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Language Consciousness among the First Vernacular Writers of Turkish

ABSTRACT

The written language that first developed in 13th-century Anatolia evolved, from the late 15th century onward, into the high language of the Turks, known as Ottoman Turkish. Western Turkish emerged as a written language during the period when the Anatolian Seljuk state weakened and the Beyliks (petty kingdoms) gained strength. The earliest surviving written works in Turkish date back to the late 13th century. In the following decades, the number of works increased, and they became more diverse in terms of genre and subject. The first Turkish works appeared in the courts of the Beyliks such as the Danismends, Aydinids, Germiyanids, Karamanids, and Ottomans. This development is attributed to the fact that these rulers did not know Persian or Arabic. However, new scholarly perspectives have challenged the validity of this view. This article examines the views on language of the authors who produced the first works in Turkish, comparing them to the first vernacular writers of Europe. The records of these authors' language consciousness provide information regarding the foundation of the Turkish written language.

KEYWORDS: Old Anatolian Turkish, language consciousness (*Sprachbewusstsein*), written language, 'Aşık Paşa, Beyliks period

STRESZCZENIE

Świadomość językowa wśród pierwszych tureckich pisarzy wernakularnych

Język pisany, który rozwinął się w wieku XIII w Anatolii, przekształcił się pod koniec wieku XV w język osmańsko-turecki. Stał się on językiem pisanym w okresie osłabienia państwa Seldżuków anatolijskich, kiedy *bejliki* (księstwa) zyskiwały na znaczeniu. Najwcześniejsze zachowane zabytki piśmiennictwa w tym języku pochodzą z końca XIII w. W kolejnych dekadach liczba dzieł wzrasta, a także stają się one bardziej zróżnicowane pod względem gatunku i tematyki. Pierwsze dzieła powstały w obrębie *bejlików* Daniszmendów, Ajdynidów,

Germijan, Karamanidów i Osmanów. Powszechnie uważa się, że przyczyną był brak znajomości perskiego i arabskiego. Tymczasem nowe perspektywy naukowe zakwestionowały zasadność tego poglądu. W artykule analizowany jest język autorów, którzy stworzyli pierwsze dzieła w tym języku, i porównuje się go z językiem pierwszych pisarzy wernakularnych w Europie. Badanie świadomości językowej autorów dostarcza informacji na temat powstania pisemnego języka tureckiego.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: staroanatolijski turecki, świadomość językowa (Sprachbewusstsein), język pisany, ‘Aşık Paşa, okres bejlików

Introduction

The earliest Turkic writings appeared in the Tarim basin in the 7th century, in Kashgar in the 10th century, and in Anatolia in the 13th century. The first two belong to the Eastern branch of Turkic, while the written tradition established in Anatolia is based on Western Turkic. Over time, the two Eastern traditions – Orkhon-Uighur and Kashgari – fell out of use, and in the 15th century, the common Central Asian Turkic literary language, known as Chagatai Turkic, emerged. At the same time, the written language of Anatolia developed into the high language of the Western Turks, known today as Ottoman Turkish. This brings us to a question that has remained relatively understudied in the history of the Turkic languages, including Turkish itself: is there is a connection between the decline of the Eastern Turkic written tradition and the emergence of a new written tradition in Anatolia? The most widely accepted theory, rooted in the state ideology of the Turkish Republic, holds that everything related to the Turks – including the Turkish language – originated in Central Asia. As we will explore in more detail below, for a long time scholars have claimed that the written tradition of Turkish was born in Central Asia prior to the 13th century, pointing to the so-called “mixed-language” texts as evidence.

Another issue that has received little attention is the influence of Turkish, as it developed in Anatolia, on Eastern Turkic – for example, in the emergence of figures such as ‘Ali Şir Nava’i. Typically, research focuses on the reverse influence: Nava’i’s impact on the Ottoman realm, rather than the other way around. Yet it is clear that even before Nava’i, the Turks in Anatolia had already developed a strong and productive written language. These aspects must be considered when discussing the period from the 10th to the 15th centuries in the history of Turkic (and Turkish) languages. While a detailed exploration of these issues lies beyond the scope of this article, I briefly touch on them here, as they should be kept in mind when discussing the emergence of the Turkish written language. Turkish began to be used as a written language during the decline of

