

KURDISH LANGUAGE RIGHTS AND MOTHER TONGUE IN EDUCATION

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Language

In his 1985 work "Anathemas and Admirations", Emil Cioran, a Romanian philosopher and essayist, wrote that "one does inhabit a country; one inhabits a language. That is our country, our fatherland and no other." For Kurds - as many other nations – language is one of the most important points for both individuals and society. Language plays a major role in the shaping of an individual's identity and its social integration. Throughout history, languages have been used for political purposes, most often as a tool used to build identities and bring together a group of people.

As language has both a symbolic and instrumental value, nation-states intervene [in its development] in order to ensure that [social integration] takes place along the desired path. Languages are managed, guided and even re-created. And a number of mechanisms are employed to ensure that the national language is spread. With this aim, state activities are often held in a single language and the chosen language is imposed to the people of that country who speak different languages.

When looking at languages, language policies and rights should be addressed together, because they interact with each other both on a national and international level and they also influence individuals' language behaviour.¹

¹ Virtanen, *Dil Politikalarının Milliyetçilik Hareketlerindeki Tarihsel Kökenleri*, 18.

Language policies can be defined as a totality of principles, decisions and practices concerning the languages used within a particular political unit, their areas and regions, their development and the rights to their use.²

Turkey was never an ethnically homogenous country, but leaderships developed definition for the nation that excluded multi-ethnicity. They claimed that all inhabitants of Turkey, past and present, consisted of Turks.³ In order to form a basis for this claim, they began to implement a process of Turkification in all fields of daily life, from arts to politics, from education to trade and from culture to sports. The architects of this aggressive Turkification program used all possible opportunities to present being “Turkish” as a source of superiority and not being “Turkish” as a shortcoming, a loss and even a source of embarrassment. For example, according to Mahmut Esat Bozkurt: *“The Turkish revolution should belong to real Turks only... The worst of Turks is better than the best of non-Turks. The ill fortune of the Ottoman Empire in the past lay in the fact that its destiny was generally ruled by people other than Turks.”*⁴

Language Policies Implemented in Turkey

The history of the Republican period in Turkey can be seen as the history of the regime’s attempt to purify and standardize Turkish through a number of institutions, and making it the dominant language throughout the country. The Republican regime implemented the single language policy with such force via laws, institutions and pressure so that for many years only Turkish came to mind when reference was made to “mother tongue” or “education in the mother tongue.”⁵

The language policies at the time of the founding of the republic present a number of historical crossroads. The adoption of Turkish as the official language in the Constitution of 1924 formed the highest legal confirmation that Turkish was the main factor in the determination of the nation’s socio-cultural content. This constituted the grounds for the policies of assimilation or exclusion for minorities of the same religion but of different ethnic origin and who spoke another mother tongue, as well as for non-Muslim minorities.⁶

The Law on the Unification of Education, passed in March 1924, carried out the complete secularization of education and also constituted a significant part of Turkification and homogenization efforts.⁷ Through this law educational institutions and the language of education became centralized. Kurdish schools, institutions and publications, sects and lodges were accordingly prohibited. While education was aimed at standardizing the population, paradoxically, the rate of schooling was kept low in Kurdish regions, the main reason being the fear that a Kurdish middle-class would emerge along with a Kurdish national consciousness as a result of education. In fact, as a prime example of this way of thinking, Necip Bey, Minister of National Education and MP for Mardin said in 2006 : *“Do we want today’s armed Kurds to appear before our children tomorrow as intellectuals?”*⁸

² H. F. Schiffman, *Linguistic Culture and Language Policy*, (London, Routledge, 1996), cited from p.3 by Virtanen, *Dil Politikalarının Milliyetçilik Hareketlerindeki Tarihsel Kökenleri*, 18

³ Soner Çağaptay, *Türkiye’de İslâm, Laiklik ve Milliyetçilik: Türk Kimdir?* (Islam, Secularism and Nationalism in Turkey: Who are the Turks?), Transl: Özgür Bircan (Istanbul, İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2006), 91.

