Politics and Language Reform in Turkey:
The ‘Academy’ Debate

By İLKÇR AYTÜRK (Ankara)

For the Turkish nationalists of the early twentieth century, who were destined to become the rulers of the republic after 1923, Ottoman Turkish embodied a disowned past. It was an uncomfortable combination of Turkish, Arabic and Persian with some Italian, Greek, Armenian and other elements, written in Arabic characters. The westernizing and nationalist elite of the early republic were determined to create a nation-state for the Türks and wanted to obliterate all signs that reminded one of the republic’s Islamic, oriental and multi-ethnic predecessor. Therefore, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s reform program started with the romanization of the Turkish script in 1928, which was soon followed by a comprehensive language reform.

The Turkish language reform received an institutional basis in the early republican period, that is between 1923 and 1938, for the first time. It is true that several commissions had been established previously under the auspices of the Ottoman Ministry of Education in order to address the question of scientific terms to be taught at public schools.1 Those commissions, however, were not reformist and they did not have a doctrinal approach regarding linguistic nationalism. They were set up to propose solutions to a pressing problem in the Ottoman public education system – as opposed to the foreign schools in the empire, which solved the problem of terminology by adopting the terms in their respective languages of instruction. In other words, the makeshift language commissions of the Ottoman era were improvisations of practical nature and did not act as agents of an overarching state policy toward language.

The İnönü Government established the Dil Heyeti (The Language Council, DH herafter) in 1926 to “study the Turkish language and prepare solutions to its problems”.2 The DH remained inactive until 1928, when it was charged with the task of looking into the matter of alphabet reform. Members of the commission composed the final report, which served as the basis for the romanization of the Turkish script in

November 1928. Yet, the DH was not dissolved following the completion of this task. The Turkish cabinet approved a new statute for the commission, reorganizing its administrative structure and expanding its area of responsibilities.³ Obviously, the DH did not function as an independent language academy, but it was an extension of the state apparatus from a legal-administrative point of view. Its work was plagued from the beginning by a split and an ensuing struggle between purist-reformists, who wanted to reduce non-Turkish elements in Turkish to a bare minimum, and Gökalpist-reformists,⁴ who were determined to retain those foreignisms that they considered long turkified. The difficulties that the DH ran into reached such grave proportions by 1930 that even MPs of the single-party regime started to criticize it for being an unproductive and wasteful institution. This rather short episode in the history of Turkish language reform came to an end when the government terminated the activities of the DH in 1931.⁵

The shutting down of the DH did not, however, signal the end of state involvement in language, nor did it reflect an unwillingness on the part of the top state elite to devise a language policy. On the contrary, the founding president of the republic, Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk after 1934), cultivated a great interest in linguistics, devoting much of his valuable time between 1932 and 1936 to the creation of a nationalist language policy and a new Turkish free of foreign material. Atatürk’s fascination with linguistics paved the way for the establishment of the Turkish Language Institute (Türk Dil Kurumu, TDK hereafter) in July 1932.⁶

---

³ Aytürk, forthcoming.

⁴ Ziya Gökalp (1876-1924) was arguably the most important ideologue of Turkish nationalism in the 20th century. His definition of Turkish identity continued to influence Turkish nationalists ever since. His views on „the New Turkish” were equally influential. As a general characteristic of his overall theoretical structure, Gökalp was pragmatic in the field of language, too. He wanted to abolish the high Ottoman written language with all its flowery Arabicisms and Persianisms and to substitute it for the language spoken in Istanbul as the new written language of the country. On the other hand, Gökalp wanted to retain those foreignisms that he considered long turkified, provided that they were understood even by the uneducated masses. Gökalpist-reformists and purists disagreed mainly on this issue.

⁵ Aytürk, forthcoming.

⁶ I would like to note that the TDK’s name at the time of its establishment in 1932 was Türk Dili Tetkik Cemiyeti (The Turkish Society for Language Research). This name was turkified in 1934 to Türk Dili Araştırma Kurumu, and finally changed to the present Türk Dil Kurumu in 1936. Some researchers translate „kurum” as „society”, a term that reflects the legal status of the TDK as a private society. However, we should not overlook the TDK’s organic link...
"guardian chairman" (hâmi reis) and the Minister of Education as the ex officio "honorary chairman" (fahri reis). An Umumi Merkez Heyeti (General-Central Committee, UMH hereafter) governed the affairs of the TDK and it consisted of a director, a general secretary and a changing number of members. All members of the UMH, including the director and the general secretary, were to be elected at the TDK’s biannual congress. Besides this central organization, based in the capital Ankara, the TDK also had branches in each governorate, which were staffed by the members of the local People’s Houses, another offshoot of the ruling single party, the Republican People’s Party. According to its statute, the TDK was a private society and like all other societies its only source of income was through membership dues and donations.

