

## Language Policies and Minority Language Maintenance: The Case of Circassian in Turkey

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### Abstract

Guided by language maintenance and shift (Fishman, 1991) as a theoretical construct, this study explored the sociolinguistic situation and the maintenance of Circassian, a Northwest Caucasian language, spoken in Turkey since the Ottoman Era. To explore the impacts of official language ideologies and policies on the maintenance of Circassian, five participants from different age groups and regions of Turkey were interviewed using linguistic life story interviews (Atkinson 1998). As part of its socio-historical focus, the study first highlights some of the Circassian initiatives that played an important role in maintaining the language during the Ottoman Era and addresses the changes in language ideologies and policies after the declaration of the Turkish Republic. Similar to other ethnolinguistic minorities' experiences in Turkey (Aslan, 2007; Seloni & Sarfati, 2013), the life story interviews revealed the impacts of assimilationist language policies in educational and social settings. Findings also revealed the long-lasting impact of the Citizen Speak Turkish policy (1928-1945) on the maintenance of Circassian and its negative impact on the generational transfer which has not been explored by former research. The findings have implications for language policymakers, Circassian NGOs, and Circassian speakers in Turkey to maintain and transfer the language to future generations.

**Keywords:** *Circassian, Language Maintenance, Heritage Language, Language ideologies, Language policies*

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## **Dil Politikaları ve Azınlık Dillerinin Korunması: Türkiye’de Çerkesçe Örneği**

Anadilin korunması ve baskın dillerle değişimi teorisi (Fishman, 1991) rehberliğinde yapılan bu çalışma, Türkiye’de Osmanlı döneminden beri konuşulan bir Kuzeybatı Kafkas dili olan Çerkesçenin sosyolinguistik durumunu ve korunması konusunu araştırmıştır. Resmi dil ideolojilerinin ve politikalarının Çerkesçenin korunması üzerindeki etkilerini araştırmak için, Türkiye'nin farklı bölgelerinden ve yaş gruplarından beş katılımcıyla dilsel yaşam öyküsü görüşmeleri kullanılarak mülakatlar yapılmıştır (Atkinson 1998). Sosyo-tarihsel odağının bir parçası olarak, çalışma öncelikle Osmanlı döneminde dilin korunmasında önemli rol oynayan bazı Çerkes girişimlerine ışık tutmakta ve Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin ilanından sonra dil ideolojileri ve politikalarındaki değişiklikleri ele almaktadır. Türkiye'deki diğer etnolinguistik azınlıkların deneyimlerine benzer şekilde (Aslan, 2007; Seloni & Sarfati, 2013), hayat hikayesi görüşmeleri asimilasyonist dil politikalarının eğitim ve sosyal ortamlardaki etkilerini ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bulgular aynı zamanda daha önceki akademik çalışmalarda araştırılmamış olan "Vatandaş Türkçe Konuş" politikasının (1928-1945) Çerkes dilinin korunması üzerindeki uzun süreli etkisini ve nesiller arası dil aktarımı üzerindeki olumsuz etkisini ortaya koymaktadır. Bulgular, Çerkesçenin korunması ve gelecek nesillere aktarılması için Türkiye'deki dil politika yapıcılarını, Çerkes STK'ları ve Çerkesçe konuşanlar için çıkarımlar sunmaktadır.

***Anahtar Kelimeler:*** Çerkesce, dil korunumu, miras dil, dil ideolojileri, dil politikaları

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1 Circassians as an ethnolinguistic minority in Turkey**

Circassians are the native autochthonous people of the North-west Caucasus who resisted against the Tsarist Russian Empire’s expansionist policies for over a hundred years during the Russo-Caucasian War (1763-1864). As a result of the conquest of their homeland, more than 90 percent of Circassians who once lived independently in their homeland were deported to the Ottoman Empire (Alankus & Taymaz, 2010). After their tragic exodus from Circassia to Ottoman Empire, which some scholars call a systematic genocide (Richmond, 2013; Shenfield, 1999), Circassians had to embrace Turkey as their new homes.

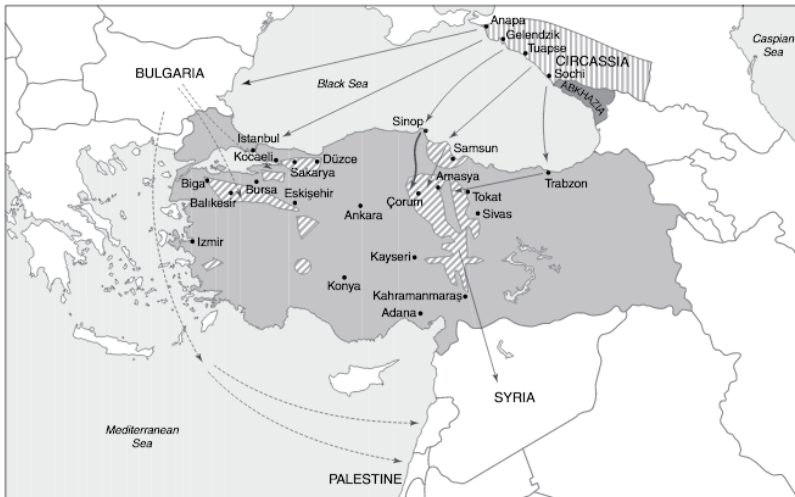


Figure 1: Expulsion of Circassians to the Ottoman Empire between the 1850s and 1880s, (Beslenev, 2014)

