The Turkish Language Reform:
A Catastrophic Success

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When first I opened a grammar of Chaghatai Turkish and learned that the Chaghatai for ‘it will be’ was bólgay, whereas the corresponding word in the Turkish of Turkey was ola, how feeble ola seemed in comparison with the vigorous bólgay! Central Asia, I thought, was the place to be. Gunnar Jarring’s books opened the door to the fascinating world through which that many-talented man had journeyed. But while I was avidly reading them and dreaming of going where he had gone, I never dreamed that I would share with Gunnar Jarring the distinction of being elected to Corresponding Membership of the Turkish Language Society in the early 1950s, much less that one day I might have the honour of being invited to give the Jarring Lecture. I am fully aware of the magnitude of the contribution made to Turkic studies by Swedish scholars, not least the members of the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, and I am proud to dedicate this lecture to one of the greatest scholars of them all.

I am an ivory-tower scholar, not a field researcher. In spite of the fascination of Eastern Turkestan, my kismet has been that for most of my career my chief interest has been the language of Turkey. I did occasionally teach Chaghatay, in one year to a class including a student who wanted to read the Baburname in the original because it was written by Babur, the first Moghul emperor, who was one of his ancestors.

My subject this evening is the Turkish language reform. I gave my book about it the subtitle A Catastrophic Success. Though the reform has not been so drastic in its effect on the spoken language, it has made everything written before the early 1930s, and much that has been written since, increasingly obscure to each new generation. It has undeniably been a success, in that the reformers succeeded in their purpose of ethnic cleansing: getting rid of the non-Turkish elements in their language, so that it has changed as much in the last century as in the preceding seven hundred. I hope to show you why I call that success catastrophic.

The Ottoman Empire came to an end in 1922, but its administrative and literary language, Ottoman Turkish, the only language that ever came close to English in the vastness of its vocabulary, did not become a dead language until the middle of the twentieth century. At heart it was Turkish; that is to say, its accidence and syntax were Turkish, yet Hagopian felt obliged to devote 40% of his Ottoman-Turkish Conversation-Grammar, published in 1907, to the grammar of Arabic and
Persian. The reason was that the Ottomans had borrowed several features of those two languages. They borrowed Persian and Arabic plurals. From Arabic they borrowed the disease of language known as grammatical gender. Further, Turkish adjectives precede their nouns, but Arabic and Persian adjectives follow them. Persian interposes an i between noun and qualifier, and both conventions were adopted. The Ottoman name for the Sublime Porte, the central offices of the Sultan’s government, was therefore Bâbiâli, two Arabic words meaning ‘gate’ and ‘high’, joined by a Persian i.

The Turks were a pastoral people in what is now Outer Mongolia. In the eighth century, defeated by their Mongol neighbours in the competition for pasturage, they left their home and began to migrate towards the south and west. By the beginning of the eleventh century most of them who had reached the Middle East became Muslim, and the literate among them adopted the Arabo-Persian alphabet. Their own language was rich in words necessary for nomadic life, but it was deficient in terms for philosophical, theological, and artistic concepts. For these they resorted to Arabic and Persian.

But they did not stop there; they did not just borrow words for new concepts. Even so basic a word as ôd ‘fire’, fell out of use; it survived in poetry until the early twentieth century but had hardly been used in prose for four hundred years, its place having been taken by the Persian ates. The Turkish sin or sîne, meaning ‘tomb’, found in popular poetry from the thirteenth to the twentieth century and still widely used in Anatolia, was supplanted in prose long ago by the Arabic mezar. The Ğami‘ al-Faris, a seventeenth-century dictionary, says that some people applied sîne only to the grave of a kâfir, a non-Muslim; a Muslim would be buried in a mezar.

In classical Turkish poetry you find lines where the only indication that they were written by a Turk is the appearance of a –dir ‘is’ or an idi ‘was’. The same is true of classical prose. This mixture of Turkish, Arabic, and Persian was not understood by the great majority of the subjects of the Ottoman dynasty, not only the Arabs and Greeks and many other peoples, but also the Turks.

