
Kula Kulluk Yakişir Mı: The Impact of Atatürk's Language Politics On Modern Türkiye

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Abstract:

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, commonly referred as the 'father' of the modern Turkish Republic, established a slew of linguistic reforms during his reign as President between 1923 and 1938. Analytically, these reforms are no short of radical; with the help of the Turkish Language Society (Türk Dil Kurumu, or TDK), these reforms consolidated a common Turkish alphabet and culture, and assimilated groups within Türkiye's regional breadth of influence as to create one singular *imagined community*. As such, Atatürk's authoritative policymaking has had a lasting impact on Turkish society at-large: from musical performance and bilateral free trade, to contemporary immigration laws, the legacy of Atatürk has been uncompromisingly upheld for several decades; only now to be challenged by current President Erdoğan's administration.

Keywords: Kemalism, linguistic nationalism, nation-building, language politics

Introduction

2023 marked the year of the Republic of Türkiye's centenary. Pompous celebrations of national identity graced the whole country over with a sea of red and white — the contrasting colours of Türkiye's storied flag — from the marble walls of Istanbul's shopping district to the far eastern regions by the border with Syria. Such over-the-top celebrations are commonplace during national anniversaries in states with galvanised national identities – states with a strong sense of a unique imagined community (Anderson, 1983, 7). From a nation-statist perspective, the authoritative implementation of widespread performances of national identity have facilitated the erasure of dissenting, minority identities . This idea coalesces with the imposition of a universal language: Turkish. It is the latter of these concepts that constitutes the fruit of the Türkiye's *imagined community*. As such, linguistic reforms of the country's first two decades, guided by Atatürk's rhetoric, bear an immense amount of transience to, and effect on, domestic and foreign governance in contemporary Türkiye. Rooted in historicism, Atatürk's totalitarian approach to Turkification intentionally antagonises all cultural outgroups, to reaffirm an ingroup identity that follows the *six principles* — also known as the “Six Arrows” or *Altı Ok* — which stand for republicanism, populism, nationalism, laicism, statism, and reformism (Aksan, 2005, 20).

The comparative analysis developed in this paper will begin with a theoretical framework created by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, followed by analytical breakdowns of various linguistic campaigns and policies that occurred during Atatürk's rule — which lasted for fifteen years, from the modern Turkish Republic's founding in 1923, to Atatürk's death in 1938. This analysis lays the groundwork for illustrating how Türkiye's cause to be seen as a legible actor within the European state system emerged during Atatürk's rule, and how this cause continues to manifest in the present day. To that end, two case studies pertaining to the effect of linguistic policy on Türkiye's domestic and foreign political realms will showcase the transience of that country's social identification between Europe and Asia.

This manifests itself in informal cultural rhetoric, but also in foreign policy. Accordingly, a discussion on *arabesk* musical expression will be followed by a deconstruction of the 2006 Settlement Law; both case studies bear significant semantic connections to Atatürk's reforms. This analysis will interweave the 'six arrows' sporadically as units of analysis to showcase to what extent contemporary Turkish foreign and domestic policymaking is guided by Atatürk's earlier principles. These ideas will cumulatively showcase how Türkiye has been able to use its geographical location to play both Eastern and Western political conceptions against each other, and to its favour. This was an effort envisioning the Turkish language as a political unifier to tie together not only a community of different dialects, but a broader, national community nestled between Eastern and Western political conceptions.

