

The Evolution of Ottoman Turkish: A Linguistic and Political History

Introduction: Defining *Lisân-ı Osmânî* (The Ottoman Tongue)

The language that served as the administrative and literary vehicle of the Ottoman Empire for over six centuries represents one of the most fascinating case studies in linguistic history. Known in modern scholarship as Ottoman Turkish (*Osmanlı Türkçesi* or *Osmanlıca*), this term is an academic convention developed retrospectively to delineate the language of a specific historical period.¹ During the empire's long history, its speakers and writers referred to their language simply as

Türkçe (Turkish) or, particularly from the 19th century onwards as a more formal designation emerged, *Lisân-ı Osmânî* (The Ottoman Language).¹ This distinction between historical self-identification and modern academic classification is fundamental to understanding the language's complex identity, which was inextricably linked to the political and cultural identity of the state it served. The evolution of this language is not merely a story of phonetic shifts and lexical changes; it is the story of an empire's rise, its cultural zenith, and its radical transformation into a modern nation-state.

Linguistically, Ottoman Turkish is a member of the Turkic language family, specifically belonging to the Western Oghuz branch.⁴ It is the direct historical continuation of the Oghuz dialects that were carried into Anatolia and the Balkans by the Seljuk Turks starting in the late 11th century.¹ Its immediate ancestor is the language now known as Old Anatolian Turkish (*Eski Anadolu Türkçesi*), which formed the linguistic bedrock upon which the imperial language was built.⁷ The core grammatical engine of Ottoman Turkish—its agglutinative nature, vowel harmony, and Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) sentence structure—remained fundamentally Turkic throughout its history.⁹

However, the defining characteristic of Ottoman Turkish, particularly in its standardized written form, was its unique hybridity. It was a linguistic amalgam, a synthesis that reflected the cultural and religious orientation of the Ottoman elite.¹¹ Upon its Turkic grammatical chassis was constructed an elaborate and often overwhelming superstructure of vocabulary and, to a lesser but significant extent, grammatical constructions borrowed from two of the great literary languages of the Islamic world: Arabic and Persian.² Arabic, as the language of the Quran, Islamic jurisprudence, and science, provided an immense lexicon for religious, legal, and scholarly discourse.¹¹ Persian, the language of high art, courtly literature, and state

administration in the eastern Islamic world, furnished the models for Ottoman poetry and a vast vocabulary of refinement and governance.¹¹ The extent of this borrowing was so profound that in some highly ornate literary or administrative texts, the proportion of Arabic and Persian loanwords could reach as high as 88%, rendering the language largely unintelligible to the uninitiated.¹³

This report will trace the diachronic evolution of Ottoman Turkish through its distinct historical stages, analyzing its linguistic structure, the sociopolitical forces that shaped it, and the radical reforms that led to its official demise in 1928. It will examine the language's formation from its Anatolian roots, its flourishing as a complex imperial idiom, the internal and external pressures that drove its transformation, and its eventual replacement by Modern Turkish. The following table provides a chronological framework that will guide this analysis, outlining the standard periodization used by Turcologists to map the language's development from its precursor to its final form.⁴

Table 1: Chronological Stages of Turkish in Anatolia

Period	Dates	Key Characteristics
Old Anatolian Turkish (<i>Eski Anadolu Türkçesi</i>)	c. 11th–15th centuries ⁷	The formative stage of Turkish in Anatolia, brought by the Seljuks. It is the direct precursor to Ottoman Turkish. Compared to later periods, it had less Perso-Arabic influence and its Perso-Arabic script more frequently used diacritics (<i>ḥarakāt</i>) to mark short vowels, making it more phonetically explicit. ⁸
Old Ottoman Turkish (<i>Eski Osmanlı Türkçesi</i>)	c. 15th–16th centuries ²	Marks the transition from Old Anatolian Turkish. This period saw the increasing formalization of the language and a growing influence from Persian literary models as the Ottoman state consolidated its power and developed its imperial culture. ⁴
Middle (Classical) Ottoman Turkish (<i>Orta Osmanlı Türkçesi</i> / <i>Klasik Osmanlıca</i>)	c. 16th–18th centuries ⁴	The "golden age" of Ottoman literature and administration. This stage represents the apex of lexical and grammatical borrowing from Arabic and Persian. It is the language of

		high courtly (<i>Divan</i>) poetry and ornate prose (<i>inşa</i>), characterized by its complexity and rhetorical sophistication. ⁴
New Ottoman Turkish (<i>Yeni Osmanlı Türkçesi</i>)	c. 19th century–1928 ²	Shaped by the Westernization and modernization efforts of the Tanzimat era. This period is marked by the emergence of new genres like journalism and the novel, which required a simpler prose style. It saw a significant influx of loanwords from French and witnessed the first serious calls for language simplification and script reform. ²

