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# Turkish language reform: the episode of the Sun-Language Theory

Geoffrey L. Lewis

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The Sun-Language Theory, which saw Turkish as the most ancient of languages, was the brain-child of Atatürk, himself an enthusiastic amateur etymologist. His motive in launching the theory is still disputed among Turkish scholars. Was it to justify abandoning the campaign to replace the Arabic and Persian words in the Turkish vocabulary with native equivalents, once it had become clear that these were not always possible to find? Was it to legitimize the fashionable pastime of concocting Turkish etymologies for manifestly non-Turkish words? The article suggests that he launched the theory simply because he believed in it.

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Readers of *Turkic Languages*, especially those acquainted with Uriel Heyd's masterly little book (Heyd 1954), will know something of the tragicomic story of Turkish language reform. The present article enlarges on one chapter in that story.

Atatürk's purpose in putting his personal authority and the power of the State behind the reform was to rid Turkish of its Arabic and Persian vocabulary. In 1932 the *Söz derleme seferberliği*—word-collection mobilization—was started, in order to find native equivalents for all the words doomed to oblivion. After some months, when the impossibility of the task had become obvious, it was announced that words, whatever their origin, that were current among the people, were to be regarded as Turkish. This sensible provision, however, could have made little impression on those reformers who had chosen the opposite course, which was to devise Turkish etymologies for Arabic words. Atay (1965, 1969: 478) tells of a discussion at a meeting of the Dictionary Commission about possible replacements for *hüküm* 'judgment':

“Naim Hazım Hoca was sitting on my right, Yusuf Ziya on my left. I said, ‘There’s no equivalent for it. Let’s keep it.’ They both replied ‘Impossible!’ I turned to my right and said, ‘Professor, you say that the origin of Arabic is Turkish. You claim as originally Turkish any word we cite from the Koran.’ I turned to my left. ‘And you, Professor, maintain that all languages derive from Turkish. You resort to all kinds of dodges to show that the French *chambre* is derived from *oda*. And now, when it comes to a word like *hüküm*, which has entered into village speech, the two of you dig your toes in.’ We had quite an argument. After the meeting, I met my friend Abdülkadir in the upper corridor of Dolmabahçe Palace. He it was who had once said to me, ‘I know most of the dialects of the Asian Turks. I also understand the dialect spoken by people like you and Yakup Kadri. If there’s one dialect I can’t make head or tail of, it’s the dialect of the Turkish Language Society.’ On this occasion he said, ‘You look worried. Tell me what words are bothering you and I’ll find Turkish origins for them.’ ‘Well,’ I replied, ‘there’s this word *hüküm*.’ ‘Don’t worry,’ he said, ‘tomorrow we’ll make *hüküm* Turkish.’ Next day he quietly put into my hand a slip of paper on which he had noted that some dialects had a word *ök* ‘intellect’, and that in several of them it took the form *ük*. I had myself discovered that in Yakut there was a word-building suffix *üm*. The rest was easy: *ük* plus *üm* had in the course of time become *hüküm*. When the meeting began, I said, ‘*Hüküm* is Turkish,’ and gave a full account of what I had learned, which reduced the two Professors to silence. We had laid the foundations of the science of—I won’t say fakery, but flim-flam. [Uydurma demiyeyim de yakıştırmacılık ilminin temelini atmıştık.] That evening I gave Atatürk a report on the Commission’s proceedings and he was delighted that we had won so important a word by this fabrication. What he wanted us to do was to leave as many words in the language as possible, so long as we could demonstrate that they were Turkish.”

Atatürk, that is to say, was satisfied that *hüküm* could be reprieved now that it had been provided with a Turkish pedigree. Although he amused himself by finding Turkish etymologies for foreign words, he did not really believe that all languages derive from Turkish; the consequence of such a belief would have been to retain all the Arabic and Persian elements in the language, which was the opposite of his intention. So for a short time he seized on the *öztürkçe*—‘pure Turkish’—words produced by the reformers and used them in his speeches and letters.

