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Tatar language preservation strategies and innovative practices

• Sabira Stahlberg, Guest Editor

INNOVATIVE

Abstract: *This special thematic issue of the Journal of Endangered Languages presents Tatar language preservation strategies and innovative practices from the Baltic Sea region to Australia, and it also includes new projects involving Noghay, Karaim and Karachay-Balkar. More than a dozen articles explore and describe different approaches to the languages from historical and modern perspectives. This issue also introduces multilingual and visual methods for presenting scientific topics. Several of the articles document for the first time themes which have been little researched so far.*

The first part of this issue, Activities, presents the language preservation strategies, education and language-supporting activities of several Tatar communities. The language, cultural, educational and literary activities of the Tatars in Finland for the past century and today are presented in two articles. Two articles from Estonia explore the Tatar identity in connection with language and religion, and Tatar multilingualism and family language policy respectively. Diaspora activities to support the Tatar language and culture and cooperation with other Turkic groups are the focus of an article about Australian Tatars. A political dimension to language is added in a historical review about the Tatar language presence in Germany. The space where language, culture and religion are preserved and transmitted is discussed in a visual article about the Cathedral Mosque in Saint Petersburg.

The second part of this thematic issue, Innovative, explores new approaches and creative methods for supporting, transmitting and learning language. Recent projects for translating Easy to Read books into Tatar and writing Tatar language haiku poetry are introduced in two multilingual articles. A new visual teaching approach for Noghay, using pictures from everyday life as inspiration, is launched here for the first time. Opportunities offered by the internet, which can be helpful for minority and

endangered language researchers and users, is presented in an article on online resources. Two book reviews complete the issue: one reports on the use of Easy to Read books in Tatar language teaching in Finland and the other on translations in Karaim and Balkar.

The experiences and practices presented here extend and diversify the concept of scientific research on minority and endangered languages. The authors employ several cross-disciplinary approaches and methods, different types and combinations of sources which allow for novel perspectives as well as diverse and original ways of presenting the research process and results. This issue focuses mainly on the Tatar language, but the questions of language preservation strategies and innovative practices are global.

Keywords: *Tatar language, language preservation, innovative practices, minority languages, endangered languages, Tatars, diaspora, Baltic Sea region, Noghay, Karaim, Karachay-Balkar*

Tatarca'yı koruma stratejileri ve yenilikçi uygulamalar

Özet: *Bu özel tematik sayı, diasporadaki Tatar dilini koruma stratejileri ve yenilikçi uygulamaları tartışmaktadır. Tatarların Baltık Denizi bölgesinden Avustralya'ya kadar dünyanın çeşitli bölgelerindeki deneyimleri, ayrıca Nogay, Karaim ve Karaçay-Balkarlara yenilikçi yaklaşımları, dilleri ile ilgili birçok farklı alanda keşfeden, öğreten, destekleyen ve çalışan bir düzineden fazla yazar tarafından sunulmaktadır. Bu sayıda, geleneksel tek dilli bilimsel makalelere ek olarak, çok dilli makaleler ve ayrıca görsel kompozisyonlar tanıtılmaktadır. Makalelerin birçoğu, şimdiye kadar çok az araştırılmış olan konuları ilk kez belgelenmektedir.*

Bu sayının ilk bölümünde dil koruma stratejilerinden bahsedilmektedir. Finlandiya'daki Tatarların geçen yüzyıldaki ve günümüzdeki dil, kültür, eğitim ve edebi faaliyetleri iki makale halinde sunulmaktadır. Dil ve din ile bağlantılı Tatar kimliği ve Tatar çok dillilik ve aile dili politikası Estonya ile ilgili iki makalede açıklanmaktadır. Göçün sonuçları, diğer göçmen gruplarla işbirliği ve dili desteklemek için yapılan diaspora faaliyetleri Avustralya Tatarları hakkında bir makalenin odak noktasını oluşturmaktadır. Geçtiğimiz yüzyıldaki Almanya'da Tatar dili varlığı hakkında tarihsel bir incelemede dile siyasi bir boyut eklenmektedir. Dil, kültür ve dinin korunduğu ve aktarıldığı alan, St. Petersburg'daki Cuma Mescidi hakkında yazılan ve görsellerle desteklenen bir makalede tartışılmaktadır.

