The Linguist and the Politician

The Türk Dil Kurumu and the Field of Power in the 1930–40s

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We will spare no effort in purifying our language of foreign rules and words, in making written language closer to spoken language, and in Turkifying the language usages of the state and of the sciences.¹

The way the upper echelons of political society fix linguistic propriety is a well studied historical dynamic and is frequently interpreted in terms of lengthening chains of interdependence, bureaucratic rationalisation, and nationalisation of societies.² This study seeks to draw a precise portrait of the organisation in charge of “purifying” and “nationalising” language during the 1930s and 1940s in Turkey. The Türk Dil Kurumu was set up in Ankara in July 1932 as a private association, but was from the outset entrusted with a task which fell squarely within the category of the state monopoly on legitimate symbolic violence.³ It is worth pointing out that the name of this organisation underwent a form of linguistic purification itself, being initially called Türk Dili Tetkik Cemiyeti (Society for the Study of the Turkish Language) before this was changed to Türk Dil Kurumu (Turkish Language Institute, hereafter TDK) in October 1935.⁴ This etymological purification (with the Arabic words being

⁴ Different acronyms will be used depending on whether we are referring to the period 1932–1934 (TDTC), the period 1935–1951 (TDK), or to the entire period (in which case TDK is used too). In 1934 and 1935 the organisation was briefly called the Türk Dili Araştırma Kurumu (Turkish Language Research Institute).
replaced by Turkish words) is, as we shall see, far more than a simple change in the association’s name, reflecting instead the kaleidoscopic nature of a political entity that cannot be pinned down using the standard categories of sociological understanding.\textsuperscript{5}

The legal ambiguities surrounding the status of the TDK partakes in the context of what Hamit Bozarslan has called “third-stage Kemalism,”\textsuperscript{6} operative in the period 1931-1945, and characterised firstly by the ever greater dedifferentiation between the state administration and the Republican People’s Party (\textit{Cumhuriyet Halk Fırkası}, hereafter CHF),\textsuperscript{7} and secondly by the increasing subjugation of intellectual and civic life to the issues as defined and laid down by the regime.\textsuperscript{8} The reintroduction of a multi-party system in Turkey therefore marks the formal \textit{terminus ad quem} of this study: between 1946 and 1951 the \textit{Türk Dil Kurumu} was gradually stripped of its various attributions that the political authorities had to all intents and purposes conferred on it, and it went back to being a straightforward cultural association—which, on paper at least, it had never ceased to be.

One of the original formulations meant to guide the collective research carried out under the aegis of TRANS\textsc{TUR} was the “the increasing number of areas of government intervention.”\textsuperscript{9} It would be convenient to define the TDK as a sort of para- or peri-state entity, operating in a grey area somewhere on the edge of the field of sovereignty. But such a metaphor clearly brings with it an

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\textsuperscript{9} Élise Massicard \textit{et al.}, “Ordonner et transiger: modalités de gouvernement et d’administration en Turquie et dans l’Empire ottoman, du XIXe siècle à nos jours” [detailed presentation of the TRANS\textsc{TUR} project submitted to the French Agence Nationale de la Recherche], 2008, available online at: http://transtur.hypotheses.org/31 (accessed 8 October 2014).