Part I: The Formation and Flourishing of an Imperial Language (c. 1300–1800)

The story of Ottoman Turkish begins not with the Ottomans themselves, but with the arrival of their linguistic ancestors in Anatolia. The language that would eventually become the voice of a vast empire was forged in the crucible of Seljuk Anatolia, where a Turkic dialect encountered and absorbed the prestige languages of an established Islamic civilization. Over centuries, this Anatolian Turkish evolved from a regional vernacular into a highly sophisticated and stratified imperial language, reaching its classical form between the 16th and 18th centuries. This period was defined by the profound influence of Arabic and Persian, which created a unique linguistic system that served the political, cultural, and social needs of the Ottoman elite, while simultaneously creating a deep chasm between the language of the court and the language of the common people.

Section 1.1: The Anatolian Crucible: From Oghuz to Early Ottoman (11th–15th c.)

The linguistic foundations of Ottoman Turkish were laid long before the rise of the Ottoman dynasty. The process began in the 11th century with the large-scale migration of Oghuz Turkic tribes, under the leadership of the Seljuks, from their Central Asian heartlands in Transoxania into Anatolia.¹ These groups brought with them not only their Western Turkic dialects but also established literary traditions and models that had already been developing in cultural centers

like Khwarezm.⁸ It is a common misconception that the early Turks in Anatolia spoke a "primitive" language that was only later refined through contact with Persian culture. In reality, they arrived with a developed written language that would serve as the basis for all subsequent forms of Turkish in the region.⁸

The direct ancestor of Ottoman Turkish is known as Old Anatolian Turkish (*Eski Anadolu Türkçesi*), a distinct literary and spoken form used from the 11th to the 15th centuries.⁷ This language was written in a version of the Perso-Arabic script, but with a notable feature that distinguished it from later Ottoman practice: the more frequent use of diacritical marks (*ḥarakāt*) to indicate short vowels.⁸ This made the script of Old Anatolian Turkish more phonetically transparent than the highly ambiguous script of the classical Ottoman period. While it absorbed foreign words, the level of Perso-Arabic influence was considerably less than what would characterize the language in its imperial heyday.⁷

For much of the Seljuk and early Beylik period, Persian held a dominant position as the language of administration and high culture in Anatolia.⁸ This cultural prestige prompted a significant political and linguistic reaction in the late 13th century. In 1277, Mehmet I, the ruler of the Karamanid Beylik (a rival to the nascent Ottoman state), issued a famous edict (*firman*) in an attempt to curb the supremacy of Persian. The decree proclaimed: "From now on nobody in the palace, in the divan, council, and at the hearings should speak any language other than Turkish".⁸ While this edict did not trigger a widespread, immediate language reform across Anatolia, it stands as a landmark event. It represents one of the earliest and most explicit political assertions of the Turkish language's status as a legitimate vehicle for statecraft and official discourse, setting a precedent that the Ottomans would later build upon.⁸

The transition from Old Anatolian Turkish to what is classified as Old Ottoman Turkish (*Eski Osmanlı Türkçesi*) occurred around the 15th century.² This linguistic shift coincided directly with the political ascendancy of the Ottoman state, from a small principality (*beylik*) to a major regional empire. As the Ottoman court and bureaucracy grew in size and sophistication, so too did the need for a standardized administrative and literary language. This early Ottoman period saw the increasing formalization of the language, with a more pronounced adoption of Persian literary conventions and vocabulary, laying the groundwork for the highly stylized language of the classical era.⁴

Section 1.2: The Classical Age: The Apex of Perso-Arabic Influence (16th–18th c.)

