

## **21st Century Ottoman: The Ottoman Turkish Linguistic Revival in Digital Affinity Spaces**

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### **Abstract**

In 2014, the Turkish National Education Council recommending teaching Ottoman Turkish as a mandatory subject in all high schools. Since that time, this historical register of the Turkish language has been making a popular comeback. This is especially true online, where participants are creating and sharing new content written in Ottoman. This article examines evidence of the revival of Ottoman Turkish in digital “affinity spaces” in order to show it is not only being excavated, but is developing independently from its own historical past. In taking into consideration new calligraphic styles, the political and cultural subtext of memes, and the rewriting of modern Turkish back into the Ottoman lexicon, this paper will identify the form of Ottoman emerging in digital spaces as a unique new iteration of the language.

**Keywords:** Ottoman Turkish; Language Ideology; Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis

In December 2014 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan began putting his full rhetorical weight, decrying nameless enemies and all, behind supporting the Turkish National Education Council’s recommendation to make the teaching of Ottoman Turkish a part of high school curricula. In a speech given at the 5th Religious Council on December 8, he stated:

Despite 200 years of oppression, despite those working to cut off our connection to our roots, Turkey’s scholars are standing up. There are those who are bothered by the thought of this country’s children learning Ottoman...There are those who don’t want to see it be taught. Whether they like it or not Ottoman will be learned and taught in this country.<sup>1</sup>

Ottoman Turkish, a supposedly “dead language” which had been legislated out of use since before the advent of talking motion pictures to all those except for historians and hobbyists, was now to become a standard part of the national curriculum. While Ottoman had been a part of courses in both religious schools and for students interested in careers in the humanities and law, this new policy would be implemented across the entire high school system. Ottoman would no longer be the exclusive province of specialists, but a subject of common knowledge. In his speech, Erdoğan claimed that the loss of this knowledge by the nation had been “a disaster.” The rhetoric around the policy change was framed in terms of reconnecting the new generation of Turkish

citizens with the pre-secular past, as part of the neo-Ottomanist national identity reconstruction efforts stage-managed by the ruling political party<sup>2</sup>.

But for anyone who had retained more than a passing familiarity with the language and its history, the question remained: which Ottoman Turkish? Ottoman was technically not in fact a discrete language, but a general term for the continually evolving formal register of Turkish. Beginning as early as the 13th century Ottoman was “a written lingua franca for the governing elite of an empire whose people spoke a variety of different languages and dialects”<sup>3</sup>. The language had been diachronically dynamic throughout its history, as well as grammatically heterodox. This was especially true in regards to orthography. Because of the great number of discrepancies between the Arabic alphabet and the phonology of spoken Turkish, alternative spellings for words and even common morphemes persisted well into the print age, not to mention the lack of standards for the growing flood of words inducted from European languages in the 19th century.

In a March 2015 article Ottoman scholar Irvin Cemil Schick spelled out what would be the difficulties in implementing a high school Ottoman curriculum<sup>4</sup>. Based on the complexity of the language—a performative register meant to be obfuscatory—and its variability over the many centuries of its written century, no amount of study would be able to be comprehensive. A curriculum would inevitably involve making choices: between learning to read just print or learn handwriting as well; to be able just to read or to be able to write as well; between looking at archival material or just architectural inscriptions. Specific tasks would require different skill sets: skills that scholars often spent years of intense training to master. Although Schick tentatively supported the teaching of Ottoman Turkish as a way for Turks to learn about their own cultural heritage, he remained incredulous towards the idea of it being successfully, and altruistically, taught in public high schools. It would inevitably lead to the attempt to shape a politically motivated, reductive, top-down plan for the teaching of Ottoman. How would that be qualitatively be different than the Atatürk reforms which had cut off Turks from their linguistic heritage in the first-place?

In this paper, I will offer an answer to Schick’s question. In the few years since the implementation of a system-wide Ottoman curriculum, one of the most active spaces for the growing number of those who are now learning Ottoman has been a number of online communities. These communities have served as supplementary educational forums for students of the language, as well as spaces for users with their own interest in the language to participate. In looking at these forums, it is clear that the type of Ottoman that is actually being revived is none other than a thoroughly 21st century Ottoman. From its use of neologistic vocabulary and tech-savvy expressions, to the way it is used to argue for modern political and cultural positions, this new Ottoman is at home in the digital world. It is an Ottoman Turkish which does not simply revive the past, but incorporates all of the history which took place during the intervening years along with it, moving forward into the brave new world of cat memes and comment trolling.

## **Ottoman Turkish on Social Media**

The sudden implementation of Ottoman Turkish proved to be a challenge due to the lack of existing pedagogical materials and qualified instructors. The government faced many hurdles on its path to implementing an across the board teaching of Ottoman. In the meantime, many private companies had been waiting in the wings hoping to benefit financially from this shortage, and stepped in to offer learning materials. One such company, Osmanlı Eğitim ve Kültür Dergisi (Ottoman Education and Culture Magazine), began publishing a print magazine for Turkish grade school students in 2014 as a resource for learning the old form of the language<sup>5</sup>. Along with its magazine, the company pushed for an active presence on social media sites, including Facebook and Instagram, where it offered interactive posts such as the one featured in figure 1.



Figure 1: Online participants debate which vowel is meant when it could be either (May 21, 2015)

Most of Osmanlı Eğitim's resources, as well as those of other companies, built their materials according to a normative notion of Ottoman as a fixed and immutable language. The use of multiple-choice questions for example, though expedient for generating easily-digestible social media fodder, reinforced the assumption of an easy orthographical correspondence between Arabic and Turkish letters, and downplayed the countless cases in which questions of pronunciation would be entirely dependent on textual context. This type of digital resource works best when looking at specific historical documents, for example in figure 2 when it breaks down the text of a famous *kitabe* (commemorative inscription) hanging above a famous fountain in Gülhane park in Istanbul. When presented as a specific historical example of a language, when its diachronic specificity is acknowledged, this approach makes sense. Abstracting from

specific historical contexts, on the other hand, would only further serve to offer a reductive and misleading understanding of the language in history.

