# NOVUS ORTUS: THE AWAKENING OF LAZ LANGUAGE IN TURKEY

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**ABSTRACT**

Laz (South Caucasian) language, which is spoken primarily on the southeastern coast of the Black Sea in Turkey, is being threatened by language endangerment. Having no official status, Laz language is considered to be an ethnic minority language in Turkey. All Laz people residing in Turkey are bilingual with the official language in the country, Turkish, and use Laz most frequently in interfamilial conversations. In this article, Laz language is removed from the dusty pages of Turkish history as a response to the threat of language attrition in the world. Accordingly, language endangerment is viewed in terms of a sociolinguistic phenomenon within the boundaries of both language-internal and -external factors. Laz language revitalization acts have also been scrutinized. Having a dekko at the history of modern Turkey will enlighten whether those revitalization acts and/or movements can offer a novus ortus (new birth) for the current situation of Laz language.

**Keywords**: Laz language, endangered languages, minority languages, language revitalization

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# YENİDEN DOĞUŞ: TÜRKİYE'DE LAZCANIN UYANIŞI


## ÖZET

Türkiye'de ağırlıklı olmak üzere, Karadeniz'in güneydoğu kıyılarında konuşulan Lazca'nın (Güney Kafkas dili) nesli tükenme ile karşı karşıyadır. Resmi bir değergesi bulunmayan Lazca, Türkiye'deki etnik azınlık dillerinden biri olarak görülmektedir. Türkiye'de yaşayan tüm Lazlar, ülkenin resmi dili olan Türkçe ve çoğunlukla aile-içi iletişimde kullandıkları Lazca bile birlikte çift dilli konumdadır. Bu makale ile Lazca, dünyadaki dil aşınma tehditine cevaben Türk tarihinin tozlu sayfalarından çıkarılmıştır. Beraberinde, dil ölüm süreci toplumdilbilimsel bir olgu olarak dil-içi ve dil-dışı etkenler dikkate alınarak incelenmiştir. Lazcayı canlandırma hareketleri de irdelenmiştir. Modern Türkiye tarihine göz atmak, bu canlandırma hareket ve/veya politikalarının, Lazcanın şu anki durumu için adeta bir yeniden doğuş olup olmayacağını açıklığa kavuşturacaktır.


**Anahtar Sözcükler**: Lazca, tehlikedeki diller, azınlık dilleri, dil canlandırma

***Nananena gondini-na, ti-ti gondineri giğun.***

**'If you lose your mother tongue, you are also lost.' (Anonymous)**

Due to the history of assimilations, change of power distributions, social human relations and linguistic varieties, a great number of languages are categorized as endangered. It may be linked to the fact that every language –somehow- loses its ability to incorporate newer concepts and notions at some point of time since language is a human invention after all, and cannot keep pace with human progress, or you call it 'transmutation'. Beside this incessant and ever increasing demand of naming things in societies, the ceasing of intergenerational language transmission especially in societal domains where language is used may be another factor to blossom language endangerment. One way or another, language endangerment is the offspring of both external (military, religious, economic, cultural etc.) and internal (attitudes, hesitations, pressure etc.) agents.

Herein, Laz as a member of the South Caucasian (also: Kartvelian) language family which is primarily spoken in Turkey[2] is accepted as a definitely endangered language by 'UNESCO Atlas of the World Languages in Danger' (http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/index.php). In this sense, further explanations concerning the situation of Laz language in Turkey are based exclusively on language endangerment as a sociolinguistic phenomenon, the identification of Laz ethnicity and language in the depths of Turkish history, and the current situation of Laz language in Turkey together with the legal acts and recent policies taken to be executed by the government to revitalize endangered languages including Laz.

**Language Endangerment as a Socio-Linguistic Phenomenon**

Drawing on discourses from ecology and environmental activism, scholars and community members voiced growing concern regarding the decline of 'bio-linguistic diversity' through the rapid decline in the number of languages spoken throughout the world (Davis, in press). The portrait of language endangerment across the world is rather fatal. Harrison (2007) stipulates that approximately 6,900 languages are spoken on the planet currently, and that more than half of these

[2] With the exception of nearly 2,000 people residing in Georgia.

languages are likely to become extinct over the next century. Moreover, around the world, over 11% of languages have fewer than 150 speakers each (Nettle & Romaine, 2000: 40). According to Krauss (1992: 6), as many as 50% of the world's languages are no longer being learned by new generations of speakers, leading him to conclude that "the number of languages which, at the rate things are going, will become extinct during the coming century is 3,000 of 6,000." As endangerment of a language is assessed by the shrinking number of its speakers, and the failure to pass it on to the next generation (Annamalai, 2014), such kind of at-risk languages are labelled as 'endangered languages'.