The period from the 16th to the 18th century marks the classical age of Ottoman Turkish, a time when the language reached its peak of complexity and literary sophistication. This development was driven by the cultural orientation of the Ottoman elite, who saw their empire as the inheritor of both the Islamic caliphates and the great Persianate empires. The language they crafted was a direct reflection of this imperial self-image, a synthesis of what they

termed the *Alsina-i Thalātha*, or "The Three Languages".¹⁴ This was not a simple blend but a structured linguistic hierarchy where each language had a defined role. Arabic, as the sacred language of the Quran and the medium of Islamic law (*Sharia*) and scholarship, provided the vocabulary for theology, philosophy, jurisprudence, and the sciences. Its influence was overwhelmingly lexical, lending an air of religious and intellectual authority.¹¹ Persian, with its rich poetic tradition and long history as a language of statecraft, served as the model for high literature, courtly arts, and historiography. It contributed not only a vast lexicon of refinement but also key grammatical features that shaped the very structure of literary Ottoman prose and poetry.¹¹ Finally, Turkish itself remained the indispensable foundation, the grammatical bedrock upon which these foreign elements were layered. It provided the core syntax, the agglutinative morphology, and the fundamental vocabulary of daily life, and it was the language of the military and the primary administrative apparatus.¹⁴

This linguistic synthesis gave rise to the high-register literary and administrative language known as *Fasih Türkçe* (Eloquent Turkish) or, in modern terms, Classical Ottoman Turkish (*Klasik Osmanlıca*).¹⁵ This was a consciously constructed and highly ornate language, designed to be a marker of education, refinement, and social status. Its primary characteristics were an extensive use of Arabic and Persian vocabulary—so much so that native Turkish words could be a minority in a given text—and the employment of complex rhetorical devices, parallel phrasing, and rhymed prose, a style known as *inşa*.¹¹ The aim was to create a grand, elevated tone appropriate for imperial pronouncements, court poetry, and official historiography, deliberately distancing the language of the elite from the vernacular of the masses.¹¹ By around 1600, this formal, written Ottoman had fully evolved into a prestige language that was seen as the natural and appropriate reflection of the empire's status as the leading power in the Islamic world.¹¹

Perhaps the most significant grammatical borrowing that defined Classical Ottoman was the Persian *izafet* construction (known in Persian as *ezāfe*). This feature, adopted directly from Persian grammar, was a linking particle—typically an unstressed vowel *-i* or *-ı*—that connected a noun to a following adjective or possessor.²⁶ This structure is the reverse of native Turkic syntax, which places the modifier before the noun (e.g., Adjective Noun).¹¹ The *izafet* created a Noun-linker-Adjective or Noun-linker-Possessor structure. A quintessential example is the formal name of the empire itself: *Devlet-i Âliye-i Osmaniyye* ("The Sublime Ottoman State," literally "State-of Sublime-of Ottoman"), which employs a chain of *izafet* linkers.²⁷ Another clear example is the name of the language, *Lisân-ı Osmânî* ("Language-of Ottoman"), which contrasts sharply with the native Turkish possessive construction, *Osmanlı dili* ("Ottoman language-its").²⁶ The adoption of the *izafet* was not merely a stylistic choice; it was a powerful grammatical tool that facilitated the seamless integration of entire Perso-Arabic phrases into Turkish sentences. However, its mastery required a formal education in Persian grammar, making it a key feature that rendered *Fasih Türkçe* inaccessible to those who spoke only Turkish.¹¹

This linguistic reality created a state of profound sociolinguistic diglossia across the empire, a

clear division between the language of the ruling class and that of the general population. On one end of the spectrum was *Fasih Türkçe*, the high-status, ornate, and heavily foreignized language of the court, the bureaucracy, and elite literature. It was a written standard that was largely unintelligible to the vast majority of the empire's subjects.² On the other end was *Kaba Türkçe* (literally "Rough" or "Vulgar" Turkish), the vernacular spoken by rural Anatolian and Balkan populations and the less-educated urban classes.² This dialect was the direct, organic continuation of Old Anatolian Turkish, containing far fewer loanwords and preserving the native Turkic vocabulary and syntax. It is this "raw" Turkish that forms the historical basis of the modern standard language of Turkey.² Occupying the space between these two poles was

Orta Türkçe (Middle Turkish), a more practical, intermediate register. Used by the educated urban classes for commerce, trade, and less formal written communication, it blended the clarity of the vernacular with some of the prestigious vocabulary of the high style, serving as a functional bridge between the two extremes.¹⁵ This stratified linguistic landscape, with its clear social and functional divisions, would define the Ottoman world for centuries.

Part II: The Era of Transformation and Demise (c. 1800–1928)

The 19th century marked a critical turning point in the evolution of Ottoman Turkish. The classical synthesis, which had remained stable for centuries, began to fracture under the immense pressure of modernity and the empire's changing relationship with Europe. The era of Westernizing reforms known as the *Tanzimat* initiated a linguistic transformation, introducing new concepts, new literary genres, and a new wave of loanwords from French. This period gave rise to "New Ottoman Turkish," a language caught between the ornate traditions of the past and the demands of a new, more direct mode of communication. The very tools of the language—its script, vocabulary, and style—became subjects of intense debate, as reformers increasingly saw the classical idiom as an obstacle to progress. This section will explore the linguistic shifts of the 19th century and analyze the structural features of the language on the eve of its revolutionary overhaul.

