

## Some Notes on Derrida's "Istanbul Letter"

### Derrida'nın "İstanbul Mektubu" Üzerine Bazı Notlar

Türkan GÖZÜTOK<sup>1</sup> 

#### Abstract

In this study, the deconstructionist reading of Jacques Derrida (Algeria 1930-Paris 2004), one of the prominent representatives of poststructuralist thought, and his views on the Turkish Alphabet Reform process are examined based on his "Letter from Istanbul." Postmodernist thought emerged in the West as a reaction to Enlightenment philosophy and positivist epistemology. Derrida developed a reading practice called "deconstruction," aimed at questioning European metaphysics and unraveling the deep structure of texts. In the "Letter from Istanbul," Derrida invites Turks to question Western thought through the lens of the Turkish Alphabet Reform. This questioning initiates a journey for Turks to seek their "lost" alphabets and languages in history. Although Derrida deconstructed the thinkers who have guided Western thought since antiquity, as well as all sacred texts of Judaism and Christianity, he maintained a distance from the Quran and Turkish-Islamic texts. While Derrida opens up discussions on the Turkish language and alphabet within the Turkish modernization process, addressing the historical problems of the Turkish language through the dichotomy of speech and writing, his approach to the Turkish language, Atatürk, and the alphabet reform also contains certain orientalist discourses.

**Keywords:** Derrida, déconstruction, Turkish letter revolution.

#### Özet

Bu çalışmada, Jacques Derrida'nın (Cezayir 1930-Paris 2004) "İstanbul Mektubu"ndan hareketle, onun yapısöküm okuması ve Türk Harf İnkılabı sürecine dair görüşleri üzerinde durulmuştur. Postmodernist düşünce, Batı'da aydınlanma felsefesi ile pozitivist epistemolojiye bir tepki olarak doğmuştur. Derrida Avrupa metafiziğini sorgulama amacı güden ve metnin derin yapısını çözmeyi amaçlayan yapısöküm / yapısökümcülük" (Déconstruction) adını verdiği bir okuma uygulaması geliştirmiştir. "İstanbul Mektubu"nda, Derrida, Türk Harf İnkılabı üzerinden Türkleri de Batı düşüncesini sorgulamaya çağırır. Bu sorgulama ile Türklerin de tarihteki "yitik" alfabelerini ve dillerini arama yolculuğunu başlatır. Derrida, Antikite'den itibaren Batı düşüncesine yön veren düşünürleri, Yahudilik ve Hristiyanlığın tüm kutsal metinlerini yapısökümcü bir okumayla çözümlendiği halde Kur'an'a ve Türk-İslam metinlerine mesafeli durmuştur. Derrida, her ne kadar Türk modernleşme sürecindeki Türk dili ve alfabesini, Türk dilinin tarihteki sorunlarını söz-yazı karşıtlığından hareketle tartışmaya açsa da Türk diline, Atatürk'e ve harf inkılabına yaptığı bu okuma biçimi bazı oryantalist söylemleri de barındırır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Derrida, yapısöküm, Türk harf inkılabı.

**Geliş Tarihi / Submitted:** 15/07/2024

**Kabul Tarihi / Accepted:** 25/07/2024

**Atıf / Citation:** Gözütok, T. (2024). Some notes on Derrida's "Istanbul Letter". *Avrasya Beşeri Bilim Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 4(1), 48-58.

<sup>1</sup> Doç. Dr., Karabük Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi, Türk Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü, Karabük, Türkiye, [turkangztk@gmail.com](mailto:turkangztk@gmail.com)

## Introduction

*Kitâbdın işitgen bilür uş anı  
Okığan bitigen ukumaz muni  
Kutadgu Bilig*

French philosopher Derrida, one of the prominent representatives of poststructuralist thought, was born in 1930 in the town of El Biar, Algeria. As the third child of a Jewish family, Derrida and his family were negatively affected and victimized by the "anti-Jewish laws" enacted by France in the 1940s. Derrida began his education in Algeria, and during his high school years there, he read the works of thinkers such as Rousseau, Gide, Nietzsche, Valéry, and Camus. These readings were later complemented by those of Bergson, Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger. After preparatory studies at Louis-le-Grand High School in Paris, he entered the École Normale Supérieure in Paris in 1952. At this school, he met Louis Althusser, with whom he would maintain a lifelong friendship. While conducting research in Belgium, Derrida attended the lectures of Michel Foucault and established a close friendship with the philosopher. In 1957, after passing the high school teaching exam, he went to Harvard University in Cambridge on a scholarship, where he read James Joyce. Derrida's early exposure to the broad spectrum of European Enlightenment thought (including German philosophy, the English language, and the Anglo-Saxon world) became influential in the French "institutional philosophy circles." For a long time, the "nationalist" and "conservative" academic circles in France resisted granting professorship titles to Derrida and Althusser, who would become among the most renowned names outside France. Due to his "deconstruction" (Déconstruction) practices, Derrida faced "aggressive" and "exclusionary attitudes" in most French university philosophy departments. After serving as an assistant at the Sorbonne and an associate professor at the École Normale Supérieure (1964), he moved to the United States at the invitation of René Girard, where he met significant academic figures such as Paul de Man, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Jean Hyppolite, Jean-Pierre Vernant, and Lucien Goldman. At the French Philosophical Society, he delivered a lecture on "Différance," which constitutes the essence of Derrida's thought, and published his books *Writing and Difference* (L'Écriture et la différence), *Speech and Phenomena* (La Voix et le phénomène), and *Of Grammatology* (De la grammatologie) in 1967. Derrida's academic career, which included a professorship at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (1984), was marked by extensive national and international work until his death in 2004. Derrida and Michel Foucault are the two most recognized French thinkers in the "contemporary world" following existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre. Several of Derrida's books have been translated into more than twenty languages (Ege, 2006, pp. 181-183).

