



TURKIC BORROWINGS IN ENGLISH: A LINGUISTIC JOURNEY FROM THE STEPPES TO MODERN VOCABULARY

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Abstract

This article examines the contribution of Turkic languages to English through centuries of cultural, commercial, and military contact. From the Silk Road to the Ottoman Empire's influence on European diplomacy, Turkic words have enriched English vocabulary across food, clothing, military terminology, architecture, and commerce. Through etymological analysis, this study demonstrates that Turkic borrowings have become integral to English communication and reflect cross-cultural exchange patterns.

Keywords: Etymology, Loanwords, Turkic Languages, English Language History, Ottoman Empire, Linguistic Borrowing

1. Introduction

The English language has absorbed vocabulary from numerous language families. While borrowings from French, Latin, and Greek are well-documented, the contribution of Turkic languages remains less recognized despite its significance. Turkic languages—spanning Eastern Europe through Central Asia to Siberia—have enriched English with commonplace words.

Turkic words entered English through varied pathways involving direct and indirect transmission. The Ottoman Empire's centuries-long dominance created sustained contact with Western European powers. Trade along the Silk Road,



military encounters during the Crusades, and diplomatic exchanges all facilitated linguistic transfer.

2. Historical Context

2.1 The Silk Road and Medieval Trade

The Silk Road (130 BCE–1453 CE) facilitated exchange of goods, ideas, and vocabulary. Turkic-speaking peoples dominated substantial portions of Central Asian trade routes. Turkic words occasionally entered European languages through intermediary languages like Arabic, Persian, and Eastern European languages, though direct borrowing remained limited.

2.2 The Ottoman Empire (1299–1922)

The Ottoman Empire marked the beginning of substantial Turkic influence on European languages. By the 16th century, the Empire controlled territories from Southeast Europe through Anatolia to North Africa. English travelers, merchants, diplomats, and captives encountered Turkish culture firsthand. Travel narratives and diplomatic correspondence introduced Turkish vocabulary for unfamiliar objects, foods, and customs [1].

The Ottoman court's influence on European fashion and cuisine during the 17th–18th centuries further facilitated Turkish terminology adoption. European "Oriental" fascination ensured many Turkish words retained their foreign character while becoming established in English.

2.3 Eastern European Contact

The Mongol invasions (13th–14th centuries) and subsequent Turkic presence in Eastern Europe provided another pathway. The Golden Horde and other Turkic-Mongol states controlled vast territories where Turkic languages interacted with Slavic languages. Some Turkic words entered English indirectly through Russian, Polish, and Hungarian [2].



3. Major Semantic Categories

3.1 Food and Culinary Terms

Yogurt (Turkish: *yoğurt*) - The most ubiquitous Turkic borrowing derives from Turkish *yoğurmak* (to knead/thicken). It appeared in English texts by the 1620s as "yughurd" or "yoghurd." The product originated with nomadic Turkic peoples around 5000 BCE. Mahmud al-Kashgari documented "yogurt" in his 11th-century *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk* [3].

Dolma (Turkish: *dolma*, from *dolmak* "to fill") - Refers to stuffed vegetables or grape leaves. It entered English in the 19th century through travel accounts and cookbook translations.

Shish Kebab (Turkish: *şiş kebab*) - Combines *şiş* (skewer) and *kebab* (roasted meat). The specific construction is distinctly Turkish, entering English in the early 20th century.

Caviar - Many etymologists trace it to Turkish *havyar*, from Old Turkish *châviyâr* (spawn-carrier). It entered English through Italian and French in the 16th century, reflecting Ottoman control of Black Sea and Caspian Sea sturgeon fisheries.

3.2 Clothing and Textiles

Turban (Turkish: *tülbent*, from Persian *dulband*) - Entered English through French and Italian from Ottoman Turkish in the mid-16th century. Interestingly, it shares etymology with "tulip" [4].

Caftan (Turkish: *kaftan*) - This long robe entered English in the late 16th century. Ottoman courtly dress fascination ensured the term's adoption.

Fez (Turkish: *fes*) - Named after the Moroccan manufacturing city but became iconic Ottoman headwear in the 19th century.

3.3 Military and Political Terminology

Horde (Turkish: *ordu* "army") - Derives from Cuman Turkic *orda* (encampment/military camp). It entered English mid-16th century through accounts of Mongol invasions and the Golden Horde. The semantic shift to "large, threatening crowd" reflects European perceptions of Mongol and Turkic military forces [5].



Janissary (Turkish: *yeniçeri* "new soldier") - Designated elite Ottoman infantry units formed in the 14th century. The word entered English in the 16th century during military conflicts.

Khan (Turkish: *han*, from Mongolic) - This ruler title entered English through Turkic languages by the 14th century.

Pasha (Turkish: *paşa*) - Ottoman title for high-ranking officials that entered English in the 17th century through diplomatic encounters.

