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THOUGHTS ON THE DESCRIPTION, SPELLING AND PRONUNCIATION OF THE OMICRON VARIANT OF THE CORONAVIRUS IN TURKISH KORONA VİRÜSÜ'NÜN OMİKRON VARYANTININ TÜRKÇEDE TANIMI, YAZIMI VE OKUNUŞUNA DAİR DÜŞÜNCELER

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ABSTRACT

It has nearly been three years since the Coronavirus broke out in China and spread across the world and infected millions of people, young and old. Many people, who got infected, have lost their lives or experienced permanent or temporary health problems. 2019 was the start of the Covid-19 era and terms such as 'Coronavirus, variant, mutations, subvariants' entered our languages. The World Health Organization has named the virus 'Covid-19' and provided information to the globe about its symptoms, its effects on people's health, ways of treatment and suggested measures of protection on the national and regional levels. Covid-19 and its variants have received massive media coverage. In the field of medicine, research, healthcare settings, and media, Covid-19-related vocabulary was used frequently. Likewise, the focus of this paper-Omicron, the latest Covid-19 variant, entered our languages.

The World Health Organization registered the pandemic as Covid-19, referring to the year of its outbreak. Covid-19 has mutated many times from its outbreak until 2022, and all variants have been given names. The main variants have been Alpha, identified in the UK in September 2020, Beta, identified in South Africa in September 2020, Delta, identified in India in September 2020, Gamma, identified in Brazil in January 2021, and finally, in November 2021, Omicron was identified in South Africa and became the latest variant which was defined as the most contagious one. The variant 'Omicron' was named after the fifteenth letter in the Greek alphabet. All the main variants have had their own subvariants.

Although there is common lexis about the Omicron variant, which has become a new term in the world, there seems to be no study in Türkiye. Perhaps that is why no definition has been made about Omicron in print and electronic dictionaries in Türkiye, furthermore, there is no spelling of it into the Turkish language yet. It seems to be left to confidentiality agreements.

In the outbreak of pandemics and epidemics, it is believed that linguists on national and regional levels should define the disease-related term/s, and the terms need to be spelled into other languages. In order to formulate accurate definitions of terminology, AND accurate spelling, professionals in the field of medicine, microbiology, experts in the field of infectious diseases, and linguists need to co-work.

Keywords: Omicron, Corona, Coronavirus, Covid-19, variant.

ÖZET

Çin'de başlayıp tüm dünyaya yayılan Korona virüsünün üzerinden üç seneye yakın bir zaman geçmiştir. Bu süreçte insanlık; hem Korona virüsü'nden hem de onun varyantlarından derinden etkilenmiş, pek çok insan hayatını kaybetmiş ve de kalıcı veya geçici sağlık sorunları yaşamıştır.

Korona virüsü ve onun varyantları konusunda Dünya Sağlık Örgütü başından beri bilimsel olarak kamuoyunu uyarmakta ve insanlığı derinden etkileyeceğini düşündüğü varyantları isimlendirmektedir. Dünya Sağlık Örgütü; Omicron varyantının ve diğer dört büyük varyantın isimlendirilmesinde Yunan alfabesinin alfabetik sırasını gözetmiş ve son olarak tespit edilen varyanta da bu alfabenin on beşinci harfi olan Omicron adını vermiştir.

Dünya Sağlık Örgütü'nün, Korona virüsünün varyantlarından birisi olarak tanımladığı Omicron varyantı; kasım 2021'de Güney Afrika'da ortaya çıkmış, tüm dünyayı etkilemiş ve de Covid-19'un en bulaşıcı ve dirençli son varyantı olarak küresel salgın hâline gelmiştir. Hatta bu varyantın diğer varyantlarda olduğu gibi BA.4 ve BA.5 gibi kendi alt varyantları da ortaya çıkmıştır.