How then languages become endangered? There are actually various reasons underneath language loss and/or endangerment. According to Hoffman (2009), the physical loss of speakers (due to genocide, natural disasters, or similar causes), the disintegration of the language community (due to displacement, assimilation into the dominant population, or economic concerns), the homogenizing effects of mainstream media (in the form of dominant-language television, radio and print media), and the forced abandonment of the language (through overt suppression, often accompanied by the institution of dominant-language schools) are among the possible factors that lead to language abandonment. In a similar vein, UNESCO Report (2003: 2) defines language endangerment within the scope of a number of factors:

> Language endangerment may be the result of external forces such as military, economic, religious, cultural or educational subjugation, or it may be caused by internal forces, such as 'community's negative attitudes towards its own language. Internal pressures often have their source in external ones, and both halt the intergenerational transmission of linguistic and cultural traditions.

On the other hand, Sreekumar (2014) portrays language endangerment as a result of an acceleration in the trend of a speech community not developing it or deriving benefits from it, or the absence of both. Relatively, Davis (2014) identifies the main characteristics of language endangerment as a slowing or ceasing of intergenerational language transmission, and a decrease in the number of social domains in which these languages are used.

In brief, it can be concluded that the more a language is used in a community, the more it develops in order to be alive; however, the less it is used, the more it fades from the scene. In this sense, language serves like a reciprocal public good. Therefore, endangered languages can be great sources of information, if only we can reach them before the last speakers die (Hoffman, 2009).

**The Cries of Lazona**[3]

According to Sarigil (2012), the Turkish Republic emerged onto the world stage as a secular and centralized nation state in the early 1920s from the remnants of the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual Ottoman Empire, and the newly created nation state was established on the bedrock of Turkish nationalism. However, there are numerous ethnic groups in the country (Andrews & Benninghaus, 1989). Amidst them, Laz of Caucasian origin is accepted as the autochthons of the Northeastern Turkey.

Within a historicist framework, it is asserted by Serdar (2013) that experiencing an existential threat due to the Russian occupation, Laz community fraternized under the Turkish orientations and showed loyalty. As natives of the coastal part of Northeastern Anatolia, Laz became subjected to the Ottoman State by the late 15th century (Cagaptay, 2006). However, governmental policies resulted with a considerable impact upon Laz language. It was banned to speak Laz in public places such as schools. That was why a great number of those children later choose not to communicate with their children in Laz. Due to the fact that native Laz language speakers are likely to have a particular Turkish accent, parents who wish that their children achieve better than they did, might have preferred to communicate with their children only in Turkish (Serdar, 2013). Apparently, good education was warranted only by full proficiency in Turkish language since Turkish language was the medium of teaching in Turkey[4].

In a sociopolitical sense, Turkish government adopted the Surname Law on June 21, 1934 which urged the community members to opt solely for Turkish rendition of any ethnic name. To add more, it was also decreed in the 1950s by the government that the names of towns, villages and the like were to be renamed in Turkish. That was why several places such as Atina, Vitse and Papilat were renamed by their Turkish equivalents which is now Pazar, Findikli and Arili respectively.

Following the 1980 coup d'etat, speaking ethnic languages of Turkey was forbidden until 1991. Broadcasting in ethnic languages was also banned until 2003. The government also banned the Laz newspaper Mç'ita Muruntskhi (Red Cross) in 1930. Moreover, as an indicator of pro-Turkish quasi-scientific propaganda, some

[3] The area which was accepted as the homeland of Laz people.
[4] Some universities use English as the medium of instruction.

members of the Turkish academic elite denied the existence of Laz ethnic identity (see Bellér-Hann & Hann, 2000).

Due to the fact that the speakers of such ethnic languages may experience the loss of their language as a loss of their original ethnic and cultural identity (Bernard, 1992; Hale, 1998), ethnonationalism (Connor, 1994) might mushroom as a reaction to governmental acts since deprivation of a certain community and/or group may create resentment, disappointment, and/or hostility. However, Laz people most generally embrace Turkish nationalism rather than any other ethnic particularities.

