

# LANGUAGE POLICIES AND MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN MINORITY SCHOOLS IN OTTOMAN EMPIRE: OUTCOMES AND FUTURE INSIGHTS

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## ABSTRACT

Language is the spirit of nations; the cement of the culture mosaic. Its education has a critical role especially for multi-national societies and states. According to Human Rights, every individual has the right to develop, teach and learn his native language in any setting. But this democratic right is required to be regularized with a healthy, efficient and long term multilingual education policy. As one of the most powerful multi-ethnic empires of history, Ottoman Empire embraced numerous cultures and several unique languages. As a policy, the Empire followed a relatively flexible and irregular language policy which fostered national homogeneity and unity in time. On the other hand, the Empire always kept the gap between Anatolian Turkish language by employing Ottoman language as official language. The imbalanced policies of multilingual education and Porte's distance to Anatolian Turkish contributed a lot to the disintegration of the Empire. This study focuses on why Ottoman language policies adversely affected the unity of the multilingual Empire, scrutinizes the insufficient multilingual education models among Muslim society with its outcomes and discusses how multilingual education in minority schools contributed the disintegration process.

**Keywords:** Multilingual Education, Ottoman Empire, Minority Schools.

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# OSMANLI DEVLETİ'NDE DİL POLİTİKALARI VE AZINLIK OKULLARINDA ÇOKDİLLİ EĞİTİM: SONUÇLAR VE ÖNGÖRÜLER

## ÖZET

Dil ulusların ruhudur; kültür mozaığının harcıdır. Dil eğitimi özellikle çok uluslu devletler için kritik öneme sahiptir. İnsan hakları beyannamesine göre her birey her ortamda kendi dilini geliştirme, öğretme ve öğrenme hakkına sahiptir. Ancak bu demokratik hakkın sağlıklı, verimli ve uzun vadeli çok dilli eğitim politikaları ile düzenlenmesi şarttır. Tarihin en güçlü çok uluslu imparatorluklarından biri olan Osmanlı İmparatorluğu birçok farklı kültür ve dile ev sahipliği yapmıştır. İzlediği esnek ve düzensiz dil politikaları zamanla birçok farklı ulusun homojenize olmasına ve birliğini tehdit eden birer unsura dönüşmesine sebep olmuştur. Dengesiz çok dillilik politikaları ve Osmanlı hükümetlerinin Anadolu Türkçesi'ne olan mesafeleri imparatorluğun dağılmasında önemli rol oynamıştır. Bu çalışma Osmanlı dil politikalarının neden imparatorluğun bütünlüğünü tehdit eden unsurlar oluşturduğuna yoğunlaşır, Müslüman toplumundaki yetersiz çok dilli eğitim modellerini sonuçlarıyla birlikte inceler ve azınlık okullarındaki çok dilli eğitimin nasıl çözülme sürecine katkı yaptığını tartışır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çok Dilli Eğitim, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, Azınlık Okulları.

## INTRODUCTION

The multilingual and multicultural Ottoman Empire was dissolved in 1923 with the declaration of Turkish Republic after the Turkish Independence War. In its more than 600 years life, the Empire resided many ethnic groups and cultures ranging from Greeks to Serbians. Individuals from different religions, languages and cultures were ruled under the Ottoman citizenship but they were not assimilated and kept their cultures. This flexibility derived mainly from “İstimalet” and “Millet Systems” with which the Empire aimed longevity. With the massive effect of 1789 French revolution, this patronage and populism led the way to revolts of the minorities in 19th century as these systems kept cultural and nationalistic conscious alive. In these systems, languages which can be accepted as the aorta of cultures were also kept which bred a multilingual Empire. This study focuses on these multilingual issues and its relation to language education in Ottoman Empire.

## A LANGUAGE DILEMMA: OTTOMAN EMPIRE AND TURKISH LANGUAGE

Ottoman Turkish (Osmanlıca), which belongs to the Oghuz or southwestern branch of the Turkic language family, had been established in the 14th century as the official language of the Ottoman state. It became the administrative and literary language of the Empire (Johanson, 2011). After the conquest of Constantinople which became the center of the Empire, a new age began for Ottoman language. The conquest led to the waves of Greek, Armenian and Jewish immigrants who added new linguistic varieties to the Empire.