İkinci bölüm, dil öğrenimi ile Tatar dilini desteklemek ve yaymak için farklı yenilikçi yaklaşımları ve yaratıcı yöntemleri araştırmaktadır. Tatarca Kolay Okunabilir kitapların çevrilmesi ve Tatarca haiku

yazımı hakkında yapılan yeni projeler, iki kapsamlı makalede anlatılmaktadır. Nogayca için günlük hayattan alınan resimlerin ilham kaynağı olarak kullanıldığı yeni bir görsel öğretim yaklaşımı da ilk kez burada tanıtılmaktadır. Çevrimiçi kaynaklarla ilgili bir makalede ise tehlike altındaki dillerin araştırmacıları ve kullanıcıları için internetin sunduğu çeşitli olanaklar verilmektedir. Sayı, biri Finlandiya'da Tatar dili öğretiminde Kolay Okunur kitapların kullanımı ve diğeri de Karaim ve Balkar çevirileri hakkında bir tartışma olmak üzere iki kitap incelemesi ile sona ermektedir.

Burada sunulan deneyimler ve uygulamalar, disiplinler arası yaklaşımlar ve yöntemler, yeni bakış açılarına izin veren farklı tür ve kaynak kombinasyonları ve aynı zamanda dilin farklı ve özgün sunum yollarını kullanarak azınlık ve tehlike altındaki dillerin bilimsel olarak araştırılması kavramını, ayrıca araştırma sürecini ve sonuçlarını sunmanın çeşitli ve özgün yollarını genişletir ve çeşitlendirir. Bu sayı esas olarak Tatar diline odaklanmaktadır, ancak dil koruma stratejileri ve yenilikçi uygulama konuları dünyadaki diğer birçok dil için de ele alınabilir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Tatarca, dil koruma, yenilikçi uygulamalar, nesli tükenmekte olan diller, Tatarlar, diaspora, Baltık Denizi bölgesi, Nogay, Karayim, Karaçay-Balkar

Suniñ başı – bolak.

Süzneñ başı – kolak.

The source is head of the water,
the ear is head of the word.

Tatar mäkale / proverb

Introduction

Language is closely connected to identity and to culture, traditions, narratives, memories and many other aspects of individuals, communities and whole societies. When a language disappears, a whole world vanishes. Often the question of support for a language becomes acute only when that language is already seriously endangered, but language-supporting activities are important for all languages – even for majority and world languages. A language which is not sustained by use slowly fades away.

For a minority or endangered language, utilising the language in many different and varied ways can be crucial for its survival. Speaking, listening, reading, writing, publishing, learning and improving vocabulary and expression are only part of the multidimensional usage of language. Every language needs spaces and situations where it can be used. Minority and endangered languages require in addition increased awareness, interest and persistence from its speakers. They must feel that using and transmitting the language is worth the effort. The language also needs some development, so that it reflects the present situation and its vocabulary and expressions are up to date (see Stahlberg 2020).

The Tatar language is not officially listed among the endangered languages of the world. According to some criteria for endangered languages it would be considered very much alive, especially because of the amount of active speakers worldwide. Official statistics do not cover the whole picture, however: several smaller Tatar groups in the diaspora are decreasing in numbers today and their specific Tatar language variations are endangered. Documentation and data collection should be carried out now, when there is still a fairly large number of individuals who can provide information and materials.

Research on endangered languages usually focuses on language ecology, diversity, endangerment, documentation and archiving, revitalisation, rights and policies, and to a more limited extent on new methods, training of activists and the use of modern technology (see Austin & Sallabank 2011; Rehg & Campbell 2018). Case studies on minority and endangered languages analyse mostly specific areas and languages, but how should a pluricentric language like Tatar be investigated? It has not only one language norm but several spoken and written forms (scripts and orthography). Today a majority of the Tatars are multilingual, an additional factor which must be taken into account when studying the language and its speakers.

In this issue, the academic discussion about endangered languages and minority languages is kept in the background, as the goal here is to analyse experiences and to give concrete examples of different

kinds of language practices. No new theories are proposed; instead, the authors concentrate on first-hand experiences and data which often have escaped the notice of scholars or are so new that they have not yet been documented and studied.

The topic of Tatar language preservation and innovative practices is discussed for the first time, for a very wide geographical area and both for a historical period and the present day. The sources must therefore be manifold and diverse, and indeed they range from archive materials, academic and non-academic literature to interviews and visual materials such as old postcards and original photographs from field research trips. *Source pluralism* is a concept suggested by Janken Myrdal for historical research purposes in 2012. It takes into account all kinds of information, various data and fragments which are pieced together from different sources and source types (Myrdal 2012). For studying the Tatar language preservation strategies and innovative practices, source pluralism is a highly relevant instrument and it has been applied throughout this issue in different ways.

