FORMATIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS OF LANGUAGE REGIMES:

TURKEY, A CASE STUDY

by

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Submitted to the Graduate School of Social Sciences

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Sabancı University

February 2009

# ABSTRACT

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Ph.D., Political Science, 2008

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Keywords: language regimes, ideology, Turkey, globalization

There are two main aims of this dissertation: to present a legal and ideological history of the formation of the language regime in Turkey in the Republican period; and to analyze its transformation in the post-1980 era.

A language regime is defined in this dissertation as a *de jure* or *de facto* regulation of the linguistic behavior, in its content or in its status, within a space of communicative action, such as that of a nation-state or a speech group. In other words, a language regime is a system of the governance of the linguistic domain within a defined political territory by planning and employment of particular policies. Language ideologies, on the other hand, are inseparable aspects of the formulation and operation of the language regimes. Such a conception of language enables an analysis of language as a domain of social and political power.

In the first part of the dissertation, the history of the language politics in the Republican Turkey is analyzed through the concept of language regime, and the ideological repercussions pertaining to the designation and practicing of these regimes are assessed.

The second part concentrates on the changes in post-1980s, within a globalizing environment, in the broadcasting policies and the ways in which language regimes have been transformed. Controversies over two basic processes have been analyzed in this part: the commercialization of the audio-visual domain, and the developments concerning broadcasting in minority languages.

# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

Kroskrity marks that various debates on language "serve to keep us aware of the status of language as a primary site of political process and of the discursive mediation of those very activities and events we recognize as political" (2000a, p. 1). A Turkish version of constant push towards such awareness is exactly what guided this dissertation.

In the last decades, public sphere in Turkey has become an arena where language fighters are chanting and hunting. Language has always been a hot issue to talk and write on, even before the Republican period. For more than a century, the cultured circles experienced confrontations about language. Major disputes have emerged between supporters of Arabic vs. Latin orthography, elite vs. simple language, moderate or living vs. pure Turkish, "progressive-nationalist" vs. "conservative-nationalist" styles, etc.

However, contemporary debates have developed to become significantly different.

For the majority of the participants of the debates, the main concern today is the alleged decline of Turkish. The fear, to be exact, of losing the language that has long been accepted as the "flag" of the national culture has been provoked with increasing use of English in various domains, from education to public communication and consumer culture. The phenomenon of the "corruption" of Turkish by "unconscious" and "careless" users has been equally effective. However, for a smaller number of citizens, mostly Kurds, the issue has been rather about being able to speak, use or learn their mother language. The fire was not fed only by those who were simply debating in public, but many legal regulations and laws concerning various aspects of language use have been made, ranging from the banning of shop names in non-Turkish languages to the granting limited rights for learning or broadcasting in Kurdish.

In summary, there are concerns about both the status and the corpus of the claimed languages. Status problems, for Turkish, have been interpreted as the language is losing ground to English and Kurdish in many aspects of cultural and social life, which were supposed to be conducted in Turkish. For the Kurdish side, the issue of status is rather a political motive and the agenda is quite different.

Problems of corpus for Turkish is also with the intrusion of English words and idioms into the language itself, but also with the increasing visibility of non-standard varieties of Turkish with respect to the popularization of the mass media. As for Kurdish, its diverse varieties and the question of standardization, again, exhibit distinct characteristics.

Each of the discursive elements of these public debates has been derived from a complicated political background, of which construction was primarily performed by the Republican state. As Kroskrity proposes, recent debates on language in Turkey are considered in this study as great opportunities for the exposition of the political that is intrinsic to language.

For an authentic perspective to analyze language politics in Turkey, one concept, **language regime** is employed as the core theoretical base of this dissertation. A second one, **language ideology**, a widely debated, well-known notion, has also been utilized in order to complement the conceptual framework. This framework and its further implications are explained in the next chapter. In this introductory chapter, I will try to present the contributions that this dissertation might offer in order to understand the historical and ideological aspects of language politics in Turkey. I will also give the outline of the work.

To be specific, this thesis aims at discovering the dynamics of the relationship between language regimes and language ideologies through an analysis of the formation of the Turkish official language regime. This discovery will be enhanced with the examinations of the practical consequences of the language regime with respect to speakers of languages other than Turkish, and of its discursive consequences within the public sphere with respect to the perception and conception of Kurdish, as a minority language.

