



## THE EFFECTS OF LANGUAGE SIMILARITIES ON TURKISH LEARNING PROCESSES OF STUDENTS FROM THE BALKAN COUNTRIES

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### ABSTRACT

Interactions between Turkish and Balkan languages began with Hun raids to Europe and reached a peak level during the Ottoman Period. Even though Balkan languages and Turkish belong to different language families, similarities exist between these languages along with many common words (cognates). This is because these nations shared the same political system from the 14<sup>th</sup> century until 1912, and have had common or similar cultures up to now, influencing each other in all aspects of life. As language is a living entity shaped by culture, it is inevitable for cultural interactions resulting from centuries of co-existence to be reflected in language.

The purpose of the study is to determine the effects of the similarities between Turkish and Balkan languages on Turkish-learning processes of students from Balkan countries and on their attitude towards Turkish. The study was conducted on a group of students with Balkan nationalities learning Turkish at Istanbul University Language Center. The data were obtained by means of “The Scale of Attitude to Turkish” which was designed by the researcher. In addition, the students involved were individually interviewed so as to determine to what extent similarities between their native languages and Turkish affect their Turkish learning process. It is thought that the results of the study will provide facilitating clues not only for students coming to Turkey from Balkan countries and learning Turkish but also for instructors teaching Turkish.

*Keywords: Balkan languages, teaching Turkish, language similarities, attitude to Turkish.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Turks’ relationships with the Balkans date back to the early fifth century. It is known that Atilla swept across the Balkans, reaching almost as far as Istanbul. The Turkish groups known as Peçenek, Kuman and Uz (Oğuz) arrived at and settled on the Balkan peninsula in the 11 and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Then in the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century Sarı Saltuk, who was probably escaping from the Mongol invasion, and the Turkish tribe named after him thereafter arrived at the Balkans and formed the first Islam community around Dobruca. However, long-lasting and permanent relationships with the Balkans started during the Ottoman period and have survived to date (İsen, 1992:90).

Because they co-existed with the Balkan nations for a long time, the Turks interacted with them not only administratively and economically but also culturally and linguistically. Mainly

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in the late 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Turks introduced to the Balkan peninsula a new system of state administration, new institutions, a new social order and the religion of Islam, which the Balkan peoples encountered for the first time.

The Turks and the Balkan peoples who politically coexisted from the 14<sup>th</sup> century to 1912 and have shared the same culture to date have influenced each other in all aspects of life. This interaction also holds true for their languages.

The Balkan languages and Turkish have similarities and many common lexical items although they belong to different language families. Some of the vocabulary items in the Balkan languages which are considered as borrowings from Turkish have Turkish origins: (**bölme** bölüm, parça; oda > *bölme* in Bulgarian, *bylme* in Albanian, *bolme*, *bulme* in Macedonian). There is also a certain group of words which entered the Balkan lexicons via Turkish after they were Turkified (*fetvâ* in Arabic > **fetvâ** in Turkish > *fetvá* in Bulgarian, *fétva* in Serbian, *fetfa* in Albanian, *fetfás* in Greek) (Karaağaç, 2008:131-301).

From Abdullah Şkaliç's book "Turcizmi u Srpskohrvatskom Jeziku", which deals with the effects of Turkish on the languages spoken in Yugoslavia, Şefikoğlu (1987:219-220) quotes: "A huge number of words originally belonging to Eastern languages have found their way into our colloquial language, and some of them have even become commonplace in our literary language. Such words are great in number indeed. It is for this reason that it is impossible to fully comprehend many of our folk ballads, tales, proverbs and idioms unless the meaning of vocabulary items in them has been made clear."

According to Gülsevin (2009:49-50), in order to thoroughly understand such topics as two different nations' languages influencing each other or a dialect's gaining diverse features as compared to its relative versions, one has to take the following facts into account:

**1.** Languages evolve, so dialects and regional accents develop. Diverse regional accents basically result from:

**a. External factors.** Settling in new areas where new comers get into contact with new people leads them to diverge over time from their relatives in their old territories in terms of language, religion, customs, culture etc. Words are loaned from new neighbours, whose phonological systems can affect the new settlers' language, and even morphological and syntactical changes can occur.

**b. Internal factors.** People who abandon their mother tongue zone and migrate to a different location begin to get disconnected from changes and developments in that zone, and follow a different developmental route.

