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May You Be Shot With Greasy Bullets
Curse Utterances in Turkish

Abstract

Curse utterances are a remarkable linguistic form. While some languages have few curse utterances, other languages, such as Turkish, are well known for their imaginative and numerous curse expressions. This study surveys the characteristics and functions of curse utterances in Turkish by examining specific examples with concepts from speech act theory and ethnography of communication. Throughout the study the examples will help to demonstrate that curse utterances are more than linguistic routines, as they allow their "addressors" to enjoy a high degree of creativity and verbal flexibility within rather strict morphological and syntactical rules.

Key words: curse utterances—speech act theory—ethnography of communication

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THIS ARTICLE ON TURKISH curse utterances has two closely related purposes. The first is to help fill a gap in our knowledge of speech acts. Earlier studies have examined speech acts such as requesting, apologizing, and complimenting, but thus far none have examined the act of cursing. The second purpose is to provide a resource to be used for cross-cultural studies on the act of cursing.

The relationship between a language, its speakers, and their thought and culture has been a topic of interest among philosophers and linguists for a long time. SAPIR was the first to argue cogently that language and culture are inextricably related, and that it is not possible to understand or appreciate one without knowledge of the other (1929, 207). His student, Whorf, developed these ideas further. In Whorf's view, the relationship between language and culture is a deterministic one. Whorf's claim that different languages lead their speakers to view the world differently is known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (YULE 1985, 196). More recent studies by HYMES (1974), GUMPERZ (1971, 1982), and SAVILLE-TROIKE (1982) have established a stronger base for sociologists, ethnomethodologists, and discourse analysts to explore the relationships between social structures, culture, thought, and language.

Research on rules for language use within sociology and sociolinguistics, which is known as "ethnomethodology," has generally focused on relatively small linguistic units (SAVILLE-TROIKE 1996, 354). Important examples include sequencing in conversational openings, telephone conversations, and service encounters, or rules for the use of terms of address as they relate to cultural contexts or sociopolitical sentiments. Among the previous studies on speech acts we find such titles as: "Politeness: Comparing native and nonnative judgments" (CARRELL and KONNEKER 1981); "May God increase your bounty: The expression of gratitude in English by native and nonnative speakers" (BODMAN and EISENSTEIN 1988); *Complaining and commiserating: A speech act view of solidarity in spoken American English* (BOXER 1993); and "Apology: A speech act set" (OLSHTAIN and COHEN 1983). As

their titles suggest, some of these studies focus on the speech acts in English only, while others compare the speech act behavior of native speakers of a language (which is usually English) with the behavior of learners of that language. In this study, curse utterances will be examined as the speech act behavior of native Turkish speakers only. It is hoped that this study will provide useful data for further cross-cultural research.

A Brief Overview of Speech Act Theory

One particular approach to functional classification developed by philosophers and linguists of speech is based on the speech act theory of the British philosopher Austin. Austin (1962) argued that some utterances in a language are, in themselves acts, and he posited the existence of a set of verbs in English that he termed "performatives" because a speaker may, by using one of them in the first person present, perform an act. Examples of such utterances are, "I name this ship 'Liberty Bell'," "I warn you to obey," and "I beg you to help me." According to this speech act theory, utterances have three kinds of meaning. The first kind is the "propositional" (or "locutionary") meaning, which states that we must use words and sentences if we are to say anything at all. The second is the "illocutionary" meaning, which is dependent on the intentions of speakers, such as stating, questioning, promising, or commanding. And lastly, there is the "perlocutionary" meaning, which is the result or effect that is produced by an utterance in a given context. This speech act theory attempts to capture all the possible functions of language by classifying the kinds of action that can be performed by speech. Prompted by this theory, empirical studies concerning the nature of different speech acts in a variety of languages and cultures have been steadily accumulating over the last few years (Cohen 1996, 384–85).

In every society there are sociocultural rules that govern how people use language and, in particular, how they perform communicative acts such as inviting, complimenting, and apologizing, in ways that are appropriate to particular situations (Riley 1992, 61). In Austin's (1962) terms, these rules are the "felicity conditions" that performatives must meet to be successful. The first condition requires that a conventional procedure exist for doing whatever is to be done, and that that procedure specify who must say and do what and in what circumstances. Second, all participants must properly execute this procedure and carry it through to completion. Finally, the necessary thoughts, feelings, and intentions must be present in all parties. In this study we will see to what degree, and in what forms, these rules are realized in the speech act of cursing in Turkish.