With the rise of journalism in the second half of the nineteenth century, writers, editors, and publishers realised that if they were to win readers for the new magazines and newspapers they had to simplify the written language by abandoning Arabic and Persian grammatical constructions. People who had been accustomed to calling the natural sciences ulûm-i tabiîye began to see that there was no harm in using the Turkish plural ilimler instead of the Arabic plural ulûm, dropping the Persian i and the Arabic feminine ending of the adjective, and putting the adjective first: tabiî ilimler. The words were still Arabic, because they were the
only words in the working vocabularies of most of those who produced and read newspapers and magazines.

The poet Mehmet Âkif wrote this in 1910: ‘The crime reports in the newspapers are couched in language so abstruse that ordinary people listen to them as if they were religious formulae. It is ridiculous to write “Depredators who nocturnally effected an opportunist entry into Mehmet Bey’s domicile purloined costly tapis eight in number,” when what you mean is “Burglars broke into Mehmet Bey’s house by night and stole eight valuable rugs. Concepts for ordinary people to understand should be expressed in the language used by ordinary people. But years were to pass before that happened.

Although Mehmet Âkif was not alone in his opinion, it took the boundless energy of Kemal Atatürk, as well as his authority as President of the Republic, to initiate the ethnic cleansing of the language. In 1928 he brought about the change of the alphabet from Arabo-Persian to Latin. Two years later, he wrote a short preface to a book on the history and potential of the language, in which he included these fateful words: ‘The Turkish nation, which knows how to protect its territory and its sublime independence, must also liberate its language from the yoke of foreign languages.’ That sentence has been quoted in every book ever written about the language reform. Unfortunately, little attention was paid to his previous sentence: ‘Turkish is one of the richest of languages; it needs only to be used with discrimination.’ He thought it would be possible to find or to construct Turkish equivalents of all Arabic and Persian words, and he practised what he preached. He dictated a list of topics, which he wanted historians to address. One of them was Beşeriyet menşe ve mebdei ‘The source and origin of human kind’, all four words being of Arabic origin. When the typescript was brought to him he amended this to İnsanların nereden ve nasıl geldikleri ‘Where humans came from and how they came’, three of the five words and all the grammar being Turkish. The other two words, insan ‘human’ and ve ‘and’, had long been naturalized and have survived the language reform.

To understand the course of the reform, you must know that ~language was the first of Atatürk’s two hobbies; the other being history. His passion for etymology, however, was more enthusiastic than scientific. Among his offerings was his ingenious derivation of asker ‘soldier’ (actually via Arabic from the Latin exercitus) from the Turkish ask ‘profit’ and er ‘man’, i.e. a man who is an asset to his country. Attributed to him, probably unfairly, were Turkish etymologies for two American place-names, Niagara being explained as from Ne yaygara! ‘What tumult!’ and Amazon as from Ama uzun! ‘But it’s long!’ It was unfortunate that although he liked nothing better than a good argument, none of his intimates ever said ‘Very amusing as an after-dinner game, Pasha, but we mustn’t take it too seriously, must we?’ On the contrary, they played the same game. This being long
before the age of political correctness, the President of the Language Society, which Atatürk founded in 1932, declared the origin of the Western word academy to be the Turkish ak adam: ak ‘white’ and adam ‘man’ (an Arabic word). An anonymous article in the Societyis journal explained ‘the old word okan’ as the name of a deity, meaning ‘majestic, glorious’. There was, however, no such word as okan; the word the writer must have had in mind was ugan and its meaning was neither ‘majestic’ nor ‘glorious’ but ‘almighty’. But worse, he went on to say that okan was the etymon of Okyanus ‘ocean’, which was a borrowing from Greek via Arabic.

The Society prescribed three methods for producing the words required to make Turkish independent of foreign vocabulary: to explore the resources of the spoken language, to collect words found in old texts, and, if necessary, to create new words from existing roots and suffixes.

In October 1932 the word-collecting began. Every provincial Governor presided over a collection committee, with the duty of organizing the collecting of words in use among the people. Within a year, over 35,000 such words were recorded. Meanwhile, scholars had been combing through dictionaries of Turkic languages and more than 150 old texts in search of words that had fallen out of use or had never been in use in Turkey; these totalled close on 90,000. In 1934 the results of both activities were published in a book called Tarama Dergisi ‘Combing Compendium’. Although the compilers had conscientiously put question-marks against some words of which they were not certain, enthusiasts did not feel inhibited about using any word found in it, and for a while the result was chaos. If you wanted to express ‘pen’ without using the ordinary word kalem, an Arabic borrowing, you looked up kalem and made your choice from among yağuş or yazgaç or cicgiç, or kavri or kamış or yuvuş. For akıl ‘intelligence’ there were 26 equivalents, from an to zerey. For hediye ‘gift’ you could pick your favourite from a list of 77 words. The one that was eventually chosen was armağan, not in fact Turkish but an old borrowing from Persian.