As for methods, this issue is cross-disciplinary and the authors use methodology from several fields of research. Instead of forcing or trying to fit materials into theories or methods which in many cases would limit the understanding, the materials are often allowed to define and modify the analysis. The inapplicability or only partial applicability of many theories and methods on Tatar language practices is partly due to a lack of sufficient research on the global level, but also because of the WEIRDness of science. *WEIRD* (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic) is a concept launched in 2010 by Joseph Henrich, Steven J. Heine and Ara Norenzayan (Henrich et al. 2010).

WEIRD scientists often assume that there are universal human behavioural patterns and perceptions. Results acquired at Western (mainly American) universities have been supposed to be valid also for the rest of the world. In his new book from 2020, Joseph Henrich demonstrates clearly that most of the world is non-WEIRD (Henrich 2020). Revisions and adjustments are therefore required when we apply scientific theories and methods to non-WEIRD groups such as the Tatars; yet where exactly the Tatars living in WEIRD societies in the Baltic Sea region, North America and Australia stand in terms of WEIRDness is an interesting question which needs further study.

Traditionally, Tatars are studied as a distinct group, an ethnic, religious, linguistic or some other kind of minority. Major topics are their origins, history, Islamic faith and minority situation. All these have been presented in numerous articles and books (for the Baltic Sea region, see Svanberg & Westerlund 2016) and need not be repeated here. The theme and scope in this issue is different: when discussed, Tatar history, identity and Islamic faith are looked at through the prism of language practices.

Further, the idea that Tatars form closed linguistic-ethnic-cultural-confessional groups is modified by the articles in this issue. Firstly, Tatars participate, create and keep up vast individual and collective local, national, transnational and international networks. Secondly, Tatar communities cooperate closely with other communities, particularly with other Turkic-speakers, in many ways. Thirdly, Tatar groups worldwide are not separated from their surrounding societies. Many language-supporting activities originate in the Tatar reformist (Jadidist) movements during the nineteenth century, but local, social and global developments inspire both individual Tatars and communities to adapt, invent and implement innovative practices.



Language strategies and practices

In February 2021 when this issue was first conceived, the goal was to map out the Tatar language practices in the Baltic Sea region. Some background existed: in October 2018, a seminar gathered international researchers and local Tatars at the University of Helsinki for a debate about new pathways in Tatar research. In 2020 a special issue of *Studia Orientalia Electronica*¹ was published about the Tatars in the Baltic Sea region. The main questions defined for the new special issue were: What are the strategies for language preservation? What kind of innovative practices have been developed for language transmission, teaching and use?

The Tatar diaspora in the Baltic Sea region possesses a history of more than a century of language preservation traditions, which offers the opportunity for researchers to follow their strategies over a longer period. At the same time they are actively promoting innovative practices and now also taking the digital leap into the internet. The Tatars in Finland, Estonia and Saint Petersburg have managed to transmit their Mishar Tatar language over several generations, while modifying and updating it; today already five or six generations have been born in the Baltic Sea region. The Tatar language is an

1 *Studia Orientalia Electronica*, special issue about Tatars: <https://journal.fi/store/issue/view/6477>

important identity marker and serves as the basis for a multitude of cultural, literary and religious activities. The Tatar groups who migrated earlier to the Baltic Sea region (now in Lithuania, Poland and also Belarus outside the region) are not included in this issue, as they do not speak Tatar today. In Sweden, once with a small but active community, there are no activities supporting Tatar language anymore.

The first idea of focusing on one region and one language was soon expanded to include Australia, Noghay in the Caucasus who speak a language close to Mishar Tatar, and Karaim and Balkar. Also multilingualism was introduced as one of the topics. Opening up both the region and the languages contributes to a richer and more complete picture of language strategies and innovative practices inside and outside the Tatar language world. The languages used for the articles in this issue are English (used for most articles), Tatar (Latin and Cyrillic script), Turkish and Russian, but also Finnish and some Hungarian figure in examples.



Tulips are very important for Tatars and a common theme in literature and art.

Art work and photo: Fazile Nasretdin

Experiments, discoveries and strategies others have used successfully can be helpful for building up and developing new strategies and methods. The concept of *good* practices is less pretentious than *best* practices. The concept of best practices implies that there are methods which are the most efficient and give the best results with large groups of people. Good practices do not claim to be the best: instead, they allow for more space for processing, checking and testing while applying the practices in order to reduce complications. In the world of minority and endangered languages, the question if there is a best practice is anyhow conditional. Many languages like Tatar are spoken, written and read in very different environments and conditions.

