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ÉVA Á. CSATÓ

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Karaim and Balkar translations of *Le petit prince* (The Little Prince) by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

• Éva Á. Csató, Uppsala University

BOOK REVIEW

Abstract: In this book review the Karaim and Karachay-Balkar translations of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* are presented. The German publisher Edition Tintenfaß focuses on bringing out books and translations non-standard language variations and minority and endangered languages. The Karaim translation *Kiči bijčiek* by Halina Kobeckaitė and Karina Firkavičiūtė was published in 2018 and the Balkar translation *Özd'än žaščik* by Magomet Gekki in 2020. At the end of the book review some linguistic comments are provided.

Keywords: Karaim, Balkar, translations, language revitalisation, endangered languages

Antoine De Saint-Exupéry'nin *Küçük Prenses* (Le petit prince) adlı eserinin Karayca ve Balkarca çevirileri

Özet: Bu makale, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry'nin *Le petit prince* adlı klasik çocuk kitabının Türk dillerinde yayınlanan iki çevirisini değerlendirmektedir. 2018'deki Karayca çeviri de 2020'deki Balkarca çeviri de Alman Edition Tintenfaß tarafından yayınlanmıştır. 2001 yılında bir aile girişimi olarak kurulan bu küçük yayınevinin programı, standart olmayan, yerel dil, azınlık dili konumunda bulunan, yok olma tehlikesiyle karşı karşıya olan ya da artık hiç kullanıcısı kalmamış olan dillerde yazılmış kitapları yayınlamaya yöneliktir. *Kiči bijčiek* başlıklı Karayca çeviri, Litvanya Karaycasını anadili olarak konuşan diplomat ve Türkolog Halina Kobeckaitė ile kızı, müzikolog Karina Firkavičiūtė tarafından yapılmıştır. Tanınmış bir edebiyatçı olan Magomet Gekki, *Le petit prince*'i *Özd'än žaščik* adıyla

Balkarcaya aktarmıştır. Konuşuru sayıca az diğer Türk dillerini desteklemek isteyenlerin yayınevinin bu girişimine katkıda bulunmalarını öneriyoruz.

Anahtar kelimeler: Karayca, Balkarca, çeviriler, dilin yeniden canlandırılması, tehlikedeki diller

Two new Turkic publications – Karaim and Balkar

In 2018 and 2020, with an interval of two years between them, Edition Tintenfaß published a Karaim and a (Karachay-)Balkar translation of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Le petit prince* (The Little Prince), a classic of world literature. Before presenting the two translations, a few words need to be said about the publisher.

The publisher

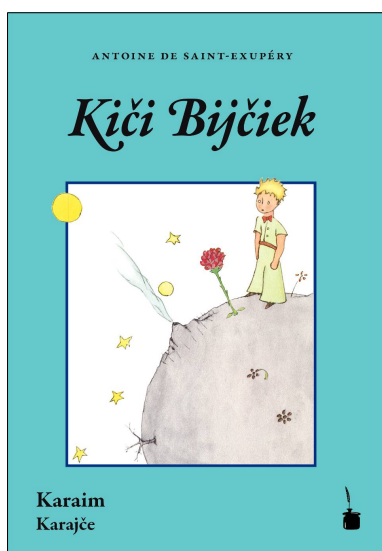
The family enterprise Edition Tintenfaß, founded in 2001 in the province of Hessen, Germany, is run by Dr Walter Sauer in collaboration with his wife, Nadine Sauer. The editorial program of this small publishing house focuses on bringing out books in non-standard and local varieties, and minority, endangered and dead languages spoken or written in Germany and worldwide. Books in about 150 languages and varieties have been published in printings of 300–500 copies so far. There are several titles in Sorbian, in the Hessian and Palatinate dialects of Germany, Pennsylvania German, Frisian, several African languages and many more. The publishers' incentive is to support small language communities. Literacy raises the prestige of a language and motivates community members to learn to read and write their heritage language.



More than 140 translations or transliterations of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's famous book *The Little Prince* are now available on the publisher's website.¹ The list even includes a Morse-code version of the French text. The idea of publishing classic texts in different languages has a long history in linguistics. Parallel translations, such as versions of the Christian *Lord's Prayer* in different languages, serve as tools of comparison between languages and also as pedagogical aids in language teaching. This prayer has been translated into most Turkic languages and also into Karaim (see Sauer & Kuhl 2015; Csató 2021). The two new Turkic translations of *The Little Prince* provide interesting material for linguists.

The Lithuanian Karaim translation: *Kiči bijčiek*

The translation of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's book into Lithuanian Karaim, *Kiči bijčiek* (2018), was made by Halina Kobeckaitė and Karina Firkavičiūtė. The book was the first in the publisher's catalogue to represent a Turkic language.