Section 2.1: The Winds of Change: Westernization and "New Ottoman Turkish"

The 19th-century period of administrative and military reforms, known as the *Tanzimat* (1839–1876), had profound and lasting consequences for the Ottoman language. As the empire sought to modernize its institutions to contend with the growing power of Europe, it was forced to import not only Western technology and legal frameworks but also the language needed to describe them.² This process necessitated a shift away from the highly

metaphorical and allusive prose of the classical era towards a more direct, precise, and functional style of writing. It was during this period of redefinition that the term *Lisân-ı Osmânî* gained currency as the official name for the language of the state, reflecting a new self-consciousness about the empire's linguistic identity in a changing world.²

Central to this transformation was the empire's relationship with France. Though a strategic alliance had existed since the 16th century, the 19th century saw an explosion of French cultural influence.¹⁸ French became the *lingua franca* of diplomacy, commerce, and modern education for the Ottoman elite, replacing Italian and gradually eclipsing the traditional prestige of Persian as the primary language of secular refinement.¹⁹ This led to a massive influx of French loanwords into Ottoman Turkish, particularly in fields central to the modernization project: law, politics, military affairs, science, and culture.¹⁹ Words such as *büro* (from *bureau*), *gazete* (from *gazette*), *telgraf* (from *télégraphe*), and *hastane* (a Turkish adaptation of *hôpital*) became commonplace.³³ It is estimated that approximately 6,000 French words entered the Turkish lexicon between 1800 and 1950, fundamentally altering its vocabulary.¹⁹ While French was the dominant influence, centuries of maritime and commercial contact in the Mediterranean also left a mark, with loanwords from Italian (especially in nautical, trade, and musical terminology) and Greek (in nautical, botanical, and everyday terms) enriching the language's diverse vocabulary.³⁴

The linguistic needs of the Tanzimat era also gave rise to new literary and communicative genres that were incompatible with the ornate style of classical Ottoman prose (*inşa*). The emergence of the newspaper and the novel, both imported from the West, demanded a language that could be understood by a wider, emerging reading public.² This led to the development of what linguists call

Yeni Osmanlı Türkçesi (New Ottoman Turkish). Pioneered by reformers and writers such as İbrahim Şinasi, Namık Kemal, and Ahmed Vefik Paşa, this new prose style was simpler, more direct, and closer to the syntax of spoken Turkish, even as it continued to use a significant amount of Perso-Arabic vocabulary.²

This period of change also fueled a growing critique of the traditional form of the language. Reformist intellectuals increasingly condemned Classical Ottoman Turkish as an "unnecessarily complex and artificial hybrid" that served as a barrier to mass education and national progress.¹¹ The Perso-Arabic script, in particular, came under fire for being phonetically ill-suited to the sounds of the Turkish language, making literacy difficult to achieve.³⁸ These early calls for simplification and script reform, which began in the mid-19th century, set the stage for the radical linguistic revolution that would follow the empire's collapse.¹¹

Section 2.2: The Linguistic Features of a Language in Flux

On the eve of its replacement, Ottoman Turkish was a language of immense complexity, characterized by a writing system that was both an artistic tradition and a significant

impediment to learning. Its phonology and morphology reflected centuries of layered influences, creating a system that was at once highly structured and fraught with irregularities.

The Ottoman Script (*Elifbâ*): An Orthographic Deep Dive

The writing system of Ottoman Turkish, known as *elifbâ*, was a variant of the Perso-Arabic script that had been used to write Turkish for nearly a millennium.¹¹ It was an abjad, written from right to left, in which the form of each letter changed depending on its position within a word (initial, medial, final, or isolated).⁴⁰ While it was the vehicle for a rich calligraphic tradition, with distinct styles like

Nesih for print, *Nasta'liq* for poetry, and the highly stylized *Divani* for imperial decrees, it was fundamentally ill-suited to the phonology of the Turkish language.¹²

