

## OTHERIZATION IN LANGUAGE; DESCRIPTIONS OF DISABILITY IN TURKISH PROVERBS AND IDIOMS

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### Abstract

In modern times, we face otherization as the opposite of what is normal in terms of social and cultural dimensions. Disabled people are otherized in many cases because of their differentness from normal and able-bodied people who are accepted as normal in the modern world. This situation causes othering, isolation and as a result otherization of disabled people. In this study, language, which is one of the cultural fields in which being disabled is otherized, will be examined in terms of proverbs and idioms. Language is one of the most efficient factors in transmitting culture from one generation to another. Proverbs and idioms are important mechanisms in transmission function of language. In this sense, socio-cultural transition which proverbs and idioms create is an efficient field in highlighting the perception of being disabled in society. The aim of this study is to explain that disability has a social basis by using proverbs and idioms as the means of cultural transfer.

**Keywords:** Disability, Othering, Turkish Proverbs, Turkish Idioms.

**Jel Codes:** Z00, Z19, Z13.

## DİLDE ÖTEKİLEME; TÜRK ATASÖZÜ VE DEYİMLERDE ENGELLİLERİN TANIMLANMASI

### Özet

Ötekileme tirme sosyal ve kültürel boyutu ile modern dönemlerde normal olanın karıtı olarak karımıza çıkmaktadır. Engellilerde, modern dünya içerisinde normal kabul edilen, tam, bütün insandan farklılık gösterdiği için pek çok durumda ötekile tirilenler olmuştur. Bu durum engellilerin toplumdaki uzaklaşmasına, yalnızlaşmalarına ve bunun sonucu olarak ötekile tirilmelerine neden olmaktadır. Çalışmada engellilerin ötekile tirildiği kültürel alanlardan olan dildeki yansımalar atasözleri ve deyimler üzerinden ele alınacaktır. Özellikle dil bir kültürün yansıması ve kuşaklar arasında aktarılmasındaki en etkin faktördür. Dilin aktarımını yerine getiren en önemli mekanizmalarından biri ise atasözleri ve deyimlerdir. Bu anlamda kültürel boyutta özellikle atasözleri ve deyimlerin yarattığı sosyo-kültürel dönüşüm engellilerin toplumsal alandaki algısını ön plana çıkarmada etkili bir araçtır. Çalışmanın amacı özellikle engellilerin toplumsal temelden beslenmesini, kültürün taşıyıcıları olarak atasözleri ve deyimler üzerinden açıklamaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Engellilik, Ötekileme tirme, Türkçe Atasözleri, Türkçe Deyimler.

**Jel Kodları:** Z00, Z19, Z13.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The objective of this study is to demonstrate the importance of the language regarding the exclusion and othering of disabled people from the society. For that purpose, it is aimed to specify different approaches towards disability and their reflections on the social sphere. Disability is not a situation that solely depends on the person every time. Social perceptions and social conditions have transformed disability from an individual phenomenon to phenomenon with a social dimension. Even though acknowledging the social dimension of the disability is a new situation, transformation of social perception takes time for this perspective to settle. The transformation of the language is an important phase for this process. Proverbs and idioms are the phenomena that shape the ongoing, long-established and commonly accepted judgments.

The conceptual background of the study seeks to answer what disability is, how we can define it, and how many approaches there are about disability. Besides these, overall features of the proverbs and idioms are defined. In the next section, examples of the phenomenon of othering are given and how it takes place in the fields other than the disability is discussed. In this section, examples of othering taking place through the proverbs and idioms are addressed. Some of them are examples of othering related to gender discrimination against women and others are related to ethnicity-based discrimination. In the next section, othering in proverbs and idioms are categorized and discussed over. Resulting the conclusion, the importance of awareness is emphasized by focusing on the significance of language in the transformation of social conditions.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

One of the first and most prominent concepts used in this article is disability. The place and area of use of the concept have been controversial. Therefore, it is important to make the definitions more accurately. The method of the study is critical discourse analysis. The analyses have been conducted with a critical perspective.

