

## Critical Examination of the Alphabet and Language Reforms Implemented in the Early Years of the Turkish Republic

### *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin İlk Yıllarında Yapılan Alfabe ve Dil Devrimlerinin Eleştirel Açıdan İncelenmesi*

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**Abstract:** *A wide variety of fundamental reforms in different spheres of Turkey's institutions were swiftly implemented in a top-down manner in the early years of the Turkish Republic under Atatürk's leadership. The purpose of this article is to critically examine the alphabet and language reforms put into practice in the years between the 1920s and 1930s. Since an analysis of socio-cultural and socio-political context is fundamental to understanding any reform initiatives, the article examines the alphabet and language reforms within the larger social, cultural, and political context within which they were carried out. In order to evaluate these reforms from a broader perspective, the article also scrutinizes the assumptions, beliefs, ideologies, and goals of those politicians or reformers who implemented them.*

**Key Words:** *alphabet reform, language reform, education policy, Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk*

### **Geniş Özet**

Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun yıkılması üzerine Mustafa Kemal Atatürk liderliğinde Anadolu'da kurulan Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin ilk yıllarında devletin çeşitli kurumlarında, sosyal ve kültürel alanda birçok inkılâp ve reform yapılmıştır. Bu çalışma, eğitim alanında yapılan en önemli reformlardan olan Dil ve Yazı Devrimlerini çeşitli açılardan ulusal ve uluslararası literatüre dayalı olarak eleştirel bir bakış açısıyla incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin kuruluş yıllarından itibaren çok hızlı ve seri bir şekilde gerçekleştirilen devrimler, devletin kurucusu Mustafa Kemal Atatürk'ün önderliğinde yapılmıştır. Bu nedenle, devrimlerin altında yatan gerçek etmenleri ve motifleri anlamak Atatürk'ün arka planının incelenmesini gerektirir. Atatürk, seküler, pozitivist ve Batı'ya dönük bir eğitim veren askeri okullarda öğrenim görmüştür. Atatürk'ün Batı stilinde bir eğitim alması, kendisinin dünya görüşünün şekillenmesinde en önemli bir rol oynamıştır. Batı'yı veya Avrupa medeniyetini çağdaş uygarlık olarak algılayan ve Türk milletinin bu uygarlık düzeyini yakalamasını hedefleyen Atatürk, bu amacını gerçekleştirmek için birçok devrim ve reform yapmıştır. Bu devrimler neticesinde Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'ndan kalan kurumlar kaldırılarak

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yerlerine Avrupa ülkelerindeki muadilleri kurulmuştur. Türk milletinin ataları Osmanlı'dan devraldığı yaşam tarzını, dünyayı algılama biçimini, düşünce yapısını ve değer yargılarını değiştirerek Avrupa standartlarında yeni bir sosyal yapı oluşturmayı hedefleyen Atatürk, bu amacını gerçekleştirmek için eğitimi bir araç olarak kullanmıştır. Atatürk'ün Batı yönelimli, sekülerist ve milliyetçi bir toplum oluşturma hedefini gerçekleştirmek için eğitim alanında yaptığı en önemli reformlardan ikisi Harf ve Dil Devrimleridir. Atatürk'e göre, çağdaş uygarlık düzeyine çıkmanın ön şartlarından birisi yeni yetişen kuşağa Doğu değil, Batı tarzında bir eğitim vermekten ve eğitime milli ve seküler bir yapı kazandırmaktan geçiyordu. Bu amaç doğrultusunda ilk önce Tevhid-i Tedrisat Kanunu çıkarılarak dini eğitim veren tüm okullar kapatıldı, halifelik ilga edildi ve din ve devlet işleri birbirinden ayrılarak devlete seküler bir yapı kazandırıldı. Daha sonra, seküler ve Batı tarzındaki eğitimin önündeki en önemli engellerden birisi olarak görülen, asırlardır Doğu kültürünün ve İslam'ın evrensel sembolü olan Arap alfabesinin kaldırılarak yerine Latin alfabesinin alınması ve yeni Türk Alfabeti olarak adlandırılması kararlaştırıldı. Çok hızlı bir şekilde uygulamaya konulan yeni alfabenin halk tarafından öğrenilmesini kolaylaştırmak amacıyla Millet Mektepleri açılarak Atatürk'ün başöğretmenliğinde okuma-yazma seferberliği başlatıldı. Daha sonra Dil Devrimi yapılarak dilin Türkçeleştirilmesi ve sadeleştirilmesi hareketi başlatılmış, Osmanlıca ve Farsça kökenli kelimeler dilden atılarak yerine yeni kelimeler türetilmiştir.