A few novel approaches to scientific writing and articles are introduced here: visual articles, based on photographs and postcards, present materials and methodology which otherwise would take many pages to describe. A further novelty is the addition of Tatar proverbs which have been selected according to the topic of the article. These proverbs were collected by Sadri Hamid (see article by K. Bedretin, in this issue) who also wrote aphorisms. They have been provided by Fazile Nasretdin and

translated by Fazile Nasretidin and Sabira Stahlberg for this issue. The proverbs enrich the understanding especially of Tatar perceptions and world views in the past. An example of a suitable scientific proverb from the collection is for instance this one:

Adäm yalgıŝa-yalgıŝa alim bulır.
Through trial and error we become scientists.
Tatar mäkale / proverb

This special issue about language preservation strategies and innovative practices naturally does not exhaust the research field. Much more research is needed to map out sustainable language activities, education, publications, identities and the connections between language and culture, religion, etc. Multilingualism and multiculturalism are important aspects and they should be taken into account not only when analysing modern times but also for historical periods. Memory studies is another approach which could be applied to history and present-day narratives of the diaspora groups and minorities. Through individual and collective narratives strategies, methods and attitudes to language are communicated and transmitted over the generations.

The articles in this issue present a wide range of Tatar speakers whose key objective is to keep their language alive, active, useful and modern. Part I discusses the traditional and present-day activities, policies and strategies Tatars use, education and the history of language preservation and its visibility. In Part II some innovative methods for supporting and developing language are presented. All articles have English and Turkish abstracts and some have also Tatar abstracts.

Part of a school certificate from 1917, printed in Kazan. At the end of the school year, pupils at the Muslim school in Helsingfors / Helsinki received a certificate with grades for subjects such as reading and writing skills and mathematics.

Sabira Stahlberg, private collection



Part I: Activities

The first section of this special issue of the *Journal of Endangered Languages* presents different language strategies and activities in several countries.

In the first article, *Tatar language preservation and educational activities in Finland*, the language-supporting activities of the Tatar community are presented by Gölten Bedretdin and Sabira Stahlberg. This overview of current Tatar language events and strategies in Finland, with some retrospection and background information is based on an in-depth interview. Also the present situation and challenges before the communities are outlined. The article follows the lifespan of a Tatar speaker in Finland from birth to old age, explaining the different possibilities for learning and using the Tatar language.

The following article, *Tatar literary activities in Finland*, describes Tatar literature and publishing in Finland and the two most productive authors, Hasan Hamidulla and Sadri Hamid. The Tatars have actively increased both Tatar and multilingual literature in Finland with more than 200 publications. Kadriye Bedretdin reviews the publications and main trends during the past century. Literature and publishing all kinds of books, booklets and other literary works such as poetry are essential for the preservation and also for the development of a minority language like Tatar.

Ege Lepa's article *The role of language and religion in Estonian Tatar identity-building* discusses how religion and language construct different kinds of Tatar identities in Estonia and the background for the present-day identity of Estonian Tatars. The article is based on interviews with Tatars from several generations and with varying attitudes to identity. Tatar language has long been perceived as the basis for a Tatar identity which has excluded those who do not know it from Tatar community and also Islamic congregation activities; this is however changing.

The questions of multilingualism and family language policy among the Estonian Tatars are discussed by Maria Iqbal in the article *Estonian Tatar families navigating between four languages*. Multiple interviews were conducted with Tatar-speaking families in Estonia, both with parents, children and youth. The article discusses language choices and strategies within and outside the families, the significance of maintaining the Tatar language within the family and transmitting it to the children, the multilingual setting in Estonia and the informants' attitudes towards different languages.

In the article *The Tatar community and Tatar language education in Australia*, Kubilay Atik discusses the background of the Tatar community and the language-supporting work and teaching in the small but very active group of Tatars in Australia. This group of Tatars from different origins, many from East

Turkestan and Manchuria, cooperate closely in a joint association with the Bashkort (Bashkirs) in organising events and other activities. The article also presents recent Tatar literature produced by Australian Tatars.

Two historical articles follow these presentations of the current situation.

The political dimension and Tatar language-related activities in Germany for more than a century is described by Sebastian Cwiklinski in the article *Tatars and the Tatar language in Germany*. Tatar was used for propaganda purposes during and after the two World Wars. Several prominent Tatar activists also lived or spent some time in Germany, publishing books and journals. Since the 1990s, migrants and students make up the main group of Tatars in the country, but only some of them speak Tatar, although there are some efforts to increase the use of the language.

