ENTRY TO ADVANCED TURKISH

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INTRODUCTION

by Brian Spooner

The decision to make these materials publicly available on the AATT website provides an opportunity to explain how the project was designed and developed—which may have more than simple historical interest. It is now more than fifteen years since the completion of the original project. During this decade and a half of private circulation, it has been usefully augmented and undergone helpful revisions, with the result that it has begun to acquire a life of its own. During this period also much has changed, both in language teaching and in its larger academic and social context. It is interesting, therefore, to go back over the analysis of the situation I wrote in the prospectus for it in 1989: the list of issues and needs little revision. The work is being published on the web now because it is still a rare representative of a particular genre, a genre which for several decades has been in escalating demand: that of aids to both students and teachers for advancing beyond the intermediate level of language competence.

Let me extend the context for this claim. I am writing of the1980s. But the language-teaching problems we sought to address then had emerged in the 1950s and have still not been solved. Although there has been some measure of success for the elementary and intermediate levels of language instruction, the more advanced levels, which presumably have always been the essential target, do not follow a matter of course. What I had to say in 1989 remains essentially valid and bears restating. It explains why we produced these materials in the early 1990s and why they are still in demand.

Through the 1950s the main focus in academic language teaching programs was on the language as written. This was true for all academic language programs, but especially for non-Western languages with well-established traditions of literacy, such as Turkish. The underlying assumption was implicit: if students learned to write the language correctly, they would be able to reproduce the written language in speech and communicate at a suitable level. As the demand for speakers of foreign languages grew, independently of academic needs, in the age of international development (the term globalization was first cited in 1959), pressure was brought to bear on the established academic language programs to develop new programs to teach students to speak the language. In the "direct method," which was formulated in the 1960s, an instructor with native competence would induct students into the use of the language exclusively through interaction in the language itself. Ideally, there would be no translation, no explanation in the learner's own language. The emphasis at this time was understandably entirely on method and product. New people were entering the field of language instruction who had little or no experience of the traditional established modes of language instruction in universities like Berkeley, Chicago, Harvard, Michigan, Penn, Princeton, and UCLA. They were educated native speakers, as distinct from classically educated non-native speakers. The

classical language programs began to lose academic status: they produced relatively few students, and what students they did produce did not have the skills that were in growing demand outside academia. The new methods looked promising. However, after nearly fifty years, we still suffer from a dearth of competent speakers of the important non-Western languages. We have not solved the language problem. Why? Turkish is just one example, and not the worst. But it is a good example, and one of the most interesting.

The problem has at least four distinct dimensions:
(i) the status of language instructors
(ii) the relationship to majors and other degree requirements,
(iii) the accelerating rate of change in the relationship between spoken and the written language in the modern world, and (not least)
(iv) balancing the needs for different levels of instruction I will discuss them briefly in the same order. My intention is only to show what we had in mind as, not to provide an exhaustive treatment of the subject.

1. Language Instructors.
The criteria for hiring language instructors have diverged from those used for standing faculty. Native competence has come to take precedence over the conventional academic research degree. The consequences of this development do not get enough attention. Let me first consider why native competence alone does not make a good language instructor, and then some of the broader consequences of this emphasis on native competence.

The "direct method" was based on a fallacy: that the target language would be taught and learned most efficiently in isolation from the linguistic and cultural context of the learner. Besides native or near-native competence in the target language, a good language instructor must be competent in the language of student, have training or experience in teaching and in language teaching, and have a comparable level of general education. But even given all these conditions and given the added ease and authority in the target language, there are disadvantages to placing the teaching of any foreign language entirely in the hands of native speakers. To begin with they are teaching a language they did not themselves consciously study and learn, to students none (or almost none) of whom can be expected ever to attain the level of competence that would allow them to be accepted as native speakers. (In my experience instructors who are native speakers in fact rarely expect them to.) Most, indeed, almost all, language students need to learn how to be accepted as non-native speakers. They cannot learn that from native speakers alone. The biggest hurdle is in fact not actual speech, but body language and all the other factors that are part of face-to-face interaction between native speakers, and are much harder to learn, not least of which is the relationship between what is said and what is unsaid. A non-native speaker with an excellent command of the language can often pass on the telephone, but rarely face-to-face. The problem of passing as a native speaker is obvious in the case of an Anglo-Saxon studying Chinese. (When I brought a family of Turkman carpet weavers from northern Afghanistan to Istanbul in 1973, for them the capital of the Turkic world, they were devastated: the people in the streets not only spoke strange Turkish, they did not—to them—look Turkish.) The student who studies with a non-native speaker will learn what to expect as a non-native speaker and how to compensate.