3.4 Architecture and Urban Features

Kiosk (Turkish: *köşk* "pavilion") - Originally an open garden pavilion, it entered English via French in the 17th century. The word expanded to include small structures for selling goods and digital information kiosks [6].

Bazaar (Persian *bāzār*, widespread in Turkish) - Entered English through Turkish during the Ottoman period by the late 16th century. English travelers described Istanbul market districts, adopting this term.

Seraglio (Turkish *saray* "palace", via Italian *serraglio*) - Referred to the Ottoman Sultan's palace compound, entering English in the late 16th century.

3.5 Social Customs and Objects

Coffee (Turkish: *kahve*, from Arabic *qahwa*) - While ultimately Arabic, "coffee" entered European languages primarily through Turkish during the Ottoman period. Ottoman coffeehouses (*kahvehane*) in 16th-century Constantinople created a coffee culture that spread to Europe. The Turkish word entered English through Italian and French [7].

Divan (Turkish: *divan*, from Persian) - Originally a collection of poems or Ottoman government council, it entered English in the 16th century. In English, it evolved to designate a type of sofa, reflecting Ottoman seating arrangements.

Ottoman - Beyond the empire designation, "ottoman" entered English in the 18th century as furniture terminology for a low upholstered seat, derived from European associations with Ottoman seating customs.



3.6 Miscellaneous Terms

Bosh (Turkish: *boş* "empty, worthless") - This colloquial term meaning "nonsense" entered English in the early 19th century through British travelers.

Lackey (Turkish: *ulak* "courier, runner") - Traveled from Turkish through Hungarian or other intermediary languages to Spanish or French, reaching English in the 16th century.

Mammoth - While traced through Russian *mamont*, the ultimate source may be Yakut (Turkic language of Siberia). It entered English in the early 18th century when frozen remains were discovered in Siberia.

4. Indirect Borrowings

Many Turkic words entered English through intermediary languages:

- **Russian:** Terms from Tatar, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Yakut
- **French and Italian:** Ottoman diplomatic and commercial contacts created pathways
- **Hungarian and Eastern European Languages:** Historical Ottoman frontier position facilitated borrowings
- **Persian and Arabic:** Often served as intermediaries for Turkic terms [8]

5. Phonological and Orthographic Adaptation

Turkic borrowings underwent various adaptations to conform to English:

- **Vowel Modifications:** Turkish vowels (*ı, ü, ö*) not in English required adaptation (*köşk* → *kiosk*)
- **Consonant Adaptations:** Turkish *ş* became "sh" (*şiş* → *shish*); *ç* became "ch"
- **Spelling Variations:** Many borrowings exhibit multiple English spellings (*yogurt, yoghurt, yoghourt*) [9]

6. Semantic Evolution

Turkic borrowings underwent interesting semantic changes:

- **Exoticization:** Many retain exotic connotations (*harem, sultan, bazaar*)
- **Generalization:** Some lost Turkish associations ("horde" no longer evokes military camps; "yogurt" is simply a dairy product)



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- **Specialization:** Some became more specialized ("janissary" is primarily historical)
 - **Pejorative Shifts:** A few acquired negative connotations ("bosh" meaning nonsense)

7. Contemporary Trends

The late 20th–21st centuries have seen few new direct borrowings due to reduced cultural contact and English becoming the donor language in Turkish-English interactions. However, certain contexts continue introducing Turkish vocabulary:

- **Culinary Tourism:** Terms like *meze*, *lahmacun*, *börek*, *raki*, *ayran*, and *simit* appear increasingly in English culinary discourse
- **Turkish Diaspora:** Communities occasionally introduce vocabulary to local English dialects
- **Academic Discourse:** Scholarly work on Ottoman history employs Turkish terminology

8. Comparative Perspective

English is not unique in borrowing from Turkic languages. Serbo-Croatian contains approximately 5,000 Turkish loanwords from centuries of Ottoman rule. Hungarian, Russian, Greek, Albanian, Romanian, and Bulgarian similarly absorbed extensive Turkish vocabulary, far exceeding Turkish borrowings in English [10].

9. Conclusion

Turkic borrowings in English, while numerically modest compared to French, Latin, or Greek borrowings, represent significant linguistic evidence of historical cross-cultural contact. These loanwords document centuries of trade, diplomacy, military conflict, and cultural exchange between Turkic-speaking peoples and English speakers.

The semantic domains—predominantly food, clothing, military organization, architecture, and social customs—reflect aspects of Ottoman and Turkic culture that most impressed European observers. Words like "yogurt," "coffee," and



"kiosk" have become so thoroughly naturalized that their Turkic origins are rarely recognized.

Understanding these etymological connections enriches our appreciation of English language history while highlighting diverse cultural interactions that have shaped modern English vocabulary. The Turkic contribution stands as testament to the Ottoman Empire's historical importance, Turkic civilizations' cultural richness, and the fundamentally dynamic, absorptive nature of English itself.

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