Curse utterances can be a very rich source for the verbal reflections of a community's cultural identity, as they reveal many aspects of the language,

culture, and way of thinking of the people who belong to the same speech community. In this respect, curse utterances can be good examples of the richness of a particular culture and language. AUSTIN (1962, 151) places the "cursing" in the behabitives part in his classification of utterances according to their illocutionary meaning, and adds that behabitives (such as apologizing, congratulating, commending, condoling, cursing, and challenging) have to do with attitudes and "social behavior." This categorization of curses by Austin, along with RILEY's (1992, 61) explanation that categories of speech acts are not universal and that speech acts found in some cultures are not to be found in others, should help us understand why in some languages there are very few occurrences of curse utterances while in others (such as Turkish) they are quite numerous.

Because curse utterances have a formulaic nature, it can be asked whether they are linguistic routines or not. According to SAVILLE-TROIKE (1982, 44–45), routines such as "How do you do," "Have a nice day," and "How are you," should be considered as single units that are performative in nature, since they fulfill a communicative function. According to the same author, understanding routines requires shared cultural knowledge because they are generally metaphoric in nature, and must be interpreted at a non-literal level. Saville-Troike also points out the different behavior of different speech communities toward routines. For instance, English speakers are often quite opposed to routines at a conscious level, because they are "meaningless" and depersonalize the ideas expressed; therefore, most native English speakers prefer not to use routines while offering condolences, but instead say: "I really do not know what to say," which, according to Saville-Troike, has itself become a routine.

Is it the same with curse utterances? Can we consider them as routines also? These are difficult questions to answer. If we take into consideration the fact that routines are utterances spoken in specific situations and under specific conditions, then it would be possible to say that curse utterances are like routines, since they are uttered as a sign of anger, hatred, mental pain, or despair. For example, the expression *Allah kahretsin* (Curse him/it.) sounds more like a routine as it has a "formulaic" function to indicate anger. On the other hand, unlike routines, curse utterances in Turkish can also be very creative. As I will show later, some curse utterances can be produced spontaneously provided that the speaker follows certain syntactical rules. For example, derivational and inflectional suffixes attached to the verb stem, such as the ancient future suffix [*-EsI (cE)*], and the optative suffixes [*-sIn*] and [*-(y) E*] are useful for creating different curse utterances. These suffixes allow for unique and flexible expressions, and thus make curse utterances a dynamic and creative form of language.[1] The flexible potential of curse

utterances also makes them an important topic for folklorists that needs to be studied in as much detail as folktales, riddles, and proverbs.

Curse utterances, which are not descriptive and which have no "truth value," can be classified as the "emotional" meaning type described by LYONS (1981, 140–44). This meaning type, unlike declarative, interrogative, and imperative sentences, does not indicate judgment; it only expresses emotions such as surprise, happiness, sadness, grief, and complaint. It would not be wrong to say that the intensity of emotions reflected in curse utterances is far higher than in any other type of speech act. In addition to the emotional meaning, curse utterances include social meaning, too, by which the social relationships and roles of the participants involved in the speech act are reflected. This issue will be clearer after we see the examples given below. Let me point out here that curse utterances are a part of women's discourse, a fact that carries many implications regarding the power and influence of women as opposed to men in Turkish culture. When we consider the contexts in which curse utterances are produced, we will realize that the main precondition for the production of such utterances is the lack of power and inability to use physical force—in this case on the part of women. Under such circumstances, cursing remains the only way to demonstrate emotional reactions such as anger, or hatred of unfair treatment. These types of curses, known in Turkish as *beddua*, are different from the more masculine *küfür* type of curse, which is ruder, more derogatory, and often an initial step toward violence or the use of physical force. In short, the *beddua* usually belongs to women's discourse, whereas *küfür* belongs to men's discourse. In this study, I focus on the use of *beddua* curses that are a part of women's discourse.[2]

THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF COMMUNICATION

Linguists and anthropologists who are interested in describing the different functions of language communication and in understanding how a particular communicative event achieves its objectives, have proposed different categorizations (e.g., HALLIDAY 1973; ROBINSON 1972; HYMES 1974). For this study I use the categorizations proposed by HYMES (1974).