The Karaim community in Lithuania speaks a Turkic language and has long history of literacy. In addition to religious literature, consisting mostly of Bible translations, a secular literature has been established, predominantly during the first part of the twentieth century. Before the Soviet era the Karaim journals published articles on community topics, poems and short stories written by native speakers. Community members have continuously been engaged in contributing to the stock of literary and religious works in Karaim. Volumes of poems, song texts and essays have been compiled and published, often in bilingual editions with translations into Russian or Lithuanian. The level of education is traditionally high and thus a strong urge to keep the literary traditions alive serves as a driving force in these Karaim publication efforts.

During Soviet times, when religious practice was restricted, the level of linguistic competence in Karaim diminished and the language was transferred only within some families to the younger generations. A revitalisation process started in the early 1990s. The competence in spoken language

1 Edition Tintenfaß: <http://www.verlag-tintenfass.de/>

is minimal: the number of active speakers today is around thirty while the whole community counts approximately 200 members. Karaim communities are also found outside Lithuania in Poland, the Crimea and Russia. These communities do not use Karaim in writing and their spoken language is Russian or Polish.

Kiči bijčiek is written in the Lithuanian-based Latin script introduced by Mykolas Firkovičius in the 1980s. Various writing systems have been used in the Karaim communities over time. The changes were triggered by dramatic transformations in the regional political conditions. Today no common literacy tradition extends across the communities, and the Latin script used by the Lithuanian Karaim is difficult to read for Karaim living in Poland, Russia and Ukraine.

The translators of *The Little Prince* are prominent members of the Lithuanian Karaim community. As mother and daughter, they represent a family tradition of working for revitalisation of the Karaim language, transfer of traditions and cultivation of literary traditions. The father, Mykolas Firkovičius (1924–2000), late *hazzan* or religious and administrative leader of the Lithuanian Karaim community, created a library of handbooks, grammars and Karaim translations of religious texts in order to ensure the revival and continuation of the community. His wife, Halina Kobeckaitė, a diplomat and Turkologist, and daughter Karina Firkavičiūtė, a musicologist, have followed up on Mykolas Firkovičius' accomplishments and published a number of books documenting the Karaim cultural heritage.

In 2015, they published the volume *Bir kiuń ėdi ... Buvo tokia diena ...* 'Once upon a time...' containing collected works of Simonas Firkovičius (1897–1982) in Karaim with Lithuanian translation. This was followed in 2016 by a collection of Karaim songs in Polish and English translations, accompanied by musical notes under the title *Życie w pieśni karaimskiej* 'Life in Karaim songs' by Karina Firkavičiūtė (2016). The aim of this book was to provide an easy access to Karaim traditional songs also to those who do not have good competence in the language. The script used for rendering the Karaim texts is Lithuanian.

The two translators, who are full-fledged speakers of Karaim, have succeeded admirably in following up earlier achievements in Karaim literature by the translation of *Le petit prince*. They have rendered difficult passages from the original French text in an elegant and easily understandable way. In spoken Karaim, multilingual speakers copy many lexical items from the languages they share with their interlocutors, mostly Polish, Russian or Lithuanian. The literary standard for written Karaim has taken a purist approach of avoiding all non-Turkic elements, especially in the vocabulary. The principle is also observed in this translation, where Slavic loans in particular are systematically left out. Words which do not have translational equivalents in Karaim are rendered by a more general, less specified

meaning, for instance French *prince* ‘prince’ is rendered by *bijčiek* ‘little king/ruler’; French *serpent boa* ‘boa constrictor’ by *jylan* ‘snake’; French *chapeau* ‘hat’ by *biork* ‘cap’; and original French *forêt vierge* ‘jungle’ by *koyu orman* ‘thick woods’.

This is a common and well-functioning strategy in spoken Karaim. The translation *gieriab* ‘ship’, ‘vessel’ for French *avion* ‘airplane’ was probably chosen in order to avoid the use of loanwords such as Russian *самолёт* (local pronunciation *samolyot*), Polish *samolot* or Lithuanian *lėktuvas*, which can be employed in spoken Karaim. Internationally used culture words more or less maintain their form, for example French *planète* ‘planet’ is rendered as *planeta*; French *astronome* ‘astronomer’ as *astronom*; and French *télescope* ‘telescope’ as *teleskop*. For French *histoire* ‘history’ the Turkish-influenced word *tarych* (Turkish *tarih*) is used. Conventionalized non-Turkic loanwords listed in the Karaim standard dictionary also occur, such as *navičliar* (plural) ‘trousers’.

The translation is used among others in the language teaching for Karaim. The level of language competence in the Lithuanian Karaim community is regrettably declining, and most of the last fully competent speakers have already passed away. Nevertheless this translation is a significant demonstration of the community’s intention to continue to cultivate its language. It is also a documentation of the linguistic competence of the translators.

