

COMPOUND TENSES I

by Seda Sürel

INTRODUCTION

Compound tenses in Turkish are formed by combining an already inflected verb form with the past copula -DI.

These structures are used to locate an event relative to another past reference point, rather than directly to the present.

1. Function

Past-based compound tenses are used to express:

- actions that were ongoing at a past moment,
- actions completed before another past event,
- background situations in past narratives.

The past copula introduces a secondary past reference to an existing tense or aspect form.

2. Forms

Past-based compound tenses consist of:

- a finite verb form,
- followed by the past copula -DI,
- followed by personal endings.

Core structures at B1 level:

- -lyor + -DI → Past Continuous
- -miş + -DI → Past Perfect (Önceki Geçmiş Zaman)

3. Morphology

The past copula derives from the auxiliary verb imek and surfaces as -DI, following vowel harmony and consonant assimilation.

Suffix shapes

- -DI → dı / di / du / dü
- -Tİ → tı / ti / tu / tü (after voiceless consonants)

Consonant Assimilation (Mandatory)

When the past copula follows a voiceless consonant

(p, ç, t, k, f, s, ş, h), -DI surfaces as -Tİ.

This rule applies to all compound tense forms.

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a. Past Continuous (-iyor + -DI)

Structure:

Verb stem → -iyor → -DI → personal ending

Morphological note:

The suffix -iyor ends in the consonant -r, so the past copula attaches directly.

The buffer consonant -y- is not used in this structure.

Full paradigm (example base: gel-):

- gel-**iyor**-du-m
- gel-**iyor**-du-n
- gel-**iyor**-du
- gel-**iyor**-du-k
- gel-**iyor**-du-nuz
- gel-**iyor**-du-lar

b. Past Perfect (-miş + -DI)

Structure:

Verb stem → -miş → -DI → personal ending

Consonant assimilation note:

The suffix -miş ends in ş, a voiceless consonant.

Therefore, -DI surfaces as -Tİ.

Full paradigm (example base: git-):

- git-**miş**-ti-m
- git-**miş**-ti-n
- git-**miş**-ti
- git-**miş**-ti-k
- git-**miş**-ti-niz
- git-**miş**-ti-ler

This form expresses an action completed before another past event.

4. Structural Guide (Step by Step)

Single past reference:

- Eve geldim.
- (I came home.)

Earlier past reference:

- Eve gelmiştim.
- (I had come home.)

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Background past action:

- Eve geliyordum.
- (I was coming home.)

The compound tense shifts the reference point further back in time.

5. Syntax

Compound tenses function as finite predicates.

They occupy the verb position of the clause and carry full personal agreement.

Temporal sequencing is often clarified by context or adverbs but is not structurally required.

6. Usage

Past Continuous (–lyor + –DI)

Used to express:

- ongoing actions in the past,
- background events interrupted by another action.

Past Perfect (–miş + –DI)

Used to express:

- actions completed before another past event,
- prior states or experiences relevant to a past narrative point.

Examples

- Dışarı çıktığında yağmur yağıyordu.
- (When I went outside, it was raining.)
- Toplantı başladığında herkes gelmişti.
- (When the meeting started, everyone had arrived.)
- Telefon çaldığında yemek yapıyordum.
- (I was cooking when the phone rang.)
- Filmi daha önce izlemiştim.
- (I had watched the movie before.)

Notes

- The past copula –DI introduces a secondary past reference.
- After voiceless consonants, –DI surfaces as –Tİ due to consonant assimilation.
- In –lyor + –DI, the buffer consonant –y– is not used because –lyor ends in a consonant.
- Compound tenses do not change word order or clause structure.