### Derrida's "Istanbul Letter " and Deconstruction

Derrida's famous text known as the " Istanbul Letter " is a letter dated May 10, 1997, written to the philosopher's former student and friend Catherine Malabou from Istanbul. This letter was written during Derrida's academic visit to Istanbul on May 9-10, 1997, as an invited guest of Yapı Kredi Publications, Boğaziçi University, and the French Consulate. The letter, published under the title *La contre-allée: Voyage avec Jacques Derrida* (The Counter-Path: Journey with Jacques Derrida) (La Quinzaine Littéraire-Luis Vuitton, 1999) (Cogito, 2006, p. 11), appears in the Derrida Special Issue of Yapı Kredi Publications' quarterly journal *Cogito*, in issues 47-48, titled "Derrida: Rethinking Life" (2006). The letter, translated from English to Turkish by Elis Simson, was published as "Jacques Derrida: Istanbul Letter." This letter, which Derrida himself described as written in the "tone" and "rhythm" of a postcard, is important for many reasons. The letter exhibits the characteristics of a text consistent with the philosopher's usual metaphorical thinking style. In this letter, Derrida uses the "travel" metaphor to revisit both his own and the Turks' "wounds of memory" (Cogito, 2006, p. 11). While in Istanbul to give lectures on "hospitality," Derrida subjects Atatürk's Turkey, Atatürk, and the modernization efforts to a "provocative" deconstruction through the lens of the alphabet reform: "Traveling with Jacques Derrida [voyager avec]!" With me? Really with me? What a title! (Cogito, 2006, p. 17).

Derrida's letter is shaped around the concept of 'Deconstruction' that he introduced to his philosophy of language from the very first line. While the deconstructionist analysis of this letter is the subject of another study, it is useful to closely examine Derrida's concept of 'deconstruction,' which engages in ontological thinking around the Turkish alphabet change through the possibilities of deconstruction. Derrida first

introduced this concept to the academic world in his 1966 lecture titled "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Science" at Johns Hopkins University. In this lecture, Derrida gained significant recognition in the fields of literature and philosophy by directing a "radical critique" on structuralism. While deconstruction, which began with Derrida in France but found broader applications in the United States at Yale and Johns Hopkins Universities, has other followers such as Paul de Man (1919-1983), Geoffrey Hartman (1929-2016), J. Hillis Miller (1928-2021), and Harold Bloom (1930-2019) (Rifat 2013: 159), it can be said that Derrida's philosophical development has been significantly influenced by thinkers like Levinas, Heidegger, and Freud who "interweave and shape" his intellectual sources. These investigations include: the phenomenological inquiry strengthened by Saussure's fundamental revolution in linguistics, drawing from Hegel and especially Husserl; the inquiry based on the opposition of being/non-being (Sein/Seinde) which Heidegger concentrated on in his "deconstruction of metaphysics," following Friedrich Nietzsche; the inquiry into the issue of the "Other" (l'Autre) inspired by Emmanuel Levinas's Jewish thought and Talmud; and the psychoanalytic inquiry centered on Freud's concept of the "unconscious" (das Unbewusste), which emerges from the "complexity of language." However, perhaps the most decisive factor in Derrida's intellectual development, alongside these thinkers and investigations, is his interest in literature and literary activities. Derrida's analytical attention, directed with inexhaustible patience towards the "inner experiences" of writers/thoughts such as Stéphane Mallarmé, Franz Kafka, Herman Melville, James Joyce, Antonin Artaud, Paul Celan, Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, and Philippe Sollers, aims at the achievements in "writing." "Derrida's intense interaction with literature allows him to read and analyze texts in a way that strips them of their authors' subjective ideologies, value judgments, and worldviews" (Ege, 2006, p. 182). According to Derrida, everything is a text, everything is in some way "composed." Everything consists of different elements. Here, we are dealing with a composition. The term "texte" (text) also has a meaning related to weaving or fabric (texture), and thus the word "weaving" comes to mind. "In this regard, we can recall that 'déconstruction' has also been translated into Turkish as 'yapıçözüm.' Whether referred to as 'deconstruction,' we can indicate that the idea here involves unraveling the threads of a text (texte), a fabric (texture). Why are we unraveling it, why do we have to constantly unravel everything? (...) It is because we want to reveal how they are woven" (Ertuğrul, 2023, p. 222).

In Derrida's deconstruction, one aspect of the "unraveling" attempt is to strip the examined text of the control of the "subject" who claims to "own" the text and to try to understand it according to its internal dynamics (Ege, 2006, p. 182). According to this view, external elements of the text (author, race, period, society, etc.) are of no importance. The text/literary text is considered a reader-centered text. In this reading approach, the internal structure of the text is subjected to deconstruction/destruction, and the "contradictions" within the text are revealed. "In Derrida's deconstruction, there is no deterministic perception and interpretation, causality, objectivity, hierarchical reality, or a single truth. Derrida opposes the idea that meaning is ready-made within a text. His aims to display the contradictory thoughts and expressions within a text and to show that the text has different interpretations by disrupting its seemingly fixed structure. The meaning of a text emerges through analyses such as neglected corners within the text and internal issues pointing to different meanings. Every text inevitably contains aspects of undecidability. Deconstruction does not have a fixed meaning. The aim is not to break down a text's structure but to demonstrate that the text already has a fragmented structure" (Eser, 2015, p. 184). As Derrida himself initially stated, deconstruction is "not" a "new" philosophical understanding, view, doctrine, system, or school; however, Derrida could not prevent his activity from becoming a philosophical movement. "Reading and writing with the concern of deconstruction eventually transformed into a movement like any other philosophical trend: Schools were established, institutions were formed. Deconstructionists emerged, and clusters of deconstruction supporters formed. Derrida could not prevent this development" (Ege, 2006, p. 194).