The Balkar translation: *Özd’än žaščik*

The other Turkic translation of *The Little Prince* published by Edition Tintenfaß is labelled as being in Karachay-Balkar, but it is actually in the Balkar (Malkar) language. Karachay-Balkar is the standard language used for the closely related Turkic varieties Karachay and Balkar. This translation emphasizes the status of the Balkar variety as a literary language. Its specific features are signalled already in the title by the use of the sound *ž* (Cyrillic *ж*) instead of *ǰ* (Cyrillic *дж*) as in the standard Karachay-Balkar language.

This translation was published in 2020 under the title *Özd’än žaščik* (*Ёзден жашчыкъ*), literally ‘The Noble Boy’. The historical Karachay-Balkar term *özd’än*, from *öz* ‘self’ + ablative suffix, denoted the class of free people, noblemen who could own land,



estates and servants, and who provided military service to the ruler. This term has been copied into Russian in the form *узденъ* (*uzden*). The word *žaščik* is a diminutive form of *žaš* ‘young man’. The title thus directly places the text within the Karachay-Balkar readers’ cultural context. The most straightforward translation of *The Little Prince* would be *Gitçe Biy* ‘Little Lord’, but the word *biy* in Balkar is associated with lords who kept slaves. Therefore it would not be the right choice for the nice little prince of the book, according to the translator.

The translator is Magomet Gekki, born in 1947 in Kazakhstan, where the Caucasian Balkars had been deported by the Soviet government a few years earlier. He is a well-known Balkar poet, who has translated many books from Russian into Balkar, among others Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* under the title *Алиса Къужур Дунианы Къыдырады* (transcribed as *Alisa Qıžur Dunyanı Qıdıradı* or, according to the publisher: *Alisa Qujur Duniyanı Qıdıradı*), literally ‘Alice wanders in the fancy world’ (2019).

The homeland of the Balkars is the mountainous Kabardino-Balkaria in North Caucasus. Their language is also called *tauča*, ‘mountaineer language’. Today about 100,000 Balkars live in Balkaria. They are bilingual speakers of Balkar and Russian and employ a Cyrillic script. The potential readers of this translation are well-trained and literate in Balkar and also active users of the language. Magomet Gekki himself has devoted his life to teaching and publishing in his native tongue.

The translation was made from *Маленький принц* (*Malen’kiy prints*), the Russian version of *The Little Prince*. The Balkar literary language uses a large number of conventionalised loanwords mostly from Russian. These lexical copies are accommodated to the Balkar sound and lexical system, for example *айрыплан* (*ayriplan*) ‘airplane’ from Russian *аэроплан* (*aeroplan*). The original French *forêt vierge* ‘jungle’ is rendered as *джунгли орман* (*ǰungli orman*), from Russian *джунгли* (*dzhungli*) in combination with the word *orman* ‘woods’. In Balkar, *orman* is an archaic word occurring only in some folklore texts. The use of synonyms or near-synonyms as paired nouns to denote one notion is a frequently used stylistic device in Turkic languages. Thus the juxtaposition of the Russian word for ‘jungle’ and the Turkic word for ‘woods’ serves to make the expression more literary-sounding. The usual Balkar word for ‘woods’ is *агац*, but this calls to mind the woods in the Balkar homeland, which are not similar to the jungle described in the translated book. No information is available as yet to the reviewer concerning the reception of the Balkar translation by the readers.

Some linguistic comments

Karaim and Karachay-Balkar are genealogically closely related Turkic languages. These translations show evidence of the relationship, as the basic lexical stocks of both languages demonstrate significant correspondences. The most conspicuous differences are of syntactic nature. Karaim is spoken in the western periphery of the Turkic-speaking world, whereas Balkar is situated in a Turkic-speaking region. Thus, Balkar is a typical Turkic verb/predicate-final language. Karaim, on the other hand, has been profoundly influenced by the neighbouring non-Turkic languages, with regard to ordering of sentence constituents and clause subordination strategies. In recent years some Karaim strive to establish a Turkish word order in their written language. This language-political consideration has slightly influenced the syntax of the translation.

Hopefully this wonderful publishing initiative will be followed up by new translations into small Turkic languages. The translations also provide valuable sources for linguists interested in comparative Turkic studies.

Thanks

Congratulations and thanks are due to the translators and the publisher. Edition Tintenfaß kindly provided the cover pictures for the books. Many thanks also to my Turkologist friends, Éva Csáki and Kemal Güler, who helped contact and interview the Balkar translator.

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Kalām kılğannı kılıç kıla almy.
What a pen can do, a sword cannot.
Tatar mäkale / proverb