Hymes suggests that a speech act should be analyzed according to the following criteria:[3] a) *Setting*—the time and place of a speech act, and, in general, the physical circumstances; b) *Participants*—various combinations of speaker-listener, addressor-addressee, or sender-receiver (each participant generally fills a certain socially specified role); c) *Ends (Goals)*—the conventionally recognized and expected outcomes of an exchange as well as the personal goals that participants seek to accomplish on a particular occasion; d) *Act sequence*—message content, or the actual form and content of what is

said (e.g., the precise words used, how they are used, and the relationship of what is said to the actual topic at hand); e) *Key*—the tone, manner, or spirit in which a particular message is conveyed (e.g., lighthearted, serious, mocking, pompous); the key may be a nonverbal signal such as a wink, gesture, posture, or style of dress; f) *Instrumentalities*—choice of channel or medium for the transmission of speech (e.g., oral, written, telegraphic, semaphore); g) *Norms of interaction and interpretation*—specific behaviors and properties that are related to speaking, and how these behaviors and properties may be viewed by someone who does not share them (e.g., the belief system of a community); h) *Genre*—clearly demarcated types of utterances, such as poems, proverbs, riddles, sermons, prayers, and lectures.

These criteria, the initials of which spell the acronym SPEAKING, will be taken up one by one below in the analysis of Turkish curse utterances.

Analysis of Curse Utterances

Setting

The act of cursing does not necessarily require a specific time or place. It can be done at any time and in any environment: during the day or night, inside or outside, alone or in a crowd, etc. Although the act of communication in most speech acts of celebration, invitation, scolding, and so forth, takes place between at least two interlocutors (participants), this is not essential with curse utterances. The person may curse someone who is not present in that setting or someone whom she does not know. The person who uses curse language does not expect any response or reaction at all from the person she addresses. As Montgomery (1986, 112) points out, a curse can be likened to a message left on a telephone-answering machine that places the speaker in the unusual position of composing a spoken message for deferred contact with an absent audience. However, curses are different from messages left on an answering machine in one important way: the likelihood of having contact with an addressee is extremely weak in cursing. Still the curser assumes that there is at least someone who hears the curse, such as God, who will put the curse into effect.

Participants

a) Addressor:

In any act of communication, there is a "sender" and a "receiver" (Hymes 1974, 25) who together may be called interlocutors. In addition, there may be an audience present that is not the primary addressee of the message.

In the act of cursing, there may or may not be (an) apparent receiver(s) in the setting. This is true for the audience as well. The sender may be alone, or may be accompanied by an audience including the receiver. Yet, the

sender's role is limited to one participant; the receiver and the audience (if they are present in the setting) are not supposed to, nor are expected to, respond or talk, and consequently the sender sounds as if she is talking to herself. Therefore, curse utterances are like "expressive monologues" in which the sender reacts to an external stimulus, a feeling, or a problem, without attending to the listener's comments, which may be minimal or absent (ERVIN-TRIPP 1968, 196). The silence of the audience, therefore, would increase the ritual-like atmosphere in the setting. On the part of the addressor, the felicity conditions, specifically the first and third ones that should be met in order for any speech act to achieve its purpose, are fulfilled satisfactorily in the act of cursing. In other words, the woman who curses is fully entitled to produce curse utterances in terms of her psychological mood, which, it is supposed, is unstable. She thinks that she has been subjected to unjust treatment, thus feels anger, pain, and despair. Since it is beyond her own power, ability, and authority to punish the one(s) or the thing(s) she blames or holds responsible, she strongly wishes that the person or the thing will be punished somehow. For this she usually asks for God's help.[4]

*1) *Allah senin gibi evladın bin türlü belasını versin!* (May God punish a son like you in a thousand different ways.)

