

# Turkish Language and Teaching Turkish as a Foreign Language<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** *Turkish is a leading spoken and written language. Today, foreigners are taking increasingly more interest in Turkish owing to its 1500-year continuous and comprehensive history. However, an adequate background of Turkish in the literature of foreign language teaching and learning does not exist. Therefore, the field of teaching Turkish as a foreign language is relatively new in terms of the innovative methodology of instruction. As a language, Turkish is becoming more essential in education as well as in daily life due to the important role it plays in forming communication chains throughout the world. Turkish became even more popular after the Soviet Union's break-up in 1991. In recent years, the fields of Turkic studies and teaching Turkish as a foreign language have received more attention throughout the world. The purpose of this study is to analyze some basic characteristics of the Turkish language and the history of teaching the Turkish language.*

**Keywords:** *Turkish Language, Teaching a foreign language,*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The Turkish language has always been a significant language for historical reasons, and due to the political, geographical, and economic position it has in the world. As a result, many universities in the world have Turkish studies departments and more people encounter the language everyday and want to learn it. Unfortunately, the technical, methodological, and theoretical developments in the teaching of Turkish as a foreign language seem far from commensurate with the magnitude and significance of the demand for it. This fact motivates the author to evaluate the teaching of the Turkish language in Turkey and abroad. Some basic characteristics of the Turkish language and the history of teaching the Turkish language will be analyzed in this study.

### ***Turkish Language***

Today, Turkish is one of approximately 3,000 languages spoken in the world. Turkish, one of many Turkic languages spoken in the world, is the official language of the Republic of Turkey and is the primary language of more than 70 million people. It is a leading spoken and written form of language and, in addition to Turkey, is widely spoken in Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Cyprus, some Middle East countries, Germany, Holland, Belgium, Britain, and Australia. Approximately, 125 million people speak Turkic languages across the world. Some of these languages are closely related to Turkish. (Bayraktaroğlu & Bayraktaroğlu, 1992:1).

Outside Turkey, the migrant workers who went to western, central, and northern Europe in 1960s and 1970s and their families and offspring form a large group of speakers of Turkish (numbering more than three million people). Most of these immigrants live in industrial cities in Germany, France, and the Netherlands, and small numbers live in Austria, Belgium, and Scandinavian countries. Their patterns or maintenance of Turkish are varied, but a considerable number of them will retain Turkish as their first language in the future (Boeschoten, 1998:4).

Before language reforms occurred in the 1920s, the official form of Turkish was written in Arabic script and its written grammar and vocabulary differed markedly from the spoken language. This older form of Turkish, known as Ottoman Turkish, was the administrative and literary language of the Ottoman Empire. Since 1928, Turkish in Turkey has been written with a modified Latin alphabet and, thus, its alphabet now resembles other Latin-based alphabets such as German, English, French, or Polish.

Turkish belongs to the Altaic languages family, which is divided into three groups: (a) Turkic, (b) Mongolian, and (c) Manchu-Tungus languages. This classification includes more than 70 languages (Majewicz, 1989:48). There are 29 letters in the Turkish language. Eight letters are vowels and twenty-one are consonants. The vowel letters are: a, e, ı, i, o, ö, u, and ü. the consonant letters are: b, c, ç, d, f, g, ğ, h, j, k, l, m, n, p, r, s, ş, t, v, y, and z.

Turkish contains more vowels than many languages. The vowels in Turkish can be classified in three groups according to their articulator properties: (a) front and back, (b) round and unrounded, and (c) high or low.

### **We can partition the vowels in detail:**

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1. Back vowels: (a, ı, o, u), 2. Front vowels: (e, i, ö, ü), 3. Front unrounded vowels: (e, i), 4. Front rounded vowels: (ö, ü), 5. Back unrounded vowels: (a, ı), 6. Back rounded vowels: (o, u), 7. High vowels: (ı, i, u, ü), 8. Low unrounded vowels: (a, e).

Turkish is an agglutinative language. Agglutination refers to the process of adding suffixes to a root-word, thus transforming a single word into a phrase or a complete sentence depending on the chain of suffixes attached (Kurtoğlu-Hotoon, 1995:20). Crystal (1991:19) stated that different languages display the characteristics of agglutination in different degrees and gives Turkish as an example of a language that largely displays agglutination. Agglutination in Turkish is due to the wide use of suffixes. These are affixed to root words to form nouns, adjectives, and verbs.