After their expulsion from Circassia, Circassians were placed in cities and villages based on the Ottoman Empire’s needs at the time and in most cases, they were split from other Circassians who spoke the same language. While the official resettlement policy of the Ottoman Empire presented its own challenges to Circassians in terms of language preservation, the assimilationist language policies of the new Turkish Republic banned the use of their mother tongue and even Circassian names (Kaya, 2010). While the official censuses in Turkey included questions on the citizens’ mother tongues, second languages, and religion until 1985, the state omitted these questions after 1985 (Virtanen, 2003; Yagmur, 2001). As a result of this omission, the exact number of minorities including Circassians is unknown in Turkey (Kurban, 2007). However, the estimate for the Circassian population in Turkey is around 2.5 to 3 million (Kaya, 2014; Kurban, 2007). Currently, Circassian (Both Western and Eastern dialects) is spoken in the Adygea, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkessia republics in Russia and in diaspora countries such as Turkey, Jordan, Syria, Israel, and the U.S. As the below map shows, Circassian speakers are spread out in different geographical regions of Turkey.

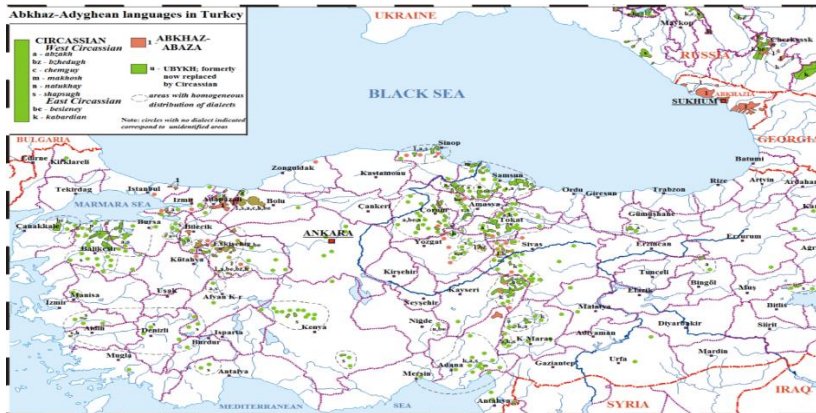


Figure 2: Map of Circassian Speakers in Turkey (Caucasian Languages in Turkey n.d.)

## 2. Literature Review

Former research (Van Tubergen & Kalmijn, 2009; Van Tubergen & Wierenga, 2011) show that immigrants who live in neighborhoods with people from the same ethnic and linguistic backgrounds are less exposed to the dominant language, which enables them to use their mother tongue in their daily life. In the case of Circassians in Turkey, while the pace of linguistic assimilation was faster in cities or places where Circassians lived with the Turkish speaking local population, it was slower in villages where there was a larger concentration of Circassian speakers. While there is a lack of research on the factors contributing to language shift in the Turkish context, one of the factors that expedited the language shift for Circassians and other minority groups in Turkey was the adoption of assimilationist language ideologies by the state and the education system (Yagmur, 2001).

While the language policies during the last years of the Ottoman Empire were more tolerant toward minorities and enabled Circassians and other linguistic minorities to open schools to teach their language, the declaration of the Republic in 1923 created a negative ethnolinguistic climate which resulted in Turkish-only policies and campaigns in both educational and social contexts. While former research explored the impacts of the

assimilationist language ideologies of the state and the Citizen Speak Turkish movement on other minority languages in Turkey such as Kurdish (Öpengin, 2012; Zeydanlioglu, 2012), Judeo-Spanish (Aslan, 2007; Seloni & Sarfati, 2013), and Laz (Kutscher, 2008) there has not been any research on Circassian language. The language policies that the Turkish state adopted based on assimilationist ideologies marginalized Circassians and their language systematically throughout the years which resulted in the forced language shift to Turkish for many Circassian speakers (Phillippson, 2018). Although there is a lack of research on the sociolinguistic situation of Circassian in Turkey, which hosts the largest Circassian diaspora, a study conducted by Zhemukhov and Aktürk (2015) shed light on the consequences of Russia's assimilationist nation-building approach and official language policies. Their study revealed the impacts of Russification policies restricting the linguistic rights of Circassians within their historical homeland.

In an effort to address the research gap regarding the sociolinguistic situation of Circassian in Turkey, this study delved into the impact of official language policies on the preservation and intergenerational transmission of the Circassian language within the Turkish diaspora. This investigation was guided by the theoretical frameworks of language maintenance and shift, as proposed by Fishman (1991). Language maintenance and shift have been used in many studies that explored the sociolinguistic situation of languages, their maintenance, shift, or death around the world. Studies that explored the maintenance and revitalization of minority or Indigenous languages revealed many factors that determine the maintenance of a language. Former research revealed that favorable educational policies (Bissoonauth, 2011), speakers' positive attitude toward their native language (Sofi, 2021), institutional support (Clampitt-Dunlap, 2000), and active use of the language at home with family members and relatives (Dweik & Al-Obaidi, 2014) are some of the factors that enable the maintenance of minority languages. On the other hand, external factors such as assimilationist ideologies (Hunt & Davis, 2019), economic and institutional stigmatization,

and repressive state politics (Opengin, 2012), and forced public assimilation and community policing (Seloni & Sarfati, 2013) play key roles in minorities' language shift to the dominant and more prestigious languages.