Deconstructive reading consists of three stages. In the first stage, a "Platonic hierarchy of binary oppositions" is established. In the second stage, this Platonic hierarchy is subjected to deconstruction by focusing on the "marginal" and bringing it to the center. In the third stage, a "new meaning that is the exact opposite" of the original meaning in the text is constructed (Eser, 2015, p. 186). The main aim of deconstructive reading is to oppose monolithic thinking, the fixation of meaning, ideological violence,

and othering. Derrida, who grew up in a Jewish family considered "other" in Algeria, as a thinker who experienced the difficulties of being "marginal," aimed to change the power dynamics in society by applying deconstructive reading to certain postmodern discourses he saw as "oppressive elements" in Western philosophy (Eser, 2015, p. 184). Derrida expresses this marginality in himself, which is symbolized by the Marranos who converted to Christianity to avoid expulsion from Andalusia but secretly maintained their Judaism, in his "Letter from Istanbul":

*"Like I often do, I asked about exiles here as well and learned that there was a very old Sephardic community near where I stayed. There are various assumptions about them (I met a Francophone Muslim woman whom I thought was named 'Ammour' and who was researching the survivors of the exile), and, perhaps a little like them, I felt like a survivor, more than ever like a Marrano"* (Cogito, 2006, p. 21).

This marginality in Derrida is symbolized by the secret conversion of Marranos, who converted to Christianity to avoid expulsion from Andalusia but secretly continued their Jewish practices. According to common belief, the Spanish word "marrano," which means 'pig,' was used to derogatorily refer to Catholics who secretly continued Judaism. This word has also entered academic discourse (Salihoğlu, 2011, p. 106). The thinker identifies this tragedy, which resulted in the oppression, humiliation, and expulsion of Jews in many parts of the world, with his own autobiography. Like all exiled Jews, he has an emigrant soul. It can be said that this soul has no place or identity:

*"Most of the time, I observe myself traveling without changing places, like an immobile voyeur analyzing what has happened to his moving body in the world"* (Cogito, 2006, p. 21).

The struggle Derrida engages in against oppressive powers through the "other," meaning the "different," is fundamentally rooted in Derrida's tragic life. Algeria became a French colony after being taken from the Ottomans in 1847. The French implemented a law called the Crémieux Decree (1870), which removed Arabic as a language of instruction and aimed to grant citizenship to Jews. The French Jewish community played a significant role in the enactment of this decree. Pressuring to modernize the so-called "outdated" Jews of North Africa, this community had the French enact the law, thus granting French citizenship to Jews (URL 1). With the Crémieux Decree, Derrida's family quickly adopted this "new identity," and Derrida received education in French from elementary school onwards. "This inherited legacy first became a tool of threat when, as a result of the revocation of French citizenship rights, he had to leave high school in 1942. However, this exclusionary policy, on the other hand, opens doors for Derrida's thoughts on language, heritage, identity, and origin and contributes to the emergence of texts that deconstruct classical philosophical language, such as *Of Grammatology*, *Writing, and Difference*" (Kırtay, 2021, p. 260-261). Marrano Jews also suffered from a similar revocation of inherited rights. The rights granted to these Jews by the Treaty of Granada in 1491 were revoked by the Alhambra Decree in 1492. Derrida, like the Jews of Spain and Portugal who were forced to convert to Catholicism, was raised in a bicultural environment. According to Derrida, this oppressive thinking is a traditional value system in Western thought that has become rational (rationalistic), deterministic (deterministic), monistic (monistic), and closed to criticism (dogmatic) (İlca, 2017, p. 316). Derrida's traditional thinking structure, which he names "Rousseau's age," has persisted almost since Plato and has deeply rooted itself in Western thought (Ege, 2006, p. 182). The thinker has used the concepts in deconstructive reading to either support or challenge his interpretations (Eser, 2015, p. 184). These concepts include "genesis," which refers to the relationship between root (essence) and imitation (the other); "metaphysical binaries" or "Platonic hierarchy," which refers to binary oppositions; aporetic reading, which questions the limitations of the signified (meaning); and *différance*, which refers to the impossibility of fixing meaning and the breadth of meaning (Uçan, 2009, p. 2294). Derrida's deconstructive reading primarily challenges the Platonic tradition's binary oppositions, particularly "logocentrism." "It can be said that Derrida's philosophy asks one question from start to finish: Why has the history of philosophy incessantly pushed writing into the background by looking at speech, by looking at 'spoken' speech, and has treated writing merely as a 'supplement,' a parasitic addition to the real, that is, speech, which feeds on the blood and essence of speech, looking at speech as its master and writing as a servant that must bow before and serve its master? What is the meaning of the infinite value that metaphysics attributes to spoken words? Why has Western

philosophy exalted speech so highly and demeaned and reduced writing so much? Why must spoken words establish absolute dominance overwriting and not recognize writing as an autonomous domain with its own distinct personality?" (Ege, 2006, p. 185). From his work *Of Grammatology* (*De la Grammatologie*) onwards, Derrida has considered discussions on "record, writing, trace, and logos (speech)" as central issues. "Of course, Derrida's reading of Plato, the issues discussed there, the place and status of memory, and the destructive effects of written speech as opposed to living speech and living memory, as a recorded speech, archived speech, on memory also come to mind" (Ertuğrul, 2023, p. 214).

*"This is actually the only thing I have always thought about, which you can read as a symptom: my journey with you. I only think about it, the letter [letter]. In this case, I am thinking about the Turkish script, the script reform [transliteration] that profoundly affected Turkish history and its letters that were lost, and the alphabets to which they were violently forced to change"* (Cogito, 2006, p. 19).

In the binary of speech/writing, Derrida focuses his attention on the superiority of speech over writing. Consequently, the subject of the alphabet, which serves as the "approximate" (Ertem 1995, p. 44) symbols of writing, comes to Derrida's agenda. This emergence is introduced with a sentence reminiscent of Descartes' famous dictum "I think, therefore I am" (*Discourse on the Method*, 1637). Using the pronoun "it" from the sentence about Turkish letters, the sequential structure of the sentence can be reconstructed as follows:

*"I am thinking only of it. I am thinking only of the Turkish letters. I am thinking only of the alphabet reform [transliteration] that deeply affected Turkish history. I am thinking only of the lost Turkish letters. I am thinking only of the alphabets that Turks were forcefully made to change."* (Cogito, 2006, p. 19)