the Anatolian Seljuk State, which had adopted Persian for official purposes, and with the rise of the Beyliks (petty kingdoms of Anatolia). The earliest written works in Turkish, dating to the last quarter of the 13th century, are few in number. From the second half of the 14th century, however, their number increased significantly, and they began to display greater diversity in terms of genre and subject. These works, considered the preparatory stage for the emergence of high language, include both original compositions and translations. The earliest examples appeared in the vicinity of Anatolian beyliks such as Danişmentogulları, Aydınoğulları, Germiyanogulları, Karamanoğulları, and Osmanoğulları. Traditionally, this phenomenon has been explained by claiming that the *Bey*s (rulers of the Beyliks) lacked proficiency in Persian and Arabic. Yet, as we will see later, recent scholarship challenges this assertion. Yunus Emre (1240?–1320?) holds an exceptional place in history as the founder of the Turkish language. His refined and subtle use of Turkish likely inspired both his contemporaries and those who came after. Other surviving works in Turkish from the 13th century include those of Sultan Veled (1226?–1312). *Bahcat-al-Hada'iq*, although extant in later manuscripts copies, was also initially written in the last decades of the 13th century. Authors from the first half of the 14th century whose works have endured to the present day include Gülşehrî (dates unknown – after 1317), 'Âşık Paşa (1272–1332), Kul Mes'ud (dates unknown – after 1334), and Hoca Mes'ud (dates unknown – after 1350). The earliest vernacular writers of Turkish were knowledgeable about Islamic sources and demonstrated proficiency in reading and writing in both Arabic and Persian. This article seeks to explain how their approach to the language serves as testimony to the development of Turkish in Anatolia.

Formation of the Turkish Written Language

The period regarded as the preparatory stage for the development of classical written Ottoman Turkish, spanning the 13th to 15th centuries, is referred to as *Altosmaniche* – Old Ottoman Turkish, Old Anatolian Turkish, Old Turkey Turkish, or Old Oghuz Turkish. The process of standardizing Turkish into a literary written language has been examined by Uğurlu (2011; 2021) who critically reviewed the existing literature on the subject. Tekin (2001, pp. 138–149) describes the historical conditions in which the earliest works in Turkish were written in Anatolia.

In the 10th century, the Oghuzs established the Oghuz Yabgu State, with major cities like Cend and Yenikent, in the Syr Darya region. It remains uncertain whether the Oghuz, who exerted political influence from the Aral Sea and Syr Darya river to Anatolia, possessed a written language in the 11th century (Karahan, 2021, p. 141). Historical records mention Oghuz communities, both

settled and nomadic, classified as “upper, middle, and lower” (Golden, 2002, p. 173). Based on these accounts, scholars traditionally argued that a written language grounded in Oghuz Turkish should have emerged in Western Turkestan (Korkmaz, 1972, pp. 31–33; Mansuroğlu, 1954, pp. 255–257; Köprülü, 1933, p. 277). Some researchers also maintain that 13th-century Anatolian Turkish texts exhibit linguistic features developed over several centuries (Mansuroğlu, 1946, p. 17; Özkan, 2014, pp. 57, 65). Nonetheless, the prevailing perspective suggests that an independent written language in Anatolia began to take shape only in the latter half of the 13th century (Tekin, 1974, p. 67; Ercilasun, 2004, p. 442; Karahan, 2021; Uğurlu, 2011, pp. 131–134; Uğurlu, 2021, p. 547).

Gelibolulu Mustafa ‘Âli (1541–1599), a prominent figure in the maturation phase of the Turkish written language, described Ottoman Turkish as a refined language compopsed of Turkish, Chagatay Turkic, Arabic, and Persian elements (Csirkés, 2019, p. 673).¹ Mustafa ‘Âli’s perspective integrates Eastern Turkic into the foundational heritage of Ottoman Turkish. Translations into Old Anatolian Turkish from the Khwarazm and the Golden Horde regions serve as evidence of Eastern Turkic influence on Turkish (Onur, 2020, p. 602). While existing literature predominantly focuses on the influence of Arabic and Persian, it is plausible that the impact of the Eastern Turkic written tradition on Turkish before Nava’i may extend beyond what has been discovered so far.