**م KİTABE CKUMALARI**

## Talik hattıyla yazılmış, Gülhâne Parkı'nda bir sebil

1229

→ **Âb-ı hayâtın aynı olan iş bu çeşmenin**

→ **Â'sâr geçti varmadı kimse farkına**

→ **Buldu emânet eyledi ihyâ müceddeden**

→ **Verdi hayat doğrusu Gülhâne Parkına**

**İpucu: Kitabenin Rika hattı**

**Lügatçe**

Âb-ı hayât: Hayat suyu  
Â'sâr: Asırlar  
İhyâ: Hayat verme, diriltme

müceddeden: Yeniden  
Ayn: Göz

Osmanlıca [osmanlicadergi.com](http://osmanlicadergi.com)  
@osmanlicadergi

Figure 2: Looking at the Kitabe from Gülhane Park (September 27, 2013)

But alongside these private accounts, an entire ecosystem of online communities interested in Ottoman had been growing in tandem with the neo-Ottomanist cultural shift. With the announcement of Ottoman's inclusion in national high school curriculums they exploded. Suddenly, everyone from schoolchildren to stay at home moms were sharing memes and commenting on posts about Ottoman. Divan poetry was being analyzed by amateurs, ancient inscriptions were being deciphered by hobbyists, and everyone was sharing their new Ottoman handwriting. In looking at these Facebook groups, Bedrettin Yazan has argued that the hierarchical nature of the language teaching classroom has been carried over into the digital realm through the enforcement of linguistic legitimacy and normativity by "language policing"<sup>6</sup>. While there is certainly a coercively normative tone in much of the online conversation, Yazan overestimates the ability of any specific actor to enforce linguistic outcomes. While online groups have moderators and page sponsors, they are unable to monitor the massive amount of content posted daily, much less exercise control over linguistic practices. Posting and commenting is all happening at once, by anyone who wants to join in. They are

anonymous, open, and noisy. Unlike in the physical political/pedagogical realm, these conversations are taking place in what JP Gee refers to as Affinity Spaces:

A place or set of places where people can affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals, not shared race, class, culture, ethnicity, or gender.<sup>7</sup>

This project used three different Facebook communities geared towards those interested in learning Ottoman Turkish: Osmanlıcımız (Our Ottoman), Osmanlıca Sevdalıları (Lovers of Ottoman) and Osmanlıca Metinler ve Transkripyonları (Ottoman Texts and Transcriptions). All three of these groups offer a digital space for people to come together with shared interests and therefore can all be considered to be affinity spaces. Online spaces are a uniquely democratic environment where users come together to engage in shared interests, whereas physical linguistic environments are predisposed to more traditional methods of ideological coercion. Within these dynamic discursive spaces we are not only seeing a revival of Ottoman by a wide-range of non-specialized users, but in fact a development of the language in new directions. I claim that this is a new form of Ottoman for several reasons.

The first is that users are themselves creating content rather than studying existing historical texts. This most often comes in the form of posts which include imagery paired with Ottoman text, often with the purpose of other users attempting to understand what has been written and transcribe it in Latin letters in the comments section. As well, examples of handwriting and calligraphy are often shared in order to solicit encouragement and words of praise from other users. In the process of creating these new texts, users are often making personal choices with regards to orthography and typography; creating new standards and trends which have no equivalent in the historical past.

The second is that these new texts are bringing with them the cultural and political baggage of the 20th century. The metalinguistic conversations which often take place in these affinity spaces are informed by the ideological concerns of participants. Even the most banal or well-intentioned post in an online forum is subject to political or cultural interpretation. This is not to mention the new content being created by users who bring with them contemporary political and cultural viewpoints which are clearly present. What these Ottoman texts mean for participants now is what makes them new.

Lastly, whereas language planners of modern Turkish in the Republican period worked hard to eradicate lexical borrowings from Arabic and Turkish, and to provide the language with neologisms for new technologies and concepts from the morphology of Turkic languages, 21st Ottoman is putting all of these new words and concepts back into the historical lexicon. Without the intention or even ability to merely reenact a staid, historically accurate recreation of some past iteration of Ottoman Turkish, contemporary participants in Ottoman affinity spaces are incorporating newer words and idioms back into a dynamic, hybrid form of the language. This is an Ottoman Turkish which has words for everything from divan poetic tropes to internet jargon. The more that users interact online sharing their interest in Ottoman, the more than the register will cease to be a historical artifact and the more that it will become the product of their own discursive creation. In the process of coming to learn about Ottoman,

participants in these affinity spaces are in face creates a new linguistic reality: 21st Century Ottoman.

## **Ottoman Affinity Spaces**

The three Facebook groups looked at for this study are online community pages which allow users to post images and text on the main wall. *Osmanlıca Sevdalıları* was founded in 2010 and as of March 2017 has 70,000 followers<sup>8</sup>. *Osmanlıcamız* is a closed group (one only has to request membership to be added) with 6,260 members as of March 2017<sup>9</sup>. On the description of the page there are strict instructions to avoid political subject by members and for everyone to conduct themselves in a spirit of mutual respect. *Osmanlıca Metinler ve Transkripsyonları* is listed as an education pages and has 15,000 followers as of March 2017<sup>10</sup>. While there are many more affinity groups for Ottoman to be found on Facebook, not to mention on other social media platforms, these three groups offer a good sample of pages since each one of them has a slightly different profile. *Osmanlıca Sevdalıları* and *Osmanlıcamız* help to contrast any difference there might be between open and closed groups, and *Osmanlıca Metinler ve Transkripsyonları* is geared towards more historical and academic posts. Nonetheless, all three of these groups are largely similar in the content which is published on their walls.

The most commonly found posts can be divided roughly into three main categories in increasing order of active linguistic intervention. The first is posts where users share an image from an actual historical document, or other historical information. Often these texts will have a specific phrase or word underlined, and users will ask for help deciphering the Ottoman text. This type of post most closely mirrors the language activities promoted by language companies such as *Osmanlı Eđitim*. That being said, they are often understood if not explicitly accompanied by some declaration of patriotism or piety. It is also by far the least common type of post. Next are examples of texts handwritten or calligraphed by users. Whether done in pencil or paintbrush, these texts use typographies which are distinct from most historical examples of written Ottoman. Last, and by far the most common type of post by users on these Facebook groups is an image paired with typed Ottoman script. This is the typical 'meme' style of post, which are meant for both passive consumption and active repurposing. Typical posts will include lines from divan poetry coupled with a pleasant bucolic or vaguely religious scene, aphorisms paired with an illustration that expands on its meaning, or humorous situations and jokes transcribed from modern into Turkish into Ottoman. Users will often transcribe the line back into Latin letters in the comments field, or add their own thoughts related to the post. It is within these comment fields that we see some of the most productive discursive activity of these affinity spaces. As participants offer their attempts at understanding the Ottoman text, and engage on metalinguistic debates over correct usage, they are each actively participating in the construction of new language practices.