*2) *Bu gadar derim, başka demem. Üstünü ak sakallı Allah dedeme havale ederim. Üstünü o bilir, o yapar!* (I say this much, no more. I assign the rest to my white-bearded grandfather God. He knows what to do next.)

From time to time, she asks for Satan's help:

3) *Kör şeytanından bul!* (Be punished by your blind Satan.)

Besides God and Satan, she sometimes requests that a third person carry out a punishment:

4) *Yağlı kurşunlara çekilesin!*(May you be shot with greasy bullets.)

In some curse utterances no one is asked to carry out an act of punishment as it is assumed to happen all by itself :

5) *Yerin yurdun ateş olsun!* (May your dwelling catch on fire.)

b)Addressee:
In curse utterances, the figure being cursed can be referred to by name.

*6) *O Bayram'ın boyları devrilsin gızım!* (May the body of that Bayram be overturned, my daughter [i.e., may he die].)

7) *Yüzü kesilesice!* (May his face be cut.)

*8) *Eğer bunlar lümereyse (numaraysa), görür gözüm görmez olsun, evimin ocağı tütmez olsun!* (If these were tricks, then may my seeing eyes be blind; may my fireplace die out [i.e., may my dynasty die out].)

In the last example, where the addressor and the addressee are the same person, the addressor is, in a way, trying to convince others about her sincerity and thereby gain their confidence. In other words, she is taking an oath. Similarly, some regret utterances are similar to curse utterances, as can be seen in the following example:

9) *Dilim çekileydi de söylemeyeydim!* (If only my tongue had been pulled out so that I couldn't say it.)

Sometimes the referent of the curse utterance is not mentioned at all:

*10) *Kimler sebep olduysa cihanda yurtsuz yuvasız galsın!* (Those who caused it, may they be left homeless in this world.)

As was mentioned before, the referent can be a thing rather than a person:

11) *Ah, yoksulluğun gözü kör olsun!* (Ah, may the eye of poverty be blind. Curse poverty.)

*12) *Yıkılası dünya, körpecik çocuklara zehir oluyor!* (May this world be destroyed! It's getting to be poisonous for the young kids.)

Ends
Curse utterances express the request and the wish that the person or the

thing at which they are aimed be punished. The form of punishment can vary in at least four ways. First, the addressor can express directly or indirectly the wish that the addressee be dead. Numbers 13–15 are examples of curse utterances that directly express this wish, and numbers 16–20 are examples of curse utterances that indirectly express this wish.

13) *Allah canını alsın!* (May God take your soul.)

14) *Canı cehenneme!* (To hell with his soul.)

15) *Geberesice!* (May he die like a dog.)

16) *Saçın tahtaya döküle!* (May your hair lay on the wood [of a coffin].)

18) *Adın kala!* (May only your name be left [in this world.)

19) *Sıcak yatıp, soğuk kalkasıca!* (May he lie warm and get up cold.)

20) *Gittiği yerlerden gelmeyesi!* (May he not come back from the place he has gone.)

Second, curse utterances can demand that parts of the body of the person addressed or referred to be harmed.

21) *Gözün kör olsun!* (May your eye be blind.)

22) *Elleri kırılsın!* (May his hands be broken.)

Third, curse utterances can express the wish that a person be punished by suffering great pain instead of dying, as dying is thought to be a remedy for the addressee:

*23) *Dillerinde çıbanlar çıksın! Çıbanlarına kurt düşsün!* (May their tongues be covered by boils. May the boils be eaten by worms.)

*24) *Allahım görünmez, bilinmez ağrılar versin de, çeksinler! Ölmesinler!* (May God give them unknown pains so that they suffer, but not die.)

*25) *Dilleri dutulsun, söyleyemesinler.* (May their tongues be tied so that they cannot speak.)

*26) *Bağırsakları dıkansın da sıçamasınlar işallah!* (May their bowels be blocked so that they cannot defecate.)

*27) *Hakimler, hekimler elinde galasın!* (May you suffer at the hands of judges and doctors.)

The fourth and last category contains curse utterances in which the main object of punishment is not the person directly, but his property and family.

*28) *Yapanların evleri yansın!* (May the houses of those who did it be burnt.)

*29) *Ocağına kıran düşe* (May your family be struck by an epidemic.)