Yazıcızade ‘Âli, in his work *Tevārih-i Âl-i Selçuk* (The Chronicles of the House of Seljuk), completed in ca. 1437, stated: “There was no Turkish poetry at that time,” referring to reign of the Anatolian Seljuk ruler Alaeddin Keykubad (1220–1237) (Bakır, 2009, p. 291). Following the collapse of the Anatolian Seljuk State after the Mongols’ victory at the Battle of Köseadağı in 1243, an attempt was made to establish Turkish as the state language. According to Yazıcızade ‘Âli, Karamanoğlu Mehmed Bey (1263–1277), during his brief tenure as vizier to Alaeddin Siyavuş (aslo known as Jimri), ordered that the state correspondence be recorded in Turkish. However, due to the absence of standardized rules for writing Turkish, secretaries wrote inconsistently, making it impossible to compile a coherent body of texts. Consequently, state correspondence reverted to being recorded in Arabic and Persian.²

1 Mustafa ‘Âli’s statement on this subject, translated from the original source, reads as follows: “The astonishing language current in the state of Rum, composed of four languages [Turkish, Chaghatay Turkic, Arabic, and Persian], is a pure gilded tongue, which, in the speech of the literati, seems more difficult than any of these. If one were to equate speaking Arabic with a religious obligation (*farz*), and the use of Persian with a sanctioned tradition (*sünnet*), then the speaking of a Turkish made up of these sweetnesses becomes a meritorious act (*müstahabb*), and, in the view of those eloquent in Turkish, the use of simple Turkish should be forbidden (Csirkés, 2019, p. 673).

2 The original passage reads: “Karaman-oglu Muhammed Beg gün vezir oldu, buyurdi ki defterleri dahı Türkçe yazalar. Ol zamanda bu ‘Arabî huruf ile Türkçe yazmak âdet olmamışdı. Her yazıcı

No Turkish works have survived from the Anatolian Seljuk period, when Arabic was used in foreign correspondence, science, and madrasahs, while Persian dominated in literature and court life. Tekin attributes the absence of Turkish works in Anatolia for 200 years to the Crusades and to the influence of Arabic and Persian (Tekin, 2001, p. 139). However, the survival of works up to the 15th century indicates a more nuanced situation during the Beyliks period. While the Beyliks endorsed artistic works in Arabic and Persian, the production of Turkish texts also grew. As Csirkés summarizes:

it was the increased availability of patronage to Persian and Arabic; the growing volume of literary output in these two languages; and the resultant need to convey such literary products to an audience unversed in Persian and Arabic that produced literary works in the Turkish vernacular (2019, p. 676).

In this society, Persian and Arabic held a status akin to that of Latin in European nations during the Middle Ages and Chinese in the Far East (Erdal, 2016, p. 142). In Europe, the production of written works in vernacular languages (as opposed to scholarly languages such as Latin and Ancient Greek) increased significantly after Martin Luther translated the Bible into German in 1522. From that point onward, especially within Protestant communities, writings in local languages rapidly multiplied (Link, Rajesh, & Christine, 2020). A comparison of book counts provides insight into the development of literary production. During the reign of Sultan Bayezid II (1481–1512), the Ottoman palace library contained over 5,000 Arabic and Persian volumes, but only about 200 in Turkish. By contrast, during the papacy of Sixtus IV (1471–1484), the Vatican library held 3,500 volumes; King Matthias of Hungary (1458–1490) possessed 2500 volumes, and King Henry VIII of England (1509–1547) owned 1,000 volumes. In these European libraries, books written in vernacular languages other than Latin and Ancient Greek were either absent or extremely rare (Csirkés, 2019, p. 674).

First Vernacular Writers and Their Opinions on The Language They Use

There are relatively few studies examining the language consciousness of the early vernacular writers of Turkish. One notable work is that of Yavuz (1983), who investigated the language-related perspectives of early writers who

kendü karihasından bir dürlü defter vü tafsıl yazdılar. Cümle idecekleri vaktin başaramadılar. Zira Türkünüñ zabtı kolay degüldür ve rukumı yokdur. Naçar girü Parsî şerh ve ‘Arabî rukum yazdılar.”

established Turkish as a written language in Anatolia. He scrutinized authors from the 13th, 14th, and 15th centuries, listing their works and categorizing them according to their intentions and motivations for using Turkish.

The views of Gelibolulu Mustafa ‘Âli mark a new stage in the development of the language. He identified the level of refinement Turkish had achieved as a written medium and positioned himself as the advocate of sophisticated linguistic expression (Purde, 2022, p. 304; Csirkés, 2019, pp. 673–674). Yet in the formative stages of the language that Mustafa ‘Âli would celebrate, writers had not yet gained such confidence.