There are several aspects of affinity spaces identified by Gee which makes it ideal for fostering of a new, non-hierarchically produced form of Ottoman Turkish. They are

spaces shared in common by both experts and newbies. None of the online communities looked at for this study relied on a moderator, and so many answers to questions of proper usage were arrived at by consensus, if at all. In fact, the entire concept of knowledge in an affinity space, according to Gee, is simultaneously individual, distributed, dispersed, and tacit<sup>11</sup>. The practices by which one learns and shares Ottoman Turkish in an affinity space are resistant to attempts to enforce orthodox practice.

In addition, by deemphasizing the sticky commitments implied in the concept of “community”, an affinity space is bounded not by specific identities or formal membership, but rather merely based on a shared, strong interest or engagement in a common activity. Ottoman Turkish online communities bring together an extremely eclectic array of participants, many whom would never otherwise interact in the real world. Each one of them bring their own personal and cultural values along with them, which has an effect on their own understanding and application of what Ottoman “is” and what is “should be.”

## **The Iconicity of Ottoman Memes**

Central to the appeal of Ottoman Turkish is its symbolic power. Even before it ceased to a legible script to Turks, it held a totemic quality which was invoked through its calligraphic forms in the decorative arts. In the present, it is immediately referential to the Islamic past in all of its nostalgic, mysterious, and glorious aspects; best captured in the term “Ottomania”. Both historically and in the present, the Ottoman Turkish script has always been “deeply polysemic.

At the most basic level, of course, it embodies written text, and as such expresses *symbolically* the meaning...of the text. But that is not all. As a highly visual art, Islamic calligraphy sometimes means *iconically*; and as a practice that is, at least in the Turkish context, intensely imbricated with politics, it also means *indexically*<sup>12</sup>.

At its most sophisticated, traditional calligraphy was able to move beyond turning beautiful words into beautiful images. It could use the letters themselves in ways that bordered on the figural. The Arabic letters could be plainly iconic, that is shaped in a way that made them resemble the image being spelled out, or more subtly by creating visual puns which would only be decipherable by those with a deep understanding of Islamic mythology. This ability to decipher its iconicity was lost along with the institutional knowledge of Ottoman calligraphy in the Kemalist reforms. While it has been kept alive as a marginal practice throughout the 20th century by enthusiasts, it has mainly done so as “a status symbol for the rich, a source of identity for the postmodern, or a test of orthodoxy for Islamists”<sup>13</sup>.

With the return of interest in Ottoman, new approaches for creating meaning from Ottoman calligraphy are open to the public. In affinity spaces, the Ottoman script is dropping its aura of enigmatic solemnity in exchange for participants’ being able to show off expressions of their interest and increasing mastery of penmanship. Rather

than a distant appreciation of historical examples of calligraphy hanging in mosques and museums, they are producing examples of the Ottoman script themselves. The profound symbolic effect of being able to write a script which for most people had always been tantamount to hieroglyphics should not be underestimated. It is this democratization of the symbolic efficacy which is making Ottoman new.

One of the first skills shared by participants when they begin to learn Ottoman is their ability to write the letters in Arabic script. It was the script after all which forms the central technical and symbolic barrier to the imagined past. But now in a number of courses offered in both public and private institutions, students are learning not only how to read but also write Ottoman. The excitement of being granted access to iconical power of Ottoman can be seen on social media as they share their personal experiences and their newly learned script in affinity spaces. The hashtag #OsmanlıcaEYazınıPaylaş (#shareyourOttomanhandwriting) has become a way for people to post pictures of how far they've come in being able to write (figure 3).

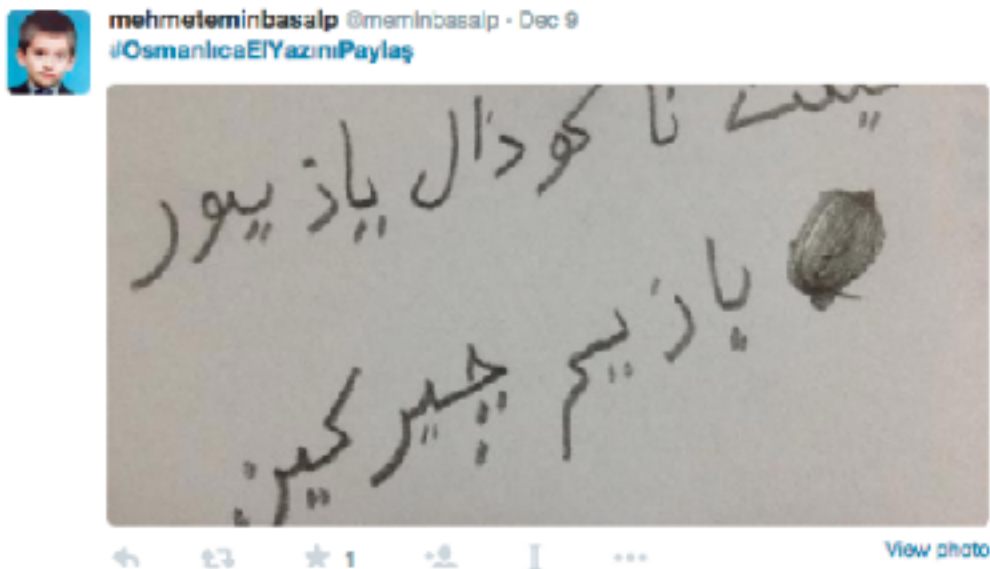


Figure 3: A student shares his handwriting on Twitter (December 9, 2014)