We have moved from a situation in which native speakers were employed as assistants (if at all), to a situation where native competence (as distinct from academic competence) is the primary qualification. Whatever the advantages or disadvantages of this change, it has been accompanied by a loss of status both for the instructors, and (consequently) for the place of foreign language instruction in the curriculum. Language instructors generally are no longer members of the standing faculty, are not eligible for tenure, are often part-time, without benefits, and teach according to different rules (in terms of teaching load and student requirements). These consequences still require more careful analysis because they are closely associated with the way we think about languages.

Our project team was by design a closely collaborating group of native and non-native speakers of a variety of different backgrounds and statuses.

2. Language in the Curriculum.

Language study used to be a regular part of the curriculum. It was understood to be focused on the language as correctly written and included textual analysis as well as the study of literary texts. It was in fact a direct descendent of classical and philological studies. Languages were included in the curriculum according to criteria that ranked the historical significance of what had been written in them. Although this form of study is still available, most language teaching is now conceived as the teaching of a skill, like a computer program, or statistics. The purpose of language instruction in a modern degree program is to enable students to add language skills to the academic or professional qualifications that come with their major, whether their career objective is literary criticism, social research or financial management. Languages are now market commodities. They are taught on demand.

In these materials we sought to demonstrate that competence in Turkish, at an academic or professional level, is not reducible to a skill. It is rather a historically distinct way of organizing thought and narrative, comparison with which greatly advances our understanding of limitations and virtues of other languages, including English.

3. The Problem of language change.

Since the 1950s our attitudes towards language and languages, along with both the nature of language and the way it is studied have changed in unprecedented ways. Starting with Saussure, and followed soon after by Edward Sapir and Zellig Harris, the emphasis on spoken language, understood as linguistics, supplanted the long-established priority given to written language, in philology. The change was facilitated and encouraged by the spread of mass literacy first in the West and in the past fifty years throughout the world. The special value attributed to the written word over the past two millennia, of which the various sacred texts are paragons, has eroded. We were taught to write correctly, and to emulate the written language as we spoke. But language is no longer anchored in writing. It has gradually lost its mooring everywhere. Consequently, all languages with strong traditions of literacy, like Turkish, have been changing at an accelerating rate. Change is equally evident in the written language but now the written lags behind the spoken.

In the development of these materials, we were conscious of exploring the idiom of a living modern spoken language--a consciousness that does always show through language materials.

We hope it is evident in these.

4. The Issue of Materials

Partly because of these changes and the associated pressures in academia, the number of students of some foreign languages has increased, though not perhaps as much as was expected. The variety and choice of materials for use in teaching the first year (elementary levels) has also increased. For the second year (intermediate) the increase in students is smaller and the increase in choice of materials similarly so. The more advanced the level, the smaller the choice of materials. Moreover, materials that exist for the advanced levels continue to be focused more on written rather than spoken use of the language. Beyond the intermediate level, one of the major problems in language instruction is retention. If a language is a skill, to be acquired as an adjunct to disciplinary study for a degree, how does it justify the use of more class time per week for more years?

The original proposal for the project included detailed annotations of existing materials, showing that the greatest need relates to the transition that separates the competence of the student learning atypical skill--not from that of the native speaker, but from that of the speaker who can operate on a level that significantly lowers the barriers of easy interaction and communication between different language communities.

