

The Use of *bir* ("one") before Verbs

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1. Introduction

The word *bir* is not only used as a numeral meaning "one", but also as an adverb. In this capacity it sometimes means "once / one time", which is not surprising. Yet it can at times signify something else. Regarding such cases, explanations from the linguistic literature are compiled here, and further examples from fiction works presented.

While certain functions can be recognized, in some cases it proved difficult to pin down exactly what *bir* contributes to the meaning of a sentence, and what it does not. Therefore, this compilation offers tentative conclusions and invites further discussion.

2. Expressing frequency

We start with the more obvious function of *bir* before verbs. Hazirqi zaman uyghur tili (= HZUT) explains:

"[*bir*.] in combination with the accusative ending [-*ni*], relates to the action and indicates **the frequency of the action** expressed by the verb. For example:

U birni tēpip ishikni ēchiwetti. – "He opened the door with one kick."

Yasin birni üsüpla uning burnini qanitiwetti. – "Yasin butted him once with his head and made his nose bleed."¹

Other examples are these:

Ex. 1. ..., herkim ulargha birla qarap hede-singil iken dep jezm qilatti. (HQ 10)
..., whoever looked at them just once knew for sure they were sisters.

If one used *bir qetim qarap*, that would literally mean "one time"; that could be a brief look or a longer look. The above *birla qarap* expresses one brief glance.

Ex. 2. Eger bireri arqingizdin kēlip qulaq tūwingizge birni salidighan bolsa, ... (S 12)
If someone approaches you from the back and hits you one in the lower part of your ear, ...

A different translation into English might use a noun, like "give a hit / a blow".

While the definite accusative marker *-ni* helps to analyze *bir* more clearly as giving the number of times of an action, *-ni* is not obligatory. In addition to Ex. 1 above here is another example without *-ni*:

¹ HZUT vol. II, p. 1496, no. 17. [Transl. and highlighting of all quotes from HZUT mine.]

Ex. 3. «Uh» dep yënik bir tindim. (BM 39)
I said "uff" and uttered a sigh [of relief]. / "I sighed and took a deep breath".

A different analysis of the above sentence is to include it under the cases discussed under 4. Strengthening below.

As we could notice in these first examples already, *bir* occurs not infrequently with body movements. The following example is interesting in that one sees the usage of a, as it were, "measure word of body movement".

Ex. 4. Perwine «manga zen sēliwatqanlar barmu, yoq» dēgendek etrapqa bir qur qariwetkendir kēyin umu zalning yan ishikidin keng qorugha chiqti. (HQ 25)
Perwine, too, after having looked around wondering whether there were any people paying attention to her, went out through the hall's side door into the wide courtyard.

qur (as a noun meaning "line / row") serves as measure word that can sometimes be translated "set"; here it expresses the idea of throwing a glance over the crowd.²

These cases, where *bir* means "one time", will be easy to understand. However, *bir* before verbs can have some other special meanings.

3. Weakening

HZUT mentions:

"Following demonstrative pronouns like «*shundaqla*», «*mundaqla*» it [*bir*] plays the role of **weakening the activity expressed** by the verb even more. This is very clearly expressed in the intonation.

Shundaqla bir salam qilip qoyup ötüp ketti. – "He passed by after (only) giving a simple / superficial greeting."

Mundaqla bir ittirip qoysam, yiqilip ketti. – "Even though I pushed him (/ it) only slightly, he (/ it) fell down."³

In neither of these examples does *bir* indicate the frequency (like how many greetings are extended, or how often the pushing happens). If the second sentence was formed without *mundaqla* (and without the aspectual *qoymaq*), the meaning would change: *Bir ittirsem, yiqilip ketti.* – "When I pushed forcefully, it fell down." (See explanations further below.)

Having seen this weakening function of *bir*, it might be surprising to learn about its opposite function, which exists as well.

² Cf. Tömür / Lee p. 152, where certain measure words, e.g. *meydan* – "match", are called "action measure words".

³ HZUT vol. II, p. 1493, no. 8.3.