Many users have gone even farther and are sharing sophisticated examples of their own calligraphic artwork. What is interesting about these examples is the contemporaneity of their typographical aesthetic. Most extant examples from Pre-Republican Turkey of Ottoman being composed using a set of canonical calligraphic styles such as *Sulus*, *Rik'a*, and *Ta'lik*, newer versions posted online have flourishes which show the influence of modern tastes. Often both the Latin and Arabic letters are calligraphed in the same piece, as in figure 4 and 5, which allows for a chance to see the stylistic influences of modern typography on the Ottoman script. Figure 4 in particular uses a completely experimental typology showing more of a visual affinity with hip-hop graffiti than it does with historical Ottoman calligraphy. That being said, over time there are more frequent examples of refinement in the examples posted by users and many are being able to more accurately imitate canonical styles: anecdotal evidence of a



growing command and confidence with the language. Figure 6 shows a user's capable use of the *Rik'a* script, the most common typography used historically for handwriting. What's important to note is that both of these aesthetic approaches to Ottoman calligraphy exist side by side without a final sense of what is 'appropriate' and historical, and what is new and innovative. If there has been a measure of language policing in these forums, it does not seem to have had an effect on how Ottoman is being written.

If classical Ottoman calligraphy was deeply evocative of complex iconical traditions, it was due thanks to the elite knowledge of the Islamic calligraphy tradition. While new examples of calligraphy may certainly be evocative of the Islamic past, it does not do through use of this patrimony but rather through what is now the novelty of Arabic letters themselves and their ability to index the Islamic past. Meaning in traditional Ottoman Calligraphy was a form of esoteric knowledge. In the present, it is a vehicle for personal expression.



Figure 4: The word for Wednesday in both Latin and Arabic letters (March 15, 2017)



Figure 5: The word for Thursday in both Latin and Arabic letters (March 16, 2017)

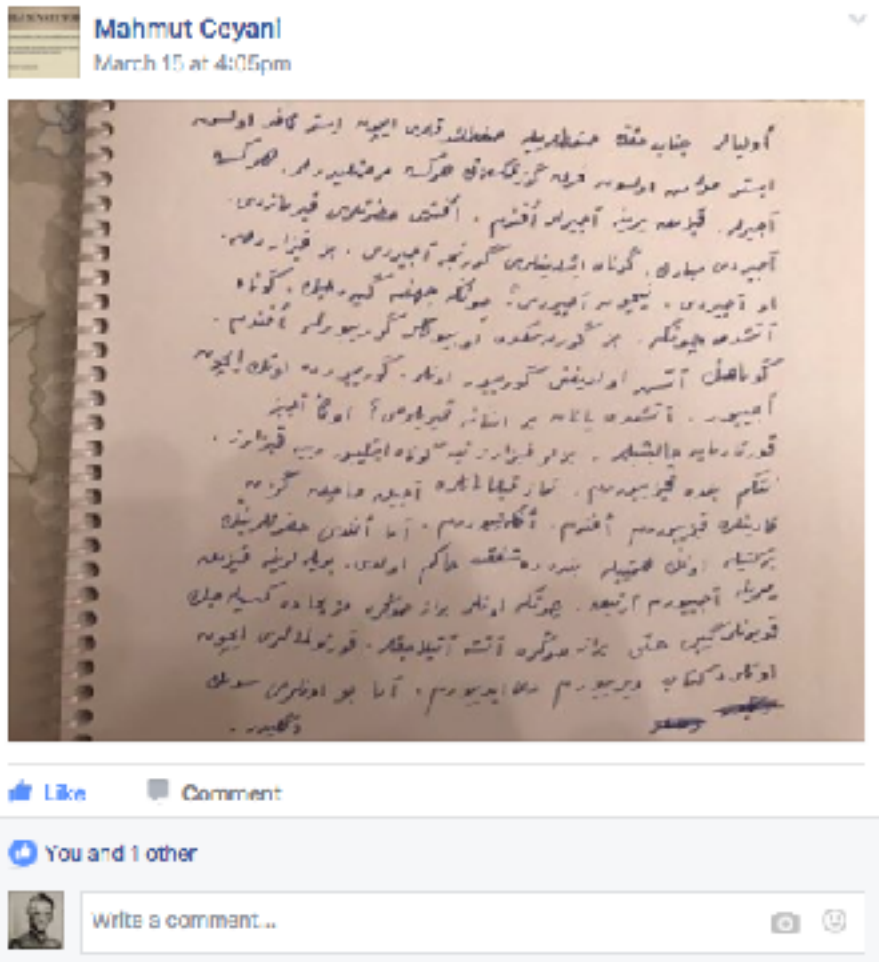


Figure 6: A confident imitation of Rik'a script (March 15 2017)

This is also true of Ottoman internet memes. Ottoman Turkish online is simultaneously invoking the visual legacy of Islamic civilization and at the same time attuning its symbolic repertoire to a contemporary setting. People in Ottoman affinity spaces are pairing the venerated Ottoman script with modern images and themes in order to create digital declarations of identity and calls to mutual recognition. If the practice of creating, recycling and reposting content online relies on practices of intertextuality and appropriation, then Ottoman is well-suited to being turned into memes. No Turkish participant will come to the Ottoman script for the first time without already holding deep social, political, and religious associations with it. First among these is the nostalgia for the Islamic past. Ottoman is used as a way for users to make coded or overtly religious claims to identity, and to give a pious coloring to even basic greetings and expressions.

Take, for example, the simple “Good Morning” meme in figure 7, 8, and 9. It includes the words for “Good morning” written in Ottoman Turkish, joined with a picture of tea or a cute animal. However, the choice of the more traditional wording “Hayırlı Sabahlar”

uses two different words from Arabic, the word for blessings and the word for morning, whereas the more currently wide-used expression “Günaydın” (Day Light) is composed of purely Turkish roots. With the lexicon of Turkish having been the subject of such intense political engineering during the Republican era, the use of Arabic roots keys these memes into an implicitly religious register of speech.