### 2.1. The Definition of Disability and Discussions over the Definitions

States of disability are defined differently on a conceptual basis. It is possible to encounter these differences in Turkish and in other languages. In Turkish, there are concepts such as crippled, disabled, handicapped, disadvantaged, impaired, and defective. The word 'disabled' has a sociological meaning unlike the other concepts.

What's more, there are some accepted definitions. In Turkish literature, a disabled, at birth or acquired later due to an illness or an accident, is a person who has lost some physical, mental, emotional and social skills, and has become unable to adapt to the requirements of normal life.<sup>2</sup> In the international literature, it is defined as the person who is unable to do the works that he/she needs to do by his/her own in his/her personal or social life due to a deficiency (physical or subsequent).<sup>3</sup> Considering in conceptual terms, we can encounter the words disability, handicapped, defective, and impairment in the English literature.

As you can see above, there is a close relationship between how disability has been defined and how it is accepted. According to Graumann, the use of concepts can directly specify the studies and incentives on the disability and is able to provide different perspectives for the pursuit of happiness of the disabled individuals who receive support (Grauman, 2011, p. 41-55, ref. nce, 2014, p. 20). For that reason, the discussions over the language about the disability are important for specification of the differences in the perspectives towards a multi-

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<sup>2</sup>See: [www.iletisimciyiz.com](http://www.iletisimciyiz.com), 20.09.2015

<sup>3</sup>See: [www.ozida.gov.tr](http://www.ozida.gov.tr), 12.05.2014

dimensional phenomenon like disability. In other words, it is possible to say that conceptual approaches with regard to the disability can vary with the definitions of being disabled. In fact, language is the indicator that expresses the way social perspectives are shaped. Anthony Giddens emphasizes that in the field of sociology, perspectives towards social problems take shape and change, even if slightly, according to the words used. (Giddens, 2008, p. 325).

One of the examples that may stand out with regard to the discussions about language and the meaning of the concept is the word “cripple”. The word cripples means to deprive of fulfilling the function or being unable to do the required work. The use of the word “impairment” in English is more structural and refers to a dysfunction in contrast to its meaning in Turkish. However, the meaning of impairment in English language has not had the same codes with that of “sakat” in Turkish. For this reason also in Turkish, the word “sakat” bears certain features which are cultural and acquires this meaning by going through a transformation.

In fact, the concept “sakat” has a negative meaning together with the unjust suffering. The expressions such as sakat(impaired), kör(blind), topal(lame), saır (deaf), dilsiz (mute) have negative meanings all the time as you can see in the proverbs and idioms that exhibit the perception of language better. According to Doğan, the examinations of the languages other than Turkish show similar perceptions and language perceptions (Doğan, 2008, p. 31). In this framework, it is necessary to consider the cultural environment where the words make sense.

## **2.2. Social Dimensions and Perceptions of Disability**

The start of disability studies as a sociological and cultural field dates back to a recent period. Acknowledging disability as a sociological phenomenon has become possible with the development of the “body sociology” within the field of sociology.<sup>4</sup> Body sociology not only researches transformation of the body with physical factors in the body but also how it is reshaped by social factors. The following are the basic factors that we use in disability studies in sociology: “1. Producing a social theory about disability 2. Social construction of the disability categories. 3. Occupational ideologies and practices. 4. Creating a policy explaining the life experiences of disabled persons. 5. Developing enabling methodologies and means of research and implementation 6. Examining disability movement as a social movement oriented towards change” (Bilton et al., 2009, p. 88).

Social disability has emerged as a critique against the individual disability model. According to Paul Hunt, disability is not a unidimensional issue. It cannot be limited with the effect of the disability on the individual. What matters here is that it has effects on the relationship that the disabled person establishes with able-bodied people (Giddens, 2008, p.325). In this perspective, the concept of disability is shaped with adaptation of the requirements and requests of the citizens with disability rather than with the disability of the individual regarding meeting the needs of the society and is grounded more on the failure of the social environment (Bilton et al., 2009, p. 9). According to this social model, disability is defined as the reflection of the insufficiency of the individual on the social sphere (Arıkan, 2002, p. 65).