**2.** Peoples who are relocated during major migrations or conquests and arrive at new territories won't live in a homogeneous society with a single ethnic group. Even if the states and political administrations are disestablished during such major events, the people who are the subjects of those disestablished states do not vanish. They survive in a new composition with new distinct ethnic groups and evolve together. When distinct people live together and share the same culture, political structure, emotions etc., they may develop a new common identity.

Linguistic data obtained from historians studying Huns, Avars, Peçenek, Bulgarians, Cumans and finally Ottomans' arrival on and passage across the Balkan Peninsula shows that many Turkish words, mainly place names, were loaned into Balkan languages.

Because language is a dynamic entity shaped by culture, it is quite natural that cultural relationships stemming from hundreds of years of coexistence are reflected in language. Because language is creator and transmitter of culture as well as being part of it. Aksan (1995:67) states that in some cases even a single word in a language can shed light on a nation's beliefs, customs, interpersonal conducts and relations, material and spiritual aspects. All the components of culture formed by communities have reflections in their vocabulary.

### **The Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the present study is to determine the effects of similarities between Turkish and Balkan languages upon Turkish-learning processes of students coming from Balkan countries and to figure out these students' attitudes towards Turkish.

Attitude, whether towards a tangible object or an intangible notion, means acquired personal tendencies which manifest themselves as being for or against it, and which guides an individual's thoughts and feelings. Being unobservable in itself, but assumed to lead to certain conducts which can be observed, attitude is something that can be acquired through learning, that guides an individual's behaviour, and that leads to a partiality in a decision-making process (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1992:115; Ülgen, 1994:79).

In learning a foreign language and mastering basic language skills, attitudes towards that language are of great importance because learning a second language is a social and psychological phenomenon (Gardner, 1985; Gardner and Lambert, 1972). Attitude is the most effective and dominant factor especially for any achievement in the process of language learning (Brown, 1994). Students have varying attitudes to the target language, its speakers, culture, and social values, and whether these are favourable or unfavourable determines the individual's success/performance in the learning process (Ellis, 1994). Whereas favourable attitudes bring about success in the process of foreign language learning, unfavourable ones lead to failure (Gardner and Lambert, 1972).

Just as positive attitudes to the foreign language facilitate learning so does awareness of similarities and differences between the mother tongue and the target language affect learning. Knowledge of overlapping and different aspects of Turkish and Balkan languages can help to estimate in advance any difficulties that learners from these countries may encounter while learning Turkish. Awareness of similarities and differences between the learner's mother tongue and the target language is important in that it enlightens us as to what sort of difficulties the learner will have while learning a foreign language and what aspects of the language can be easily learned.

According to Lado (1957:2), for a foreign language learner, aspects of this language similar to his / her mother tongue prove to be easy while different aspects are difficult to learn because students tend to transfer forms and meanings in their own culture and language into the target language and culture. This happens both when, in a productive state, they attempt to speak and act in the target culture and when, in a receptive state, they try to understand native speakers of the target language. This being the case, determining beforehand the difficulties those learners will have and creating the appropriate teaching atmosphere accordingly may prevent student mistakes.

## **METHOD**

### **Design of the Study**

This study is organized according to the "eclectic method" which is used together with qualitative and quantitative research techniques. Eclectic method is the use of both techniques

with the aim of collecting data about a topic with qualitative research, explaining the collected data, clarifying quantitative findings and discovering different dimensions of the data collected from the participants. (Kıral and Kıral, 2011: 4).

### **Participants**

The population of this research consists of students of Balkan nationalities learning Turkish as a foreign language. The sample group consist of totally 26 students of Balkan nationalities (14 girls and 12 boys) – 6 Albanians, 8 Macedons, 3 Bosnians, 3 Kosovans, 2 Montenegrins, 2 Croatians and 2 Serbians – who learn Turkish at Istanbul University Language Center.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

The data for this research were obtained through the semi-structured interview technique. However, no limitations should be put on the answers of individuals being interviewed (Şimşek and Yıldırım, 2005). Semi-structured interviewing technique provides the shortest time to obtain information about individuals' knowledge, thoughts, attitudes and behavior and possible reasons for them (Karasar, 2003). Each student was individually interviewed to determine the effects of similarities between their native language and Turkish on their performance in learning Turkish. During the interviews, "Semi-structured Interview Form" designed by the researcher was used. The interview questions were designed in a preconceived framework to serve the purpose of the research and were checked by expert teachers studying on teaching Turkish to foreigners in terms of their appropriateness for the purpose and method of the research.