Alfabe ve Dil Devrimlerinin sebepleri ve Türk toplumu üzerindeki etkileri konusunda farklı görüşler ileri sürülmüştür. Alfabe Devrimini koşulsuz olarak destekleyenlere ve Kemalistlere göre, daha çok sessiz harflerden oluşan Arap harfleri sesli harf gerektiren Türkçe'nin ses yapısına uymuyordu ve öğrenilmesi zordu. Fakat Latin harflerini okumak, yazmak, öğrenmek ve öğretmek oldukça kolaydı. Bu nedenle, Türk halkını cehâletten kurtarmak ve okur-yazarlık oranını yükseltmek amacıyla Alfabe Devrimi yapıldı. Bu görüşte olanlara göre, Harf İnkılabının diğer önemli sebebi Türk milletinin Batı toplumuyla bütünleşmesini sağlayarak Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'ni çağdaş Batı medeniyetinin saygın bir üyesi yapmaktı. Kemalistlerin devrime bakış açılarında dikkat çeken en önemli ortak nokta, devrimleri artı ve eksileri ile objektif olarak değerlendirmekten kaçınmaları ve devrimlerin yeni yetişen kuşak üzerindeki olumsuz etkilerini görmezden gelmeleridir. Devrimleri tarafsız olarak değerlendiren yazarlara ve Türk tarihinde ihtisas yapmış yabancı akademisyenlere göre ise bu devrimlerin altında yatan temel etmen, okuma yazmayı kolaylaştırmak ve okur-yazarlık oranını arttırmak gibi pedagojik kökenli endişelerden değil, kültürel, sosyo-politik ve ideolojik sebeplerden kaynaklanmıştır. Bu devrimlerin asıl yapılış amacı, yeni yetişen Türk neslinin İslami mirasla, İslam dünyası ile ve Doğu kültürünü temsil eden ataları Osmanlı ile olan tarihi ve kültürel bağlarını koparmak ve böylece onların yüzünü zorla Batı kültür ve medeniyetine döndürmektir. Kısaca, bu devrimler Batı'nın değerleri üzerine kurulu yeni bir sosyal düzen oluşturmayı hedefleyen Batılılaştırma projesinin bir parçası olarak uygulamaya konulmuştur. Bu proje ile geçmiş ile bağı koparılmış, Doğu kültüründen arındırılmış Batı tipinde bir Türk kimliği oluşturulmaya çalışılmıştır. İşte bu sebeple, Kemalistler gibi Batı medyası da yeni bir Türk kimliği oluşturma çabalarının bir yansıması olan Harf ve Dil devrimlerinden övgüyle söz etmiş ve desteklemiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** alfabe devrimi, dil devrimi, eğitim politikası, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti, Mustafa Kemak Atatürk

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to critically examine the alphabet and language reforms implemented by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the first president of the Turkish Republic, in the years between the 1920s and 1930s. To that end and to help the reader make better sense of these reforms, the article first begins with a brief introduction about the historical roots of Turkey and some information about Mustafa Kemal's background. It then moves on to discussing the divergent perspectives on the alphabet and language reforms by drawing on the national and international literature.

The Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923 in Asia Minor or Anatolia subsequent to the demise of the Ottoman Empire, which collapsed after War World I. It was founded by Mustafa Kemal after the "War of Independence" by the whole public against the Western powers' imperialistic attempts to usurp and exploit Anatolia's resources. Even though modern Turkey was first established on the cultural, social, economic, political, and educational remnants of the Ottoman Empire, those institutions were abolished by rapidly implemented successive reform movements. This huge task was carried out by Mustafa Kemal, the founder of the Republic of Turkey. Given that it was Mustafa Kemal who was the main figure in initiating reforms, some information about his background such as his identity, thinking, and world view is needed to gain insight into both the impetus behind his motives and the nature, scope and purposes of the reforms implemented.

Born in 1881 in the Ottoman city of Salonika (Thessaloniki in Greece), Mustafa Kemal attended the military school at Monastir in Macedonia. During his years in this school as a cadet, his thinking was shaped by a zealous Turkish nationalism. Having graduated from the military academy in Istanbul with the rank of captain, Mustafa Kemal held various staff positions, served in garrisons, took part in the Young Turk revolution, and became involved in nationalist movements. When the Western powers, the Allies, invaded Anatolia after War World I, Mustafa Kemal resigned from his official task to derive them back by recruiting a nationalist army. Under his leadership, the Turkish nationalist forces successfully fought against the invaders, expelling them from the country in 1922. Having ejected the Western powers from the country, he proceeded to

get rid of the Sultanate and Caliphate. He then established the Grand National Assembly and proclaimed Turkey's regime republican in 1923. Consequently, Mustafa Kemal and his comrades launched on large scale reforms aimed at replacing the Ottoman institutions with the Western ones (Metz, 1996; Milton-Edwards, 2005; Zürcher, 2003).

Why did Atatürk attempt to replace the Ottoman institutions with the Western ones? The answer lies in his world view. Atatürk was educated in secular, Western-oriented military schools with a positivist outlook (Goldschmidt & Davidson, 2006; Korkmaz, 2009). Through his Western style education, Atatürk developed unfavorable attitude toward all institutions of the Ottoman Empire that he thought were needed to be replaced with those of European states. His primary aim was to westernize not only the institutional structure and organization of the newly established republican, but also the structure of Turkish society at large; i.e., creating a new social order by reconstructing every aspect of the society (Lewis, 1968). He judged it essential that the way the Turks constructed knowledge and viewed the world be fundamentally altered and changed. He wanted to instill in Turkish people a new way of thinking, reasoning, acting, and living through sweeping reforms as noted by Lewis (1999):

Even though contemporary reform-oriented people of authority and high position believed that the act of political reform was the key to progress, Atatürk's belief was that progress could never be achieved within the multi-racial Ottoman Empire. To him, for progress to occur, it is essential for reformers not to combine the old with the new. Reforms were to aim at changing radically all aspects of Turkish society abolishing its traditional beliefs and institutions (p. 51).

Thus, a wide range of fundamental changes and reforms were experienced by Turkish people in different aspects of their life. To convince the public to embrace reforms, Atatürk and his fellows argued that what the public was undergoing was to their best interest. If the newly emerged modern Turkish state was to survive and compete successfully with the rest of the world, Atatürk judged, its institutions would be compatible with those of Western states or European civilization. Atatürk and his reform

associates further asserted that the Ottoman Empire couldn't take on the characteristics of modern civilization, so it deserved to be abolished together with its institutions.

### **Why Reforms in Education?**

As should be clear from the preceding paragraphs, Atatürk looked upon education as a means to change and transform the structure of society from Eastern to Western type by designing and implementing educational reforms and policies that would guide the public to embrace the values, beliefs, ideas, and behaviors of Western people. Structuring a type of nationalist, secularist, and Western-oriented society was what Atatürk had in mind when attempting to reform schools and other social institutions. Secularization, nationalization, and westernization constituted the underlying character of the reforms in education. These three movements are called “modernization that was composed of four processes that were Anti-Islamic secularization, De-Otomanization, Pro-Westernization, and Re-Turkification...” (Basak, 1986, p. 99). The most salient and fundamental aspect of Atatürk's assumption was that secularism was a necessary component of modernization and social change. In order to promote westernization, Atatürk believed, religion and state had to be separated (Lewis, 1999).