In this context, what can be considered a syndrome for Derrida is not the "traveling with" itself, but rather the obsession with the Turkish alphabet reform and the constant contemplation of this issue. Derrida's aim in his deconstructive reading, which leaves room for the reminders of travel, is to open up a discussion about the Turkish language, Atatürk, and the script reform. This opening should be seen as more than just a discussion of the creations of a modernist builder; it should be regarded as an "anarkhen, dissèmination (dissemination)." In the "Istanbul Letter," Derrida is both a philosopher and a traveler away from his "home," and also a guest foreign to Turkish and Turks. Indeed, he is nothing more than a "migrant" who feels alone even in his own "home," carries his language and its lost letters as a heartache, and always bears them within himself. Derrida expresses the notion of being nothing more than a "lonely" or "lost" person, even in France, through his stay in the "Orientalist art-filled," hundred-room, but unused, chateau-like French embassy:

*"I am as alone here as I am in France. This place is almost an endless, 'Orientalist' castle full of artworks; I could get lost here. I am always lost (je suis tout le temps à me perdre)."*

Derrida's goal is not the Turkish language, nor the "destruction" it has undergone in the historical process, nor the lost words, nor the lost letters of the Turks, nor the fact that Turkish-speaking Turks have never been recorded throughout history. Derrida's aim is to use the letter as a medium to express his personal reflections within the genre of the letter, to show the devastations of his "languagelessness" or the solitude of his native language through language philosophy, and to open up questions about the formation codes of Western culture as he does in every reading. By pointing to what he sees as the "violence embedded in the genetic code of Western civilization" (Rutli, 2017, p. 128), Derrida invites the Turks to think alongside him while questioning the hierarchical superiority of this civilization. He addresses the Turks' confrontation with the issues of Westernization/modernization through the alphabet reform. Derrida exposes the exclusionary and othering identity discourses underlying Western culture once again through the Turkish alphabet reform. This exposure occurs in front of the Atatürkist Turkish intellectuals and Francophones who come to listen to him at Boğaziçi University. On the other hand, Turkish conservatives, unaware of Derrida's deconstructive reading, embrace him as a French intellectual seeking traces of Ottoman Turkish and Arabic script, opposing Latin letters. However, Derrida has had an "ethical and political concern" from the very beginning of his deconstructive reading. This ethical and political concern is, as Derrida himself has expressed, perhaps an "ethical concern aimed at resisting all forms of

authority" (Rutli, 2017, p. 125-126). While Derrida aims for Europe to confront this hierarchy that shapes European thought, he sometimes himself falls into the snare of this hierarchy with the binary oppositions he establishes in the "Istanbul Letter." The dualities he discusses, such as "living" and "sleepwalking," or living-dead, "I," memory, identity, recollection, repetition, exile, travel, existence-lost, turn into "we" in the mouth of the bicultural, even identity-lost Derrida. The plural identity Derrida refers to as "we" is one where French people and the French language are predominant. Derrida reveals the expansion of this identity at the very beginning of his writing with the French word 'voyager' (to travel). "What does 'voyager' (to travel) mean in proper French?" (Cogito, 2006, p. 17). Derrida presents "proper French" in contrast to Turkish. This raises the immediate question of how "proper French" has historically developed. Two significant formations that contributed to making French "proper French" should be mentioned. The first is the French Academy, and the second is the French nationalism motivated by the French Revolution. The essence of this nationalism is the process of building French national identity, summarized by Camille Julian as "the French nation created French soil over a thousand years" (Uysal, 1998, p. 105).

Established in 1635 by King Louis XIII, the French Academy (Académie française) is the principal authority on all matters related to the French language. Although it was closed after the French Revolution, it was reestablished in 1803 by Napoleon Bonaparte. The Academy is the oldest of the five academies within the Institut de France. It is known as "the first academy dedicated to eliminating impurities in a language." The Italian model, established in Florence in 1582, which accepted the Tuscan dialect of Florence as the common language for Italian, was used as a model. Both academies published the first dictionaries of their respective languages. The Academy, officially established on July 10, 1637, by the approval of the Parlement de Paris, was tasked with setting unchangeable grammar rules, overseeing spelling rules and literature, and working diligently to make the language an art and science language (URL 2). The French Academy, which transformed French into a unified language from thirty different dialects, is still protected by law. While France had a "multilingual" structure in the 1870s, French has been used as the official language since a law enacted in 1793. Today, French is protected by Law 94-65, "Law on the Use of the French Language," enacted in 1994. This law imposes a requirement for everyone to use French in all areas. Police officers are required to detect violations of the French language and report them to the public prosecutor, and the government must also prepare an annual "monitoring report" on the state of the language to inform the public. All publications in the country must be in French. Except for summaries, all scientific meetings and their promotions must be conducted in French (Sözer 2003: 190-191). Today, France's language policy is implemented in countries such as Andorra (Catalan), Algeria, Colombia, Costa Rica, Poland, Romania, and North Macedonia (Erdenk 2009, p. 100). Similar policies are also found in the United Kingdom and Iran. The English Language Unity Act (2009) aims to serve a similar function. It was enacted to protect English from Latin American immigrants (Hispanic-Spanish) in the United States, emphasizing in the law that "the common bond linking the diverse ethnic and cultural linguistic backgrounds in the United States is the English language." In Iran, the "Law on the Prohibition of the Use of Foreign Names, Titles, and Expressions (Terms)" was enacted. This law bans the use of "foreign words and expressions" in all official and private institutions' reports, correspondence, speeches, and discussions in Iran. Language studies are overseen by the Persian Language and Literature Culture Center (FDEKM). Germany has also taken necessary measures to protect the German language. German has been granted 'official language' status through the Administrative Procedure Act, and the Court Procedure Act stipulates that the "language of litigation" is German (Sözer 2023, pp. 191-192). While language policy in European countries has historically evolved to preserve linguistic and national unity, the situation in Derrida's homeland, Algeria, is quite ironic. After being a French colony for 132 years, Algeria plans to gradually phase out French and switch the language of instruction to English starting in 2024. In Algeria, with a population of forty-five thousand, fifteen thousand people speak French. Algerians, seeking to end the dominance of French, included English in the primary education curriculum in 2022 (from URL 2: Sözer 2023, p. 187).