For the purpose of finding out the attitudes to Turkish of students of Balkan nationalities learning Turkish as a foreign language, a "Scale of Attitude to Turkish" was utilised. The scale was specially designed by the researcher by using "Foreign Language Attitude Scale" developed by Briem (1974) and redesigned by Corbin and Chiachire (1995). This attitude scale is applied to 112 students the second time after 20 days with the aim of pre-test, the reliability of the scores is calculated as .86 via Cronbach Alpha reliability formula.

Consisting of 28 items, Scale of Attitude to Turkish was scaled as *absolutely agree* (5), *agree* (4), *undecided* (3), *don't agree* (2), *absolutely disagree* (1). Therefore, the lowest total points to be obtained from this scale are 26 with the highest being 130. The highest possible score that can be achieved by circling only the choice *undecided* for all scale questions is 78 points, which is indicative of neutral attitudes suggesting pure indecision. The scores that can be achieved through this scale and attitude levels corresponding to them are as follows:

The highest score for unfavourable (negative) attitude: 26 points, the score for totally undecided: 78, the highest score for positive attitude: 140. As can be understood from these figures, the scores over 78 points refer to positive attitudes, those under 78 negative attitudes.

### **FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION**

It was found after the analyses conducted to determine the students' attitudes towards Turkish that out of 26 students, 19 had positive attitudes to Turkish lessons; 4 had moderate levels and 3 had negative attitude levels. These results indicate that 73,07 % of the students had positive attitudes to Turkish; 15,38 % had moderate levels of attitudes and 11,53 % had negative attitudes.

**Table 1.** Attitude Levels of Students towards Turkish

N: 26		
Positive Attitude	Moderate Attitude	Negative Attitude
N: 19 73,07% X:110	N:4 15,38% X: 78	N:3 11,53% X:60

According to Starks and Paltridge (1996: 218) learning a language is closely related to the attitude towards the target language. Many national and international studies have shown that the positive attitude towards learning a target language increases the success (Chambers, 1999; Gardner, 1985; İnal, Evin and Saracaloglu, 2005; Shah, 1999; Thadphoothon, 1999).

However, the majority of the students' attitudes' (73,07%) being positive should not be connected to the similarities between Turkish and Balkan languages. The reason for this is that the similarity between the native language and the target language is not the only reason for the students to show positive attitude towards the target language. In Göçer's study (2009), for instance, a meaningful difference could not be found between the attitudes of students from Turkic Republics and other foreign countries. In this respect, it can be thought that besides the linguistic similarities, the aim of learning Turkish (education, work, marriage, etc.) are effective in the students' attitudes being positive.

During the interviews carried out to determine the effects of similarities between the students' native languages and Turkish upon their learning Turkish, the responses supplied by the students about their countries and mother tongues are as follows:

The first question posed to the students for the research was whether their families included any member who knew Turkish. The reason for this was that during the interviews with the students coming from Macedonia it was seen that Turkish was spoken as a native language especially in Eastern Macedonia and those students learnt Macedonian after secondary school. Such students who acquired Turkish as a mother tongue were excluded from the research.

Out of 26 students aged 17-28, only 2 Macedons had members in their families who knew Turkish. It shows that most of the students in the sample group were exposed to Turkish after their arrival in Turkey.

The second question posed at the interview was whether the student's native language's alphabet was similar to the Turkish alphabet and he / she had any trouble in learning Turkish because of a different alphabet. The Albanian students and those coming from Kosova and Montenegro with Albanian being their mother tongues responded that Alabanian had 36 letters and they used the Latin alphabet, adding that they didn't have any difficulty reading and writing Turkish. However, they said that they found it hard to pronounce the letters "ı, ö, ü," which occur in Turkish.

The Macedon students stated that they used the Cyrillic alphabet containing 31 letters and that they had learnt the Turkish alphabet easily because they knew the Latin alphabet owing to their previous knowledge of English. The letters they said they found most hard to pronounce were "ğ, ı, ö, ü."

The Bosnian students replied that they used the 30-letter Latin alphabet, but it had more vowels than the Turkish alphabet and said that as the letters "ı, ö, ü" do not occur in their languages, they found it hard to pronounce them.

The Croatians said that their alphabet was made up of 30 letters and two combined forms (i+e=ie, r+r = f), and that they had difficulty pronouncing the consonant “y” and “ı, ö, ü” which do not occur in their own alphabets.

The Serbian interviewees responded that they used both the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets in Serbian, and therefore they didn't have any trouble with the Turkish alphabet, but as with the other students they said they had difficulty in the Turkish letters which do not occur in their mother tongues, especially pronouncing them.

