

## The Use of *bir* ("a / one") in Noun Phrases

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### 1. Introduction

The simplest gloss for *bir* is "one". I.e. *bir* serves as a numeral. E.g. *bir nerse* – "one thing"; *bir qétim* – "one time". Apart from this, *bir* is used in a large number of derived words and fixed expressions. E.g.:

<i>birnechche</i>	several / a few
<i>herbir</i>	every / each
<i>birdinbir</i>	one and only / sole
<i>birdem</i>	a moment
<i>bir qisim</i>	1. one part / part of / some; 2. not quite right / a bit strange / differently

For further details, see the dictionaries and grammars. Here, we are going to discuss only a few uses of *bir*.

Since Turkish is a related language and more literature is available on Turkish than on Uyghur regarding some aspects of *bir*, we will use Turkish as a point of comparison.

Special attention will be given to the **position** of *bir* in the noun phrase. Interestingly, when a noun is accompanied by an adjective, *bir* can occur either in front of the two, or in between:

<i>bir qéri adem</i>	an old man
<i>qéri bir adem</i>	an old man

This much is clear from the examples I have collected: Several authors use **both** word orders at different times. What, on the surface, looks arbitrary is, in fact, governed by certain rules. The different positions communicate different things.

## 2. Literature

The literature deals with *bir* in noun phrases in the following ways:

- Hahn lists several derivatives of *bir* in the glossary, but does not discuss the usage of *bir* in any detail.
- The "Handbook", in Lessons 6 & 9 (where numerals are treated), does not include a discussion of *bir*.
- Tömür / Lee list "Special Uses of the Numeral *bir*" briefly on pp. 148f.
- Friederich says: "The indefinite article is expressed by the numeral *bir* 'one'."<sup>1</sup> He points out the difference in word order: "The indefinite article ... is expressed by putting the numeral *bir* directly in front of the specified word.

E.g. *yéngi bir mu'ellim*  
a(n unidentified) new teacher

... When the number 'one' is to be expressed, the numeral *bir* usually comes to stand in front of any other attributes. The same is true of all other numerals.

E.g. *bir yéngi mu'ellim* – one (not two) new teacher."<sup>2</sup>

- A fuller treatment of "Special usages of *bir*"<sup>3</sup> is found in *Hazirqi zaman uyghur tili* (HZUT), vol. II, pp. 1491-1497. We will refer to it below.

In summary, the current reference works mention the special functions of *bir* either not at all, or deal with them unsatisfactorily briefly, or their discussion is not accessible to those who only read English.

## 3. *Bir* as numeral

If *bir* is used as **numeral** (i.e. to express the quantity "one" as opposed to zero or a higher number than one), then it has to stand in front of the adjective.<sup>4</sup>

*bir* – adj. – noun

I.e. in this usage, only the phrase *bir kichik botulka* – "one small bottle" is correct. The adjective goes together with the noun.

When a measure word is used together with *bir*, adjective and noun usually stay together:

*bir* – meas. word – adj. – noun

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<sup>1</sup> Friederich, p. 17. Translation mine.

<sup>2</sup> Friederich, p. 32. Translation mine.

<sup>3</sup> Orig.: «*Bir*»ning alahide qollinilishi.

<sup>4</sup> This is the same in Turkish. Cf. Rijkhoff, p. 267f.

The number and the measure word cannot be separated.

Ex. 1. bir tal altun üzüük (E 78)  
*a / one [piece of] golden ring*

Ex. 2. bir meydan keskin jeng (AD 1)  
*a / one [stage of] intense battle*

Possible is, however, the order

adj. – *bir* – meas. word – noun,

as we see from the following quote:

Ex. 3. Ular yoghan bir tüp toghraq gholigha teng yölenginiche ... (HQ 30)  
*Both leaning against the trunk of a large [stem of] poplar tree, they ...*

The order *bir tüp yoghan toghraq* would just speak of one particular large poplar. By the example sentence's word order, its largeness is given prominence. See further comments under 5 below.