Aside from agglutination, the syntax of the Turkish language also sets it apart from other languages. In Turkish, the basic word order is SOV (subject-object-verb) but constituent order may vary freely as demanded by the discourse context. For this reason, different combinations of the subject, object, and verb are possible in Turkish. It has been argued that word order variation is sensitive to the information structure of the sentence (Erğuvanlı, 1984:1; Hoffman, 1994:117; Lewis, 1967:239). Hoffman stated that specific positions in a sentence are associated with certain pragmatic functions. One such position is the immediately preverbal position. Hoffman argued that the immediately preverbal position is the focus position in Turkish and that word order variation achieves a pragmatic function in the sense that the focus of the sentence is brought to this position.

Turkish distinguishes itself from many other languages with its vowel harmony. For this reason, during the affixation process, the vowels in the suffixes have to agree with the last vowel of the affixed word in order to achieve vowel harmony (Hengirmen, 2005:24). These vowel patterns are not difficult to learn since Turkish is a phonetic language. Unlike other languages, the alphabetic letters and the vowel sounds in Turkish correspond one-to-one, thus simplifying spelling.

Turkish is extremely regular when compared to other languages. There is no gender. The third person singular pronoun “o” means ‘he’, ‘she’ and ‘it’ equally. Turkish contains no distinction between adjectives and adverbs since one word serves both purposes. Therefore, there are no “good” versus “well” mix-ups.

Since the Turkish language is not Indo-European, most of the words do not even vaguely resemble words from European languages. Only the words borrowed from European languages, largely from French, resemble words in European language. Many people are under the misconception that, due to Turkey’s geographic location, Turkish is linguistically similar to Arabic, Persian, or Hebrew. These languages belong to different major language families and, thus, aside from some common vocabulary due to cultural and regional ties, they share very little with the Turkish language.

### ***Teaching Turkish as a Foreign Language***

According to Adıgüzel (2001:5), foreigners take interest in Turkish due to its 1500-year comprehensive history and its prevalence. However, despite its history and common usage, Turkish is one of the less commonly taught languages in the world. The historical development of teaching the Turkish language will be discussed briefly in this section.

The first most important era in the history of teaching Turkish was the 1700s. Teaching the Turkish language as a foreign language started with teaching Turkish to interpreters. Until the second half of the 18th century, the Ottoman Empire relations with the West employed an “ad hoc” diplomacy. Interpreters played a significant role in the field of diplomatic and economic relations between the Ottoman government and Western states and thus became the first Turkish language learners in history (Baker, 1998:571).

The history of interpreters in the Ottoman Empire dates back to as early as the beginning of diplomatic history. In terms of their professional tasks and their status, interpreters held a privileged position in the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans used the word *tercüman* to refer to interpreters. This word was adopted as *dragomanno* in Italian, *drogman* in French, and “dragoman” in English (Hitzel, 1995:17; Ottoman, 2004).

According to Gürçağlar (2003:50), “Dragomans were usually Ottoman subjects of Greek or Armenian origin who were educated in the west in various languages. They were familiar with Persian and Arabic apart from Ottoman and Western languages. For westerners they always remained an oriental, while for Ottomans they were windows opening up to the west.”

Dragomans were initially chosen from Greek, Italian, German, Hungarian, and Polish converts to Islam. The dragomans played important roles in trade, politics, education, and culture. They transferred eastern culture to the west and western culture to the east. The dragomans were first responsible for translating the documents coming from various embassies. Professional translations came to be institutionalized in the sixteenth century as the growing diplomatic and the commercial activities of the Empire created more demand for professional dragomans (Ağıldere, 2010:694).

In 1551, the Venetian Republic sent some of its young citizens to Istanbul to learn Oriental languages and to work as dragomans. The Venetian Republic example of founding a dragoman school in Istanbul inspired the French government to establish a school for educating dragomans. With the encouragement of the minister

to King Louis the XVIth, a school was established in 1699 and was given the name *L'Ecole des Enfants de langues* (Hitzel, 1995:18-19). In 1700, twelve students were given scholarships by the King of France in order to complete *L'Ecole des Enfants de langues* in the Pera region in İstanbul (Karal, 1978:7).