4. Strengthening

In their description of the numeral *bir*, Tömür / Lee include this brief note:

"In front of ... verbs, it serves as an adverbial modifier and serves to intensify the meaning of the ... verb. E.g.:

U bir warqiriwidi, hemmeylen jimla bolup qaldi. – "He had shouted really loudly, but they all just kept quiet."⁴

Likewise, the Uyghur Tilining Izahliq Lughiti (= UTIL) states:

"Coming as an adverbial modifier before verbs, it [*bir*] plays the role of **strengthening the meaning of the action**:

Bu xewer mehellige bir keldi. – "This news spread through all the neighborhood."⁵

The six-volume edition of UTIL furthermore gives this example:

Chërik mesxire qilghanda ghelite bir küldi. – "The soldier[?], when mocking him, laughed very strangely."⁶

If *bir* was not used, then the first example above would simply mean that the news "came" to the neighborhood. The translation of the second example would lack "very". *bir* in the second example does not inform us whether the man laughed out "just once" or several times / for longer.

In addition, HZUT points out two special cases:

"Together **with the verb *kelmek***, it [*bir*] expresses **the meanings of "exactly / full-to-the-brim / fully / scattered"**. For example:

Bu gilem öyge bir keldi. – "This carpet filled the room completely." ...

Qeghez parchiliri meydangha bir keldi. – "The scraps of paper scattered all over the square." ..."⁷

The second special case is this:

"Together **with the verb *qilmaq***, it [*bir*] expresses the meaning of "to distribute". Mostly used negatively, it is used in the sense of **distributing a message which to be uttered and distributed is not appropriate**. For example: ...

Gülzar etisila bu gepni pütün mektepke bir qildi. – "The next day Gülzar spread this matter in the whole school."⁸

⁴ Tömür / Lee pp. 148f. [Highlighting in original.] Cf. the very similar explanation and example in HZUT vol. II, pp. 1493f., no. 9.1.

⁵ UTIL, s. v. *bir*, no. 5, [Transl. and highlighting of all quotes from UTIL mine.]

⁶ UTIL-I s. v. *bir*, no. 5.

⁷ HZUT vol. II, p. 1494, no. 10.1.

⁸ HZUT vol. II, pp. 1494f., no. 10.2.

bir does not primarily serve to say that the spreading of the news happened speedily ("at once"), but to say that as a result everybody heard about it.

Leaving aside the special cases involving the verbs *kelmek* and *qilmaq*, we turn back to the general idea of strengthening the action. We see that *bir*, when it precedes verbs, often does **not** carry the notion of quickness and / or casualness, as one might think. Rather, it highlights the action. Consider some further examples:

Ex. 5. Ömerjan toxtap manga taza bir qariwetti-de: ... (BM 31, similarly 39)
Ömerjan stopped and looked at me really attentively / gave me a good look.

(If this sentence lacked the adverb *taza*, it would also be open to mean "just once".)

The next sentence is an exclamation of relief.

Ex. 6. – Ya'Alla, Xudayim bir saqlaptu-de! (S 14)
Oh Allah, my God really saved you! [It was definitely his doing.]

Neither does the number of times matter here, nor is the "weakening" meaning present, but *bir* serves to emphasize the emotion of thankfulness that the person was spared.

There are sentences which suggest that *bir* before verbs can **express that an action is carried out decisively, purposefully** and possibly with force, in short, *bir* can be a **marker for determination**. In translating, the meaning can often be rendered with the adverbials "**really**", "very" or "for sure", as the last examples showed already.

Let us take this piece of advice as an example:

Ex. 7. Doxturgha bir körünüp baqsingiz bolamdikin. (S 14)

This is to be translated not as a cautiously uttered suggestion ("Wouldn't it be worthwhile (quickly) seeing the doctor?"), but as a strong piece of advice:

You should really go and see the doctor.

If the demand was given without *bir*, the decision would be left to the person addressed.

Here is another example of a sentence where *bir* is not required grammatically, but is used to say how much, or to what extent, something is done:

Ex. 8. ...yerlik tuxumlarni ëri bir maxtap salghanidi: ... (Yerlik tuxum 8)
... her husband had highly praised the eggs from the region: ...

The next example reports an action that is taken in frustration.

Ex. 9. Xeyr, sadaqetlik yarim! - dëdi Baqem we qilichini sughuruwëlip, yënidiki tagh tërikining ëgilip chüshken chong bir shëxini bir chëpip, shirtide üzüwetti-de, ëtigha irghip mindi. (Hoshur: Nozugum 381)

"Good-bye, my faithful sweetheart!" said Baqem and drew his sword, hit hard a big branch that had bent down from a nearby mountain poplar tree and split it with a rustling sound, jumped onto his horse and rode away.

Bir chëpip expresses the idea that the action was executed with force; consequently, that includes the fact the result was achieved "at one go".

