The Pen's Grand Seraglio: A Survey of the Written Styles of Ottoman Turkish (c. 1300-1928)

Introduction

Ottoman Turkish, known in its own time as *Lisân-ı Osmânî* (لسان عثمانی), was the administrative, literary, and cultural language of the Ottoman Empire for over six centuries, from its emergence in the late 13th century until its state-mandated dissolution in the early 20th century.[1] It was a unique linguistic creation, a hybrid language built upon the grammatical foundation of a Turkic tongue but with a lexicon, aesthetic sensibility, and literary tradition profoundly shaped by the high cultures of the Islamic world, primarily Arabic and Persian.[3] The story of its written styles is therefore not a single history, but a multifaceted one. A comprehensive understanding requires an integrated analysis of three distinct yet interwoven dimensions: the linguistic styles, which reflected the empire's rigid social hierarchy; the literary styles, which chronicled a long and sophisticated conversation between tradition and innovation; and the calligraphic styles, which transformed the act of writing into a supreme art form and a technology of imperial power. This report will survey these three dimensions to provide a holistic portrait of the Ottoman written world. It will trace the language's evolution from its Anatolian genesis to its classical zenith and eventual transformation, culminating in its abrupt end with the sweeping reforms of the nascent Turkish Republic, which replaced the Perso-Arabic script with a Latin alphabet in 1928 and deliberately severed the new nation's ties to its imperial past.[5]

Part I: The Language and Its Registers (Lisan-ı Osmânî)

The essence of written Ottoman Turkish lies in its composite nature and its function within a stratified society. The language itself was a mirror of the empire, with distinct registers used by different social classes for different purposes.

1.1 The Genesis of a Tripartite Language

The linguistic roots of Ottoman Turkish lie in the Oghuz dialects of the Western Turkic languages, carried into Anatolia by the Seljuk Turks in the late 11th century.[3] This vernacular, known as Old Anatolian Turkish, gradually evolved into the language of the Ottoman state. In contemporary sources, the language was simply called *Türkçe* ("Turkish"); the term "Ottoman Turkish" is a later academic designation used to distinguish this specific historical form from its modern successor.[1] Scholars typically periodize its 600-year history into three main stages: Old Ottoman Turkish (13th–16th century), Middle Ottoman Turkish (17th–18th century), and Newer Ottoman Turkish (19th century).

A defining feature from its inception was the adoption of the Perso-Arabic script. This choice was a natural consequence of the Oghuz Turks' deep cultural and religious integration into the Perso-Islamic world, where Arabic was the language of religion and science, and Persian was the language of high literature and courtly culture.[5] However, this script was ill-suited for the Turkic language. Rich in consonants but poor in vowels, the Arabic alphabet could not unambiguously represent the nine distinct vowels of Turkish, a challenge that persists for modern students and historical linguists alike.[5]

1.2 The High Style: Fasih Türkçe (Eloquent Turkish)

At the apex of the Ottoman linguistic hierarchy was *Fasih Türkçe*, or "Eloquent Turkish." This was the highly ornate, formal register used for poetry, administration, and all forms of high literature.[1] This register was what the Ottomans themselves considered *Lisân-ı Osmânî* in its strictest sense, the language of the ruling elite.[1] Its most prominent characteristic was its immense lexical borrowing from Arabic and Persian; in some elevated texts, these loanwords could comprise as much as 88% of the total vocabulary.

This influence extended beyond vocabulary to grammar. Ottoman writers incorporated complex grammatical structures from Persian, most famously the genitive construction known as the *izafet*. A phrase like *takdîr-i ilâhî* (تقدیر الهی), meaning "divine dispensation," directly links a Persian noun (*takdîr*) and an Arabic adjective (*ilâhî*) with the Persian grammatical particle *-i*, a structure entirely foreign to native Turkic grammar. Mastering *Fasih Türkçe* required a rigorous, classical education in Arabic and Persian, making it inaccessible to the vast majority of the population.[1] This linguistic divide was not an accident but a fundamental feature of the imperial system. The very structure of the language served as a powerful instrument for reinforcing the empire's social and political hierarchy. Competence in *Fasih Türkçe* was a prerequisite for and a symbol of belonging to the military, bureaucratic, and religious elite, effectively creating a ruling class that was culturally and linguistically distinct from the Turkish-speaking masses it governed. The language of power—of law, decrees, and high culture—was thus a guarded domain.