Dünyada yeni bir terim hâline gelen Omicron varyantıyla ilgili olarak bir literatür oluşsa da Türkiye'de bu alanda henüz bir çalışma yok gibidir. Belki de bu yüzden olsa gerek Türkiye'de Omicron'un tanımı basılı ve elektronik sözlüklerde yapılmamış, yazım bilgisine yazım kılavuzlarında değinilmemiş, okunuşuyla ilgili herhangi bir malumata erişilememiştir. Dolayısıyla Omicron'un tanımı, yazımı ve okunuşu gizli anlaşmalar sistemine terk edildiği gibi sözlük kullanıcılarının aradıkları ilgili bilgilere ulaşamadıkları için söz konusu sözlük derlemelerine ve yazım kılavuzlarına duyacakları olumsuz ön yargılarını beslemekte veyahut bunları kuvvetlendirmektedir.

Tüm dünyayı etkileyen küresel salgınlarda/hastalıklarda Türkiye'de ve dünyada dilcilerin ve mikrobiyologların disiplinlerarası çalışarak kamuoyunda oluşabilecek yanlış veya eksik tanım, yazım ve de okunuşların önüne geçmesi gerektiği düşünülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Omicron, Korona, Korona Virüsü, Covid-19, Varyant.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus, which emerged in China in the last months of 2019, spread across the world and turned into a pandemic. It has had a tremendous impact on people's health and lives. It has led to the death of more than six million people worldwide and more than six hundred and twelve million people have been infected (Google, 2022). Due to ongoing mutations of the virüs, the Coronavirus keeps existing in our lives with different names.

Omicron was declared as the latest variant of Covid-19 by the Technical Advisory Group on SARS-COV-2 Virus Evolution (TAG-VE) bound to the World Health Organization on November 9, 2021, upon the report of an infected blood sample analysis (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). The World Health Organization has also reported Omicron to be the fifth main variant added to the list of variants of concern (Turkish Medical Association [TTB], 2022).

Although countries have set a number of travel restrictions to South Africa and some other countries before and after the emergence of the Omicron variant, it has spread around the world, like other variants, and has become among the top-ranking variants of the Covid-19 pandemic.

With research into the global literature, it can be seen that the use of the term began from the day the variant was first detected. For instance, He, Hong, Pan, Lu and Wei (2021) studied the general characteristics of the Omicron and measures to reduce transmission; Pulliam, Schalkwyk, Govender, Gottberg, Cohen, Groome, Dushoff, Mlisana and Moultrie (2021) studied the rate of transmission of the Omicron variant; Chen, Wang, Gilby and Wei (2021) studied the transmission, its response to vaccination and antibody resistance of the Omicron variant; Tian, Sun, Xu and Ye (2022) studied the outbreak and the risk assessment of the Omicron; Ahmed, Abdul Quadeer and McKay (2022) studied the effects of vaccines on preventing the transmission of Omicron. As can be seen, much international and interdisciplinary research on Omicron has been published.

Despite the emergence of the Omicron variant in Türkiye in early December 2021, it has only been studied by Eraslan (2022). Information mainly comes from WHO and the Turkish Technical advisory board for Covid-19 has supplied information via written and visual media. Several articles have already been published suggesting the spelling of the terms "Corona", "Coronavirus", and "Covid-19" into Turkish (Zülfikar, 2020; Eraslan, 2021). However, there is still no agreement on the definition and its spelling into the Turkish language. This study aims at pointing out the necessity of a definition and spelling of the term 'Omicron', into the Turkish language. Additionally, the study aims to make a contribution to the medical literature on the national level.

The qualitative research method has been used in this study. The data has been obtained through the document analysis (document screening) method. Electronic and print dictionaries have been referred to in the search for a definition and the spelling of the term, Omicron.

2. OMICRON

2.1. Description Of Omicron

In search of a definition of the term 'Omicron', Tuğlacı (1983), Ülker (2004), Kocatürk (1999), Dökmeci and Dökmeci (2011), Erdemir (2011), Contemporary Turkish Dictionary (TDK, 2022a) and Covid-19 Glossary (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Health, 2022) have been referred to but no information has been found.

