

NOUN PHRASES: DEFINITE AND INDEFINITE

by Seda Sürel

INTRODUCTION

Turkish commonly links two nouns through two patterns: the definite noun phrase (belirtili isim tamlaması) and the indefinite noun phrase (belirtisiz isim tamlaması). In the first pattern, the first noun takes the genitive suffix -(n)In. In the second pattern, the first noun has no genitive suffix and functions as a classifier or modifier. The English labels "definite" and "indefinite" describe this traditional Turkish classification, not definiteness marked by articles like "the" or "a" in English.

1. Function / Meaning

A definite noun phrase marks the first noun with the genitive suffix and presents it as the possessor or related noun. An indefinite noun phrase leaves the first noun without the genitive suffix. The first noun describes the type, role, or content of the second noun, or helps form an established compound name.

Examples:

okulun bahçesi (the school's garden / the garden of the school — definite)

okul bahçesi (a school garden, a type of place — indefinite)

2. Definite Noun Phrase: Recap

This pattern was covered in detail in the [Turkish Genitive Case lesson](#): the first noun takes -(n)In, and the second noun takes a possessive suffix.

Examples:

Ayşe'nin kalemi (Ayşe's pen)

öğretmenin kitabı (the teacher's book)

öğrencinin çantası (the student's bag)

3. Indefinite Noun Phrase: Form and Structure

First noun (no genitive suffix) + second noun → -(s)I

The first noun does not take the genitive suffix -(n)In. The second noun takes -(s)I, the same form used for the 3rd person possessive suffix, but here it works as a compound marker rather than expressing true possession. Four-way vowel harmony applies:

a, ı → -(s)ı

e, i → -(s)i

o, u → -(s)u

ö, ü → -(s)ü

If the second noun ends in a vowel, the buffer -s- appears: çorba-sı, kahve-si. If it ends in a consonant, the suffix attaches without -s-. Some final consonants may also change when the suffix is added, as in kaşık → kaşığı and bardak → bardağı.

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Examples:

çay kaşığı (teaspoon)
su bardağı (water glass)
mercimek çorbası (lentil soup)

4. What an Indefinite Noun Phrase Expresses

This pattern covers several distinct meanings:

Type or category:

Türk kahvesi (Turkish coffee, a type of coffee)

Profession or role:

Ali Türkçe öğretmeni. (Ali is a Turkish-language teacher.)

Content, ingredient, or source:

elma suyu (apple juice)
portakal suyu (orange juice)
mercimek çorbası (lentil soup)

Compound proper names formed with this pattern:

İstanbul Üniversitesi (Istanbul University)
İstiklal Caddesi (İstiklal Street)
Taksim Meydanı (Taksim Square)

Not every English noun+noun expression can be translated into Turkish using -(s)I automatically. The accepted compound depends on established Turkish usage, not on freely combining any two nouns.

5. Comparing the Two Patterns with the Same Nouns

The same two nouns can form either pattern, and the grammatical relationship and meaning change depending on which one is used.

Examples:

okulun müdürü: the principal associated with a particular school
okul müdürü: school principal, expressing a role or position
çocuğun kitabı: a book belonging or related to a child
çocuk kitabı: a children's book, expressing a type of book

Additional Note (for reference, beyond the core A1 rule):

Case suffixes after -(s)I: When a case suffix follows a noun ending in -(s)I, a buffer -n- appears: caddesi-n-de, üniversitesi-n-e. Street and square names take an apostrophe before the case suffix, as in İstiklal Caddesi'nde. Suffixes added to complete institution names are written without an apostrophe, as in Yeditepe Üniversitesi.

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Plural structure: In the indefinite pattern, the plural suffix attaches to the second noun before -(s)l: otobüs bilet-ler-i, el çanta-lar-ı, çay bardak-lar-ı.

First noun with other suffixes: The first noun does not take the genitive suffix -(n)l, but it can carry another suffix in some established compounds: kadınlar kulübü (women's club).

Examples

- okulun bahçesi. — The school's garden.
- okul bahçesi. — A school garden.
- Türk kahvesi çok meşhur. — Turkish coffee is very famous.
- Ali Türkçe öğretmeni. — Ali is a Turkish-language teacher.
- Elma suyu içiyorum. — I'm drinking apple juice.
- İstanbul Üniversitesi büyük. — Istanbul University is large.
- Okulun müdürü toplantıda. — The principal of the school is in the meeting.
- Okul müdürü konuştu. — The school principal spoke.
- Çocuğun kitabı masada. — The child's book is on the table.
- Çocuk kitabı okuyor. — He/she is reading a children's book.

Notes

- A definite noun phrase marks the first noun with -(n)l and marks the second noun with a possessive suffix. An indefinite noun phrase leaves the first noun without the genitive suffix and marks only the second noun with -(s)l.
- The -(s)l suffix on the second noun has the same form as the 3rd person possessive suffix, but in this pattern it functions as a compound marker, not as true possession.
- An indefinite noun phrase covers types, professions, content or source, and compound proper names.