If we compare the TDK with the DH, a number of similarities and differences can be discerned. To begin with, the TDK was not a State organ. Its members were not considered civil servants, nor did they receive their salaries from the public budget. Moreover, as a private society according to Turkish law, its members were selected internally. Leaving those procedures aside, however, there was no hiding the factor of the influence of the state over the activities of the TDK. A private society, whose founder was the powerful president of the country, could not have escaped the orbit of the government. All members of the UMH were, in practice, handpicked by Atatürk, majority of them being MPs from the Republican People’s Party (RPP hereafter). The personnel of the institute and members of the UMH were paid out of the institute’s budget, but it was well known that the Turkish state was the only contributor to that budget in the form of donations. Be that as it may, it is possible to conclude that the TDK had an ambiguous and indirect relationship with state authorities and, compared to the DH, this can be considered a step forward toward institutional autonomy. Atatürk must have allowed a procedural separation from the State and a certain degree of administrative autonomy for two possible reasons: first, he probably wanted to bestow the status of a scholarly academy on the TDK, and to increase, thereby, its prestige in the eyes of domestic opponents, on the one hand, and the international academic

with the Turkish state, especially until 1950, which gave it a privileged status and influence in comparison to other private societies. In addition, the term „kurum” is reserved mainly for state institutions in present Turkish usage. Therefore, I think it is more appropriate to translate „kurum” as „institute” in this case.

7 TDK, Türk Dili Tektik Cemiyeti Nizamnamesi (İstanbul: Devlet Basimevi, 1932), 3-4.
community, on the other. Second, Atatürk might also have planned to deflect criticisms away from the state in case the experiment would fail as its predecessor did. The failure of the DH, after all, had prompted an unexpected internal revolt against that institution within the RPP ranks. With the new arrangement, however, the government kept the TDK at an arm’s length, which allowed enough room for both controlling the institute and disowning its activities if need be.

From 1932 to his death in 1938, Atatürk was the guiding spirit of the language reform and the TDK. He got inspiration from a book published in 1930 by Sadri Maksudi [Arsal], a Turkish émigré from Soviet Russia. Sadri Maksudi composed his book, *Türk Dili İçin* (For the Turkish Language), as a manifesto of the purist-reformist thesis regarding language reform. The political decline of the last three hundred years had forced the Turkic peoples to live under the yoke of other nations, he argued, and, globally, Turks were facing assimilation if they would not immediately embark on a project of cultural revival. He added that the most critical element of the revival, which had to be carried out urgently, was the creation of Öz Türkçe (pure Turkish), that is to say, a new kind of Turkish, which would be devoid of foreign elements to the greatest extent possible. He considered the Republic of Turkey, the only independent Turkish state then, as especially suited for and capable of creating Öz Türkçe and inaugurating its use in every sphere of life, in daily speech as well as in the language of sciences. Sadri Maksudi advised the government to transform the DH, which was still functioning in 1930, into a language academy in order to render its decisions more authoritative and durable. Atatürk decided to put Sadri Maksudi’s plan into action in 1932 by founding the TDK, albeit not as an academy, and charging it with the task of ridding the Turkish vocabulary from as much foreign elements as possible. The TDK undertook and completed a number of serious, academic projects from 1932 to 1938, mainly in the form of critical editions of historical Turkish texts. The impact of the institute during those years cannot be ignored in terms of organizing a nationwide campaign to collect little known linguistic materials from the Anatolian dialects, and inculcating an interest in and awareness of language in the public consciousness. This being said, however, one has to admit that those contributions and positive aspects cannot be isolated from the attitude of the UMH and the ideological agenda of the TDK, which can be said to have compromised the institute’s prestige and its influence in the eyes of the academic community and future generations.