*30) *Çoluğundan çocuğundan gülme!* (May your wife and children cause you to suffer all the time.)

As mentioned earlier, curse utterances have no truth value. When the curse utterance is produced, it is not possible to see whether the desired punishment will happen or, if it does, to what degree the punishment will occur. What is important is that the performer calms down by uttering them, and psychologically she feels more at ease thinking that what she has wished will be realized. In other words, the perlocutionary act is not for the person whom the curse is aimed at, but for the performer. This is what Austin mentions as evincing emotion: "We may evince emotion in or by issuing an utterance as when we swear; but once again we have no use here for performative formulas and the other devices of illocutionary acts. We might say that we use swearing for relieving our feelings" (AUSTIN 1962, 105).

Therefore, curse utterances, like swear utterances, are unique in that

they produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings of the speaker, but not of the audience or anyone else as happens in the case of most other speech acts.

Act Sequence (Message Content)
From the examples above, we can generalize that the performer of curse utterances often has malicious wishes for the person or the thing that she refers to; she wishes to see the person or the thing punished. Sometimes it is stated directly, and sometimes it is only implied, that God is being asked to carry out the desired punishment.

However, while most curse utterances do express malicious wishes regarding the person they are aimed at, they sometimes convey an affectionate meaning that can be understood from the intonation of the performer and from the context in which it is said. In such cases, the root of the verb that expresses a negative desire always takes the negative suffix *-mE,* and thus turns the utterance into a positive wish, a "false curse."

31) *Kız gebermeyesice! Bu ne güzellik!* (You girl, may you not die, what a beauty you are!)

32) *Allah canını almasın! Korkuttun beni!* (May God not take your soul [i.e., may God let you live]. You've made me scared.)

Like these examples, there are some other utterances that sound like curses only in the manner of speaking. Syntactically, they have a structure similar to "genuine" curse utterances, yet it is hardly possible to call them curses when their meaning is taken into consideration. First, let's see examples from SUCU (1989, 295):

33) *Ölmüş kargalar gözünü oya!* (May dead crows gouge out your eyes.)

34) *Kül gözüne boz görüne!* (May ash seem grey to your eyes.)

35) *Yıkılmış duvarın altında galasın!* (May you stay dead under an already collapsed wall.)

A careful listener or reader will easily notice the humor in these utterances. How can one expect dead crows to gouge out one's eyes? And, apart

from grey, what other color can ash seem to one's eyes? Finally, how can a living person stay dead under an already collapsed wall? These interesting utterances, which can be called "tricky curse utterances," reflect the witty thinking of people when using language.

Key

As ROBINSON (1972, 72) mentions, there are some unmodified innate responses, or in AUSTIN's (1962, 76) terms "ceremonial nonverbal actions," to certain stimuli that should be considered a part of verbal behavior. This could be interpreted as meeting the second felicity condition mentioned above, which requires all participants to execute the conventional procedure for a particular situation. In this regard, curse utterances are attended by unique emotional expressions such as crying, and beating one's breasts and knees, which correspond with the seriousness of particular situations. The addressor alone, or along with an audience (if there is one), performs these ceremonial nonverbal actions. It should also be added that the manner of performing curse utterances may be different, depending on the culture of a society, but their variety and efficacy have not yet been examined.

Instrumentalities

Cursing as a speech act mostly appears in spoken language, but it exists in written works as well, such as stories, novels, and other narratives where the language of conversation is reflected in written form. Nevertheless, the lack of visual and auditory effects, such as accompanying body movements and pitch of voice, may lessen the actual impact of curse utterances.

Norms of Interaction and Interpretation

The contexts and situations in which Turkish curse utterances are used most often in speech are in rural areas and among women. Regarding the gender of the addressor, WARDHAUGH (1986, 307) mentions that women are sometimes required to be silent in situations in which men may speak. Although this observation is generally true for women, especially among those who have a lower status in Turkish society, it is definitely not true for cursing situations. The women in Turkish society perform the act of cursing much more often than men. The reason for this is closely related to the concepts of power and influence. According to WARDAUGH (1986, 310), power and influence for both men and women are associated with education, social class, regional origin, and so on, and there is no question that there are related linguistic differences in these cases. A good education, being a member of a high social class, and so forth, give a person both power and influence. The lack of such attributes puts a person in a weak and virtually hopeless posi-

tion in regard to external problems. Women, who fall in a weaker social category more often than men, therefore find cursing to be the only way to protest unfair treatment. Men who are in the same situation, on the other hand, mostly demonstrate their reaction to unfairness through the other type of cursing mentioned above, *küfür,* which usually sounds more blasphemous, more aggressive, and ruder.