The action can also be seen as an act of self-conquest: While it is hard to leave the passed-away sweetheart behind, life must go on and the agent has resolved for himself to finally move on – which is shown by the reported action.

This **notion of overcome hesitation** also comes out in the next sentence. The speaker has made up his mind and speaks with determination.

Ex. 10. Nëmila bolsun bir sorap baqay. (BM 31)
No matter what (the consequence), I will ask him now!

I.e. the sentence does not mean "Whatever, why don't I just ask him?!"⁹

The following example too is one with a self-exhortation:

Ex. 11. Özem bir apiray. (Overheard conversation)
Let me take it (there) myself.

With this sentence the speaker conveys that he resolved to carry out the action himself and is now decisive about it. One possible background is that he has heard strange things about that place that he is going to, and now wants to find out for himself whether or not what he heard is true.

The following sentence does not come from a piece of literature, but was offered by a mother tongue speaker, and understood exactly the same way by another one.

Ex. 12. Öyümge bir këlip, ...

It does not express an incidental invitation like "Why don't you come visit me for once?", uttered perhaps as a polite phrase; Rather, it means:

Do come to my house. [I have something important to talk about.]

Similarly, ... *kinoni bir körsetey!* does not mean "[When the opportunity presents itself,] let me show you the movie." Rather, it comes close to saying "I must show you this movie!"

⁹ *bir* in its adverbial sense, then, does **not** express the same as Chinese 一下 *yíxià* "one time / once / a moment / a short while / all at once / all of a sudden / to give it a go / to do sth for a bit / to give it a try". Whereas Chinese *yíxià* serves to express the short duration or signals that the action is carried out as a trial, or lends the utterance an informal or less direct and thus more friendly tone, Uyghur *bir* stands for an action that is taken consciously, intentionally and with determination. To simplify it, Chinese *yíxià* weakens, Uyghur *bir* strengthens. As to the German modal particle (*ein*)*mal* ("for once") and its variants, they cover both roles: They can fortify a command (*Hör' mal zu!* – "Now listen to me!") **or** express casualness (*Ich geh' mal einkaufen.* – "I'm going shopping [but not for long / not for anything special]"). Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_modal_particle.

5. Residue

Different mother tongue speakers did not always interpret *bir* in certain places in the same way. We add a few examples that are somewhat ambivalent.

- Ex. 13. Bolidu, esiringizgni tehrir bölümdikiler bir körüp baqsun, këyin jawabini bëreyli, ... (S 5)
Alright, let the people in the editing department have a look at your work, then we'll give you an answer.

One explanation is that the construction carries a notion of necessity: Without those people looking at the writing, an answer cannot be given. A translation like "They definitely need to take a good look." would express this. Another explanation is that the speaker expects the proof-reading to be something that is easy to do. (Note also the use of the aspectual verb *baqmaq*.) In that case there would be some weakening function there. A translation like "Let them take a look before we give you an answer." would then be more appropriate.

The next example is taken from Yulghun.¹⁰

- Ex. 14. Bir bërish arzuyum bar idi.

It could be rendered:

"I had a desire to go at least once",

but also:

"I really wanted to go."

Finally we quote an interaction between father and daughter:

- Ex. 15. Qiz shakilatning yaltiriqini soyiwëtipla dadisining ünimighinigha qoymay uninggha birni chishletti. Andin özining ëghizigha saldi. (Yerlik tuxum 11)
The girl peeled the chocolate's silver paper off, and (not giving in to his disagreeing) made her Dad bite off some, then put [some, or the rest of] it into her own mouth.

Interpreting the *birni* as "one bite" makes sense. But one could also argue that *bir* shows determination in that the girl overcomes her Dad's rejection.

6. Summary

bir before verbs can signify that the action happens one time. That is always so if it comes with the accusative marker *-ni*. In translating, one might sometimes use a noun, e.g. "a / one kick".

Together with certain demonstrative pronouns, *bir* before verbs has a weakening role and expresses that the action was carried out gently, superficially and so on. A translation might include an adverb like "only / just".

In contrast, *bir* also serves to strengthen or intensify the action. More specifically, *bir* can signal resoluteness and determination. In combination with the verbs *kelmek* and

¹⁰ Yulghun.com, s. v. *bir*, No. 3.

qilmaq, an idea of completeness is conveyed. In translating, an adverb like "very / really / completely" will often be in place. I.e. *bir* often does not denote quickness or casualness (as the affinity with the number "one" might suggest), it rather has the role of lending the sentence a more vivid tone.

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