In his letter, Derrida symbolizes Atatürk, whom he sees as the subject of the "alphabet reform," with the abbreviation "K.A." This symbolization, in a way, transforms Kemal Atatürk's name into a letter mark or "trace." It is also an attempt at ambiguity and trivialization, effectively pushing the subject outside the

text. Derrida positions himself against the imprints of Atatürk's photographs, which are displayed on the walls of all official institutions, despite the forgotten tradition. This positioning, of course, occurs through text (or archiving) as a form of record-keeping. Derrida views Atatürk not as the founder of cultural and national identity but as a symbol of authoritarian and political power. Deconstruction operates not only on the "narrow meaning" of a text but also on any culture, institution, or composition. As a thinker of writing and archiving, Derrida is a "figure" positioned against Plato's archaia in his deconstructive reading. This is not a contradiction in terms of Derrida's philosophy. One must acknowledge that Derrida is "far from a classical understanding of the archive." "Deconstruction does not necessarily involve destruction. In fact, many institutions, theses, gestures, behaviors—those that produce certain hierarchies and violences and are inconsistent with their claims but have become entrenched—are rendered less noticeable and normalized with their 'crookedness' and actual inconsistencies. It is also worth remembering that deconstruction aims to show that what appears to be a natural phenomenon is actually constructed. That is, deconstruction targets attitudes, established patterns, clichés, institutions, and institutionalized structures that present themselves as natural—these could be social structures, state institutions, or even the very sovereignty itself" (Ertuğrul, 2023, pp. 222, 223). Based on the contrasts he uses, is Atatürk a modernizing "audacious" figure or a "tyrannical" savior? Is the alphabet reform a "chance" or a "blow" for the Turks? Derrida invites Turkish intellectuals to reflect on these questions through binary oppositions. Immediately following, he contrasts the French language and French authorities, which are official in 27 countries and a second language in many places, with an Orientalist discourse.

*"Recently, the talented heroic commander K.A., whom you know as well, acted with the orders of this audacious, clear, yet tyrannical savior of modern times, leading his people to the threshold of modernity. Forward on the great journey! Forward march! How traumatic it is! Imagine such a thing happening here: the President decides that we must use a new writing system starting tomorrow. Moreover, without changing the language! And the return to yesterday's letters will be strictly prohibited! This coup de la lettre [letter coup]—this chance or this blow—perhaps strikes us in every event" (Cogito, 2006, p. 19).*

Derrida is well aware that language serves as a tool of social memory. In this deconstructive reading focused on reconfiguring the Eurocentric philosophy of language, Derrida knows very well that the real power of a language lies not in its letters but in the "language" itself. The fundamental elements of a language are 'thought' and 'language.' "Language can also be likened to a piece of paper: Thought is the front side of the paper, and sound is the backside. If you cut the front side of the paper, you inevitably cut the back side as well. The situation is the same with language: Neither sound can be separated from thought, nor can thought be separated from sound" (Saussure, 1980, p. 105). Therefore, a nation that loses its thought and the sounds that signify it, and thus loses its 'language,' cannot be saved by any alphabet. As Derrida is keenly aware, changing a language, which is the accumulation of centuries of thought, cannot be done with a simple decision or decree like altering alphabets. In his letter, Derrida also deconstructs the familiar jargon of some "ignorant prejudiced" circles that have no knowledge about the historical development, dialectal features, and alphabets of the Turkish language. In other words, he aims to make us consider the opposite of this discourse. Just as Derrida performs a deconstructive reading for the so-called lost Ottoman Turkish, it is necessary to apply this deconstructive reading to the Turkish language, which has been lost in elite circles for approximately six centuries.

*"I am crushed by the fact that this task would require hundreds of volumes and the invention of a new language. Therefore, I will limit myself to a mere explanation, a political 'metonymy,' to confirm my blatantly heretical and ignorant prejudices: (...) In the pretext of transitioning to modern culture, people have become, in a single day, unable to read the memory of centuries, rendered ignorant. This is the terrible path of abandoning one's country to some unknown adventure, the most monstrous but perhaps the only way to do this: memory loss! (...)" (Cogito, 2006, p. 27).*

In Derrida's "Istanbul Letter," his analysis of the Turkish language reform could have been perceived as more neutral if he had also briefly highlighted the state of Ottoman Turkish. By incorporating the dialectical struggles of the 19th-century Turkish written language, Derrida might have provided a more

balanced view. The defense of the Turkish language that Derrida omits could be aptly expressed through Namık Kemal's words:

*"In book form, which of our literary works, stripped of tezyinat-ı lâfziyye, can truly be deemed worthy of praise... Setting those aside, even among the literate in Istanbul, perhaps one in ten can derive benefit from a document written in the sebk-i ma'ruf or even from a legally binding state law. This is because our literature has been overwhelmed by expressions borrowed from several foreign languages of the East and West, disrupting the consistency of expression. The style of writing, which has completely deviated from proper articulation, has essentially become akin to a foreign language"* (Levend, 2001, p. 113).

In the Ottoman Empire, the written language was seen as a fundamental obstacle to modernization. The convoluted nature of the state's language, characterized by seci'li yapısı, lack of rules, inconsistent spelling, and the intertwining of Arabic and Persian grammatical elements, rendered it incomprehensible and impractical. This language issue needed to be resolved to establish the intellectual foundations of the Tanzimat era. Ahmet Mithat, in 1881, expressed this linguistic dilemma in the newspaper Tercüman-ı Hakikat:

*"Alas, we are currently beggars of language. We knock on the doors of Arabs, Persians, and now even Europeans, begging for their words and grammatical rules. To escape this disgrace of linguistic begging, we seek to reform our language within our own language"* (Levend, 2010, p. 81, 129).

