

CONSONANT HARMONY BASICS

by Seda Sürel

INTRODUCTION

Turkish uses consonant harmony to keep pronunciation smooth when suffixes are added to words. The final consonant of the word can influence the consonant at the beginning of the suffix. This prevents harsh sound transitions and keeps the flow of the language natural.

Consonant harmony at this level is shaped by two mechanisms: voicing harmony and buffer consonants.

1. Voicing Harmony (D → T Alternation)

Many Turkish suffixes begin with the consonant D.

When the word ends in a voiceless consonant, this D changes to T to match the sound environment.

When the word ends in a voiced consonant, the suffix keeps D.

Voiceless consonants:

ç, f, h, k, p, s, ş, t
→ suffix uses T

Voiced consonants:

b, c, d, g, ğ, j, l, m, n, r, v, y, z
→ suffix uses D

Examples:

- kitap → kitapta
- kök → kökte
- ağaç → ağaçta
- ev → evde
- yol → yolda
- göz → gözde

This alternation affects many high-frequency suffixes, especially the locative (-da, -de, -ta, -te) and ablative (-dan, -den, -tan, -ten).

2. Buffer Consonants (y, n, s)

When two vowels would come together at the boundary between a word and a suffix, Turkish inserts a buffer consonant. This prevents vowel collisions and keeps pronunciation clear.

The three buffer consonants are:

y — prevents vowel-vowel contact

Used when the word ends in a vowel and the suffix begins with a vowel.

- araba + ı → arabayı
- masa + a → masaya

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n — appears after a 3rd person possessive suffix when a vowel-initial case suffix follows

Prevents vowel contact after a 3rd person singular/plural possessive suffix when a vowel-initial case suffix is added.

- evi + e → evine
- kapısı + a → kapısına
- arabası + a → arabasına

s — used in third-person possessive forms before vowel-initial suffixes

Prevents vowel sequences in 3rd person possessive combinations.

- araba + ı → arabası
- masa + ı → masası

These consonants do not carry meaning; they serve purely phonological purposes.

3. A Note on “ş” in Common Expressions

In some frequently used words such as “bir şey” and “her şey”, a phonetic fusion occurs and the word is pronounced with ş at the start of şey.

This is not a buffer consonant.

It is a fixed pronunciation pattern of the word şey, not a productive harmony rule.

Examples:

- bir + şey → bir şey
- her + şey → her şey

This phenomenon is part of natural spoken Turkish rather than a suffixing rule.

Examples

- ev → evde, evden
- okul → okulda, okuldan
- kök → kökte, kökten
- kitap → kitapta, kitaptan
- masa → masaya, masanın
- araba → arabayı, arabası
- bir şey → bir şey

Notes

- The final consonant of the word determines whether the suffix begins with D or T.
- Voiceless final consonants trigger T; voiced ones trigger D.
- The real buffer consonants are y, n, s.
- “ş” appears only in certain fixed expressions and does not function as a buffer.
- Consonant harmony plays a role in many key structures including case suffixes, possessive forms, and high-frequency verb constructions.