Since educational reforms replaced the educational system of the Ottoman Empire with that of Western states, how education was conducted during the Ottoman centuries needs to be briefly summarized. The Ottoman Empire was founded by Turkish people, but it had a heterogeneous mixture of diverse ethnic groups and religious creeds. Ethnicity of the people was determined by their religious affiliation. Non-Muslims communities such as Armenians, Greeks, and Jews were called *millet*s and were granted communal autonomy. Such groups were entitled to take charge of their own schools, religious affairs, and court issues according to their own religious beliefs or customary law (Pitman, 1987). Therefore, it was the policy of the empire to allow her subjects to conduct their own education. Christians and Jews were free to choose the type of education they wanted for their youth. Muslims were usually educated in the *medrese*, part of mosque complex called *külliye*, through not only Koranic instruction, but also modern sciences such as mathematics, astronomy, history and so on. But, in general, schools were mainly structured in three main channels as horizontal institutions closed to each other. The first and most common ones were local schools and medreses explained

above. The second ones were reformist schools of Tanzimat called *idadî* and *sultanî* and the third ones were schools educating in foreign language like colleges and minority schools (Wolf-Gazo, 1996). In short, education was neither national nor secular during the Ottoman rule because of the cosmopolitan and multicultural nature of the empire. To keep a variety of nations who differed from each other in terms of their race, ethnicity, culture, religion and so on under the Ottoman roof, it was necessary for the Ottoman administrators to permit their subjects to enjoy flexibility in their education endeavor.

But, Atatürk and reformers believed that the Ottoman system of education gave rise to different opinions and life styles among people. What they wanted was not diversity of opinions and world views but uniformity. Their aim was to assimilate these different people into one type of personality that would fit into the system; i.e., citizens who did not differ from one another in terms of their values, beliefs, thinking, opinions, and life styles. To that end, they thought that whatever was associated with Islamic civilization, be them beliefs, habits, practices, would be replaced by those of the Western. Therefore, after the declaration of the republic, the first task for Atatürk and his fellows to do was to get rid of what seemed to be an obstacle in establishing secular and Western schools. It was the *caliphate* as the head of all Muslims in the world that the reformers judged needed to be exterminated. Some Kemalists even went so far as to describe the caliphate as a black bird, “a crow, which as an evil omen has hovered over the Turks for centuries” (Ersanlı, 2002, p. 145). Thus, on March 3, 1924 the Grand National Assembly passed a law that abolished the caliphate and banished all members of the house of the Ottoman from the country, paving the way for the separation of the state and religion. The same law called *the Unification of Education* also abolished the religious schools, the medreses and mekteps, and put all schools including private ones under the Ministry of Public Instruction. The Ministry of Evkaf, which administrated the pious foundations, was terminated and its functions transferred to an office directly under prime minister (Davison, 1998). In contrast to the American concept of separation of church and state, which protects religion from government control, this law placed the religious schools under the control of the government. The religious schools steadily lost students under the state control (and in 1933 they were completely closed). In the end, the educational

system was completely secularized through this law (Shaw & Shaw, 1977; Zürcher, 2003).

Even though secularism was vehemently implemented by the government, “society at large preserved its traditional way of life and customs, rooted directly in Islam” (Karpat, 1970, p.534). The majority of Turkish citizens who were dedicated to Islamic tradition and values were opposed to and resisted the reform movements. When some representatives in the Grand National Assembly joined their resistance, Atatürk formed and maintained an authoritarian one-party regime to accomplish his aim and objectives, enhancing his position as the president (Zürcher, 2003). The Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi-CHP) that Atatürk founded had established a power monopoly in support of his reform program. Ultimately, the political system of Turkey was declared as a one-party state (Zürcher, 2003), which helped Atatürk govern the National Assembly through a sort of personal rule during his presidency. This personal authoritarian rule enabled Atatürk to secure his reforms successfully even in the face of strong resistance by the public (Metz, 1996). “As president of the republic, Kemal was authoritarian.... Kemal admired democracy in theory, but he ruled as a stern father and teacher to his people, who he felt were not yet ready to govern themselves” (Goldschmidt & Davidson, 2006, p. 229). Eventually, Atatürk was able to found “a modern Turkey that eradicated Ottoman political and social systems and Ottoman literature and culture, effectively erasing the historical memory of the Ottomans in the culture of modern Turks” (Cuthell, 2009, p. 56).

### **The Alphabet and Language Reforms**

Having seized a great and insurmountable power through his party, Atatürk was dedicated himself to exterminating whatever was associated with Islamic civilization and symbols of Islam. When the disestablishment of Islam and the Ottoman institutions was done with the last law (in 1928) that stated and still states that Turkey is legally and constitutionally a secular state, it was time to do away with another important and universal symbol of Islam, the Arabic script, which set Turkey apart from the Western community. Understanding why the Arabic script was exterminated or what beliefs and assumptions were instrumental in paving the way for the abolition of the Arabic script

necessitates looking into the issue within its historical and socio-cultural context along with the examination of the basic characteristics of Ottoman Turkish.

Ottoman Turkish was written with the Arabic script. As such, it was composed of the elements of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish language. Ottoman vocabulary was basically based on Arabic that constituted the primary language of religion and religious law (Metz, 1996; Römer, 2009). The contact between Turkish language and Arabic was started soon after Turkish people began to convert to Islam around the tenth century (Korkmaz, 2009). Therefore, “it was religious factors more than anything else that facilitated the spread of Arabic and Persian among Turks” (Dogancay, 1995, p. 224). As a result, Ottoman Turkish borrowed large amounts of vocabulary along with expressions and syntactic structures which were integrated into the Ottoman idiom (Metz, 1996). The use of Arabic alphabet, the holy book of Islam, the Koran, which was written in Arabic, exerted a great cultural influence on Ottoman Turkish. The Arabic script was also one of the defining characteristics and elements of Muslim identity. In other words, Ottoman Turkish was strongly connected with Islamic civilization and the Eastern societies through its mixed language.