Aynur Çetinkaya

8 hrs



Figure 7: The Arabized Good Morning Meme with cute animal (April 17, 2015)



Figure 8: The Arabized Good Morning Meme with tea cup (April 14, 2015)



Sırrı Aşeka

Yesterday at 12:56am



خیرلی صبا حلو

Like · Comment

Figure 9: The Arabized Good Morning Meme with cute animal and tea cup (April 17, 2015)

Even if the message is meant to be as innocuous as sharing a morning cup of tea and your best wishes for the day, using “Hayırlı Sabahlar” instead of “Günaydın” in the Arabic script implies a bold ideological statement in the Turkish context. In the face of almost a century of linguistic secularization and register stripping, the reintroduction of an Arabic lexicon associated with Islam is an attempt by users to reinstate religious heritage into basic social intercourse. With each post, Ottoman Turkish becomes less of a historical relic and increasingly an ordinary form of expression seen daily by those involved in the affinity space. The meme has also expanded in these forums to include “Hayırlı Akşamlar” (good evening) and the even more religiously explicit “Hayırlı Cumalar” (Happy Friday), referring to the day of communal Muslim prayer. Each of these memes speak to a desire for more overt and individual expression of a participant’s religious and cultural identity. In response, these postings prove to be very popular, with active users often wishing each other good morning to one another in the

comment field, creating more opportunities to inculcate the expression. In short, the “Hayırlı Sabahlar” meme is a normalization of religious iconicity which helps foster a sense of community in affinity spaces.

But affinity spaces are not all just about sharing and agreeing. At the same time, they can serve as a forum for debate and disagreement. These disagreements are referred to by Steven Thorne and Dejan Ivkovic as “linguascaping”: linguistic engagements that construct, and often contest ethno-linguistic identifications and power relations<sup>14</sup>. When people come together to share and talk about language online, this tends to increase users’ own meta-linguistic awareness. In the anonymity and equality of digital discursive space, language choice and other semiotic markers such as script become the vehicle through which ethno-linguistic presence and power relations are mediated. As much as the shared interest in Ottoman acts as a way to bring people together to share their experiences in learning the language, they are also the site of open conflict about what Ottoman represents and who is able to enjoy its symbolic authority. Because these Ottoman affinity spaces are not a classroom with a single teacher, the voice of authority telling the students the correct way to use Ottoman Turkish, the debates are open-ended and rely on those practices that emerge through consensus. The rise of the internet has led to a new sociolinguistic reality where rather than counting on stable linguistic norms, we can expect to see a dynamic and fluid language practice. Whereas the classroom is distinguished by homogeneity and boundedness, these online affinity spaces are completely open to political dynamics, and historical embedding. That is to say, rather than remaining as a fixed object of study, Ottoman is continuing to develop like any other living language.

Let’s take an example from one of the Ottoman forums. In figure 10 below, the user Yasemin Ö. has uploaded a picture in the Ottoman script as well as a section of Ottoman poetry transcribed above into Latin letters. In several places, the Turkish transcription uses a ‘W’ instead of a ‘V’ in order to more closely reflect the original Ottoman orthography.

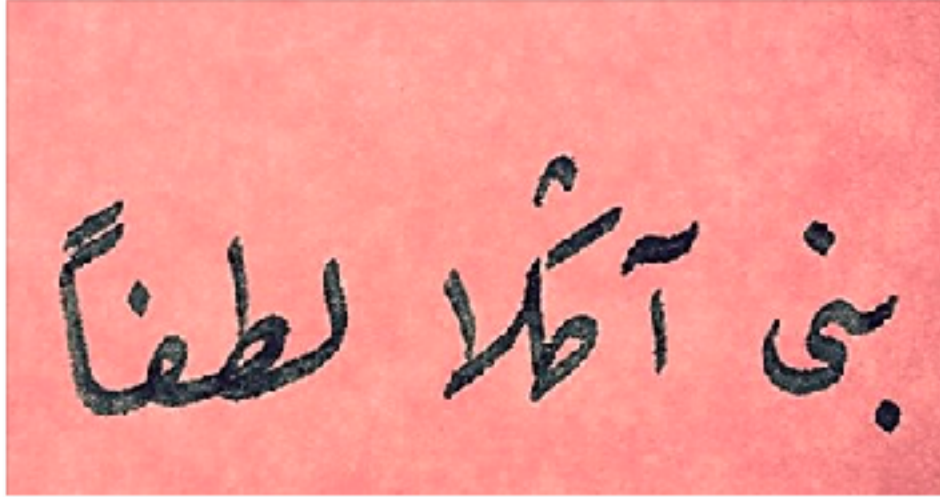


Yasemin Jas Minn Özbay

20 hrs

"We gurur, kaybedenlerin, acizlerin maskesiymiş  
Sewgi dolu yüreklerde gurur olmazmış  
Yüreğimde sewgi bulduğumda anladım..." 😊

See Translation



Like · Comment · Share

👍 50 people like this.

Figure 10: Yasemin Ö's post (April 16, 2015)

Yasemin's transcription	Standard Turkish Spelling
We gurur...	Ve gurur
Yüreğimde sewgi	Yüreğimde sevgi

As mentioned previously, the Arabic script offers many cases of orthographic ambiguity in relation to Turkish, especially when it comes to the asymmetrical representations for vowels. For example, both the sound 'W' and 'V' could be represented by the Arabic letter 'و'. In the Kemalist language reforms of the early 20th century, the letter W was not only left out of the new Latin alphabet, was actually made illegal, and subject to a fine if it appeared in public. Part of what made 'W' so contentious, along with the letter 'Q' and 'X' was its use in the romanized scripts of the Kurdish Kurmanji language. Therefore, the use of 'W' has in many cases comes to resemble a language which is not recognized, and for a long time actively suppressed by the Turkish state. Though Yasemin Ö's post is meant to only discuss poetry, immediately below the first comment by user Ibrahim P. reminds the community that



the Turkish language does not have the letter ‘W’. The poetry being transcribed is actually trying to represent the letter ‘ş’, at the orthographic level there is no difference between using a letter ‘V’ and ‘W’. But given the history of Kemalist language ideology, it creates quite a stir in the comment field. User Ibrahim P. comments “There is no letter ‘W’ in Turkish” followed later by User Durmuş Ö. who also responds “My dear sister Yasemin, is there a reason for your using a ‘W’? Others noticed besides me. What if you didn’t use it.” While the purpose of the post is to give other users a chance to transcribe the text from the image, done so by user Karanfil B., the majority of comments are drawn instead to the conspicuous use of the letter ‘W’. Yasemin replies to Durmuş Ö. in the last comment

Mr. Durmuş, I don’t want to hear any criticisms of my use of ‘W’s... Using ‘W’s in this way is a personal preference... what’s more I don’t understand what harm my using ‘W’s causes... This is an Ottoman page and everyone should be concerned only with what I have shared...respectfully.<sup>15</sup>

It should be noted that Yasemin continues to use ‘W’s in a non-standard way throughout her own comment.