World Disability Report, published in 2011, has been the most recent disability approach comprising the changing conditions. According to this report, disability cannot be emphasized as a feature of the individual and cannot be addressed by disregarding the relationship between the individual and its social environment. In this sense, disability is not a phenomenon

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<sup>444</sup>See: Wendell, Susan, 1996. *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*, new York: Routledge and Davis, Lennard, J., 1995. *Enforcing normalcy : disability, deafness, and the body*, London; New York: Verso.

experienced by the individual himself/herself alone. The disability changes with the environmental experiences. In this sense, this perspective is referred as “psycho biosocial” perspective (Yentürk and Yılmaz, 2012, p. 51).

### **2.3. The Importance of Proverbs and Idioms in Turkish**

Humanity has always been in communication since its existence and language is mostly the means of communication. The ability to socialize, which makes humans different from other living creatures, is the result of the basic need of humans to communicate with others. Language is the oldest form of communication. Language has changed and transformed with the development of humanity. In this sense, culture developed by humankind has been advanced and shaped by language. Verbal culture has been enriched with language and other products based on language. We see two-dimensional development line in the basic progress of the language. First of all, as it has been addressed above, it has a verbal culture and history and secondly it has a written dimension of culture changed with the invention of writing (Çevik, 2006, p. 1).

Therefore, proverbs and idioms are important for shaping the verbal history that has transformed language. By definition, proverbs are the common creations and products of the people, the that form the nation. They are the statements which were brought forward with common experiences of people and which reflect them in all aspects. The proverbs are reflections and creations of both social and natural events. We can discover many social events with proverbs and idioms. We can observe the interpretations of morals, traditions, natural events, and beliefs.<sup>5</sup>What's more, proverbs and idioms sometimes reflect the depth of a nation's intelligence, dreams, emotions and notions. Proverbs pass on the experiences, observations and experimentations of previous generations- hence the name *atasözü* in Turkish.<sup>6</sup> These proverbs about past experiences are mostly informative and guiding for next generations (Çevik, 2006, p. 24).

The idioms have the same functions as proverbs and they are a form of fixed expression used figuratively to provide ease of expression and attract attention other than the meaning of the words themselves. The most important difference between proverbs and idioms is that idioms cannot be used by changing their words. For example, you cannot use “Hold the bold from his fringe” instead of “From his fringe hold the bold” (Çevik, 2006, p.48).

It is possible to say that proverbs and idioms, which can be regarded as significant elements of folk literature for Turkish, gain wide use and continue to exist mostly in nomadic societies. For that reason, Turkish tribes and clans have a rich folk literature knowledge as they lived a nomadic life for a long time (Öztopçu, 1992, p. 34). Especially, oral literature was enriched thanks to the transmission of the proverbs throughout the years and interactions with different cultures at the same time.

### **3. OTHERIZATION IN PROVERBS AND IDIOMS**

The othering of the disabled persons is a phenomenon that we encounter at many points of the social sphere. Furthermore, it is useful to discuss the concept of othering before explaining how othering takes place. First of all, the other and othering, us and them dichotomy has a conceptual dimension which is recently discussed? We can come across with the others in every society and in different conditions. While the identity, which has been defined as

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<sup>5</sup>See: [www.tdk.gov.tr](http://www.tdk.gov.tr), 15.10.2015

<sup>6</sup>*Atasözü* literally means the word of ancestor in Turkish.

dominant and superior in some societies, can be defined as I, the persons that are not with the same identity can be others. In some societies, we can observe that there are persons that are otherized due to the other features even if they have the same identity. For example, it is expressed that the persons living in the slums are fictionalized as the others in the study of Erman on the slums. According to Erman, even if it changes in time, the people living in the slums are addressed as the others in differing names (Erman, 2004, p. 9).

*Öteki* (other) in Turkish, is derived from the root “*öte*” (beyond) meaning what is beyond, what remains beyond and distant. The word other, together with the words “*öbürü*” and “*di eri*” (both have the same meaning), contains the meanings as the one which is distant in importance and location between two similar things. Besides, other can be defined as the person excluded from the current cultural structure.<sup>7</sup> Another important point emphasized by Nahya in her study is the anthropological that is etymological origin of the word other. In this sense, "other" is derived from Latin word “*alius*” and means “other” in English. In this sense, the word other, different from Turkish, bears a stark difference and a more contrasting meaning in a cultural sense (Nahya, 2011, p. 27-31). Therefore, it is possible to say that the concept has a sociological meaning and has an objective of differentiation.

