VOWEL HARMONY BASICS

by Seda Sürel

INTRODUCTION

Vowel harmony is one of the most important features of Turkish. It ensures that words flow smoothly by matching the vowels of suffixes with the last vowel of the word. Once learners understand this logic, choosing the correct suffix becomes predictable and effortless.

Turkish has 8 vowels: A, E, I, İ, O, Ö, U, Ü.

These vowels follow two major harmony systems: front–back harmony and four-way harmony. A third feature, rounding, appears in some suffixes.

1. Front–Back Harmony (Primary Rule)

This is the foundation of vowel harmony. The suffix vowel must match the backness of the last vowel in the word.
Back vowels: A, I, O, U
Front vowels: E, İ, Ö, Ü

Rules:
- If a word ends in a back vowel, the suffix takes a back vowel.
- If a word ends in a front vowel, the suffix takes a front vowel.

Examples:
- kapı → kapıda
- okul → okullar
- bilek → bilekte
- köy → köyde

2. Four-Way Vowel Harmony

Many suffixes adjust to one of four vowel options depending on the last vowel of the word.

Last Vowel→Suffix Vowel
A / I → ı
E / İ → i
O / U → u
Ö / Ü → ü

This pattern appears in key suffixes such as the accusative, some cases, possessive forms, and several verb-related suffixes.

Examples:
- kapı → kapıyı
- el → eli
- okul → okulu
- göz → gözü

VOWEL HARMONY BASICS

by Seda Sürel

3. Rounding Harmony (Secondary Rule)

Some suffixes also follow rounding rules:
Rounded vowels: O, Ö, U, Ü
Unrounded vowels: A, E, I, İ

Rounded vowels tend to keep the suffix vowel rounded when the suffix allows it.

Examples:
- kuş → kuşum (not kuşım)
- yol → yolu
- gün → günü

This rule is less common but appears in important everyday suffixes.

4. Why Vowel Harmony Matters
- Nearly all suffixes in Turkish change according to harmony.
- It makes pronunciation smooth and natural.
- Once mastered, most suffix patterns become intuitive.
- Harmony improves both speaking and reading accuracy, because suffixes become instantly recognizable.

5. Pattern Examples
- masa → masada
- okul → okulu
- köpek → köpeğe
- yol → yolda
- göz → gözü
- oda → odada

Practical Summary for Beginners
When adding a suffix:
- Check the last vowel of the word.
- Choose the suffix form that matches front/back harmony.
- For certain suffixes, also match rounding.

This simple process allows learners to form plurals, case suffixes, and basic verb forms without memorizing long lists.

VOWEL HARMONY BASICS

by Seda Sürel

Examples
- ev → evler
- kalem → kalemler
- kapı → kapıda → kapıyı
- köy → köyü
- okul → okullar

Notes
- The last vowel of the word always determines the suffix vowel.
- Almost all Turkish suffixes follow vowel harmony.
- Rounded vowels may affect the suffix when possible.
- Incorrect harmony sounds unnatural to native speakers.