Another question asked during the interviews was whether there were lexical similarities between their mother tongues and Turkish. The interviewees replied giving many examples that Turkish and their native languages had a lot of common words (cognates). The following examples are striking indeed: Examples for common words in Turkish and Albanian respectively are *perde* (perde), *kasap* (ksap), *pamuk* (pambuku), *fincan* (filxhan), *mahalle* (mëhallë), *dolap* (dollap), *yastık* (jastëk), *nargile* (nargjile); examples for Turkish and Macedonian common words: *para* (pari), *cezve* (deşve), *biber* (piper), *tütün* (tutun), *çay* (čaj), *bayrak* (bajrak); Similar words in Turkish and Serbian: *bakır* (bakar), *pamuk*, *nar*, *sabun* (sapun), *alet* (alat), *tepsi* (tepsija), *boğaz* (bogaz); Turkish –Croatian cognates: *karanfil* (karanfilić), *çirak*(cirak), *balta*, *çorap* (çarape); Turkish-Bosnian cognates: *kaşık* (kašika), *döşek* (dušek), *çeşme* (česma), *şeker* (šećer), *kilim* (ćilim), *köfte* (ćufte), *sandık* (sanduk), *kapı* (kapija), *meydan* (megdan). Some of these vocabulary items are of Turkish origin, while others are of Arabic origin, but entered the Balkan languages via Turkish. The students stated that lexical similarities between Turkish and their own languages facilitated their comprehension and production of Turkish and that they felt less alien to Turkish as they heard more and more similar words in their exposure to Turkish.

The next question posed to the students during the interview was what language area they had the most trouble when learning Turkish. For this question, all the students whose mother tongues are Macedonian, Albanian, Bosnian and Croatian pointed out that they had a particular difficulty with Turkish affixes because affixes occur in the form of prefixes in their languages whereas in Turkish they occur as suffixes. They particularly stressed that they found it hardest to understand and use the causative and passive suffixes in Turkish. Three Albanian students said that they had trouble with long nominal chains, not being able to accurately use completing markers and markers for the completed nouns. The reason they gave for this was that the completions in Turkish were achieved through a different syntactic order as compared to their own tongues and markers were placed at the end of words in Turkish. And Serbian students said that the language area they found most difficult to understand and use was reported past tense (-miş) and simple present tense, adding that these tenses do not have corresponding matches in their languages.

All the students pointed out that the most outstanding difference between Turkish and their native languages was in sentence structure. The students stated that it was the first time they had encountered a language with its verb at the end of the sentence and that they mistakenly used the verb in mid-position instead of final position while speaking Turkish. This was also clearly observed during the interviews with the students.

As a last question, the interviewees were asked what language area they learnt the most effortlessly while studying Turkish. The Bosnians and Albanians responded that they learnt present continuous in Turkish very easily. The Croatians, Macedons and a Serbian said that the Turkish pronouns were easy to learn because their languages had more pronouns because of

masculinity and femininity. The other Serbian said that noun phrases in the form of nominal chains were simple for him as he had grasped the logic behind their formation.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The conclusions drawn from the research and some suggestions formed on the strength of these conclusions were given below:

1. The findings of the study show that the majority of the students in the sample group (73, 07 %) developed positive attitudes towards the Turkish language. We think that our historical relations with these nations, the current socio-political situation and lexical similarities between the students' mother tongues and Turkish had a major role in the development of these positive attitudes. We also think it possible to make the Turkish language more popular in this region with activities directed towards increasing the publicity of the Turkish language and culture in the Balkans.

2. All the students having participated in the study said that they had trouble writing and pronouncing the sounds "ğ, ı, ö, ü" which do not occur in their languages while they exist in Turkish. In order to deal with the problem, adequate classroom activities have to be provided to consolidate the teaching of vowels and through dictation practice to be incorporated in teaching activities teachers have to make sure that all their students learn the Turkish alphabet as a primary task. The students' problems with punctuation should be settled while they are in the elementary stage of learning Turkish; otherwise, such mistakes may become permanent in the intermediate and advanced levels.

3. During the interviews with the students, it became clear that their own languages and Turkish had many cognates which both facilitate their learning of Turkish and get them to feel more sympathetic towards Turkish. Nevertheless, the students stated that they had trouble mastering structures and forms totally different from those of their native languages (such as sentence structure, affixes, verb phrases). For this purpose, we suggest that interlingual contrastive analyses have to be carried out between Turkish and Balkan languages to determine similar and different aspects between them and teaching situations should be created accordingly.

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