In the process of othering in the social sphere, the existence of the persons who “we”, the persons that act together are and who are “they”, the otherised has become more visible with the modernization process. Normal citizens have been considered as normal humans and the normal society for the states, the borders of which were determined with modernity, and were considered as desirable citizens with their functionality while emphasizing citizenship consciousness and demarcating the rights of this citizen, modernization has placed some patterns on the superior position (Wallerstein, 2005). In particular, in the fields of politics and social sciences the concept of citizen who is considered as normal and desirable, has been started to be discussed as a problem recently. The issue of how differences can live in modern societies and which conditions should be created constitute the current problems of political theory.

At this point, policies of identity and difference and policies based on accommodating the other within the social order within a certain framework are started to be produced. In this sense, eliminating gender based discrimination, prevention of ethnic based discrimination and widening the area of freedom are the basic problems of both nation states and transnational organizations (such as European Union). The protection of rights of others with liberal democratic discourses by producing up to date policies is a must. Furthermore, it is very hard to eliminate the otherings imposed beyond the legal regulations or laws in the social structures. In this context, what comes to the fore is what determines the other being related to what “me” is. In other words, “*while the distance defines the other, what forms us is the "other" at the same time*” (Kundakçı, 2011, p. 68).

Thereby, the relation creating the dichotomy between me and the other which are connected to each other's existence is shaped by itself. Another emphasis standing out in this shaping-by-itself is the “language” element helping the process of the structuring of the social sphere according to Onur nce ( nce, 2003, p. 265). Language and the constructs with it help to shape the basic categories defining which properties me and the other should have and the difference between them. At this very point, we encounter proverbs and idioms facilitating the othering. Especially, when we examine Turkish language we can say that othering in language are takes place easily through well-established proverbs and idioms. Infidels, Jews, Armenians, Kurds and Arabs have faced with language elements assigned discriminatory and negative

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<sup>7</sup> Güncel Türkçe Sözlük, [www.tdk.gov.tr](http://www.tdk.gov.tr), accessed on 15.10.2015.

meanings as they were the others of this community. For instance, be French, infidel zmir, infidel's invention, infidel's torture, finding the priest, Jewish bargain, Albanian obstinacy, it's all Arabic to me, getting balled up as Arab's hair are the stereotyped expressions in which it is really easy to find expression and meanings of othering.

These examples are some continuously repeated phrases and we use them without any consideration. However, some terms ingrained in the proverbs reflect the same discriminatory perception as well. For instance; "yoruk of the mountain, knows neither plum nor grape", "Kurd eats and looks at his sandal", "You can't make a hide out of the bear", "I want neither the sugar of Damascus nor the penis of the Arab", "to swallow like Agop's goose", "to call the Armenian, uncle", "when the Jewish gets old he thinks of the old trades" are some of the many proverbs that are accepted to be said by ancestors and the meanings of them are accepted to be a characteristic of the mentioned ethnicities.

Together with the above expressions stressing ethnicity, even being minority with respect the others in a region is sufficient to be otherised and excluded. In that case, not which ethnicity you belong to but where you were born or where you are from is what matters as an othering element. For example, mostly jokes were created for the people from the Black Sea region. And funny situations were told via a figure from the Black Sea region in the joke. As is, it causes some features of the region to stand out and a different culture to be shaped here. Such approaches also can get into the language easily. As it has in these examples; *Laz'ın kafası 12'den sonra çalır* (The brain of Laz starts working after 12 pm), *Senin bu yaptığını Çorumlu bile yapmaz* (Even the one from Çorum wouldn't do what you did), *Afyon'un kayma ı, Konya'nın manya ı* (Cream of Afyon and mad of Konya).

