Citizens Speak Turkish: Language Reform in the Early Years of the Republic – Maureen Freely for the Levantine Heritage Foundation

Atatürk was a man of the enlightenment. He spoke six languages with different degrees of fluency – French, Arabic, Persian, German, and English, as well as his native tongue. He is also said to have understood Greek. The years he'd spent fighting this and other cradles of western civilisation had not dented his enthusiasm for the best they had to offer. The republic he established just one year after winning the war was unapologetically western in outlook. But his vision was in no way obsequious. He wanted Turkey inside Europe, and respected inside Europe, and perhaps, in due course, even setting a shining example for Europe. He never imagined that a backward land, ravaged by a decade of total war, could turn into a prosperous nation-state overnight. But - military man that he was - he knew that he could greatly speed up the process by running the whole country like an army.

Hence his many fabled reforms, announced and imposed at lightning speed. The abolition of the Caliphate, the closure of Sharia courts, the hat law and the surname law, the secularisation and unification of the education system, the introduction of new civil and penal codes based on European models, which among many other things, replaced Islamic polygamy, and divorce by renunciation, with civil marriage.

All this was underpinned by *Nutuk* - Oration - which he read out to the second congress of the Republican People's Party over six days in October 1927, setting out what became the new republic's glorious and fiercely guarded official history and is even today the cornerstone of the national curriculum.

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For (as he knew full well) a nation-state is only as unified as the story it tells about itself. Though for him a single story universally shared was never going to be enough. Just as important was the language in which the story would be told.

His views on language were of course coloured by his war years. This too he made clear. 'The Turkish nation, which is well able to protect its territory and independence, must save its language, too, from the yoke of foreign languages.' Though he was most concerned about eastern languages. By the time Atatürk said these words, the Ministry of Education had already ordained that Arabic and Persian were no longer to be taught in schools.

But that was just a tiny first step, if he was to create a single nation unified by a single language. For the nation he now headed was polyglot in the extreme. Armenian, Syriac and Aramaic may have vanished for the most part from eastern provinces, but there was still a lot of Arabic, Kurmanji, and Zazaki. Throughout Anatolia there were the languages that the displaced and resettled Muslims of the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Greece had brought with them. In Istanbul alone, with a population of just under 800,000 according to the Republic's first ever census in 1927, more than a quarter of the city (28 percent) had a language other than Turkish as their mother tongue. Of these 92 000 spoke Greek, 45 000 spoke Armenian, 39 000 spoke Ladino, 6000 spoke French, and 6000 Albanian, with another 32 000 speaking Arabic, Persian, Circassian, Bulgarian, Zazaki or Kurmanji. No mention of Maltese or Roma…

There were, in addition, the longstanding dissatisfactions with Turkish itself. These had been much discussed in elite circles through the 19th century. It was viewed by many in the intelligentsia as having borrowed too much from Arabic and Persian, in terms of both conventions and vocabulary. Differing greatly in its written and spoken forms. And because written in the Arabic script, confusing to the point of inscrutable even to the highly educated, because the Arabic script, with only three vowels, was never up to conveying the eight vowels of Turkish.

If Turkey was to be a unified nation, it needed a language that could be read and understood by all. Hence the speedy move to a Latin alphabet – or the Alphabet Revolution as it is generally called. Announced by Atatürk in July and August of 1928 and adopted by the National Assembly on 1st November of the same year, it became compulsory for all public communications and official documents, as well as for the national education system, just two months later, on the 1st of January 1929.

The move was largely appreciated for better suiting the Turkish language. Through its simple rule of matching a single letter to a single sound, it became easier to teach and learn, and so greatly aided in the drive to increase literacy rates – and they did rise dramatically, from 9 per cent in 1924 to 65 per cent in 1975 and 82.3 per cent in 1995. But the switch to a new alphabet also served another purpose. In the space of a generation, it became impossible for all but a very few to read Ottoman history, literature, or religious thought in the original.[1]