Language for Political Assimilation & Early Foreign Relations

A conception of linguistic nationalism in Türkiye's case calls on using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic methodology of the *signifier* and the *signified* (Waterman, 1956, 307). The 'signifier' is the concept of a word that is arbitrarily deemed by a society as the correct expression of a particular concept, whereby the 'signified' is understood as the meaning of the concept a word describes. This dialectic is central to understanding a theory developed by Atatürk and the Turkish Language Society (*Türk Dil Kurumu*, or TDK) themselves: the Sun-Theory of Language, or *Güneş Dil Teorisi*. While inherently pseudo-scientific, Atatürk linked changes to linguistic signifiers to reflect a 'Turkified' conception of primal, pre-civilization human instincts. He believed that the first hunters and gatherers in pre-modern Anatolia, the peninsula on which Türkiye lies, looked up at the sky — and instead of proclaiming other remark of exclamation in seeing the sun for the first time, they proclaimed a Turkish sounding *Ağ!* — thus assigning a fundamentally new, bright, and radiant future through a 'signifier' to signify the Turkish nation. Following the narratives

designated by the Sun-Theory of Language, even the sun was reclaimed as something fundamentally Turkish in origin (Enimov, 2001, 385). While this concept does not rest on a scientific basis, it illustrates the way in which revisionist grandeur is central to understanding Atatürk's idea of republicanism, one of the Six Arrows, which lends legibility to Turkish ingroup identity. The principle of republicanism, according to Atatürk entails a construction of a national narrative that mirrored those of European superpowers, in order to create strong conceptions of a Turkish nation-state in the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire's collapse (Salehi, 2020, 59).

An analysis of Atatürk's own perspectives on language provides a foundation for what institutional changes would occur thereafter — changes referred to by John Perry as “sociopolitical engineering” (1985, 285). Atatürk delivered his landmark speech *Nutuk* in segments between October 15th and 20th, 1927, before the Republican People's Party (the *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, or CHP) in Ankara. This was the first time Atatürk presented his language reforms to the public. In this speech, Atatürk cites a telegram describing the current nationalist movement as “full of energy and glowing with enthusiasm even in the remotest parts of the country” — and furthermore, that the people of Türkiye had acquiesced to the central government's “efforts to follow the army's instructions in complete unity” (Atatürk, 1927, 140). This instruction, which can be conceived as a ‘civilising mission’ for Türkiye's internal stability, was carried out uniformly by the army alongside ethnographers, who acted as government agents. They collected and synthesised information on various Turkish dialects surveyed, a practice which directly informed word changes in the Turkish dictionary (Perry, 1985, 286) Under the executive order of Atatürk, the Turkish Language Society (TDK) launched ethnolinguistic campaigns which travelled to far reaches of the Turkish-speaking world – beyond its own national borders and into the Middle East, Azerbaijan, Rumelia (modern-day Bulgaria), as well as Western Turkestan, encompassing

modern-day Afghanistan (Perry, 1985, 286). Some of these allegiances – especially in Azerbaijan – have grown and continue to manifest heavily in Türkiye’s favour in the present day. Bilateral investment between Ankara and Baku has provided Türkiye with a net economic gain of nearly seven and a half billion dollars per year (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). Economic trade is facilitated by historical narrative. The Azeri language undertook similar reforms at the bequest of Atatürk in the 1930s, while at the same time maintaining a characteristically different lexicon; as such, Azeri and Turkish are approximately 70% mutually intelligible, while Turkish is used as a *lingua franca* in business dealings in Azerbaijan (Imran 2018, 101). This showcases Türkiye’s ability to create client states along linguistic lines, which contributed to their political dominance in Anatolia and throughout the Caucuses.

Beyond Türkiye’s external efforts to assert its national identity, internal measures were also undertaken. Indeed, information collected by ethnographers informed further action on word changes by the TDK, who conceived of a three-fold plan in 1936 to guide the Turkish language into the future. This plan remained in formal practice until Atatürk’s death in 1938, but its legacy would linger far beyond this time (Çolak, 2004, 67). First, it sought to revitalise ancient literature from the Ottoman period — those exclusively by authors of Turkish origin and ethnicity, such as those by poets Fıtnat Hanım and Nedim, and diffuse them to the masses (Çolak, 2004, 67). Next, the TDK produced dictionaries and other reference documents pertaining to “word-creation” in Turkish: *Osmanlıcadan Türkçeye Söz Karşılıkları Tarama Dergisi* was the most popular (Çolak, 2004, 67). This reference document contained each “foreign” word identified as unacceptable by the TDK, followed by multiple synonymic replacements, respectively. This dictionary remains in print to this day, suggesting not only a continuity of Atatürk’s discourse, but also the state’s efficacy in maintaining a unified social order under a common, standardised language (Salehi, 2020, 62).

