphasized subject is placed between the object and the verb. He illustrates this with the example *qagan at bunta biz bārtimiz* 'it was we who gave him the title of qagan here'. He also has another example, which, however, shows how difficult the reading of the inscriptions sometimes is. His reading *öd tanrı yasar* 'it was heaven who determines lifetimes', was by himself in a later edition changed to: *öd tārri aysar* 'if the god of time determines', which seems to me to be a more plausible interpretation.

In my opinion an excellent example of the emphatic character of the inter-object-verb position of the subject can be found in a long sentence in

the Bilgä Kagan inscription (E 20/21): *türk bodun atı küsi yok bolmazun teyin kangım kaganıg / ögüm katunug kötürügmä tängri el berigmä tängri türk bodun atı küsi yok bolmazun teyin özümin ol tängri kagan olurtdı*. The English translation would be: 'In order that the name and fame of the Turkish people will not be destroyed, the god of heaven who had lifted up my father the Kagan and my mother the Katun (to the throne), the Kagan who had given them a state, in order that name and fame of the Turkish people will not be lost, I myself was put on the throne by this very god'. In this sentence the last part is: ... *özümin ol tängri qagan olurtdı*. Here *ol tängri* 'that god', i.e., the god who did all the beautiful things mentioned before, stands in the emphatic position before what I would call here a compound verb.

Even if the number of actual examples of inverted word order in the Runic inscriptions is very small, its occasional occurrence—so well known to us from later texts—is a clear indicator that the positioning of words in the sentence, along with the change of accent, probably always was a method for emphasizing and deemphasizing. The relatively frequent occurrence of inverted syntax in quotations of direct speech compared to its absence in narrative prose allows us to conclude that *devrik cümle* was used as a stylistic method in Turkish literature. This aspect shows us that the Orkhon inscriptions are pieces of literature written in an elaborate, pretentious literary style.

The situation in proverbs

To conclude this discussion I would like to refer to the role of inverted syntax in proverbs. Dizdaroğlu (1976.252) gives three examples, one of which is: *sakla samanı, gelir zamanı*, meaning approximately: 'put something aside, you will need it one day'. According to Dizdaroğlu these proverbs would lose all their characteristics, if one transformed their syntax to follow the normal word order.

I find it difficult to determine whether the postverbal nouns here are backgrounded, or the word order serves prosodic functions. I would therefore like to draw attention to the general importance of proverbs as «carriers» of inverted syntax. We can assume that proverbs are not recently-created parts of any language, especially since they are often widely used over large areas. The further apart the places are where a particular proverb is used, the more likely it is that the proverb shows lexical or structural variation.

Against this background it is even more interesting to note that proverbs which are structured with inverted word order are found in identical forms in areas far away from each other. Thus, for instance, we

find that the proverb quoted by Dizdaroğlu occurs in the Turkish dialect of Kerkuk in Irak in the shape *kaldır samanı, gelir zamanı*, while its equivalent in Kosovo is: *bekle samanı, celir zamani*. In all three cases, in spite of the lexical difference in the verb of the first part, the structure of the proverb is the same.

Another proverb with a similar structure may be quoted from the Turkish dialect of Cyprus: *dağdan gelir dağ adamı, hasda eder sağ adamı*. The equivalent proverb in Kosovo Turkish is: *dağ adamı, hasta eder sağ adamı*. Identical proverbs can even be found in areas much wider apart. One of the examples from Turkey which Dizdaroğlu gives for *devrik cümle* is *inanma dostuna, saman doldurur postuna*, which means something like: 'Don't trust anyone, even your best friend might one day kill you and even stuff your peeled-off skin with straw'. This proverb is found among the Uighurs in Eastern Turkistan as *eşänmäğın dostunga, saman tıkar postunga*. There is a slight difference in the vocabulary, but exactly the same syntax. The two Persian loanwords nevertheless point to an Iranian influence.

Conclusion

The occurrence of deviations from the so-called normal word order throughout the history of the Turkish language seems to suggest that the method of focusing and defocusing by way of using different positions of a word in the sentence is an inherent characteristic of the Turkic languages. The circumstance that it was little used in narrative reports might indicate that it was regarded as being stylistically not proper for serious literature. It appears, however, even more likely to me that, at least in the Runic inscriptions, the use of inverted syntax in emotionally neutral utterances was limited by the insufficient punctuation system of the script. Free syntax in a written language requires a sufficiently elaborate graphical system, so that ambiguities can be avoided.

Notes

- 1 To mention just a few examples from the more recent literature:
 - *Konaşacak şey bulamazdı annesiyle kalınca.*
 - *Kapıdan çıkınca elini tuttu babasının...*
 - *Babası az şekerli içerdi kahvesini.* (Tomris Uyar 1971)
 - *Ayrancı tarafındaki Portakal Çiçeği sokağında, 51 numaralı apartmanın ikinci katında yaşayan bir ev kadını pek memnun değildi çoğunluk dört duvar arasında geçen yaşamundan.* (Nazlı Eray 1982). First sentence of the story «Monte Kristo».

- *Onu da tanıyordu yıllardır.*
 - *Üzerline, karşıdan vuruyordu güneş, ileriden gelenler iyi seçilmiyordu.*
 - *Güneşli sokak görünüyordu oturdukları yerden.*
 - *«Nasılsın» dedi Anjeliki adama? (Demir Özlü 1994)*
- 2 Just by looking at the collected texts mentioned above, we gain a certain impression of the existence of *devrik cümle*; cf. e.g. Z. Korkmaz (1963.119; partly disregarding the phonetic signs): *bulgur neşâl gaynadılır söyleyim saña [...] gazanı ilâni goruh ortıya...*; H. Dallı (1976.149): *Herkez ora hazır olup, başlıyesin biçme [...] saba gidip awşam eve...*
- 3 Although the two manuscripts of the *Dede Korkut* epos probably cannot be dated earlier than the 14th century, it is written in a so-called archaic language. Ettore Rossi comes to the conclusion: «Credo si possa ritenere che la lingua del Kitab-i Dede Qorqut e il turco (oğuz) dell'Anatolia orientale e meridionale (fino alla Siria settentrionale) del sec. XIV-XV. Essa ha molte caratteristiche del turco piú antico d'Anatolia dell' età selgiuchide e del così detto osmanlı arcaico, monstrando rilevanti con il turco oğuz piú orientale sviluppatosi in quello che oggi suol chiamarsi azeri e con il turcomanno» (1952.86).

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