

A 'Secularizing' Translation: The Call to Prayer in Turkish

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That the links among the languages of the world go beyond ties of linguistic kinship and indicate historical and socio-political hierarchies is already well-documented. Over time, certain languages have assumed higher political and symbolic power over others – sometimes created through a relationship of political and cultural colonization, while in some instances, religion is the means through which a language is attributed a special status. In many cases, there has been a backlash of the dominated/submissive languages, largely resulting from some kind of socio-political transformation. The linguistic reform of 20th-century Turkey is a case in point. The replacement of the Arabic script by Latin script in 1928 gave way to a series of drastic measures taken by an authoritarian government to purge the Turkish language of Persian and Arabic structures and vocabulary in an effort to go back to (and in some instances to create) a 'purer' Turkish. There is little doubt that this reform led to great tension in the society – which is still manifest.

The present paper explores an integral part of the linguistic reform in Turkey and studies a brief and dramatic episode in Turkish cultural history – the mandatory recitation of the call to prayer (*ezan*) in Turkish translation. The call to prayer, like most other Muslim rituals, has been (and is still) performed in Arabic in Turkey since the Ottoman Empire. Early Republican reforms, carried out through the second half of the 1920s and the 1930s, aimed to establish a secular order in Turkey and a series of measures were taken in order to sever the ties of the young nation with its Islamic past, largely identified with the Ottoman Empire. One of these measures included the introduction of a ban on the recitation of the call to prayer in Arabic in 1932 and its replacement with a 'standard' Turkish translation personally overseen by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The Turkish text was distributed all over Turkey and became *the ezan* sung five times a day in all mosques in Turkey until 1950, which marks a reversal in most republican cultural reforms.

The paper will focus on the discourse created around the Turkish call to prayer in the early 1930s in the press and the memoirs of the individuals who bore witness to this important turning point in Turkish secularism. It will further trace the way in which the translation was carried out. Today there is only one surviving version and no evidence regarding the presence of multiple versions of the Turkish call to prayer, despite public knowledge of one instance where there were divided opinions regarding the translation of the specific word *Allah* which is indicative of the potentially controversial aspects of the translation process. The paper will also delve into some of the current discourse on the (lack of a) need to hear the call to prayer in Turkish and discuss the Turkish call to prayer as a site where linguistic, political, religious and cultural forces clash across time.