But, Atatürk thought that if Turkish people were to have a secular and national identity, their language with its strong ties with Islamic tradition ought to be abolished. That is, Ottoman Turkish had to be jettisoned if nationalism, secularization, and westernization were realized in Turkey. As Akural (1984) noted, “Atatürk’s language-reform theory presupposed that the influence of Arabic and Persian on Turkish was detrimental to progress” (p. 133). Viewing the Arabic script as an undesirable feature of the culture that tied Turkish people to Islam and deprived them of developing a national identity, Atatürk decided that it was essential to make Ottoman language obsolete by removing it from Turkish people’s memory (Lewis, 1999; Toprak, 1981). Hence, Atatürk looked upon the alphabet reform as a tool to cut off Turkish people’s ties with their Islamic past and the Muslim world.

So, to accomplish that aim, in May 1928, numbers written in Arabic were jettisoned and their Western equivalents were welcome. In the summer of 1928, a commission under the personal direction of Atatürk worked on the alphabet reform trying to decide the best way to introduce the new reform to the citizens. Some proposed

modification in the Arabic script to make it more compatible with Turkish phonology. A good number of members of the assembly favored gradually introducing the new letters over a period lasting up to five years. Other suggested that the Latin alphabet be adapted gradually over ten years. So, perspectives on how language was to be reformed can be categorized into three sections (Dogancay, 1995): (1) *Radical purists* in favor of eliminating all foreign rules and words from the language, (2) *Conservatives* wishing to maintain the language without change, (3) *Moderates* arguing for the elimination of foreign rules and lexical items that were felt to be alien, but maintaining words accepted and used by the people in everyday communication. These moderates argued that language could not be changed by decree in a revolutionary fashion. Atatürk, on the other hand, demanded that the alphabet reform be introduced in a few months. His view on this matter was well expressed in his saying that “the Turkish nation, who rescued their country from foreign invasion and imperialism, and thus secured their independence, should also protect their language from dominance and influence of foreign languages” (Dogancay, 1995, p. 230). As a matter of fact, long before the Turkish Republic was founded, Atatürk revealed his perspective on this issue. When he met Ivan Monolof, a Bulgarian Turkologist, in 1906, he put forward this viewpoint: We have to select the Latin alphabet, getting rid of the language that prevents us from entering Western civilization [so to speak, the Arabic script]. We should resemble the West in all respects including our outfits (Albayrak, 1989; Şimşir, 1992, 2006).

The new Turkish alphabet was first accepted by the Alphabet Commission. It consisted of 29 letters. The three letters Q, X, and W of the Latin Alphabet were not accepted for the reasons that they did not fit the Turkish language. The letters Ç, Ğ, J, Ş, İ, Ö, and Ü which were not among the Latin alphabet were added to the Turkish alphabet (Kayıran & Metintaş, 2009). Consequently, in November 1, 1928 the Grand National Assembly approved the new Latin alphabet that had been devised by the above-mentioned committee under Atatürk’s guidance and leadership. This law called the Acceptance and Implementation of the Turkish Letters (Türk Harflerinin Kabulü ve Tatbiki Hakkındaki Kanun) made the use of the new alphabet in public communications compulsory as of January 1, 1929 (Aydemir, 1995). Later on, the Letter Campaign was embarked on in order to teach the newly adopted language to the public. Every

representative of the Grand National Assembly was to go to his region to illuminate the people there about the new alphabet. To that end, the reformers also established the Nation Schools (Millet Mektepleri). Atatürk then traveled throughout the country with chalk and a portable blackboard, explaining the new Turkish alphabet to the public almost in every setting such as schools, village squares, and other public places (Metz, 1996). He appeared before public as schoolmaster to explain and justify the new reform, giving such speeches as follows:

My friends, our rich and harmonious language will now be able to display itself with new Turkish letter. We must free ourselves from these incomprehensible signs, which for centuries have held our minds in an iron vice. You must learn new Turkish letter quickly. Teach them to your compatriots, to women, and to men, to porters and to boatman. Regard it as a patriotic and national duty....It is those who failed to understand the character of the Turk and bound his mind in chains. Now is the time to eradicate the errors of the past. We shall repair these errors.... Our nation will show with its script and with its mind that its place is with the civilized world. (Lewis, 1968, p. 278)

With this law, it immediately became unlawful to write Turkish with the Arabic letters (Metz, 1996). Within a year, by the middle of 1929, the new script was used to print all publications. The books printed with Arabic and Persian scripts were strictly prohibited even for religious purposes. The old script could only be used for scholarly purposes (Bosworth, 1965). Teachers were also required to quit instructing in these languages in the schools (Shaw & Shaw, 1977). Arabic and Persian were no longer taught in schools as foreign languages, (Dogancay, 1995) thereby drying up a formidable source for perpetuating Arabic and Persian influences (Basak, 1986). With the introduction of the alphabet reform, discrimination against people of different world views and minorities was practiced in every field of education. For example, when the old Darulfunun in Istanbul was given a new charter and reconstituted as the University of Istanbul, two-thirds of its teaching staff, over 100 scholars, lost their tenure and only the most dependable followers of reforms and Kemalist line were able to keep their position (Zürcher, 2003). It was just the beginning of many purges the Turkish universities were to experience in the following years. The same process still continues to disadvantage some citizens who are critical of these reforms.