The script's most significant weakness was its profound ambiguity in representing vowels. Turkish has a rich system of eight vowels (*a, e, ı, î, o, ö, u, ü*), while the Arabic script was designed for a language with only three short vowels and their long counterparts.¹ The Ottoman script used the consonant letters

elif (ا), *vav* (و), and *ye* (ي) to represent vowels, but did so inconsistently and often omitted short vowels entirely. This created massive ambiguity for the reader, who had to rely on context and prior knowledge of the word to decipher its pronunciation. For instance, the consonantal skeleton <کورک> (*k-w-r-k*) could be read as *gevrek* ("biscuit"), *kürk* ("fur"), *kürek* ("shovel"), or *körük* ("bellows"), among other possibilities.³⁸

Furthermore, the script was burdened with consonantal redundancy from a Turkic perspective. It retained multiple letters from Arabic that were pronounced identically in Turkish but were necessary to preserve the original spelling of Arabic loanwords. For example, the /s/ sound could be represented by three different letters (<ث> *se*, <س> *sin*, and <ص> *sad*), and the /z/ sound by four (<ذ> *zel*, <ز> *ze*, <ض> *dad*, and <ظ> *zi*).³⁹ This system forced students to memorize the "correct" historical spelling of thousands of loanwords, adding another layer of difficulty to achieving literacy.⁴⁰

Table 2: The Ottoman Turkish Alphabet (*Elifbâ*) and its Ambiguity

Ottoman Letter	Name	Modern Turkish Equivalents	IPA Phonemes
ا	<i>elif</i>	a, e	/a/, /e/, /æ/
ب	<i>be</i>	b	/b/
پ	<i>pe</i>	p	/p/
ت	<i>te</i>	t	/t/
ث	<i>se</i>	s	/s/
ج	<i>cim</i>	c	/d͡ʒ/
چ	<i>çim</i>	ç	/t͡ʃ/
ح	<i>ha</i>	h	/h/
خ	<i>hı</i>	h	/x/

د	<i>dal</i>	d	/d/
ذ	<i>zel</i>	z	/z/
ر	<i>re</i>	r	/r/
ز	<i>ze</i>	z	/z/
ژ	<i>je</i>	j	/ʒ/
س	<i>sin</i>	s	/s/
ش	<i>şin</i>	ş	/ʃ/
ص	<i>sad</i>	s	/s/
ض	<i>dad</i>	d, z	/z/, (/d/)
ط	<i>tı</i>	t	/t/
ظ	<i>zı</i>	z	/z/
ع	<i>ayn</i>	ʾ, h, a, i, u	/ʔ/, (vowel carrier)
غ	<i>gayn</i>	g, ğ, v	/ɣ/, /g/, /v/
ف	<i>fe</i>	f	/f/
ق	<i>kaf</i>	k	/k/, /q/
ك	<i>kef</i>	k, g, ğ, n, y	/k/, /g/, /ŋ/, /j/
گ	<i>gef</i>	g, ğ, v	/g/, /j/, /v/
ڭ	<i>nef/sağır kef</i>	n	/ŋ/
ل	<i>lam</i>	l	/l/
م	<i>mim</i>	m	/m/
ن	<i>nun</i>	n	/n/
و	<i>vav</i>	v, o, ö, u, ü	/v/, /o/, /œ/, /u/, /y/
ه	<i>he</i>	h, e, a	/h/, /e/, /æ/
ی	<i>ye</i>	y, ı, i	/j/, /ɯ/, /i/

Source: Adapted from.³⁸

Phonology and Morphology in the Late Ottoman Period

The sound system of late Ottoman Turkish preserved several features that have since been lost or altered in the modern standard language. Notably, it maintained a distinct phoneme for the velar nasal /ŋ/ (the "ng" sound in "sing"), which was written with the letter *sağır kef* (ڭ) and was common in Anatolian and Rumelian dialects.⁴³ The Istanbul accent, which would form the basis of the modern standard, began to merge this sound into a plain /n/ during the 19th century.⁴³ Similarly, the voiced velar fricative /ɣ/ (represented by the letter *gayn*, غ) was still an active consonant, akin to the French "r" [ʁ].³² In Modern Turkish, the letter that replaced it, *ğ* (*yumuşak ge*), has largely lost its consonantal value, now functioning primarily to lengthen the preceding vowel or act as a palatal glide [j] between front vowels.⁴⁵ While the principle of

vowel harmony was a core feature of the language's Turkic structure, it was applied less consistently than in Modern Turkish, particularly in the case of Arabic and Persian loanwords, which often violated harmony rules.⁴¹

