



Case Assignment and Complement Movement in Turkish Postpositional Structures: A Minimalist-Syntactic Analysis

Shahla Yaghoobi 

Assistant Professor, Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages, Payame Noor University, Tehran, Iran. E-mail: Dr.yaghoobi@pnu.ac.ir

Article Info

Article type:
Research Article

Article history

Received: 09 Oct 2025

Received in revised form: 05 Jan 2026

Accepted: 17 Jan 2026

Published online: 29 Jun 2026

Keywords:

case assignment,
complement movement,
Turkish postpositions,
minimalist program,
PF-driven movement

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the syntactic properties of Turkish postpositions within the framework of the Minimalist Program, with particular emphasis on case assignment, complement movement, and the categorical distinction between functional and lexical elements. Drawing on insights from Kornfilt (1997), Cinque (1996), den Dikken (2006), and De Vos (2013), the analysis differentiated between true postpositions, which functioned as syntactic heads and assigned case to their complements, and non-true postpositions, which exhibited morphological possession and behaved as derived nominals. Empirical data from Turkish revealed that movement to the specifier position of the postpositional phrase (Spec, PP) was not triggered by an EPP feature, but rather by linearization requirements at the phonological form (PF) interface. Morphological case—specifically genitive, dative, or ablative—was shown to be a prerequisite for movement and syntactic convergence. In contrast, non-true postpositions formed possessive constructions that lacked functional projection, thereby blocking displacement. These findings support a PF-driven model of movement and reinforce the Strong Minimalist Hypothesis, demonstrating that interface conditions strictly regulate syntactic operations. Turkish postpositions thus fulfill not only semantic roles but also formal syntactic functions. The results carry significant implications for cross-linguistic typology and the analysis of postpositional systems in head-final languages.

Cite this article: Yaghoobi, S. (2026). Case assignment and complement movement in Turkish postpositional structures: A minimalist-syntactic analysis. *Research in Western Iranian Languages and Dialects*, 14(2), 81–94. <http://doi.org/10.22126/jlw.2026.12969.1858>



© The Author(s).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22126/jlw.2026.12969.1858>

Publisher: Razi University

1. Introduction

Postpositions in Turkish occupy a unique syntactic niche that challenges traditional assumptions about phrase structure, movement, and case assignment in head-final languages. As a typologically SOV language with rich morphological marking, Turkish consistently places postpositions after their complements, aligning with Greenberg's (1966) Universal 4. However, the internal structure and categorial status of these postpositions vary significantly, raising questions about their role in syntactic derivation and their interaction with morphological case.

In minimalist syntax, movement is typically motivated by feature-checking requirements, such as the need to satisfy an EPP feature or complete a probe-goal relation (Chomsky, 2000, 2001). However, recent developments in interface theory suggest that movement may also be driven by phonological constraints at PF (De Vos, 2013), especially in languages where morphological cues play a central role in syntactic licensing. Turkish postpositions offer a compelling test case for this hypothesis, as they exhibit both overt and covert case assignment, and their complements sometimes undergo movement to the specifier position of the postpositional phrase (Spec, PP).

This study investigates the syntactic behavior of Turkish postpositions through the lens of the Minimalist Program, focusing on the conditions under which complement movement occurs, the role of morphological case in licensing, and the distinction between lexical and functional postpositions. Drawing on data from native Turkish constructions and theoretical insights from Kornfilt (1997), Cinque (1999), den Dikken (2006), Ayano (2001), and Pancheva (2011), the analysis demonstrates that movement in Turkish PP structures is not structurally obligatory but emerges from interface-driven constraints—particularly those at PF.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this inquiry holds relevance for applied linguistics, including second language acquisition, syntactic parsing, and translation studies. Understanding the structural behavior of postpositions in Turkish can illuminate broader typological patterns in head-final languages and inform pedagogical approaches to teaching Turkish syntax. By situating Turkish postpositions within minimalist theory and exploring their morphosyntactic properties, this study contributes to ongoing debates about the nature of syntactic movement, the role of case, and the architecture of grammar.

The significance of this research problem lies in its implications for the Minimalist Program, mainly the Strong Minimalist Hypothesis (SMH), which posits that syntactic operations are tightly constrained by interface conditions at Logical Form (LF) and Phonological Form (PF). Traditional accounts attribute movement to syntactic features such as the Extended Projection Principle (EPP) or probe-goal relations. However, recent developments in PF-driven syntax challenge this view, suggesting that movement may instead be motivated by linearization requirements at the PF interface (De Vos, 2013). Turkish postpositions provide an ideal empirical realm for testing these competing hypotheses. Because Turkish reveals both functional postpositions that assign case and lexical postpositions that behave as derived nominals, the language permits us to observe how morphological case, categorial status, and PF constraints interact to determine whether movement to "Spec, PP" is licensed.

The aim of this research is to investigate the conditions under which complement movement occurs in Turkish PP structures and to determine whether such movement is syntactically obligatory or interface-driven. Specifically, the study aims to (a) distinguish systematically between functional (true) and lexical (non-true) postpositions, (b) examine how morphological case contributes to syntactic licensing, and (c) evaluate whether movement to "Spec, PP" is triggered by EPP-type features or by PF linearization pressures. The central hypothesis explored here is that movement in Turkish PP structures is not driven by an EPP feature but is instead PF-driven, arising only when morphological case makes the complement visible to PF and when linearization requires displacement for interface legibility.