Finally, lists of newly uncovered words that were to replace their non-Turkish antecedents would be published in newspapers across Türkiye. Words with Arabic and Persian roots were “expunged” from vernacular through the replacement of lexicon informed by developments in agglutinative structure — spoken clusters of syllables — that had been consistent in Turkish since the 1860s (Perry, 1985, 296). This removal of foreign lexicon from the Turkish language was done to ensure its attainment of a sort of semantic nirvana known as *Öz Türkçe*, or ‘pure Turkish’ (Perry, 1985, 296). For example, the word ‘airplane’, which had been described using the Arabic loan word *tayyāreh*, was replaced with the word *uçak* in 1924 during a mass instance of military term “relexification”, which is the concerted effort to revamp the language to satisfy ethnonational goals (Perry, 1985, 296). This process continued until Atatürk’s death in 1938. Perry’s concept of Turkish “relexification”, insofar as it illustrates the power of “relexification” by its purpose served towards ethnonational goals, is evidently teleological in nature. As is clear, Kemalist policymaking has used the social construction of language to ‘perform’ the state and its ethno-nationalist principles. This very idea is outlined by Jacques Derrida as being inherently ‘man made’ and arbitrary, and as such, heavily dependent on conceptions of historical grandeur and outgroup stereotypes (Karatani, 1995, 7; Perry, 1985, 297).

The final step in reclaiming the Turkish language from *outsiders* was the adoption of Latin script. This was the driving force in what is colloquially known as the “Alphabet Revolution” of 1928 (Szurek, 2015, 71). These linguistic reforms were also responsible for the legible development of ethnonational outgroups, such as the Kurds, who have a distinct social, cultural and linguistic identity, that has remained a threat to Türkiye's *modus operandi* into the present day. A decade after annihilating large swaths of ethnic Armenians, Circassians, and Assyrians, Atatürk advanced a spread of reformist political values to incorporate various cultural groups beyond the realm of Turkish influence, in the interest of

greater regional power. These efforts were also a means to deem the causes of these Middle Eastern neighbours, who were vehemently opposed to Turkification after their haphazard treatment by Ottoman forces, legible through a common script (Kılıçarslan, 2022, 1668). To draw a loose parallel, Atatürk's Romanization plan evolved from motivations not unlike the Soviet Union's imperialist Stalin-era plan to promote the Cyrillic alphabet to incorporate the languages of its non-Russian speaking constituent republics into a broader Russian-dominated cultural community (Kılıçarslan, 2022, 1668). This initiative was promoted most succinctly through the *Vatandaş, Türkcan Konuş!* — or the 'Citizen, Speak Turkish!' campaign — which entered the periphery of the government after its conception by Istanbul University law students in 1928 (Kılıçarslan, 2022, 1668). When the campaign became government funded, it developed punitive mechanisms to deal with Turkish citizens not respecting the prohibition on the usage of Perso-Arabic script, including harsh imprisonment (Ahmad, 1991, 80). By extension, this policy also allowed the central government to consolidate power from Muslim clerics. Clerics were now prohibited from reading Quranic scriptures, unless translated into Turkish — an idea consistent with Atatürk's principle of laicism, as outlined in the Six Arrows. Spheres previously afforded to the religious elite, such as the Dolmabahçe Palace in Istanbul, had become "classrooms" for the secular elite to debate and decide on political matters (Szurek, 2015, 89). There was never a formal end to the campaign, and as such, its legacy lingers within Turkish society as an informal warning to minorities who seek to operate in Türkiye without regard to Atatürk's nationalist project, pointing potentially to his waning legacy in the contemporary era (Ulutaş, 393, 2010). On the other hand, more recently, Türkiye has backtracked on its Atatürk-era secular reforms, leading to controversial exchanges with the *umma*, or broader Muslim community. In 2017, Türkiye's foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu ostracised Iran by developing "sectarian policy" as a means of establishing "two Shi'a states in Iraq and Syria"