This observation can be justified by Herding's argument (quoted in MALTZ and BORKER 1982, 200), which says that speech is a means for dealing with social and psychological situations: "When men and women have different experiences and operate in different social contexts, they tend to develop different genres of speech and different skills for doing things with words." It is women rather than men, then, who have become more verbally adept at producing curse utterances in Turkish rural areas. In other words, curses can be considered to be a more feminine than masculine type of speech.

Another characteristic of the women who perform curse utterances in a Turkish context is that they belong to a social grouping in which religious beliefs are quite strong. In such a grouping it is believed that both the good and the bad are performed by God, and therefore, it is God who will do the punishing. As mentioned before, especially for people living in rural areas and having a fatalistic view of life, malediction is culturally influenced.

Genre:

Like proverbs, riddles, and prayers, curse utterances are "marked" in a way that differentiates them from casual speech. The ancient future suffix *-EsI (cE),* as in the example *Töremiyesice* (May he not come into existence) and the optative suffixes *-sIn* and *-(y) E,* as in the examples *Gözün kör olsun* (May your eyes be blind) and *Baba çıka* (May a disease come out) are the indicators of curse utterances.

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to approach Turkish curses by employing criteria suggested by HYMES (1974). As a speech act, curse utterances show many similarities with other speech acts, yet they also show a number of differences. One such difference, for example, is that in cursing the perlocutionary act is directed toward the sender (addressor) rather than a receiver (addressee). Another observation about cursing in Turkish is the correlation between the social background of a person and the use of this speech act. Generally, the use of curse utterances in speech does not seem proper and refined, and it projects personal traits such as rudeness and aggressiveness in the addressor. Despite the negative images associated with curse utterances,

they are still a commonly occurring speech act in colloquial speech because of their routine-like nature.

In this study, the use and frequency of curse utterances in different social strata have not been dealt with directly. I believe, however, that research in this area will reveal other specific features of curse utterances. Similarly, a comparative study of curse utterances will no doubt show cultural differences in regard to cursing.

In conclusion, curses can be considered important sources for reflecting on cultural identity. Curse utterances provide us with a rich source of data to observe the dynamic nature of the Turkish language. It would not be wrong to say that curse utterances will continue to exist as verbal customs and traditions, with few modifications in our fast changing world. Curses will survive as long as the concepts of "goodness" and "badness" exist in human relationships.

NOTES

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1. In regards to the difference between "routine-like" and "creative" curse utterances, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to offer a measure for nonnative speakers of Turkish to differentiate between the two. As is true for some other language issues, it all depends on the amount of one's experience with the language and on one's intuitive knowledge. Therefore, I prefer to avoid suggesting standards to differentiate between the two. However, I should note that examples 2, 8, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, and 28 can be classified as "creative" curse utterances while the others are "routine-like."

2. DUNDES, LEACH and ÖZKÖK (1972) give a number of examples of *küfür* in their study of the ritualized exchange of insults in Turkish involving rhyming couplets.

3. Hymes suggests sixteen criteria in all, but for convenience I preferred using the shorter list of Hymes's criteria given in WARDHAUGH (1986, 239–40).

4. The examples marked with an asterisk (*) appear in the novel *Irazcanın Dirliği* ("Well-being of Irazca") written by the Turkish novelist Fakir BAYKURT (1972). I chose this particular novelist because his work reflects the lives of country people and their use of language. Thus his writings are a valuable source for the study of curse utterances. The other examples of curse utterances used in this article have been collected from real-life situations. Also see GÜLENSOY (1981), which provides an extensive list of bibliographies on Anatolian and Rumelian dialects, including some folklore sources.

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