**Laz Language**

Laz is an underdescribed and endangered language spoken in North-East Turkey (Lacroix, 2009). The last official Turkish census dates back to 1965 and gives the number of 85,108 speakers (Andrews, 1989: 176). Feurstein (1983) estimates 250,000 speakers all around the world. Today, most of the Laz speakers live in Pazar (Atina), Ardesen (Art'aşeni), Camlihemsin (Vica), Findikli (Vitze), Ikizdere (Xuras), Arhavi (Ark'abi), Hopa (Xopa), Sarp (Sarpi) and Borcka (Borçxa). There are also Laz people living in the northwestern Anatolia settled after 1877-1878 Russo-Turkish War such as Akcakoca, Sapanca, Karamursel, Golcuk, Bartin and Yalova in Turkey. Beside the Laz people living in Georgia, there are also ones who are present in Germany. Yet, as a member of South Caucasian language family along with its congeners Mingrelian, Georgian and Svan, Laz has speakers in both Turkey and Georgia according to the 17$^{th}$ edition of Ethnologue which was released in 2013. In the great scheme of this article, situation in Turkey addressing the Laz language is touched upon. Thus, language endangerment and related revitalization acts in Turkey probing into the Laz language are mentioned henceforward.

Actually, Laz had no common writing system until 1920s. Laz alphabet of Latin origin was first prepared by Iskender Tzitaşi in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic. At the very same, Laz was used as a language of education in the institutions founded for Laz children there. Many books were penned in Laz language. It was nearly after five decades that Lazuri Alboni (Laz Alphabet) was released to the public by Fahri Lazoğlu in 1984. This alphabet was firstly published in a magazine called Lazebura by a group of Laz people living in Germany. It was only after its announcement in the magazine named Ogni (Understand, Hear) in 1993 that Laz people residing in Turkey began using the aforementioned alphabet. Today, two alphabets are known: Latin alphabet for Laz people living in Turkey, and Mkhedruli (Georgian) alphabet for Laz people living in Georgia.

Having no official status, Laz had no common written standards with a notable influence of Turkish on its vocabulary system. Not written, Laz was only spoken within the close family circle at earlier times. Therefore, all Laz are fully proficient in Turkish; the older generations (i.e. older than 40) are generally bilingual speakers, and among the younger generation, a rapid decrease in the number of competent speakers of Laz can be observed (Kutscher, 2008). On the other hand, the differences between the five major dialects (Xopuri, Vitzur-Ark'abuli, Çxaluri, Atinuri and Art'aşenuri) are minor though the level of mutual intelligibility is low. This also hardens communication in Laz. To cope with such conflicts in communication, Laz language in Turkey has had a writing system ever since an alphabet based on the Turkish language system was created by Lazoğlu and Feurstein (1984). Since then, this system has been used in most of publications in Laz language. A textbook named 'Nana-nena' (mother tongue) by making use of both Latin and Georgian alphabets was published in 1991. At the very same, the first Laz-Turkish dictionary, Didi Lazuri Nenapula, created by the great efforts of Bucaklişi and Uzunhasanoğlu (1999) was also released to the market.

It may seem true that all languages are not functionally equal just like the crayons of different colors in the same box. But all languages are equal in their rights to live and flourish. As stated by Skutnabb-Kangas (2012), the right to one's cultural life is as significant as the right to one's physical life. However, Laz people are forgetting their own language as younger generation fails to fully acquire the language. There are also semi-speakers who can understand and speak some but generally show tendency to apply for Turkish words instead.

**Laz Language Revitalization**

UNESCO's Constitution (i.e. Article No.1) also includes the maintenance and perpetuation of language diversity as a basic premise:

> to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world without distinction of race, sex, language, religion, by the Charter of the United Nations (UNESCO, 1982).

Based on this principle, UNESCO has developed programs aimed at promoting languages as instruments of education and culture, and as significant means through which to participate in national life (Aikawa, 2001: 13). With that in mind, language revitalization here is not a simple term in the narrow sense of re-establishing a language that no longer functions as an active language of

communication, but in a broader sense of turning around the decline of language use in particular communities (Henderson, Rohloff & Henderson, 2014).