And by then, thanks to the Language Revolution, the other strand of Atatürk's linguistic interventions, Turkish itself had changed so much that Atatürk's own *Nutuk* had had to be translated to be understood by the young. This was just one reason why Geoffrey Lewis, author of the definitive book on Turkish language form, called it a catastrophic success: a feat of social engineering, perhaps, but a long way from the romantic dream Atatürk had shared when he set up the Language Society (Dil Kurumu) in 1932: 'To bring to light the true beauty of the Turkish language and to raise it to the level it merits among the languages of the world.' His mistake, Lewis implies, was to apply his military genius to the task. And when Lewis went on to stay that the entire nation was mobilised in this cause, he was not, in his view, being metaphoric. In every province there was a committee, headed by the governor, and made up of public officials, teachers, and military commanders, to collect Turkish words in local use. By 1934, they had submitted their collections, 130 000 in all. In the same two-year period, scholars had been scouring old texts in search of old Turkish words that had fallen out of use, collecting roughly the same number. Out of these, 7572 words were selected for inclusion in the new, improved language. The general public was also invited to contribute to the effort. Every day a dozen or so 'foreign words' would be presented in newspapers or on the radio, and citizens invited to send in suitable replacements. This exercise yielded 640 new words. The reformers sought to further extend the new vocabulary by putting existing root nouns and suffixes together in ways never before considered. Words accepted by the Language Society were circulated to the Ministry of Education. In 1930, just 35 % of words in Turkish newspapers were of native origin. By 1933, this had increased to 44% and by 1935 to 48%. Atatürk himself wrote a text on

[1] The Present State of the Turkish Language, by Geoffrey Lewis, read to the British Academy on 6th March 1985. See also The Turkish Language Reform: A Catastrophic Success, by Geoffrey Lewis, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999

geometry in which all terms were drawn from Western languages, and not Arabic or Persian.[2]

Along the way there were surreal excesses, most notably the Sun Language Theory, which proposed Turkish as the first ever language, from which all other Indo-European tongues emerged. But the Language Society continued to have Atatürk's solid support. When he died in 1938, he left it a goodly portion of his estate. In the twelve years that followed, it continued its work under state auspics. Its highest achievement during these years was the official adoption of the Republican Constitution in new Turkish. But after Menderes and the Democrat Party came into power in 1950, the old version was reinstated. And so we see language policy becoming the political football it is to this day. With the work of the Society no longer being channelled into schools, the percentage of new words in common use began to drop, only to rise again, after Menderes was deposed and later hanged by the generals behind the 1960 coup, whereafter the reinstated Language Society was again able to direct language policy. By the mid 1970s, the percentage of new words in the Turkish press was generally 70% and sometimes as much as 90% in secularist, fiercely Kemalist newspapers such as Cumhuriyet.

Spoken Turkish did not change quite as much or quite as fast, with older generations in particular dragging their feet. It was because all Turkish children had to attend Turkish primary schools that it had more success with the young. But the Language Society did also enjoy the enthusiastic support of large sectors of the intelligentsia from the outset. Prominent among them was the poet and sociologist Ziya Gokalp, who held that it was culture not blood ties that held people together, and that it was through language, a single language, that a cohesive Turkish identity would be forged.[3] Though views such as his were greatly amplified by the state's authoritarian megaphone, it is important to remember that the Language Revolution also had prominent critics such as the authors Ahmet Hamdi Tanpinar

[2] ibid

[3] The Role of Language in the Formation of Turkish National Identity and Turkishness, Aysegul Aydingun and Ismail Aydingun, Nationalism and Ethnic Politics Volume 10, 2004, Issue 3, published online 16 August 2010

and Peyami Safa, who deplored the ethnic cleansing that had robbed the language of much of its beauty.[4]

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What was seldom if ever debated in such fora was the fate of Turkey's other languages. It was a given that they had no place in a nation of patriotic citizens. From the earliest years of the Language Revolution, the expectation was that Muslims with other mother tongues would demonstrate their patriotism by giving them up for Turkish. In the case of the non-Muslim minorities, whose patriotism the war years had already rendered suspect, harsher measures came into play.

Here we come to the Citizen Speak Turkish campaign, which might be said to have crashed and burned in the same year it was created, but which continued to resonate in the years and decades to follow, especially at times of political tension. The idea was first proposed in January 1928 at a meeting of Istanbul University's Law Faculty Students Association. Having agreed that anyone in their midst not conversing in Turkish could not be a good citizen, they set about posting signs in public places to this effect. Within a fortnight they had attracted the attention of Turkish Hearths (Turk Ocakları) which invited them in for a meeting, which resulted in the forming of a Commission for the Protection and Expansion of the Turkish Language, which quickly arranged meetings with the Istanbul mayor as well as the owners of newspapers still published in foreign languages, asking for their support, and also receiving some support from the Ministry of Education. As more notices went up, public confrontations grew in number, and they were duly reported in national newspapers, often in ways that reinforced the idea that those speaking in languages other than Turkish were not good citizens.[5]