Additionally, research has been done to find question to whether the word Omicron is a compound noun or an adjective and the following definitions of the term 'micron' have been found:

| | |
|---|---|
| Tuğlacı (1983, s. 475) | One-thousandth of a millimeter, micron. |
| Ülker (2004, s. 561) | A unit of length equal to one-millionth of a meter. |
| Karol, Suludere and Ayyalı (1998, s. 446) | A microscopic unit of measurement the size of one-thousandth of a millimeter. micrometer. |
| Kocatürk (1999, s. 469) | One-thousandth of a millimeter, microns. |
| Erdemir (2011, s. 677) | One-thousandth of a millimeter, microns. |
| Nursing Terms work Group (2015, s. 434) | Microscopic unit of measurement, micrometer, one-thousandth of a millimeter. |

Further research has been done into whether the ‘O’ in the term ‘Omicron’ has any meaning:

| | |
|--|---|
| Sinanoglu (1953, s. 194) | It indicates a draw(the even score in a contest or match) |
| Dökmeci and Dökmeci (2011, s. 589) | 1. Symbol of <i>ortho</i> 2. the symbol of <i>Oxygen</i> ; a blood type symbol (ORh+ or -) 3. The fifteenth letter in the Greek alphabet. (Omikron) |
| Çelgin (2011, s. 457) | The fifteenth letter of the ancient Greek alphabet. |
| Nursing Terms Study Committee (2015, s. 677) | 1. Oxygen 2. Orotic acid 3. Orotidin |
| Medication and Pharmaceuticals Study Committee (2014, s. 1131) | The symbol for “ortho-position” |

As the above definitions indicate, the letter ‘O’ in the term ‘Omicron’ is part of the term. So the term ‘Omicron’ is not a compound noun, it is a proper noun.

As mentioned earlier, the Omicron variant of Covid-19 has been named after a letter in the Greek alphabet like the earlier variants. Coronavirus took its name due to its resemblance to a crown (Eraslan, 2021, s. 298), and it should be emphasized that the computer-generated image of the Omicron variant is similar to the letter ‘O’ (National Public Radio [NPR], 2022).

The SARS-CoV-2 variant B.1.1.529 has been classified as a variant of concern and named Omicron by the World Health Organization (WHO), after scientists in South Africa identified and reported the variant on Nov. 24, 2021.

In Türkiye, the Contemporary Turkish Dictionary (TDK, 2022b), The Turkish Language Institute (TDK, 2011) and Covid-19 Glossary (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Health, 2022) do not provide a definition for Omicron. This research paper aims to draw attention to the need for a definition of the term and raise interest to do studies to formulate a definition for Omicron and its spelling into Turkish.

2.2. The Spelling Of The Term ‘Omicron’

In the Turkish language, there is no common agreement on the spelling of the term ‘Omicron’, ‘Corona’, ‘Covid-19’ and ‘Coronavirus’. In some Turkish resources, it is possible to see its spelling as ‘Omikron’. In the study of Eren (2000, s. LIII), for instance, before the emergence of the Omicron variant, the word Omicron has been spelled as ‘Omicron’ like in the original form. However, in the Spelling Book of the Turkish Language Institute (TDK, 2021, s. 25), there are some rules for spelling of words of western origin into the Turkish language, which might shed a light on the spelling of Omicron into the Turkish language.

Words of western origin are written in their original form, in case:

1. *they are used in science, art, and professions: Andante (music), cuprus (chemistry), desepty (pharmacy), quercus, terminus technicus (technical term), etc.*
2. *the idioms and quotes are from languages that use the Latin alphabet: Veni, vidi, vici (I came, I saw, I beat); conditio sine qua non (if not); eppur si mouve (the world turns against all things); to be or not be (to be or not be); l'art pour l'art (art is for art); l'Etat c'est moi (I am the state); traduttore. traditore (the translator is a traitor); persona non grata (unwanted person), etc.*

The rationale underlying the spelling rule might be not to wander off the original form of the term. However, in the first rule about spelling terms, the word ‘some’ implies that the rule is word specific, and does not apply to words in general due to the fact that the Spelling Book (of TDK, 2021) and the Contemporary Turkish Dictionary (of TDK, 2021) are not updated promptly and on regular basis, it leads to confusion of people as to how to spelling words of western origin into Turkish in resources. Fort his reason, different spellings are to be found of the same terms.

In addition, in the Spelling Book (of TDK, 2021), the *Greek Proper Nouns* section of the *Software of Foreign Proper Nouns* interprets the issue as follows:

When spelling Greek names into the Turkish language, Turkish letters that correspond to the phonetics of Greek are used. For instance; Herodotos, Euripides, Pindaros, Solon, Sokrates, Aristoteles, Platon, Venizelos, Karamanlis, Papandreu, Onasis are Greek names and they are spelled into the Turkish language in their original form by using letters that correspond to the phonetics of the names, however, the names Herodotos, Sokrates, Platon, Pythagoras,

Eukleides have been spelled into the Turkish with a change of the original form; Heredot, Sokrat, Eflatun, Pisagor, Öklid.