In this online language, there is a level of ambiguity in terms of how Ottoman can be written. There is a destabilization of linguistic norms by nature of the fact that these conversations are taking place in affinity spaces rather than government buildings. However, as to be expected in a country that has grown up under a firmly linguistic-ideological state system of education, there is bound to be a great deal of resistance to this notion. What, indeed, is the correct way to transcribe this line of poetry? The answer is that it is open to debate.

Another commonly recurring topic of contention on these forums is what content is appropriate for being expressed in Ottoman; to what extent can Ottoman be used for sacred versus profane purposes? Ottoman is often used as a vehicle for professions of religiosity. Posts are often accompanied by pictures of mosques, people praying, and sections of the Qur’an and Hadith translated into Ottoman Turkish. At the same time, Ottoman is being used to share pictures of cats, and other cute animals. Sometimes it’s being used for both (figure 11).



Figure 11: Admonition to recite the Bismillah along with a parrot wearing a Taqiyah (March 16, 2017)

But how far can this be taken? At what point is the aura of Ottoman's historical authority violated? More often than not, it is not their tweeness which will get a user into trouble, but serious expressions of identity from the other end of the political spectrum. While early non-professional interest in Ottoman had tended, broadly speaking, to be found among conservative circles, Anatolian housewives and devout students at religious high schools, with Ottoman going mainstream it has perked the interest of those who might not be coming to it out of any sense of religious affiliation at all. Take for example the user Taher B., who seems cheekily aware of the tension between the austere traditional heritage of Ottoman and its new home on the incorrigibly silly and outrageous circus that is the modern internet. He has been all too happy to upset this already uneasy balance by posting pictures from non-Islamic contexts, such as movies from the 1970s, and even political icons from the Turkish Left. The transcriptions he makes into Ottoman are often translations from other languages, and completely outside of the Islamic context.



Like · Comment · Share

- Tahir Berk Eyvallah GhöcI hocam**  
April 17 at 4:25pm · Like · 1
- Ali Vural**  
April 17 at 4:27pm · Like · 1
- Durmuş Yener Özel** Filmler karakterler de çok iydi. resimide yazı da:)  
April 17 at 5:24pm · Like · 2
- Abdülmecid Ekiel** Çiğdem baş para emozler zümresini, Sevdiklerimiz olarak sunmanız kadar SAÇMA ve GAYTİ AHLAKI bir sanayeme olamazdı, En Admin e...!!!! !!!!!! ... Seb Mero  
April 17 at 10:17pm · Like · 2
- Tahir Berk** Yani kimseyi sevdiklerimiz olarak sunmıyor herkesin sevdiklerine nasıl davranması gerektiği ile ilgili ve filmin sadece hikayesine kurgu yapı yapıyor detayısıyla yorum yaparken biraz daha t'iz'ın...  
Yesterday at 1:11am · Like · 1
- Yusuif Yıldırım** Filmi bilenler için yadırgayın olabilir, yanında verilmiş olan mesajı bu filmin konusu detaylı şekilde izli ediyorsanız ne kadar suretler iyi, sevimsiz olsada paylaşımın güzelliğini gözeleyemez ...  
Yesterday at 1:18am · Like · 2
- Taooflin Demirel** Yusuf Yıldırım gölgelendi hepsi ki din dusmanı devlet ve millet dusmanı gordum ya ... sabah saaban günaha girdim  
Yesterday at 1:50am · Edited · Like · 3
- Rahile Kriks Dmz** Türkçesini de yazın ben öğrenmeye çalışıyorum yeniyim  
Yesterday at 8:54am · Like · 2
- Yusuif Yıldırım** "Sevdiklerimize zaman ayırın yoksa zaman sizi sevdiklerimizden ayırır" güzel bir Rahile hocam ...  
Yesterday at 3:56am · Like · 1
- Rahile Kriks Dmz** Teşekkürler Esazifurullahı hocca değilim sadece Osmanlıca öğrenmek isteyen biriyim  
Yesterday at 4:06am · Like · 1

Figure 12: The Canım Kardeşim meme along with sample of heated conversation over its meaning (April 17, 2015)

The quote in this picture from figure 12 reads “Set some time out for your friends, or else time will set them apart from you.” This is a quote he attributes to William Golding. Without access to the bitterly partisan semiotic archive of 20th century, this post is seemingly harmless. However, other Turkish users are all too aware of the discrepancy. The accompanying image comes from a movie from the early 1970s called *Canım Kardeşim* about young, working-class Turks who dream of a better, consumerist lifestyle. Coming out in the politically polarized era in Turkey, this film offered a subtle social critique. When paired with writing in Ottoman Turkish, this critique is no longer subtle. It’s jarring. Many users in this affinity space quickly picked up on the juxtaposition between highfalutin court script and a still from a mid-century left-wing picaresque film.

User Safiye D.G. asks in the second comment, “couldn’t you have found another picture than these enemies of the religion who hate Ottoman and Ottoman Turkish?” User Ali K., whose profile name is written in the Arabic script, writes “it’s a nice film, but the characters not so much.” The user Gönül K., a very active presence on several of these Ottoman affinity groups on Facebook, restricts her comments to transcribing the idiom into modern Turkish, but then adding briefly that everyone has their right to believe what they will, and that this is not an appropriate forum for discussing the film. Taher B. agrees with her. Nonetheless, the debate continues. User Abdülmeceid E. states that the use of these characters is ridiculous and immoral. User Tacettin D. adds that they are enemies of the religion, the state, and the nation. Interspersed between this political debate are all those other users who express their interest only in the Ottoman alphabet. We see a tension between those who hope to use this affinity space as a purely pedagogical resource, while other seem to hold a metalinguistic of the political implications of using Ottoman Turkish online.