Many studies have been published recently on the construction of the national identity in Turkey, and the way in which language was incorporated in this construction.[1] However,

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[1] See Şavkay (2002), Sadoğlu (2003), Çolak (2004), Aytürk (2004), and Aydıngün and Aydıngün (2004).

these studies are exclusively dedicated to the first decades of the Republic, as they are parts of a recently growing scholarly enterprise to enlighten the political and cultural transformations related to the new era.

In some of the studies on the establishment of the modern language politics in Turkey, the common approach has been to concentrate on instrumental aspects. Questions of how language has been used, changed, modified or reformed in order to supplement the nationalizationist/ modernizationist practices have been in the center of some researches (cf. Çolak, 2004; and Aydıngün & Aydıngün, 2004). In other researches, the nationalist nature of the Language Reform was scrutinized. Şavkay, for example, aims to present the political dimensions of the Turkish Language Reform, especially those that went beyond the mere establishment of a national language for a new nation-state. He questions the ways in which the Reform had been associated with the Kemalists' understanding of nationality (Şavkay, 2002, pp. 16-17).

There is only one study, which could be considered as a social scientific endeavor, on the language politics of the later Republican decades (Doğançay-Aktuna, 2004). Doğançay-Aktuna examines the politics of language since the *Tanzimat* era (the Ottoman reform period of 1839 to 1876), but her analyses are rather formed by conventional perspectives and ideas. In her work, she reproduces the classical themes of the Republican discourse on the issue of language reform and "its success". Most strikingly, her story of the language policy in Turkey does not reflect on any image of the minority languages.

She states that her article has a two-fold purpose: "to familiarize the reader with the most important language planning effort in Turkey, the Turkish Language Reform … and to discuss current language problems and recent Turkish language planning attempts on Turkish." (p. 5). Whereas the article is titled *Language Planning in Turkey: Yesterday and Today*, her theoretical and ideological framework apparently has no space for questioning the re-configuration of the non-Turkish linguistic situation in Turkey by the Republican state's language planning. Her approach, in fact shared by many, takes Turkish as the only legitimate and proper language in Turkey to be discussed in such a presentation. In this dissertation, I aim, *inter alia*, at explaining how this conception of language hierarchy has become so dominant that it also informs academic studies.

As it will be unfolded in the next chapters, Turkish language politics were not only about reshaping the content and the functions of Turkish language, but they were also about

the governance of non-Turkish languages. So, to put it another way, the exploration here focuses not only on the constitution of a particular variety of Turkish as the standard and official language of the nation, but also emphasize how other languages and linguistic varieties are excluded, both practically and discursively, outside the legitimate domain of linguistic action in the public sphere.

What conditioned this dissertation has been the examination of the larger system of language politics, with an analysis of recent developments. Nevertheless, a historical background is also considered as a necessity.

The new Republican state acquired a more substantial legitimacy and power that were absent in the last century of the Ottoman Empire. The Republic was ruled by educated elites who had uncompromising faith in positivism for achieving development and social change. Therefore, they conceived language quite differently from the rulers of the Ottoman Empire. This is not say that linguistic matters was completely irrelevant to the culture of the Imperial Palace, but the Republican state introduced practices and narratives of language politics that were far more radical. The language had been constructed as a new category; it was nationalized along with other cultural aspects of the society. People, who were just speaking the language, were confronted with "the national language", which became a sign of loyalty, obedience, unity, and integrity. On the other side, other people who were just speaking "other languages", too, were confronted with the national language, which indexed their own tongue as a symbol of diversity, subversion, treason and betrayal.

In that sense, the language politics of the Republican period is beyond an instrumentalization of language for political ends. It is not simply repressive, either, as it banned the use of a language while prioritizing another. There are also productive aspects of the language regime and practices in Turkey. The Republican language regime not only denied some languages, but also constructed their status as a non-language (as in the case of Kurdish). It did not only exclude the provincial dialects of the national language, but created a new "high" Turkish (in the process of the Language Reform) while the claim was to create a language that would be of Turkish essence. Last, but not the least, the Turkish language regime constructed and framed the codes of legitimate talk on language. Creation of a moral code of language and spread of it to all citizens resulted in the emergence of a civil society, which would consider Turkish language as one its essential elements. A counter consequence, however, was the emergence of a significant number of discontent citizens, who claimed their

own, separate identity through their own language, while facilitating the very ideological principles that the regime produced.

