Agents in Turkish and their morphology

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Introduction

The process of deriving nouns that refer to agents (nomen agentis) is generally defined as a regular morphological operation. Basically, a new noun is derived through affixation to a verbal base and the resulting noun represents the agent of the base verb. However, recent studies revealed that the process of deriving agent nouns is not as simple as it is commonly understood.

The complexities concerning agent nouns are mostly due to the complexity of the notion of agent itself. What counts as agent is a question that has occupied many researchers for a long time and an enormous effort has been put into accomplishing the task of developing a definition that would satisfy everyone. It became clear in the course of time that such an attempt is doomed to fail. The studies then shifted on to defining prototypical properties of agents and listing those qualities that would qualify an entity as an agent.

Studies on thematic roles and their relation to grammar provided formal explanations for the behavior of agents. Studies on syntax, on the other hand, gradually incorporated knowledge that is encoded in the thematic structure and sought to derive certain aspects of grammatical structure through linking regularities. These studies suggest that agents are the most likely candidates for the subject position. Pragmatic approaches aimed to derive certain aspects of information structure from thematic structure and they maintained that topichood is related to agency. The lexical
semantic studies further contributed to our understanding of thematic roles; verbs that belong to certain semantic classes do not occur with agents.

However, later research abandoned reference to thematic roles; particularly, reference to agents was replaced by reference to external arguments. As the investigation penetrated deeper into the lexical, semantic, and grammatical properties of the argument assigning elements, it became clear that most of the grammatically significant phenomena are not related to thematic roles or role labels.

The place of thematic roles in morphology is mostly discussed within the context of argument inheritance. When an element with an underlying predicate argument structure undergoes a categorial change, it preserves the information encoded in its predicate argument structure and the form inherits this type of knowledge in one way or another. The role of morphology in manipulating argument structure is first formalized by Williams (1981) in which the rules formulated could make an external argument internal and an internal argument external.

This study will shed light on one morphological rule that targets the external argument, namely the derivation of agentive nouns in Turkish.

The function of deriving agentive nouns is generally fulfilled by different affixes; in other words, finding a language with a single affix for deriving agentive nouns is not likely. One reason for this situation may be attributed to the multifaceted nature of the notion of agent and its role in human experience. Both English and Turkish have a number of different affixes that they use in the derivation of agent nominals.

Among the agent deriving affixes in Turkish, two of them stand out as the most productive in the ordinary sense of the word. -(y)lcl which derives agent nouns from verbal bases and +Çl which derives agent nouns from nominal bases. The remaining
agentive suffixes are comparatively low in productivity in the deriving of agentives. Thus, it makes sense to develop morphologically relevant generalizations over the data of agentives from these two suffixes.

We will not presuppose any particular theory of morphology in our analyses. Neither is it our aim to provide conclusive generalizations for the domain of agent nominal derivation in Turkish. What we would like to do is to present relatively representative data for researchers and to provide a descriptive account of two agentive suffixes. Here, we will present some of our observations on the data given in the appendices and derive generalizations from the regularities that we determine from the outputs of agent deriving suffixes.

It is commonly agreed that dictionaries are not reliable sources to study productivity. The knowledge of lexical items stored in the minds of the language user includes what is called “encyclopedic” knowledge which may be encoding information that would display considerable variations among the members of the same speech community. This does not mean that knowledge of words, especially their semantics changes from one user to another in an unbounded fashion. In the case of agentive nominals, however, the diversity of opinions on what counts as agents may stem from encyclopedic knowledge. The readers may check themselves through some of the agentive nominals listed in the appendices by reviewing the matches and mismatches of the semantics of the agentives as they are stored in their minds with the semantic content assigned to the same agentive nominal by the dictionary writer(s). Thus, we will limit ourselves to the semantics of the agentive nominals and adjectivals as they are defined in the dictionaries.

As many researchers acknowledge, the term “agentive” is misleading, however, they still use this term in their arguments for the sake of ease of reference.

In the first chapter of this study we will present different
views of “agency” and the notion of “agent”. In order to clarify the issue we will refer to fields other than linguistics. Approaches to prototypical agent will also be presented in this chapter.

The second chapter will discuss fundamental points in nominalizations, especially in the derivation of agentive nouns in English and Dutch. In this respect, the proposals advanced by formal and functional approaches to agent nominalization will be introduced. We will discuss agent nominalization in the context of different types of derivational relations among different processes in this chapter.

In the third chapter, we will review general properties of derivation in Turkish. Here, we will discuss different approaches to agent nominalization in Turkish and present categorizations developed by different researchers. We will propose a new approach to agent nominalization on the basis of the base forms. With respect to -(y)lcl derivations we will argue that the semantic role of the underlying subject noun phrase is not determined by the verb alone but by the verb phrase. As for the +%Çl derivations, we will argue that the appropriate analysis of such nominals should make reference to the implicit verb relating to the base noun to the derived agentive noun.

The data of our observation is presented in the appendices. We have divided the dictionaries that form the data into two sections as pre-republican and republican for no obvious linguistic reason. First, the data sources do not define a period of language in combination to one another. Second, the effects of neologisms provided during the language reform can thus be avoided. The final appendix is the latest list of professions as they are officially recognized and approved by the Union of Chamber of Commerce.