

The Views of Early Republican Intellectuals on Language Teaching in Turkey and an Evaluation of Them in Context with Linguistic Revolution

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Abstract: In this study, our aim is to derive the views of intellectuals and authors published in the journals and papers during the first years of Republican Era in Turkey on language teaching and the teaching of basic language skills and to evaluate them in context with Linguistic Revolution of Turkey (July 12, 1932).

The views we deal here compose a good source for those interested in developing educational programme and they caused a brainstorming on cultural revolutions and linguistic issues of the new Turkish State among our intellectuals and authors of the time.

Principally being a literature review, our study also presents useful information to solve today's problems on language teaching.

Key words: language teaching, linguistic revolution, Republic of Turkey, Turkish, Turkish intellectuals.

Introduction

After many turbulent years of the last period of Ottoman Empire, new Turkish Republic had in one hand steam to make major innovations and serious problems to overcome the difficulties of creating a new society on the other hand. Nearly in all fields of the society, constituted innovations and revolutions. Tradition left its position to modernity. Educational activities also received its share from these revolutions. However, before talking about educational activities, we need to deal Turkish Linguistic Revolution.

Evolution and revolution in a language are very different concepts. While talking about these two concepts, Korkmaz (1970) explains that, the first one occurs in a long time span without any human intervention. So it should be evaluated as a maturation process. The second concept is very different by means of the intervention as any revolution is made by some human effect and it occurs in a short time span comparatively. In this sense, the changes, Turkish language experienced, can be said to be revolution.

In order to explain the term 'revolution', Karal (1956) quotes from Atatürk as follows:

"Revolution is something like replacing all old – fashioned institution with those ones providing opportunities of civilization to the nation."

Dealing linguistic revolution in this sense, we can conclude that Turkish Linguistic Revolution is an attempt to create a national language including all national developments of culture, gaining self – development opportunity and self – confidence (Korkmaz, 1970 s; 99).

Turkish has three main periods: Seljuks, Anatolian Principalities and Ottomans. Having the knowledge of these periods of Turkish language in mind, we can examine the effects it had throughout its history. When it reached to Republic period, Turkish language was in a state of deterioration and corruption to the culture and nation it belonged to.

In spite of the attempts made by some public officials and intellectuals to purify and simplify Ottoman Turkish during the Tanzimat, the language could never succeed to become a nationalized one. During Ottoman period, the influence of Arabic and Persian was so much that Turkish language was very far from being an original one. The influences of other languages were multi directional such as rules, vocabulary, syntax, and alphabet and so on (Korkmaz, 1970 s; 100). Regarding all these factors, Atatürk made a revolution on 12 July 1932 known as Letters Revolution. This revolution is an attempt to facilitate education, relations of society and to increase literacy level. In essence, this is not merely a revolution of letters and writing. After the use of Latin

alphabet, many innovations and explorations occurred in grammar, phonology, semantics and syntax of Turkish language.

As a result of purification, simplification and derivation practices, many diligent works were carried out. Authors, intellectuals, scientists and journalists adopted different ways to enhance their works with genuine Turkish. Vocabulary that our language acquired during revolution era has three types: 1- Derivations from vulgar (from regional spoken language) 2- Derivations from old written texts of Anatolian Turkish Literature 3- Newly created words (Korkmaz, 1970 s; 110).

As all other revolutions, Linguistic Revolution was sustained by the support and care of Atatürk and Turkish Language Institute. In a short time, efforts turned out to be fruitful and new Turkish Republic managed to create a fresh and modern society by means of educational, cultural and social aspects.

While the results of Linguistic Revolution had their way to educational systems of the new state, many debates, concerning Linguistic Revolutions and unity of education, arose among the intellectuals of the time.

1. The Views of Early Republican Intellectuals on Language and Language Teaching

Before starting to discuss their views, we need to explain what we mean by the phrase 'Early Republican Intellectuals'. Turkish Republic, founded on 1923, had a new type of intellectuals supporting almost all revolutions held by the government. That was valid for nearly 15 years between 1923 and 1940. Those intellectuals mostly grown up to the last days of the Empire and experienced ending struggles of modernization of the Empire. Having those desperate struggles in their vision, they bore some kind of modernist intelligence to the new State of old country (Anatolia). Here, our expression of 'Early Republican Intellectuals' stands for that group of writers, journalists, pedagogues, sociologists and academicians.

However being modernist enough, intellectuals of early period had many problems to solve especially on educational issues. Language teaching was one of the most prominent of these.

To see the picture of the day, we should remember the Linguistic Revolution and Letters Revolution that demolished all the possessions of tradition. The government enacted to use Latin alphabet instead of Arabic letters in 1928 and four years later another revolutionary process, can be defined as a purification and simplification of the language, was started by the government and the intellectuals of the period.

After these revolutionary steps, there occurred a new problem: adapting these changes to educational programs especially by means of language teaching and literacy. While proposing their ideas, early republican intellectuals performed considerable brainstorming.