---

The reform movement, which Atatürk started in 1932 by establishing the TDK, reached its peak in 1934, and arguably deteriorated into utter chaos by 1934. The chaotic situation resulted from two unforeseen developments: First, the TDK could not supply enough new words to replace those that were marked for clearance and, second, those new words that were suggested in place of foreign words were adopted in a haphazard manner, resulting in a complete lack of understanding between their users. Uriel Heyd, the first scholar to write a history of the Turkish language reform, noted in this context that “any Turkish word found in the vernacular of a remote Anatolian village, in the speech of an even more remote Turkish tribe in Siberia or in the manuscript of an eleventh century Turkish-Arabic dictionary was regarded as a possible addition to the modern Turkish vocabulary”.

The Tarama Dergisi, which was published in 1934 in two volumes, was the culmination of a vast project of combing through ancient manuscripts, dictionaries and studies on local dialects that brought together many alternatives for the non-Turkish words in the Turkish language. It offered more than ten substitutes for the Ottoman word ābide (monument), for example, ranging from bağana to bengütaş, from kurçak to yüzünük. One was completely free to pick whichever pleased him/her more. This problem specifically plagued the press, where the columnists first wrote their articles in the Ottoman Turkish as usual and then handed them over to their assistants to “translate” the articles into the officialese. Atatürk himself wanted to set a personal example and used the new words of the Tarama Dergisi as much as he could. As a matter of fact, the epitome of the purist-reformist movement is considered to be Atatürk’s address at the presidential banquet given in honor of the Swedish Crown Prince, who paid a state visit to Turkey in 1934. The address was composed in the new Turkish entirely and must have given a hard time to the translator of the Crown Prince. At that point, it did not escape even Atatürk that purist-reformism did not achieve its declared goals. Actually, it only replicated the former problem in that the “revolutionized Turkish” was as unintelligible to the man on the street as the high Ottoman language once had been. Meanwhile, members of the TDK continued to support radical purism in two congresses, held in 1932 and 1934, identifying their institute with this thesis for all time. Moreover, they lent their name to the infamous Sun-Language Theory

10 Heyd, 31.
11 Atay, Falih Rifki: Çankaya (İstanbul: Bateş, 1984), 475-476.
12 Levend, 424-426.
at the Third Turkish Language Congress in 1936, an act that was to taint the prestige of the TDK further.  

The TDK has become a controversial institution in modern Turkish history as a result of such radical attitudes and equally bizarre theories in its early years. It had come to acquire a moral function, rather than a scientific one, and the principles it preached were not accepted unanimously. Actually, it generated feelings of hatred in one part of the intelligentsia, that is, among the Gökalpist-nationalists and the conservatives in general. Just to give an example, one of the latter, Ali Fuad Başgil, a well-known professor of constitutional law, pleaded in 1948 with those who would study the Turkish language reform in the future not to be too harsh on him:

The future historian of humanity! Let my words be a present to you. So that when you will write the history of today, you will not charge all Turkish scientists as responsible for this terrible mistake. Actually, we should not have kept silent. We should have known that, witnessing such a mistake, it was a heavy burden even to keep silent. In this respect, we are all guilty. But forgive [me]: If I bowed my head, I did it for the responsibility I bear for my family, not because I was a sinner.  

Başgil, of course, was overstating his case; it needs to be clarified at this point that the attitude of the government regarding öz Türkçe was not dictatorial. The new language policy was promoted vigorously, but it was not imposed by the force of law as in the case of other Kemalist reforms. Non-compliance did not bring with it any penalty other than discomfort in relations with Atatürk and the government. We know of at least two cases of such individual non-compliance. In early 1933, the TDK invited Hüseyin Kâzım Kadri, the author of one of the most comprehensive Turkish dictionaries to date, to share his expertise and lexical material with them. Kadri stated in his reply that, since he did not agree with the aims and activities of the institute, he could not be of any help to them. The UMH discussed Kadri's letter and decided to "punish" him by removing his name from the institute's membership roll. Another time, when Ragip Özdem, probably the only member of

---


15 Türk Dili Tetkik Heyeti, Umumi Merkez Heyeti Zabit Defteri, 8 March 1933, unpaginated.
the UMH with a proper linguistic training, begged to be excused from any association with the Sun-Language Theory and told this personally to Atatürk, he was only moved to the chair of linguistics at the University of Istanbul. These examples show that opposition to the official language policy in Atatürk's Turkey was possible in so far as it was on an individual basis and opponents did not throw tantrums.

