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THE TURKISH AORIST

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Abstract: This paper argues that the aorist of Turkish reflects aspect/mood rather than tense; it has two important semantic functions: a) it marks volition, b) it characterizes what is the typical, normal or inherent quality of an entity. Different uses of it are explained in terms of these semantic functions.

This is a preliminary attempt to characterize the different uses of the Turkish Aorist (sometimes called 'Present Tense' or even 'Muzari') in terms of a limited number of semantic properties.

Not much is known about the function of the aorist in various languages, with the exception of classical Greek. However, even in Greek the picture is not very clear. Goodwin (1890) states that

The Aorist expresses the simple occurrence of an action in past time--- without any of the limitations as to completion, continuance, repetition etc. which belong to other tenses. (p.16)

However, at a later point he shows that in non-indicative moods time distinctions disappear and "the tenses here differ only in their other character of denoting the continuance, the completion, or simply the occurrence of an action" (p.22). Thus, the difference between the aorist and the present becomes merely one of aspect.

The present and aorist here differ only in this, that the present expresses an action in its duration, that is, as going on or repeated while the aorist expresses simply its occurrence, the time of both tenses being otherwise precisely the same. (p.22)

It seems to me then, the Greek aorist is not a simple tense marker; it has an important role in the aspectual system of the language.

It will be shown in this paper that the aorist of Turkish indicates aspect or mood more than tense; thus, any attempt to analyze it along the lines of a real time line would lead to an inadequate treatment.

Menges (1968) defines the aorist as the "timeless tense":

The aorist does not have any tense-notations, it just expresses the actions as such, going on at present or in the future or pictured as such; the aorist is, in fact, the 'timeless tense'. (p.128)

One can see the motive for Menges' words by looking at the following sentences.

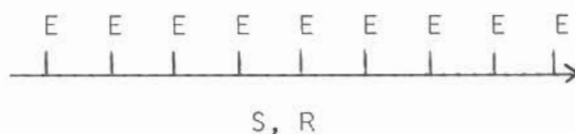
- 1- iki kere iki dört ed-er.
two times two four make-aorist
'two times two make four'
- 2- dünya güneş-in etraf-+n-da dön-er.
earth sun- gen. around-poss.-rotate-aorist
loc.
'the earth revolves around the sun'
- 3- insan doğ-ar, yaş-ar, öl-ür
man be born- live- die-aorist
aorist aorist
'men are born, they live and die'
- 4- ağaç yaş iken eğ-il-ir. (proverb)
tree wet when bend-pass-aorist
'a tree is bent when it is wet'

In all the sentences the underlined part represents the aorist form. 1) expresses a timeless proposition while all the others are propositions in which the truth value does not change from one time point to another (or else their truth values are believed to be constant as in the case of proverbs). What is important for our purposes here is that none of the above propositions is temporally restricted; that is, if time is involved, then it is a long stretch of time, past and future- in fact all of time. Since the aorist is the only appropriate form for the expression of such propositions, Menges must have felt the need to describe the aorist in such a contradictory manner- the 'timeless tense'.

Reichenbach(1947) on the other hand analyzes the aorist as follows:

The extended tenses are sometimes used to indicate not duration of the event, but repetition. Thus we say 'women are wearing larger hats this year' and mean that this is true for a great many instances. Whereas English expresses the extended tense by the use of the present participle, the other languages have developed special suffixes for this tense. Thus the Turkish language possesses a tense of this kind, called Muzari, which indicates repetition, or duration, with the emphasis on repetition including past and future cases.(pp.290-91)

Reichenbach then gives the schematic representation of the Turkish Muzari as



where S, R and E represent point of speech, point of reference i.e., that point according to which the direction of the point of event is fixed, and point of event, respectively.

It is apparent that Reichenbach is not drawing a distinction between tense and aspect, for his extended tenses would fall properly within the domain of aspect. His analysis of Muzari is rather confusing and misleading. One gets the impression that the function of Muzari is the same as that of the English present participle in those cases when the latter indicates repetition. This is totally wrong; the English sentence 'women are wearing larger hats this year' would never be translated into Turkish with Muzari, but with the progressive.

5- bu sene bayan-lar daha büyük şapka { *giy-er-ler }
 this year lady-pl. more big hat wear-aor.-pl.
 { giy-iyor-lar }
 prog.