One of the most important reasons given by reformers for the adoption of the Latin alphabet was that it was easier to read, write, and learn for illiterates, so it had potential to raise the literacy rate. The aim, hence, was to rescue the nation from ignorance by helping them become literate (Tongul, 2004). It is argued that the alphabet reform made it easy for Turkish people to read and write, boasting the literacy rate (Metz, 1996; Tseng, 2009). Supporters of the alphabet reform have asserted that the Arab alphabet whose voice structure is mostly based on not consonants but vowels is suitable to the structure and usage of the Arabic language but it is not as such for the Turkish language in that it does not meet the requirements of the Turkish language, the voice structure of which demands more vowels. It is further argued that the alphabet reform like all other reforms initiated by Atatürk stemmed directly from the historical, social, and cultural needs of Turkish people and was capable of addressing these needs (Korkmaz, 2009). Other important reason given by reformers for the alphabet reform had to do with the need for the newly established Turkish Republic to become a respected member of the civilized nations; i.e., Western civilization (Çalık & Baltaoğlu, 2001).

Focusing on the consequences of the alphabet reform, Korkmaz (2009) noted that the alphabet reform helped the process of removing words of foreign origin, especially Arabic and Persian ones, from the Turkish language, thereby paving the way for the Turkification of the Turkish language. Some also claimed that the acceptance of the Latin alphabet was very beneficial to foreigners living in Turkey in that they especially businessmen were able to learn the language more easily after the change in alphabet (Çalık & Baltaoğlu, 2001). It helped the Republic of Turkey, Korkmaz (2009) asserted, get integrated with the Western world, modifying the political image of the Turkish state in terms of social and cultural factors in the eyes of the West. To her, it served as a means to facilitate the social, cultural, and economic development of the state (pp. 1477-1478). But, the author did not support her last assertion with evidence. Like this author, those who put forward similar perspectives fail to support their position with sound evidence or rational argument. As a matter of fact, there is so much convincing evidence that refutes their perspectives as will be shown in the subsequent paragraphs.

Academicians of the era such as Prof. Mehmet Fuat Köprülü and Prof. Zeki Velidi Togan raised objections to the adoption of the Latin alphabet in place of the

Arabic script. The former put forward his perspective on the issue as follows: “Those who favor the Latin alphabet assume that it is the way that quickens our entrance to Western civilization. But, that cannot be done with a change in our alphabet via the acceptance of the Latin alphabet” (Köprülü, 1926, as cited in Albayrak, 1989, p. 481). Köprülü later changed his negative view of the alphabet reform, writing positive comments about it. But, he attested that the motive behind this reform movement basically stemmed from the desire to westernize the Turkish society and its culture. In his article entitled the Alphabet Reform, Köprülü argued that “under Atatürk’s leadership this revolution [the alphabet reform] reflected the will to escape from Eastern culture and to enter the circle of the contemporary Western culture. This fact was understood later by the opponents” (Köprülü, 1938, as cited in Korkmaz, 2009, p. 1477).

The Western press at that time also made comments on the alphabet reform. For instance, in November 2, 1928 under the heading “Turks Forbid Writing” *Appleton Post-Crescent*, an American newspaper, reported that the alphabet reform was part of Mustafa Kemal’s reform package that aimed to cut off the Turks’ ties with Eastern culture and to urge them to enter Western civilization. Other American newspapers such as *Nebraska State Journal* and *Middletown Times Herald* made similar comments on the alphabet reform, praising Mustafa Kemal for his efforts to westernize Turkish society and its culture (Sarikoyuncu, 2008). These newspapers implicitly stated that the alphabet reform was forcefully imposed upon the public.

The change from the Arabic script to the Latin alphabet can be evaluated in light of theories of linguistic and language reform. To some theorists of linguistic, language reform can be defined as the deliberate manipulation of language triggered by the need to facilitate language use as well as to serve the underlying political, socio-economical, cultural, and ideological tendencies of the community at that time (Nahir, 1984). In fact, “language itself is a microcosm of the social engineering (and violence) inflicted by the state on national identity” (Gökner, 2008, p. 474). According to Perry (2004), language reform is primarily not a linguistic and cultural but a sociopolitical process, the effects of which color the speech and literature of succeeding generations. As such, it is practiced mainly not by linguists but by generals, politicians, social ideologues, and other amateurs (p.238-239). According to these scholars, the Turkish alphabet reform can safely be said

a sociopolitical and ideological undertaking in that it was carried out under the leadership of Kemal Atatürk as part of his modernization, westernization, secularization, and nationalization movements. As Fishman (1971) forcefully argued, “seeking a new Turkish identity (in contrast with its old Ottoman-Islamic identity) governmentally sponsored language planning conscientiously and vigorously moved to attain script from Roman in place of Arabic script to attain Europeanization...” (p. 11). Bingol (2009) also stated that aiming to build a Western type nation-state, Kemalists or reformers “sought a Western identity for the new Turkish Republic” and therefore “favored two Western concepts, secularization and nationalization, as important norms of the new Turkish identity.... Thus, they favored the adoption of Western numerals and of the Latin alphabet...” (p. 41).

Like these authors, a large number of scholars acknowledge that the most important reason for the alphabet reform was undoubtedly sociopolitical, ideological, and also psychological in intent. Atatürk actually hoped to disconnect the cultural ties between future Turkish generations and their Ottoman Islamic traditions (Akural, 1984). He and his comrades favored the forceful exposure of Turkish society to Western cultural influences. So, his language policy functioned as an adjunct to the mental manipulation of the younger generation, by severing its cultural ties with the Ottoman past (Akural, 1984). It aimed to break Turkey’s ties with the Islamic East while simultaneously facilitating communication with the Western world by pushing the nation toward the West (Davison, 1998; Katoğlu, 2007; Lewis, 1999; Şavkay, 2002). By abolishing the Arabic script that was claimed to be unsuitable for Turkish phonology, Atatürk did irrevocably turn Turkey toward the West, breaking a major link with its Islamic heritage and its ties with the Islamic world (Ahmad, 1993; Metz, 1996), “thereby inserting and enhancing a cultural and historical distance between the Turkish Republic and the Ottoman Empire” (Çınar, 2005, p.148). The new nationalized generations were effectively prevented from the opportunity to learn Arabic letters, “having little or no textual access to the recent Ottoman-Islamic past” (Göknar, 2008, p. 488). Turkish children educated after the alphabet reform couldn’t read the books their ancestors had written in Ottoman Turkish, unless they were transcribed or republished in Latin alphabet (Davison, 1998; Cuthell, 2009). In the end, those who could read Ottoman Turkish

gradually decreased to the point where not the public but only historians can read thousands of centuries old documents in the Ottoman archives. Today, many scholars in the history departments do not have a strong command of Ottoman Turkish, which poses a great threat to the effort to understand the Ottoman past (Öztürk, 2004).