The republican intelligentsia got on board all too easily in supporting linguistic purism. Some kind of opposition from conservative intellectuals, on the one hand, and from journalists and the print media, on the other, was expected even during Atatürk's lifetime. Owners of newspapers and journals had recently weathered the fall in their readership as a result of the alphabet reform, and, could now only be less than willing to test their readers by adopting a radically purified language. Conservatives of all sorts, not to speak of the now immobilized religious class, disapproved of radical purism. Naturally, it would not be historically correct to treat all conservatives as a monolithic group: at the one extreme were those who took offense from even the slightest shift away from the classical Ottoman prose; yet, the vast majority of conservative intelligentsia happened to be followers of Gökalp and agreed on the necessity of the elimination of some, but certainly not all, foreign words from Turkish.

The Emergence of Opposition, 1938-1950

Shell-shocked by the swiftness and success of the Kemalist revolution, those conservatives expected that Ismet İnönü, who succeeded Atatürk as the second president of Turkey after the latter's death in 1938, would undo at least some of the reforms, the language reform being one of them. Their hopes were dashed soon with new developments on the ground. First, the TDK obtained financial autonomy with the announcement of Atatürk's will, in which he bequeathed half of the dividend over his shares of a Turkish bank, İş Bankası, to the TDK. Although, contributions from the public budget continued during İnönü's presidency, Atatürk's bequest was a crucial step toward institutional stability in the long term. Second, President İnönü proved to be as enthusiastic about purist language policy as Atatürk had originally been. At the height of World War II, as Turkey was maneuvering between the Allied and the Axis powers to maintain neutrality, İnönü found the time and energy to attend the UMH meetings, charging the TDK with a renewed bout of purification, this time, of scientific termi-

nology. Universities, too, were called on duty to form committees in each academic department to take care of discipline-specific terms. The efforts of the TDK culminated in the publication of new textbooks after 1942 for elementary and middle schools, which employed terms that were considered controversial by conservatives. Moreover, 1945 witnessed the radical purification of the text of the Turkish constitution, being another step that confirmed İnönü’s steadfastness along the purist lines.

These moves of the government triggered a backlash in 1941 for the first time in the republican era. After the death of Atatürk, faculty members at the University of Istanbul were determined to augment their institutional autonomy at least in the field of the language of instruction. In response to the formation of departmental committees as mentioned above, the University of Istanbul, which was always considered more conservative in outlook, commissioned and published a report by Ragip Özdem on the problem of scientific terminology. The report amounted to nothing less than a systematic assessment of all aspects of language policy in Turkey with a critical eye, sparing not even the alphabet reform of 1928. “In the absence of the necessity of a powerful revolution, which is religious in character, and which purports to transform the most deep-seated Weltanschauung, or the sense of existence of a social group, it cannot be considered a normal attitude to change the writing system that should naturally be cherished by nationalism,” Özdem argued, “unless the said social group sees it as the only way of salvation to depart from, rather than embrace, its former Weltanschauung, in the international and inter-religious struggle...”. At the end of his treatise, he recommended, in barely circumpect language, the establishment of a new committee, composed of academics from the universities and members of the TDK, to determine the future direction of language policy in Turkey.

Özdem’s critique of the reform project was significant in that, first, he spoke as an insider. He could not easily be branded as a reactionary as most other opponents of the reform; on the contrary, he was a staunch Kemalist, nationalist, and a westernizer in every respect. Second, his well-known professionalism and expertise in the field of linguistics added a considerable weight to his opinions. Not surprisingly, a bitter retort followed shortly. The anonymous author of the

---

17 Heyd, 38.
18 Ibid., 41-43.
19 Özdem, Ragip: Terimler Meselesi Münasebetle Dilimizin İslahi Üzerine Muhtıra (İstanbul: İstanbul Üniversitesi Yayınları, 1941), 7.
20 Ibid., 94.
reply "vehemently rejected," on behalf of the TDK, Özdem's "allegations" on the alphabet reform, asserting that "this argument, which occupies pages 6, 7, and 8 of the report, has to be torn out not only of this book but also out of souls and minds".21 Above all, the author expressed the TDK's opposition to the formation of a new language committee, which they rightly identified as an attempt at bypassing the TDK or dissolving it altogether.22 Although nothing came out of Özdem's report of 1941, we can take it as a warning sign of how the TDK alienated a growing number of academics with its highhanded approach. Also, the report marks the beginning of a search for an alternative institution for directing language policy, paving the way for the "academy" debate.

