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MAKING KURDISH PUBLIC(S): LANGUAGE POLITICS AND PRACTICE IN TURKEY

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
ABSTRACT .....	ix
CHAPTER ONE .....	1
Introduction .....	1
Research Design and Ethnographic Context .....	7
The Conundrum of Kurdish Literacy: or, Who Gets to Have an Illiteracy Problem? .....	12
“We Are Frankly Nationalist”: Creating the Modern Turkish Nation-State .....	19
“A Sacred Treasure”: Turkish Language Reforms and Policies across the 20 <sup>th</sup> Century .....	30
Chapter Summaries .....	43
CHAPTER TWO .....	56
“Did They Tell You Why They’re Here?” .....	56
The Communicative Logics of Literacy in Turkey .....	56
What Literacy ‘Does’: Inscription, Its Features and Consequences .....	62
“Herkes İçin Okuma Yazma”: Literacy for Everyone .....	66
“Come On, Girls, Let’s Go To School!” .....	69
The Mother-Child Education Foundation .....	75
The Bağlar Women’s Center .....	78
Inside the Literacy Classroom .....	82
To Move Around the City: Literacy as Liberating, Literacy as Emancipatory .....	86
The Communicative Logic of Literacy in Turkey .....	92
CHAPTER THREE .....	100
“They don’t know where to put learning Kurdish in their lives”: Pedagogies of Kurdish in Transition. ....	100
‘They Don’t Know Where to Put Learning Kurdish in Their Lives’: Community centers, group lessons, and new encounters with pedagogical Kurdish .....	107
‘We came here for solidarity’: learning Kurdish in the university setting .....	121
“I always saw myself as lacking”: self-cultivation and the individual learner. ....	131
Ambivalence, resentment, and resistance in new contexts of Kurdish .....	140
CHAPTER FOUR .....	149
Hefty Dictionaries in Incomprehensible Tongues: Commensurating Code and Language Community in Turkey .....	149
Speech Communities, Language Community .....	154

On Not-Reading, and Other Practices of Print .....	159
“Em Bixwînin! Em Binivîsin!”[Let’s Read! Let’s Write!]: Textures and Types of Kurdish in Print .....	161
“I don’t know Book Kurdish”: Anxiety and Authority in a Kurdish Language Community ..	167
Commensurating Codes in/and Context.....	173
“Same-ness” in Language, Community, and Polity: The Stakes of (Triple) Commensuration .....	177
CHAPTER FIVE .....	181
Public Kurdish and the Politics of Legitimate Language in Turkey .....	181
Authority and Expectation: official language in policy and practice .....	185
Illegitimate language and the Limits of Legitimate Politics .....	190
Switching and the Politics of Public language in Turkey .....	200
CHAPTER SIX.....	211
Conclusion: The Moral Dimensions and Political Limits of a “Mother Tongue.” .....	211
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	237

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation tracks what I term the *public dispensability* of language: the apportioning of particular language varieties to contexts deemed public by their users, and the dialectical, productive potential for language forms to assemble and shape publics of varying durability and form. The work of linguistic representation, as phenomena described in this dissertation demonstrate acutely, produces not only the people involved as participants in communication, but also the groupings to which they belong, against which they mobilize, through which they live their relationships to the world. These representational processes are deeply internalized and reproduced at both the most unremarkably quotidian and unabashedly spectacular scales.

Based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork in literacy classrooms, Kurdish language classes, and wider community spaces in Turkey, I examine how language is used in public and how language is used to assemble publics, and explore the fraught politics of a would-be public Kurdish. I investigate how ways with text – reading, writing, brandishing, and circulating text objects – become indices of, and means to, the transformations of selves, and explore some of the consequences – personal, political, linguistic, moral – that ensue.

Although the official ban on Kurdish (the largest minority language in Turkey) was lifted in 1991, the use of Kurdish in public life in Turkey remains restricted and politically fraught. Decades of violent confrontation between state security forces and Kurdish militants continue to frame “the Kurdish question” in Turkey, defining national debates over the future of democratic pluralism and national security. In recent years, the Kurdish political project has been increasingly pitched in terms of expanded linguistic rights, particularly for “mother tongue education.” Yet the majority of able speakers – women and older generations, who grew up in monolingual rural settings – are also the

least likely to have had formal schooling or to have developed comprehensive literacy skills. A paradox thus unfolds: a newly emergent Kurdish language press produces texts (grammars, novels, newspapers, etc.) that few can read, since those who wield literacy are unlikely to know Kurdish, and those most likely to be proficient in Kurdish are unlikely to know how to read.

How do expectations around language forms both presuppose and produce contexts as variously public, and with what stakes for negotiations of political and personal sovereignty? I examine how language ideologies and linguistic practices mediate the everyday productions of self- and group-making, and highlight the importance of understanding the political economy of language in Turkey – the politics around which language is deployed in what contexts, to what purposes, and with what histories of association.

