
Abstract: Legacy of colonial linguistics in nationalist language ideologies and practices: The example of Turkey

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Résumé

Ever since the early 20th-century colonial partitioning of the Kurdistan region into four parts – Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria – orchestrated under the auspices of Western colonial powers alongside their regional allies, the Kurdish language has suffered relentless assaults posing a continuous threat to its existence. While colonialism is in its origin a European form of governance (Dei & Lordan, 2016), the tradition of exploitation and (colonial) knowledge that came out of colonialism has traveled to inform the life-worlds of many in the non-Western world and has altered the ways of imposing and maintaining rule on the colonized (Scott, 1995). This legacy has informed what I term *colonial language governmentality* that is effective in Turkey today. Whereas Turkey is not usually included in colonial literature, via my work I will demonstrate how Turkey borrowed the colonial logic in its governance of minority populations, Kurds in particular. Ramon Grosfoguel's (2007) distinction between "epistemic location" and "social location" is analytically helpful to situate Turkey in the literature on colonialism. Grosfoguel writes that one's social location in the oppressed side of power relations does not necessarily lead to thinking from a "subaltern epistemic location" (p.213). To apply this distinction to the case of Turkey, one can say that Turkey's being socially located in the "east" or in the "global south" does not refrain it from pursuing imperial, colonial and racist aspirations. My work presses for a reassessment of the historical trajectory of the Turkish state's language policies as constituting more than a merely nationalist response to the changing sociopolitical and economic landscape of the early 20th century, as has been widely advocated, but also as strongly informed by the ideologies and processes such as racism, colonialism, and imperialism of the time. The Kurdish language oppression in Turkey is a direct consequence of the colonial division of Kurdistan and the subsequent adoption of Euro-colonial language ideologies and practices by the Turkish state starting from the late Ottoman Empire, but more firmly in the early Turkish Republic. In this work, I examine the experimentation of the Turkish state from crude colonial governance to a liberal form via the language policies introduced during the short-lived peace negotiations process between the state and the Kurdish population.

Whereas Kurdish was banned from being spoken even in the intimate confines of private spaces until the early 1990s through an array of official and non-official state measures, there emerged a short-lived process of a very rudimentary project of transitional justice between 2009-2015 before things took an even more violent turn after the end of the process. For the first time in its history, the Turkish state openly and officially engaged with the Kurdish political movement and vowed to end the century-long political and military conflict. Most of the reforms introduced by the Turkish state concerned the Kurdish language and its

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education and therefore, the process can be defined as a "linguistic turn" in the country's sociopolitical history. The state started to offer Kurdish elective class in public schools, allowed the teaching of Kurdish in private institutions and opened Kurdish language and literature departments in several universities. I argue that by "culturalizing" or even further, "linguizing" the conflict, which is political, the state intended a "displacement of the problematic" (Balibar, 1991, p.22). It purposefully remained blind to grave socioeconomic inequalities between the Kurdish region and the rest of Turkey. It also served as a placebo to the radical visions of social emancipation and liberation. I describe the negotiation process as a "liberal bracket" in the long and still ongoing colonial history of Turkey's language practices towards other languages, specifically Kurdish. I use the term "bracket" to indicate that liberal policies pursued by the Turkish state during the peace negotiations were not for altering but rather strengthening the colonial language governmentality via new strategies of governance. I theorize how the three techniques that were used — depoliticizing the Kurdish language, monopolizing the linguistic field, and institutionalizing language hierarchies — situate the peace negotiation process within the long history of the colonial language governmentality by looking at the ways the language education initiatives are introduced and handled by the Turkish state. Some ways included the state's suppression of any political engagement with the language and used the Kurdish language to deliver state propaganda during this process. Only Kurds loyal to the state were accepted to these new places and many scrutinizing mechanisms were put in place to prevent subversive attempts. My work is based on an ethnographic study of the Kurdish language movement, with its institutions and language activists, conducted in two cities in Turkey: namely, Diyarbakir and Istanbul between February 2017 and December 2019.

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Mots-Clés: decolonial education, free schools, language activism, Kurdish, Turkey