[5] 'Citizen Speak Turkish: A Nation in the Making, by Senem Aslan, Nationalism and Ethnic Politics, Vol 13, Issue 2, 2007

The campaign spread to other cities in western Thrace and the parts of Anatolia's western coast where non-Muslim minorities and Muslim immigrants from Greece and the Balkans could be found in greatest numbers. 'Citizens, let's speak Turkish. Speaking Turkish is a national duty. A Turk speaks Turkish.' Notices to this effect were now to be found across the public transportation network as well as in theatres and restaurants. The main targets of course were Greeks, Armenian and Jews, but in her study of the campaign, the political scientist Senem Aslan found that Jews got the worst of it by far. This despite the fact that Turkey's Jewish citizens had (unlike its Greek and Armenian citizens) never been linked with any separatist movement. Even so, they could not, as one Izmir newspaper editor said, be placed in the same category as the city's numerous Muslims recently arrived from Greece because *they* couldn't help it. Whereas those who'd long been resident in Turkey could. As one columnist put it: 'We do not expect anything from them, but we only ask them not to howl in that dirty language in our ears in these revolutionary days.'

There were renewed calls for the closure of Jewish and Christian schools and places of worship – this in direct contravention of the Lausanne Treaty granting non-Muslim communities religious rights. Nationalist newspapers added to the fire by proposing boycotts against non-Muslim stores and non-Muslim street vendors who were still not hawking their wares in Turkish. Telephone operators were urged to cut off conversations in foreign languages. One newspaper, after claiming that the Armenians, 'the main enemy of Turks' used Turkish more often than the Jews, went on to demand that all Jews leave the country. Another columnist questioned why non-Turks even had the right to live in Turkey. 'We expelled the Greeks. Why did we let the Jews stay here?" In Edirne, which had a large Jewish population, a local columnist went even further. 'One of the conditions of Turkish citizenship,' he writes, 'is to know and speak the official language of Turkey. Those whom we accepted into citizenship should know about this. They owe their comfort and freedom, their fortunes and everything to the Turks whose language they do not want to speak… If you do not want to speak Turkish and show respect to Turkishness and its language, what are you doing in this country? You are free to go to wherever you want."[6]

[6] ibid

Aslan is careful to note that even as street confrontations with non-Turkish speakers grew in number, so too did some voices of moderation. Yunus Nadi, the owner of the Cumhuriyet newspaper, went so far as to write an editorial entitled "Citizen, Don't Fight!" in which he argued that a campaign of violent confrontation would be counterproductive. Instead of yelling at people, he said, a slow and measured approach through education, persuasion, and legal measures was called for. After a particularly violent series of incidents in Edirne, the governor intervened, with the Ministries of Education and the Interior also pitching in to restore order and castigate the students for going too far. But even as the posters were removed, the debate as to whether or not citizens should speak Turkish raged on in the press. And tough that storm soon passed, the suspicions about Turks speaking languages other than Turkish remained. Throughout the 1930s, many municipalities continued to fine citizens for not speaking Turkish. And in 1933, after the Italian manager of a French railroad company fined an employee for not speaking to a customer in French, and the employee countered that no one could force him to speak in a foreign language, hundreds of students gathered outside the company headquarters in Beyoglu, pelting it with stones and clashing with police.

Even if the state did not condone their actions, these agitators certainly saw themselves as championing grand idea – one nation, one language. If it became increasingly risky to speak in Greek or Armenian or Ladino in public spaces, it was thanks to what Senem Aslan calls Atatürk's missionaries. It is helpful to remember that during the 1930s the National Union of Students was strongly and overtly fascist, with links to student organisations in Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany.[7]

But there was, from 1940, another slower, more muted and refined strand of the Language Revolution, with the creation of the Translation Bureau, under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. Led in its first six years by Hasan Ali Yücel, it was very much aligned with state language policies, but outward-looking at the same time. If Republican Turkey was to become a 'distinguished member of Western culture and thinking', as Yücel put it, then its citizens needed to have access the greatest works of the West. If it was to enlarge on its commitment to the spirit of humanism, as advocated by Atatürk, there could be no better way than the curated introduction of foreign literatures in translation, which would enrich Turkish culture and. lead in due course to a renaissance of Turkish literature. During the quarter century of its existence, the Translation Bureau published 1247 books, 500 of which were