In all other places where *bir* is used in a noun phrase, it functions as some kind of "**indefinite article**" – but this is not a precise term, as we will see; and not every indefinite noun requires this article.

#### 4. *Bir* as "individualizer"

One function of *bir* is to single out one person or thing from a group.<sup>5</sup> In this usage, too, *bir* stands in front of the adjective, if there is one. But first we consider examples without adjective:

HZUT states:<sup>6</sup>

"As a specifier, it [*bir*] has the role of showing that the specified item is **a certain one** of its type of thing. E.g.

a. *Men sizni bir jayda körgen.*  
I have seen you in some place before.

c. *Sizni bir adem saqlawatidu.*  
Someone [specific] is waiting for you.

These are cases where it is in place to refer to the notion of "**specific indefiniteness**". Crystal explains:<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This is the same in Turkish. Cf. Rijkhoff, p. 320.

<sup>6</sup> HZUT, vol. II, p. 1491, section 2. Transl. and highlighting of all quotes from HZUT mine. – Their example (b.) is perhaps better treated further below. Cf. also p. 1496, section 17.

<sup>7</sup> Crystal, s. v. specific indefinite. Highlighting as in orig.

"..., in the sentence *Jane is married to a pilot*, *a pilot* would be an example of **specific indefiniteness**, in that it is understood to mean a known, particular pilot whose identity is not being disclosed. The contrast would be with *Jane wants to marry a pilot*, which is totally non-definite. Both are distinct from **specific definite** noun phrases, as seen in *Jane is going to marry the pilot that lives in the apartment upstairs*."

Uyghur *bir* often serves to mark a person or item that is talked about in such a "specific indefinite" manner, as is the case in the above examples.<sup>8</sup> There can be several reasons for not identifying the person or item more fully: The speaker himself might not know or not remember more details, or the identity of the object is irrelevant in the given context (as in the first example below), or the writer might hold back some information on purpose (as in the second example below, where the subsequent dialog deals with the very question of who that person is), etc.

Here are some more examples from literature:

Ex. 4. ..., qalghan öylerni bir shirketke ijarige bériwetken. (HĖ 22)  
..., *the rest of the houses he rented out to some company*.

Ex. 5. Bir chaghda bir adem méning qéshimgha kélip olturdi, ... (HĖ 40)  
*Once someone came to me, sat down, and ...*

Ex. 6. ... chĕmpiyonluqni bir qiz baligha tartquzup qoyupsina, ... (HQ 40)  
*How could you allow a girl to win the championship, ...*

In the last sentence above, *bir* is not absolutely required. Grammatically it is correct either way, and meaningwise there is no big difference either.

The above examples were cases with *bir* + noun only. Below are two including adjectives:

Ex. 7. – Bu nĕme dĕgining, sen bir yat ademge gep qilghandek gep qiliwatisenghu?! (HĖ 34)  
*"What is it that you said? How can you speak (to me) like speaking to a stranger?"*

Ex. 8. «Tapqinini u dunyagha yüdüp kételemti, axirida bir yaman xotungha qalidu ...» (S 19)  
*"What he found [i.e. the money he made], could he carry it over into the next world?; He'll end up with a wicked woman ..."*

In these cases, where an adjective is added to the noun, and *bir* stands in front of both of them, the individual that is talked about is a representative of a closer-defined group – in the above cases not just any man, but one of the kind that is strange; or not just any woman, but one of the wicked ones. The sentences below contain more such noun phrases:<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> As to total non-definiteness in Uyghur (where *bir* is not used), this cannot be discussed here. For some introduction to definiteness and indefiniteness, see "Handbook", pp. 68-71, section 2.2, and Tömür / Lee.