Ottoman Turkish was written with the Arabic script and shows a development in three stages: Old Ottoman (early Ottoman state) or Old Anatolian Turkish (OAT, 13th–14th/15th centuries), Middle Ottoman (15th/16th–17th/18th centuries), and New Ottoman (18th/19th century to 1928). Ottoman Turkish in general is a mixture of three languages: Turkish, Persian, and Arabic. Morphology was Turkic; the syntax was primarily Turkic with important Persian elements, especially regarding subordinate clauses. OAT emerged in the 13th century in the Turkish-ruled Anatolian principalities where Persian was the official language at the time. Persian itself had acquired a large number of Arabic borrowings following the Islamization of Persian-speaking lands and thus the Arabic elements entered the Ottoman language through Persian. This is why Ottoman vocabulary is largely based on Arabic and, to a lesser extent, on Persian. Both Persian and Ottoman continued to coin new words from Arabic roots according to Arabic rules of word formation. (Agoston et. al., 2009)

Ottoman Empire was using a different language in official and administrative issues. On the other hand Ottoman citizens were communicating through plain Turkish. The main reason behind this dilemma is that plain Turkish was thought to be too insufficient for such a superb and magnificent Empire.

The Conquest of Constantinople in 1453 was a turning point for Ottoman language. By the efforts of Mehmed II, the massive influx of Greek, Jewish, Armenian and other groups of immigrants settled Constantinople and created new varieties of Ottoman language. Turkish spoken in Constantinople started to be the standard Turkish. A High Ottoman variety, often called ‘eloquent’ (fasih) Turkish, became the written medium of the Empire’s administration and literature (Johanson, 2011). It was a Turkish variety with a genuinely Turkic grammatical structure, but written in Arabic script and overloaded with Arabic-Persian lexical borrowings symbolizing the high status of the language of the Empire. It differed considerably from the everyday spoken Turkish of the period and was unintelligible to less educated members of the society. It was used for the elaborate high style of classical Ottoman literature during the period from the 15th to the 19th century. According to a traditional classification, there was also a ‘middle’ (orta) variety of Ottoman Turkish and a ‘rough’ (kaba) variety, typical of the lower classes (Johanson 1994). It is significant to point out that vulgar label for plain Turkish used by ordinary citizens widened the gap between citizens and the Empire especially in Anatolia. In addition, Ottoman scholars showed little interest in documentation and cultivation of Turkish, except for its Arabic-Persian components unfortunately.

### **The Origins of Multilingualism in Ottoman Empire: Millet System**

In its more than 600 years of life time, the ultimate aim of the multi-cultural Ottoman Empire was to leave no unconquered land all around the world. The Empire regarded all non-Muslim lands as “Dar’ul Harb” (House of War) which should be converted to “Dar’ul Islam” (House of Islam). However, Ottomans differed from imperialistic states as they did not aim to eradicate cultural existence in conquered lands. Having developed by Mehmed II, Millet System is a term which is closely related with non-Muslims or dhimmis in conquered lands. In Millet System, dhimmis under Ottoman rule were protected according to the Islamic laws by the Empire; their life, religion and language was under guarantee. In return, dhimmis were required to pay special taxes like “harac” and “cizye”. This culture protection resulted with a multilingual empire in which different languages are spoken in different regions. The Ottomans ruled with relative tolerance and flexibility for centuries over a multiplicity of peoples who followed different religions and spoke languages as diverse as Turkic, Arabic, Greek, Slavic, Syriac,

Coptic, Aramaic, Armenian and Latin. Table 1 below indicates some of the major ethnic groups and languages:

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**Table 1. Some Ethnic groups and languages  
Ottoman Empire**

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Armenians	Armenian
Bulgarians	Bulgarian Language
Greeks	Greek Language
Georgians	Georgian Language
Ottoman Jews	Aramaic
Ottoman Kurds	Kurdish Language
Ottoman Circassians	Caucasian Languages
Serbs	Serbian

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In addition to these, Arabic and Turkish were common languages for Muslim groups. Depending on the multi-ethnic structure of the imperial Ottoman, it can be inferred that numerous languages are spoken and taught in the vast lands of the empire.

#### **MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN OTTOMAN EMPIRE**

As a multilingual Empire, Ottomans resided multilingual education, especially among non-Muslims. Multilingual teaching in Ottoman period can be scrutinized under 2 titles: Muslim and non-Muslim language education.

#### **Muslim multilingual Education**

Education of Muslims in foreign languages was in the effect of religion. It has 2 periods.

### **Period of Madrasah**

This period is closely linked with classical religious instruction. In this period, 2 educational institutions apply multilingual education; Madrasahs and Enderuns. In Madrasahs, Arabic is taught as a second language and main focus in on it. On the other hand, Enderuns included more multilingualism as they both taught Arabic and Persian. In addition to these, devshirmes were taught Turkish as a second language. It is quite clear that Ottoman multilingual education focused on Arabic and Persian rather than Western languages because of religious priority.