While language maintenance is defined as the retention of a heritage or minority language by its speakers, language shift is the process when a minority or heritage language is gradually replaced by the dominant and more prestigious language (Pauwels, 2016). There are several factors at play that determine the maintenance of a minority language or its gradual shift to the majority language which in most cases is associated with upward social mobility. According to Kloss (1927) some of the critical factors that contribute to the language maintenance or shift are the number of minority language users in the dominant society, and how the minority language and its speakers are perceived by the dominant ethnolinguistic group. In addition to these factors, Mackey (1962) lists "duration of contact, frequency of contact, and pressures of contact derived from economic, administrative, cultural, political, military, historical, religious or demographic sources" as some of the external factors that modify speakers' language use (As cited in Fishman, 1964, p. 49).

Besides these factors, Fishman (2006) reiterates the importance of intergenerational language transmission in maintaining minority languages and underscores the fact that the transmission is socio-culturally constructed and factors such as social, economic, and political experiences of the group are at play in language maintenance. He also states that "Education is a very useful and highly irreversible language shift mechanism" (Fishman, 2006, p. 320). While the states' policies towards minority languages and educational policies are critical in language maintenance, broader language ideologies and attitudes of both the dominant language speakers and the minority group itself play an important role in language maintenance. According to Bradley (2013) language attitudes are the key factors in maintaining a minority language and the beliefs and preferences of minorities regarding "how public use of a minority language in the presence of monolingual majority is viewed, and whether the society as a

whole support, tolerate or repress LM for minority languages” (pp: 1-2). The language attitudes of the minority groups towards their own languages are shaped by social and political factors which impact linguistically minoritized groups’ experiences with their mother tongue. The lived experiences of linguistically minoritized groups’ play an important role in determining their attitude toward their language and its intergenerational transmission. Fishman (1991) asserts that the intergenerational transmission is a must in any minority language maintenance, and it can be said that the speakers have shifted to another language if linguistically minoritized groups stop transmitting the language to future generations.

The one nation-one language ideology, that sees a common language as a unifying source for the nation-states has been on the rise since the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries around the world (Hornberger, 2001) including Turkey which has the largest Circassian population in the diaspora. Since language is seen as an important marker of identity and nationality, nation states around the world used language as a tool to maintain homogeneity and considered linguistic diversity and multilingualism as threats to national unity (Oltean & Cimpean, 2019). According to Seloni and Sarfati (2013), language policies based on nation state ideologies can also trigger language shift since the minority languages can be seen as threats to the national unity.

### **Objectives of the Study**

By adopting a critical sociohistorical lens and combining sociohistorical data with linguistic life story interviews, this study explores the impact of language policies and language ideologies during both the Ottoman Empire and Turkey on the maintenance and generational transfer of Circassian language. In doing so, this study first presents some of the initiatives that played a critical role in Circassian language maintenance during the Ottoman Empire followed by the official policies and laws that prohibited the use of Circassian in education and daily life after the declaration of the Republic in 1923. The empirical data includes linguistic life story interviews (Atkinson, 1998) with five Circassian participants from

different age groups to uncover the perceived impact of the de jure language policies on the maintenance and generational transfer of Circassian in Turkey.

Guided by language maintenance and shift (Fishman, 1991) as a theoretical construct, this study sheds light on the sociolinguistic situation of Circassian during both the Ottoman period and the Turkish Republic. The linguistic life story interviews reveal the impact of official language policies implemented by local policy arbiters such as teachers on the maintenance of Circassian as a heritage language and shift to the dominant Turkish language. By presenting the sociohistorical background and empirical data on Circassian maintenance in the biggest diaspora country, this study addresses the sociolinguistic situation of Circassian which is an under researched minority language in Turkey.

The following research questions guided this study:

1) What was the sociolinguistic situation of Circassian in Turkey during the Ottoman Empire and what factors, or initiatives helped the maintenance of Circassian?

2) What were the impacts of the official language ideologies and language policies on the maintenance of Circassian in Turkey after the declaration of the Republic?

3) How did the Circassian participants from different ages perceive the impacts of the language policies on the maintenance and generational transfer of Circassian as a heritage language in Turkey?

#### **4. Methodology**

This qualitative study explored the sociolinguistic situation of Circassian and its maintenance in Turkey by conducting linguistic life story interviews (Atkinson, 1998) with five participants. Methodological inspiration to use life story interviews was drawn from Seloni and Sarfati (2012) where they explored the use and maintenance of Judeo-Spanish in Turkey. Since language maintenance and shift was used as a conceptual framework, in-depth linguistic life-story interviews provided rich data to answer the research questions in this study.

To be able to explore the impacts of language policies and their



implementation on the participants' daily language use and language maintenance, five Circassians from different age groups and geographical regions of Turkey were interviewed. Since Circassians live in many different cities of Turkey, by recruiting participants from different age groups and geographical regions, this study aimed to explore the impact of official language policies on participants' language learning, use, and generational transfer.

The linguistic life story interviews provided rich data regarding the participants' language use and their experiences as Circassian speakers in Turkish educational and social settings. The interviews were conducted online in Turkish for 45-60 minutes with each participant and yielded 8 pages of transcribed data. Once transcribed, the interview transcripts were shared with the participants for member checking purposes (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Following the member checking process, the transcripts were translated into English by the researcher and coded using open coding (Emerson et al., 2011) including descriptive, in-vivo, and concept coding (Miles et al., 2018). Following the open coding process, the themes that were relevant to the research questions were identified and analyzed using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

#### **4.1 Participants**

There were five participants in this study who were selected from different Circassian groups such as Abzeh, Kabardian, and Besleney from different geographical regions in Turkey. To better understand the maintenance efforts of Circassian in Turkey during different time periods and how the official language ideologies of the state were translated into language policies in different regions, participants were selected from different age groups and cities. The names (all names are pseudonyms) and the short biographical information of the participants are shown in the below table. In this study, the objective of the in-depth interviews was not to generalize the linguistic life stories of the participants to the broader Circassian population in Turkey. Instead, the researcher sought to establish categories from the interview data of five participants and analyze the relationships among these

categories (Dworkin, 2012). Throughout this process, the researcher closely examined the 'lived experiences' (Charmaz, 1990) related to the participants' use of the Circassian language and the perceived linguistic oppression during their schooling and daily lives.