(Bora, 2017). Shi'a Islam is only now deemed as a threat due to discourse surrounding Sunni Islam in Turkish *realpolitik* not seen since before Atatürk's reforms. Underlying this change is what current Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan deems a "historical responsibility" in the two countries (Bora, 2016).

There are obvious practical pitfalls surrounding the creation of a new language, evidenced by the Sun-Language Theory. Most evidently, given its artificial conception by an elite political body, this new language was not reflective of common Turkish vernacular whatsoever. These projects initially alienated the lower classes, and also deemed Türkiye's goals, and path to influence within the geopolitical arena more abstract. Given Türkiye's geographic position, foreign actors remained interested in doing business with the country. This evidently forced foreign actors to be up to speed on Atatürk's reforms, which, while inconveniencing, benefitted Türkiye's state protectionism, and sustained its promotion of its nuanced foreign policy goals for the long term (Ulutaş, 2010, 393). Thus, despite the heavy usage of teleology, the aforementioned linguistic projects and political campaigns have served as guiding forces in Türkiye's nationalist self-conception in domestic and foreign realms.

The 1960s: Atatürk And The Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat

The usage of music as a tenet of cultural capital to emblemize the nation is ubiquitous across the globe. Modern Türkiye is no exception. In yet another Turkification practice linked to language, Atatürk engaged in musical reforms. Co-opting of musical elements of the West with those present within domestic musical traditions, Atatürk's soft reforms led to the creation of a musical genre known as *arabesk*, which was marketed to elite Western audiences as a digestible, Turkish national product (Karahasanoğlu & Skoog, 2009, 53). Ziya Gökalp, referred to as Türkiye's first practising sociological theorist, conceptualized

the sudden emergence of *arabesk* music. He proclaimed that the country's new national music ought to be "born from the fusion of Folk and Western music [...] which, if we collect and harmonise in the Western manner, will yield a music that is both national and European" (Markoff, 1990, 130). Lyrics were required to be written in Atatürk's new Turkish as per TDK directives; initially, these interventions in musical traditions were seen as heinous by traditionalists and musicians alike. (Karahasanoğlu & Skoog, 2009, 54). Yet, the ultimate goal of mixing Turkish instruments such as the *bağlama* folk lute with Western idiom was to create a soft-power element to satisfy the regime's broader foreign policy appetite. Like any policy, it required succinct, legal mechanisms to be employed properly in the geopolitical arena. The Turkish State Radio, or TRT, was this legal mechanism. It strictly aired *arabesk* programming to diffuse Türkiye's cultural capital to the world, and deliberately to Europe (Karahasanoğlu & Skoog, 2009, 54). Musical timbres explored included large choral ensembles and orchestras of European instruments which maintained a characteristically 'eastern sound' (Signell, 1976, 74). These broadcasts targeted Europe — in order to deem Türkiye's quest for European identity legitimate. However, the Arab world, and in particular Egyptians, became heavily attuned to *arabesk*. In a bout of "spontaneous synthesis", Egypt, by co-opting Turkish approaches to song construction, was able to bridge semantic gaps between Turkish and Arab identity that were shattered after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and subsequent Arab Revolts (Tekelioğlu, 1996, 155).