### **Period of Mekteps**

Having speeded up after Tanzimat (1839), period of Mekteps started in 1773 and became a symbol of western education in Ottoman lands. For the first time, western languages were taught by native speakers, especially French. The lingua franca of the period, French was taught as a second language and used as a medium of instruction in some schools like Tıphane-i Amire, Darüüşsafaka Lycee and Galatasaray Sultanisi (Soner, 2007). In 1865, a language school in İstanbul was opened by Porte to teach French for diplomatic practice and different languages like Bulgarian, Armenian and Greek (Balci, 2008). After 1908, multilingual education gained importance and French became obligatory, German and English was elective in state schools. However, rate of attendance to these schools was relatively low which made minority multilingual education superior to Mekteps.

### **Multilingual Education of non-Muslims: Minority Schools**

One of the most striking and critical concessions that multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire granted to the minorities was the privilege to open their own national schools. Also, same privilege was given to other countries in time. In most of these schools, multilingual education was included and many languages were taught. Mainly Greek, Armenian, Jewish, Catholic and Foreign schools were included in this category. Language education heavily depended on professional, commercial and political reasons.

#### **The Greek Schools:**

The oldest Greek school in Istanbul was the Phanar Greek School, which is also called the Patriarchate School (Akyüz, 2008). It dates back to the Byzantine period and was controlled and sponsored by the Patriarchate. In this school Latin,

Turkish and Greek were taught and medium of instruction was both Turkish and Greek. It should be noted that Ottoman administration had to pay to put Turkish as a course in this school. Most of the talented Ottoman interpreters (dragomans) were educated in these schools. In a Greek Gymnasium named “Zografion” Latin was excluded. Instead this school included courses for language for specific purposes. It was teaching western languages like German and French for specific purposes like trade and commerce. Greek-French Trade schools were also similar to Zografion.

### **The Armenian Schools**

With the provocation of nationalistic ideas, many Armenian schools were opened rapidly in the mid-1800s with the support of France. In 1859, there were 42 Armenian schools only in Istanbul. In 1894, 183 Armenian schools were active in Elazığ with the support of French government (Çetin, 1981). In these schools, Turkish, Armenian and French was taught. Especially French was more taught more intensely than other 2 languages.

### **The Jewish Schools**

Beginning from their first migration to Constantinople in late 15<sup>th</sup> century, Jewish groups opened schools in Ottoman regions. In early Jewish schools, natural sciences were in the center of education. However, in time, religion became the core of education, so Hebrew was taught intensely. In the first modern Jewish school in 1854, Turkish and French languages were harshly rejected. But after years, Turkish, German, French and Italian were taken into curriculum. (Taşdemirci, 2001).

### **Catholic Schools**

Supported by Pope and Catholic circles, Catholic schools did not show any educational quality up to 17<sup>th</sup> century. After 1693, Greek, Turkish and French languages were included in educational curricula in these schools like St. Benoit. Moreover, in St. Luis, Turkish, Arabic and Persian were taught (Taşdemirci, 2001).

### **Foreign Schools**

Unlike Catholic schools which was established in an earlier age, foreign schools were legalized in 1869 and could only be controlled by Ottoman Empire after 1914. Invasion of these schools in 19<sup>th</sup> century is closely related with

weakening Ottoman's compromising more and more. In mid-19th century, 400 American and 100 French schools and many German and Italian foreign schools were active in Ottoman Empire (Taşdöğen, 2001). Among them, American schools were quite significant in terms of multilingual education. For instance, as an American school, Pera Erkek Okulu was quite rich in terms of multilingual education. In this school, English, French, Italian, Armenian, Turkish, Greek, Hebrew were taught intensely. In another school by Americans; Bebek Yatılı Koleji, English was the medium of instruction except arithmetics. (Danacıoğlu,2000) Similarly, Tarsus American College, Fırat College and Merzifon American College included English, Turkish and Armenian. In some of these schools, medium of instruction was Armenian.

## **MULTILINGUALISM AS A THREAT FOR THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE**

Especially in 19th century, multilingualism and spread of multilingual education posed dangers for the Empire in political arena. This threat showed itself in 2 aspects:

1. Threats deriving from being Multilingual Empire and its effects on minorities
2. Threats deriving from lack of multilingualism among Muslim society

### **4.1. The Threats deriving from being Multilingual Empire and its effects on minorities**

It is a crystal clear fact that language has often been the basis of nationalist movements. Philosophers and linguists like Herder and Humbolt emphasized the importance of linguistic heritage for nations claiming that language is the spirit of a nation. Shabad et. al. (1982) underlines the fact that when a population is linguistically homogeneous, language may contribute to the unity and political stability of a state. When, on the other hand, a country contains sizable minorities speaking different languages, competing micro-nationalist movements may arise, posing serious challenges to an established state. The Ottoman example on this issue closely fits with the strong tie between nationalism and language. Millet system provided a great flexibility especially for non-Muslim ethnicities. Different languages in the Empire stayed alive for centuries, even showed linguistic improvement. However, this protection led ethnic homogeneity which provide different ethnic groups to flourish nationalistic ideas. And inevitably this threat fragmented the Empire both in cultural and political terms.