Turks refer to the speech he made on 3 October 1934, at a banquet in honour of the Swedish Crown Prince and Princess, as *baysal utkulu nutuk*, the speech characterized by *baysal utkusu*, this expression standing out as the oddest of all. It contains three French words, *Altes Ru-vayâl* and *Prenses*, and only one word of Arabic origin, *tarih* ‘history’ (or two if we count *tüm* ‘all’). It also contains some startling neologisms. Here is a sample sentence (full text and glossary in Levend 1972: 424-426):

“Avrupanın iki bitim ucunda yerlerini berkiten uluslarımız, ataç özlüklerinin tüm ıssıları olarak baysak, önürme, uygunluk kıldacıları olmuş bulunuyorlar; onlar, bugün, en güzel utkuyu kazanmıya anıklanıyorlar: baysal utkusu.”—  
‘Our nations, which hold firm their places at the two extremities of Europe, in full possession of their ancestral qualities have become the agents of tranquillity, progress and harmony; today they are preparing to win the most beautiful victory of all: the victory of peace.’

The speech was composed in Ottoman and then translated into öztürkçe. An eyewitness (Tankut 1963: 125) noted that Atatürk delivered it “with the awkwardness of a schoolboy who has just begun to read”. This self-inflicted injury must have vexed him greatly, for he was a proud man and a master of his own language, possessing the rare gift of being able to extemporize lengthy Ottoman periods of the kind that others might struggle for hours to compose. One can only imagine his mortification, after all the effort he had invested in the language reform. And then there appeared a *deus ex machina*: along came Kvergić.

Some time in 1935, Atatürk received a 47-page typescript in French, entitled “La Psychologie de quelques éléments des langues turques”, by a Dr Hermann F. Kvergić of Vienna. The theme was that man first realized his own identity when he conceived the idea of establishing what the external objects surrounding him were. Language first consisted of gestures, to which some significant sounds were then added. Kvergić saw evidence for his view in the Turkish pronouns. *M* indicates oneself, as in *men* the ancient form of *ben* ‘I’, and *elim* ‘my hand’. *N* indicates what is near oneself, as in *sen* ‘you’ and *elin* ‘your hand’. *Z* indicates a broader area, as in *biz* ‘we’ and *siz* ‘you’. Further, Kvergić considered that Turkish was the first human language to take shape. Nothing could have been more timely.

Two months before, a copy of the paper had been sent to Ahmet Cevat Emre, the chairman of the grammar section of Türk Dil Kurumu, the Language Society, who after a cursory examination dismissed it as unsubstantiated and worthless. Atatürk was more impressed, partly because having discussed it with Emre he suspected that the latter's rejection of it was due to his seeing in Kvergić a potential rival. "To me," he said, "the psychological analyses look important." He thought that primitive man might well have given vent to exclamations like "Aaa!" and "Ooo!" and that language could have emerged from utterances of this kind. He passed the paper on to İbrahim Necmi Dilmen, the secretary-general of the Language Society, and said, "It looks important; have it evaluated." Dilmen talked it over with Hasan Reşit Tankut, Naim Hazım Onat and Abdülkadir İnan, who saw merit in the psychological analyses (Emre 1960: 342-346). The result of Atatürk's subsequent lucubrations, aided by these and others of the staff of the Society, was Güneş-Dil Teorisi, the Sun-Language Theory, which saw the beginning of language as the moment when primitive man looked up at the sun and said "Aaa!"