Foreign musical exchange was not merely exogenous — meaning, it did have an impact outside of Türkiye's borders. Three decades after Atatürk's death, ideas of American counterculture found their way to Istanbul. Yet even such radical anti-government movements became subsumed by ideas of Turkification, which instead chose to adopt characteristically conservative conceptions of Turkish identity that harkened back to the time of Atatürk. Unlike contemporary counter-culture movements in other parts of the globe, such

as Tropicália in Brazil, the Turkish psychedelic movement, despite it being restricted to a mobilizable, middle-class, educated, urbanite society, did not seek to reform the social progress of an authoritarian figurehead. What was initially perceived as a radical social movement acted as a litmus test for Atatürk's reforms towards the end of the twentieth century; the result showed that little polarisation within the domestic realm was present (Kozak, 2018, 226). Guitarist Erkin Koray, for example, is a by-product of *arabesk* responses to external movements in popular Western music. Fusing the electric guitar and Anatolian rhythm, Koray rehashed timeless folk and wedding songs such as *Cemalım* ("My Cemal") that remained instilled within the minds of the Turkish public. Psychedelic music was thus enjoyed by an audience far larger than the "drug-smoking, petit-bourgeois class" that made up the contemporary equivalent to the American movement, which had made its way through Istanbul on the aptly named 'Hippie Trail' (Kozak, 2018, 227). Hence, the aesthetic of American psychedelia, but not its fundamentally anti-establishment principles, were adopted by Turkish music listeners *en masse* at this time. This is proof that even when faced with radical global cultural shifts, modern Turkish society has been able to thwart a level of distaste for Atatürk's reforms (Kozak, 2018, 228). An inherent lack of domestic revolt on these grounds is indicative of a highly effective state system, especially in a Middle Eastern state so susceptible to European influence.

The Rule of Erdoğan: Anti-Atatürk?

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan — who was first elected in 2003 as Prime Minister of Türkiye and has served as the country's President since 2014 — is a character of immense controversy domestically and on the world stage. This section draws on the 2006 Settlement Law as a case study to advance the argument that measures such as the Settlement Law put into question his ability to both govern Türkiye in a democratic fashion, and respect Atatürk's

guiding principles for domestic success.

The election of Erdoğan's Justice & Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, abbreviated as AKP) in 2003 has decidedly moved Türkiye towards a more authoritarian conception of national governance within the domestic realm. This has put the party at increasing odds with Kemalist state apparatuses as well as the general populace. As such, the phenomenon of democratic backsliding accelerated after Erdoğan's failed coup attempt in July of 2016 to consolidate all state institutions under direct power of the President, the country suffered from the sudden closure of nearly one hundred non-governmental organisations and the arbitrary arrest of over ten thousand academics (Manis 1, 2016). Protestors banded together across partisan lines to defend the tenet of reformism; chants pertaining to the sanctity of the Turkish Republic were as prevalent as imagery of Atatürk himself during these demonstrations. On a policy level, the 2006 Settlement Law wrestles with Atatürk's reforms – as evidenced shortly – while at the same time bearing parallels with the 1934 Settlement Law (Öztan 83, 2020). The 1934 policy entailed a facilitation of immigration and citizenship-granting to Balkan Muslims — primarily Bosnians and Albanians — on the pretence that most practised secular-oriented forms of Islam that would not challenge Atatürk's principle of laicism (Öztan, 83, 2020). According to Atatürk, the Settlement Law was designed to ensure that those living within Türkiye's sovereign borders would “speak one language, think in the same way, and share similar sentiments” (Öztan 85, 2020). Around this time, Kurds, alongside Thracian Jews, were initially conceived as targets for assimilation by the Atatürk regime; however, attempts to incorporate these groups into the Turkish nation were not ultimately made, because of strong pre-existing constructions of identity within these cultural ingroups (Ülker, 2008, 6).