Journalists wrote their articles in Ottoman, then passed them on to an ikameci, a substitutor. The substitutor opened his copy of Tarama Dergisi and substituted for the Ottoman words whatever equivalents he chose from that book. At the same time, in the office of another newspaper another substitutor might be choosing different equivalents for the same Ottoman words.

At this point Atatürk decided that the reform had entered a dead end and that the sensible course was to retain in the language all the foreign words that were in general use and for which no Turkish synonym could be found, so long as they could be provided with a Turkish etymology. Encouraged by this, everyone had a go.
Those who instead of inventing etymologies for all the doomed Arabic and Persian words honestly tried to find pure Turkish replacements for them, made some terrible mistakes. For example, there was no Turkish equivalent of the Arabic maarif ‘education’. The reformers produced eğitim, which they said was a noun derived from an ancient verb eğitmek ‘to educate’. Well, there never was a verb eğitmek and, if you will pardon the paradox, it did not mean ‘to educate’; it was a misreading of an ancient verb iğidikem ‘to feed (people or animals)’, but that did not prevent eğitim from becoming the modern Turkish word for ‘education’. For millet ‘nation’ the researchers had found eight possibilities, among them uluş and ulus, and they chose the wrong one, ulus. Uluş was a genuine Turkish word, though it meant not ‘nation’ but ‘country’. The Mongols borrowed it, gave it the Mongolian pronunciation ulus and also gave it a new meaning, ‘empire’ or ‘people’. By the fourteenth century the Turks had borrowed it back in its Mongolian form ulus, which they used until the seventeenth century and use again today. The reformers could not find a Turkish suffix to replace the Arabic adjective-suffix -i as in millî ‘national’, so they borrowed the French suffix -el or -al as in culturel and principal, and they replaced millî ‘national’ by ulusal. Having chosen for ‘national’ a word half Mongolian and half French, the reformers could at least claim that they were not chauvinists.

Yet the name of the National Library of Turkey is still Millî Kütüphane, which is part Arabic and part Persian. I once asked the Director of the Library how it had escaped being called Ulusal Kitaplık. With a happy smile she explained that the name Millî Kütüphane was written into the law establishing the library; the reformers had not noticed it and, inşallah, deo volente, nobody ever would.

Many of the neologisms were correctly constructed from Turkish roots and suffixes, for example altyapı ‘under-building’, which has replaced the French enfrastruktur, and kazı ‘excavation’ and çagrışım ‘association of ideas’, which have replaced the Arabic hafriyat and tedai respectively. Far too many neologisms, however, were not correctly constructed.

You may say that this is no reason to call the reform a catastrophe. After all, every language is a set of conventions, and most people everywhere neither know nor care about the origins of the words they use; they are not interested in whether a word has always been part of their language or was recently created by a Language Society or an Academy. But I am thinking of the educated Turks who know the exact word they want but hesitate to use it because it is too old-fashioned and has not been replaced with a neologism. Or it has been replaced by one of the many neologisms that were arbitrarily invented. So they use a French or English word instead. A Turk, however, does not have to be a professional
scholar to find at least some of the inventions excruciating and cannot bear to to hear them, much less to say them.

An example: the reformers made neden, the ablative of ne ‘what?’, into a noun meaning ‘cause’, replacing the Arabic sebep. This new noun is unique in having an ablative case which no Turk with any feeling for the language will use. The old expression for ‘because of this’ was bu sebepten, literally ‘from this cause’. Few Turks can bring themselves to say bu nedenden, literally ‘from this from-what’. Nor do they like the alternative bu neden nedeniyle, ‘by this from-what’s from-what’, so they continue to use the Ottoman bu sebepten.