That vocable, *ağ* in Turkish spelling, was the "first-degree radical of the Turkish language". It originally meant sun, then sunlight, warmth, fire, height, bigness, power, god, master, motion, time, distance, life, colour, water, earth, voice. As man's vocal mechanisms developed, other vowels and consonants became available, each with its own shade of meaning. Because the primeval exclamation was shouted, and it is obviously easier to begin a shout with a vowel than with a consonant, any word now beginning with a consonant originally began with a vowel, since abraded. The words *yağmur* 'rain', *çamur* 'mud' and *hamur* 'dough', for example, are compounded of *ağmur* 'flowing water' preceded by *ay* 'high', *aç* 'earth' and *ah* 'food' respectively. (The reader is urged not to waste time searching the dictionary for the last four words.)

The Third Language Congress (Dil Kurultayı), in 1936, was dominated by what Heyd (1954: 34), with admirable restraint, refers to as "this amazing theory". Atatürk's responsibility for the theory is not disputed, though clearly he did not do all the donkey-work. Dilâçar (1963: 50) says that the paper on the application of the analytical method of the theory, described in the agenda as the work of İsmail Müştak Mayakon, who read it to the Congress on 27 August 1936, was wholly due to Atatürk.

The first hint of what was coming was in a paper entitled “The sun, from the point of view of religion and civilization” presented on the first day by Yusuf Ziya Özer. The theory was mentioned only at the very end:

“It must be seen as quite natural that the sun, which plays so important a part in human culture, has ... exercised no less influence on language too ... We should therefore take pride in the fact that the Sun-Language Theory has been propounded as a product of the Turkish scientific outlook, which has been linked to the sun since time immemorial.”

Dilmen began the next day with a lengthy outline of the theory, proving, among other things, the identity of English *god*, German *Gott* and Turkish *kut* ‘luck’. The proof is simple enough: *Gott* is *oğ* + *ot*, *god* is *og* + *od*, *kut* is *uk* + *ut*. He avoids explaining the second *t* of *Gott* by spelling it with only one *t*. Similar moonshine was delivered on that second day and three following days, the sixth day being given over to the foreign scholars.

Space does not permit a full examination of the material presented to the Third Congress, much as one would like to go into the content of papers with such intriguing titles as Tankut’s “Palaeosociological language studies with panchronic methods according to the Sun-Language Theory” and Dilâçar’s “Sun-Language Anthropology”. Emre’s contribution, however, deserves a word, because Zürcher (1985: 88) describes him as “l’un des rares linguistes un peu sérieux de la Société”.

Although Emre had expressed his contempt for Kvergić’s “La Psychologie de quelques éléments des langues turques”, a work which was not devoid of sense, he was wildly enthusiastic about the Sun-Language Theory. At the Third Congress he presented a paper called “Terminoloji ve Güneş-Dil Teorisi” (TDK 1937: 190-209), mostly on the origin of the French borrowings *filozofî*, *filozof* and *filozofik*, all of them commonly supposed to be from the Greek *phil-* ‘to love’ and *sophía* ‘wisdom’. Having learned that the etymology of Greek *phil-* was doubtful, he had evidently decided that the word was his to do with as he would, to the following effect.

“As the Sun-Language Theory shows, no word originally began with a consonant, so the first syllable of *filozof* was *if* or *ef*, and in its primitive form *ip* or *ep*. Now *ip* or *ep* in Turkish meant ‘reasoning power’ [this is no

better founded than his preceding assertions]. Further, the Greek *phil-* is supposed to mean 'to love' or 'to kiss'."

Emre rejected the first sense, because Aristotle used *sophía* alone for 'philosophy', so the *philo-* could only be an intensifying prefix, having nothing to do with love. On the other hand he accepted the second sense, because *ip*, besides meaning 'reasoning power', was clearly the same as the Turkish *öp-* 'to kiss'. Next, the original form of *philo-* was *ipil-*, the function of the *il* being "to broaden the basic meaning of the *ip*", and this was obviously the same word as *bil-* 'to know'. As for *sophía*, that did indeed mean wisdom; compare *sağ* 'sound, intelligent' and *sav* 'word, saying'. In short, *filozofi*, *filozof* and *filozofik* were Turkish, so there was no need to create replacements for them.