Accepting the sociopolitical character of the alphabet reform, Bernard Lewis, who is a renowned historian on the Middle East history, agrees with the above scholars' interpretations by acknowledging that "the basic purpose of the change in alphabet was not so much practical and pedagogical, as social and cultural- and Mustafa Kemal, in forcing his people to accept it, was slamming a door on the past as well as opening a door to the future" (Lewis, 1968, p. 273). Lewis (1999) also noted that "the purpose of the change of alphabet was to break Turkey's ties with the Islamic east" (p. 27). Goldschmidt and Davidson (2006) also made similar comments on Atatürk's reform efforts as follows:

Mustafa Kemal devoted the last fifteen years of his life to changing Turkey from the bastion of Islam into a secular nation-state. Islam, the lifestyle and basis of government for the Turks since their conversion a thousand years earlier, was now to be replaced by Western ways of behavior, administration, and justice. If persuasion failed, then the changes would be imposed by force. Twice opposition parties arose within the Grand National Assembly, but in both cases Kemal suppressed them (p. 229).

Likewise, Zürcher (2003) pointed out the ideological motives behind the alphabet reform by stating that "it [the adoption of the Latin alphabet] was yet another way to cut off Turkish society from its Ottoman and Middle Eastern Islamic traditions and to reorient it towards the West" (p.189). Seeing the alphabet reform as ideological, Zürcher (2003) argued that the alphabet and language reforms together with educational institutions were exploited and mobilized to spread the Kemalist message or the six principles of Kemalism consisting of (1) *republicanism*, (2) *nationalism*, (3) *populism*, (4) *statism* (5) *revolutionism* or *reformism* and (6) *secularism* or *laicism*. "Kemalizm remained a flexible concept and people with widely differing world views have been able to call themselves Kemalist" (Zürcher, 2003, p. 181) for the purposes of securing socio-economic benefits for themselves under the guise of being a Kemalist.

Implicit in the efforts to reform the alphabet was the impetus to attract the European community's acceptance of Turkey as a civilized nation. So-called intellectuals

of the West prejudicially described the Ottomans or Turkish as predatory barbarians. “The new Republic under Atatürk leadership felt that it could expiate the alleged sins of its predecessors only by renouncing its modern Ottoman heritage, forgetting that neither the modern Scandinavians nor English have ever been ashamed of their plundering ancestors, namely Vikings and Anglo-Saxons, who wrested the British Isles away from its Celtic inhabitants” (Basak, 1986, p. 100).

The alphabet reform didn't stop with the acceptance of the Latin script, but kept going further. It was followed by the language reform that was aimed at Turkification of the language. Because preaching Turkish nationalism in the denationalized and polyglot Ottoman Turkish would be a contradiction in terms, eliminating foreign words from Ottoman language were regarded to be necessary. The language reform and the creation of a pure Turkish were to be a symbol of nationalism (Dogancay, 1995). So, a new phase of language reform emerged in the form of simplification and purification of the Turkish language that was involved the expurgation of Arabic and Persian accretions. They were to be replaced by lexical items of Turkic origin with neologisms based on Turkish roots and suffixes. This second phase in the form of expurgation would be performed in two stages. The first stage was the simplification of the style in general, and the grammatical features in particular; and the second was the purification of the dispensable elements, only to be replaced by elements from native sources (Basak, 1986). To promote a deeper sense of national identity among Turkish people, Kemal Atatürk established the “Turkish Linguistic Society”, later turned into the Turkish Language Association (TDK) in 1932, that would discuss ways of simplifying and purifying the language. Atatürk was quite aware of the influence of language on people's worldviews and its role in the transmission of culture from the old generation to the young one. Because reality is viewed in varying ways in different languages and linguistic terms or concepts are closely linked to social values, Atatürk judged it essential that the Turkish language be purified from Arabic and Persian influences. Atatürk also hoped to see the emergence of a different worldview among Turkish-speaking people through TDK (Akural, 1993).

TDK was initially vested with the task of language planning. In line with the ideologies of Atatürk and his ruling party, the political process of authoritative decision making was seen in works in language planning (Fishman, 1971). The goal for language

planning was the development of the Turkish vernacular into a standardized national language that would be the vehicle of modernization and the tool for national unification. The main emphasis of the Turkish language planning was on corpus cultivation, that is, the purification and renovation of the language as mentioned above through the production and dissemination of technical and scientific vocabulary and other neologisms (Dogancay, 1995). It is further argued that the goal of corpus cultivation under the aegis of the Turkish Language Association was twofold: (1) lexical modernization, enrichment of the language and the lexicon so that it would permit the developing language to fulfill new communication functions; and (2) renovation via simplification of the style in general and purification of the lexicon in particular (Dogancay, 1995). To these ends, literary styles of Arabic and Persian were abandoned and the foreign borrowings were expurgated. What constituted the bulk of language planning were lexical renovation and modernization as well as attempted authentification, consisting mainly of the following processes:

- Collecting and publishing Turkish words from the spoken everyday language of the Anatolian people to replace Arabic and Persian borrowings.
- Researching old texts from the pre-Islamic Turkish era to find words that had fallen out of use and using other Turkic languages as resources to borrow from.
- Compounding existing Turkish words to make up new ones.
- Deriving new words via derivative suffices.
- Creating neologisms similar in sound to their European counterparts.