Morphologically, the language remained firmly agglutinative. The native Turkish system of adding suffixes to a root word to denote grammatical functions like case, possession, number, and tense was the primary engine of the language.⁹ This system was applied universally, with Turkish suffixes being attached to native and loanwords alike. A word like the Arabic *miyane* ("midst") could be fully integrated into Turkish morphology: *miyanemiz* ("our midst"), *miyanemizde* ("in our midst").⁴¹ However, the late Ottoman period was also characterized by a unique linguistic phenomenon that scholars have termed "compartmentalization".⁴⁷ Rather than fully integrating all foreign elements, the language often treated entire Perso-Arabic phrases, complete with their own internal grammar (like the *izafet* or Persian plural markers), as single, indivisible blocks. These "islands" of foreign morphosyntax were then embedded within a larger, syntactically Turkish clause. For example, a writer might use the Persian plural suffix *-ân* on the noun *pâdişâh* ("sultan") when it was part of a Persianate *izafet* construction (e.g., *pâdişâh-ân-ı kelân*, "the great sultans"), but use the Turkish plural suffix *-lar* on the same word when it stood alone (*pâdişâh-lar*).⁴⁷ This sophisticated strategy allowed the language to maintain the integrity of its core Turkic grammar while simultaneously incorporating entire prestige phrases from Arabic and Persian, highlighting the rule-governed, rather than chaotic, nature of this complex hybrid system.

Part III: The Republic and the Creation of Modern Turkish

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the founding of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 heralded the most radical and rapid transformation in the history of the Turkish language. The new secular, nationalist government, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, viewed the Ottoman language as a symbol of a decadent and rejected past. What followed was not a gradual evolution, but a top-down, state-directed linguistic revolution (*Dil Devrimi*) aimed at forging a new language for a new nation. This revolution involved two main thrusts: a complete change of the writing system and a massive "purification" of the vocabulary. The result was the creation of Modern Turkish, a language that, while being the direct descendant of Ottoman, was deliberately and profoundly severed from its immediate predecessor.

Section 3.1: The Language Revolution (*Dil Devrimi*)

The driving force behind the Turkish language reform was political and ideological. For Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, creating a new language was an essential component of his broader project of building a modern, secular, and unified Turkish nation-state.⁴⁸ The Ottoman

language, with its heavy reliance on Arabic and Persian and its complex, inaccessible script, was seen as an embodiment of the old imperial and Islamic order that the Republic sought to replace.¹¹ The primary goal was to create a standardized national language that was based on the vernacular spoken by the common people (*Kaba Türkçe*) and was accessible to all citizens, regardless of their level of education. This was a direct attempt to close the vast social and cultural gap that had been maintained by the elite diglossia of the Ottoman era, where *Fasih Türkçe* served as a marker of class distinction.² The first and most dramatic step in this revolution was the alphabet reform of 1928. On November 1, 1928, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey passed Law No. 1353, officially replacing the Perso-Arabic script with a new Latin-based Turkish alphabet.³⁹ The change was implemented with extraordinary speed, driven by Atatürk's personal conviction and leadership. An Alphabet Commission was established, but Atatürk famously told its members, "This will either be done in three months or never," signaling his impatience with prolonged debate.³⁹ The new alphabet was meticulously designed to be as phonetic as possible, establishing a near one-to-one correspondence between letters (*harf*) and sounds (ses).⁹ It incorporated unique characters adapted for Turkish phonology, such as Ç (/tʃ/), Ş (/ʃ/), Ğ (the "soft g"), Ö (/œ/), Ü (/y/), and the distinct dotted and dotless I/i (/i/) and I/ı (/ɯ/).³⁹ In a symbolic break with the Arabic script's influence, Atatürk personally intervened to have the letter 'Q' (ق, *qaf*), associated with Arabic phonology, removed from the proposed alphabet.³⁹ The reform was implemented through a massive public education campaign, with "Nation Schools" (*Millet Mektepleri*) established across the country to teach the new script to the entire population, and Atatürk himself often acted as the "head teacher," demonstrating the new letters on blackboards in public squares.³⁹ While critics then and now have argued that the reform created a cultural rupture and rendered an entire population illiterate overnight, proponents counter that with a literacy rate of only about 6-7% among the Muslim population at the time, the old script was already a barrier to mass education. The new, simpler phonetic alphabet, they argue, was a crucial tool for democratizing literacy and unifying the nation.³⁹ Following the alphabet reform, the second phase of the revolution began: the purification of the vocabulary. On July 12, 1932, Atatürk personally initiated the founding of the *Türk Dili Tetkik Cemiyeti* (Society for Research on the Turkish Language), which would soon be renamed the *Türk Dil Kurumu* (TDK), or Turkish Language Association.⁴⁸ The TDK was given a clear mandate: to purge the Turkish language of the "yoke of foreign tongues," specifically targeting the thousands of Arabic and Persian loanwords and grammatical constructions that saturated Ottoman Turkish.¹¹ The process was intense and systematic, especially in its most fervent phase from 1932 to 1938.⁴⁸ The TDK launched nationwide campaigns to collect "pure" Turkish words from rural dialects and combed through ancient Turkic texts, such as the 8th-century Orkhon inscriptions and the 11th-century *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk*, to find archaic words that could be revived.³⁴ Where no suitable existing word could be found, the TDK coined a vast number of neologisms by applying Turkish derivational suffixes to Turkic roots. This effort was so extensive that by 1934, the association