The impact of the theory on books and articles published during its brief reign is easily recognized. Turning the pages of İnan's book (1936), for example, you see it to be a compendium of notes mainly on the history of the language and on its dialects, particularly that of the Kirghiz. Then, after a discussion of various views on the etymology of the name, you come across the following and know you have left the realm of scholarship for the land of the Sun-Language Theory:

	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)
Kirgiy	(ik	+	ir	+	ig	+	iy)
Kirgiz	(ik	+	ir	+	ig	+	iz)

This table purports to show the components of the words *Kirgiz* and *kirgiy*, the latter being the Kazak-Kirghiz word for falcon, a bird which may have been the Kirghiz tribal totem. Then comes the analysis. *Ik* is the first-degree principal root, representing abrupt motion, *ir* confirms the root meaning, *ig* is the object or subject over which the abrupt motion recurs, while *iy* is the expression and nominalization of this. The first three elements of *Kirgiz* and *kirgiy* are identical in form and meaning, but one of the final elements ends in *y*, the other in *z*. The explanation is that the function of *iy* was to turn the word into a noun. In the totemistic period all surrounding subjects and objects were the same, but once the concepts of distance and the individual had emerged, all such subjects and objects, starting from the centre, the ego, were expressed by the element *z*. To his credit, İnan at this point loses interest in the Sun-

Language Theory and goes on to talk about his experiences among the Kirghiz.

Atatürk's faith in his theory must have been shaken by the reactions of the foreign guests at the 1936 Congress, a distinguished group including Alessio Bombaci, Jean Deny, Friedrich Giese, Julius Németh, Sir Denison Ross and Ananiasz Zajaczkowski. One, variously referred to as Bartalini, Baltarini and Balter, and variously described as Lector and Professor in Latin and Italian at Istanbul University, mentioned it tactfully in the course of a graceful tribute to Atatürk and the new Turkey:

"La théorie de la langue-Soleil, par son caractère universel, est une preuve nouvelle de la volonté de la Turquie de s'identifier toujours davantage avec la grande famille humaine."

Four of them did not mention it at all in their addresses to the Congress or subsequent discussion, two thought it "interesting". One agreed that all human speech had a common origin, but saw that origin in Sumerian rather than Turkish. Two wanted more time to think about it. The only foreign guest to swallow it whole was Kvergić, who volunteered the etymology of *unutmak* 'to forget':

"Its earliest form was *uğ+un+ut+um+ak*. *Uğ*, 'discriminating spirit, intelligence', is the mother-root. The *n* of *un* shows that the significance of the mother-root emerges into exterior space. The *t / d* 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 manifests and embodies in itself the concept of the preceding *uğ-un-ut*, while *ak* completes the meaning of the word it follows and gives it its full formulation. 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; this is indeed the meaning the word conveys." (TDK 1937: 333)

About Atatürk's motive in launching the theory, opinions differ. Did he deliberately take up Kvergić's idea of the antiquity of Turkish and develop it in order to justify ending the purge of words of Arabic and Persian origin?

Karaosmanoğlu (1963: 110) saw in the theory "a concern with seeking a new shape, a middle way, for his attitude to language". Hatiboğlu



(1963: 20) is more explicit: Atatürk put the theory forward to end the impossible situation in which satisfactory replacements could not be found for words that were being expelled from the language.

Banarlı (1972: 310-311) is of the same opinion:

“Atatürk tried öztürkçe and took a personal part in the efforts in this direction. As the experiment advanced, however, this same Atatürk saw quickly and clearly what sort of impasse the Turkish language and Turkish culture had been dragged into by those vying with each other to bastardize the whole thing. Eventually he took upon himself the duty of rectifying the situation and, by a stroke of tactical genius, availed himself of the Sun-Language Theory to drop the öztürkçe experiment.”