The assumption behind the change of vocabulary was that the meaning of neologisms constructed from Turkish roots and suffixes, unlike Ottoman words would be readily intelligible to everybody; while a Turk might not know the Arabic mefhum ‘concept’, he could at once understand kavram, manufactured from kavramak ‘to grasp’. Well, he might, unless he was from one of the many regions of Anatolia where it means ‘handful’. And when the suffix was itself a neologism he would be even worse off, especially if it coincided in form with a familiar word. Among Atatürk’s coinages for the language of geometry, of which I shall be saying a little more, were replacements for the Arabic names of the plain figures – triangle, pentagon and so on. He added to the appropriate numeral a newly invented suffix -gen. The more committed reformers will tell you its origin was Turkish, but in fact it was the suffix -gon of pentagon and hexagon, altered to -gen because as a rule the vowel o does not occur in final syllables. Anyway, the word for ‘triangle’ became üçgen. In theory, anyone could understand that it had something to do with ‘three’, and would soon realise from the context that it meant ‘triangle’. But the reformers should have known that gen was part of the vocabulary of every farmer in Anatolia, to whom üçgen could mean only ‘three fallow fields’. Consider the neologism özek, the official replacement for the Arabic merkez ‘centre’. A villager from the neighbourhood of Isparta would have no difficulty with it, because it was there that the word-collections had found it. To most other Anatolians, however, it would mean only the pole of an ox-cart. A town-dweller, knowing öz ‘own’ and ek ‘patch, addition’, could never guess its new meaning.

Those are典型 of the mistakes that the reformers made. Another was that they impoverished the language by eliminating a great many Arabic and Persian words for which there were no Turkish equivalents, nor did they take the trouble to construct them from Turkish roots and suffixes. The enormous resources of Ottoman Turkish were at their disposal. They did not have to perpetuate the whole exuberant vocabulary; they were free to pick and choose, but they deliberately elected to throw away their heritage.
Ottoman had individual words that expressed the concepts of declaring, asserting, remarking, hinting, and more of similar meaning. To express all these senses, modern Turks have to make do with anlatmak ‘to tell’, söylemek ‘to say’, and bildirmek ‘to inform’, with adverbs to supply the nuances. So, for ‘to hint’, if they wish to avoid or don’t know the old word ima, they have to say üstü kapalı söylemek ‘to say covertly’ or dolaylı anlatmak ‘to tell indirectly’.

I have mentioned another of the reformers’ sins, that when they could not find or construct a real Turkish equivalent for a foreign word that they wanted to expel from the language, they invented one. There was an incident at the Sixth Language Congress, in 1949, which does not appear in the published proceedings. Someone asked what principles had governed the formation of new technical terms. An embarrassed silence was eventually broken by the chairman of the Linguistics and Etymology Commission, who said: ‘My friends! We had no principle or anything resembling a principle. We’ve been making them up as we went along!’

That was no more than the truth. As the pure Turkish replacement for the Arabic hayat ‘mage’ they produced imeğe, its alleged origin being the Old Turkic im ‘password’, with the addition of the suffix seen in çekirge ‘grasshopper’ and süpürge ‘broom’. The connection between ‘password’ and ‘image’ may seem tenuous, but one only has to spell out imeğe and the French or English image to see the true etymology.

The old word for ‘civilization’ was medeniyet. It was of Arabic derivation, though it was a nineteenth-century Turk who did the deriving, and the Arabs borrowed it from the Turks. The replacement found for it was uygarlık, an arbitrary coinage based on the name of the Uyghur, a people who established an advanced civilization in Eastern Turkestan in the tenth to twelfth centuries. So it has far less claim to being pure Turkish than medeniyet, which still holds its ground.

I once conducted a small experiment about those two words. On the northern approaches to İzmir one sees notices reading Yayaya Saygî Uygarlıktır ‘Respect for the Pedestrian is Civilization.’ I asked two affable taxi-drivers the meaning of uygarlık, and after briefly conferring they agreed that uygar meant the same as modern or çağdaş (‘contemporary’). It emerged that they did not associate uygarlık with medeniyet, which they both knew, though I did not try their patience by asking them to define it. I am sure that Gunnar Jarring would have had the courage to pursue the enquiry to its very end. But my small experiment lends support to the view of a Turkish friend whom I told about it: that nuances of meaning are emerging between old words and their replacements; he himself did not feel uygarlık and medeniyet to be synonymous. If he was talking about a particular civilization or the history of civilization, he would use medeniyet.
Uyarlık, on the other hand, conveyed to him something more dynamic: civilized and vigorous and progressive.