Also, as Morse (2001) asserted, in qualitative research the data gathered can originate from personal experiences, or it can encompass what's known as "shadowed data". Shadowed data pertains to the broader knowledge individuals possess about a particular subject and the behaviors of others. Consequently, the data collected is not just about the interview participants' lived experiences but also the collective experiences of those who they are familiar with (Morse, 2015). Although this study does not intend to generalize the interview findings from just five participants, the findings do mirror the wider concern regarding assimilationist language ideologies and policies impacting the Circassian community in Turkey.

Table 1: Participants

Samil	74 years old Circassian (Abzeh) male from Antalya, Turkey
Nejan	63 years old Circassian (Kabardian) female from Kayseri, Turkey
Aslan	56 years old Circassian (Kabardian) male from Kayseri, Turkey
Janberk	46 years old Circassian (Kabardian) male from Kayseri, Turkey
Setenay	36 years old Circassian (Besleney) female from Ankara, Turkey

#### **4.2 Researcher Positionality**

As a researcher, it is imperative to acknowledge my researcher positionality, which informed my approach and perspective throughout the research process. I must emphasize that I am a Circassian, born and raised in Turkey. This background gives me a

unique vantage point for understanding the intricate dynamics of Circassian language maintenance in this specific context. Being a member of the Circassian community in Turkey not only facilitated my access to participants but also provided a deeper and nuanced understanding of the cultural and sociolinguistic factors at play. It is important to acknowledge that my personal connection to the Circassian culture and community may influence my interpretation of the findings, given my shared cultural and linguistic heritage with the participants. As a result, I have been vigilant in maintaining an objective stance during data collection, analysis, and interpretation to mitigate potential biases. This reflexivity has been fundamental in ensuring the study's credibility while navigating the complexities of my own positionality within the research context.

## **5. Findings and Discussion**

In this section, I first present the findings to the first research question which aimed to explore the sociolinguistic situation of Circassian during the Ottoman Era and the initiatives that impacted its maintenance and generational transfer. As part of the study's sociohistorical focus, I will then present the findings to the second research question which focused on the impacts of official language ideologies and policies on Circassian maintenance after the declaration of republic in Turkey.

### **5.1 The sociolinguistic situation of Circassian during the Ottoman Era**

Since their arrival to Turkey in 1864 from their historical homelands, Circassians established several institutions to preserve their ethnic and linguistic identity. The three initiatives that played an important role in Circassian language maintenance and generational transfer during the Ottoman Era were the Ghuaze Newspaper, Circassian Solidarity School, and Circassian Sample School. In the following section, I address each institutions' impact on Circassian language maintenance starting from their arrival to Ottoman Empire in 1864 to the declaration of the Turkish Republic in 1923.

## 5.2 Ghuaze Newspaper

The second constitution (Ikinci Mesrutiyet) that was declared in 1908 created a democratic environment that was visible in both social and cultural life in the Ottoman Empire (Dogan, 2019). Thanks to this democratic atmosphere, many newspapers, journals, and schools owned and operated by minorities were established. Circassians, as one of the minorities in the Ottoman Empire, also benefited from this democratic environment and the Circassian Union and Support Association was established in Istanbul as the first Circassian initiative. The Circassian Union and Support Association holds an important place in history in terms of maintaining the Circassian culture and language. The association was highly motivated to maintain Circassian language and culture and published the first bilingual newspaper (Ghuaze) in 1911. Ghuaze was published in Circassian and Ottoman Turkish, which aimed to inform Circassians in Turkey and reached Syria, Jordan, and Caucasia where there was a concentrated Circassian population (Arslan, 2008).

The Ghuaze newspaper had an important mission in terms of preserving the Circassian language and its authors contributed to Circassian language maintenance efforts with columns on Circassian language and the alphabet in the newspaper. One of the prominent figures who created an Arabic based Circassian alphabet<sup>1</sup> was Tharxet Ahmet Cavit Pasha and the Ghuaze

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<sup>1</sup> Circassians officially employed both Arabic and Latin-based alphabets until the adoption of the Cyrillic-based Circassian alphabet in 1936. The initiative to develop an Arabic-based Circassian alphabet commenced in the early 18th century. Western Circassians officially used the Arabic-based Circassian alphabet from 1918 to 1927, while Eastern Circassians employed it until 1924. However, both in their homeland and within the diaspora, the use of the Arabic-based alphabet was predominantly confined to highly educated intellectuals and not the broader Circassian population. Subsequently, Western Circassians officially transitioned to the Latin-based Circassian alphabet from 1927 to 1938, while Eastern Circassians did so from 1924 to 1936. Since 1936, Eastern Circassians have continued to use the Cyrillic-based alphabet, while Western Circassians adopted it in 1938 and have used it ever since (Aydin, 2015; Zhemukhov & Aktürk, 2015).

newspaper published articles written with this alphabet (Aydin, 2015). As one of its missions, the Ghuaze newspaper dedicated some parts to language maintenance by publishing articles written in Circassian aiming to teach its readers how to read and write in Circassian (Arslan, 2008). While it served a vital purpose in terms of language and cultural maintenance, the Ghuaze newspaper was only in publication for four years. The newspaper was closed down in 1914 as a result of the First World War, since several members of the association and the authors of the newspaper were sent to the war (Arslan, 2008).