So is Ercilasun (1994: 89):

“The conclusion emerging from all these brochures and articles written by Atatürk is this: one of his aims when launching the Sun-Language Theory was to give up excessive purification and to ensure the survival in the language of such words as *millet* ‘nation’, *mühim* ‘important’ and *sabah* ‘morning’ ...”

Ertop’s (1963: 90) view is quite different:

“Those who assert that the Sun-Language Theory was used by Atatürk in order to limit the purification are overlooking Atatürk’s personality. He never refrained from acting decisively and radically in any matter which he believed might affect the good of the nation ... He did not use the theory as a means of turning the clock back; had he believed in the necessity for such a move, he would have made his ideas plain, openly and directly.”

This argument has some force, but it is harder to accept Ertop’s subsequent remarks, which reflect the views of the many adherents of the old Language Society<sup>1</sup> who refuse to believe that Atatürk abandoned the campaign to “purify” everyday speech. He goes on to offer what he calls clear proof that the theory was not advanced with the aim of slowing the

<sup>1</sup> That is, the Society as it was before 1983, when it was in effect nationalized as part of a new Atatürk Cultural, Linguistic and Historical Institution linked to the Prime Minister’s office.

pace of language reform: (a) work on the reform went on after the theory was propounded, (b) technical terminology continued to be put into pure Turkish, and (c) Atatürk busied himself with linguistic concerns almost until his death. While all three statements are accurate, they are irrelevant to the question of whether or not Atatürk had tired of the campaign to purge the general vocabulary and concocted the Sun-Language Theory to justify abandoning it. The basis of all three items of “proof” is the fact that, while he sometimes tried his hand at finding öztürkçe equivalents for items of general vocabulary, his overriding concern was with technical terms.

Heyd’s statement (1954: 36) that the Sun-Language Theory gradually faded out after Atatürk’s death needs to be modified; the theory had already begun to fade out during his lifetime, and interest in it evaporated the moment he died. Tankut says (1963: 125) that the theory was carried to excess by people out to make a name for themselves, and Atatürk eventually abandoned it. There are several pieces of evidence that he was still interested in it in 1937. One is Özden’s testimony (see next paragraph) that the topic was still alive in March of that year, another is that Atatürk was still corresponding with Kvergić in September 1937. A third is that in that month the seventeenth session of the Congrès International d’Anthropologie was to be held in Bucharest, and Atatürk decided that a Turkish delegation should go there to make the theory known to the learned world (Tankut 1963: 123-125). According to a report subsequently presented to Atatürk, the paper was well received, but as the proceedings of the congress were never published this cannot be confirmed.

Âkil Muhtar Özden was a highly respected medical man who served on the Language Commission (Dil Komisyonu). Among his notes on a session held on 8 March 1937 are these (Tevfikoğlu 1994: 100-113):

“Atatürk at once began to deal with the question of technical terms. He asked what I had been doing. I told him I was working on the lines he had indicated and that I was having difficulty in applying Sun-Language to abstract words. He asked for an example. The word *muvaazi* [‘parallel’] came to mind. The analysis started immediately. It was proved that *parallel* was Turkish.”

Others of his notes read: “atom (Türkçe)” and “Geometri (Türkçe)”, with no explanation of the first assertion and, for the second, a terse “ge=gen=geniş”; i.e. the first syllable of *geometri* is not the Greek *gē*

‘earth’ but the Turkish *geniş* ‘wide’. On *poligon* he made two notes: “Türkçe / Pol=bol / gen=en” and “gen=geniş / poligon (genişliği çok).” These can be expanded as follows: *Poligon* is Turkish. *Pol* is *bol* ‘abundant’, *gen* is *en* ‘width’ and *geniş* ‘wide’; *poligon* means ‘of much width’. Later on comes an analysis of *likid* ‘liquid’: “*Likid* (Türkçe) Yg-il-ik-id-ey Yg=Katı İl=Bunu namütenahiye kadar uzaklaştıran, yani yok eden ek. (İlik Türkçe katı olmayan bir şey demektir).” In other words, *liquid* is Turkish, originally *yg-il-ik-id-ey*. *Yg* means ‘hard’. *İl* is the suffix removing it to infinity, i.e. annihilating it (*ilik* [‘marrow’] is Turkish, meaning a thing which is not hard).