Derrida's debate on whether M.K.'s decree to change the letters "without changing the language" was a chance or a blow has many historical, political, social, economic, and cultural reasons behind it. Among the reasons that provided the recognition of Latin letters in the Ottoman Empire are the "fear of Turks" that began in Europe in the 15th century, trade relations with the Ottoman Empire, and the printing presses established by the Jewish, Armenian, and Greek subjects within the Ottoman Empire. The first Turkish works printed in the Latin alphabet in the Ottoman Empire were published in 1493 (İnce and Akça, 2017: 12). After the introduction of the printing press to the Ottoman State during the Tulip Era, this influence continued to grow. The first person from the palace circle to use Latin letters was Hatice Sultan, the sister of Selim III. In 1784, she wrote letters in Latin letters to better communicate with the French architect and painter Melling, and these letters contained almost "commands" to Melling (Perot 2001).

The issue of alphabet change in Ottoman social life has been on the agenda since 1852. Some applications related to the Latin alphabet were made in the Ottoman Empire, but the process was completed in 1928. It can be said that the subject of "writing" and "lost letters and cultures" is at the center of all Derrida's philosophical thoughts. "Memory does not have a pure interiority exempt from the record of letters," and memory has always been recorded with letters (tupos) as in Plato's Pharmacy. This recording "can also bear the traces of letters that have been covered up, forgotten, or never learned" (Cogito, 2006, pp. 13, 20). From this point of view, searching for the lost letters of Turkish is a requirement of deconstructive reading. Tracing the Göktürk and Uighur alphabets, which were either taken from Turkic tamgas/damgas, ramices, or Scandinavian peoples but adapted to the Turkish way of thinking, is interpreting deconstructive reading in reverse.

For this reason, the Uighur script prologue (verses 15-16) of Kutadgu Bilig, whose first writing cannot be definitively determined to be either in Arabic or Uighur script, is clear evidence for the human/social memory that writing and, consequently, the alphabet is secondary, while sound/word/language is the primary element:

*"Asıǵlıǵ-turur bu yok ol hîç yası/Üküş, türkler ukmaz muniñ ma'nîsi*

*(It is beneficial; it has no harm / Most Turks do not understand its meaning./*

*Kitâbdın işitgen bilür uş anı/ Okıǵan bitigen ukumaz munı*



*(The one who hears the book understands it/But the one who reads and writes cannot comprehend it.) (Arat, I, II).*

Derrida's discussion of the issue of letters, a topic on which the modern world has yet to reach a consensus, in "Istanbul Letter" also brings to mind some Orientalist discourses regarding the origins of letters in the West. The Islamic thinker Ibn Khaldun, like Derrida, expressed views contrary to the European metaphysical desire. Ibn Khaldun criticized those who ignored the Quran regarding the origins of alphabets. According to the Quran, he claimed that the source of the Latin alphabet used today is not the Western Arab region but the South Arab geography, specifically the Yemen region. He based this claim on the relationship between the level of civilization achieved by the people of 'Ad and writing. Ibn Khaldun also stated that writing was used during the time of Prophet Hud and developed by the Himyarites (around 700 BC). He noted that after the destruction of the 'Ad people, the Semitic people who remained, known as the Thamud, spread writing to the western and northern regions of the Arabian Peninsula and to other nations of the world. "Ibn Khaldun seems accurate in this view, as in the past and present, the names of the letters used by the Semites, Latins, Greeks, Göktürks, Sogdians, Slavs, and indeed the whole world are Arabic" (Kahraman, 2020, p. 768). Discussions about the alphabet in the modern world are not limited to this. Although the majority of the scientific community accepts that the origin of the alphabet lies with the Phoenicians (Canaanites), there are those who oppose this view. According to them, the Sinai Arabs used the alphabet much earlier than the Phoenicians. Therefore, it is wise to be cautious about the view that the origin of the alphabet is Phoenician, as new findings could change this information (Kahraman, 2020, p. 768). In addition, modern science, which primarily accepts positivist thought in the history and philosophy of language, is far from referencing the Quran. Therefore, much information about language and writing found in several surahs of the Quran (such as Al-A'raf, An-Naml, Al-Baqara, Ar-Rum, Al-Ma'idah, and Al-Qalam) is ignored. The Quran, in Surah An-Naml (verses 27-29), provides information that writing was used in Yemen during the Sabaeen period before the Himyarites. According to these verses, this state, ruled by a queen, was discovered by Prophet Solomon through a bird named Hudhud. Prophet Solomon sent a letter starting with "Bismillah" to the ruler of this state, inviting them to monotheism. Although Prophet Solomon learned of the existence of the Sabaeen late, he was aware that they used writing, as he chose to write them a letter. Some Arab scholars, such as Ibn al-Nadim (385/995), based on the story of Saba in the Quran, have criticized Ibn Khaldun for considering Himyarite script along with Lihyanite, Safaitic, and Thamudic scripts (Kahraman, 2020, p. 771). According to the modern world, the invention of writing, particularly the historical development of symbolic/alphabetic writing, evolved from Phoenician, Aramaic, and Nabataean scripts to Arabic script. Another Orientalist discourse suggests that the origins of letters lie with the Phoenicians. While the modern world acknowledges the Phoenicians as the inventors of alphabetic writing, it does not state that the Phoenicians and Nabataeans were Arab people (Çetin, 2000, p. 276). This is a clear betrayal of science and humanity. This incomplete discourse leads those lacking accurate historical knowledge to believe that the Phoenicians were a people outside the Arab race. This discourse has also been repeated by some Muslim authors. "The origins of letters trace back to the Phoenicians, the ancestors of the Arabs. These letters are simple shapes derived from only twenty-two (22) of the many pictograms used in Sumerian, Egyptian, and Hittite pictographic writings, representing the first sounds of the names of the entities they denote. Six (6) letters were later added to Arabic, and other nations, apart from the Arabs, either made additions to these twenty-two (22) letters according to the sounds in their languages or modified some letters. One of the main issues here is the persistent and forced effort to make writing a formation unique to a particular nation. Writing originated in the Arab region but is a common heritage belonging to all of humanity's ancestors (Kahraman, 2020, pp. 761, 772). As can be seen, the question of the origins of the Latin alphabet is no longer a topic of discussion worldwide. At the current point of Western linguistics, the relationship between language and thought and the infinite productive power of language are much more important. Alphabets are symbols for transferring spoken language to written form. The function of writing is to represent language. The correct alphabet for a language is the one that can transfer all the sounds of its spoken language into writing. As all linguists know, the spoken and written forms of Ottoman Turkish are distinct. Arabic letters symbolize the written language, but this symbolization is highly inadequate for Turkish vowels. In the most developed languages of the world, including French, a common spoken language, a cultural center language (Parisian, London, Berlin dialects, etc.), has been

