

VOWEL HARMONY BASICS

by Seda Sürel

INTRODUCTION

Vowel Harmony Basics

Turkish suffixes change their vowels to match the word they attach to. This is vowel harmony, and it is the reason a Turkish word never sounds like two languages stitched together. Once the logic is clear, choosing the right suffix stops being a guessing game and starts being automatic.

Turkish has eight vowels: A, E, I, İ, O, Ö, U, Ü. These eight sort into two systems that govern almost every suffix in the language: front-back harmony and four-way harmony. A third pattern, rounding harmony, adds a further layer within four-way suffixes.

1. Front-Back Harmony

This is the rule underneath everything else in Turkish suffixation. Turkish vowels split into two families based on where they sit in the mouth.

Back vowels: A, I, O, U

Front vowels: E, İ, Ö, Ü

A suffix vowel matches the family of the last vowel in the word. A word ending in a back vowel takes a back-vowel suffix. A word ending in a front vowel takes a front-vowel suffix. This holds even when a word has several suffixes attached, because each new suffix looks at the vowel that now sits at the end of the word.

See the [locative case](#) and [plural formation](#) for suffixes that follow this pattern directly.

2. Four-Way Vowel Harmony

Some suffixes go further than front-back harmony and adjust to one of four exact vowels, not just two. This pattern governs the [accusative case](#), several other case endings, possessive suffixes, and a range of verb forms.

Last vowel A or I → suffix vowel ı

Last vowel E or İ → suffix vowel i

Last vowel O or U → suffix vowel u

Last vowel Ö or Ü → suffix vowel ü

3. Rounding Harmony

Four-way suffixes follow one further pattern beyond front-back placement: roundedness. Turkish vowels split into rounded (O, Ö, U, Ü) and unrounded (A, E, I, İ) sets, and a four-way suffix mirrors the roundedness of the word's last vowel, not just its frontness.

After an unrounded vowel, the suffix stays unrounded. After a rounded vowel, the suffix becomes rounded. This is why the four-way table above has four options rather than two: frontness and roundedness are tracked together.

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4. Why This Rule Shapes the Whole Language

Nearly every suffix in Turkish obeys harmony in some form. This is not a stylistic preference. A suffix with the wrong vowel sounds instantly foreign to a Turkish ear, the way a mismatched verb ending sounds off in English. Learning the pattern early means plurals, cases, and verb forms start to feel predictable instead of memorized one entry at a time.

A small number of words also shift their final consonant when a suffix is added, as in köpek → köpeğ. That change belongs to a separate rule, consonant softening, and not to vowel harmony. It will get its own lesson.

5. When a Word Does Not Follow Harmony

A small number of Turkish words break these rules, mostly Arabic loanwords whose suffixes follow the original Arabic pronunciation rather than the written Turkish vowel. saat (hour) and kalp (heart) are the clearest examples. Both are written with an A, the same letter found in true back-vowel Turkish words like at (horse) or kat (floor). But in saat and kalp, that A was never the same sound. In Arabic, the consonants next to it shape the vowel into a thinner, fronter sound than the A in at or kat. Turkish suffixes follow that actual sound, not the letter on the page, which is why the plural is saatler and kalpler, never saatlar or kalplar.

These words are few enough to be learned individually, the way English speakers learn irregular plurals like mice instead of mouses, rather than by applying a rule. The front-back and four-way rules above still apply to the overwhelming majority of Turkish vocabulary.

Practical Summary

When adding a suffix to a Turkish word: find the last vowel, match it to the correct suffix vowel under front-back harmony, and if the suffix is a four-way type, also match roundedness. No suffix list to memorize, no exceptions to track case by case beyond the handful of loanwords above, just one rule applied consistently.

Examples

- kapı → kapıda (locative case)
- okul → okullar (plural suffix)
- bilek → bilekte (locative case)
- köy → köyde (locative case)
- kapı → kapıyı
- el → eli
- okul → okulu
- göz → gözü
- ev → evim
- masa → masam
- kuş → kuşum
- yol → yolu
- gün → günü
- masa → masada
- oda → odada
- ev → evler
- kalem → kalemler
- saat → saatler, not saatlar
- kalp → kalpler, not kalplar

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Notes

- The last vowel of a word always determines its suffix vowel, no matter how many suffixes stack on top of each other.
- Vowel harmony applies to nearly the entire language, including loanwords once they have settled into everyday use.
- Rounding harmony is not a separate, optional layer. It is built into every four-way suffix, which is why that suffix type has four forms instead of two.
- Vowel harmony is easiest to hear, not just see. Say evler and evlar out loud: the second one snags in a way that feels similar to hearing "an history" instead of "a history" in English. That small friction is what a Turkish ear reacts to when a suffix breaks harmony.