Firstly, Ottoman Greeks revolted in 1803 with help of Western countries full of philhellenistic spirit. In 1832, Greek established their own independent nation. Secondly, Serbians were not convenient for the rights given to them and started to grow hostility for Ottoman administration. This hostility turned into physical rebellion in 1804 and gained the support of Russia. Serbians were given many cultural and administrative privileges including ones related to language until 1878 but each privilege paved the way to independence. Independent Serbia was established in 1878 Berlin Congress. Thirdly, as a homogenous ethnic group, Bulgarians showed their hostility through murder and chaos in 1876. The privileges given in Constantinople Conference in 1876 did not satisfied Bulgarian insurgents and problems carried on. In Berlin Congress (1878), Ottoman Empire gave autonomy to Bulgarians. At last independent Bulgaria was recognized in 1906. Finally, Armenian people who were always given extra credits by the Ottoman Empire and even called as “Millet-I Sadıka” (the faithful nation) set off terrorist attacks after Berlin Congress. Several attacks were made by Armenian insurgents including Ottoman bank raid in 1896 and assassination attempt to Abdulhamid II in 1905. Despite all these terrorist activities, Armenians could not establish an independent nation in that period but left a mark.

Nationalistic revolts in multilingual Ottoman Empire indicate that language flexibility and multilingual education for non-Muslim groups fostered unity and cultural homogeneity of different ethnicities which led to their disengagement.

#### **4.2. The Threats deriving from lack of multilingualism among Muslim society: Dragoman Threat for the Empire**

For centuries, foreign language learning was seen as an unnecessary and even a sinful activity for Ottoman Muslims. In addition, Lewis (2000) points out the fact that as Muslim groups’ negative view on living abroad is the main cause of foreign language absence among Muslim population. That is why foreign language related professions were dominated by non-muslim groups. Having been the major foreign language profession after 1800s, Dragomans were the Ottoman non-Muslim officials in the service of interpretership. This gap was filled especially by Armenian and Greek professionals. Naff (1983) states that due to their Muslim prejudices, the Ottoman Turks refused to acquire the infidel lingua franca of European diplomacy; moreover, even Reisüll-Küttab were rarely ever well-informed regarding European politics, or even, frequently, the location of European states, they were forced to rely on the Phanariot dragomans of the Porte in dealing with western diplomats. They were mostly Greek, Armenian or Jewish who were graduated from famous minority schools with multilingual education. These interpreters of whom nationalistic feelings arouse in the early 19th century,

frequently involved in treachery and espionage by risking and revealing state secrets, hiding some statements of other side, exchanging and manipulating important papers and intentionally delaying negotiations. When Ottoman officials revealed any Dragoman betrayal, they sentence them to death most of the time. Having been accused of espionage, Aleksander Gika (1940, Nikola Drako (1769), Dimitraško (1812, Bucharest Treaty) were some of the executed dragomans (Naff, 1983). In 1802, another dragoman Panayoti Godrika was accused of leaking information and documents to France and punished. Similarly, having been found guilty on espionage and disinformation, dragoman Aleko was sentenced to death in 1807 (Balci, 2006). Although Ottoman administration assigned a Turkish officer as the head of translation division in 1821, dragoman problems accumulated in time due to the insufficient foreign language education in Muslim schools.

## CONCLUSION

In fact, language education resides more than just human development. Multilingual education policies play critical roles in the long run especially for culturally and ethnically rich states. As a vital requirement of democracy and human rights, every human has the right to teach and learn his native language. Totally prohibiting or liberating minority languages in multi-national states shatters the cultural mosaic and ends either with disengagement or assimilation. Today many developed and multi-national countries like Canada and USA apply different foreign language policies such as immersion, dual language forms, submersion and transitional forms of multilingual education (Skuttnab-Kangas, 2000). In these modern forms of multilingual education, the primary aim is to adapt learners to target language and culture by keeping their native language and culture. In more global terms, with English as Lingua Franca phenomenon (ELF), linguistic and cultural imperialism are receding and intercultural communicative competence is gaining utmost importance. In this conjuncture, Turkey as a multi-ethnic and multi-national state needs to develop more efficient multilingual education policies and keep the cultural balance by reconsidering past experiences.

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