[7] ibid

classics of the enlightenment. In the first three years alone, it produced 39 works from ancient Greek, 38 from French, 10 from German, 8 from English, 6 from Latin, 5 from Eastern classics, and 2 from Russian. The translators were drawn from the ranks of the great and the good..[8] They were almost all Turkish-speaking Turks, with humanist exceptions. As Ozlem Berk Albachten has pointed out in her fascinating study of the many German intellectuals who found refuge from the Nazis in Turkey in those years. A number of them worked in collaboration with their students at Istanbul University to take some of the West's greatest works into Turkish.[9]

Huge efforts were made to distribute these books at low cost to the nation's local libraries, and perhaps one of them was the library in which the author Yasar Kemal worked as a young man, where he acquainted himself with the great western classics. He drew upon these just as much as he did the oral epics of his Kurdish childhood when he wrote the novel that took Turkey by storm in the 1950s, and went on to become one of the very, very few Turkish novels to be translated into English, under the title *Mehmet My Hawk*, in the middle years of the republic.

Because the Translation Bureau's work was happening in tandem with a surge of new and exciting work in poetry and drama as well as fiction, it is often credited as having made that that renaissance possible. And certainly it would have played a part, though this account misses out the great tradition of Turkish dissident writing through the years of the Republic.

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[8] Meta Journal des traducteurs/Translators' Journal
The Relation Between Translation and Ideology as an
Instrument for the Establishment of a National Literature
Nüzhet Berrin Aksoy Volume 55, Number 3, September 2010. SEE also : The Relation Between Translation and Ideology as an Instrument for the Establishment
of a National Literature, by **F. Betul Cihan-Artun** Middle Eastern Studies
Vol. 53, No. 5 (September 2017), pp. 747-761

[9] Exile as translation and transformation in early Republican Turkey, by

Özlem Berk Albachten, Translation Studies
Pages 132-148 | Published online: 2010

This is rarely in alignment with what Saliha Paker describes as the Translation Bureau's mindful alignment with the principles of the Language Revolution.[10]
But it could do little about the nation's many language loopholes. If we look across the century of the Turkish republic, we can see a long line of eminent authors who were well equipped to read and think beyond the limits set by those seeking to create a single mindset in a single nation speaking a single language, because they could read and think in the languages of their families or education.[11] Of those who went abroad for study, quite a few were on Turkish state scholarships. Many, many others acquired their foreign languages at Turkey's foreign lycees.

Istanbul took the lead in this regard, with French, German, Italian, Austrian and American lycees that though established on the 19th century, were allowed to continue running when the empire became a republic and have done so to this day. Tuition in these establishments is in the European language of its founders in all classes except for those for which the Ministry of Education mandates tuition in Turkish, such as History, Geography and Literature. They continue to be highly competitive: there does not seem to have been a moment when the city's elites did not view fluency in a language other than Turkish as desirable. There are also the Maarif Schools, later called Anatolian Lycees, which though state-run, are taught in English, French or German, with the exception of above-mentioned classes, which must be taught by Turkish teachers in Turkish, following a strictly regulated curriculum. These schools have greatly grown in number in recent years, in no way running counter to the national project, which has from the outset called for controlled encounters with Western knowledge.
The animus that gave rise to the Citizen Speak Turkish campaign is reserved for the languages with deep roots inside Turkish borders. Though there are still Armenian and

[10] As quoted in The Relation Between Translation and Ideology as an Instrument for the Establishment of a National Literature, p 444

[11] To name just a few: Ahmet Hamdi Tanpinar studied at a French school in Istanbul. Sevgi Soysal learned German from her mother. Sait Faik Abasıyanık studied in France. Sabahattin Ali acquired German while studying in Germany on a Turkish government scholarship. Oğuz Atay was taught Arabic and Persian by his mother. Peyami Safa was taught Arabic by his family, and taught himself French. Tezer Ozlue attended Istanbul's Austrian Lycee. Ferit Edgu learned French in France.

Greek schools in Istanbul, their future is never secure. And not to forget for one second the long and ruthless assaults on Kurdish languages, which date back to the earliest years of the republic and also continue to this day.

In the course of the republican century, we have seen Turkey go from a genuinely polyglot society to a country in which all children acquire Turkish. How much of this is due to patriotic zeal and how much is due to outright coercion, or a fear of repercussions, or a desire to give one's children the best chances in life, we shall never know.