Ex. 9. Bu peqet ösmürlük dewridiki bir shërin chüsh xalas! (HQ 31)  
*This is just a sweet dream of the teenager time, not more!*

Ex. 10. Sarang bolmisang Xudayim bir chirayliq qiz berse, xeqqe tenglemting! Wuy kalikomsha ... (HQ 53)  
*If you're not crazy, then when God gives you a fitting girl, would you offer her up to others?*

Ex. 11. ..., bir qëri adem «Tapqach chiqsang» dep bek jëkip këtiwidi. (S 8)  
..., an old man had become very demanding, saying "Find some before you come back".

We will now discuss cases where *bir* stands between the adjective and the noun.

## 5. *Bir* preceded by the adjective

### 5.1. *Bir* giving prominence to the preceding adjective

Regarding Turkish, Göksel & Kerslake explain the following rule:

"The indefinite article *bir* usually follows the adjective, but can precede it:

(88) genç **bir** adam/bir **genç** adam  
'a young man'

(89) açık **bir** pencere/**bir** açık pencere  
'an open window'

There is a subtle difference in meaning between the two word orders with the indefinite article. Because modification within nominal phrases in Turkish operates from left to right, placing the adjectival to the left of *bir* has the effect of making the sequence {adjectival + head} be perceived as a semantic unit. Thus in (88) the form *bir genç adam* denotes a member of the class 'young man', whereas the form *genç bir adam* denotes a young member of the class 'man'. This latter order, which is much the more common, gives more prominence to the adjective.<sup>10, 11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> HZUT presents this differently. On p. 1491, in section 4, with ex. (a.) and (b.), it is claimed that *bir* in front of adjectives emphasizes the adjective's meaning. But this somewhat contradicts their rule in section 9.2 on p. 1494 (see under 5.1.). Part of the problem is that the two issues "*bir* before adjectives" and "*bir* before verbs" have been subsumed under the same rule, which is not appropriate. Cf. my separate treatment about "*bir* before verbs".

<sup>10</sup> Turkish, p. 209. Highlighting as in orig. Cf. Rijkhoff, pp. 267f.

<sup>11</sup> A different way of explaining the difference has recently been offered by Tat:

"When *bir* immediately precedes the head noun in an AP [= adjective phrase] construction, it can only be interpreted as an indefinite article. If it has a scope over the whole phrase, it typically has a numeral interpretation (...). The distinction is exemplified below:

(1) **bir** kırmızı elma  
one red apple  
'one red apple'

We believe the same is true of Uyghur. In our corpus, six authors use the order <adj. - *bir* - noun>, and three of them also use the order <*bir* - adj. - noun>. As to the frequency, the collected examples show a ratio of roughly 1 : 1.5 for <*bir* - adj. - noun> versus <adj. - *bir* - noun>.<sup>12</sup>

Let us quote the standard Uyghur reference works on this matter. Tömür / Lee list, among other usages of *bir*, the following:

"As a *qualifier*, it [*bir*] serves to **accentuate the qualified object**. E.g.:

*Bu nahayiti murekkep bir mesile.*  
This is an extremely complicated problem."<sup>13</sup>

It would perhaps be more precise to say that *bir* "accentuates the adjective which qualifies the object".

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

"As a modifier it [*bir*] serves to accentuate [*gewdilendürish*] the modified element and to strengthen its representative and unique feature."<sup>14</sup>

HZUT comments on this issue in a similar way. First, it says:

"Sometimes, coming to stand after the adjective, it functions to further **emphasize the meaning of the adjective**. E.g.

a) *Yawashmu bir bala idi u.*  
He was a really meek child.

b) *Tüzük bir xet yézinga balam.*  
Write in proper handwriting, my child."<sup>15</sup>

Further below, HZUT explains:

"After [sic!] nouns, as a modifier, it [*bir*] plays the role of **accentuating the modified element**. [NB: The word "after" (*keynide*) must be an error, because the examples both have *bir* **before** a noun, and after an adjective phrase.]

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(2) *kırmızı bir elma*  
red an apple  
'a red apple' (P. 1. Layout and highlighting as in orig.)

She establishes the following AP structure for Turkish:

"Cardinal *bir* > pred. adj > Specific *bir* > Non-pred. adj > head noun". (P. 14.)