However, cultural impact of economic globalization challenges cultural and linguistic diversity on the one hand, and facilitates a global civil platform for the emergence of a transnational identity discourse over the nation state on the other (Sreekumar, 2014). Though there is an empty generalization on the premise that language diversity is just a hindrance for development, unfair reports on language endangerment around the world are correlated with the crisis of biological diversity (Hale et al., 1992; Crystal, 2000; Nettle & Romaine, 2000; Harmon & Jonathan, 2010; Whalen & Simons, 2012). Therefore, one should not be sacrificed for the other beneath the philosophy of development with diversity.

Though most languages in the world have no official status (Nettle & Romaine, 2000: 31), gaining governmental recognition is surely beneficial for minority languages which is accepted as a sign of prestige. However, the situation in Turkey is relatively complicated. In such a way, minority languages associate themselves at the same level (at least theoretically) with the majority or official language. The fact that Turkish is the official language spoken in Turkey for many reasons as mentioned may also lessen the perceived importance of maintaining other minority languages. Nevertheless, the European Union accession process initiated such an environment that multicultural recognition of ethnic differences is essential. It is also better late than ever that Turkish government has recently taken some legal precautions against language endangerment and revitalize them through ministerial acts. Since in today's world, languages are accepted as a token for both cultural and linguistic diversity; not a key used for rationalizing dissidence. In this sense, for language revitalization, minority groups see education often as a safeguarding force for the revival or the development of their languages as the state usually promotes national cohesion through strong propagation of the standard majority language for general use, often at the expense of minority languages, which has an important eroding effect on minority languages (Gorter, Zenotz & Cenoz, 2014).

Relatedly, schools are of great importance as they are the arteries of development. Accordingly, the Turkish government legalized elective language courses by catering secondary graders of public schools with some ethnic languages in 2012 for the first time in its history. The languages are being taught as a part of an elective course named 'Living Languages and Dialects' which is applied two hours per week. Until 2013, there has been no approved curriculum for Laz language courses at schools, though. Eventually, a very recent curriculum for the 5$^{th}$ grades was approved last year by Ministry of National Education.

Linguistic diversity gives us unique perspectives into the mind because it reveals the many creative ways in which humans organize and categorize their experience (Nettle & Romaine, 2000: 11). The fewer languages in existence (or the less documentation there is), the less diversity there is with which to work, and the less we can learn about a language. That is why endangered languages are also the storehouses of information that is valuable not only to linguists but to other academics, as well. However, no academic research was conducted on Laz people and language until 2000. Herein, the first academic thesis on the Laz language, and the first Laz grammar book were penned at Bogazici University in Turkey, which was also the first to offer and open first elective Laz language courses at an academic level in 2011. To add more, Lazuri Nenaçkina (Laz Language Grammar) written by Yilmaz Avci in 2002 is the first grammar book that defines Laz language in a structural way. At the very same, 'Pazar Laz' (Ozturk & Pochtrager, 2011) is another book written upon the grammar of Laz language but on a dialectical distinction. Beside the educational changes at a formal level, there are some other steps pampering non-formal education. Certain cultural and solidarity organizations or associations are established. The Sima Foundation for people from East Black Sea region, Lazebura, GOLA Culture, Art and Ecology NGO, Laz Cultural Association and Laz Institute are amidst them. The common purpose of these activities has been stated as the preservation and promotion of the Laz culture and language. In this sense, Lazuri Visinapamt (We are speaking Laz) courses are opened. Additionally, online courses on Laz language provided through websites for open education are offered. Although Krauss (1992) defines television as cultural nerve gas because it streams the majority or the official language and culture into the homes of everyone from different ethnic backgrounds, and accelerates the rate of abandoning as people begin to leave their own languages and cultures, television and/or radio can also be functional in enhancing the prestige of a language. For instance, Gelisim TV (a television channel of local level) in Turkey began broadcasting in Laz language soon after the legislation approved by the Turkish government in 2013, permitting the use of ethnic languages in broadcasting.