(Dogancay, 1995, p. 233)

The main processes involved in this effort were collecting words from folk vernacular (*derleme*), from old texts (*tarama*), and deriving neologism (*birleştirme*). The outcome of this planning process was then codified and presented to the public through newspaper, grammars, dictionaries, and exemplary oral and written texts. Arabic and Persian grammatical forms were attacked and discouraged by reformers. Lexicographers began to drop Arabic and Persian words from dictionaries, and collected words from dialects, ancient literary sources and even Turkic languages from Central Asia to replace

the Ottoman vocabulary (Zürcher, 2003). Whereas new words were coined from Western words, Arabic and Persian words were removed from the school curriculum. New Turkish words began to be published in 1934 and appeared in newspapers in 1935 (Metz, 1996).

The language reform movement further resulted in the Sun-Language Theory (Güneş-Dil Teorisi) in 1935. This theory stipulated that all languages could be etymologized back to an initial sound emitted when first man, a Turk, looked at the sun and registered his vocal reaction. Accordingly, Turkish was not only the source of all languages but also the language of the oldest cultures, dating back to the stone and iron ages, then spreading via migration to other places. Many words in French, German, and English whose origins were unknown could be traced back to old Turkish words (Dogancay, 1995; Katoğlu, 2007). Thus, “Turkish was the first language on the earth and that all other languages developed from it; that Turks were the first people and that all human achievement had essentially Turkish origins” (Shaw & Shaw, 1977, p. 376). Even though this theory didn’t gain much support in the face of the modern world, the process of simplifying and Turkifying the language continued and still keeps going on in Turkey.

### **Critical Evaluation of the Reforms**

A review of the critiques on the alphabet and language reforms shows that not every scholar blindly supports the efforts at language reform. Shaw and Shaw (1977) detect several drawbacks associated with the language reform movement. One is related to securing teacher for teaching the new language. They say, “The old problems of securing sufficient teachers for the more distant rural areas continued to limit the extension of the higher levels as rapidly as they were needed” (p. 386). There was also the perennial problem of finding teachers from the towns who were willing to serve in the primitive villages of Anatolia. The schools continued to provide a kind of literary and classical education which failed to meet the needs of many citizens, especially in the rural areas. The gap or disparity in literacy level or educational attainment between urban and rural residents and man and women kept continuing. The majority of village children were not able to pursue their education beyond elementary school (Shaw and Shaw, 1977). The effect of language reform on the struggle against illiteracy was disappointing

as well. As opposed to the reformers' claim that literacy rate would increase sharply with the advent of new language, illiteracy has remained relatively high, even compared with other developing countries (Zürcher, 2003).

The other ostensible reason given by reformers for the abandonment of the Arabic alphabet is inconsistent with the results of scientific research as well. Reformers asserted that the Arabic alphabet had got inadequate vowel presentation and that it created irregularities in Ottoman Turkish spelling. The letter/sound relationship that the Latin alphabet provided would facilitate the teaching of reading in the public schools. They regarded the phonic method as the only viable way to teach reading. The lack of fit between Arabic letters and Turkish phonology was considered to be the major reason for the very low rate of literacy. However, psycholinguistic researchers and reading specialist conclude that letter/sound correspondence is not a serious obstacle to the successful learning and reading (Akural, 1984). So, the Arabic alphabet was not a major obstacle in teaching reading, nor was it a determining cause of the widespread illiteracy in the Turkish Republic (p. 136). Those scholars who cite the language reform as a forward step toward westernization and progress do not raise any questions concerning the actual efficacy of the Latin alphabet for teaching reading.

When evaluating the language reform, several questions need to be asked and answered in relation to democratic principles that Atatürk and his reform associates claimed to have established. For the sake of westernizing the society, was it necessary to destroy and eliminate peoples' cultural heritage by exposing them to swiftly implemented reforms that they didn't want to embrace? Can these forceful reform efforts be justifiable? Does democracy justify the actions done against the will of people? Was it pragmatic and justifiable to transform a traditional society with a cultural background far removed from Europe by replacing those cultural elements with those of Western society in an autocrat and authoritarian way? Another important question concerns whether the Turkish language reform succeeded in achieving its goal of national unity and whether it defeated its own purpose by creating styles which are an obvious indication of political separation. Plenty of people, not just conservatives and religious groups, had been opposed to what they called the violence done to the language under the assumption of purification, and objected to the manipulation of the language as a tool of politics

(Dogancay, 1995). Language eventually became the reflection of one's political position on the left-right spectrum. Whereas the leftist groups used the language as an indication of their detachment from the past, the rightist ones were quite content with the language, viewing it as a comprehensible national language (Dogancay, 1995).

Language purifiers whose work failed to comply with democratic values and principles tended to disregard the changing attitudes, interests, and the needs of the people whose language was reformed. In their attempts to create a pure language, members of the Turkish Language Association were sometimes proposing new words in an arbitrary fashion, hence creating occasions, whereby people didn't understand each other's writings. The Turkish language was not only impoverished under the language purification movement but also distorted as was the case in deriving new words via suffixes of Western origin such as utilizing *men/man* to make *öğretmen* "teacher" from the verb *öğret* "to teach", *göçmen* "refugee", *yazman*, "clerk", and the like (Dogancay, 1995). Many of these derivations were not compatible with the goals of language reform explained in previous sections on the grounds that they were not productive derivational suffixes of Turkish but those of the English/German *-man*. Another example showing the failure of language reformers to meet their goals was the creation of neologisms similar in sound to their European counterparts such as *okul* from "ecole" in French (school in English), *komutan* from "commandant", *teori* from "theory" or "théorie" and so on (Bosworth, 1965; Dogancay, 1995). It is argued that TDK was defeating its own purpose of purifying the language from Arabic/Persian influences by adapting these European words instead. Through the expurgation of the language, many shades of meaning were irretrievably lost, thereby impoverishing the language by forcing it into the straitjacket of monotonous, tedious repetitions. The result was an artificial language which Turkish people cannot understand. It is also noted that with the new purified Turkish, the gap between the language of the people and the elite minority was widening again and history was repeating itself (Dogancay, 1995). As political scientists argue, the debate over the gap between the elite language and the language of the masses can be related to the fact that the neologism are mostly accepted and used by the left wing liberal sectors of the population who are usually the intellectuals in Turkey, whereas the more

conservatives and religious sectors accept and use only some of the neologisms (Dogancay, 1995; Gökner, 2008).