Similarly in 6)

6- bebek bu gün-ler-de çok { *öksür-ür }
 baby this day-pl.-loc. very cough-aor.
 { öksür-üyor }
 prog.
 'the baby is coughing a lot these days'

we find the aorist form unacceptable although coughing as a repeated event extends into the past and very likely into the future. Thus, iteration alone is not sufficient to capture the generalities that lie behind the uses of the aorist.

Very often the aorist is treated as the marker of the habitual aspect in Turkish. It could be the case that Reichenbach had this in mind when he talked about "repeated events including past and future", for habituality often does include iteration, though not always. For example it is difficult to talk about iteration in a case like 7)

7- İstanbul yedi tepe üst-ün-de dur-ur
 seven hill top-poss.- stand-aor.
 loc.
 'İstanbul stands on seven hills'

There is of course another related problem; namely, if a habitual situation involves iteration of an event, then, how many repetitions should there be for it to be considered habitual?

Comrie(1976) defines habituality as follows:

The feature that is common to all habituals, whether or not they are also iterative, is that they describe an extended period of time, so extended in fact that the situation referred to is viewed not as an accidental property of the moment, but precisely, as a characteristic feature of the whole period. (pp.27-28)

If one examines this definition closely, it becomes apparent that it is

tantamount to defining durativity. In other words, it seems to me that Comrie is not drawing a clear distinction between habituality and durativity although he claims he does and defines durativity - in his terminology 'continuousness' - as "imperfectivity that is not habituality" (p.26). It is simply not correct to say, as Comrie seems to imply, that durativity describes a situation that is not characteristic of an extended period of time. Both habituality and durativity have this characteristic; however, while habituality describes a given situation as being typical, normal and expected for the entity in question, durativity does not. As Hirtle(1967) puts it

... an event seen as a habit is attributed to the subject as a permanent capacity whose realization in an action is not evoked, though it may occur at any moment, including the moment of speaking. (p.50)

This I believe is an important aspect which differentiates habituality from mere durativity.

Let us now look at some Turkish data in the light of this discussion.

8- baba-m iş-e otobüs ile
father-work-dat. bus with
poss.

(a) gid-er
go-aor.
b) gid-iyor
prog.

'my father goes to work by bus'

9- sabah-lar-+ sekiz-de
morning-pl.-acc. eight-loc.

(a) kalk-ar-+m
get up-aor.-1st sing.
b) kalk-+yor-um
prog.

'I get up at eight o'clock in the mornings'

10- A- ahmet ile ayşe kavga et-ti-ler
with fight do-past-pl.
'Ahmet and Ayşe had a fight'

B- sahi mi? asl-+n-da bir-bir-ler-in-i çok
real ques. fact-poss. one-one-pl.-poss. very
loc. acc.

(a) sev-er-ler
love-aor-pl.
b) sev-iyor-lar
prog.

'Really? In fact they love each other a lot'

11- baba-m erken
father-early
poss.

(a) yat-ar
go to bed
aor.
b) yat-+yor
prog.

ama son iki sene-dir geç
but last two year-for late

(a)*yat-ar
b) yat-+yor
prog.

15) is ambiguous between a mere question requesting an answer and the suggestion that beating one's wife is bad and that it should not be carried out. 16) however is not ambiguous; it means 'beating your wife is bad'; moreover it has the implication that wife-beating is typical, the norm for the person. This is why, I believe, 16) is much stronger in force than 15).

Let us now look at sentence 11) closely; the first part says it is characteristic of my father to go to bed early; the second part says during these last two years he has been going to bed late. The acceptability of the progressive, but not the aorist, in the second part clearly shows that his going to bed late is just a repeated behavior but not an indication of a change in what is normal for him, i.e., going to bed early. Notice that 'yatar' in the second clause yields a contradiction, so would having 'yatıyor' in both clauses.

At first it seemed to me that some of the unacceptable cases could be explained differently; namely, with reference to the collocational restrictions the aorist might have with time adverbials. More specifically, I thought the aorist could not accept any "frame adverbs" like 'for two years', 'since my coming to this country' etc., thus the unacceptability of the aorist in the clause of 11). But this is not the case; 12) a) proves that this initial suspicion was wrong. In fact 12) a) is a good example for the point I have been trying to make. While 12) b) indicates that I have been smoking regularly for two years, 12) a) treats my smoking as a typical behavior of mine, despite the fact that I started it only two years ago.

To sum up then, I would like to argue that the aorist characterizes what is the typical, normal, or even inherent quality of an entity or a situation. Permanency of time is merely a sufficient condition not a necessary one for the use of the aorist.