In 1754, the Austrian government decided to found a school for Austrian dragomans in Istanbul. They were followed by the Polish in 1766 and the English in 1814 (Ağildere, 2010:695). Before the foundation of dragoman schools in Istanbul in 16<sup>th</sup> century, most of the letters from the Ottoman Empire were translated by the Armenians and Tatars living in Poland. Later, in 1766, a Polish dragoman school was founded in Istanbul. The most known Polish dragomans were Samuel Otwinowski, Ibrahim bey Strasz, Krzysztof Dzierzek, Franciszek Mesgnien-Meninski, Wojciech Bobowski (Ali Ufki Bey), Antoni Ilinski, Karol Karski, Konstanty Borzecki, Marcin Starkowiecki, and Antoni Muchlinski (Reychman, 1950:41; Zajączkowski, 1953).

### ***After the Collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991***

The second most important era in the history of teaching Turkish encompassed the years after the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991. Central Asian countries continued nation building soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This process involved the establishment of political, economical, and social institutions; the development of national identities and self-acknowledgement; and the elaboration of alternatives to communism in order to create an ideological base for new societies and political rules.

Turkey's strong, historical, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic links with the newly independent Central Asian countries made Turkey a valuable and important stabilizing factor in this new world order. Turkey's role was discussed both in Turkey and in the West. A power vacuum was created by the collapse of the USSR and the western countries were aware that the religion of Islam might fill up that temporarily empty space. Therefore, they strongly encouraged Central Asian states to adapt a Turkish model of secular democracy together with a liberal economy.

Nearly all of the central Asian leaders in 1991-1992 agreed to regard Turkey as a model. A mutual belief was that relations with Turkey could make their entry to the western world easier. These countries established an extensive network which provided a wide range of facilities for cultural, economic, and, to some extent, military cooperation with Turkey (TİKA, 1996). According to a number of various reports, Turkey then took a mission upon itself to train 10,000 students from the Post-Soviet countries (Yüce, 2005:86).

Özyürek (2009:1845) pointed out the importance of Turkey and Turkish after the collapse of USSR. The Turkic States which gained their independence after the dissolution of the USSR focused all their attention on Turkey. The most important reason behind such an interest, according to Özyürek, is that Turkey is situated at a crossroad between Asia, Europe, and Africa. Because of her geographical location, she is the cradle of different cultures and civilizations. This position gives her some very significant advantages. Therefore, the number of foreigners coming to Turkey from around the world and, especially, from the countries in the region is gradually increasing. More people are visiting Turkey and are starting to reside in the country, either to learn more about the Turkish people and the Turkish culture, to do business in Turkey, or to receive an education in Turkey.

Whatever the purpose of their visit is and whether they stay for a short or a long period, the main problem that foreigners encounter in Turkey today is that they do not know how to speak or write Turkish. This difficulty, especially for those who settle in Turkey, has made learning Turkish an obligation.

Students who come to study at a university in Turkey usually learn Turkish in the Turkish preparatory classes of the university. During the 2008-2009 academic year, 1,098 students from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan studied at Turkish universities. These students, however, encountered a number of difficulties during the language learning process. Predictably, the difficulties encountered by the foreign students were different from the difficulties encountered by the students who came from a Turkic origin. The students coming from the Turkic states and communities in the region had (and still have) an advantage over foreigners when they tried to learn Turkish. Many of the languages spoken in the countries around the region such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tataristan are dialects of the Turkish language. Therefore, the students from these countries encountered fewer problems in learning Turkish compared to those who are completely foreign to Turkish. Nevertheless, the foreign students of Turkic origin who spoke Azerbaijani Turkish, Kazakh Turkish, Kyrgyz Turkish, Uzbek Turkish, Turkmen Turkish, and Tatar Turkish at home still experienced some difficulties while learning Turkish (Özyürek, 2009:1846).

As Demir (1993) noted, the educational process is a very influential factor in the process of socialization. Throughout history, the educational process has had the power to build, shape, reconstruct, and add fresh details to the atmosphere in both psychological and social environments. During the transition period, the educational process has played a role of vital importance and has been perceived to function in a similar way in the social transformation of the Central Asian countries. The Turkish government started Turkish language

instruction in Central Asian and the Post-Soviet countries. In this context, the quality of Turkish instruction is open to exploration.

### ***Turkish Studies in Poland***

Oriental studies in Poland have a rich tradition that stretches back for centuries. Throughout most of their history, Oriental studies focused on the cultures and languages of the Near and Middle East due to Poland's close contacts with these regions. Looking at a map, it is surprising how relatively distant countries like Poland and Turkey went through a long period of a specific kind of contacts. Sometimes the contacts were friendly and sometimes they were aggressive, but they were always very vivid. Wawrzyniak in his unpublished master's thesis analyzed the Polish and Ottoman diplomatic relations in detail.

