

-MAKTAYDI: A FORMAL WAY TO SAY "WAS DOING"

by Seda Sürel

INTRODUCTION

1. Function

-mAktaydı describes something that was going on at a certain point in the past. It means roughly the same thing as -lyordu, "was doing."

Örnek: Nüfus hızla artmaktaydı.

— The population was increasing rapidly.

The two forms can describe the same kind of situation, an action in progress in the past.

One important difference is register: -lyordu is the everyday, neutral choice. -mAktaydı belongs to more formal, written, or prepared speech.

2. Forms

Positive:

Verb stem + -mAktA/-mEktE + idi → -mAktaydı/-mEkteydi

yapmaktaydı (was doing)

gelmekteydi (was coming)

Negative:

Verb stem + negative -mA/-mE + -mAktA/-mEktE + idi → -mAmAktAydı/-mEmEktEydi

Örnek: Sistem o sırada düzgün çalışmamaktaydı.

— The system was not working properly at the time.

Unfused alternative:

You'll sometimes also see the unfused version, -mAktA idi, written as two separate words. It means exactly the same thing as the fused form. Both are correct; the fused form is simply more common in ordinary writing.

3. Morphology

-mAktaydı is built from three pieces.

Step 1: Verb stem + -mAkt (the infinitive, "to do") + -DA (the locative ending, "at/in")

yap + mak + ta → yapmakta

gel + mek + te → gelmekte

A useful way to think of -mAktA / -mEktE is something like "in the process of doing," though this is just a helpful mental picture rather than a literal translation.

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Step 2: Add the past form of "to be," idi, "was."

-mAktA + idi → -mAktaydı

-mEktE + idi → -mEkteydi

Because -mAktA ends in a vowel and idi begins with one, Turkish adds a buffer consonant, y, and the two words fuse together: mAktA-y-dı.

Step 3: Vowel harmony decides whether you get -maktaydı or -mekteydi, depending on the vowels in the verb stem.

Negative morphology:

Structure: Verb stem + negative -mA/-mE + -mAktA/-mEktE + -ydl + personal ending

çalış-ma-mak-ta-y-dı-m → I was not working

Related form: In formal Turkish, you will also often see -mAktAdır for ongoing situations in the present: yapılmaktadır ("is being done"), compared with yapılmaktaydı ("was being done").

4. Structural Guide

Both -lyordu and -mAktaydı can describe an action that was ongoing in the past. In many contexts, they refer to the same past situation, while register and style affect which form sounds more natural.

Örnek:

O sırada yağmur yağıyordu.

O sırada yağmur yağırmaktaydı.

— It was raining at the time.

Both sentences say the same basic thing. The difference here is tone and context.

-lyordu is the natural, everyday choice. You'd use it in conversation, casual writing, and most storytelling.

-mAktaydı sounds more formal. It's common in news reports, history books, biographies, and other writing where the speaker is presenting the situation in a more formal or report-like way, rather than telling a story as it's being lived. This is a tendency of the register, not a fixed grammar rule.

Örnek (history writing):

Osmanlı ordusu o dönemde büyük bir yeniden yapılanma sürecinden geçmekteydi.

— At that time, the Ottoman army was undergoing a major restructuring process.

Here, -mAktaydı fits naturally because the sentence is presenting a historical situation the way a textbook or documentary would.

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5. Usage

Formal and analytical writing:

Örnek: İç talep görece istikrarlı seyrederken, dış finansman koşulları belirgin biçimde sıkılaşmaktaydı.
— While domestic demand remained relatively stable, external financing conditions were tightening noticeably.

Historical and biographical narration:

Örnek: Genç yaşta İstanbul'a taşınan yazar, o dönemde ilk romanı üzerinde çalışmaktaydı.
— Having moved to Istanbul at a young age, the writer was working on his first novel during that period.

Nature writing and narration:

Örnek: Kartallar bölgede avlanmakta, genç kuşlar ise uçmayı öğrenmekteydi.
— Eagles were hunting in the area, while the young birds were learning to fly.

Passive constructions in reports:

Because -mAktaydı is common in formal and institutional writing, it often appears together with the passive voice, since reports frequently describe processes without naming who is carrying them out.

Örnekler:

Dosya inceleniyordu. / Dosya incelenmekteydi.
— The file was being reviewed.

Yeni düzenleme uygulanmaktaydı.
— The new regulation was being implemented.

Konu meclis gündeminde görüşülmekteydi.
— The matter was being discussed on the parliamentary agenda.

Examples

A) Everyday, compared directly
O sırada yağmur yağıyordu. / O sırada yağmur yağırmaktaydı.
— It was raining at the time.

B) History
O yıllarda İstanbul'un nüfusu hızla artmaktaydı.
— In those years, Istanbul's population was rapidly increasing.

C) Biography
Öğrencilik yıllarında Ankara'da yaşayan ressam, o dönemde ilk sergisine hazırlanmaktaydı.
— While living in Ankara during his student years, the painter was preparing for his first exhibition at the time.

D) Nature writing / narration
Balıklar sığ suda toplanmakta, martılar ise tepede dönmekteydi.
— The fish were gathering in the shallow water, while the seagulls were circling overhead.

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Notes

- -mAktaydı vs -lyordu: Both describe an ongoing past action, and the basic time meaning is the same. -lyordu is far more common and neutral in everyday conversation. -mAktaydı is strongly associated with formal, written, report-like, historical, or prepared speech, but it can still occur in spoken Turkish, especially in more careful or formal speaking situations like a lecture or news broadcast.
- When should I use it? As a general guideline: for ordinary conversation and everyday storytelling, -lyordu is usually the natural choice. For formal reports, historical description, or prepared and elevated narration, -mAktaydı may fit better. This is a register tendency, something native speakers feel rather than a strict rule, so both forms will sound grammatical in most contexts.