The word Omicron is the fifteenth letter of the Greek alphabet and was inherited by the medical literature of the west, and with the suggestion of the Advisory Board for Covid-19 of the World Health Organization (WHO), the word Omicron has become a medical term that represents the name of a virus. In research and medical literature, it is used in its original form all over the world.

However, in the Turkish Spelling Book (TDK, 2021, s. 26), the rule is to spelling *Greek names into Turkish by using Turkish letters that correspond to the phonetics of Greek*. The same rule applies to the spelling of western origin proper and generic nouns that have the letter 'c' in them are spelled into Turkish with the /k/ sound provided that the 'c' is pronounced a /k/ sound. Here are some examples; physics, rhythmic, Titanic, Anzac, America, academic, Calven, doctor etc.-the Turkish spelling is fizik, ritmik, Titanik, Anzak, Amerika, akademik, Kalven, doktor and the like. Due to the fact that in Turkish the replacement of voiced letters with voiceless letters is common, the term 'Omicron' should be spelled into Turkish as 'Omikron'.

2.3. Pronunciation Of Omicron

Because Omicron is a new term, it is not present in Mete (2020, s. 440), Demirel (2021, s. 460), and in the Phonetics Dictionary (TRT, 2021).

The Turkish language is claimed to be a language that you read as it is written and you write as it is read but with words of different origin, the words need to be spelled. This being the case, the loanword 'Omicron' should be spelled as 'Omikron' and should be pronounced as it is written and written as it is pronounced.

3. CONCLUSION, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Covid-19 is a pandemic, which has impacted people's lives and economies in a dramatic way. Within three years, Covid-19 has mutated many times and the world has experienced different variants and subvariants of the original virus. Each variant has been named after letters in the Greek alphabet. By March 2022, the Alpha, Beta, Delta, Gamma, and Omicron variants, respectively, were identified and named as five major variants, and these variants also have had multiple subvariants of their own.

In November 2021, after the Omicron variant was identified in South Africa, the world got alarmed and some countries took measures promptly, however, due to its highly transmissible nature it spread around the world in a short time. Because it is very strong, it still exists in our lives and keeps mutating.

With the outbreak of the pandemic in 2019, the terms 'Corona, Coronavirus, Covid-19, variants' entered our lives and are still used. Like everywhere in the world, in Turkey experts have studied to formulate definitions for Covid-19-related terminology and how to spelling them into Turkish. Despite the efforts, no general agreement has been reached on the spelling of the terms 'Corona, Coronavirus, Covid 19' and this being the case, they have not been included in Turkish dictionaries.

There have been plenty of scientific studies on the Omicron variant all over the world, and research continues but in Türkiye, there is no definition or scientific description of Omicron. In other words, in Turkish medical literature, the term 'Omikron' does not exist in its spelled form. This research discusses the need for a definition of the term 'Omicron' in Turkish and the need for a commonly agreed spelling of it.

A definition of Omicron could be formulated through the co-work of experts in microbiology, infectious diseases, and linguists of the Turkish language.

Words of western origin are one of the leading problems in spelling into Turkish. Based on the item in the Turkish Spelling Book (TDK, 2021), "*When writing Greek names, Turkish letters that correspond to the phonetic of Greek letters are used.*" The term 'Omicron' should be spelled as 'Omikron' and be entered in the Turkish print and electronic dictionaries.

Glossary of Abbreviations and Acronyms

| | |
|------------|---|
| Covid-19 | Coronavirüs Disease 2019 |
| etc. | et cetera (latin for and so on) |
| GTS | Contemporary Turkish Dictionary |
| s. | Page |
| SARS-CoV-2 | Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 |
| TTB | Turkish Medical Association |
| T.C. | Republic of Turkey |
| TDK | Turkish Language Association |
| TRT | Turkish Radio and Television |
| WHO, DSO | World Health Organization (DSÖ-Turkish acronym) |

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