There are two questions we should ask about the reform. The first is, has it liberated the language from the yoke of foreign languages? The answer is yes; most of the vocabulary of younger writers is that of the new Turkish. The second question is, has it eliminated the gap between the language of the intellectuals and the language of the people? The answer is no. It is natural that there should be a gap between the language of intellectuals and the language of the people, because intellectuals need more words than non-intellectuals. No one ever expected intellectuals to stop talking about literary criticism or bacteriology or whatever their particular interest might be. The hope was that they would give up the use of Ottoman words for everyday concepts; they would not, so to speak, say ‘domicile’ when they meant ‘house’, or ‘I shall exercise cogitation on this topic’ rather than ‘I’ll think about it’. And they don’t; the language of the intellectuals is no longer full of Ottoman words, but it is full of so-called ‘pure Turkish’ neologisms, very few of which have entered the language of the people, the majority of whom are not great readers. The language of the people, though not full of Ottoman words, retains many that the intellectuals have abandoned. The reform has hardly changed the speech-habits of non-intellectuals; the language spoken today by the farmer, the shopkeeper, and the small craftsman is not very different from that spoken by their grandparents.

For a change, let me say a word about one aspect of the reform that I see as totally admirable: the technical terms of the sciences. Until 1937, Turkish schoolchildren were still being taught geometry with the Ottoman technical terms. ‘Right angle’ was zaviye-i kaime, two Arabic words joined by the Persian i. It is now dik açı, a straight translation of the Arabic. The change began in the winter of 1936/7, when Atatürk wrote a little book on the elements of geometry, which was published anonymously. In it he employed most of the geometrical terms now in regular use, many of his own invention.

We all remember the formula we learned at school: ‘The area of a triangle is equal to the length of the base multiplied by half the height.’ In pre-reform Turkish it was Bir müsellesin mesaha-i sathiyesi, kaidesinin irtifaına hâsil-ı zarbinin nisfîna müsavıdır. Now it is Bir üçgenin yüzölçümü, tabanının yüksekliğine çarpımının yarısına eşittir. Really two languages; all they have in common is the indefinite article bir at the beginning and the suffix -dir at the end. But only a fanatical conservative would insist in calling interior opposite angles by the 16 syllables of zaviyetan-ı métekabletan-ı dahiletan rather than the five syllables of içters açılar. New technical terms have been devised for the other branches of science, although not all their practitioners use them. Certainly medical doctors seem to prefer English or French.
To revert to non-technical words, the sad truth is that very many of them were created by people with no qualifications for the job, a category that included not a few of the Society’s experts. But the individual who produced the largest number of new words did not claim to be an expert on language. He was Nurullah Ataç, a popular writer on literature who cheerfully admitted, ‘My ignorance is endless and at my age it cannot be eradicated.’ Whenever he introduced a neologism into one of his articles, he added in parentheses the word it was intended to replace, but without trying to explain or to justify his invention. His contributions to the new Turkish number many hundreds, most of them now in regular use, such as yanıt ‘answer’, örneğin ‘for example’ and sorun ‘problem’.

Some devotees of the reform will look you in the eye and swear that such obvious adaptations of Western words as okul for ‘school’, genel for ‘general’, and terim for ‘technical term’ are of purely Turkish origin. They make the same claim for süre ‘duration’, a Frankensteinís monster whose father was the Turkish sürmek ‘to continue’ and whose mother was durée, the French for ‘duration’.

Let me sum up my four reasons for calling the reform catastrophic. (1) The reformers did not close the language gap between intellectuals and non-intellectuals; what they did was to create a new gap. (2) They impoverished the language by failing to produce Turkish replacements for all the Arabic and Persian words they consigned to oblivion. This loss affects every Turk who now, in speaking or writing, looks for the word that expresses his feelings but does not find it, because it is as dead as Etruscan and has not been replaced. (3) Many of the replacements that were produced are far from being pure Turkish. (4) Most Turks below the age of 50 are cut off from the writings of the 1920s and 1930s, one of the greatest periods of their modern literature. The ‘Translations into Modern Turkish’ that you will see in bookshops are no substitute for the real thing.