In the aftermath of World War II, Turkey entered a new era of democratization, joining the western world in this respect, as well. The first multi-party election was held in 1946, accompanied by an unprecedented level of freedom of speech. Criticizing the language policy of the government became much easier in this new environment. The most serious step toward that direction was taken in 1948 at what was called, the First Language Congress of the Istanbul Teachers' Association. The congress was chaired by Adnan Adivar, a well-known critic of the single party regime, who had returned from self-imposed exile only recently. Almost all detractors of the regime as well as men of letters with a conservative taste participated in the congress, enjoying that precious moment of freedom to articulate their intense dislike of the TDK and the kind of language reform it represented. While some of the participants poured scorn on the TDK and in effect insulted its members, some others tried to put forward constructive criticism. One of them, Mustafa Şekip Tunç, professor ordinarius of psychology and philosophy at the University of Istanbul, enumerated what, according to him, were the causes of the failure of language reform in Turkey from 1932 onwards. He believed that failure in language reform was the outcome of a series of misconceptions, such as:

1. The assumption that history can be regarded as a tabula rasa
2. The impulse to make a pure language without any foreign words
3. The mechanical notion that language is made up of atom-words
4. The belief that these new atom-words can throw out and replace the historical words of a living language with the help of education
5. The hope that the revolutionary taste of the youth can defeat ages-old literary traditions of a given society

21 TDK: Terimlerin Türkçeleştirilmesi Bakımından Profesör Doktor Ragip Özdem' in Muhtarsı Hakkında Rapor (Ankara: Türk Dil Kurumu Yayınları, 1941), 5.
22 Ibid., 20.
6. The wishful thinking that success in the field of alphabet reform can be as easily repeated in the field of language. Tunç ended his speech by congratulating the organizers of the congress, which, he hoped, inaugurated “a new institution” for language reform, be it a “committee” or “academy”. Other participants, too, joined him in demanding “a language academy.” The final report of the congress summarized the attitude of the Teachers’ Association regarding language reform: the report reiterated the Association’s commitment to the purification of the Turkish language à la Gökalp, but condemned the radical purism of the TDK. Calling the UMH an amateurish team, which lacked academic and scientific credentials to undertake a reform project, it called for the establishment of “a language academy” as quickly as possible.

It needs to be stressed at this point why opponents of the TDK preferred the term “academy” for the planned institution. In their eyes, the TDK was a revolutionary organization, which wrought radical changes in Turkish and disseminated the new, purified language – opponents called it kurumca (TDKish) or uydurukça (fakeish) as Geoffrey Lewis aptly translated them – through state organizations, such as the public education system and the Turkish radio. They contrasted this revolutionary attitude with that of the Académie Française. Indeed, the Académie had a reputation for being a very conservative institution. Since its foundation in the 17th century, its “immortal” members set the standard for what could be considered proper French and what not. Particularly significant for the Turkish conservatives was the Académie’s deliberate delay in responding to new words that entered French vocabulary and its refraining from including those in its prestigious dictionary. The Académie wanted to convey the message, thereby, that only those few new words that could establish and maintain a strong foothold in spoken and written French were worthy of inclusion in the classical canon of French vocabulary. The would-be Turkish academy, too, was expected to follow the French example. In other words, like its French counterpart, the Turkish academy would consecrate a classical Turkish, in all probability the Turkish spoken and written right before the radical stage of language reform, and

---

24 Ibid., 20.
25 Ibid., 172-174.
authorize its use in print media, school textbooks and public radio broadcasts.

The impact of the new conservative discourse was felt immediately on the activities of the TDK. Undoubtedly, the fact that the RPP failed to give full support to the purist thesis as it used to in the past played a major role in this. The Minister of Education of the RPP government from 1948 to 1950, Tahsin Banguoğlu, was also the ex officio chairman of the TDK as per the traditional relationship between this institution and the Turkish state. In a drastic change of mood, however, Banguoğlu lent an attentive ear to the conservative critics and, what is more, he decided to bring the critics and members of the TDK together to search for common ground. Shortly after the congress of the Teachers' Association, the TDK convened its sixth congress in 1948 in Ankara with the participation of the critics of language reform. On top of everything else, the meeting was chaired, presumably with the intervention of Banguoğlu himself, by Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın, an important journalist and a courageous critic of purism even in the 1930s. In retrospect, this should not surprise observers of Turkish politics in general and Turkish language reform in particular since Banguoğlu was to emerge as a conservative figure later in his career. Within the context of the democratic transformation taking place in Turkey during those years, however, members of the TDK must have been alarmed at the evaporation of State support, which they had taken for granted since 1932.