1.3 The Vernacular: Kaba Türkçe (Rough Turkish)

In stark contrast to the elite register stood *Kaba Türkçe*, literally "Rough" or "Vulgar" Turkish. This was the vernacular spoken by the rural population and the uneducated urban lower classes.[1] Its defining feature was its relative purity; it used far fewer Arabic and Persian loanwords and adhered to a more authentically Turkic vocabulary and syntax. The linguistic chasm between the registers is perfectly illustrated by a simple word: a court scribe composing an official document (
Fasih Türkçe) would use the Arabic word *asel* (عسل) for "honey," whereas a common person in the marketplace, or even the scribe himself in daily life, would use the native Turkish word *bal* (بال) (*Kaba Türkçe*).[1] Historically,
Kaba Türkçe is of immense importance, as it was this less-adorned spoken vernacular that formed the direct linguistic basis for modern standard Turkish after the 20th-century reforms.

1.4 The Middle Ground: Orta Türkçe (Middle Turkish)

Occupying the space between these two poles was *Orta Türkçe*, or "Middle Turkish." This was a more practical, mixed register used by the urban merchant classes, artisans, and educated non-elites in the cosmopolitan centers of the empire.[1] It blended the necessary Turkic vocabulary for daily life with the Arabic and Persian terms required for trade, commerce, and social interactions with the upper classes, serving as a functional linguistic bridge in a deeply stratified society.

Table 1: Comparative Features of Ottoman Turkish Registers				
Register	**Primary Users**	**Common Contexts**	**Lexical Base**	**Illustrative Example (Honey)**
Fasih Türkçe (Eloquent Turkish)	Imperial court, ulema, poets, high bureaucracy	Poetry, imperial decrees, theology, high literature	Heavily Arabic & Persian (up to 88%)	*Asel* (عسل)
Orta Türkçe (Middle Turkish)	Merchants, artisans, educated urbanites	Trade, commerce, higher-class daily speech	Mix of Turkic and loanwords	(A blend of both)
Kaba Türkçe (Rough Turkish)	Rural population, lower classes, soldiers	Everyday vernacular, folk traditions	Predominantly Turkic	*Bal* (بال)

Part II: The Styles of Ottoman Literature

The creative output of the Ottoman Empire was vast, encompassing history, biography, and travel writing. However, for centuries, the undisputed center of literary life and aesthetic thought was poetry. Ottoman literary styles evolved through a continuous dialogue between strict adherence to classical conventions and periodic bursts of transformative innovation.

2.1 The Primacy of Poetry: The Divan Tradition

The most prestigious form of Ottoman literature was *Divan* poetry, a tradition named for the collected works (*divan*) of a poet. It was an elite art form, composed in *Fasih Türkçe* and deeply indebted to Persian and, by extension, Arabic literary models in its forms, themes, and imagery.[2] The goal of the Divan poet was rarely to express a wholly original philosophy but to demonstrate mastery (
sanat) by finding new and beautiful ways to articulate conventional ideas within a highly structured aesthetic framework.

2.1.1 The Pillars of Divan Poetry

Three major poetic forms dominated the Divan tradition for centuries:

- **The *Gazel***: The quintessential lyric form, the *gazel* is a short poem of 5 to 10 couplets sharing a single meter and monorhyme scheme.[13] It typically explored themes of love—both profane and mystical—using a rich but conventional lexicon of symbols. The poet often cast himself as a suffering lover (the nightingale) singing to an indifferent beloved (the rose), situating the poem in an idealized garden setting. The poet's pen name, or
mahlas, was traditionally included in the final couplet.
- **The *Kasîde***: A longer, more formal ode or panegyric, the *kasîde* was the primary vehicle for securing patronage. Structurally complex, it was divided into sections, including a lyric prologue (*nesîb*), a praise section (*medhîye*), and a section of self-praise (*fahrîye*). Its purpose was to laud a powerful figure—a sultan, a vizier, a pasha—or a religious personage, often in exchange for favor or financial support.[13]
- **The *Mesnevî***: The principal narrative form, the *mesnevî* is a long poem composed in rhyming couplets. Its flexible structure lent itself to a wide variety of genres, from didactic Sufi treatises by early masters like **Aşık Paşa** and **Yunus Emre**, to elaborate mystical allegories like **Ahmed-i Dâi's** *Çengname* ("Tale of the Harp") and **Şeyh Galib's** masterful *Hüsn ü aşk* ("Beauty and Love"). It was also used for satire, as in **Sinan Şeyhi's** brilliant *Harname* ("Tale of the Donkey").[13]

2.1.2 Key Periods, Movements, and Poets

The Divan tradition was not static but evolved significantly over its long history:

- **Formative Period (14th-15th c.):** Following the emergence of Turkish as a literary language in Anatolia, foundational poets like **Ahmet Paşa** and **Necâtî** established the core conventions of the Ottoman style. **Mesîhî**, a representative figure of the late 15th century, is noted for works like his *Divan* and *Şehrengiz* (a poem praising a city's beauties).
- **Classical Zenith (16th c.):** This was the "golden age" of Ottoman poetry, coinciding with the empire's peak power under Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent. Lavish imperial patronage supported a flourishing literary scene. The era is defined by two towering figures: **Bâkî**, the ultimate master of the polished, secular, and courtly style, who perfected the form of the *gazel* and *kasîde* [16]; and
  Fuzuli, a poet of breathtaking lyrical power who wrote with equal genius in Turkish, Persian, and Arabic. His *mesnevî*, *Leyla ü Mecnun*, is an undisputed masterpiece of the tradition, exploring the themes of mystical love with profound depth.[16]
- **17th-Century Innovation:** The classical style, perfected by poets like **Yahya Efendi**, was challenged by a new movement. **Nefʾi**, a master of the *kasîde* and of devastatingly sharp satire (*hiciv*), introduced the *Sebk-i Hindî* ("Indian Style") to the Ottoman court. This style, which he and followers like **Nâʾilî** and **Neşatî** cultivated, was characterized by complex, difficult metaphors and an almost exclusively Persian lexicon.[16] This period also saw a decline in state patronage, leading to the rise of the Mawlawīyah (Mevlevi) dervish order as an alternative center of literary life.
- **The Tulip Era (18th c.):** This period saw a stylistic shift toward worldly elegance, a celebration of urban life, and a new sense of realism. The dominant poet was **Ahmed Nedim**, who infused the high courtly language with populist elements and perfected the *şarki*, a song form that reveled in the physical pleasures and specific locales of Istanbul.[16] The era produced one last, great classical masterpiece in
  Şeyh Galib's mystical *mesnevî*, *Hüsn ü aşk* (1782), a work of dazzling complexity and spiritual depth.
- **The Final Phase (19th c.):** While conservative poets in circles like the Encüman-i Şuarâ ("Council of Poets") sought to preserve the classical tradition by emulating 17th-century masters, new sensibilities were emerging. **Keçecizade İzzet Molla's** *Mihnetkeşan* (1822), a self-satirizing autobiographical *mesnevî* describing his personal trials, is considered by some to be the first work of modern Ottoman literature, signaling a definitive turn away from classical themes toward individual experience.

2.2 The World in Prose

For most of its history, Ottoman prose was functionally oriented and stylistically subordinate

to poetry. The high style of prose often adhered to poetic conventions like *seci* (rhymed prose), which constrained its development as an independent narrative form. A tradition of fictional prose akin to the Western novel did not emerge until the Tanzimat reforms of the mid-19th century.