Lyons(1977) states that it is very common in languages to use the same aspect for both habitual and generic statements, and that this is usually explained in terms of " 'sometimes' shades into 'often' and 'often' may approximate asymptotically to 'always'."(p.716) We have seen that Turkish is one such language; the aorist is used with both habitual and generic statements. However I would like to give a somewhat different explanation for why this should be the case in most languages.

I want to argue that both habitual and generic statements are characterizing statements. For example when we say 'birds fly' what we really mean is that flying is an inherent, structural, permanent capacity(property) of entities called birds; in the same manner when someone says 'my father smokes' he means smoking is a typical behavior that characterizes his father. In other words if some behavior is perceived as being typical or characteristic of some entity, then we tend to view it as a permanent property of that entity.

Notice that the truth value conditions for these two types of propositions are quite different; generic propositions are considered to be omnitemporal, i.e., their truth value is constant for all times, while propositions that express habituality could only be transtemporal, i.e., their truth value is constant throughout the present period.

Thus, it seems to me that we should try to seek our answer not along the real time line as to what is actually permanent and what is not but rather to what is perceived as being permanent and what not.

So far we have looked at one important semantic function of the aorist; yet there is another equally important function of the aorist as exemplified in the following sentences.

18- ahmet parti-ye gel-me-z ^vçünkü ayşe gel-iyor.
party-dat. come-neg- ^vbecause come-prog.
aor.

'Ahmet won't come to the party because Ayşe is coming'

19- bu kitab-ı oku-yup san-a ver-ir-im.
this book-acc. read-adv. you-dat. give-aor.-1st sing.
'I would give this book to you after I finish reading it'

20- mehmet-e söyle derd-in-i , o san-a yardım ed-er.
dat. tell problem-poss. he you-dat. help do-aor.
acc.

'Tell your problem to Mehmet, he would help you'

21- kahve-ler-imiz-i iç-ip ders-e baş-lar-ı-z.
coffee-pl.-poss.-acc. drink- lesson- start-pl.-aor.
adv. dat.

'We'll drink our coffee and then start the lesson'

Menges(1968) reports that very often Russian grammars of Turkic languages treat the aorist as the future tense. I believe this is due to the fact that the aorist is very often used to refer to future events, as can be seen in the above sentences. However, Turkish does have a future marker, and each of these sentences can be uttered by using this marker, though with an important difference.

18'- ahmet partiye gel-me-ye^ğek ^vçünkü ayşe geliyor.
fut.

'Ahmet is not coming to the party because Ayşe is coming'

19'- bu kitabı okuyup sana ver-e^ğim.
fut.

'I will finish this book and then give it to you'

20'- mehmede söyle derdini, o sana yardım ed-e^ğek.
fut.

'Tell your problem to Mehmet, he will help you'

21'- kahvelerimizi içip derse baş-la-ya^ğı-z.
fut.

'We will start the lesson after finishing our coffee'

We can explain the difference between the two as follows: the forms

- 27- mersi biraz al-ir-im
 thanks little take-aor.-1st sing.
 'Thanks, I'll take some'

If B wishes only to ask for information, he can use the progressive form, which is not ambiguous. 28) can only be interpreted as a question, never as an offer.

- 28- Ğambon yi-yor-mu-sun?
 ham eat-prog.-ques.-2nd sing.
 'Do you eat ham?'

Just as it is possible to make offers by asking the hearer's willingness we can make polite imperatives in the same manner.

- 29- ben-im ile sinema-ya gel-ir-mi-sin lütfen?
 I- gen. with cinema-dat. come-aor.-ques. please
 2nd sing.
 'Would you please come to the cinema with me?'

- 30- anne-n-e yardim ed-er-mi-sin lütfen?
 mother-pos. help do-aor.-ques. please
 dat. 2nd sing.
 'Would you please help your mother?'

Both offers and commands are speaker-based acts; when they are treated as hearer-based by questioning the addressee's willingness, a degree of deference is achieved, and this is often taken as a sign of politeness.

Notice that the use of 'lütfen' is important; without it 29) would be an offer and 30) a question rather than a command. Of course, very often in a given context - both linguistic and non-linguistic - one reading would be preferred over the other, and the use of 'lütfen' becomes optional.

We have seen that the Turkish aorist can be characterized in terms of two semantic functions, one aspectual, the other modal. It would have been better, if not desirable, if we could have explained all the different uses of the aorist by a single semantic category, but at this point I can neither foresee how this could be done nor imagine what that category might be like.

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