### **5.3 Circassian Solidarity School and Circassian Sample School**

The Circassian Solidarity School that served both Circassian and non-Circassian students at preparatory, primary, and junior high levels was the first educational institution established by Circassians in Istanbul in 1910 as an initiative of Circassian Unity and Cooperation Association (Guctekin, 2013). As a boarding school specifically serving male students, Circassian Solidarity School followed the official curriculum by the state while offering Circassian reading and speaking as required courses for Circassian students and as electives for non-Circassians (Guctekin, 2013). The school aimed to maintain the Circassian language by using the Circassian alphabet that was created based on the Latin alphabet for the first time and made it a required course for all Circassian students, which played a major role in maintaining the Circassian language at the time. However, the efforts of this school in maintaining the Circassian language was short-lived since it was closed in 1914, only four years after its opening.

Another initiative that played an important role in the maintenance of Circassian language was the Circassian Sample School as a private primary and secondary school that was founded in 1920 in Istanbul. This school was the second Circassian school opened during the Ottoman era thanks to the democratic rights given to minorities after the declaration of the second constitution. Different than the Circassian Solidarity School that served Circassians mostly from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, Circassian Sample School was a private school that offered most of

its instruction in Circassian while English and French were also offered as foreign language courses (Arslan, 2008). The impact of Circassian Sample School on language maintenance is undeniable since it offered primary and secondary level education by using Circassian as the medium of instruction.

By offering courses on the history and geography of Circassia, Circassian literature and Circassian music (Duman, 2015) this school was not only important for language maintenance but also for raising awareness regarding the construct of “homeland” by teaching the history and geography of Circassia. Even though Circassian Sample School offered a top-notch education for Circassians for its time with its modern curriculum and contributed to Circassian language maintenance, it faced the same fate as the Circassian Solidarity School with its short-lived service. Both of these educational institutions were great examples of grassroots educational movements and thanks to the language activism of the officials of these two institutions, the Circassian language was revitalized for the first time in educational settings. Some of the important figures who spearheaded the grassroots Circassian language movement and established these important but short-lived institutions were Xunce Hayriye Melek, Berzek Makbule, Zaliqie Emine Reşit, Pekhu Seza Polar and Ulagay Faika (Karayel, n.d). It was thanks to these idealist Circassians that the Circassian language, history, and literature were first taught to younger generations, leaving a lasting impact on language maintenance and revitalization efforts among Circassians in Turkey. However, the school that was opened thanks to the democratic atmosphere created in the Ottoman Empire after the second constitution, was closed right after the Treaty of Lausanne was signed in 1923 which marked the beginning of the new Turkish Republic.

#### **5.4 Language Policies After the Republic and the Citizen Speak Turkish Movement**

The new Republic was not as tolerant regarding the linguistic rights of minorities, and some scholars referred to the language policies of the Turkish state which were based on nation-state ideologies “a policy of linguisticide” (Hassanpour et al., 2012). As a

result of the new Republic's nation-state ideology, like the other ethnolinguistic minorities, Circassians were also impacted by the policies regarding the use of Circassian in education and social life. The language policies of the Republican Turkey accelerated the language shift during the single party era (1923-1945) and restricted the languages and cultures of minorities to their homes (Grassi, 2018). While the Turkification policy of the minorities was one of the major traits of the single party era in Turkey, the linguistic oppression and assimilation was on the rise especially during the *Citizen Speak Turkish* movement (Bali, 2000).

The *Citizen Speak Turkish* movement that started in 1928 was a result of the nationalist atmosphere that was created in the entire country based on the nation-state ideology. Some of the minority languages spoken in Turkey at the time were Arabic, Farsi, Syriac, Kurdish, Albanian, Circassian, Greek, Armenian and Judeo-Spanish (Galanti, 2000). The movement emerged because of the state's several Turkification policies that aimed to ensure "linguistic homogeneity" by erasing any public visibility and audibility of minority languages (Aslan, 2007, p. 251). The policy gained momentum with the help of the Turkish language reform, and other legal and political campaigns that promoted a "Turkish-only policy" in the entire society (Seloni & Sarfati, 2013). Since the *Citizen Speak Turkish* policy idealized a language-people-country link and imposed Turkish on all ethnolinguistic minorities by prohibiting linguistic diversity in society, it falls under the monoglot ideology (Blommaert, 2006). Some similar language movements that are based on monoglot ideologies were reported in different parts of the world such as *Swedes speak Swedish, People who are Chinese speak Chinese* (Han & Johnson 2020: 3).

While the Ottoman Empire used religion as the uniting power for its Muslim citizens (Yagmur, 2001), the new republic used nation-state ideology and linguistic Unitarianism as the new uniting force (Virtanen, 2003). The linguistic Unitarianism fueled by the assimilationist language ideologies of the state stigmatized minorities who spoke any language except Turkish and the representation of languages other than Turkish in education and public life was seen as a threat to national unity (Seloni & Sarfati,

2013). Even today the prevailing language ideology is “one nation, one language” through linguistic Unitarianism in Turkey (Yagmur, 2001, p. 5). The official language ideology of the state is also stated in the Turkish Constitution (Chapter 3, Section 2, Article-42) as “No language other than Turkish shall be taught as a mother tongue to Turkish citizens at any institutions of training or education” (as cited in Yagmur, 2001, p. 11).