In the 2006 Settlement Law, the encroaching usage of the Kurdish language in the

country's southeast, vis-à-vis the awakening of Kurdish nationalist sentiment by now-imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, was responsible in restricting formal immigration to those of "Turkish descent and culture" (İçduygu & Aksel, 2013, 181). However, seeds of anti-Kemalist rhetoric were sown directly into this policy, as it allowed Sunni Muslims to become Turkish citizens exclusively. At the time of the law's passage, little concern was raised by the AKP, who, on foreign political ends, believed that reparations could be made with "like minded" Sunni-majority neighbours who had been alienated by previous acts of Turkification (İçduygu & Aksel, 2013, 183). More recently, however, Turkish voters have criticised Erdoğan not out of hatred for Islam, but out of a lack of affinity for Atatürk's principle of laicism (Bacık, 2022). This has spurred populist movements to orient themselves towards "multilingual municipalism" (Sarigil & Peters, 2023, 131). As such, political allegiance to minority political movements, such as the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party, or *Halkların Demokratik Partisi* (HDP), remain the only outlets for ethnic Turks who have become disillusioned with Kemalist nationalism to express dissent — which concurrently undermines Atatürk's assimilationist-nationalist vision from the very people he privileged. This is another cause deemed by and those operating in foreign states in the region, such as Iraqi Kurdistan — which, in recent years, has contributed to Türkiye's state weakness.

Pragmatically, Türkiye engages in liberal economic policy with its like-minded neighbours on sociocultural and religious levels — such as the Sunni-majority United Arab Emirates, with whom they established a \$50-billion-dollar free trade deal in 2023 (Uppal & Saba). On the flipside, it engages in protectionist policy-making with those who do not engage in sociocultural and religious levels, even if this means losing out on economic benefits. This showcases that since 2006, Turkish governmental policy has focused on "regional harmonization" and not the appeasement of the West — something that is again

guided by Türkiye's own "obsession" with ethnonationalism (Altunışık & Martin, 82, 2023). Erdoğan can be credited with Türkiye's reintroduction of Islamic values, vis-à-vis the identitarian focus of the AKP platform – which illustrates a departure from key tenets of Kemalism (Gürpınar, 2020, 7). In response, Erdoğan has received attacks from all sides of the political spectrum. Western critics point to a lack of rational decision-making by Erdoğan on this matter, considering Türkiye's long-lasting pro-EU sentiment (Gürpınar, 2020, 7). Kemalists, primarily within the Republican People's Party (the *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*), have criticised Erdoğan's grip on power as "anti-Atatürk" — which puts into question his authoritarian tendencies as fundamentally incapacitating the Turkish Republic (Makovsky, 2023).

Concluding Remarks

It is worth noting in the context of this analysis, the official term Türkiye — and not *Turkey*, as has been the norm of use in the English language for decades — has been employed. This is no accident; it is a result of Erdoğan's decision to change the country's official name to properly "reflect [its] culture and values" in December of 2021, a move that garnered much populist appeal domestically (Wertheimer, 2022). Such is proof that linguistic reforms remain a pinnacle force guiding Türkiye's domestic and foreign policy making, and the public perceptions representing them. Türkiye, through its control on language, has been able to maintain the balance of power with actors who have challenged their political influence. However, the abstraction, and the apparent mutual unintelligibility between Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's 'six arrows' under Erdoğan's rule, speaks to a country radically defined by the interplay of actors in the Middle Eastern region — on the basis of republicanism, populism, nationalism, laicism, statism, and reformism. Generations of Turks across the political spectrum and across partisan lines are now faced with an increasingly authoritarian President in Erdoğan. The 2006 Settlement Law can thus be interpreted as a

critical juncture guiding Türkiye away from the staunch ethnonationalism that is increasingly incongruent with Western globalist forums such as the European Union. This is a sphere that Türkiye still struggles to penetrate, one hundred years after its founding. Its membership into the Western globalist sphere will be dictated by how well Erdoğan will be able to balance transnational European ideals of democracy, its goal to enter the European Union, along with Atatürk's guiding ethnonationalist principles — and how much support he will be able to lobby from the Turkish people in doing so.

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* N.B. The title for this essay, *Kula Kulluk Yakişir Mi*, or “how unseemly it is to follow anyone slavishly”, is inspired from the live recording of the same name by kamancheh player Kayhan Kalhor (ECM Records, 2013) which fueled the writing of this paper.

