

Ataturk's Reformation of Turkey and its Continuing Impact on the Turkish Language



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Introduction

The fall of the Ottoman Empire and the birth of the Turkish Republic after World War I brought about significant linguistic changes to the region. Turkey's first president, Mustafa Kemal Pasha, known as Ataturk, initiated radical reforms to westernize and secularize the new nation. His language reforms entered the sphere of religion, where he tried to replace Arabic with Turkish as the nation's language of religion. By 1933, laws enforcing his reform were written and dissenters were punished. This reformation ultimately failed as Ataturk faced backlash from those who considered the new legislation to be religious persecution, thus ensuing protests. The lasting impact of Ataturk's reformation is still seen in modern-day Turkey, as Turkish President Recep Erdogan has pushed for a revival of Ottoman Turkish, retreating from Ataturk's linguistic changes in an attempt to reshape the nation.

Linguistic History

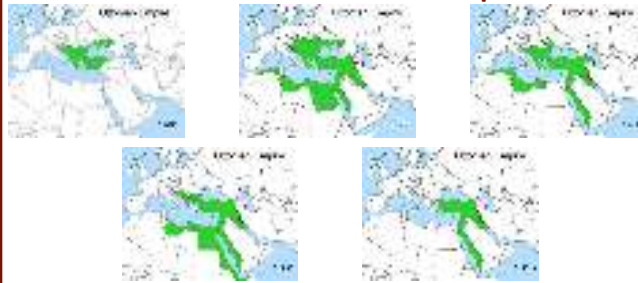
During the time of the Byzantine empire, the majority of its population consisted of Greek-speaking Christians; however, during the eleventh century Seljuk Turks had brought the Turkish language and Islam to what is now modern day Turkey. As the language of the Quran, Arabic infiltrated the Turkish language after the mass conversion of Turks to Islam during this time. Turkish writers were heavily influenced by the Persian literary tradition. During the golden years of conquest and expansion of the Ottoman Empire into North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, the language was shaped by Arabic and Persian lexicon and grammar. These words and structures became commonplace in everyday language use, and while Ottoman Turkish was the language of the ruling class, it was not the language of the general populace, creating a significant language gap between the two groups. Multiple attempts at simplifying Turkish were made prior to the rule of Ataturk; however, it was the rise in nationalism during the mid-nineteenth century and the circulation of Turkish newspapers that inspired poets and writers to decrease the use of foreign words in their works. Modern Turkish began to develop as the disparity between Ottoman Turkish and everyday language decreased and more and more Turks took pride in their language.

Historical Background

The ancient region of modern day Turkey has been ruled by many empires, starting with the Hittites in 17 BCE, all the way through the Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, and finally the Ottomans in 14 CE. However, European exploration and colonization challenged the Ottoman Empire's expansion and by the end of the 17th century, the Ottoman Empire had lost much of its European and North African territory. In the decades leading up to WWI, the Ottoman Empire was plagued by war and conflict, and lost much of its territory. Despite the Empire's weakened state, nearly 11 million people in modern Arab countries were under Ottoman rule when WWI began in 1914. The Ottoman empire sided with the Central Powers and ultimately lost the first World War, sparking a wave of Turkish Nationalism and paving the way for Ataturk's rise to power. He promptly began reforming all facets of the nation, including the language.

Ataturk launched the language reformation movement by implementing a Latin-based alphabet; by 1929, it was unlawful to use the old Arabic script. He also endorsed Turkish synonyms for foreign words, and regulated the creation of new Turkish words. In 1932, he began mandating the Turkification of Islamic rituals in order to expand the use of Turkish beyond the sphere of government and into the spheres of culture and religion. This was part of a larger movement to increase Turkish nationalism through the reformation of the Turkish language. The government believed there was a need "to rescue the people from the influence of the Arabic language attaching them to old mentalities and old traditions". Ataturk began with the ezan project, which involved the transition from Arabic to Turkish in the recitation of the ezan.

The Fall of the Ottoman Empire



Conflict

The Turkish ezan was met with resistance. On February 1, 1933 during one public protest known as the "Bursa Incident", Tatar Ibrahim recited the Kamet in Arabic and Topal Halil recited the ezan in Arabic which started a discourse about religious oppression. During these recitations, a local police officer was present and stated his intentions of reporting the offenders who violated the law, which stated the ezan must be recited in Turkish. One Muslim present expressed his distaste for these laws to the congregation and questioned why Muslims could not practice as they wished and had to comply with state regulations, unlike Jews and Christians present in the country. More protests followed and officials responded by arresting the most prominent protestors. Ataturk came to the region to address the demonstrations and ensure that unrest did not continue. He was careful to deny these allegations and frame the conflict as one based on language, not religion, believing a linguistic conflict was more desirable than a religious one. 30 protestors, many of whom were immigrants, stood trial, as well as three officials accused of failing to effectively enforce the law. Records suggest the punishments were not strictly regulated and often highly arbitrary. These events triggered backlash and further arrests as the Arabic recitation continued to be prohibited. Dissenters felt the new legislation was a form of religious persecution and Ataturk's reformation ultimately failed.

Modern Politics



In Modern Times

In 2014, Turkey's current president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, proposed an initiative to use education as a means of reviving the Ottoman Turkish. However, Erdogan faced backlash after the National Education Council voted to make Ottoman Turkish courses mandatory in high school. This resulted in the Prime Minister stepping in to ensure that the course would be an elective, rather than compulsory. Critics feared that Ottoman Turkish would not be useful to children and that this movement is an indication of impending Islamization. Erdogan, on the other hand, argued that reverting back to Ottoman Turkish is a way to learn about history and that the switch to the Latin alphabet was a fatal move. Erdogan is still adamantly pushing for Ottoman Turkish to be taught in schools, stating in 2018 "The bond between our nation and its old civilization was tried to be weakened." More measures to prevent use of Arabic or other foreign languages in Turkey were taken as a district municipality in Istanbul began taking down Arabic shop signs in June of the same year after an influx of Arabic-speaking refugees from Syria, with officials citing a new regulation requiring shop signs to include at least 75 percent Turkish words.

Conclusion

Ataturk's reformation reflected a global trend of growing nationalism that began in the nineteenth century. His rise to power transformed the region and his desire to sever all ties to the past by purging the nation of traditional Ottoman practices and institutions has had lasting impacts into the modern day. His language reform was both a success and failure; while it increased literacy rates and promoted the Turkish literary tradition, it was also met with pushback as he undermined the significance of the Arabic language to the Muslim population in the country. Language reform is still impacting the nation today as the current present is campaigning for a return to Ottoman Turkish, and responding to the influx of Arabic-speaking immigrants by restricting the use of their language.