While this study adopts a PF-driven account of movement, it is important to acknowledge that a considerable body of work argues for a syntactic, feature-driven explanation. Under traditional minimalist approaches, movement is triggered by features such as the Extended Projection Principle (EPP), the need for a functional head to check its uninterpretable features, or probe–goal relations that require the complement to raise to a specifier position. On this view, displacement is an inherent property of syntactic computation rather than a response to interface pressures. Advocates of this approach argue that movement should be obligatory whenever the relevant syntactic feature is present, irrespective of morphological case or PF visibility. From this perspective, the optionality of movement in Turkish PP structures is unpredictable, and the absence of movement in lexical postpositions is attributed to differences in feature composition rather than PF constraints. By contrasting these accounts, the present study targets to show that the Turkish data—particularly the dependence of movement on overt case marking and the categorical immobility of lexical postpositions—are more naturally explained under a PF-driven model.

This study addresses these gaps by synthesizing insights from minimalist theory, typology, and Turkish morphosyntax to develop a cohesive account of postpositional behavior. The findings are intended for linguists working in generative syntax, typology, morphology, and interface theory, as well as scholars interested in Turkish linguistics and the structure of head-final languages more broadly. Furthermore, the potential implications for applied fields—such as second-language acquisition, computational parsing, and translation studies, where understanding the structural behavior of postpositions—can improve pedagogical approaches and processing models.

To this end, the research draws on empirical data from Turkish—both naturally occurring and constructed examples—and analyzes them within the framework of the Minimalist Program. The analysis focuses on the interaction between morphological case, syntactic movement, and interface conditions, particularly at PF and LF.

2. Literature Review

The syntactic behavior of postpositions in head-final languages has been the subject of extensive theoretical inquiry, particularly within the framework of the Minimalist Program. Foundational works such as Cinque (1996) and Greenberg (1966) have established typological expectations for SOV languages, including the prevalence of postpositional syntax and the possibility of complement movement to the left of functional heads. These insights are particularly relevant to Turkish, where postpositions exhibit both functional and lexical properties, raising questions about case assignment, movement, and interface legibility.

Kornfilt (1997) offered a crucial distinction between *true postpositions*, which functioned as syntactic heads and assigned case, and *non-true postpositions*, which were derived morphologically from nouns and participated in possessive constructions. This dichotomy was further elaborated by den Dikken (2006), who proposed a layered PP structure involving pLoc and pDir projections, and by Ayano (2001), who introduced the [+F]/[–F] feature distinction to explain why only certain postpositions projected syntactic structure and hosted movement.

Recent developments in minimalist theory have shifted attention toward interface conditions, particularly those at PF. De Vos (2013) argued that movement might be motivated by phonological linearization constraints rather than syntactic necessity, a view supported by Pancheva (2011), who emphasized the role of morphological realization in licensing syntactic operations. These perspectives aligned with the behavior of Turkish postpositions, where movement was closely tied to the presence of morphological case and the categorial status of the postpositional element.

Cross-linguistic studies have reinforced the typological relevance of these findings. In Japanese and Korean, functional postpositions assign case and host movement, while locative expressions derived from nouns form possessive constructions that resist displacement (Sohn, 1999). These parallels suggest that the lexical-functional divide in postpositional syntax may be a general property of agglutinative, head-final languages.

Iranian Context and Comparative Studies

In the Iranian context, Karimi (2005) investigated PF-driven movement in Persian scrambling, offering a theoretical foundation that was also applicable to Turkish syntax. Erbas and Gündoğdu (2017) analyzed Turkish noun phrases and possessive constructions, highlighting structural parallels with Persian Ezafe chains. Bahramikhorsheid et al. (2018) examined the grammaticalization of postpositions in Azerbaijani Turkish, demonstrating that these elements had undergone category reduction and divergence—sometimes losing their original lexical function entirely, while in other cases retaining it alongside their new grammatical role. Such positional shifts reflected deeper structural changes within the language.

Furthermore, Shabani and Jalili-Kandelji's (2016) comparative study of Ezafe constructions in Azerbaijani Turkish and Persian revealed that differences between the two languages were considerably greater than similarities. The formation and linking of Ezafe structures were entirely distinct, with Azerbaijani Turkish exhibiting broader and more varied constructions than Persian, and lacking the so-called *benowat Ezafe*¹. Nevertheless, certain similarities were identified, including the possibility of pluralizing the head noun and the dependent noun, the formation of compound words through Ezafe, and the acceptance of a linking element within Ezafe constructions. Finally, Ebrahim Poornik et al. (2025) advanced Halliday's systemic functional grammar perspective, arguing that the diversity and semantic categorization of the head and dependent in Ezafe constructions did not necessarily align with traditional classifications, but rather represented a degraded form of a clause, typically relational in nature.