<sup>12</sup> The pattern <*bir* - adj. - *bir* - noun> – *bir qizil bir alma* – "a/one red an/one apple" is not possible in either Turkish or Uyghur (although it exists in other languages).

<sup>13</sup> Tömür / Lee, p. 148. Highlighting as in orig.

<sup>14</sup> UTIL, s. v. *bir*, no. 7. Transl. and highlighting mine.

<sup>15</sup> HZUT, vol. II, p. 1494, section 9.2.

*Bu tolimu japaliq bir ish.*  
This is a very troublesome matter.

*Bu nahayiti qara niyet bir adem.*  
This is a person with very bad motives.<sup>16</sup>

These two separate explanations probably mean to say the same.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, in these cases, the order is:

adj. – *bir* – noun

Some examples from literature are:

Ex. 12. Eger qedinasi yëqin turghan bolsa, Bay uning aghzigha qattiq bir testek urghan bolatti. (AD 293)  
*If his spouse had stood nearby, Bay would have given her a heavy slap on her mouth.*

Ex. 13. Bizmu oghul bala bolghandikin, uka, pütün bir ish qilip baqmaymizmu? (HĖ 12)  
*We too are men, brother, will we not do a complete job?*

Ex. 14. ... qimmetlik bir nersemni yoqitip qoyghandek ...(S 19)  
*... as if I had lost a valuable thing of mine ...*

Ex. 15. Xeyr, sadaqetlik yarim! - dédi Baqem we qilichini sughuruwélip, yénidiki tagh térikining égilip chüshken chong bir shëxini bir chëpip, shirtide üzüwetti-de, étigha irghip mindi. (N 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.*

In all these cases, an emphasis on the qualities expressed by the adjectives makes sense in the respective contexts.

## 5.2. Other noun modifiers

We find this same pattern with other modifiers of the noun as well: When they occur together with *bir*, *bir* follows them. In those cases, there is no alternative. Putting *bir* before them would be ungrammatical, or would at least lead to ambiguities.

- -*Tiki*-construction  
*sheherdiki bir idare* (HĖ 32) – "an office in town"
- participle construction  
*yetmish yashtin ashqan bir adem* (HĖ 16) – "a man who surpassed 70 years"

<sup>16</sup> HZUT, vol. II, p. 1495, section 12.

<sup>17</sup> The two last examples are not ideal, because they both use an adverb alongside the adjective, which complicates the matter; cf. under 5.3. below.

- pronoun (here demonstrative pronoun)  
*mundaq bir hiyle* (HĖ 23) – "such a trick"
- simile  
*uning sheripidek bir ish* (HĖ 23) – "a matter like his honor"

I.e. an adjective that precedes *bir* + noun, behaves in the same way as other noun modifiers.

### 5.3. Prominent adjective with modifying adverb

An adverb which specifies an adjective usually stands right in front of it – see the next three examples.

adv. – adj. – *bir* – noun:<sup>18</sup>

Ex. 16. Bu nahayiti murekkep bir mesile. (Tömür / Lee)

*This is an extremely complicated problem.*

Ex. 17. Uyghurlardiki qoshnidarchiliq ichide ash sunush aditi eng gewdilik bir ish. (Qoshnidarchiliq 93)

*In the neighborhood among Uyghurs, the giving of food is a most outstanding thing.*

Ex. 18. ..., insan bezide bekmu kichik bir ishlardin razi bolup qalatti. ([S ?])

*..., people sometimes become satisfied through some very small things.*

Finally, we turn to a usage of *bir* that is not discussed in most common reference works on Uyghur.

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<sup>18</sup> Whether this is the only possible order could not be fully verified this time. Two examples that show a different order were encountered:

adv. – *bir* – adj. – noun:

haman bir yat adem (HĖ 5)  
*a still [nevertheless] alien man / stranger*

nahayiti bir yaxshi beke (HĖ 42)  
*an extremely good small-knife*

However, concerning the second example, some mother tongue speakers consider *nahayiti yaxshi bir beke* the proper, or at least more natural, way of expressing it.