Language Reform under a Hostile Government, 1950-1960

In May 1950 general elections put an end to the 27-year long rule of the RPP in Turkish politics and brought to power the Democratic Party (DP hereafter), which promised in its election campaign to reverse the RPP policies in a number of key areas. The downfall of the RPP had enormous implications for language policy as well as the future of the TDK. The new Minister of Education, Tevfik İleri, who saw the TDK as an RPP outpost and a defunct organization, kept the UMH waiting for a number of months and when they finally met in November 1950, İleri imposed a number of statutory changes. Under those circumstances, the UMH was compelled to convene an extraordinary congress in 1951 to pass those changes that were demanded by the minister. The congress first eliminated the clause in the TDK statute that made the former president and chairman of the RPP, İsmet İnönü, its “guardian chairman”, removing the organic link that tied the TDK and the RPP. Second, it also changed the clause that designated

the Minister of Education the *ex officio* chairman of the TDK. These changes effectively brought the TDK's special status to an end. It no longer enjoyed a privileged position as a society that received state support and protection. Furthermore, the DP government reduced the annual public subvention to the TDK from 50,000 TL to 10,000 TL in the draft budget law for 1951. When the draft law reached the legislature for the final vote, even the 10,000 TL subvention was eliminated on the grounds that "the TDK has lost its scientific character, that it has become a political tool [of the RPP], and that its activities consist of causing ruin and mess". From then on, the TDK was completely on its own, having no other source of income than Atatürk's bequest, and facing a government that did not hide its ill will.

The DP government's first step toward undoing the language policy of the RPP and the TDK was the legalization of the Arabic *ezan* (Islamic call to prayer recited from the minarets) to replace the Turkish text, which had been in force since 1933. Then came the second correction to the language of the constitution, replacing the purified text of the 1945 amendment with the original document from 1924. Such was the intensity of the debate on language that the Turkish constitution had been subjected to two changes within less than 10 years. The greatest challenge to the existence of the TDK, however, was incessant attempts by its critics at influencing the DP government to abolish the TDK altogether and to found a "language academy" to succeed it. As rumors about the plan reached the TDK, the UMH decided to contact the government directly and to lobby against such a drastic measure. Besim Atalay, one of the most radical purists in the UMH, visited the Minister of Interior, Ethem Menderes, and successfully talked him out of the project. The UMH also decided to engage the critics with a counter-propaganda attack and published a collection of articles that defended the institute's language policy since the 1940s. Although the government refrained from pursuing the TDK further, a flood of rancorous articles continued to appear in the Turkish press. When an anti-TDK research institute resolved to re-publish those in a

---

28 Levend, 463-464.
29 Ibid., 465.
31 Levend, 466.
32 Ibid., 486-487.
book format – obviously to keep up the heat against the TDK – the collection of articles filled six volumes!34

The 1960 Coup

The DP rule came to an abrupt end in 1960 as a result of a coup d’état, initiated by junior officers from the Turkish military. The officers established the Committee of National Unity, which was to assume both legislative and executive powers and ruled the country during the next one and a half years. One of their main criticisms toward the former DP government and justifications for the military takeover was the latter’s inclination toward counterrevolution, i.e. surrendering to the religious establishment and sacrificing Atatürk’s westernizing reforms one after another. The clash between the DP government and the TDK provided some ammunition to the officers, too, as they accused the DP of giving up Atatürk’s language policy. The Committee of National Unity restored full cooperation with the TDK as well as the annual subvention that was cut off from the public budget in 1951.35 The Committee also renamed all ministries and state departments with their former turkified names. These developments engendered a feeling of support for the coup among the members of the TDK, which was expressed on many occasions.36 One can assume that this support intensified the conflict between the TDK and the conservatives, who accused the state policy of language reform of being undemocratic and top-down in character. The break between the two groups was now complete, as Kemalists, RPP-supporters, and the left in general rallied to the support of the TDK, whereas right-wingers of all sorts campaigned for the abolition of the TDK and the establishment of a “language academy” in its stead.