Key words: language politics; publics; literacy; Kurdish; Turkey

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

On a balmy March morning in 2006, in a neighborhood park adjacent to the main commercial district of Diyarbakir, Turkey, a Women's Day rally was underway. Her voice crackling through the handheld speaker, a community activist called for an end to Turkish state violence against its Kurdish citizens. Enumerating community losses – thousands killed and disappeared, many more imprisoned, hundreds of thousands forced to flee their villages and homes for lives on the crowded and impoverished margins of Turkey's cities – the activist demanded state accountability and the beginning of a new order, one characterized by peace-building rather than war-making, and expanded cultural and political rights for Kurds. The small crowd – consisting mostly of women and teenaged girls, with a phalanx of television and newspaper reporters clustered to one side – cheered and clapped. Many waved handmade posters, some in honor of International Women's Day and others emblazoned with Kurdish slogans proclaiming “Our mother tongue is our treasure!” Yet other posters were scrawled, more simply, with the letters *Q*, *X*, and *W* – nothing more.

A series of speeches followed, given by representatives of local community organizations from this, the largest city in the primarily Kurdish region of southeastern Turkey. One by one, the speakers spoke about violence against women, about poverty and health crises, about the social trauma of living through war. They rallied their listeners to do more, to speak up, to march shoulder to shoulder for the cause of gender equality and social justice. Elderly women, their

heads draped in the sheer white scarves of their generation and rural origin, clustered behind the small platform where the speakers stood and in the front row of the listening audience.

One woman in her seventies, the embroidered fringe of her scarf festooned with the red, yellow, and green colors of Kurdish nationalism, carefully stepped up onto the dais and took the microphone in her hands. She spoke as a representative of the Peace Mothers (*Dayîkên Aştîyê, Barış Anneleri*), an organization of mostly Kurdish women who have held rallies across Turkey since the late 1990s, demanding an peaceful resolution to end to armed conflict in the Kurdish regions of the southeast.<sup>1</sup> Through the static of the bullhorn she began by wishing those assembled “*8ê adarê pîroz be!*” – a Happy 8<sup>th</sup> of March – and continued, in Kurdish, to call for peace and for state accountability to past and ongoing acts of violence. Like several of the other speakers that morning, her call to action made reference to the Kurdish language.<sup>2</sup> *Zimanê me rumetê me ye!*, she proclaimed. Our language is our treasure! Quiet cheers greeted her statement, and the colorful paper Qs and Xs danced above the crowd. Unlike the other speakers, however, she gave her speech almost entirely in Kurdish; the rest of the rally proceeded in Turkish, the dominant code of most public life in Turkey.

Flanking the small crowd gathered that morning, lined up on either side, stood several dozen police officers. In both uniforms and plainclothes, they scanned the crowd; some jotted notes while others allowed their cameras lenses (both video and still) to rove ceaselessly across the faces of those gathered in the park. Naslıcan and Berfin, two of the teenagers who had

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<sup>1</sup> Words or phrases in Kurdish will be italicized; those in Turkish will be both italicized and underlined – e.g., “Kurdish” will be *kurdî* in Kurdish and *kürtçe* in Turkish. Short glosses will be provided in the text; longer translations will be included in the footnotes as relevant. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> “Kurdish” here refers to Kurmanji Kurdish, the variety of Kurdish spoken most widely in Turkey as well as Syria, and in north-western sections of Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan.

accompanied me to the gathering, visibly shrank back when they spotted the police officers. Together with a cluster of the girls from the neighborhood women's center who had all headed over, en masse, to participate in the Women's Day rally, they drew off to the side. Faces cast down and away from the cameras, they huddled where they could hear the speeches but still – they hoped – remain unnoticed by the cameras. “My brothers will kill me,” Berfin hissed under her breath. “If we show up on TV, it's done. I'm never going to leave the house again.” Several girls, bolder in their comportment before the surveillance, moved decisively in front of the others, blocking their friends from view. Naslıcan told me later that she was essentially on parole; having been arrested with a number of “political mates” a few months prior, she had been released with the warning to stay out of trouble. Her parents, terrified, had explicitly forbidden her from going anywhere other than to the women's center and back; a detour like this to attend a rally – however modestly sized and peaceful – would incur not only their wrath but a ban on further social circulation.

The rally dispersed after an hour, posters rolled up and tucked under elbows, participants linking arms to return along the bustling streets to their homes or the community center. If the younger girls giggled and shrieked, if the older women sighed and ambled, slowly, under the soft blue skies of a spring morning, it was only in part the beauty of the weather and the all-too-rare opportunity to stroll the city streets, at least for a bit. The opportunity for a walk, the space of a rally, a welcome gathering of familiar faces and shared commitments, would soon be followed by much more unsettled activities and spaces. After a brief few weeks of spring, the weather would soon turn scorching hot, and the sporadic fighting in the mountains – a ceasefire that broke, and started, and broke again – would begin again. And so, too, would the season of rallies

– marking the anniversaries of the arrest of the Kurdish guerilla leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in 1999 and of Saddam Hussein’s poison gassing of the Kurds of Halepçe, Iraq, in 1988, and the weeklong festivities around Newroz, the Kurdish new year. The season of funerals would inevitably follow, as guerillas and soldiers clashed in the mountains, and Turkish police met stone-throwing Kurdish protesters with bullets and tear gas.