The last article in this section is about language space. *Соборная мечеть Санкт-Петербурга в фотографиях и открытках – The history of the Cathedral Mosque in Saint Petersburg in photos and postcards* by Renat Bekkin takes the reader into the world of old and new pictures of the most important mosque in Saint Petersburg, Russia. The article is a visual memory study (in Russian). The mosque functions not only as a religious space, but also as a place where Tatars can use their language and maintain their culture and traditions.

**Gilem akılınıñ yartısı.
Science is half the mind.
Tatar mäkale / proverb**

Part II: Innovative

The next section of this special issue presents innovative methods for language preservation, support and learning.

In an extensive article in English and Tatar (Latin and Cyrillic script) on Easy to Read and Tatar Easy Language, *Tatar Easy to Read books for language learning, developing reading skills and support for minority and endangered languages*, Sabira Stahlberg and Fazile Nasretdin present an innovative

project launched in Finland in 2019. Easy to Read books for minority and endangered languages can support language learning, the development of reading skills and also motivate readers to explore further books. An internationally understandable Easy Tatar language form in Latin script has been developed to reach out to Tatar diaspora readers worldwide.

A new approach to language use and learning is the writing of Tatar haiku poems. Originally a Japanese poetry format, haiku is today used in schools for language teaching throughout the world. Sabira Stahlberg, Fazile Nasretidin and Orsolya Kiss discuss in the English and Tatar (Latin script) article *Haiku poems as a creative path to language development and language learning* haiku poetry from the perspectives of a researcher, writer and language learner.

The article *Visual images as mnemonic devices in the context of language revitalisation: some notes with sample illustrations* by Birsel Karakoç and Enver Karakoç proposes a visual method for language teaching. Photographs with people, animals and events the pupils know can be used for introducing discussion, awakening memories and activating language skills. The article is richly illustrated with photos from everyday life among the Noghay in the Caucasus.

The article *Internet-based resources and opportunities for endangered languages* by Sabira Stahlberg is an overview of new digital possibilities which can be helpful for supporting, transmitting and revitalising minority and endangered languages. The article discusses among others language project management, websites and blogs, social media and chat forums, media and newsletters, online meetings, e-learning and online teaching, using and creating archives and databases, documentation, dictionaries and translation, the creation of e-books and publishing online, as well as the production of audio and video materials.

Two book reviews including comments about translation practices and literature end this special issue.



Haiga (haiku with picture) by Fazile Nasretidin for this special issue, English translation Sabira Stahlberg:

*The tulip grows
with its face to the sun
full of hope*

The Turkish-language article by Kamer Yafay Nogmanov, *Tatar diline kazandırılmış “Ciñel tel” projesi – Using Easy to Read books in Tatar language teaching* tells how the Easy to Read books, translated into Tatar in Finland (see article by Stahlberg & Nasretdin, in this issue), are used in the Tatar weekend school in Helsinki during language classes. Good reading habits are important for the improvement of language skills, as reading contributes both to vocabulary and expression, and the Easy Language in the books is seen as interesting and motivating for further reading by the children.

The final article is *Karaim and Balkar translations of Le petit prince (The Little Prince) by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry* by Éva Á. Csató. It discusses the two translations and offers some linguistic comments. *The Little Prince* is a world-famous book which has been translated into hundreds of languages. The Karaim and Balkar translations are both published in Germany. The translations offer the speakers the opportunity to get acquainted with the book and its captivating story and to improve their language and reading skills, but the books are also highly interesting materials for linguists.

Thanks

I wish to thank the editors of *Tehlikedeki Diller Dergisi – Journal of Endangered Languages*, Ülkü Çelik Şavk and Süer Eker, for offering this unique opportunity to discuss and present language strategies and activities. I am very grateful to all authors, reviewers and translators, who professionally and with enthusiasm participated in the making of this special issue. It was an extremely short (certainly record-breaking in the academic world) and intense process, and without their accuracy and hard work it would not have been possible.

A big *rahmät* (thanks) goes to Fazile Nasretdin who provided haiku poems, photographs of tulips, book covers and historical topics for several articles and the Tatar proverbs collected by Sadri Hamid. Fazile also co-wrote about Easy to Read and haiku, carried out fact checks on some of the articles, and supported the editing process in many ways.

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Telne kaläm saklıy.
The pen protects the language.
Tatar mäkale / proverb