Even though the Citizen Speak Turkish policy targeted mostly non-Muslim citizens of Turkey who obtained a minority status at the Lausanne Treaty, Muslim minorities including Circassians did not have any special protection under the law (Virtanen, 2003). As a result, Circassians had their share of the linguistic oppression and assimilation during the first two decades of the new Republic and in the following years. The elites of the new Republic required both Muslim and non-Muslim citizens to faithfully adapt to the Turkish language and culture. However, this requirement took an oppressive stance toward minorities throughout the years (Bali, 2000). During the early years of the Republic, Circassians and other non-Turks were not allowed to openly express their ethnic identities (Yelbasi, 2017). During this period both ethnolinguistic minorities had faced oppression from the state because of using their native language in educational settings and in public.

While the *Citizen Speak Turkish* movement that shared the assimilationist language ideologies of the state enforced the linguistic assimilation of minorities in cities, the teachers and other government officials implemented the official language policies of the state in rural areas including villages and small towns in Turkey. The language policies that limited the rights of ethnolinguistic minorities during the very first years of the new Republic continued over the years and have reached its peak after the 1980 military coup (Liddicoat, 2018). After the coup, the linguistic human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas & Philipson, 2012) of minorities were further violated since the 1982 constitution banned the public use of all minority languages that were not the official language of a state that Turkey recognized (Haig, 2013 cited in Liddicoat, 2018).



To explore the impact of official language policies, all participants were asked to reflect on their language use during their schooling and daily life as a member of an ethnolinguistic minority group in Turkey. In these interviews, the researcher aimed to explore participants' thoughts on linguistic assimilation, Circassian language maintenance during different time periods in Turkey, and its generational transfer. Specifically, the participants were asked to reflect on their mother tongue use during schooling, their perspectives on the policies including the Citizen Speak Turkish, and the linguistic human rights in Turkey.

### **5.5 The Perceived Oppression of Circassian in Schools**

All participants except Setenay, went to school in a Circassian village and their experiences of using Circassian were similar even though they lived in different cities in Turkey and went to school at different times. When asked about the use of Circassian during his schooling, Samil addressed the linguistic oppression that he faced at school by stating:

Speaking Circassian at the school was banned, students would get punished for speaking Circassian. Teachers would encourage us to speak Turkish everywhere, there was even a committee called the discipline committee and this committee's job was to report students who spoke Circassian outside of school to the teacher. Once the teacher had the names who spoke Circassian in the village, he would condemn these students and physically punish them. (Samil, 74 years old, Antalya)

As Samil stated, Circassian was not only banned in schools but also outside of the school during students' free time. The discipline committee that the teachers formed in his school functioned as a very strong linguistic oppression tool that psychologically pressured students to not use their mother tongues. Considering the fact that the students whom the teachers recruited for the discipline committee were in elementary school aged between 7-12, the significant psychological impact that this committee had on students cannot be denied. By recruiting informants and physically punishing students for speaking Circassian, teachers as

implementers of the official language policy created a feeling of illegality among young students for speaking their native language not only in school but in their daily lives. Samil who himself served on this discipline committee also addressed the equation of speaking Circassian to not being smart and a source of disappointment for the teacher by stating:

Sometimes when the discipline committee reported a student speaking Circassian outside of the school, the teacher would say things like [oh, even you? You are such a good student, you are very smart, I wouldn't expect you to speak Circassian, I am disappointed etc.] I myself served on this committee as an informant to report Circassian speakers to the teachers (Samil, 74 years old, Antalya).

Samil's experiences as a Circassian student in the early 1950s represent the linguistic oppression that he faced in both educational settings and in his daily life in a Circassian village. Similar to Samil, Aslan, who went to elementary school in a Circassian village during the 1970s revealed his experiences of linguistic oppression by stating:

During elementary school, I would feel alienated from my own ethnic identity whenever I went to school. Speaking Circassian was completely banned at the school. Even outside of the school students were not allowed to speak Circassian or play the Circassian games like K'en<sup>2</sup>. If the teacher saw us playing K'en or speaking Circassian outside of the school time we would get physically punished. Playing K'en was a way for us to feel our Circassian identity, but the Turkish teacher that we had wanted to ban K'en even in our free time after school (Aslan, 56 years old, Kayseri).

In terms of linguistic oppression both Samil and Aslan shared similar experiences in their schooling even though they went to

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<sup>2</sup> K'en is a traditional Circassian game played with the rectangular anklebones of small animals such as rams, sheep and goats. The game was popular in Circassian villages before marbles.

school in different cities at different times. In Aslan's case not only speaking Circassian, but also playing games that were popular among Circassians were banned which created a sense of alienation from his own identity. Aslan also expressed the long-lasting psychological effects of the linguistic oppression that he experienced at early ages by stating:

Even now, after all these years, when I enter the school or pass through the area, I still feel the same anxiety that I felt fifty years ago. Because we would become different people at school. We would feel alienated from our own identity (Aslan, 56 years old, Kayseri).

Echoing what Samil and Aslan stated regarding the linguistic oppression they experienced, Janberk, who went to primary school in a small Circassian village in Kayseri in the early 1980s maintained:

Speaking Circassian was completely banned at the school. First, they would warn us, then teachers would physically beat students for speaking Circassian. It was banned at the school even during the recess time. Once school was over, we would feel such a relief that me and my friends would go to our homes singing in Circassian (Janberk, 46 years old, Kayseri).