The foregoing instances of the application of the theory are not cited just for their inherent fun. They also demonstrate the unscholarliness of the officers of the Language Society (as well as of Dr Kvergić) who unblushingly delivered themselves of such drivel in public. And these people and others like them were largely responsible for the creation of öztürkçe, a fact which explains why so much of it violates the rules of the language.

A dispassionate examination of the evidence leads to the following conclusion. When Atatürk launched the theory, it was not with the express intention of justifying a change of course. He had decided that a change was due, because he had seen the futility of trying to make the mass of the people give up their ancestral vocabulary. On the other hand, he could not abandon his declared purpose of liberating Turkish from the yoke of foreign languages (Arsal 1930: 1). Language was his hobby. He loved playing at etymology and he may have persuaded himself that the Turkish derivations he and others found for the ostensibly non-Turkish elements in the language could be justified. He was already toying with the notion that “what made man aware of his identity was the sun” before he had read Kvergić’s paper, which asserted the antiquity of Turkish (but did not mention the sun). The elements of the Sun-Language Theory all came together in his mind and he published it. It was not an excuse to justify a change of policy; it was a systematization of his ideas. He launched the theory because he genuinely believed in it; he started to abandon it when he saw that foreign scholars regarded it as nonsensical. He must also have sensed that the best native opinion too, though scarcely outspoken, was on their side.

A related topic that may conveniently be discussed here is the much debated question of whether Atatürk, while adhering to the new techni-

cal terms, many of which he devised himself, gave up the use of neologisms for everyday concepts.

There is no shortage of misrepresentations of his attitude; here is one specimen (Gültekin 1983: 72):

“After 1936 he saw the extremist aspects of the purification campaign and he corrected them. But can one deduce from this that he withdrew from the language movement which he initiated in 1932? ... Atatürk did not return to pre-1932 Turkish. It is well known that in 1937 he himself worked especially on the purification of scientific language. Again, his bequest of a share in his estate to the Language Society shows that he wanted the work on language, which he initiated in 1932, to continue.”

And another (Yücel 1982: 36):

“If one may speak here of coincidence, it is by an interesting coincidence that the year [1936] in which the name Türk Dili Tetkik Cemiyeti was changed to Türk Dil Kurumu was, according to a view frequently advanced by some, the year in which Atatürk realized that this kind of undertaking was a dead end, i.e., that *he had made a mistake*, and put a stop to the purification exercise. If one bears in mind (*a*) that until the end of his life Atatürk was very closely involved in the Language Society’s endeavours and, more important, (*b*) that he directed these endeavours along the lines of his own views, and (*c*) that this change of name could not possibly have been made without his knowledge, then ... one is bound to state categorically that in giving permission for such a change Atatürk fell into an inconsistency.”

The italics, which are Yücel’s, must be intended to point to the enormity of the implication. Atatürk was in fact not afraid to admit that he was fallible, but idolatry, by definition, denies the humanity of its object. By italicizing these words, Yücel seems to reject the possibility not only of Atatürk’s making a mistake but of his realizing that he had done so.