⁴ Ahmet Yıldız, *Ne Mutlu Türküm Diyebilene* (Happy is He Who Can Say That He is a Turk), (Istanbul, İletişim Yayınları, 2004), 209.

⁵ Necmiye Alpay, *Anadili, Yabancı Dil ve Eksiltici İkidillilik, Uluslararası Katılımlı Anadilde Eğitim Sempozyumu – 1* (Mother Tongue, Foreign Language and Subtractive Bilingualism, International Symposium of Education in the Mother Tongue), (Ankara, Eğitim-Sen Yayınları, 2010),

⁶ Balçık, *Milliyetçilik ve Dil Politikaları*, 783.

⁷ Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye’nin Tarihi*, 272. “Mustafa Kemal attached great importance to the secular education of young people. He considered education a strong tool for transforming the minds and spirits of people in a society where the literacy rate was around ten percent.” Kemal Kirişçi & Gareth M. Winrow, *Kürt Sorunu, Kökeni ve Gelişimi* (The Kurdish Question and Turkey), Transl: Ahmet Fethi (Istanbul, Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2007), 112.

⁸ Bahar Şahin, “Türkiye’nin Avrupa Birliği Uyum Süreci Bağlamında Kürt Sorunu: Açılımlar ve Sınırlar” (The Kurdish Issue Within the Context of Turkey’s Harmonization Process to the European Union), in: *Türkiye’de Çoğunluk ve Azınlık Politikaları*, Derleyenler: Ayhan Kaya& Turgut Tarhanlı, (Istanbul, TESEV Yayınları, 2006), 127.

The language policies, institutions and mentality of the Republican period took deep root.

The military coup of September 12, 1980 attempted to take control not only of the entirety of country but also of its language and language rights. As with other constitutions, the 1982 Constitution prepared by the coup leaders stipulated Turkish as the official language. However, unlike other constitutions, this clause was not to be amended, nor shall its amendment even be proposed. Article 26 of the constitution regulating freedom of thought and expression and Article 28 regulating freedom of press, contained the terms “*language forbidden by law*” and threatened reprisals for expression in a forbidden language. On the other hand, according to Article 42 of the Constitution, “*no other language than Turkish may be used or taught as a mother tongue to Turkish citizens in education and training institutions.*” The use of languages other than Turkish as a mother tongue in education was thus made impossible.

Law No. 2932 best expresses the perception of language in the period following 1980. It passed in October 1983. This law primarily prohibited the use of Kurdish. However, the term “Kurdish” was such a bogey word for the *coup* leaders that the law managed to express the ban on Kurdish without actually using the term “Kurdish.” According to Article 2 of the law:

“It is forbidden to express, promote or publish thoughts in any language apart from the primary official language of states recognized by the Turkish State.”

Significant pressure was exercised on the use of Kurdish in daily life too.

“A ban of this kind affected primarily the educated and active classes, but the military rulers went a step further and reminded even illiterate people that all traces of the Kurdish identity had been banned. In December 1982, the Minister of Education reminded all province governors that in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia folk songs could be used for ethnic or separatist purposes and that songs should therefore be sung in Turkish only. Although instructions of this kind were routinely ignored, violators at times received punishments that would constitute an example for others.”⁹

The coup leaders’ attitude towards Kurdish was so harsh that not even detainees and convicts were permitted to speak Kurdish with their families. When family members who did not speak Turkish spoke with their children in Kurdish they would be beaten and asked either to keep silent or to communicate via signs. Likewise, in tribunals, Kurds were not given the possibility of conducting their defence in their mother tongue; in court records Kurdish was referred to as “a language that cannot be understood.”

According to the dominant paradigm in Turkey, if education in the mother tongue is permitted, it will damage national identity; protecting the country’s unity will thus become impossible. That is why the demand to use languages other than Turkish in education is still considered “the most unacceptable demand” by governments in Turkey, quite aside from political affiliation. Such demands are dealt with harshly.

