

Werk

Titel: Recent changes in the Turkish language debate

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Ort: Wiesbaden

Jahr: 2006

PURL: https://resolver.sub.uni-goettingen.de/purl?666048797_0010|LOG_0018

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Report

Recent changes in the Turkish language debate

Astrid Menz & Christoph Schroeder

Astrid Menz & Schroeder, Christoph 2006. Recent Changes in the Turkish Language Debate. International Workshop, Istanbul, Dec 3 and 4, 2004. *Turkic Languages* 10.

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The topics of the public debate in Turkey about the Turkish language have developed out of the specific role this language has played in the emergence of the Turkish national ideology and of the Turkish national state. This is well known – just as important historical, sociolinguistic, and lexicological aspects of the Turkish language reform are well described.

However, it appears that the Turkish language debate has entered a new phase after the 1980s, due to sociological, sociolinguistic and political developments both in Turkey as well as in the international context. While on the one hand, the traditional republican puristic approach to the Turkish language continues, it is at the same time undergoing a process of decentralization, and it is faced with two new developments, i.e. with the way language is used in the media, which tolerates non-standard variations, and with a language shift towards English in private higher education. Parallel to this, in the course of a heated discussion about ethnic minorities and the identity of “Turkishness”, the concept of “*anadil*” (“mother language”) is undergoing a re-consideration. Also, Turkish is experiencing a process of internationalization, both as a vital migrant language in Western Europe as well as an important language in the educational market of some of the post-Soviet Turkic Republics. This process sheds a new light on the discussion of the differences between the Turkic languages, i.e. the question whether, from a Turkish viewpoint, these languages should be called “Turkish dialects” (*lehçe, şive*) or “languages” (*dil*).

On December 3 and 4, 2004 an international workshop ‘New developments in the Turkish language debate’ took place at Istanbul Bilgi University. It aimed at bringing together scholars from different academic fields – historical studies, sociology, literature studies, linguistics and Turcology – in order to develop a critical inter- and multidisciplinary view on the subject matter. The concept for the workshop had been developed by Astrid Menz and Christoph Schroeder. The workshop was organized in

co-operation between Istanbul Bilgi University and the Orient-Institute Istanbul, and it was generously financed by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation (Cologne, Germany).

The workshop was divided into four sessions:

In session 1 'Recent tendencies in the Turkish language debate', first Murat Belge (Istanbul Bilgi University) gave a historical overview on the developments in the Turkish language debate from the 1980s onwards ('*Dil tartışmasında güncel durum*'). His talk was followed by Tefik Turan (University of Hamburg), who spoke about the problematic interrelation between Turkish literary criticism and language criticism ('*Dil eleştirisi olarak edebiyat eleştirisi*'). Subsequently, Bernt Brendemoen (University of Oslo) presented an analysis of approaches to errors and norms as manifested in popular guides on the 'correct' use of the language ('Errors and norms in the popular debate').

The second session centered on the topic of 'Public language use and language debate'. The first speaker, Meryem Şen (Kocaeli University) investigated the attitudes of Turkish standard speakers towards the various regional dialects of Turkey ('Stance-taking and its implications for changes in language'). Her talk was followed by Ayşe Öncü (Sabancı University Istanbul), who analyzed Turkish language use on private television channels, observing the changing power relations between the 'high' literary language and the 'low' vernaculars ('Politics of language in Turkish television'). Following that, Astrid Menz (Boğaziçi University Istanbul) explored the differences in the orthographic rules for Turkish as they are presented in different spelling guides ('Theory and practice of Turkish orthography in the print media').

The third session 'Affirming identity and language' started with a talk by Johann Strauss (Université Marc Bloch, Strasbourg, France), who analyzed the way in which etymological dictionaries of Turkish construct history and identity ('A new perception of diachronia: Remarks on some recent etymological dictionaries of Modern Turkish'), paying particular attention to the debate surrounding the recently published etymological dictionary *Sözlerin soyağacı: Çağdaş Türkçenin etimolojik sözlüğü* by Sevan Nişanyan. Next, Nurettin Demir (Baskent University Ankara) discussed the historical development of terminology used by Turcologists in Turkey for concepts such as 'language branch', 'dialect', and 'language' ('*Türkiye'de dil-lehçe-şive-ağız tartışmaları*'). The speaker showed how different terminologies have come to represent different positions among Turcologists in Turkey regarding their ideas about the Turkic language family. The subsequent speaker, Büşra Ersanlı (Marmara University Istanbul) also concentrated on the relationship between terminology and ideological standpoints, investigating the recent discussion surrounding the naming of the national language of Azerbaijan in the process of this country's attaining independence ('Language politics for affirming identity: Political names given to Turkish'). The last speaker in this session, Özlem Eraydın Virtanen (Maltepe University Istanbul) discussed the changing attitudes in Turkish language politics, in particular with regard to the status of minority languages ('*Türkiye'deki dil politika-sında yeni gelişmeler*').

Two presentations formed the last session ‘The market of languages in Turkey’. Zeynep Kızıltepe (Boğaziçi University Istanbul) und Seran Doğançay-Aktuna (Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, USA) analyzed the changing status of English as a foreign language in Turkey, which challenges the status of Turkish as the medium of instruction in particular in higher education (*‘Yüksek öğrenim başta olmak üzere Türk eğitim sisteminde yabancı dillerin durumu’*). Christoph Schroeder continued with a focus on educational issues and the role and status of Turkish therein, investigating the approach to Turkish which is dominant in the teaching of Turkish as a foreign language and as the mother tongue of migrant children in Western Europe (*‘Turkish as an export product’*).

To the knowledge of the organizers and participants, the workshop constituted the first time that the role of the Turkish language in Turkish society was discussed on an interdisciplinary platform, in an approach combining a critical investigation of the language debate with an assessment of the sociolinguistic status of the language in a changing society. The novelty of the approach and the high quality of the presentations led the participants at the workshop to decide that the discussion should be shared with a wider public, in the form of a publication on the Turkish language debate – and that this publication should be in Turkish in order to address the Turkish public in particular. At present, Astrid Menz and Christoph Schroeder are preparing a volume *‘Türkçe dil tartışmalarında yeni yönelimler’*, which will appear in September 2006, published by Istanbul Bilgi University Press (İstanbul Bilgi Yayınları). The volume contains the written versions of most of the papers presented at the workshop.