Although the main proposition of the thesis will be that the official language regime of Turkish state has always been to single out Turkish as the one and only legitimate language, this is not to deny that there have been fluctuations in time in the consistency of the regime. These fluctuations has ranged from forwarding a radical version of pure Turkish in the 1930s, constructed within the framework of the *Dil Devrimi* (variously translated as Language Reform or Revolution), to shifting the focus more on the uses of traditional and elite Ottoman Turkish in the 1950s when the *Demokrat Parti* (Democratic Party, DP henceforth) was in power, and to the approval of the implementation of English in many universities as the language of instruction after 1980s. Therefore, the Republican language regime has gone through considerable changes, although the principality of Turkish has never lost power, at least for the majority of the citizens.

The Turkish official language regime has faced serious challenges by the social and cultural transformations particularly in the 1990s. There have been three concurrent and interrelated developments with respect to the sources of these challenges. First, the social structure has been transfigured through urbanization and commercialization of the cultural spheres. Second, distinctive processes inherent in globalization, such as the expansion of economical, political and cultural patterns, considerably threatened the assumed monopoly of the state in determining the cultural dynamics of the population. And third, the rise of politics of identity brought about the empowerment of identity claims that endangered the presumed integrity of the nation and its cultural and linguistic representations of homogeneity. So, accompanying the recent debates on languages, there have occurred major social and cultural transformations.

To explore both the establishment of the domain of language politics and its ideological implications, as noted above, a core concept, language regime, and a complementary one, language ideology, will be utilized.

The literature of linguistic anthropology has recently concentrated on how particular language ideologies produce particular discourses on language and its use, and particular practices of them (Schieffelin, Woolard, & Kroskrity, 1998). This dissertation aims to explain how certain language policies and practices of linguistic manipulation guide and inform particular language ideologies. That is, it tries to examine the opposite direction of the

ideology-regime link. Studies of language ideologies generally excavate ideological underpinnings of certain metalinguistic discourses and practices. Here, the object of analysis is rather the ways in which nation-state politics of language frame linguistic ideologies and how the hegemony of the official discourses of language are established over the perceptions and conceptions of languages in Turkey in general, and of Kurdish as a minority language, in particular. It is intended to present that such a domination or colonization of minds with respect to languages not only operates through a rigorous indoctrination via national and compulsory education and the control over mass communication institutions, but also through the very policies, practices and formations of legitimate and illegitimate domains of language use.

Therefore, the thesis is comprised of three different levels of analysis. The first level focuses on how the domain of language is incorporated as into a project of total political and social transformation an essential dimension. This examination investigates the Turkish modernizationist project of westernization, of which two main pillars has been nationalization and secularization, and its articulation of language as both its medium and instrument. The end result of this articulation has been the construction of a language regime that encompassed the officialization of a particular variety of Turkish in all public domains, and the discouragement and/or the legal exclusion of other varieties of Turkish and non-Turkish languages. As a part of this analysis, a short examination of the census results will be given in order to assess to what extent the regime was successful in leveling the linguistic differences in Turkey.

The second level of analysis is based on the explanation of the changes and variations within this language regime with respect to social and cultural changes. At this stage, the transformation of the social structures and emerging of new channels of information flows are brought under inquiry, such as globalization, urbanization, and commercialization of the information networks that were once under the monopolistic control of the state.

The third level of analysis concentrates on the development of particular discourses about Kurdish. The survey at this level assesses the discursive frameworks in the public arena about the Kurdish language(s). Since Kurdish has not been controlled and cultivated under a state authority, as Turkish has been in the 20th century, the former lacks a unified, standard form. This lack of homogeneity has been frequently overemphasized by the Turkish nationalists, to the point of arguing that there is no language as Kurdish. However, for those

who have been in favor of linguistic and cultural freedoms of non-Turkish speakers, the problem is about democratization and human rights, rather than about the justifications for realities of linguistics. Thus, there have developed particular frameworks of discourses on Kurdish that are distinct and competing in the public sphere.

Having presented the conceptual flow of the dissertation, the outline of the chapters and section follows below.