Here is an extract from a reader’s letter to the newspaper Cumhuriyet in 1995: ‘I was looking for one of Yakup Kadri’s books. It was nowhere to be found. I asked the publisher who had reprinted many of his books why he hadn’t reprinted that one. He replied, ‘We haven’t been able to find anyone to put it into Turkish.’ Apparently a book printed in the 1930s, which I read as a schoolboy, today has to be put into Turkish! Did Yakup Kadri write it in Chinese, I wonder? Further, no one can be found to understand that Turkish and turn it into the new garbage!’ The writer of that letter was not alone; all but one of the many Turkish friends who supplied me with material for my book said that if I criticized the reform too unkindly they would not mind a bit. Most of them were no older than the one friend who did not say that.
In general, conservative-minded people were against the reform, while progressives were for it. A man named Tekin Erer wrote this in 1973: ‘There is a simple method of distinguishing the leftists in our country. To ascertain how far to the left a person is, look at the words he uses in writing and speech. If the fake words he employs are too numerous for you to be able to understand, you may unhesitatingly call him a communist.’

He was wrong; extremists at both ends of the political spectrum were bitterly opposed to the reform. The communists saw it as a bourgeois movement aimed at widening the gulf between the official and literary language and the language of the people. The poet and playwright Nazım Hikmet (1902 – 63), the most distinguished of all Turkish communists, did not use ‘pure Turkish’ but followed Atatürk in making full use of the language as it stood. Extremists of the right regarded the Language Society as a subversive organization whose mission was to decrease mutual understanding between the Turks of Turkey and the Turks of the then Soviet Union, whom they hoped some day to liberate.

Atatürk’s devotion to the reform which he had initiated suffered a shock on 3 October 1934. He had already gone a long way in the use of the new language; he took it to the limit in the speech he made that day at a banquet in honour of the Crown Prince and Princess of Sweden. He had composed the speech in the language he had spoken all his life, and every Arabic or Persian word was then replaced with a neologism, presumably by a ‘substitutor’. It is recorded that he delivered the speech ‘like a schoolboy who has just begun to read.’ One can see why this embarrassing experience made him think that the reform had gone too far.

He had another shock two years later, at the Language Society’s Third Congress, which was dominated by the Sun-Language Theory, for which he was responsible. Uriel Heyd, in his 1954 book on the language reform, calls it ‘this amazing theory’. So does Bernt Brendemoen, writing in 1990, who in addition calls it ‘infamous’. It was inspired by a Dr Kvergic of Vienna, who sent Atatürk an unpublished paper entitled ‘La Psychologie de quelques éléments des langues turques’, which did not mention the sun; the sun was part of Atatürk’s contribution. Kvergic asserted, among other things, that Turkish was the first language in the world. Atatürk’s theory taught that language began when primitive man looked up at the sun and said ‘Aa!, in Turkish spelling ağ, which became ‘the first-degree radical of the Turkish language.’ Its meanings were numerous, ranging from ‘sun’ and ‘God’ to ‘water’ and ‘time’.

Dr Kvergic was invited to the Congress and he applied the Sun-Language Theory to produce the following etymology of unutmak ‘to forget’:
'Its earliest form was uğ+un+ut+um+ak, Uğ, “discriminating spirit”, is the mother-root. The n of un shows that the significance of the mother-root emerges into exterior space. The t of ut is always a dynamic factor; its role here is to shift the discriminating spirit into exterior space. The m of um is the element which embodies the concept of uğ-un-ut, while ak completes the meaning of the word. After phonetic coalescence, the word takes its final morphological shape, unutmak, which expresses the transference of the discriminating spirit out of the head into the exterior field surrounding the head’. Every word of that was pure invention. One wonders how a man who talked such rubbish in public ever obtained a doctorate.

İbrahim Dilmen, the Secretary-General of the Society, used the theory to prove that the Western word electric was derived from the Uyghur yaltrık ‘gleam, shining’. One is reminded of Müller’s dictum ‘The change of a consonant is a mere trifle, for in etymology vowels are worth but little, and consonants almost nothing.’ In case you do not believe that Müller could have said that, I should explain that this was not the great nineteenth-century Oxford philologist Max Müller but his cousin George.

There were a number of foreign guests at the Congress, besides Dr Kvergic. Atatürk’s faith in his theory was shaken by the reactions of all of them except Dr Kvergic. Some of them politely said the theory was interesting. Others wanted more time to think about it. Four of them did not mention it at all. Atatürk was a man of high intelligence and he knew what they thought of his Sun-Language Theory.