To disprove the common assertion that he never returned to pre-1932 Turkish, we need only examine the proof-texts, his own speeches and writings. While in general exhibiting a desire to avoid using words of Arabic origin if Turkish synonyms—or synonyms he believed to be Turkish—existed, they show that he was no longer going out of his way to give up the words he had used all his life in favour of unnecessary neologisms. Since 1933, 26 September had been celebrated as Dil Bay-

ramı, the Language Festival. The vocabulary of his telegrams to the Language Society on this occasion is worthy of study. Those he had sent in 1934 and 1935 had been couched in öztürkçe throughout.<sup>2</sup> They included such words as *kutunbitikler* 'messages of congratulation', *orunlar* 'official bodies' and *genelözek* 'general headquarters', none of which proved viable. The 1936 telegram contained four words of Arabic origin: *mesai* 'endeavours', *teşekkür* 'gratitude', *tebrik* 'congratulation' and *muvaffakiyet* 'success'. The 1937 telegram contained six: *münasebet* 'occasion', the *hakk* of *hakkımdaki* 'about me', *mütehassis* 'moved', *teşekkür* and *muvaffakiyet* again, and *temâdi* 'continuation'. But of no less significance than the old words he used are the new words which he used; *birlikte* 'together', *duygu* 'sentiment', *bildiren* 'conveying', *değerli* 'valuable'; the inference is not that he had abandoned the language reform, for then he would have said *beraber*, *his*, *tebliğ eden* and *kıymetli* or even *zikıymet*. What he was doing was adhering to the wholly praiseworthy aspect of the reform: making full use of the existing resources of the language. His use of *kutlulamak* as well as *tebrik etmek* in the 1936 telegram is a perfect example, reflecting the stylist's desire to avoid repeating a word if a synonym can be found.

On 1 November 1936 he delivered his annual speech opening the new session of the Grand National Assembly. It too was peppered with words of Arabic origin, including *sene* 'year', *tetkik* 'research', *tamik* 'investigation in depth' and *temenni* 'wish'. So too was his speech on the same occasion in 1937, in which he even used *millet* and *memleket* rather than *ulus* and *yurt* for 'nation' and 'country'.

His last message to the Language Society is significant. It consists in two sentences of the speech read for him by the Prime Minister, Celâl Bayar, at the opening of the new session of the Assembly on 1 November 1938, nine days before he died. It is worth quoting, because it has often been used as evidence that the Society never ceased to enjoy Atatürk's support in its efforts to eliminate everyday pre-reform words from the language. Both the contents and the language of the message give the lie to that claim:

"Dil Kurumu en güzel ve feyizli bir iş olarak türlü ilimlere ait Türkçe terimleri tespit etmiş ve bu suretle dilimiz yabancı dillerin tesirinden kurtulma yo-

<sup>2</sup> The text of the 1933 telegram does not seem to be available. The texts of the later telegrams appeared in the September issues of *Türk dili*, 1934-1937.

lunda esaslı adımını atmıştır. Bu yıl okullarımızda tedrisatın Türkçe terimlerle yazılmış kitaplarla başlamış olmasını kültür hayatımız için mühim bir hâdise olarak kaydetmek isterim.”—‘The Language Society, in a most excellent and successful endeavour, has established Turkish technical terms pertaining to the various sciences, and our language has thus taken its essential step on the road to liberation from the influence of foreign languages. I should like to place it on record, as an important event for our cultural life, that teaching has begun this year in our schools from books written with Turkish technical terms.’

The partisans of “purification” will not give Atatürk credit for saying what he meant. Those words, in which he praises the Society for its work on technical terms and for nothing else, are often cited as commendation of the Society’s “sürdürülen özleştirme çabaları”—‘continued efforts at purification’. In fact they reflect his disillusion with those of its “experts” who sat round his table night after night, drinking his rakı and applauding his views without ever having the honesty—even if they had the knowledge—to tell him that some of the ideas he came out with could not be taken seriously.

Özgü (1963: 37) notes that Atatürk, in that last message to the Language Society, used “such foreign words as *feyizli*, *tesir*, *tedrisat*, *mühim*, and *hâdise*, which did not yet sound incongruous” and she sanctimoniously adds: “The younger generation is further advanced, thanks to the inspiration and the command it has received from Atatürk.” Instead of singling out five of the fourteen “foreign words” he used in those two sentences, she could have been better employed in noticing that he used only two of the new words, *terim* rather than *istilah* for technical term and *okul* rather than *mektep* for school. His use of them is understandable: *terim* was the new technical term *par excellence*, while *okul* did not have the pre-Republican religious and social connotations of *mektep*.