Although these issues apply to non-Western languages in general, there are also special considerations in the case of Turkish. The structural differences between Turkish and English make the transition from intermediate to advanced levels of proficiency for our students in Turkish particularly difficult. It is at the mid-intermediate level in Turkish that the real difficulty begins. Apart from the strangeness of most of the vocabulary, the problem lies in the way Turkish connects and subordinate clauses into the sequence of a narrative. In order to cross this threshold, the student must internalize a repertoire of sentence patterns which are peculiar to Turkic languages. In fact, because of different histories of other Turkic language communities in the Soviet period, their different relationships with neighboring languages (especially Russian and Persian) some structures are peculiar to Turkish itself. Assimilation of these sentence patterns requires exposure to a wide variety of examples and takes time. These patterns include, for example, relative clauses, the expression of time and space, and indirect speech (e.g., the ability to say "when I came to America," "after leaving the house," "the Turkish course I took," "the town where I was born," or "I didn't know that he was married"). Existing materials make it extremely difficult to progress beyond minimal conceptual
control of any of these forms in Turkish. It is also extremely difficult to pick up these structures through participation in a Turkish-speaking community.

In grammatical terms the most crucial single factor in all of these sentences in Turkish is the participle in its various forms, and the expansions of the sentence which it makes possible. As noted by West and Erguvanlı:

From the point of view of native speakers of Altaic languages [including Turkish], the participle may not seem to be a particularly unusual verb form; but for native speakers of Indo-European languages, it requires a major shift in linguistic conceptualization. The Turkish participle presents a peculiar set of problems from the pedagogical point of view... Too many students

have gone on to advanced levels of Turkish without having fully grasped the usage of participles (S. West and E. Erguvanlı, An evaluation of Robert Underhill's Turkish Grammar, with a supplement on the Teaching of Turkish Participles, Bulletin of the Turkish Studies Association,1982, p. 170).

The project that led to the materials presented here, therefore, grew out of the perception that for variety of reasons the most urgent need in Turkish instruction, given existing resources and the current organization of programs, was for materials focusing on the threshold between intermediate level and advanced level, and especially the various uses of the participle that are involved in making this transition. If I may conclude by enumerating the principles explicitly:

1. The project should be carried out concurrently with teaching commitments in order to provide continuous opportunities for classroom suggestion and testing.

2. It should be developed collaboratively between native and non-native speakers of the language.

3. and based on collaboration between professional language instructors and scholars who use the language in their research and who therefore require their students to learn it for research purposes.

4. It must include careful attention to the cultural use of the language, through the selection of subject matter for materials and the organization of dialogues.

5. It should be carried out in close collaboration with specialists in neighboring languages, of the same and different language families. This is important because the different languages have evolved in communities that are historically related and share many cultural features. Because of this "Sprachbund" relationship, work on shared features in neighboring languages is likely to provide insights that would be helpful in the development of proficiency materials. Where provincial vernaculars diverge from the national standard, the divergence is often in the direction of neighboring languages. Isoglosses often cross the boundaries not only of vernacular language communities but of national languages. In this way Turkish shares many features (both Turkic and non-Turkic) with Russian and the Balkan, Caucasian and Iranian languages; at the same time it has assimilated a large amount of Islamic and other vocabulary and calques from Arabic.

We set out to provide a graded series of proficiency-based materials sufficient in quantity and coverage to enable instructors to raise students from the intermediate to the advanced level of competence in Turkish, so that they will be able to benefit fully from the opportunity provided by the advanced-to-superior level summer intensive program at Boğaziçi University (Istanbul). The materials consist of dialogues, sentences, exercises, and drills, which both illustrate and elicit performance at the advanced level. They provide a basis for manipulative and meaningful drilling in the four skills of speaking, comprehension, reading and writing, and practice in free discourse. They are provided with pre- and post- activities, so that work done in class is continued outside and vice versa. They place particular emphasis on the structural ability to connect and subordinate clauses. The distinctive grammar of Turkish (in comparison with other European and Middle Eastern languages) makes the attainment of this ability, which is essential

for most of the sentence types required in paragraph-length speech or writing, dealing with purpose and causality, particularly crucial.

I do not think we are any closer to solving the problems surrounding any of these issues. And I do not think that any of the parties to them--funding agencies, university administrators, instructors, or students--consider any of their current strategies to be final. But I trust the development and open distribution of materials like these may be a step in a useful direction, and that it will encourage further similar efforts for Turkish and other languages with similar traditions of literacy and scholarship.