A lack of confidence is also evident in the early development of the written languages of Europe. The emergence of Italian as a literary language is initiated with *Prose della volgar lingua* in 1525. The book’s authors, brothers the Pietro and Carlo Bombe, remarked: “l’essere a questi tempi nato fiorentino, e ben volere scrivere fiorentino, non sia molto vantaggio” [being a native speaker of Florentine is not, in these times, much of an advantage if you want to write the language] (Lepschy, 2001, p. xliii).

One of the early contributors to Turkish literature in Anatolia was Sultan Walad. Unlike his father, the renowned Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (1207?–1273), he penned almost all of his works in Turkish. Despite being fluent in reading, writing, and speaking Turkish, Sultan Walad declares in his poetry that he does not know Turkish. These statements can be read as either manifestations of humility or as indications of the writer’s uncertainty stemming from the lack of established writing conventions (Argunşah, 2019, p. 160):

Türkçe bilseydüm ben eydeydüm size [If I knew Turkish, I would tell you]
Sırları kim Tenrî’den degdi bize [The secrets that reached us from God] (Yavuz, 1983, p. 39).

Until the 13th century, Persian appears to have been the predominant written language in Anatolia. However, individuals educated in Eastern Turkic literary tradition were also present and likely used their language in written form in Anatolia. Since Oghuz Turkish was widely spoken by both the ruling elite and the general populace, features specific to Eastern Turkic were probably no longer accepted. Indeed, in 1458, Muhammed Bin Baydur translated work *‘Aka’id-i İslam* (also known as *Kitab-ı Güzide*) into Anatolian Turkish, describing the original text’s language as *olga bolga* (Arat, 1960, pp. 225–238).³ There

3 In the words of the original text: “...gördüm kim terki b muhallel ve muhabbat olga bolga ‘ibaretince yazmışlar. Diledim kim bu latif ve şerif nüshanın lutfi ve şerefi dahi artuk ola; ol sakim ‘ibaretinden sarîh ve fasîh ruşen Türkçe’ye döndürdüm.” [“I saw that they had written it in an ornate and complex style, using olga bolga expressions. I wished that the grace and nobility of this elegant and noble copy might be increased even further; so I translated it from that obscure language into clear, eloquent, and lucid Turkish.”] (Arat, 1960, pp. 225–238).

is an ongoing debate regarding the meaning of the phrase “olga bolga.” Some scholars argue that it corresponds to the Eastern Turkic written language, while others maintain that it denotes a mixed dialect (*karışık dilli* in Turkish) incorporating elements of both Eastern Turkic and Turkish (Buran, 2021, p. 26; Cin & Babacan, 2019, p. 12).

Following an extensive scholarly debate, a consensus has been reached that *Bahcat-al-Hadâ'iq* is the first prose work in Old Anatolian Turkish (Argunşah, 2019). Although the work is identified as having been written in 1286, all surviving copies date from later centuries. The author explains his motivation by noting that his companions, who knew Turkish, requested him to write a book in Turkish on knowledge and wisdom (Yavuz, 1983, p. 15). However, the language of the book is not purely Turkish; it incorporates features of both Eastern and Turkish. For this reason, it is classified as a “mixed dialect” work.

Mantik-ut-Tayr, composed by Gülşehrî in 1317, was inspired by the work of Feridüddin Attar. What sets Gülşehrî apart from his contemporaries is his preference for Turkish over Persian. This preference is evident in his writings, where he openly praises his own artistic achievement and takes pride in using Turkish as his medium of expression (Yavuz, 1983, pp. 30–31). The assertion made by German, Italian, and Dutch writers in the second half of the 16th century, that their vernacular languages were superior to Latin and Greek (Burke, 2004, p. 19), bears a striking resemblance to Gülşehrî’s attitude towards Turkish in 1317. ‘Âşık Paşa from Kırşehir, Arapkir completed his *masnavi* titled *Garib-name*, consisting of 10,592 verses, in 1330. It stands out as the most extensive among early works written in Turkish. Beyond its other features that render it significant in the history of the language, the author’s reflections on Turkish are especially noteworthy. His remarks reveal an awareness of witnessing the transformation of vernacular Turkish into a literary medium (Akar, 2013).