As Janberk revealed, school was a place where he felt pressured not to speak his mother tongue since that meant getting physically punished by the teacher. Skutnabb-Kangas (2009, p. 8) states that "Schools mirror societies. Systematic inequality in societies reflects and is reflected and reproduced in schools". In the case of Circassians, the schools functioned as places of forced linguistic assimilation that caused self-policing (Lozada-Olivia, 2015) and psychological pressure alienating students from their identities. Schools were the places where official language ideologies of the state were forcefully implemented by teachers on school aged Circassians through oppressive language policies. Aslan's below interview excerpt shows the perceived impact of

forced linguistic and cultural assimilation manifested through schools in Circassian villages:

The Circassian language and identity created a feeling of illegality in us due to all the pressure and oppression. We always felt like we were involved in an illegal act when we spoke our language or expressed our Circassian identity in any way (Aslan, 56 years old, Kayseri).

These oppressive language policies were invariably based on linguistic ideologies that often resulted from larger sociopolitical ideologies (Blommaert, 2006) and teachers were the local arbiters of these assimilationist language policies. Surprisingly, the linguistic oppression that the participants in this study perceived was not always from Turkish teachers, but Circassian teachers as well. During the interviews all five participants stated that ethnically Circassian teachers were stricter in implementing the assimilationist language ideologies of the state with their oppressive language policies in schools. In his interview Samil stated: "The teachers were all Turkish at my time, but later when my brother was in school, they sent a Circassian teacher to the village, but that teacher was more Turkist than any Turkish teachers" (Samil, 74 years old, Antalya). Similarly, Aslan stated:

The oppressive policies toward Circassians during that time made Circassians very merciless toward themselves. Speaking Circassian was banned at school and this rule was more fiercely applied by the Circassian teachers than the Turkish ones. Our vice principal was also Circassian, and I have never heard him speak Circassian and he was very strict with us when he heard us speak Circassian (Aslan, 56 years old, Kayseri).

Echoing both Samil and Aslan's remarks regarding Circassian teachers' prohibitive attitude toward their mother tongue in schools, Nejan asserted:

We only had one teacher in my school who was Circassian himself from a nearby village and he would not allow any of us to speak Circassian at school. We could not speak in our native

language when the teacher was around even though he was Circassian (Nejan, 63 years old, Kayseri).

Another participant, Setenay, who did not study in a Circassian village herself, shared the linguistic oppression that her parents experienced in their Circassian village by stating:

They [her parents] of course experienced linguistic oppression in their schools and the teacher who prohibited their Circassian use at school was Circassian himself. He was from the same village and taught for many years and he was known to be a very strict teacher when it comes to Circassian use at the school (Setenay, 36 years old, Ankara).

In sum, as the participants stated in this study, the intolerant and oppressive language policies implemented by schoolteachers created a rather appalling educational environment where the students felt alienated from their identity, felt anxious and constantly stressed. The participants revealed that the language ideologies of the state translated into oppressive language policies in the hands of both Turkish and Circassian teachers. The discipline committees that teachers created along with physical punishments to completely ban the use of Circassian not only in school settings but also in daily life is an example of forced assimilation in education. According to Skutnab-Kangas (2009, p. 2) “forced assimilation in education kills languages” and the “assimilationist subtractive education is genocidal” (Skutnab-Kangas 2006, p. 277). As one of the participants stated Circassian children have experienced the “feeling of illegality” at a very young age just because of using their mother tongue. Skutnab-Kangas (2006, p. 275) maintains that “Educational linguistic human rights, especially the right to mother-tongue-medium education, are among the most important rights for any minority. Without them, a minority whose children attend school usually cannot reproduce itself as a minority. It cannot integrate but is forced to assimilate” which was the case for the participants in this study.

### **5.6 The Citizen Speak Turkish Policy and Language Use in Public Settings**

As the above interview excerpts revealed, the forced linguistic assimilation played a major role on the sociolinguistic situation of Circassian in Turkey throughout the years. However, Circassians not only faced forced linguistic assimilation in educational settings but also in their daily lives due to the oppressive policies of the state based on one nation, one state, and one language ideology. The assimilationist ideologies strictly adopted by the state toward Circassian also affected its use in written materials such as newspapers. While the first theme of this study presented evidence of language prohibition in school settings, participants were also asked about their experiences of using Circassian in public settings during different time periods in Turkey. To address the linguistic oppression in printing and publications in a language other than Turkish, Samil, one of the participants who was engaged in language and cultural activism through Circassian associations during 1970s and 1980s stated:

There was always oppression when it comes to linguistic rights. If you persisted to write in Circassian and speak Circassian you would get in trouble and face oppression by the government. In the 1970s we used to publish a monthly magazine, but due to the political atmosphere, we were always overcautious and did not want to get in any trouble with the government by using even a couple of Circassian words. We even had to delete the lyrics of the Circassian songs that we published in the magazine since they were written in Circassian, and we only published the notes of the songs (Samil, 74 years old, Antalya).

This study also aimed to explore the direct and indirect impacts of the *Citizen Speak Turkish* policy on the participants' language use as minoritized language speakers in Turkey. The *Citizen Speak Turkish* movement was started by nationalist law students in Turkey with the support of the state in 1928 (Bali, 2000) that aimed to prohibit the use of any minority languages in public settings. This movement was effective in Turkey during the 1930's and substantially oppressed the minorities all around Turkey to not use

their mother tongues in public settings. This nationalist campaign violating the language rights of minorities ended in Turkey with the transition to a multi-party system in 1945 (Bali, 2000), however, it had long lasting impacts on the generational transfer and maintenance of minority languages in Turkey. While none of the participants in this study directly experienced the impacts of the *Citizen Speak Turkish* policy due to their ages, they revealed its impact on their parents and elders during the interviews. When asked about the impact of the Citizen Speak Turkish policy on Circassian language maintenance, Samil stated:

Our elders would tell us that the government would put signs on the streets saying, "Citizen speak Turkish". These things happened more in cities like Düzce and Balıkesir where Circassian population was more concentrated. We didn't have these in my village since it's just one village and all the surrounding villages were Turkish villages. We didn't see any signs, but there would be indirect pressure on the people (Samil, 74 years old, Antalya).