Another meaning encountered in the proverbs and idioms is related to sexism. Such sexist approaches mostly exalt the status of men while the women, however, is constructed in a secondary position and degraded. Women's fertility and maternity is depicted in a humiliating way in many proverbs. For instance, "Man should know how to bring and women should know how to content with." (*Proverb*) "Women may have golden chandelier but the man puts the candle there." (*Proverb*). If we are to give an example of the interference with women's sexuality, it is possible to talk about the difference between woman and girl, symbolizing the virginity of women in society. For example, using the phrase "like a girl" to define something that is brand new is again a reflection of this discourse of othering and differentiation. In some proverbs, the women are subordinated, described as something, an object that can be taken or given; 'giving a girl (as wife) in marriage' and 'taking a girl (as wife) in marriage'.

Additionally, many other expressions are the subject of proverbs stating the physical or feminine personal properties attributed to women as a means of humiliation. For example, "If they would say there is a wedding in heaven, women would try to raise a ladder." (*Proverb*) "The will of women defeated men" (*proverb*) "Take the molasses from the jar and woman from her roots." (*Proverb*) "Field is better with rocks and woman is better with hair." (*Proverb*). Also woman are used to humiliate men. For example in the sentence 'man like a woman', we see that woman here is used as a means of humiliating men.

As a result, othering is the reflection of the attitudes dominating the general ideas of the society through language. Language that is in the position of the intermediary here constantly transforms the emphasis of othering through proverbs and idioms. Disability is also another condition in which this othering process takes place.

#### 4. OTHERIZATION IN LANGUAGE; DISABILITY IN PROVERBS AND IDIOMS

As mentioned before, the disabled are most of the time excluded from the social sphere physically or they intentionally stay away from the community. Besides, ordinary people also neglect the disabled. Almost 1 billion people have impairment throughout the world in our at the present time. The rate is 12% in Turkey, equaling to 8.5 million people.<sup>8</sup> Even though we talk about such a large section of the society, we cannot say that we encounter them frequently in public sphere.

There are many factors leading to the exclusion of the disabled people from the social sphere. The first one that comes to mind is the conditions not enabling a disabled person to move unescorted. Especially the conditions are seriously harsh for the orthopedically handicapped and mentally disabled. On the other hand, European Urban Charter and other binding provisions requires legal regulations especially on the level of local governments (nce et al., 2016, p. 87-89). Though juridical regulations are encouraging, it is a long process to break down social perceptions and to rebuild the magain in a way to help defending the rights of the disabled (nce et. al., 2016, p. 104). Here we encounter language and the proverbs and idioms as the elements of it to help to shape the perception we mentioned above. Within the proverbs and the idioms we observe many terms and words that exclude the disabled. We see that in many of them, othering takes place by highlighting the physical impairments of the disabled.

Another case addressed before the proverbs and idioms is that some words and phrases in use for the disabled are directly settled in the language. For instance, 'blind' for the visually impaired, 'deaf' for the hearing-impaired, 'mad, lunatic' for the mentally challenged and words like cripple, dummy are expressions which are already settled into the language and used constantly.

According to Burcu, it is possible to examine disability in proverbs and idioms under certain categories (Burcu, 2007, p. 203-207):The ones with a meaning of 'pity' come to the fore among the proverbs and idioms. In fact, it is possible suggest that actually this 'pity and mercy' based view is not an emotion the disabled encounter in only language but also most frequently in law and their daily life routines. Especially in the approach towards disability supported with social aid policies, the disabled are accepted to be deplorable and needy. However, the aim of public policies should be to help the disadvantageous groups, like the disabled, to be equal with others. And some of the proverbs below can be given as an example of the feelings of pity and mercy (Polat, 2009, p. 3):

When a bald man dies, they say he had golden hair.

Allah builds the nest of the blind bird.

You can't talk about colour to the blind.

When you come close to a blind, close an eye.

Don't cry for the dead but cry for the mad.

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<sup>8</sup> See: "Engelli ve Ya lı Bireylere li kin statistiki Bilgiler", *statistik Bülteni*, April 2017, <http://eyh.aile.gov.tr/data/>.

Night time is blind eye, night task is blind task.

According to Burcu (2007, p. 203-207) there are also proverbs and idioms that directly 'exclude' the disabled rather than feeling sorry for them. It is observed in these proverbs and idioms that disability is seen as a kind of deficiency in contrast to the understanding of the concept of a complete and whole human generally accepted by the society. Some of the examples of this include the following:

Lunatic loves lunatic, imam loves the dead,

When a mad sees another, hides his stick.