Kamu dilde varıdı zabt u usul [There existed established writing rules in all languages]
 Bunlara düşmişidi cümle ‘ukul [They were sought after by all the wise]
 Türk diline kimsene bakmazıdı [Nobody paid attention to the Turkish language]
 Türklere hergiz gönül akmazıdı [Nobody was fond of Turks]
 Türk dakı bilmez idi ol dilleri [Turks didn’t know those languages either]
 İnce yolu ol ulu menzilleri [Those delicate ways and high destinations]
 Bu *Garibname* anın geldi dile [Therefore this *Garibname* was told]
 Kim bu dil ehli dakı ma’ni bile [These natives of this language will also learn the meaning]
 Türk dilinde yani ma’ni bulalar [They will uncover the meanings in the Turkish language]
 Türk ü Tacik cümle yoldaş olalar [Turks and Tajiks will all be comrades]

Yol içinde birbirini yermeye [And will not revile each other on the journey]
Dile bakup ma'niyi hor görmeye [Not looking down on the meaning because
of the language]
Ta ki mahrum olmaya Türkler dakı [So that Turks will not be deprived]
Türk dilinde anlayalar ol Hak'ı [They will understand *Hak* (God) in the Tur-
kish language] (Yavuz, 1983, pp. 24–25).

The views of Hoca Mes'ud and Şeyhoğlu Sadrüddin Mustafa (1340?–1414?) are also worth mentioning. Hoca Mes'ud authored the *masnavi* titled *Sühbeyl ü Nevbahar* in 1350. Unlike Gülşehrî, he asserts that composing poetry in Turkish is challenging due to the incompatibility between the language's phonetics and the established poetic form (Yavuz, 1983, pp. 18–19; Csirkés, 2019, pp. 673). In the following verses, he voices his concern that the perceived lack of refinement in the language might reflect poorly on his reputation:

Bu bir nice beyti düzünce benim [When I composed a couple of these verses]
Haceletten eridi yarı tenim [Half of my body melted with embarrassment]
Ki bir ehl kişi eger okuya [What if a competent person reads it]
Rekikini anlaya ve kakıya [Sees its clumsiness and lambasts me]
Diye hiç terkip bilmez imiş [For I did not know how to compose words]
Söz içinde tertip bilmez imiş [Nor did I know how to arrange them within
a poem] (Dilçin, 1991, pp. 573–574).

Similarly to Hoca Mes'ud, Şeyhoğlu Sadrüddin Mustafa also lamented the challenges of writing in Turkish. As a native speaker, he explained that he writes in Turkish because of his readership. The following verses show Şeyhoğlu's frustration:

Gerek ma'ni gide suret yüzince [The meaning fades away in front of the form]
Yahod suret gide ma'ni düzünce [Or the form disappears when the meaning is
set]
...
Sovukdur tadı yokdur tuzu yokdur [It is cold and coarse, it is tasteless.]
Yavandur lezzeti vü özi yoktur [It is bland, has no flavor or essence] (Yavuz,
1983, pp. 26–27).

These statements evoke the dissatisfaction articulated by writers from Poland and France in the second half of the 16th century:

In the case of Polish, a native speaker referred in 1566 to the poverty of the language (*niedostatek*), while the poet Szymon Szymonowic expressed his regret for what he called 'the acute lack of words among us' (*u nas brak wielki w słowach*). Even Joachim Du Bellay, in his famous apologia for French, the *Deffense et*

illustration de la langue françoise admitted that ‘our language is not as copious and rich as Greek and Latin’ (*notre langue n’est si copieuse et riche que la Grecque et le Latin*) ... (Burke, 2004, p. 18).

Conclusion

In its early development, the Turkish written language appeared to compete with Persian. In this contest, Turkish writers asserted that the true value lay in the meaning, regardless of the language used, emphasizing that language was merely a tool. From their perspective, Turkish was fully capable of conveying meaning just as effectively as Persian. Yunus Emre, as a key figure in the development of Turkish, is regarded as living proof of this conviction. ‘Âşık Paşa stands out as the writer most reflective about the language he employed and its evolution. By contrast, Hoca Mes‘ud and Şeyhoğlu perceived Turkish as inferior to Persian, while Gülşehrî expressed confidence in the language, asserting that more beautiful poems can be written in Western Turkic than in Persian.

Although these authors demonstrated skill in following the orthographic rules of Arabic and Persian, they faced challenges when it came to spelling Turkish words and voiced dissatisfaction with the lack of standardized writing conventions. The perspectives of the first vernacular writers in Anatolia and in Europe regarding the language they used show parallels. Such statements appear characteristic of the formative periods of written languages and provide evidence of the initial processes involved in their creation and formalization.

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