One should also examine whether the following order is possible:

*bir* – adv. – adj. – noun (here: *bir nahayiti yaxshi beke*).

## 6. *Bir* as marker for a new participant

If a person or thing is mentioned for the first time and will be referred to again later, i.e. if a person or thing is **introduced as a new participant** or prop, then *bir* goes after the adjective and right before the noun.<sup>19</sup>

adj. – *bir* – noun

For comparison, we first quote an example where a so-far unknown character is mentioned **without** formal introduction as a character who the reader should remember. No *bir* is used:

Ex. 19. – Men undaq qarimaymen, – dedi boynigha yung sharpa oruwalghan ziyalij siyaq Ø adem, – bu teleydin emes, köp chëniqishtin yëtilgen maharetke baghliq ish. (HQ 14)  
*"I don't think so," said a man appearing like an intellectual who had a woollen shawl wrapped around his neck, "this is not by good luck, it is something that depends on a skill that has been acquired through a lot of training."*

Although that man, whose opinion is reported here, is referred to again in the following paragraph, he is not a figure who the reader has to integrate as a recurring participant in the overall story.

Now we look at cases where a new person or thing **is** marked with *bir*. The first example comes without adjective (but with a participle construction).

Ex. 20. Mehellimizde nahayiti namrat ötidighan bir tul xotun bolidighan, ... (S 24)  
*In our neighborhood lived a widow who passed her days in extreme poverty.*

The way this widow acts matters for how the story continues.

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<sup>19</sup> This is the same in Turkish. Göksel & Kerslake explain:

"A noun phrase marked as indefinite can perform one of two referential functions:

(i) It can refer to a **specific** entity (or set of entities) known to the speaker, which is being introduced into the discourse as a new item, and which is assumed not to be familiar to, or not to be identifiable by, the hearer:

(18) Dün sokakta {çok eski **bir** arkadaşım}-la karşılaştım.  
'Yesterday I bumped into {a very old friend of mine} in the street.' ...

(ii) It can denote a **non-specific** entity (or set of entities), whose identity is unknown or unknowable to the speaker. Non-specific indefinites occur mainly in clauses expressing a future or hypothetical event, or in negative statements or questions.

(20) [{Daha büyük **bir** araba} almay]-ı düşünüyoruz.  
'We're thinking of [buying {a larger car}].' ... " (Turkish, p. 373f.)

(This second function is not dealt with here, but cf. above under 4. *Bir* as "individualizer".) On both functions also cf. Rijkhoff (quoting Schroeder), pp. 319f.

The next example introduces an inanimate referent which is talked about in the next part of the discourse:

- Ex. 21. Bu örülüp chüshey, dep qalghan eski bir öy bolup, adette biz uning bir teripige kömür qoyattuq, yene bir teripige ayalim ... qoyatti. (QI 78)  
*This being an old house, about to collapse, we usually put coal onto its one side, on the other side my wife placed ...*

After this sentence, further details about the things in this house follow.

Likewise, the following sentence is the beginning of a section of the discourse in which the speaker gives details about a dream they had:

- Ex. 22. Shu kéche yene qorqunchluq bir chüsh körüp oyghinip kettim. (BM 43)  
*That night I saw a(nother) frightening dream and woke up.*

The below example comes from an expository text and shows that referents referring to events are introduced with *bir* in the same way as personal referents and concrete inanimate ones. This statement below introduces a new paragraph.