Despite this rich literature, several gaps remain. First, while the functional–lexical distinction is well established, its implications for movement have not been fully explored within a PF-driven framework. Second, the role of morphological case in licensing movement has been acknowledged but not systematically analyzed across different postpositional types. Third, the question of whether movement to “Spec, PP” is syntactically required or interface-driven remains unresolved. Addressing these gaps is crucial for advancing minimalist theory and refining our understanding of Turkish postpositional syntax.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Typological and Structural Properties of Turkish Postpositions

Turkish is a canonical example of a head-final, SOV language, exhibiting consistent postpositional syntax. According to Greenberg's (1966) Universal 4, languages with SOV word order tend to place adpositions after their complements. Turkish aligns with this prediction, as postpositions invariably follow the noun phrases they modify. However, this surface regularity conceals a deeper structural complexity: not all postpositions in Turkish behave uniformly in terms of syntactic projection, case assignment, or morphological composition. Cinque (1996) argues that head-final languages uniquely permit complement movement to the left of functional heads, a property that Turkish exploits in certain postpositional constructions. This movement is not universal across all PP structures, suggesting that Turkish postpositions vary in their categorial status and syntactic behavior. Kornfilt (1997) formalizes this variation by distinguishing between *true postpositions* and *non-true postpositions*. True postpositions function as syntactic heads, assign case to their

1. Benowat Ezafe is a traditional Persian Ezafe construction in which a child's name (functioning as the head noun, or *mozaf*) is linked to the father's name (the dependent, or *mozaf-eileyh*) via the Ezafe clitic to denote lineage.

complements, and participate in regular syntactic derivation. Non-true postpositions, by contrast, are morphologically derived from nouns and form possessive constructions with their complements.

For instance, in constructions such as *Ali için* ('for Ali') or *benim gibi* ('like me'), the postpositions *için* and *gibi* follow their complements and assign dative or genitive case, respectively. These elements are morphologically simple, do not bear possessive or locative suffixes, and allow movement of the complement to "Spec, PP." In contrast, postpositions such as *altında* ('under') or *önünde* ('in front of') are morphologically complex, containing possessive and locative suffixes (*-ı* + *-nda*, *-ü* + *-nde*), and their complements are genitive-marked nouns. Such constructions resemble possessive noun phrases more than syntactic PP projections. This structural divergence has significant implications for syntactic analysis. True postpositions behave like functional heads: they project PP, assign case, and host movement. Non-true postpositions, however, lack functional features and are better analyzed as derived nominals embedded within DP. Their inability to host movement or assign case independently reflects their lexical status and morphological dependency.

The typological consistency of Turkish as a postpositional language thus coexists with internal categorial variation. This variation is not merely morphological but syntactic, affecting the availability of movement, the nature of case assignment, and the structure of the postpositional phrase. Understanding this variation is essential for any minimalist analysis of Turkish syntax, as it determines which elements participate in probe-goal relations and which remain inert. Moreover, this distinction aligns with broader cross-linguistic patterns. In Japanese, for instance, particles such as *ni* and *de* function as postpositions with clear case-assigning roles, while complex locative expressions often involve nominal elements. Korean exhibits similar behavior, with locative particles derived from nouns and functional postpositions that assign case and host movement (Sohn, 1999). These parallels suggest that the lexical-functional divide in postpositional syntax may be a typological feature of agglutinative, head-final languages.

In sum, Turkish postpositions exhibit a dual nature: some function as syntactic heads with case-assigning capacity, while others behave as lexical nominals embedded in possessive constructions. This structural bifurcation is crucial for understanding complement movement, case licensing, and the interaction between morphology and syntax in Turkish PP structures.

3.2 Lexical vs. Functional Postpositions

A central theoretical concern in the analysis of Turkish postpositions is the distinction between lexical and functional categories—a distinction that directly impacts case assignment, syntactic projection, and the possibility of complement movement. This dichotomy, explored in depth by Ayano (2001), den Dikken (2006), and Kornfilt (1997), is particularly salient in Turkish, where postpositions exhibit both morphologically simple and complex forms, each with distinct syntactic behaviors.

Lexical postpositions, or *non-true postpositions*, are morphologically derived from nouns and often include possessive and locative suffixes. Examples such as *altında* ('under'), *önünde* ('in front of'), and *yanında* ('beside') contain nominal roots (*alt*, *ön*, *yan*) followed by possessive suffixes (*-ı*, *-ü*, *-i*) and locative markers (*-nda*, *-nde*, *-nda*). These constructions form possessive noun phrases rather than syntactic PP projections. The complement of such postpositions is typically genitive-marked, reflecting a possessive relationship rather than a syntactic dependency. As a result, these elements do not assign case independently and cannot host movement to "Spec, PP." In contrast, functional postpositions, often referred to as *true postpositions*, are minimal in morphological complexity and serve as syntactic heads that assign case to their complements. Examples include *için* ('for'), *gibi* ('like'), *ile* ('with'), and *göre* ('according to'). These elements typically follow noun phrases marked with genitive, dative, or nominative case, and they project a PP structure that allows movement of the

complement to “Spec, PP.” Their behavior aligns with minimalist expectations for functional heads: they possess uninterpretable features (e.g., [+case]) that must be valued through probe-goal relations, and they participate in syntactic derivation as active licensors.