On the other hand, Debenport (2009) reports that writing down a language will make it available to those who should not have access to the language through television, radio, internet or other mass media tools. In this sense, publishing realm comes to life for Laz language. The Lazika Publishing Collective has printed 35 bilingual (Turkish-Laz books) since its founding in 2010. For instance, Antoine de Saint-Exupery's book, "The Little Prince," was known to be the first world classic to be formally translated into Laz. The Laz Culture Publishing is paving the way towards the accessibility of sources written in Laz language, as well. Alongside the books published in Laz language, there are also some other written documents which

are now available for the public weal. On that note, the banishment of Ogni, the first magazine published in Laz language, paves the way for others like Mjora (Sun) and Skani Nena (Your Language, Your Voice) with two issues each. Followed by these, the same tradition was carried on by the Lazika Publishing Collective with the release of a new magazine named Tanura (Luminary) in 2011. In addition to all these put forward, Turkey's first Laz newspaper Agani Murutsxi (New Star) was launched at bimonthly intervals in 2013 in order to take the Laz language from villages to the cities. Most recently, an academic journal named as Lazoba-Lazoloji Araştırmaları Dergisi (Lazoba-Journal of Lazology Studies) has been announced to be published very soon. It is planned to publish scientific studies on Laz language, culture, geography, history and related subject areas once every six months.

Leonard (2008: 23) refers to some languages as "sleeping languages," meaning "those that are not currently known but that are documented, claimed as part of one's heritage, and thus may be used again." A sleeping language –then- can be awakened if some part of the population relearns the language from documentation and/or preservation. Relatedly, music can be used as a transmitter of cultural tradition, history and language itself. In this sense, founded in 1990s, a Laz rock band Zugasi Berepe (Children of the Sea) functions as another milestone. Today, many songs in Laz (e.g. Didou Nana by Kazim Koyuncu) are known even by non-Laz speakers living in Turkey.

**Conclusion**

Around the world, each community has its own way of dealing with endangered languages in order to keep them alive through various revitalization efforts. Revitalization of Laz language in Turkey is attempted through many different methods, including in schools (elective language courses for now), other classes (online education or courses provided by NGOs for both adults and children), publishing books of world classic status or newspapers in Laz language, using music as a medium of transferring heritage language to the next generation and making other people be aware of their unique identities, holding festivals at international level to raise worldwide awareness by means of either NGOs or through the agency of government itself, organizing seminars, workshops, if possible, webinars on Laz language in order to draw academia's attention to the issue and the like. By that way, as a response to grassroots activism and increased awareness of endangered languages, language maintenance through documentation helps communities to preserve their languages.

On the other hand, there is another variable that is to be taken into consideration which simply defines the perception or reaction of the families. In this

respect, three types of position regarding the current situation of Laz language in Turkey can be defined: the people who reject any revitalization step with the Turkish nationalist perspective claiming that it would be prejudicial to the embodiment of Turkish state, the people who support all by cautiously laying great emphasis on their difference from Kurds, another ethnic community which outnumbers Laz, and the rest who support again all but by showing solidarity with Kurds and other similar ethnic groups. As the first two groups forms a considerably high majority, special attention is to be paid while struggling for reforms to overcome any bursting side effect. Since, of course, culturally speaking, 'a language that is no longer regularly spoken may yet have a role to play in the maintenance of group boundaries' (Edwards, 2010: 6).

However, some serious setbacks for such a renewal are to blossom as a response. First, there is not enough number of academicians to work on this issue. Additionally, there is a limited number of teachers of Laz language. In actual sense, there is not any Laz language teacher in Turkey due to the fact that there is no division of or department for Laz language –either at linguistic or at pedagogical level- at universities. For that reason, teachers are selected by parents through local endeavors. For instance, last year, again limited but sufficient demand by students and individual efforts of their parents were embedded in cooperation and coordination to find a teacher for two secondary schools to teach Laz language as an elective course. That is why Laz activists, NGOs and such platforms now try to encourage people, especially parents who are lack of genuine enthusiasm of supporting their children to take such an elective course underlining the fact that Laz language is on the brink of death. Actually, raising awareness about language loss will only be successful when meaningful and contemporary roles for minority languages can be established within a community by the efforts of individuals, academicians and other small groups together with the national- and governmental-level legacies developed. In this sense, language assessment and planning, reconstructing language materials, involving adults into the learning environment, enhancing cultural practice to encourage the use of endangered languages both at home and in public, developing intensive language programs (if possible, promoting the integration of endangered language as the language of instruction in these programs), expanding the use of endangered language by means of government, media, local commerce and so on should be on the 'to do list' from now on.

In brief, not only people of Laz origin but also the other community members living in Turkey are increasingly being aware of the presence of distinct ethnic origins, language and culture through aforementioned revitalization movements. It also confronts with the ism that Turkey is at the bottom of the ladder in giving rights

to minority languages so that minority language communities do not longer stampede from using and handing down their native languages to the next generations. Such a touchy and delicate matter should be treated with caution as there is 'human' under the skin.

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