Critics of the TDK tried to infiltrate even the Committee of National Unity and to impress on the military leaders the need for an academy. An associate professor of the Turkish language, Ahmet Temir, prepared a draft law on the establishment of a “Turkish Academy of Sciences” and submitted it to the Committee of National Unity and the Ministry of Education for consideration. The draft law proposed to transform the TDK into a branch of a prospective academy, but only after the resignation of all current members of the UMH and a process of selection of new members with scientific credentials. The TDK’s property,

36 Ibid., 103; Levend, 488-489.
library and its income from Atatürk’s bequest, as well, were to be transferred to the new academy according to the draft law.37 The project sent shock waves through the TDK, which did not expect such a grave threat to its existence when the Committee of National Unity was in power. It fought, however, the draft law successfully a second time by bringing to the attention of all parties the irrevocability of Atatürk’s will.38 Besides, supporters of the TDK argued that Atatürk’s decision to set up the TDK as a private society, and not as an academy, was a premeditated move on his part. In Atatürk’s eyes, the role of the TDK was to revolutionize the language, to kick off a radical stage in language planning and to create a new Turkish that was to be thoroughly national, the argument went. Had he wanted to stop further simplification and nationalization of Turkish, barring any change, he would have picked the format of an academy, since academies are known to be more conservative.39 The TDK’s opinion regarding the establishment of a language academy, on the other hand, was neutral: a rival institution on its own turf did not bother the TDK, as long as the language academy would not be established at its own expense. If the government was intent on realizing this project, then, it had to provide new funds, infrastructure and personnel for a brand new institution without alienating the terms of the bequest contained in Atatürk’s will. This was a matter of respect to Atatürk’s heritage according to the supporters and members of the TDK.40

The debate on the language academy continued after Turkey’s transition to democratic politics in 1961. As a matter of fact, the debate on language and the future of the TDK turned into a fundamental topic for discussion at all intellectual and public forums in Turkey, dividing the intelligentsia into two. What was at stake was far more important than is implied by a marginal clash of linguistic preferences. The significance of language in the Turkish context was that one’s views regarding the TDK and the language reform imparted his or her political standing and worldview in general. In effect, the debate over language and the academy was also meant to determine the ingredients of the Turkish national identity. Was Turkishness to be a completely new identity, born with the establishment of the republic in 1923 and free of the unwanted Islamic-Ottoman overtones? Or, should it also include an Islamic component, reflecting the Turks’ ages-old experience as

40 Ibid., 4-5 and 7.
members of the Muslim ummah, as Gökalp said? Depending on the answer to these questions, one would either speak yaşayan Türkçe (meaning “living Turkish”; the motto of the conservatives, by which they meant the unreformed Turkish) or ara Türkçe (reformed and purified Turkish).

The crusade against the TDK reached its peak in 1968 with the convention of the Second Language Congress, once again at the initiative of the Teachers’ Association. Twenty years after the first event, the second congress reiterated some of the well-known arguments of the conservatives. Having acknowledged the need for the simplification of Ottoman Turkish, they nevertheless maintained that the Turkish language had reached a satisfying level of simplification and maturity on the eve of the reform project in 1932. It would have been the right thing, then, to entrust the preservation of “that” Turkish to a language academy; alas, the rulers of the country, carried away with their success in other fields of Kemalist reforms, chose to push through a radical purge of the language of all its foreign elements. The conservatives, thus, adhered to the Gökalpist view that not all foreign words in Turkish were indeed “foreign”: some participants at the congress brought up Turkey’s imperial past so as to be able to refer to Turkish as an imperial language and to those “foreign” words as words that had been “conquered by us”. The Ottoman Turks were collecting words from their imperial subjects just as they collected taxes from them, some others opined. According to them, the attempts by the TDK at abandoning those “turkified” words amounted to a hatred for the rich Turkish national culture. People, who held even more extremist views, went so far as to claim that the TDK acted under the influence of communist bosses from Moscow, who sent instructions for creating a “cosmopolitan Esperanto” and cutting the lexical ties that linked Turkey to its national heritage. All participants, moderates and radicals together, united in calling for the transformation of the TDK into a language academy and the conference proceedings included a lengthy section devoted to this debate.