His interest in technical terms continued after the Congress. Already by the end of 1936, however, he had lost interest in creating neologisms for everyday words, and had reverted to his mother-tongue.

After Atatürk’s death, in November 1938, Dilmen cancelled the course of lectures on the Sun-Language Theory which he had been giving at Ankara University. When his students asked him why, he replied, ‘After the sun has died, does his theory survive?’

The Language Society felt secure in the knowledge that it was not a State institution but a private body founded by Atatürk, so that it could never be abolished. Nor was it; when the conservatives thought the time was ripe it was simply nationalized. A law passed on 11 August 1983 reconstituted it as part of a new Atatürk Cultural, Linguistic, and Historical Institute dependent on the Prime Minister’s office. Since then the new Society has ceased to propose replacements for Ottoman words.
The importation of French words began in the nineteenth century and continues. The Higher Education Council has recently prepared draft regulations for higher education based on the internet. They contain two words not to be found in any Turkish dictionary: akreditasyon and akredite. The most grotesque example of French borrowing I have so far met is the notice outside the places where you can have the exhaust emission of your vehicle tested. It reads ‘Ezgoz emisyonu ölçüm istasyonu’ ‘exhaust emission measuring station.’ Only the third word is Turkish.

As long ago as 1974, Özcan Başkan, one of the first generation of Turkish linguists, combined Türkçe ‘Turkish’ and İngilizce ‘English’ to make a Turkish counterpart of the French franglais: Türkilizce. Since the 1960s, French has been largely replaced by English as the source of Western words. The Turkish for ‘balloon’ is balon, plural balonlar, but a company organizing flights over Göreme, in the ancient Cappadocia, calls itself ‘Kapadokya Balloons’. The switch from French borrowings to English borrowings is the subject of a shrewd Turkish witticism: ‘I’m really getting tired of Turks who talk English instead of Turkish. Most people now say opereyşin instead of operasyon, and spekülsyşin instead of spekülasyon.’

The new Language Society regularly suggests Turkish replacements for such Western words, though nobody seems to take much notice of its suggestions. In these proposed replacements ‘pure Turkish’ is far from predominating; some of them are what I think of as proper Turkish and what the old Language Society would have called Ottoman. In the pages of any newspaper or magazine, Ottomanisms may now be seen which twenty years ago one would have thought obsolete. One example: in a newspaper report on a terrorist raid last April, the terrorists were called teröristler. The headline, however, was Otelde Dehşet ‘Terror at Hotel’, dehşet, of Arabic origin, being the Ottoman for ‘terror’. On 15 October 2001, the newspaper Akşam reported that the Turkish Army had moved to kısmi teyakkuz ‘partial alert’, both words being Arabic.

Pleasant though it may be for lovers of the old language to see and hear some of it coming back into use, they must not deceive themselves into assuming that the language reform is over and done with. Hardly any neologisms are being created nowadays (why bother to create them if you know French or English?), but the effects of fifty years of indoctrination are not so easily eradicated. Let me finish with a word about two neologisms.

The established replacements for the Arabic istiklal ‘independence’ and hürriet ‘freedom’ are bağımsızlık and özgürlük. The -im of bağımsızlık is a deverbal suffix, but as bağ is not a verb-root, the root has to be the noun ‘bond, impediment’. The best one can say for bağımsızlık is that its meaning is not so unguessable as that of its partner özgürlük. Öz means ‘pure’, and gürlük means ‘abundance’, so özgürlük can only mean ‘pure abundance’; it cannot mean ‘freedom’. But it does. The objection most critics have raised to these two words, however, is not the
obvious one that the first violates the rules of the language, while the second makes no sense, but that they have no emotional content. Untold thousands of Turks, they say, fought and died for hürriyet and istiklâl; how many would be ready to fight and die for özgürlük and bağımsızlık? The answer to this rhetorical question is that you do not miss what you have never known. To those Turks who have grown up since the 1950s, Hürriyet is the name of a daily newspaper and a square in Beyazit, while İstiklal is the name of a street in Beyoğlu. To them, özgürlük and bağımsızlık mean what hürriyet and istiklâl meant to their grandparents and what ‘freedom’ and ‘independence’ mean to English-speakers, and yes, they are ready to fight and die for them if necessary. The language they have spoken all their lives is their language.

Ah well. Ottoman was a splendid language while it lasted. De mortuis nil nisi bonum.

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