den Dikken (2006) provides a layered model of PP structure, distinguishing between directional (pDir) and locative (pLoc) projections. In this model, functional postpositions occupy the pDir or pLoc head and license movement through feature checking. Lexical postpositions, by contrast, remain embedded within DP and lack the structural capacity to project these layers. Ayano (2001) formalizes this distinction using feature specifications: functional postpositions bear [+F] features that trigger syntactic projection and movement, while lexical postpositions are [-F] and inert in derivation. This categorial distinction is not merely theoretical—it has observable consequences in Turkish syntax. For instance, in *Ali için* (‘for Ali’), the postposition *için* assigns dative case and allows *Ali* to move to “Spec, PP.” In contrast, in *binanın altında* (‘under the building’), *altında* is a nominal form with possessive and locative morphology, and *binanın* remains in situ as a genitive-marked possessor. The absence of movement in the latter case reflects the lexical status of the postposition and its embedding within DP.

Cross-linguistic parallels reinforce the validity of this distinction. In Japanese, particles such as *ni* and *de* function as functional postpositions with case-assigning roles, while complex locative expressions often involve nominal elements. Korean exhibits similar behavior, with locative particles derived from nouns and functional postpositions that assign case and host movement (Sohn, 1999). These patterns suggest that the lexical-functional divide in postpositional syntax is a typological feature of agglutinative, head-final languages.

In Turkish, the presence or absence of morphological case on the complement serves as a diagnostic for categorial status. Functional postpositions require case-marked complements and participate in syntactic licensing. Lexical postpositions, by contrast, rely on possessive morphology and do not engage in probe-goal relations. This distinction is crucial for understanding which postpositions can host movement and which remain structurally inert. Ultimately, the lexical-functional divide in Turkish postpositions reflects deeper principles of minimalist syntax. Functional heads participate in derivation through feature checking and case assignment, while lexical items remain within the domain of morphology. Recognizing this distinction allows for a more precise analysis of Turkish PP structures and sets the stage for examining the conditions under which complement movement occurs.

3.3 Case Assignment and Movement

In minimalist syntax, movement is traditionally understood as a response to feature-checking requirements. A syntactic head bearing unvalued features (the probe) searches its c-command domain for a matching constituent (the goal) to value those features. Movement may be triggered to bring the goal into a local configuration with the probe, often to satisfy the Extended Projection Principle (EPP) or to ensure visibility at the interfaces (Chomsky, 2000, 2001). However, recent developments challenge the necessity of EPP-driven movement, proposing instead that displacement may be motivated by phonological linearization constraints at PF (De Vos, 2013).

Furthermore, syntactic derivations must converge at both PF and LF, and any movement operation must result in structures that are interpretable at the interfaces. However, due to the morphological and categorial properties of Turkish postpositions, we are compelled to approach their analysis primarily from the perspective of PF. This is because movement to “Spec, PP” in Turkish is not uniformly driven by syntactic features like [EPP], but rather by surface visibility—particularly the presence of overt case morphology that facilitates linearization at PF. In this sense, PF legibility emerges as the dominant force in licensing displacement, while LF interpretability acts as a filtering mechanism, blocking movements that would yield semantically incoherent structures. Accordingly, Turkish postpositional structures provide compelling evidence for this

PF-driven account. In constructions involving *true postpositions*, movement of the complement to “Spec, PP” is observed when the complement bears overt case morphology—typically genitive, dative, or ablative. For example, in *Ali için* (‘for Ali’), the dative-marked complement *Ali* may raise to “Spec, PP,” satisfying a DP feature associated with the postposition. This movement is not obligatory in all contexts; however, when it occurs, it correlates strongly with the presence of morphological case.

The role of case in licensing movement is further supported by data involving covert case. In constructions like *su gibi* (‘like water’), the complement *su* appears unmarked, yet it is interpreted as bearing nominative case. Movement is possible but less robust, suggesting that overt case morphology enhances syntactic visibility and facilitates displacement. In contrast, when case is absent or unlicensed, movement fails, and the structure becomes ungrammatical. This pattern indicates that case assignment is a prerequisite for movement, not merely a morphological reflex. Non-true postpositions, by contrast, do not assign case independently. In constructions like *binanın altında* (‘under the building’), the complement *binanın* bears genitive case, but this is licensed by the possessive morphology of the postposition *altında*, not by syntactic agreement. The postposition itself is a derived nominal, containing possessive and locative suffixes, and does not project a functional PP capable of hosting movement. As a result, the complement remains in situ, and no displacement to “Spec, PP” occurs. This contrast between true and non-true postpositions reveals a deeper syntactic principle: movement in Turkish PP structures is contingent on the presence of a functional head capable of assigning case. When such a head is present, and the complement bears appropriate morphological marking, movement to “Spec, PP” is licensed. Conversely, when the postposition is lexical or derived, lacking case-assigning capacity, movement is blocked.

The minimalist architecture supports this analysis. Under the Strong Minimalist Hypothesis, syntactic operations are driven by interface conditions and economy principles. Movement occurs only when necessary to satisfy feature valuation or legibility at PF. In Turkish, morphological case serves as a PF-visible cue that licenses movement and ensures linearization. The absence of EPP-driven displacement suggests that movement is not structurally obligatory but emerges from interface constraints. Moreover, this PF-driven account aligns with Pancheva’s (2011) view that syntactic derivations must be legible at both LF and PF. In Turkish, case morphology enhances PF legibility, allowing the complement to be linearized in a position that reflects its syntactic role. This interaction between morphology and syntax underscores the importance of case as a bridge between structural licensing and phonological realization.