2.2.1 Narratives of Journeys and Lives

The most significant prose genres were non-fictional:

- ***Seyahâtnâme* (Travelogue):** This genre is dominated by one monumental work: the 17th-century, ten-volume *Seyahâtnâme* of **Evliya Çelebi**. It is a vast, encyclopedic, and often fantastical account of his decades-long travels across the Ottoman Empire and beyond, providing an unparalleled window into the 17th-century world.[18]
- ***Sefâretnâme* (Ambassador's Report):** A related genre detailing the experiences of Ottoman ambassadors on diplomatic missions. A key example is the *Paris Sefâretnâmesi* of **Yirmisekiz Mehmet Çelebi**, which describes his embassy to the court of Louis XV in the early 18th century and was influential in introducing French culture to the Ottoman elite.
- ***Tezkire* (Biographical Dictionary):** These collections of biographies, especially of poets (*tezkiretü'ş-şuara*), are invaluable sources for literary history. The 16th-century works by **Latîfî** and **Aşık Çelebi** are among the most notable.[16]

2.2.2 The Art of the Epistle: Münşeât

The *münşeât*, or collection of letters, was a genre where prose was elevated to high art. Far from being simple correspondence, these letters were carefully crafted literary compositions. The 17th-century works of authors like **Veysi** and **Nergisi** were celebrated as exemplars of fine writing, with their style described as *tahrir-i rengin* ("word-painting"). This demonstrates that while fictional prose was undeveloped, the aesthetic ambitions for non-fictional prose were extremely high. It was only in the final century of the empire, through the intense cultural encounter with the West, that prose was "unlocked" from its traditional constraints and transformed into a vehicle for modern fiction.

Part III: The Art of the Pen (Hüsn-i Hat)

In the Ottoman world, the visual form of the written word was as important as its content. Calligraphy, or *hüsn-i hat* ("beautiful writing"), was not merely a decorative craft but was revered as one of the highest art forms, inextricably linked to the sacred act of transcribing the Qur'an.[22] The Ottomans inherited a rich calligraphic tradition from earlier Islamic civilizations but cultivated it with such fervor and genius that they elevated it to

unprecedented levels of refinement, creating distinct styles that served the varied needs of faith, art, and the state.[23]

3.1 The Foundational Scripts: Naskh and Thuluth

The core of Ottoman classical calligraphy rested on two scripts from the *Aklâm-ı Sitte* ("Six Pens"), which were perfected by Ottoman masters.

- ***Naskh* (Nesih):** Renowned for its supreme clarity, legibility, and balanced simplicity, *Naskh* features small, rounded letters arranged on a clear horizontal baseline.[23] The great 15th-century calligrapher **Şeyh Hamdullah** (d. 1520) is credited with refining the script, giving it a new precision and elegance that became the Ottoman standard.[25] Because of its legibility, *Naskh* was the script of choice for transcribing the Holy Qur'an, as well as scientific and literary manuscripts.[23] Its clarity also made it the ideal model for the first Arabic printing types developed in the 18th century.[29]
- ***Thuluth* (Sülüs):** In contrast to the modesty of *Naskh*, *Thuluth* is a large, majestic, and dynamic script known for its powerful, sweeping curves and fluid lines. It was primarily an architectural and monumental script. Its larger version, *Jeli Thuluth*, was used for grand, decorative inscriptions on the walls, domes, and minarets of mosques and other public buildings, such as the Bayezid Mosque in Istanbul.[23] While also perfected by **Şeyh Hamdullah**, its *jeli* (large) form reached its zenith under the 18th-century master **Mustafa Râkim**.

3.2 The Chancery Hands: Ta'liq and Divani

The administrative needs of the vast Ottoman bureaucracy spurred the development of specialized chancery scripts.

- ***Ta'liq*:** A "hanging" script of Persian origin, *Ta'liq* is characterized by its rounded, cursive letters, descending loops, and lines that gracefully ascend from right to left.[32] Used in the Ottoman Empire from the 15th century for official correspondence and literary works, it served as the direct precursor to the uniquely Ottoman *Divani* script.
- ***Divani*:** Developed in the 16th century, *Divani* was the official script of the Ottoman Imperial Council (*Divan-ı Hümayun*).[23] It is a highly complex, extremely cursive, and stylized script. Its letters are tightly interwoven, often written without the diacritical dots, and feature unconventional ligatures, making it deliberately difficult to read and nearly impossible to forge.[35] This complexity was not an aesthetic indulgence but a critical security feature.
  Divani was used exclusively for the most important state documents—imperial decrees (*ferman*), edicts, land grants, and resolutions—to ensure their confidentiality and

protect them from forgery.[35] The script itself became a visual embodiment of the inaccessible and awesome authority of the Sultan. An even more ornamental version, *Divani Jali*, filled the spaces between letters with decorative flourishes and was used for ceremonial purposes.