Run away when you see a lunatic.

What good of advice to the lunatic.

It is harder to restrain the mad than restraining the money.

The lunatic settles down only as much as how much the inside of a rock gets wet by the rain. (Meaning anybody)

Gathering the bald and the blind. (Supplementation and extraction may occur)

The third category includes the proverbs and the idioms classifying them as inferiors and humiliating them. It can again be observed that the physical deficiencies are made fun of in these expressions putting the disabled in a humiliating position. For example; the deaf can't hear but make it up; Single eye, blind eye; Rug seller and the blind pilgrim; The blind shouldn't get to bazaar but the bazaar shouldn't be without a blind; If you lie down with dogs (in Turkish it says blind instead of dog), you will rise up with fleas; One-eyed would be the king in the country of the blind; wormy vetch will have a blind buyer; A lunatic throws a rock in a well, forty wise cannot get it out; Every day is a feast to the lunatic; Iron doesn't get soaked, the lunatic doesn't get wise (Polat, 2009, p. 4).

## 5. CONCLUSION

According to the studies conducted on the subject of disability, structural changes are needed for the solution of the problems the disabled people face in social life. The enduring problems of the disabled people are shaped with the situations that limit their participation in and exclude them from the public life. In this sense, they feel as the other in society. They express being the other mostly as being excluded from the public sphere.<sup>9</sup>

When the general results of the study are evaluated, acquired findings will not be able to provide a direct solution advice. After all, change in expressions and verbal patterns are not something that can happen in a short time. However, it is of great importance to change the social perceptions towards the disabled and in other but more appropriate words, 'awareness' should be raised. Change in language is possible through changing the cultural codes of the society. No word or word phrase is formed by itself; each one has a reason behind it. Linguistic structures will also affect the cognitive structure of the society. Actually these two situations

<sup>9</sup> In one of the studies conducted on this subject, these rates are mentioned with regard to the perceptions of the disabled about othering. See: nce, H. Babao lu, C. Akkaya Yaralı, A. (2016). "Belediye Hizmetleri ve Engelli Vatanda ların Beklentileri Üzerine Ampirik Bir Çalı ma", Nev ehir Hacı Bekta i Veli Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi,6 (2),86-109.



are like cycles continuously affecting each other. While new perceptions are shaping the language, language will support the perceptions.

In addition to the task of reflecting social perceptions, another function of language is being the accumulator of culture. Language has progressed for centuries with the accumulation of new cultural codes in it. Through this process, the language affects the way the society is shaped. If the community has progressed as a modernist one, the elements of the language which could not keep up with this process was abolished and became obsolete. Likewise, some linguistic structures have progressed by evolving along with the society. In this case; if sexual discrimination still exists in a society, the discourses considering women as second class individuals and othering them will continue to be in use.

To conclude, the proverbs and idioms are cultural transmissions and they transmit the old, namely what belongs to our ancestors, to the current day. Therefore the mentioned transmission means that a certain point of view in each case still continues to exist. As Nuray Alagözülü demonstrates us as the result of her study titled *Dil ve Cins: Türkçe Atasözlerinde ve Deyimlerde Kadın Üzerine Eritilemeler ve Toplum-Bilimsel Yapı* (Alagözülü, 2009) (Language and Sex: Metaphors on Women and Socio-cognitive Structure in Turkish Proverbs and Idioms), we can see that actually the same perception is created in new life conditions as well. One of the empirical results of this study is qualified as an example about the social status of women. The answers in the study given for the questions towards what men see the women as are shaped in a way that is significantly close to the old ancestors' discourses: Woman is horse/ mare, Women are evil, Women are home, Women are honour, Women are land, Women are flowers. All these sentences are the product of a point of view seeing women mostly only as an element of beauty, which is learnt and transmitted through generations. Therefore, the same problem is at stake for the disabled as well. Namely, the knowledge acquired with the proverbs in the social perspective is transferred to daily life through experiences.

\*The proverbs and idioms above are translated into English literally since the meanings of othering are hidden in the Turkish words used. Therefore conserving the Turkish words while translating these proverbs and idioms into English is preferred to enable the reader to understand the aim of giving these particular examples.

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