In sum, case assignment in Turkish postpositional structures is not merely a morphological phenomenon but a syntactic mechanism that enables movement. The presence of a functional postposition with case-assigning capacity licenses displacement to “Spec, PP,” while lexical postpositions block movement due to their nominal status. This analysis supports a PF-driven model of syntax and reinforces the view that movement in Turkish is interface-sensitive, rather than structurally mandated.

3.4 Postpositional Stability vs. Feature-Driven Movement

Turkish postpositions pose a significant challenge to the Minimalist claim that syntactic displacement is universally feature-driven. Unlike English prepositions, which are often analyzed as undergoing movement triggered by strong or weak features, Turkish postpositions remain structurally fixed after the noun phrase and do not require displacement. This stability undermines the explanatory power of feature-driven movement, since their distribution can be accounted for without invoking feature strength. As argued by Kornfilt (1997, 2009) and Göksel and Kerslake (2005), Turkish postpositions function more plausibly as independent syntactic heads, making the strong or weak feature distinction redundant. Thus, Turkish data reveal that postpositional stability at PF limits the universality of feature-driven movement in

minimalist syntax.

3.5 PF-Driven Syntax and the Strong Minimalist Hypothesis

The traditional view within the Minimalist Program holds that syntactic movement is triggered by formal features such as EPP, which require constituents to occupy specific structural positions (Chomsky, 2000, 2001). However, this view has been increasingly challenged by interface-based models that attribute movement not to syntactic necessity but to conditions imposed at the interfaces—particularly the phonological form (PF). De Vos (2013) proposes a PF-driven theory of movement, arguing that displacement occurs to satisfy linearization constraints and ensure legibility at PF, rather than to fulfill abstract syntactic requirements.

Turkish postpositional structures provide strong empirical support for this PF-based model. As discussed in previous sections, the movement of complements to “Spec, PP” is closely tied to the presence of morphological case. In constructions involving true postpositions, overt case marking (e.g., dative, genitive, ablative) enables the complement to be linearized in a position that reflects its syntactic role. This movement is not obligatory in all contexts, nor is it uniformly triggered by an EPP feature. Instead, it appears to be conditioned by the need to make the structure phonologically interpretable—particularly when multiple elements compete for linear order in head-final configurations.

Under the Strong Minimalist Hypothesis, syntactic operations are minimized and tightly regulated by interface conditions. The grammar generates only those structures that are legible at both logical form (LF) and phonological form (PF), and movement occurs only when necessary to satisfy these legibility constraints. In Turkish, morphological case serves as a PF-visible cue that licenses movement and facilitates linearization. The absence of movement in non-true postpositional constructions—where case is embedded in possessive morphology and the postposition behaves as a derived nominal—further supports the view that movement is interface-sensitive rather than structurally mandated.

Pancheva (2011) emphasizes that morphological realization plays a critical role in syntactic licensing, particularly in languages with rich inflectional systems. In Turkish, the interaction between case morphology and postpositional structure exemplifies this principle. When a postposition functions as a syntactic head and assigns case, the complement becomes eligible for movement; conversely, when the postposition is lexical and embedded within DP, movement is blocked, and the structure remains static. This contrast illustrates how PF legibility, rather than syntactic obligation, determines the availability of displacement.

Moreover, the PF-driven account aligns with broader typological patterns in head-final languages. In Japanese and Korean, movement within postpositional structures is similarly conditioned by morphological cues and linearization pressures. These parallels suggest that PF-motivated movement may be a general property of agglutinative, postpositional languages, where morphology and syntax are tightly integrated.

3.6 Structural Inertia

Lexical postpositions exhibit structural inertia due to their nominal embedding. Possessive and locative morphology embed the complement within a nominal structure, preventing probe–goal relations. This inertia reflects the deeper interaction between morphology and syntax, showing that not all postpositions participate equally in syntactic derivation. Therefore, structural inertia explains why complements of lexical postpositions remain in situ despite being case-marked. The nominal nature of these postpositions blocks displacement, reinforcing the functional–lexical divide.

It appears that Turkish postpositional syntax supports a model of grammar in which movement is not an inherent syntactic requirement but a response to interface conditions. The

presence of morphological case enables PF legibility and licenses displacement, while its absence results in structural inertia. This analysis reinforces the Strong Minimalist Hypothesis and highlights the importance of morphology in regulating syntactic operations. By situating Turkish data within a PF-driven framework, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of movement, case, and the architecture of grammar.

4. Method

This study employed a qualitative, theory-driven approach to syntactic analysis, grounded in the principles of the Minimalist Program and informed by cross-linguistic typology. The primary objective was to examine the structural behavior of Turkish postpositions—specifically the conditions under which complement movement occurred. The examination of the role of morphological case in licensing this movement was also undertaken.