The option to close down the TDK and substitute a conservative language academy in its place remained on the table during the rest of the 1960s and the 1970s. Within the context of Turkey’s sharply divided political environment in those years, and especially toward the

---

41 Faruk K. Timurtaş, ed. İkinci Dil Kongresi ve Akademi (İstanbul: Türk Mülkimler Birliği Yayımları, 1969), 20.
42 Ibid., 37-45.
43 Ibid., 34-35, 58, 74, 135.
44 Ibid., 287-352.
end of the 1970s, the TDK's reputation for being a "leftist" organization grew, making this a concern even for its traditional allies in the Kemalist bureaucracy and the military.

The 1980 Coup

The coup d'état of 1980 brought the military to power for a second time. The generals were determined to end the civil-war-like conditions in the country by redesigning Turkish political and social life ambitiously. They put the blame on ideological polarization for the most part, considering the deep-seated left-right divide the main cause for Turkey's descent to chaos in the late 1970s. The aim to create a totally new political setting led the generals to close down all existing political parties in Turkey and to bar all members of the upper echelons of those parties from joining newly established ones. Scores of civil society organizations, too, were similarly outlawed for their alleged contribution to radical politics in Turkey.

One of the top casualties of that campaign was none other than the TDK. Appeals to the generals of the new military government, who were regarded as "friendly" and supporters of the purist policy, did not convince them to spare the TDK this time, as they did in 1960. The new Turkish constitution of 1982, prepared under military rule and which went into force following a referendum, contained a specific article (Article 134) on the foundation of an Atatürk Kültür, Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu (Atatürk Supreme Council for Culture, Language and History, AKDTYK hereafter), which was to incorporate the TDK, as well.45 The Law No.2876, passed on 11 August 1983 and based on the aforementioned article of the constitution, provided a detailed blueprint for the future administration of the TDK, of course, under the close scrutiny of the state. Accordingly, the TDK's former institutional autonomy was terminated: it ceased to be a private society and became a public institution. Meanwhile, its library, property and income from Atatürk's shares were also expropriated and transferred to the new TDK, despite criticisms regarding the legality of such a move. Former members, also, lost their titles and new ones were appointed in their places.46

The military regime's bid for transforming the TDK into a state organ met with the stiff resistance of the institution's members.47 Dele-

46 Ibid., 56-72.
gations were sent to meet with the top brass of the army, letters were addressed to the members of the provisional parliament and, knowing the Turkish military’s traditional Kemalist line, the TDK called for respect for Atatürk’s legacy. Those appeals proved unsuccessful however. A retired general, Suat İlihan, who happened to be the first chairman of the AKDTYK, implemented the institutional transition as well as the transfer of leadership on 19 October 1983 by means of an order that the former elected members of the TDK found hard to resist under the military regime.

Conclusion

The traditional language policy of the TDK and the TDK’s image in the eyes of the Turkish intelligentsia were doomed to change following the takeover by the AKDTYK in 1983. First of all, the new leadership gave up the notion of “revolutionism” (devrimcilik) in language, signaling a reversal of the former purist policy. The new TDK became a decidedly Gökalpist institution, accepting the existence of a large body of words of foreign origin in Turkish as an incurable and, what is more, ordinary fact of life. Accordingly, it would be meaningless to spend the resources of the TDK on combating those foreign words which had entered Turkish daily use for long. The majority of such, so called, “turkified” words were of either Arabic or Persian origin. Thus, from 1983 on, the new TDK concentrated its efforts on finding, or making up, Turkish equivalents for mainly thousands of English and French words that flooded Turkish in the second half of the twentieth century.

Second, the traditional alliance between the TDK, the leftists and the Kemalists came to an abrupt end. In the eyes of the latter, the new TDK was a monstrous creation of a military regime, which trampled on Atatürk’s will. Furthermore, the new institute had its wings clipped by the regime and could not carry on the purist language policy with its former revolutionary zeal. In response to what they regarded as the illegal seizure of the TDK and the change of its language policy, former members of the TDK founded an alternative institution, the Dil Derneği (the Language Society), in 1987. This new society for Turkish language research is hanging on since then, maintaining its own website (www.dildernegi.org.tr), publishing a journal, a Turkish dictionary and

49 Ibid., 47.
spelling guide. These latter contain scholarly polemics that contradict the current language policy of the TDK and are meant to provide alternatives to the standard TDK dictionaries and spelling guides. It is possible to say that this alternative institution came to replace the old TDK, continuing the same tradition both institutionally (in being a private society) and in terms of language policy.

---