What motivated those who were not content to follow Atatürk’s lead and confine their creative urge to technical terms? They began with a genuine desire to close the gap between the official and the popular language, or at least to comply with his desire to do so. When he decided that things had gone too far, and reverted to his natural mode of expression, they allowed a decent interval for him to depart from the scene and then resumed their work, having developed a taste for inventing words, which for many of them had become a profession. So they continued to

invent, for which one should not blame them too harshly; after all, Atatürk's withdrawal from the wilder shores of öztürkçe was based on a personal decision which he did not seek to impose on anyone else. But while continuing to invent, they persisted—and this was their unpardonable offence—in claiming to be following in the footsteps of Atatürk.

For a defence of their position, that of Aksoy (1982: 144-145) would be hard to beat, depending as it does on his coolly equating the Language Society with the nation:

“Let us suppose that we have been misinterpreting the Sun-Language Theory and that Atatürk, after practising purification for two or three years, used the theory as a way of reverting to the old language. If we accept this, what does it change? Has the current of purification which began in 1932 stopped? Has it not gradually broadened and gained strength? Is what is meant that since Atatürk gave up purification we must do so too? If that were the case, would we not have done so when he did? The fact that that did not happen and that the purification went on; what does that prove? Is it that the nation persisted in purification in spite of Atatürk, or that the allegation that he abandoned the purification is wrong? Certainly the latter, for never has the nation taken a course opposed to the principles of nationalism, populism and independence.”

All that is proved by the “fact that that did not happen and that the purification went on” is that the Society—not the nation, which was never consulted—persisted in the purification although Atatürk had abandoned it. Whether its persistence was justified is another matter. Had the Society not persisted, Atatürk's goal of liberating the language from the Arabic and Persian yoke would not have been achieved. But one may recognize this without insisting that he himself never “gave up purification”, because he indubitably did, and to deny that he did is to falsify history.

To revert to the Sun-Language Theory: Dilmen, who had been giving a series of lectures on it at Ankara University, cancelled the course on Atatürk's death. When his students asked him why, he replied, “Güneş öldükten sonra, onun teorisi mi kalır?”—‘After the sun has died, does its / his theory survive?’ (Banarlı 1972: 317). It was not mentioned, for good or ill, at the 1942 Congress. Atatürk never publicly repudiated it; why did he not “make his ideas plain, openly and directly” on this matter? A sophistic answer might be that as he had never put his name to it he could fairly have claimed that it was not his business to disown it.



But the simple truth is that although his belief in it had been shaken by the reception given to it by the foreign guests at the 1936 Congress, he still clung to it because he saw it as his contribution to scholarship.

One can well understand his reluctance to engage in a public debate which might have entailed a public retreat, and not just because it would have hurt his pride. In the Thirties there were more pressing calls than the Sun-Language Theory on the time and energy of a head of state, particularly one in poor health. During 1937 and until a matter of days before his death on 10 November 1938, Atatürk was spending much of his waning strength on coercing France into ceding the Hatay to Turkey. The memory of the Sun-Language Theory must have recurred to haunt him while he was trying to concentrate on matters of high policy. What began as a harmless after-dinner pastime had ended up as an incubus.

It is recorded (Tevfikoğlu 1994: 92-113) that during the evening of 16 October 1938, when Atatürk lay on his deathbed, he said again and again in delirium "Aman dil ... Aman dil ... Dil efendim." Some interpret this as 'For pity's sake, the language', and explain it according to their point of view, either as 'Don't let them go on ruining the language' or as 'Don't let them stop the language reform.' Others cite the well-known fact that he habitually pronounced *değil* as *dil*, and prefer 'For pity's sake ... It isn't ...' What he really meant is unknown, save only to God.

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