We can only have glimpses of how things played out behind Turkey's millions of closed doors. As I did twenty years ago, when I did a radio documentary on the Language Revolution. I had been objecting to the narrow focus that my BBC producer had proposed, drawing on Geoffrey Lewis's example. I wanted us to look at the fallen empire's many other languages. My producer pointed out, quite reasonably, that we only had forty-five minutes. The compromise was for us to ask each of our interviewees what the languages of their families were, going back three generations. In every case, there was at least one grandparent whose language was to be kept inside. Those from the old Ottoman elites, for example, spoke of Hungarian or Persian or Circassian grandmothers who even if they spoke Turkish, spoke it with foreign accents. Conversations with such such grandmothers were discouraged, lest they pass on their terrible accents to the child.

And the stories keep coming: the student whose refugee grandparents had passed Chechen on to the children, only for those children to decide that the only way to protect their own children from discrimination was for them never to learn the language. The academic who could not converse with his Kurdish mother, after she made the same decision, even though she herself did not have a word of Turkish. The writer whose Arabic speaking parents likewise chose not to pass it on.

Such stories might suggest that Atatürk's dream of a single nation united by a single language did in fact come to pass. But the dream is in some respects more distant than ever.

This is thanks in part to the large numbers of Turks who began to go to Europe as guest workers in the 1960s and ended up staying, even as they kept their links to their homelands strong. Go to any Anatolian town or village in the summer and you will hear children speaking German, French, Danish, Dutch, English.
Just as significant is the mass exodus we have seen over the past seventy years from the countryside to the city. The Istanbul I first met as an eight-year-old in 1960 was a beautiful sea of indoor and outdoor languages, with Greek and Ladino and Armenian swirling in and out of Turkish. But by the time I left for university ten years later, we were also hearing a lot of Kurmanji, Zazaki, Arabic and Laz.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, the many languages of the Balkans, the Caucasus and other parts of the former Soviet Union joined the mix.
Today, following the latest waves of political and economic refugees, we hear more Russian than ever, and Ukrainian, too. Ditto for Arabic and Farsi. In the Istanbul district of Aksaray alone, once 90% Turkish Muslim, the population by one muhtar's reckoning is now at least 70% foreign. By the writer Evan Pheiffer's reckoning, the conversations you hear in the streets are more likely to be in Arabic, Russian, Kurdish, Turkmen, Georgian, Amharic, or Urdu than the national tongue.[12]

For once again, and for better or worse or both, Istanbul is one of the world's great crossroads, while Turkey is a regional power with a place at the big table. The flow of peoples in and out of it is so fast and anarchic as to be beyond even the most authoritarian state's control.
Turkey's star has been rising on the cultural front, too.

And I am its witness. When I first started translating Turkish literature twenty-five years ago, there was almost nothing in English translation. But in recent years our share of the world literature in translation pie has gone from zero to double digits, percentage wise, and though

[12] City of Refuge
A history of Istanbul through eight neighbourhoods, by
by Evan Pheiffer, Bloomsbury 2026

French, Spanish, German and Japanese works find their way into English in much greater numbers, the shift is still significant. Because many of us have had the privilege of translating Turkish classics that were overlooked for a century, the quality is very high, gaining Turkish literature overall ever greater prestige.

Turkey being a country long accustomed to controlling and curating language and culture, and even when engaged in fiery debate, conducting that debate in Turkish, and for and by Turks, it is not perhaps surprising that the rise of interest in things Turkish in the West has been met with a certain degree of consternation. Especially when it is Turkey's dissident voices getting the most attention. We saw this most dramatically with Orhan Pamuk, when he became an international cause celebre after saying a very few meek words about the Armenian genocide, without even using the word. There was national outrage about his being welcomed in the West as the authority on Turkey. In the eyes of most of his fellow citizens, no such authority had been granted, and their anger at his taboo-breaking words spilled over into criticisms not just of his novels, but also of his language, which many denounced as clumsy. And of course, it was not long before their angry eyes turned to his translators, and to the practice of translation generally, most especially when the translators in question were not Turkish speaking natives.

So the politics of language is as highly charged as ever, even if today's controversies take place in new spaces, and under new guises, in a much-changed world. And though there have been many moments over the past twenty-five years when I have wished for a more peaceful life, I have come to understand that arguments about language are always interesting, because almost always, metaphoric. Because to argue about language is to argue about history and religion, national identify and cultural rights, authoritarian overreach and the right to free expression. And just occasionally, these arguments allow us to pay tribute to the languages that still influence our lives and thoughts, even after a century of calumny and state-sponsored erasure. As I hope that we in this room we shall continue to do as this symposium continues.