

POSSIBILITY / PROBABILITY

by Seda Sürel

INTRODUCTION

Turkish expresses possibility and probability through two modal forms: the lexical predicate *olabilir* and the epistemic use of the potential suffix *-ebil / -abil*. Both forms encode non-assertive modality and indicate that an event is likely, possible, or logically inferred.

1. Function

These constructions mark epistemic modality: the event is evaluated as possible, uncertain, or probable based on available information. They do not express ability in this context, but likelihood.

2. Lexical Predicate: *olabilir*

olabilir is a lexicalized predicate derived from *ol-* + *-abilir*.

It denotes logical or situational possibility.

Examples:

- Hava yağmurlu olabilir. (It may be rainy.)
- Bu doğru olabilir. (This may be true.)

The predicate inflects as a single unit when required:

- olabilir* → *olabiliriz / olabilirler*
- olmayabilir* → *olmayabiliriz*

3. Epistemic Use of *-ebil / -abil*

The potential suffix *-ebil / -abil* attaches to verb stems and expresses probability rather than ability when used epistemically.

The interpretation is contextual.

Examples:

- Erken dönebilir. (He/She might return early.)
- Yarın başlayabilir. (It may start tomorrow.)
- Araba bozulabilir. (The car might break down.)
- Ses artabilir. (The sound may increase.)

4. Morphology

4.1. Vowel Harmony

Back vowels → *-abilir*

Front vowels → *-ebilir*

Examples:

- al* → *alabilir*
- gör* → *görebilir*
- uç* → *uçabilir*
- dinle* → *dinleyebilir*

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4.2. Consonant Alternation (Lexical Patterns Only)

Most stems ending in p, ç, t, k do not undergo softening before -ebilir / -abilir:

- yap → yapabilir
- seç → seçebilir
- bak → bakabilir

Some stems show lexically fixed alternations, especially t → d:

- git → gidebilir
- tat → tadabilir
- et → edebilir

These alternations are lexical, not fully productive.

4.3. Negation

Negation precedes the potential suffix:

verb + -ma / -me + -yAbilir

Examples:

- gelmeyebilir (may not come)
- olmayabilir (may not be)
- başlamayabilir (may not start)
- bitmeyebilir (may not finish)

5. Syntax

Both olabilir and -abilir serve as the main predicate and inflect for person when relevant.

Examples:

- Gidebilirim. (I may go.)
- Gelebiliriz. (We may come.)
- Olabilirler. (They may be.)

No auxiliary verb is required.

6. Distribution and Interpretation

- olabilir expresses logical possibility.
- -abilir expresses contextual or inferred probability.
- Both forms encode epistemic modality rather than ability.
- Negative forms preserve the same modal meaning.

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Examples

- Bugün yağmur yağabilir. (It may rain today.)
- Araba bozulabilir. (The car might break down.)
- Sınav zor olabilir. (The exam may be difficult.)
- Yarın başlayabiliriz. (We may start tomorrow.)
- Bu plan olmayabilir. (This plan may not work.)
- Etkinlik iptal edilebilir. (The event may be cancelled.)
- O da gelebilir. (He/She may also come.)
- Gece boyunca değişiklik olabilir. (There may be changes overnight.)

Notes

- olabilir is lexicalized but morphologically transparent.
- Epistemic -ebilir marks probability, not ability.
- Negation attaches before the potential suffix.
- The predicate inflects regularly for person.