In this conversation over whether or not the characters from *Canım Kardeşim* are enemies of Ottoman, religion, or the state, the last word is given by Durmuş Y.O., the same user from the previously mentioned debate over the letter ‘W’. He offers words of reconciliation: “Let’s be a little more tolerant, how about it friends and brothers. Do these unkindly words befit us?” However, these words are fitting for affinity spaces, inasmuch as they are constituted by metalinguistic debates. They are offered in a space which hosts a process of constructing, and/or contesting possible ethno-linguistic identifications and power relations, through the use of semiotic resources. Ottoman Turkish may be back after a 90-year hiatus, but history and politics have continued in its absence. When participants online try to revive a language, they are bound to encounter the interference of contemporary lived culture. To use Ottoman Turkish in the 21st century, means bringing it up-to-date with all of the political and social debates of the 20th.

## **Modern Concepts in the Ottoman Lexicon**

The most incontrovertible evidence that 20th century Modern Turkish has left its imprint on 21st century Ottoman is in the form of its lexicon. As previously mentioned, much of the Arabic and Persian vocabulary was stripped out of Turkish during the language reforms, and were replaced by neologisms created by using morphological elements found in the Turkish of the Anatolian countryside, as well as other Turkic languages. This was a crucial ideological step in setting Republican Turkey clearly apart from its Islamic past. Modern Turkish words in fields such as technology, design, and computer science did not come handed down from the Ottoman linguistic heritage, but instead were invented ex-nihilo by turkologists in the early 20th century. This does not stop them from being used in new iterations of 21st century Ottoman as it is used online. When these modern words are transcribed back into the Arabic script, it is as they are being written into Ottoman for the first time. And this happens often. Learning the Arabic script is a relatively low barrier to entry into a perceived familiarity with Ottoman Turkish in comparison with the extensive knowledge that would be required to wield the largely alien body of historical Ottoman vocabulary, let alone imitate the tortuously stylized syntax of its literary and legal language. Whenever a participant in affinity space produces their own text in Ottoman, it is almost always modern Turkish as they know it, cloaked in an anachronistic orthographic garb.

Examples of these “anachronistic” uses of modern Turkish back into digital Ottoman are most often found in user-created posts dealing with humorous or non-religious topics. In figure 13, the user Sukut G. has created a post which gives what he believes is evidence for a creationist account of human biological development. The words “smart design” are written above the image of the robotic arm, and the word “coincidence?” next to the anatomical image of the human arm. This meme is in reference to the religious argument for the theory of “intelligent design”. However, the term *akıllı tasarım* (intelligent design), is a modern neologism. The word *tasarım*, design in the sense of creating something according to advanced requirements, was first mentioned in Turkish dictionaries in the early 1980s. Although the user Sukut G. is making a religious argument, it is one that is modern in both form and content.



Figure 13: Arguing in Ottoman for intelligent design (April 15, 2015)

Figure 14 shows a picture of the man with the moustache and prayer beads in tennis shoes uses both the word with the caption in Ottoman reading: “I’ll admit, I sometimes get “panic attacks”. I have a crisis whenever I leave my bed in the morning.” Both “crisis” and “panic attack” are both modern borrowings from French, but the term panic attack is English. The word “itiraf”, Turkish for “confess”, is misspelled if compared to how it was originally written as an Arabic loan word: it is missing the “ع”, a phoneme not found in Turkish. It is clear that the creator of this meme was merely transcribing literally back into Arabic letters without knowing how it had been written historically. The character shown in the illustration may be holding prayer beads, but their dress is otherwise contemporary. This goes to show that users feel increasingly comfortable putting Ottoman words not only next to cute animals, but into the mouths of modern, tennis shoe-wearing Turks.



Figure 14: A man admits to panic attacks in Ottoman (April 14, 2015)

That is not to say that much can be inferred as to the identities of participants in these affinity spaces. An ideal vision of a participant in affinity spaces is perhaps best offered in a post from Zeynep K. in figure 15. Here is the convergence of the themes of religious identity, modern technology, and the role of humor in affinity spaces. The man sitting at his computer says “new password: *maşallah* (so be the will of God)”. The voice on the computer responds “your password needs to include both letters and numbers” the man answers back “41 times *maşallah*”. To understand this joke, participants need to be able to speak modern Turkish, be able to read it written in Ottoman orthography, to have experienced having to choose passwords on computers, understand the importance of the expression *maşallah* in Islamic religious life as well as the expression “41 times *maşallah*”, how older generations tend to use these types of idioms increasingly in speech, and lastly the inherent silliness of seeing cartoons written in the script of Ottoman Divan poetry. This complex set of shared knowledge helps to bring together members in an affinity space using one of the most powerful ways of creating a sense of inclusion in digital communities: being in on the joke.



Figure 15: A digital native chooses a new password (April 14, 2015)

Lastly, figure 16 uses Ottoman not to praise technology but to criticize it. User Zeynep K. makes a contemporary political commentary on the restrictive and socially corrosive effects of using Facebook. In an allusion to George Orwell's novel 1984, the text in Ottoman reads "Reading is Freedom", ironically juxtaposed with the image of a computer user imprisoned within a cage shaped like the Facebook logo. The word for freedom used here, *Özgürlük*, is an example of an Öztürkçe neologism par excellence. The neologism is composed of the arguably quintessential Turkish root *öz* meaning pure or unique, and *gürlük* meaning abundance. Before the Republican language reforms the word had been *Hürriyet*, borrowed from Arabic. In his seminal book on the Turkish language reform, Geoffrey Lewis makes special mention of these words and their historical specificity.

To those Turks growing up since the 1950s, 'Hürriyet' is the name of a daily newspaper...To them, *özgürlük*... means what *hürriyet*...meant to their grandparents and what 'freedom'...means to English-speakers. The language they have spoke all their lives is their language.<sup>16</sup>



For a word so deeply tied to Republican-era political values, one that was coined specifically in contrast to the original Ottoman *hürriyet*, its being written in Arabic letters is highly emblematic of the ways in which modern Turkish history is rewritten into the Ottoman archive.



Figure 15: An Orwellian view of the internet (March 29, 2015)

However this meme is not, as some might argue, a glaring contradiction or evidence that those attempting to use Ottoman are incompetent and woefully ignorant of history. It is proof instead that the Ottoman being used in digital space is an organic creation by regular users: an anecdote to the radical breaks and coercive language politics that envisioned an incompatibility between the official register of Ottoman and spoken Turkish in the first place. While successive governments have worked tirelessly

to purge, purify, segregate, and design Turkish, its actual speakers and users are moving ahead with creating a register of language marked by mixing, sampling, and creativity. Of all of the features of this digital form of Ottoman which make it radically new, most important is that, for the first time ever, access to it is open to everyone.