As we get on our presentation of their opinions, our subjects will prove to have very different and genuine proposals on language teaching.

There are a great many of people in number so we need to group them by means of their arguments.

2. Their Proposals on Syntax:

Kazım Sami, a republican intellectual, says that grammar is important but it should be taught embedded into reading and speaking (Yetiş, 2005). He supports grammar, but does agree with teaching rules barely. According to him, vivid examples should be used to teach grammar.

Şükriye Emel, another intellectual of the time, has different views from K. Sami. According to her, the main problem of language teaching is the chaotic situation caused by Letters Revolution (Yetiş, 2005). She observes both teachers and students having great difficulties in understanding new letters (Latin alphabet). Being accustomed to vowel points of Arabic script, students and teachers are perplexed on how to pronounce the words. If this problem is solved then other fields of language teaching will be eased.

M. Zekeriya participates to these issues with examples he derived from American and Russian education systems. He argues that grammar has no importance for a student's linguistic development and learning (Yetiş, 2005). As anyone do not need to revise grammar rules while speaking, grammar and rules should be considered to be sub – conscious base for language and they need to be learned by speaking, reading, writing and vocabulary. M. Zekeriya is so strict in his view that he even proposes that grammar should be removed from curriculums while the new Republic is trying to create a reasonable level of literacy.

Kazım Nami, an instructor of Turkish for foreign students of different ethnic origins, talks about his educational story and emphasizes that during his years as a student in military school nearly all of the language courses were constructed on reading, writing and speaking. Grammar has a very slight place in the last grade according to his educational experience. He states that though his little formal training on grammar, he is very

successful to teach Turkish grammar to others (Yetiş, 2005). He argues that grammar is useful only to teach it to others.

According to his views, he is a supporter of some kind of Transformational – Generational-learning style. Grammar rules should be learned sub – consciously. While learning a language – or for any first language curriculum – grammar rules and structures are formed subsequently. He states that the language itself is so flexible that you can not stuff it into a grammar book. Grammar shall only be used as a tool for brainstorming. His criticism on grammar is so strict that he can not stop himself but calling grammar courses as ‘parasitic’.

Mustafa Şekip has very different views on grammar. According to him, new script and letters need a new grammar and the structure of this new type of grammar is difficult to estimate beforehand. From this obscurity, he thinks that as the rules are not clear, there is nothing to say about teaching (Yetiş, 2005).

According to Yusuf Ziya, grammar is useless to use a language fluently. They are human’s instincts and competences to determine the fluency of the language (Yetiş, 2005).

Orhan Seyfi, a well-known poet of the time, supports sub-conscious learning for grammar. He points out that first of all grammar needs to be revised whether it is suitable for linguistic revolution and new alphabet. Grammar rules should be in accordance with both spoken and written language.

Sadri Etem is another intellectual to refuse the necessity of grammar in the curriculum as a separate topic. Trying to teach a language with grammar is something like trying to teach swimming someone in a desert says for grammar and language teaching.

Peyami Safa, one of the greatest authors of Modern Turkish Literature, thinks that grammar is only important to understand the content of a language not the language itself. An inductive style should be adopted. Grammar consolidates the structures that we already know.

Nazım Hikmet, one of the greatest poet of the day and whose reputation still exist in literary world, calls everyone to put the grammar aside and learn reading, writing and speaking. Grammar should be considered only useful for those having academic interests.

3. Their Proposals on Writing – Reading

On writing and reading activities, Kazım Sami has many things to say again. He presents American style of education and emphasizes that reading and writing skills are best developed when they are conducted together. All examples should be suitable to children linguistic development.

Şükriye Emel is more pessimistic than others about new alphabet and the problems of educational regulations. According to her, as the Minister of Justice stated in the Parliamentary, letters and their spelling is the main cause of chaos. Therefore, the standardization of spelling must be ensured and changeover process must be completed as soon as possible.

M. Zekeriya is also another opponent of grammatical patterns and rules while teaching reading and writing. As we, Turkish nation, are in a very need of creating an educated society, we should eliminate all other patterns like abandoning new alphabet and removing grammar from curriculum.

4. Conclusion

As a general assessment of their opinions, we can conclude that nearly all intellectuals of the period agree in approving a language teaching method in which grammatical patterns and rules are thought not directly but in a sub-conscious manner, in doing so the language will be learned and thought easily. Regarding the fact that the period was a very sensitive one by means of revolutions especially cultural ones, it is easy to understand their concerns on practical and quick language teaching ways.

Nearly all of them are aware of the importance of revolutions and the sensitive manner of the society. So no offensive proposal exists in their writing. The main concern for them is to help the development of the society.

The opinions of intellectuals form a good source for us as language teachers and researchers. Somehow they saw many problems of our field beforehand and they tried to bring practical solutions. While doing this, they benefited from their early experiences many of which depended on the period of Empire.

As we observe, we realize that language teaching became easier thanks to Linguistic Revolutions especially to Letters Revolution.

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