adopted as the written language. The rules of the language have been created in this direction, and this language has been developed as a language of science, art, literature, and education. Turkish lacks such historical development and has never had such an 'opportunity.' The alphabet is not a primary issue for Turkish today, just as it wasn't in the past. The main issue for the Turkish language is the gradual infusion of foreign grammatical elements and the potential disconnection of the Turkish language-thought relationship, especially in elite circles, from the period following Kutadgu Bilig. According to Doğan Aksan's study titled 'A Statistical Study on Loanwords in Turkish from Köktürk to Today,' published in 1977, the number of foreign words in Kutadgu Bilig is below 2% (Aksan, 1982, p. 59)." The greatest problem faced by Turkish throughout its historical process has been the invasion by other languages. This invasion has affected not only the level of vocabulary but also the realm of concepts and grammatical rules. Starting from the Tanzimat period (1839), as a result of Westernization, the influence of Western languages, especially French, began. Although Turkish was the official state language according to the first Ottoman Constitution adopted in 1876 (Özyurt, 2004, p. 163), the language issue remained unresolved. According to Süer Eker, while Arabic and Persian had influenced Turkish over a thousand years, French achieved a similar impact in less than a hundred years, with the number of French words in Turkish during this short period approaching the total number of words from these two languages (Eker, 2010: 181-182). In the Ottoman period, the language of the court and the language of the people were completely separate at all times. In the Western world, the aristocratic class processed and developed the vernacular language through ancient works, and these languages were protected by the monarchies. During the nation-state building process, language also became a crucial element of cultural identity. To establish ties with the modern world, the Turks first implemented the alphabet reform and then the language reform. Despite the alphabet and language reforms, Turkish is still under threat from Western languages today.

In this letter, Derrida deconstructs the transition from the Arabic alphabet to the new Turkish alphabet using all the resources of European Enlightenment thought. This deconstruction turns into a kind of romantic and Orientalist dialogue with himself in the "Istanbul Letter." The text contains many Orientalist discourses in various aspects. Although Derrida perceives Turkey differently, he still maintains a generalization and preconceived notion about the Muslim East in his mental geography. "For in a dialogue, he also considers his confrontation with the entire Western tradition as an inheritance and says, 'From the Holy Scriptures to Plato, Kant, Marx, Freud, and Heidegger... No matter what, I cannot give up these names. I cannot. To ask me to give up these names that have shaped and I dearly love, is to ask me to die.' He emphasizes that his connection with Western philosophical tradition is actually not understood correctly" (Kırtay, 2021, p. 261). Therefore, Derrida, who deconstructs texts from the Antiquity period and all works that have shaped European thought, including the most important sacred texts of Christianity and Judaism, does not apply a deconstructive reading to any texts related to the Qur'an, Islamic thought, or Turks, but instead ventures to search for the "spectre" of Arabic letters in Istanbul. "Derrida's preference not to speak about Islam and not to subject it to deconstruction is a manifestation of the radical Arab 'Other' being emphasized beyond the limits of a post-structuralist understanding" (Cowalt & Foshay, 1993: 316; Almond, 2015: 69-70, cited in Çakaş, 2018, p. 466). This venture by Derrida, based on the plurality of meaning, also contains some Orientalist discourses, regardless of its intended purpose. Derrida's "father" writing and letters (letter) are Arabic and Arabic alphabets. The alphabet, which originated in the Palestine region, passed from the Canaanite branch to the West, evolving into Greek, Etruscan, and Latin alphabets; while spreading eastward from the Rāmī branch, it formed the Göktürk, Sogdian, Uighur, Armenian, and Arabic alphabets (Başkan, 2006, p. 193). In essence, whether it is Arabic or Latin letters, the origin is still Derrida's ancestral lands and culture. Derrida's search for traces of Ottoman period Arabic letters in Republican Turkey reflects a memory related to this "father" writing and letters. The fact that his country Algeria was a French colony as a result of "Latin globalization" and Derrida's subsequent experience as a Jewish Arab 'Other' is an expression of belonging to this memory and to nowhere. According to a deep reading of the letter, the acceptance of Latin letters has made Arabic letters the "Other," and the Turks, as a result of European-centered hegemony, have been compelled to accept the Latin alphabet. However, the Western world's view of the Ottoman Turks is clear, and in Cemil Meriç's words, the Ottoman Empire is synonymous with Islam in the Western perspective. "Even if we burned all the Qur'ans and demolished all the mosques, in

the European's eyes, we are the Ottomans. The Ottomans, that is, Islam. A dark, dangerous enemy. The children of Mount Olympus have always seen the children of Mount Hira in this light..." (Meriç, 2023, p. 9).

### Conclusion

Algerian-born French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) visited Istanbul in 1997 at the invitation of Yapı Kredi Publications, Boğaziçi University, and the French Consulate. On May 10, 1997, he wrote a letter from Istanbul to his editor, Catherine Malabou. This study examines the Turkish translation of Derrida's famous letter, published in *Cogito* magazine (Issue 47-48/2006), from various perspectives. The study evaluates Derrida's deconstructive (Dèconstruction) reading and presents some assessments based on this approach. In his renowned letter, Derrida expressed certain views on the Turkish language, Atatürk, and the Turkish alphabet reform. These views are presented in accordance with the possibilities of deconstructive reading. As a poststructuralist thinker, Derrida aims to question the thought patterns based on the superiority of European metaphysics from Plato to the present day. In this reading, Derrida extensively utilizes the inquiries of influential Western thinkers such as Levinas, Heidegger, Freud, Nietzsche, and Saussure. By developing a deconstructive reading in the light of these influential thinkers, he also opens up the discussion on the Turkish alphabet reform. Particularly using Saussure's binary oppositions and Levinas's concept of the 'Other,' Derrida searches for the "traces" of Arabic letters in Istanbul. This search reflects the way a bilingual and bicultural thinker, who was a 'migrant' worldwide due to his forbidden native language and Jewish identity in colonized Algeria, questions the destructive effects of Western thought through his own wounds. Derrida invites the Turks to think along with him, although this invitation sometimes turns into a new orientalist discourse. Thus, Derrida, through his French identity discourse expressed as "we," allows us to recall the devastation faced by the Turkish language throughout history and the 'lost' alphabets of the Turks, such as the Uighur alphabet, through the Arabic/Phoenician/Latin alphabet that forms the origin of world alphabets.