The data analyzed in this study consisted of 13 representative Turkish postpositional constructions, drawn from a combination of native speaker intuitions, descriptive grammars (e.g., Kornfilt, 1997), and previous syntactic literature. Examples were selected to represent both true postpositions (e.g., *için*, *gibi*, *ile*) and non-true postpositions (e.g., *altında*, *önünde*, *yanında*). This selection ensured coverage of various case-marking patterns, including the genitive, dative, and ablative, as well as morphological configurations. The sampling strategy was qualitative and theory-driven, aimed at capturing both prototypical and edge-case constructions across the functional-lexical spectrum of Turkish postpositions.

Postpositions were categorized based on three syntactic and morphological criteria:

- **case assignment capacity:** whether the postposition assigned case overtly or covertly to its complement,
- **morphological complexity:** whether the postposition was a simplex functional item or a derived nominal with possessive and locative suffixes, and
- **movement potential:** whether the complement could raise to “Spec, PP” under minimalist assumptions.

These criteria were used to distinguish between functional and lexical postpositions, following the frameworks of Ayano (2001), den Dikken (2006), and Pancheva (2011).

The analysis proceeded within the minimalist architecture, applying probe-goal theory, feature valuation, and interface conditions (Chomsky, 2000; De Vos, 2013). Each example was evaluated for

- the presence or absence of movement to “Spec, PP,”
- the morphological case marking on the complement,
- the categorial status of the postposition (functional vs. lexical), and
- the syntactic consequences of PF legibility and linearization.

This study focused exclusively on standard Turkish and did not account for dialectal variation or historical change. Additionally, while native speaker judgments were consulted, no formal corpus-based frequency analysis was conducted; the emphasis remained on structural diagnostics and theoretical interpretation.

5. Results

To substantiate the theoretical claims regarding case assignment, complement movement, and categorial distinctions in Turkish postpositional syntax, this section presents a structured analysis of representative data. The examples are drawn from native speaker judgments, descriptive grammars (e.g., Kornfilt, 1997), and syntactic literature, and are organized into three categories: (a) true postpositions, (b) non-true postpositions, and (c) hybrid or edge cases. Each example is glossed and analyzed to highlight the interaction between morphological case, syntactic projection, and movement potential.

5.1 True Postpositions: Functional Heads With Case Assignment

The analyzed data confirmed that true postpositions in Turkish function as syntactic heads that assign case to their complements and project a PP structure capable of hosting movement to “Spec, PP.” These postpositions are morphologically simplex and semantically relational, primarily expressing direction, purpose, or comparison. Ultimately, the data demonstrates that these postpositions function as heads within the syntactic structure to govern their complements through case assignment (see Examples 1–5).

1. *Ali için çalış-ıyor.*
Ali for work-PROG
‘Ali is working for (someone/some purpose).’
2. *Ben-im gibi insan-lar az-dır.*
I-GEN like person-PL few-COP
‘People like me are few.’
3. *Su gibi ak-ıyor.*
water like flow-PROG
‘(It) flows like water.’
4. *Çocuk ile gel-di.*
child with come-PST
‘He came with the child.’
5. *O-nun için yap-tı.*
that-GEN for do-PST
‘He did it for him/her.’

Table 1 illustrates the relationship between case assignment and movement to “Spec, PP” in Turkish postpositions.

Table 1. Case Assignment and Spec,PP Movement in Turkish Postpositions

Example	Gloss	Case on Complement	Movement to Spec,PP	Notes
Ali için	Ali for	Dative	+	Movement licensed by overt case
benim gibi	I-GEN like	Genitive	+	Possessive pronoun triggers displacement
su gibi	water like	Nominative (null)	+	Movement possible but less robust
çocuk ile	child with	Nominative	+	Comitative structure allows movement
o-nun için	that-GEN for	Genitive → Dative	+	Functional postposition with possessive pronoun

In these constructions, it was observed that the complement often rises to “Spec, PP,” satisfying a DP feature associated with the postposition. The presence of overt case morphology—particularly dative and genitive—enhances PF legibility and licenses movement. For instance, in *Ali için*, the dative-marked *Ali* is syntactically visible and eligible for displacement. In *su gibi*, movement is less predictable due to the absence of overt case, which suggests that morphological realization plays a facilitative role.

Syntactic trees for these constructions typically show a PP projection with the complement in “Spec, PP” and the postposition as the head (see Figure 1).

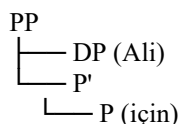


Figure 1. Syntactic Representation of a True Postpositional Construction

This structure aligns with minimalist expectations for functional heads and supports the claim that movement is case-driven and PF-motivated.

5.2 Non-True Postpositions: Lexical Nominals With Possessive Morphology

The analysis revealed that non-true postpositions are morphologically complex and are

derived from nominal roots. Unlike true postpositions, these elements include possessive and locative suffixes, which form possessive noun phrases rather than syntactic PP projections. Furthermore, it was observed that these elements do not assign case independently and are unable to host movement (see Examples 6–9).

6. *Bina-nın alt-ı-nda araba var.*
building-GEN under-3SG-LOC car exist
'There is a car under the building.'
7. *Ev-in ön-ü-nde bekle-di.*
house-GEN front-3SG-LOC wait-PST
'He waited in front of the house.'
8. *Kitap-ın yan-ı-nda kal-em var.*
book-GEN side-3SG-LOC pen exist
'There is a pen next to the book.'
9. *Araba-nın iç-i-nde çocuk var.*
car-GEN inside-3SG-LOC child exist
'There is a child inside the car.'

