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This, the most recent study to be published on language engineering in Turkey, is undoubtedly a very important contribution. The author, Emeritus Professor of Turkish at Oxford, has previously written extensively on Turkish linguistics and on the history of the Republic of Turkey. The title is provocative, if not paradoxical. The language reform, particularly since the last decade of Mustafa Kemal’s (Atatürk’s) Presidency, achieved great success in the face of serious difficulties. The catastrophic aspect lies not only in the loss of Ottoman Turkish but also of the Turkish of the 1920s and 1930s whose vocabulary the present generation can hardly understand without a dictionary.

After the introduction, the chapters deal mainly with the following topics: Ottoman Turkish; the new alphabet; Atatürk and the language reform until 1936; the Sun-Language theory and after; components; ingredients; inventions; concoctions; technical terms; the new Turkish; what happened to the Language Society.

While Lewis examines style and syntax, his chief concern throughout the book is the Turkish lexicon and how it changed or, rather, was transformed by orders from above. He examines this process systematically against the background of political and social change in the late Ottoman Empire and in the Republic of Turkey, choosing his instances from a variety of sources: books, newspapers, private letters, and conversations conducted in Turkey. Numerous examples are cited in Turkish, with an English translation.

The discussion of Ottoman Turkish highlights its “Persianization” and “Arabization” and the problems these created for the mass of Turks unfamiliar with Persian and Arabic. Thus, there were several experiments during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth to make the Ottoman language more accessible to everybody. This occurred amidst a lively public debate carried on by intellectuals and others, some of whose arguments would resurface in the discussion on language reform during the 1930s and subsequently. Various literary-linguistic associations were
set up, whose members discussed whether a language reform, aimed at removing Persian and Arabic words, was needed at all and, if so, how to put it into practice. Some of those opposing simplification wished to maintain the distance between themselves and “the common people” while, conversely, some of their rivals wished a simpler Turkish to be understood and used by the majority of the population. Another frequently raised suggestion was to keep the Ottoman vocabulary in a new Turkish language but to do away with the grammatical and syntactic forms which had penetrated from Persian and Arabic.

The modification of the Arabic alphabet, used in Turkish, was also debated in intellectual circles; a project put into practice by Enver Pasha in 1913 was to introduce vowel signs between the consonants. However, more relevant to later developments under the Republic was the change into a Latin alphabet, also discussed in late Ottoman times. The Arabic (or rather Arabo-Persian) characters were far from suitable for Turkish, while Latin ones were not only better adapted to communication but also provided an obvious rapprochement to the West. The Arabic alphabet, however, enjoyed the hold of tradition and was sacred as the script and language of the Qur’an; hence, certain religious leaders of the time opposed the conversion to Latin letters. Under the Republic, with the anti-religious bias of Atatürk and his advisers, the Latinization of the Turkish alphabet proceeded smoothly from 1928 onwards. Lewis finds fault with some of the linguistic decisions made in carrying this out, but acknowledges that it remarkably increased the percentage of literacy in Turkey, from 9% in 1924 to 65% in 1975 to 82.3% in 1995. He might have taken into account that this growth was also due to the efforts of the education authorities; but he is certainly correct in ascribing much of it to Latinization.

One of the most interesting chapters in this book deals with language reform up to 1936, that is, the years when Atatürk was most involved in it, often in person. Inventing new words to replace those of Arabic or Persian origin became a popular pastime among intellectuals who supported the regime. These formations had to be old Turkish words or neologisms from European languages, often linked to Turkish roots by an amateurish etymology which attempted to prove that they all had a Turkish origin. Annual language congresses were organized, principally intended to promote the transformation of Ottoman into modern Turkish. Dialectal expressions were collected from all parts of Turkey, in a well-organized popular campaign. Much of this activity was sponsored by the Turkish Language Society and used by its members to create new words. In the meantime, the view that Turkish had been the first language of mankind was gaining ground, mostly since 1935. It was then that the “Sun-