### **Future Ottomanists**

In the few years since Ottoman Turkish education was extended across the entire high school system, there have been many signs that 21st century Ottoman is coming into its own. Calligraphy as a popular art form continues to become more sophisticated, more Turks are able to read their own history and are sharing what they find, and the memes on social media cover ever broader subjects and opinions. The cacophony of identities and styles seen on affinity spaces is an encouraging example of the resilience of the Turkish language despite decades of language policy which worked to eradicate traces of the past. Because the Turkish language was the object of such an intense political project of erasure, the return of its history through Ottoman serves as a repudiation of such attempts at establishing control over language. In her book *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey*, Nergis Ertürk argues that state language reform, and the Turkish case specifically, was not a project in which some pristine and wholly authentic vernacular form of the national language was discovered. It was quite the opposite. Language reform is a process of suppression and erasure. Language must be contained because of the threat it opposes to authority. “Writing reform is driven by the experience of language as [a] threatening, uprooting *force*, generative of unforeseen consequences without end.<sup>17</sup>”

The creative ways in which Ottoman is being reinvigorated today is a testament to this force. However, this force goes both ways. Free from the strictures of Kemalism, Ottoman Turkish no longer belongs to those who initially sought to inspire interest in it. If the original intent of mandating Ottoman Turkish in high schools was to further promote a neo-Ottomanist cultural shift for the benefit of the governing administration, the language is now in the hands of anyone able to turn it into a meme on social media. One of the reasons why Irvin Cemil Schick, after offering his many reservations, tentatively comes out in support of Ottoman education in Turkish high schools argues in his belief that for too long Ottoman “experts” were able to assert unquestioned authority over the historical past due to their monopoly on being able to read its archive<sup>18</sup>. Until now, Turks were taken in by whatever past was given to them, swallowing mythology whole since they didn’t have the ability to offer a counter narrative. This could change if Ottoman was taught in schools. Students would have the ability to destroy myths and erase taboos.

And this is what we are seeing even back in official school programs. Ottoman Turkish is not being used to idolize the past, but being produced by the new generation according to their own interests and preferences. In November 2016 a public high school in Samsun published the first issue of ‘Heybe’ an Ottoman Turkish magazine produced by students<sup>19</sup>. The style of Ottoman used throughout the magazine shows an eclectic mix of lexical and orthographic choice, with neologisms and slang existing side by side with historical texts and the erudite imitations of a letter from the school

director. The form and content of the articles in this magazine bear the mark of its young creators. The inaugural issue featured articles on the history of the school, crossword puzzles, a selection of classic poetry, and even reviews of recently released films. Even within the controlled environment of a public school, a new generation of students is creating an Ottoman which is entirely theirs.

This should be a comfort for those watching recent attempts by the Erdoğan administration to dictate cultural policy by relying on the patronizing imposition of Ottoman symbols in everything from social mores to construction projects, and now in the field of education. As an uprooting force, language cannot be ultimately be controlled through appeals to normative grammar and historical precedent. 21st century Ottoman Turkish as it was developed collectively online in affinity spaces, and put into practice across society is polysemic in ways that will elude any effort by those who would attempt to wield it in the service of state power.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in "Erdoğan: İsteseler De İstemeseler De Osmanlıca öğrenilecek." Hürriyet. Hürriyet, 08 Dec. 2014. Web. 28 Mar. 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Darling, L. T. (2012). Ottoman Turkish: Written language and scribal practice, 13th to 20th Centuries. In B. Spooner & W. L. Hanaway (Eds.), *Literacy in the persianate world: Writing and the social order* (Vol. 4, pp. 171–195). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. Pg. 171.

<sup>3</sup> Spooner, Brian, and William L. Hanaway 1929. *Literacy in the Persianate World: Writing and the Social Order*. vol. 4.;4;, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Schick, Irvin C. "Elbette Okullarda Osmanlıca öğretilsin!" T24.com.tr. T24, 5 Mar. 2015. Web. 04 Apr. 2015.

<sup>5</sup> "Osmanlıca Eğitim Ve Kültür Dergisi." Facebook, 2017. Web. 28 Mar. 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Yazan, Bedrettin. "Adhering to the Language Roots: Ottoman Turkish Campaigns on Facebook." *Language Policy* 14.4 (2015): 335-55. Web.

<sup>7</sup> Gee, James Paul. *Situated Language and Learning A Critique of Traditional Schooling*. Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2012. Print. pg. 67

<sup>8</sup> "Osmanlıca Sevdalileri." Facebook, 2017. Web. 28 Mar. 2017.

<sup>9</sup> "OSMANLICAMIZ." Facebook, 2017. Web. 28 Mar. 2017.

<sup>10</sup> "OSMANLICA METİNLER VE TRANSKRİPSİYONLARI." Facebook, 2017. Web. 28 Mar. 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Gee 2005, 228.

<sup>12</sup> Schick, Irvin Cemil. "The Iconicity of Islamic Calligraphy in Turkey." *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* No. 53/54 (2008): 211-24. JSTOR. Web. 13 Nov. 2014. Pg. 221.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>14</sup> Thorne, Steven L., and Dejan Ivkovic. "Multilingual Eurovision Meets Plurilingual YouTube." *Dialogue Studies Dialogue in Multilingual and Multimodal Communities* (2015): 167-92. Web.

<sup>15</sup> Özbay, Yasemin (Yasemin Jas Minn Özbay) "We Gurur..." Facebook. April 15, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis, Geoffrey. *The Turkish Language Reform: A Catastrophic Success*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999. Print. Pg. 112

<sup>17</sup> Ertürk, Nergis. *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey*. Oxford, UK: OxfordUP, 2011. Print. pg. 27

<sup>18</sup> Schick 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Heybe 1 (2016): 1-8. SAMSUN / İLKADIM - Samsun İbrahim Tanrıverdi Sosyal Bilimler Lisesi. Web. 28 Mar. 2017.