- Ex. 23. Uyghurlardiki qoshnidarchiliq ichide ash sunush aditi eng gewdilik bir ish. (Qoshnidarchiliq 93)  
*In the neighborhood among Uyghurs, the giving of food is a most outstanding thing.*

Now there is a point of ambiguity in the analysis. The last three examples could also be seen as such cases where the adjective is stressed, and therefore precedes *bir*. Yet, in all three cases the reader's attention is drawn to the new topic, on which the writer dwells for a while. One could also see this as two sides of the same coin: The new topic is marked in that *bir* stands immediately in front of it; at the same time, the topic is already described in some meaningful way, which happens to include an adjective.<sup>20</sup>

## 7. Further discussion

There may be places where the above distinctions of how *bir* is used do not make a big difference to the interpretation of a story. Contrast, for instance, the two examples below. (The second one is not an ideal example, because instead of an adjective a participle is used, but the function is virtually the same.)

- Ex. 24. ..., bir qéri adem «Tapqach chiqsang» dep bek jékip kétiwidi. (S 8)  
*..., an old man had become very demanding, saying "Find some before you come back".*

- Ex. 25. Yashanghan bir kishi: «...» \_ dep medet berdi. (Source??)  
*An elderly man said: "...", cheering [him] on.*

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<sup>20</sup> Arguably, HZUT's example (b.) from p. 1491, section 2, is better classified within this section, rather than under the category of *bir* as "individualizer" (4. above):

*Bir ish bilen izdep keldim.*

I came to find you because of some matter [about which I will say more in a moment].

In Ex. No. 24, *bir* functions as "individualizer" and reference is made to a certain representative from the group of "old men". His precise identity is known to the speaker, but is irrelevant to the audience.

In Ex. No. 25, *yashanghan* characterizes the person as elderly, and apparently this point is somewhat important to the writer. It might be justified to translate "**Even** an elderly man cheered ...".

While there are nuances of different meanings communicated, they will not stand out each time to the reader, and in some places some mother tongue speakers do not see a difference between the two word orders. The usage might partly depend on writers' personal preferences.

Notwithstanding, the way authors write does seem to reflect the grammatical and semantic distinctions that have been laid out here. Consider this example: In *Hayat éqinida*, the author retells the final episode of Leo Tolstoy's life. He writes that Tolstoy came to ***bir kichik wogzal*** ("some / a certain small train station"). There, he fell sick and died. The story continues:

Ex. 26. ..., bu weqedin xewer tapqan dunyadiki axbarat orunlirining muxbirliri bu kichik wogzalni meshhur bir jaygha aylanduruwetkenidi. (HĚ 17)

[Highlighting mine.]

*The media journalists who had heard about this incident turned this small train station into a famous place.*

What had just been referred to as "some small train station" – with *bir* preceding the adjective *kichik* – is now "a famous place", and *bir* follows the adjective *meshhur*, which is stressed.

## 8. Residue

It could not be examined thoroughly whether noun phrases with two adjectives separated by *bir* are acceptable to all mother tongue speakers. While such an example has not been encountered in our corpus, it is theoretically conceivable to say, for instance, *qiziq bir yash yigit* – "a funny young guy", where *yash* simply serves to narrow down the group of people he belongs to, and *qiziq* brings out his special character.

## 9. Summary and application

When *bir* is found **in front of an adjective**, then it is either used as a numeral (with or without an additional measure word) ["**one (piece)**"], or in order to express "specific indefiniteness", i.e. denoting an individual as a member of a certain group – just by way of information, without special emphasis ["**one of this kind**"].

However, when *bir* appears **between an adjective and a noun**, then it gives prominence to the quality that is indicated by the adjective ["**such a one**"]; or it is used to introduce a new participant / prop ["**someone of interest**"].

For the sake of active application, the rules are stated once more vice versa:

- In counting, *bir* (+ measure word) goes in front of the adjective + noun. (This is the same as in English.)
- If one has a certain person or item in mind and wants to characterize it as an individual belonging to a certain group, again, *bir* goes in the front.

*bir* – adj. – noun

- However, if one wants to accentuate a quality, *bir* goes after the adjective. (This is not possible in English.)
- Likewise, if one introduces a new participant or thing, which will be significant in the following part of the story, then *bir* has to stand directly in front of the noun.

adj. – *bir* – noun

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