An important event of the early 2000s underlines the state’s antagonism to the use of the mother tongue and especially to Kurdish. :

In November 2001, a group of primarily students at Istanbul University submitted a request for elective Kurdish lessons to the university administration. The petition movement which began in Istanbul found great support in universities and secondary schools throughout the country and quickly spread. As of February 14, 2002, students from 24 universities throughout Turkey had submitted 11,837 signatures to petitions and were joined by thousands of primary and

⁹ McDowall, *Modern Kürt Tarihi*, 563 et al.

secondary school students and their families, demanding that Kurdish be taught in elementary and secondary schools. The state reacted very violently to petitions concerning elective Kurdish lessons; 1,359 people were taken into custody; 143 people were arrested pending a trial and 46 people were dismissed from their educational institution.¹⁰

In interviews held during the field study, undertaken for the purpose of this report, with children whose mother tongue is Kurdish, it has been observed that Kurdish children who have not been permitted to use their mother tongue in education and who have been forced to receive education in a language they do not know, encounter a variety of problems. It has also been observed that Kurdish students who have difficulty in communicating, who are not able to express their feelings and thoughts as they wish, who feel excluded from the community, who are not in complete control of the unfamiliar language and who in the meantime forget or are not able to develop their own mother tongue have a strong impression of being backward and of falling behind.

Issues Identified

The first of the issues commonly referred to by almost all interviewees regarded the significant communication problems between students and teachers in the first years of school. Students and teachers from both groups, as well as parents, expressed that when children begin school they either do not speak Turkish, the school language, or they speak it very little. They are therefore not able to understand their teachers or express themselves. Since they could not learn what they were meant to learn in class because they could not understand their teachers, the students said they generally had to keep quiet. Because they did not speak Turkish, teachers frequently did not even attempt to understand them, when they spoke Kurdish some thought that they were swearing or being wilful and they were therefore scolded. Many students also said that as they did not speak Turkish, they were not able to share their thoughts and feelings with their teachers.

These findings show that Kurdish students who speak little or no Turkish are only able to start reading and writing with a considerable delay since they start recognizing letters only at the end of their first year. They are unable to develop literacy skills and consequently are generally made to repeat the year. Most students who repeat a year cite their inability to understand what is being taught to them as the reason for failing. Many students stated that those who had to repeat a year felt their self-confidence decreased and negatively influenced their relationship with the school. Teachers whose mother tongue is Kurdish particularly said that students who found it difficult to learn Turkish and failed their class generally quit school within a few years.

An issue referred to by most students interviewed is that in the first years of school many people had to “*keep quiet*” because they did not speak Turkish. Many people say that because it was forbidden to speak Kurdish and they could not speak Turkish, they were unable to speak to each other; they got bored of keeping quiet in class and waiting for the bell to ring to speak and for the final bell to go home. These interviewees also said that in later years at school they were unable to ask questions because of their inadequate Turkish; they again had to “*keep quiet*,” that this “*keeping quiet*” over time became a habit and also influenced them in later stages of life, rendering them passive.

Conclusion

The abolishment of the serious linguistic, psychological, cognitive, educational, social and economic damage caused by subtractive educational policies and practices depends directly

¹⁰ For details on the petition campaign see: Kerim Yıldız&Koray Düzgören, *Bir Dilin İnkârı: Türkiye’de Kürtçe Hakkı* (The Denial of a Language: The Right of Kurdish Language in Turkey) (London, Kurdish Human Rights Project Publication, 2002)

on the use of Kurdish as a language of instruction in the education of Kurdish students, since these types of damages already arise from the exclusion of Kurdish from the education of Kurdish students. That is why a great many steps need to be taken for the use of Kurdish in the education of Kurdish students. In this sense, taking as a starting point the findings of this study and the topics discussed so far, studies from the relevant literature and the theoretical framework, it is possible to put forth a number of linguistic, social and cultural recommendations concerning the educational policy and practices followed in schooling of Kurdish students who speak little or no Turkish when they begin school. The implementation of some of these recommendations might be realized in the long term, taking five or more years both from a conjectural perspective and due to the need to prepare the necessary infrastructure.