The morphological and syntactic properties of the investigated constructions are summarized in Table 2, illustrating the distribution of case on the complement and the absence of movement to "Spec, PP."

Table 2. Morphological and Syntactic Properties of Non-True Postpositions in Turkish

Example	Gloss	Morphology	Case on Complement	Movement to Spec,PP	Notes
binanın altında	building-GEN under-3SG-LOC	Poss + Loc	Genitive	—	DP-internal structure; no movement
evin önünde	house-GEN front-3SG-LOC	Poss + Loc	Genitive	—	Complement remains in situ
kitabın yanında	book-GEN side-3SG-LOC	Poss + Loc	Genitive	—	Possessive structure dominates
arabanın içinde	car-GEN inside-3SG-LOC	Poss + Loc	Genitive	—	No syntactic projection; lexical nominal

The analysis revealed that the investigated constructions resemble possessive noun phrases more closely than syntactic PPs. In particular, the postpositional element is embedded within DP, thereby lacking the functional features necessary for case assignment or movement. For instance, in the construction *binanın altında*, the genitive-marked *binanın* is interpreted as the possessor of *altında*, and no displacement occurs.

Based on these findings, the syntactic structure of these constructions is represented as follows (see Figure 2).

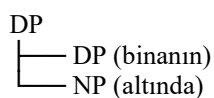


Figure 2. DP-Internal Structure of a Non-True Postpositional Construction

This analysis supports the claim that non-true postpositions function as lexical items embedded within DP, which remain structurally inert in terms of movement and case licensing.

5.3 Hybrid and Edge Cases: Morphological Ambiguity and Movement Potential

The analysis identified some postpositional constructions that exhibit hybrid behavior, characterized by limited movement or appearing in both functional and lexical contexts. These cases demonstrate the gradient nature of categorial distinctions and highlight the role of morphological cues in licensing movement (see Examples 10–13).

10. *Bu-nun gibi insan-lar az-dır.*
this-GEN like person-PL few-COP
'People like this are few.'
11. *Çocuk-lar için hediye al-dı.*
child-PL for gift buy-PST
'He bought a gift for the children.'
12. *O-nun yan-ı-nda otur-du.*
that-GEN beside-3SG-LOC sit-PST
'He sat beside him/her.'
13. *Biz-im için uğraş-tı.*
we-GEN for strive-PST
'He made an effort for us.'

While the general pattern applies to most constructions, certain hybrid cases exhibit divergent properties, as summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Morphological and Syntactic Properties of Hybrid and Edge-Case Postpositional Constructions in Turkish

Example	Gloss	Case	Movement	Interpretation
bu-nun gibi	this-GEN like	Genitive	+	Pronoun triggers movement; case visible
çocuk-lar için	child-PL for	Dative	+	Plural noun with overt case; movement licensed
o-nun yanında	that-GEN beside-3SG-LOC	Genitive	–	Morphologically complex; no movement
bizim için	we-GEN for	Genitive → Dative	+	Functional postposition with possessive pronoun

These findings demonstrated that morphological case—particularly when overt—plays a decisive role in enabling movement, even within borderline constructions. For instance, the analysis showed that in *bu-nun gibi*, the genitive-marked pronoun *bu-nun* raises to “Spec, PP,” thereby reflecting functional behavior. Conversely, it was observed that in *o-nun yanında*, the postposition *yanında* is morphologically complex and prevents movement, behaving instead as a lexical nominal.

5.4 Movement Licensing Conditions

The analyzed data revealed a consistent pattern: movement to “Spec, PP” is licensed only when the postposition functions as a syntactic head and assigns case to its complement. Specifically, the presence of overt case morphology enhances PF legibility and facilitates displacement. In contrast, lexical postpositions embedded within DP lack the structural capacity to host movement, relying instead on possessive morphology for interpretation (see Table 4).

Table 4. Case Assignment and Movement Licensing Conditions of Postpositions in Turkish

Postposition Type	Case Assignment	Movement to Spec,PP	Morphological Form
True (Functional)	+	+	Simple
Non-True (Lexical)	–	–	Poss + Loc
Hybrid	Partial	Partial	Mixed

This typology supports the theoretical claim that complement movement in Turkish postpositional structures is case-driven and PF-motivated, not structurally obligatory. Moreover, the categorial status of the postposition—whether functional or lexical—determines its syntactic behavior, aligning with minimalist predictions and interface-based models of grammar.

Crucially, this typology supports the theoretical claim that complement movement in Turkish postpositional structures is PF-motivated, not a consequence of syntactic necessity. The categorial status of the postposition—whether functional or lexical—determines its syntactic behavior. This aligns with predictions of the Minimalist Program and strengthens

interface-based models of grammar, where morphological visibility at PF plays a central role in licensing displacement.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the syntactic behavior of Turkish postpositions is governed by a principled interaction between morphological case, categorial status, and interface conditions. The distinction between true (functional) and non-true (lexical) postpositions reveals that complement movement to “Spec, PP” is not structurally obligatory but emerges from PF-driven constraints—particularly those related to case visibility and linearization. In particular, true postpositions assign case and project functional structure, enabling movement consistent with minimalist expectations. Non-true postpositions, by contrast, are morphologically complex nominals embedded within possessive constructions, blocking movement and operating outside the domain of syntactic derivation. These findings support a PF-based model of movement and reinforce the Strong Minimalist Hypothesis, which posits that syntactic operations are tightly regulated by interface legibility.