The next, second theoretical chapter will explore the conceptual repercussions pertaining to the concepts of language regime and language ideology. First, a brief review of the traditional research on language policy and planning is presented. Following, enriched by the theoretical contributions of Foucault and Bourdieu, the post-modern critique to the classical language policy research and the evolution of the concept of language regime are reviewed. Last, the theoretical implications (together with language ideology) and the possibilities of explanation promised by the concept are discussed.

From the third chapter on, the empirical research is presented. The chapter starts with a short history of the pre-Ottoman and Ottoman legacies of language politics. Especially the last century of the Empire is considered as important, and is detailed accordingly, since most of the basic ideological principles of the Republican practices were formed in that period. The formation *and* the practices of modernity in the Ottoman Empire are deemed critically significant for explaining the Republican politics.

In the fourth chapter, the Republican official policies and legal regulations will be analyzed. Regulations, with actual practices, and ideological implications and outcomes, amount to the subsistence of a language regime. The formation and the development of the Republican language regime are analyzed. The main axis is formed by the chronological history of regulations that affected languages of the country, in one way or another. However, the discourses and "realities" generated are also evaluated. Through the notion of language regime, the relationship between the political and the linguistic spheres in the Turkish case will be assessed.

The fifth chapter is devoted to a survey of the changes in the linguistic populations in Turkey. Considered as a sign of the effectiveness of the language regime of the top-down modernization in Turkey, the levels of linguistic assimilation are assessed based on the data from the censuses and other relevant researches.

Chapter 6 continues the history of the language regime in Turkey, now with a specific focus on the regulations of and public debate about broadcasting. Mass media in general, and television and radio broadcasting in particular have become the field of language battles, especially since 1990s. On the one hand, private radio and TV channels have flourished. They rapidly and substantially commercialized a domain that belonged to the state before. The profound changes emerged with commercialization of audio-visual domains inevitably changed the way language has been conceived with respect to broadcasting.[2] Moreover, the intrusion of English was unleashed under the conditions of less-control by the state and of profit maximization.

Broadcasting in a language other than Turkish was considered a political taboo for more than half a century. This taboo has been recently challenged not only by the technological developments that enabled transnational broadcastings that render the official language policies on broadcasting mostly invalid. More importantly the Turkish governments have experienced a two-way pressure from both inside with the demands of cultural and linguistic rights, claimed especially by Kurds, and from outside, particularly from the EU that mandates the implementation of a certain level of multiculturalist policies to become a member. Finally, some of the languages other than Turkish were broadcasted on Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (*Türkiye Radyo Televizyon Kurumu*, TRT henceforth) after being defined as "the traditional languages and dialects that are used by the Turkish citizens in their daily lives" instead of being titled as "the minority language".

Since 2000, the media coverage on the issue of broadcasting in non-Turkish language has been vast. In a context of abundance of speech on language, some regularity with respect to the representations of particular language ideologies have appeared. In the last eight years, there have been reformulations and explicit manifestations of how Turkish and non-Turkish language has been conceived. Therefore, 2000s has been a valuable period for the excavation of language ideologies that have considerable effect in the public arena. Chapter 6, then, will be the part where these language ideologies are presented and analyzed.

The controversy on language in Turkey in the last two decades has been best demonstrated in the field of broadcasting. Spitulnik remarks "[t]he place of powerful

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[2] Öncü (2000) discusses various aspects of commercialization in the sphere of television. Öncü's article has been a major inspiration in the formulation of this dissertation's case study.

institutions such as mass media … in the construction and the maintenance of such linguistic hegemonies has been the subject of growing attention over the past decade" (Spitulnik, 1998, pp. 164-165). In this sense, this chapter might be considered as a study on the Turkish case of how mass media has become a primary field of conflicts on language politics.

The conclusion chapter will be an evaluation of the findings of the empirical research above. First, the following questions will be answered. To what extent has the theoretical framework that is constructed with the critical notions of language, regime and language ideology helped us to understand the political nature of language in Turkey? What are its advantages, and what has it enabled us to uncover? Secondly, based on the categorizations of regimes by Pool and Laitin (see below) and the review of the history of the Turkish language regime, its comparative position with respect to other regimes will be explained. And finally, more theoretical questions will be discussed, such as how language regime and ideology could be related to each other and how the case study of Turkey helped us to advance the conceptual understanding of politics of language.

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