had published a dictionary containing 90,000 proposed new words.⁴⁸ For a brief period in the mid-1930s, the purification effort was influenced by the pseudo-linguistic "Sun Language Theory," which bizarrely claimed that all human languages ultimately derived from a proto-Turkish. This theory, though scientifically baseless and later abandoned, conveniently served a temporary political purpose by allowing some foreign words to be retained under the pretext that they were originally Turkish anyway.⁵³ The overall impact of the TDK's work was a fundamental reshaping of the Turkish lexicon, as illustrated in the table below.

Table 3: Examples of Lexical "Purification" by the TDK

Domain	Ottoman Turkish (Origin)	Modern Turkish (Neologism)	Literal Meaning/Etymology of Neologism
Geometry	<i>müselles</i> (Arabic)	<i>üçgen</i>	From <i>üç</i> (three) + <i>-gen</i> (side/angle) = 'three-sided' ⁴⁸
	<i>mustatil</i> (Arabic)	<i>dikdörtgen</i>	From <i>dik</i> (upright) + <i>dört</i> (four) + <i>-gen</i> = 'upright-four-sided' ⁴⁸
	<i>zaviye-i kaime</i> (Arabic/Persian)	<i>dik açı</i>	From <i>dik</i> (upright) + <i>açı</i> (angle) = 'upright angle' ⁴⁸
	<i>mesâha-i sathiyye</i> (Arabic)	<i>alan</i>	From Old Turkic <i>alan</i> (open space, field) ⁴⁸
General Vocabulary	<i>ahlak</i> (Arabic)	<i>töre</i>	From Old Turkic <i>töre</i> (customary law, ethics) ³⁴
	<i>aile</i> (Arabic)	<i>ocak</i>	From Old Turkic <i>ocak</i> (hearth, fireplace) ³⁴
	<i>akıl</i> (Arabic)	<i>us</i>	From Old Turkic <i>us</i> (mind, intelligence) ³⁴
	<i>hediye</i> (Arabic)	<i>armağan</i>	From Old Turkic <i>armağan</i> (gift) ⁴⁸
	<i>afv etmek</i> (Arabic)	<i>bağışlamak</i>	From Persian <i>bağışla-</i> (to spare, to grant) ³⁴

Section 3.2: A Comparative Analysis: Ottoman vs. Modern Turkish

The *Dil Devrimi* created a profound divergence between Ottoman and Modern Turkish, transforming the language across every linguistic domain. While Modern Turkish is the historical successor to Ottoman, the deliberate and rapid nature of the reforms makes the

relationship more akin to that of a parent and a child who has consciously rejected much of their inheritance.

The most immediate and visible difference is the **script**. Ottoman Turkish was written in the complex, ambiguous, and artistically varied Perso-Arabic *elifbâ*, which required years of study to master.²⁶ Modern Turkish uses a simple, highly phonetic Latin-based alphabet designed for ease of learning and unambiguous representation of the language's sounds.³⁹

The **vocabulary** underwent a seismic shift. As noted, Ottoman Turkish was a lexical amalgam, with some texts containing up to 88% Arabic and Persian loanwords.¹³ The purification campaigns of the TDK systematically replaced a huge portion of this vocabulary with revived Old Turkic words or newly coined neologisms.² While many common Arabic and Persian loans remain in Modern Turkish (e.g.,

kitap from Arabic *kitab* for "book," *şehir* from Persian *shahr* for "city"), thousands of words used in Ottoman literature and administration are now completely archaic.⁹

In terms of **grammar**, the core Turkic structure—agglutinative morphology and SOV word order—remains the same in both forms, providing the essential continuity between them.²