By situating Turkish data within a PF-driven framework, this study contributes to broader typological and theoretical debates. It supports the view that interface conditions—rather than syntactic mandates—regulate movement, and that morphological realization serves as a bridge between syntax and phonological form. These insights not only refine our understanding of Turkish syntax but also challenge the universality of feature-driven movement in minimalist theory. Moreover, cross-linguistic parallels with Japanese and Korean suggest that this lexical-functional divide may be typologically robust across head-final, agglutinative languages. The implications extend beyond theoretical syntax, informing second language acquisition, syntactic parsing, and translation studies. By integrating minimalist theory with morphosyntactic diagnostics, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of postpositional systems and the architecture of grammar.

While this study provides a robust qualitative framework, it also opens several avenues for future research:

- **quantitative analysis:** While this study is qualitative, a corpus-based investigation could provide statistical evidence for the frequency and distribution of functional vs. lexical postpositions.
- **interface conditions:** Further research could explore how PF-driven constraints interact with LF interpretation, particularly in complex clauses.
- **cross-linguistic comparison:** Expanding the analysis to other agglutinative, head-final languages could test the generalizability of the functional–lexical divide.
- **diachronic perspective:** Investigating the historical development of Turkish postpositions could shed light on the evolution of functional vs. lexical categories.

Ethical Considerations

As this study does not involve human participants or animals, ethical approval was not required.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this research.

References

- Ayano, T. (2001). *The syntax of postpositions in Japanese* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Southern California]. https://jglobal.jst.go.jp/en/detail?JGLOBAL_ID=200901051308728945

- Bahramikhorshid, S., Malekimoghadam, A., & Mirzayini, S. (2018). Grammaticalization in Azerbaijani Turkish: A case study of postpositions. *Zabanpazhuhi*, 10(27), 69–89. <https://doi.org/10.22051/jlr.2017.11563.1191> [In Persian]
- Chomsky, N. (2000). Minimalist inquiries: The framework. In R. Martin, D. Michaels, & J. Uriagereka (Eds.), *Step by Step: Essays on minimalist syntax in honor of Howard Lasnik* (pp. 89–155). MIT Press.
- Chomsky, N. (2001). Derivation by phase. In M. Kenstowicz (Ed.), *Ken Hale: A life in language* (pp. 1–52). MIT Press. <https://direct.mit.edu/books/edited-volume/4333/chapter/181356/Derivation-by-Phase>
- Cinque, G. (1999). *Adverbs and functional heads: A cross-linguistic perspective*. Oxford University Press.
- De Vos, M. (2013). A PF-based theory of movement. *Lingua*, 133, 1–30.
- den Dikken, M. (2006). *Relators and linkers: The syntax of predication, predicate inversion, and copular sentences*. MIT Press.
- Ebrahim Poornik, F., Kord-e Zaferanlu Kambuziya, A., Dabir Moghadam, M., & Golfam, A. (2025). The study of Ezafe construction in Persian based on Halliday's systemic functional grammar. *Linguistic Studies: Theory and Application*, 4(4), 51–82. <https://doi.org/10.22034/jls.2024.141702.1135> [In Persian]
- Erbasi, B., & Gündoğdu, S. (2017). Ezafe across language families: Iranian and Altaic. In *Proceedings of the 1st North American conference on Iranian linguistics (NACIL 1)* (pp. 28–30). Stony Brook University. https://www.stonybrook.edu/commcms/nacil/pdfs/abstracts/Erbasi-Yucel_NACIL_EZAFE.pdf
- Göksel, A., & Kerslake, C. (2005). *Turkish: A comprehensive grammar*. Routledge.
- Greenberg, J. H. (1966). Some universals of grammar with particular reference to the order of meaningful elements. In J. H. Greenberg (Ed.), *Universals of language* (2nd ed., pp. 73–113). MIT Press.
- Karimi, S. (2005). *A minimalist approach to scrambling: Evidence from Persian*. Mouton de Gruyter.
- Kornfilt, J. (1997). *Turkish*. Routledge.
- Kornfilt, J. (2009). Turkish and the Turkic languages. In B. Comrie (Ed.), *The world's major languages* (2nd ed., pp. 519–544). Routledge.
- Pancheva, R. (2011). PF-driven movement and morphological realization. *Syntax*, 14(2), 123–156. <https://pancheva.github.io/papers.html>
- Shabani, A., & Jalili-Kandelji, M. (2016). A comparative study of the genitive compound in Azerbaijani Turkish and Persian. *Persian Literature (Baharestan Sokhan)*, 13(32), 61–78. <https://sid.ir/paper/168525/en> [In Persian]
- Sohn, H.-M. (1999). *The Korean language*. Cambridge University Press.