Cuceloglu and Slobin's (1976) study which involved the participation of university students lucidly illustrates the above assertion. These scholars' study have revealed that while traditional vocabulary is preferred by the right-wing, traditionalist, and the more religious sectors of the population, the reformed terms (the neologisms) are used by the left-wing, modernist, and secular sectors. They have stressed that the choice of terminology communicates important messages about the political and social ideology of the speaker, and these messages are interpreted differently on the basis of the political and social ideology of the listener (Cuceloglu & Slobin, 1976). Their conclusion is that the language reform became political. This study clearly showed that university students attributed social and political attitudes and values to individuals on the basis of the style of Turkish that they tended to use. Sabuncuoglu (1985) also supports the above findings by arguing that there is a positive correlation between the use of neologisms within the Turkish media, educational and other institutions and the political attitudes of the rulers of the time and the ideologies of individuals (as cited in Dogancay, 1995). As a matter of fact, the language reform contributed to political partisanship by promoting the ideologies of certain political groups.

### **Conclusion**

In the light of the arguments and scholarly studies cited in this article, it can safely be concluded that the alphabet and language reforms were put into practice in a social, political, and cultural atmosphere that was characterized by conflicting assumptions, beliefs, visions, interests, values, and dispositions of the people of the two different worlds; i.e., Western vs. Eastern. These reform movements did not come from the down, so to speak the public, but from the top. Turkish people wanted to protect their ancestors' cultural heritage without feeling ashamed of their past. But, the reformers imposed the reforms on the public against their will. As part of a wide range of socio-cultural reforms, the alphabet and language reforms constituted an important step toward the transformation of Turkish identity from Eastern type to Western one. They were also manipulated for disseminating nationalism and other ideologies. As a result of top-down reform movements, Turkish society now experiences a sort of cultural identity crisis.

Neither Western nor Eastern societies see and accept the people of Turkey as those whose cultural background is similar to theirs.

There are divergent perspectives on the alphabet and language reforms with respect to their causes and effects on Turkish people. Those who devalue traditional Turkish culture with its strong ties with the Eastern world and Islamic heritage, like Kemalists or vociferous proponents of Atatürk's reforms, usually make favorable comments on the alphabet and language reforms, tending to ignore and de-emphasize the actual reasons for these reforms and their destructive effects on the young generation. The alphabet reform did increase the literacy rate but at the expense of preventing the young generation from the opportunity to read their ancestors' language. As acknowledged by respected historians who specialized in Turkish history like B. Lewis and J. S. Shaw, there is an undeniable fact that the actual motive behind the alphabet and language reforms was not pedagogical or educational such as raising the literacy rate of the public but ideological and socio-political in character. The foremost aim of these reform movements was to cut off Turkish people's ties with both the Ottoman past and the Islamic world and to enter Western civilization. These reforms were part of the westernization project geared toward creating a new social order or a secular nation-state on the basis of Western values. For this very reason, the Western world also viewed the reforms favorably as they constituted a further step toward the westernization of the Turks. That is why it is not surprising to observe that the viewpoints of the advocates of the language reform are consistent with those of Western states that have historically been the enemy of the Turks and Turkish states. There is a striking resemblance between the perspectives of Kemalists and those of the Western media on the issue. Given that the West that has almost always viewed the Turks and the Islamic world as their traditional enemy and despised their culture applauded these reform movements, a conscious person needs to ponder over the question of whether the alphabet and language reforms in their entirety served to the interests of the West or the Turks in the long run (It should be noted that Kemalists or the elites who willingly embraced Western values do not represent the majority of Turkish society). This is the burning question to which Kemalists and uncritical supporters of the reforms purposefully avoid giving objective answers.

Lastly, the alphabet reform also failed to accomplish one of its most important aims, catching up with the civilized world or developed nations in today's words. 83 years have passed since the alphabet reform was put into practice, almost a century, but the Turkish Republic has not been able to reach the socio-economic standards, industrial and technological levels of developed countries. Turkey is still categorized as a developing country. But, even though Japanese like Koreans did not change their traditional language which is difficult to learn (nor did they blindly imitate or embrace Western values), they are among the top developed nations in the world today. As it stands, this fact constitutes compelling evidence against the superficial argument of Kemalists and their followers that the alphabet reform and the acceptance of Western values were necessary to catch up with the civilized world. Therefore, it is time for educational policy makers to revive Ottoman Turkish as a means to help the young generation to return to their cultural roots, to preserve traditional Turkish values rather than Western ones, and to eradicate Western identity forcefully imposed upon Turkish people by reformers. To that end, Ottoman Turkish like other foreign languages needs to be offered in school curricula as a compulsory or an elective course at different levels of schooling from secondary to tertiary education. Alternatively, to teach Ottoman Turkish to the young generation, the Ministry of Education can establish Nation Schools, launching on a sort of the Letter Campaign that was embarked on in the late 1920s following the alphabet reform. Surely, putting this project into practice will take substantial amount of time and effort as it first requires raising teachers who can read and write Ottoman Turkish. But, if the past mistakes made by Kemalists against the language are to be remedied, every effort should be made to initiate and successfully carry out that project.

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