3.3 The Everyday Hand: Ruq'ah (Rik'a)

As the Ottoman state modernized in the 18th and 19th centuries, the need for a more efficient administrative script became apparent. The answer was *Ruq'ah*.

- **Features:** Developed as a radical simplification of *Divani* and *Ta'liq*, *Ruq'ah* is characterized by short, straight, clipped strokes and minimal curves.[39] It is stripped of all non-essential ornamentation, making it extremely fast to write and easy to read.[39]
- **Application:** *Ruq'ah* was created specifically to enhance the efficiency of the Ottoman bureaucracy, replacing the multiple complex chancery hands for most day-to-day administrative work. Its standardization is credited to calligraphers **Mümtaz Efendi** and **Mehmed Izzet Efendi**.[39] The state then propagated
  Ruq'ah as the standard handwriting style taught in its new, empire-wide school system. This made it not only a tool of bureaucratic rationalization but also of educational unification, and it remains the basis for everyday handwriting in Turkey and much of the Arab world today.[39] The evolution from the esoteric
  Divani to the practical *Ruq'ah* perfectly maps the transformation of the Ottoman state from a classical, palace-centric power to a modernizing, mass bureaucracy.

3.4 Unique Ottoman Calligraphic Genres

Beyond the major scripts, Ottoman calligraphers developed unique artistic forms:

- ***Tughra*:** The Sultan's imperial monogram was a complex calligraphic emblem that served as his official signature on all decrees and documents. Each sultan possessed a unique and intricate *tughra*, designed by a master calligrapher, which symbolized his personal authority and the power of the state.[23]
- ***Hilya*:** These are calligraphic panels containing a textual description of the Prophet Muhammad's physical and moral qualities. The standardized and most revered format for the *hilya* was devised by the celebrated 17th-century calligrapher **Hafiz Osman**. Hung in homes and dervish lodges, these panels served as devotional "aniconic icons," allowing for veneration of the Prophet through the beauty of the written word.

Table 2: Major Calligraphic Scripts of the Ottoman Empire			
Script	**Key Visual Features**	**Primary Application**	**Period of Peak Use / Development**

Naskh	Clear, rounded, highly legible, horizontal baseline	Copying the Qur'an, books, manuscripts	15th-16th c. (Refinement by Şeyh Hamdullah)
Thuluth	Large, majestic, with sweeping, dynamic curves	Monumental architectural inscriptions (mosques, etc.)	18th c. (*Jeli* form perfection by Mustafa Râkim)
Ta'liq	"Hanging" script, cursive, rounded, ascending lines	Official correspondence, literary works	15th c. onward (precursor to Divani)
Divani	Highly cursive, interwoven, complex, often undotted	Imperial decrees (*ferman*), high-level state documents	16th-19th c. (Ottoman chancery script)
Ruq'ah	Simple, clipped, short straight strokes, efficient	Everyday handwriting, bureaucracy, mass education	19th c. (Standardization)

Part IV: The End of an Era: The Language Reforms and the Birth of Modern Turkish

The 600-year tradition of written Ottoman Turkish did not fade away; it was brought to a deliberate and definitive end by the radical cultural and political reforms of the early Turkish Republic. This transformation was not merely a linguistic update but a profound act of nation-building through cultural engineering, designed to sever the new nation from its imperial and Islamic past.