To address the perceived impact of the Citizen Speak movement on her Circassian maintenance, Setenay revealed:

The Citizen Turkish movement had a domino effect even on my Circassian learning. As a Circassian born to both Circassian parents, I was not able to learn my native language and I think one of the biggest reasons for this was the pressure that the Citizen Speak Turkish movement created on my parents. They never had the motivation or desire to teach us the language, on the contrary they did not want us to speak Circassian so that we would not attract any attention in public that could harm us. So, they consciously prevented us from learning Circassian (Setenay, 36 years old, Ankara).

Even after the 2002 EU talks that supposedly gave some rights to minorities regarding language rights, the public perception toward minority languages was still highly stigmatized. To address the public perception towards any non-Turkish language, Aslan asserted:

When I was working, I had a Circassian colleague at my job. I remember talking to him in Circassian while he was passing by at work and the lady who worked with me overheard us and said, “By speaking Circassian you are being separatist” Separatism meant anything except Turkish at that time [2010] (Aslan, 56 years old, Kayseri).

As the participants revealed in their interviews, even though the *Citizen Speak Turkish* policy did not have immediate effects on Circassians in certain regions of Turkey, the direct or indirect psychological pressure that it created transferred to future generations, as Setenay mentioned. The lasting effects of the *Citizen Speak Turkish* policy violating the language rights of minorities have continued for many years and impacted both Setenay’s parents’ attitude toward Circassian and her heritage language maintenance. The use of Circassian in public was associated with a potential harm to Setenay by her parents which prevented her learning Circassian. According to Fishman (2006, p. 5) “parents who are insecure about their own ethnic identity are likely to associate that language more with disadvantages than with advantages and, therefore, identify with it less and often discontinue using it more”. In the case of Circassians, the language policies in Turkey that stemmed from the nation-state ideology had long lasting impacts and have fueled Circassians feeling of insecurity about their identity and language.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored the impacts of language ideologies and policies on an underrepresented minority language in Turkey through linguistic life stories of five participants from different age groups and regions of Turkey. To provide a sociohistorical background of Circassian, firstly, the sociolinguistic situation of Circassian during Ottoman Empire and the initiatives that played important roles on language maintenance were presented. Then, the impact of the language policies, primarily in educational settings that prevailed for many years after the declaration of the Republic were addressed. In doing so, linguistic life story interviews were shared to present participants’ perceptions



regarding the linguistic oppression that they experienced in Turkey. The interview data revealed the negative impacts of assimilationist language ideologies on the maintenance of Circassian in Turkey. While the participants' perceived linguistic oppression alienated them from their ethnic identity in educational contexts, the *Citizen Speak Turkish* policy had long lasting psychological impacts which negatively impacted the generational transfer of Circassian as a heritage language.

The governments' official support is critical in many contexts in maintaining heritage languages and the language ideologies of the states determine the fate of minority languages in many countries. In countries such as Turkey where the nation state ideology has prevailed for so long, the linguistic rights of minority groups including Circassians have been historically neglected. However, in recent years along with other minority languages in Turkey, Circassian is offered as an elective course to middle school students in schools with more concentrated Circassian population. While these efforts by the Turkish Educational Ministry are valuable in terms of Circassian maintenance and generational transfer, they are not sufficient. In today's world, technology is in every aspect of our lives, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited almost all education to online platforms. During the lockdowns due to the pandemic, many Circassian associations in Turkey offered online language courses which enabled people from across the world to learn their heritage language at the comfort of their homes. While language ideologies and policies negatively impacted many minority languages including Circassian for so long in Turkey, technology is on Circassians' side in the post-COVID era, and it has a great potential to help maintain the language. However, along with government initiatives, as the participants revealed in this study, there is a need for awareness raising activities for families who are proficient speakers of Circassian but are unwilling to pass the language to their children.

First, the reservations that parents have regarding the teaching of Circassian need to be addressed with policies developed by organizations that value the maintenance of the language. Second, parents who speak the language should be encouraged to have a

family language policy (FLP) (King, et al., 2008) at home to maintain Circassian. FLP plays a critical role in the maintenance of minority languages especially in contexts where the dominant language has social, academic, and financial benefits over minority languages. While FLP is not sufficient by itself to maintain a minority language or improve children's bilingual development, parents' lack of attention to language use in the home fuels the language shift to the dominant language (King, et. al., 2008). Third, there should always be active language advocacy by Circassian NGOs at a political level to get more support from the Turkish government in maintaining the language. As the participants in this study stated, without the support of government agencies, individual efforts to maintain the language will not be sufficient. Finally, the fate of Circassian in Turkey will be determined by its own speakers in the near future. As one of the participants stated in this study, if Circassians accomplish establishing the "sense of belonging to their ethnic identity" for younger generations, there is always hope for its maintenance. However, if purposeful and immediate action is not taken by key stakeholders including parents, government officials, and Circassian NGOs in Turkey, the future looks grim for the maintenance of Circassian.

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