### References

- Aksan, D. (1982). *Her yönüyle dil, ana çizgileriyle dilbilim*, 3. Ankara: Türk Dil Kurumu Yayınları.
- Başkan, Ö. (2006). *Dilde yaratıcılık*. İstanbul: Multilingual Yayınları.
- Derrida, J. (2006). İstanbul mektubu. (Çev. Elis Simson). *Cogito Dergisi*, 47-48, 17-36.
- Ege, R. (2006). *Derrida Jacques. Felsefe ansiklopedisi Cilt 4* (Ed. Ahmet Cevizci). Ankara: Ebabil Yayıncılık.
- Kırtay, H. (2021). Derrida ve Türk harf inkılabı. *Felsefe Dünyası Dergisi*, 74, 259-277.
- Levend, A. S. (1972). Türk dilinde gelişme ve sadeleşme evreleri. Ankara: Türk Dil Kurumu.
- Ilıca, S. (2017). Yapısökücülük ve Aleksandr Sergeyeviç Puşkin'in Bahçesaray Çeşmesi'ni yapısökücü okuma. *Avrasya Uluslararası Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 5(11), 316-329.
- Saussure de F. (1985). *Genel dilbilim dersleri* (Çev: B. Vardar). Ankara: Türk Dil Kurumu.
- Eser, O. (2015). Kıta felfesinde yapısöküm yaklaşımının çeviri olgusuna etkisi. *Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 8(38), 183-187.
- İnce, Y ve Akça, B (2017). Osmanlı döneminde Latin harfleriyle Türkçe yazılan eserler ve yazarları. *Erdem Dergisi*, 73, 5-42.
- Rıfat, M. (2013). *XX. yüzyılda dilbilim ve göstergebilim kuramları 1. Tarihçe ve eleştirel düşünceler*. İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları.
- Uçan, H. (2009). Modernizm / Postmodernizm ve J. Derrida'nın yapısökümcü okuma ve anlamlandırma önerisi. *Turkish Studies. International Periodical For the Languages, Literature and History of Turkish or Turkic*, 4(8), 2283-2306.

- Eser, O. (2014). Meaning in the vortex of intervention and translation on international diplomacy. *Turkish Studies-International Periodical For The Languages, Literature and History of Turkish or Turkic*, 9(6), 379-387.
- Ertuğrul, T. (2023). *Jacques Derrida'nın arşiv humması: Arşivcilikte yeni yaklaşımlar, yeni yöntemler* (Yay. Haz. A. Davaz- B.T. Keşoğlu). İstanbul: Çevrimi Sertifika Kitabı.
- Salihoğlu, M. (2011). Marranolar ve dini inançları. *Ekev Akademi Dergisi*, 15(49), 105-112.
- Ertem, R. (1995). *Elifbâ*. TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi, 11, 44-49.
- Çakaş, C. Ö. (2018). Postmodernist düşüncenin İslam'a bakış açısında Oryantalist İslam kurgusunun izleri: Nietzsche, Foucault ve Derrida Örneği. *Research Studies Anatolia Journal*, 1(3), 461-471.
- Almond, I. (2015). Yeni oryantalistler: Nietzsche'den Orhan Pamuk'a İslam'ın postmodern temsilleri. İstanbul: Pinhan Yayınları.
- Coward, H. & Fosha, Y.T. (1993). *Derrida and Negative theology*, Albany: Sunny Press.
- Erdenk, E. (2009). Dilin mevzuatla korunması: Ülke örnekleri. *Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 11(2), 93-108.
- Perot, J. (2001). *Hatice Sultan ile Melling Kalfa: mektuplar*, (Çev. Ela Güntekin). Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları.
- Sözer, A. N. (2023). Türk dilinin çalışma yaşamındaki yeri ve önemi: Devrim kanunları açısından bir değerlendirme. *Yaşar Hukuk Dergisi*, 5 (2), 181-247.
- Özyurt, C. (2004). Osmanlı'da resmi ulusçuluk ve dil politikası. *Selçuk Üniversitesi İletişim Dergisi*, 3(3), 155-165.
- Eker, S. (2010). *Çağdaş Türk dili*. Ankara: Grafiker Yayınları.
- Uysal, S. S. (1998). *Şiire adanmış bir yaşam: Yahya Kemal Beyathı*. İstanbul: Yahya Kemal'i Sevenler Derneği Yayınları.
- Arat, R. R. (1999). *Kutadgu Bilig I (Metin (4.Baskı))*. Ankara: TDK Yayınları.
- Kahraman, F. (2020). Alfabenin icadı ve harflerin kökeni. *Marife*, 20(2), 759-781.
- Çetin, N. M. (2000). *Arap. Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi*. İstanbul: TDV Yayınları.
- Meriç, C. (2023). *Umrandan uygarlığa*. (Yay.Haz. M.A. Meriç). İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları.

### İnternet Kaynakları

URL 1: [https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cezayir%27deki\\_Yahudilerin\\_tarihi](https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cezayir%27deki_Yahudilerin_tarihi), Erişim Tarihi: 08.06.2024.

URL 2: [Fransız Akademisi - Vikipedi \(wikipedia.org\)](https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fransız_Akademisi), Erişim Tarihi: 26.06.2024.

URL 3: <https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fransızca> , Erişim tarihi: 06.06.2024.