4.1 The "Letter Revolution" (Harf Devrimi)

The first and most dramatic step was the "Letter Revolution." On November 1, 1928, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey passed a law outlawing the Perso-Arabic script and mandating the adoption of a new, Latin-based Turkish alphabet. The law went into full effect on January 1, 1929, making the use of the old script in any public communication illegal.[6] The motivations were twofold. On a practical level, the new alphabet was phonetically better suited to the vowels of the Turkish language, and proponents argued it would be easier to learn, thus boosting national literacy.[5] On an ideological level, the goal was far more ambitious: to modernize and secularize the nation by making a decisive break with the Ottoman and Islamic heritage intrinsically tied to the Arabic script.[2]

4.2 The "Purification" (Dil Devrimi)

The script change was immediately followed by an even more profound linguistic purge. In 1932, President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk initiated the *Dil Devrimi* ("Language Revolution") with the establishment of the Turkish Language Association (TDK).[6] Its explicit mission, as declared by Atatürk, was to "liberate its language from the yoke of foreign languages". This government-sponsored campaign systematically sought to remove thousands of Arabic and Persian loanwords and grammatical constructions that were the hallmark of *Fasih Türkçe*.

The TDK's methodology was aggressive. It dispatched researchers to collect "pure" Turkish words from folk dialects across Anatolia and resurrected archaic words from ancient Turkic texts like the *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk*. When these sources failed, the reformers simply coined neologisms from Turkic roots and suffixes. Atatürk himself was personally involved, most famously in his 1936 *Geometri* textbook, where he created new Turkish terms for mathematical concepts, replacing the Arabic-derived *müselles* with *üçgen* (triangle) and *zaviye* with *açı* (angle). This "purification" was highly selective; while Arabic and Persian words were targeted as "relics of the Ottoman and Islamic past," loanwords from Western languages like French were largely spared, revealing the deeply ideological and political nature of the project.[6]

4.3 Legacy and Discontinuity: A "Catastrophic Success"

The combined impact of the script and language reforms was monumental. The scholar Geoffrey Lewis famously described the outcome as a "catastrophic success".[6] The "success" was undeniable: the reforms created a new, simplified, and standardized national language, *Öztürkçe* ("Pure Turkish"), that bridged the gap between written and spoken forms and contributed to a dramatic rise in literacy.[10]

The "catastrophe," however, was the profound cultural schism it created. In the space of a few years, the entire 600-year literary, administrative, and historical heritage of the Ottoman Empire became linguistically inaccessible to subsequent generations. A young Turk in the 1930s could no longer read a text written by their own grandparents. The rich poetry of Bâkî, the state decrees of Süleyman, and the histories written just decades earlier were rendered as foreign as ancient hieroglyphs without years of specialized academic study.[3] The two reforms worked in tandem as a powerful tool of social engineering. The alphabet change made the physical documents unreadable, while the lexical purge made their content, even if transliterated, incomprehensible. This was a deliberate strategy to create a cultural "Year Zero," forcing the new Turkish nation to turn away from its multi-ethnic, Islamic, and monarchical past and orient itself toward a new, secular, and Western-looking future.

Conclusion

The written styles of Ottoman Turkish were not disparate phenomena but deeply interwoven expressions of the empire's soul. The linguistic registers of the language were a direct reflection of its social hierarchy, separating the ruling elite from the common populace. The evolution of its rich literary forms, particularly in the dominant Divan tradition, chronicled a centuries-long cultural dialogue between reverence for Persianate convention and the drive for individual innovation. The development of its calligraphic scripts was a direct function of the needs of the state—for religious devotion, artistic prestige, imperial security, and bureaucratic efficiency.

This intricate world of the written word, which defined Ottoman identity for six centuries, was brought to a sudden and politically-driven end. The language reforms of the early Turkish Republic were a radical and successful act of nation-building that created a new, modern Turkish identity. But in doing so, they consciously walled off the nation's new generations from their own imperial past. Today, the grand literary and calligraphic heritage of the Ottoman Empire—the poetry of Fuzuli, the decrees written in *Divani*, the Qur'ans penned in *Naskh*—persists not as a living tradition, but as a field of specialized academic inquiry, a magnificent seraglio of the pen whose doors are now largely closed to the culture it once defined.

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