On the other hand, the geopolitical position of Poland in Europe on the crossroads from Central Asia to West Europe was one of the major factors, which facilitated close contacts with the Turkish speaking peoples. The earliest contacts between Poland and the Turkish tribes deal with the Kiptchak group of languages, notably the Tatars and the Karaims. Considerably great groups of Tatars and Karaims were settled down on the lands of Lithuania and Poland already in the 14th century (Majda, 2001:172).

Turkish studies in Poland go back to the first half of the 15th century with the start of diplomatic relations between Poland and the Ottoman Empire (Toros, 1983:10). After a few decades, the Oriental studies department was founded in Vilna (today Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania) in 1802. This department was the first Oriental studies department in Poland. However, Poland was not an independent country at that time. Some of the scholars in the department were historian Józef Sękowski and orientalist Antoni Muchlinski. The curriculum of the department included Turkish, Arabic, and Persian with literature, history, and geography courses. When the department was closed by the Russians in 1830, Polish learners of Oriental studies went to other cities such as St. Petersburg, Paris, and Vienna. After that time, the first Turkish studies department was founded in Krakow at Jagiellonian university in 1919 (Majda, 2001:172-173).

### ***Turkish Studies in Turkey***

Two main institutions to teach Turkish as a foreign language in Turkey. The first institution is the Turkish and Foreign Languages Research and Application Centre (TÖMER). TÖMER was founded in 1984 as a department of Ankara University for teaching Turkish to foreigners. Leading language and culture associations like the British Council and the Goethe Institute were models for the new center. In the 1980s, TÖMER was the first and only institution to teach Turkish as a foreign language. TÖMER is also the publisher of the innovative language learning series called the *New Hitit Turkish for Foreigners* education series, which has been developed for teaching Turkish as a foreign language. The education series has been prepared at three different levels (basic, intermediate, and upper-intermediate) based on the criteria established in the CEFR.

The second institution in Turkey that teaches Turkish as a foreign language is the Yunus Emre Institute, which was founded in 2007. In 2005, the Turkish Ministry of Culture prepared a bill to establish foundations for the teaching of the Turkish language and culture all around the world. The ministry is prepared to build these foundations, which they have modeled on Goethe Institute of Germany, the French Cultural Center of France, and the British Council of England.

These foundations have taken the form of an institute and several cultural centers. All of these are named after the famous Turkish poet Yunus Emre who lived around 13th and 14th centuries. Yunus Emre was one of the first known Turkish poets to have composed works in the spoken Turkish of his own age and region rather than in Persian or Arabic. His poems, written in the tradition of Anatolian folk poetry, mainly concerned divine love as well as human destiny.

The Yunus Emre Institute conducts educational activities and scientific research in order to promote Turkish culture, history, language, and literature abroad, and it supports scientific studies by cooperating with various organizations. The Institute also aims to contribute to the training of competent academicians and researchers in the fields of Turkish language, history, culture, art, and music and attempts to provide training through certification programs.

The Yunus Emre Institute establishes Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centres in different countries throughout the world. These Cultural Centres contribute to the promotion of Turkey through scientific projects, cultural activities, and courses and they strengthen friendship ties and increase cultural exchanges with other countries.

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Yunus Emre Enstitüsü (YEE) has taught Turkish to more than 99 thousand people in 40 countries and has introduced Turkish culture since its establishment in 2009. The interest towards Yunus Emre Enstitüsü that aims to introduce Turkish culture and language to the world in 50 centres in 40 countries, steadily increases. Yunus Emre Enstitüsü carries out activities in centres abroad with a total of 322 personnel, 189 of whom are local. Thanks to the Enstitü that introduces Turkish culture to the world through projects realised, 99 thousand 261 students have learned Turkish to date. YEE continues to produce projects to increase interest in Turkish language by sending Turkish instructors over the Council of Higher Education to more than 80 universities abroad Enstitü has established collaborations with.

## II. CONCLUSION

Since human beings lead social lives, learning a foreign language has always been necessary for people throughout history. Especially in today's globalized world, where life is shaped by international relationships, learning a foreign language is of great importance. Thus, foreign language learning is regarded as an indispensable part of curriculum all over the world. Although the Turkish language has been taught as a foreign and second language at various institutions all over the world, an adequate background of the Turkish language in the literature of foreign language teaching and learning does not exist. Therefore, the field of teaching Turkish as a foreign language is relatively new in terms of the methodology and materials.

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