However, Modern Turkish has completely expunged the borrowed grammatical structures that were a hallmark of literary Ottoman. The most significant of these is the Persian *izafet* construction, which has been entirely replaced by native Turkish possessive and adjectival compounds.² The use of the

izafet today survives only in a handful of fossilized historical or religious phrases, such as *takdîr-i ilâhî* ("divine will").²

The **phonology** of the language was also standardized and altered. Modern Standard Turkish is based on the Istanbul accent, which had already begun to diverge from other dialects in the late Ottoman period.⁴³ Sounds that were distinct phonemes in Ottoman Turkish have been lost or merged in the modern standard. The velar nasal /ŋ/ (*sağır kef*) has merged with /n/, and the voiced velar fricative /ɣ/ (*gayn*) has evolved into the modern *ğ*, which is no longer a true consonant.⁴³ Furthermore, the rules of vowel harmony, a defining feature of Turkic languages, are applied much more systematically and consistently in Modern Turkish than they were in Ottoman, where the presence of numerous foreign loanwords often led to harmonic inconsistencies.⁴¹

The cumulative effect of these changes has had a dramatic impact on **intelligibility**. The relationship is asymmetrical and highly dependent on the register of the Ottoman text. A speaker of Modern Turkish might be able to decipher a simple text written in vernacular *Kaba Türkçe* from the late 19th or early 20th century, recognizing the shared grammatical base and core vocabulary.²² However, the high-flown, ornate

Fasih Türkçe of classical poetry or imperial decrees is almost entirely incomprehensible without extensive, specialized academic study.² While a degree of partial intelligibility with the older language persisted for a few decades after the reforms, particularly among the older generation, this connection has largely faded over time, effectively making the language of the Ottoman era a foreign tongue to most contemporary Turks.²

Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of Ottoman Turkish

The evolution of Ottoman Turkish is a narrative of creation, transformation, and deliberate dissolution. For six centuries, it served as the linguistic backbone of a multicultural empire, developing from an Anatolian Turkic dialect into a sophisticated and complex literary and administrative language. Its unique synthesis of a Turkic grammatical foundation with a vast Perso-Arabic lexical superstructure was not an accident of history but a conscious act of cultural and political statecraft. The resulting language, *Lisân-ı Osmânî*, was a powerful instrument of imperial identity, projecting the Ottomans' claim as the legitimate heirs to the great Islamic civilizations. However, this very sophistication created a profound internal division, a state of diglossia that separated the elite language of the palace from the vernacular of the people.

The 20th-century *Dil Devrimi* represents one of the most radical and successful instances of state-led language engineering in modern history. Driven by the nationalist and secularist ideology of the new Turkish Republic, the reforms aimed to forge a unified national identity by creating a language that was modern, accessible, and distinctly Turkish. The replacement of the Perso-Arabic script with a phonetic Latin alphabet and the systematic purging of thousands of "foreign" loanwords were immensely successful in achieving these political goals. They helped democratize literacy, bridge the gap between written and spoken language, and align the new nation culturally with the West.³⁹

Yet, this success came at a significant cultural price. The reforms deliberately and effectively severed the direct linguistic link between the Turkish people and their 600-year Ottoman heritage.⁴⁹ The vast literary, historical, and administrative archives of the empire—a rich tapestry of poetry, chronicles, court registers, and theological treatises—were rendered inaccessible to subsequent generations, becoming the exclusive domain of a small number of academic specialists.¹ In unifying the nation under a new linguistic banner, the reforms inadvertently fragmented its connection to a significant portion of its own cultural and historical consciousness.⁴⁹

Today, Ottoman Turkish is, for all practical purposes, a "dead" language with no native speakers. Its legacy, however, is far from over. For scholars, it remains an indispensable key to understanding the history, society, and culture of the Ottoman Empire and its vast sphere of influence in the Balkans, the Middle East, and North Africa.¹ Furthermore, the language and the cultural world it represents have re-entered the political arena in contemporary Turkey. The rise of the political and cultural movement known as "Neo-Ottomanism" can be seen, in part, as an attempt to reclaim or reconnect with the imperial past that the early Republic so decisively rejected.⁵⁸ Renewed interest in teaching Ottoman Turkish in schools and a popular fascination with Ottoman history reflect a complex and ongoing negotiation with the cultural chasm created by the language revolution.⁶⁰ Thus, the evolution of Ottoman Turkish is not merely a closed chapter of linguistic history; it is a living legacy whose linguistic and political consequences continue to resonate in the identity and debates of modern Turkey.

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