The rally I describe above frames this dissertation, even as much of what I write about only obliquely references the histories of violence and protest alluded to above. The space of a public park, the gathering of women and girls to raise voices in political dissent, the waving of posters proclaiming the preciousness of a mother tongue and the placid provocation of the letter Q – these snapshots represent aspects of Kurdish life in early 21<sup>st</sup> century Diyarbakir that are both utterly ordinary and deeply revealing. This dissertation tracks spaces and textual objects and people like these to explore the apportioning of language to contexts, people to places, textual practices to qualities of person. I examine how language is used in public, and how language is used to assemble publics, and explore the fraught politics of a would-be public Kurdish. I investigate how ways with text – reading, writing, brandishing, and circulating text objects – become indices of, and means to, the transformations of selves, and explore some of the consequences – personal, political, linguistic, moral – that ensue.

Although the official ban on Kurdish (the largest minority language in Turkey) was lifted in 1991, the use of Kurdish in public life in Turkey remains restricted and politically fraught (Erbey 2007; Haig 2004). Decades of violent confrontation between state security forces and Kurdish militants continue to frame “the Kurdish question” in Turkey, defining national debates over the future of democratic pluralism and national security.

It is the female refugees from this violence – largely unschooled, and swept up into a conflict of fierce political stakes – who compose a majority of adult literacy learners in Turkey. Although Kurdish is the first language of many of these students, the code of literacy instruction is always Turkish (as mandated in the Turkish Constitution). This fact is rarely mentioned or addressed by policymakers and literacy activists. Yet the political, economic, and social factors that have led to the presence of these women in literacy classrooms, and that frame how it is that they encounter written language, are deeply shaped by the relationship between majority and minority language. The Kurdish political project is increasingly pitched in terms of expanded linguistic rights, particularly for “mother tongue education.” Yet the majority of able speakers – women and older generations, who grew up in monolingual rural settings – are also the least likely to have had formal schooling or to have developed comprehensive literacy skills.

A paradox thus unfolds: a newly emergent Kurdish language press produces texts (grammars, novels, newspapers, etc.) that few can read, since those who wield literacy are unlikely to know Kurdish, and those most likely to be proficient in Kurdish are unlikely to know how to read. Meanwhile, government planners and literacy teachers operate exclusively in Turkish, and ask few questions about the kinds of texts their students might hope one day to access and produce – and the kinds of citizens and political subjects they might hope to be.

The perspectives brought to the table by different participants reveal often-conflicting understandings of the promises of literacy, and about the public dispensability of different language codes: which languages are expected, or expectable, in given contexts? How do those expectations both presuppose and produce those contexts as variously public, and with what stakes for negotiations of political and personal sovereignty? I examine how language ideologies

and linguistic practices mediate the everyday productions of self- and group-making, and highlight the importance of understanding the political economy of language in Turkey – the politics around which language is deployed in what contexts, to what purposes, and with what histories of association. Based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork in literacy classrooms, Kurdish language classes, and wider community spaces in Diyarbakir, Ankara, and Istanbul, my research allows me a unique position to explore how linguistic practices mediate the making of Kurdish public(s).

This dissertation investigates the institutional histories, pedagogical practices, and affective orientations that shape how a would-be learner in Turkey negotiates written language. I draw on the insight from linguistic anthropology that people’s ideas *about* language guide and shape their language *use*. This includes how they frame their understandings of kinds of language(s) – whether given codes are considered languages or dialects, for example, and inflected as modern, or traditional, or public, or domestic – and how, then, they “map those understandings onto people, events, and activities that are significant to them” (Irvine & Gal 2000: 35). People’s ideas about language – from speech to text – locate linguistic phenomena as part of, and evidence for, what they consider to be pervasive and important social contrasts, inflected in profoundly moral, aesthetic, and political ways (ibid: 36; Kroskrity et. al 1992). Beyond explicit characterizations of what literacy means in present-day Turkey, implicit ideologies of who can or should read and write – and in what language – are also pervasive in Turkish society. This project follows students, teachers, administrators, and community members inside and outside the classroom, in order to explore how literacy practices both reflect and shape



wider ideas of language use, including what languages are expected in what contexts, and what, in fact, “being/becoming literate” might mean.

How, for example, do ideas about the relative appropriateness of certain languages to certain contexts shape the relationship to the written word? In a country where the sole official language (Turkish) dominates institutional settings, from schools to hospitals to media, what role is there for a written Kurdish? How might histories of associating Kurdish with spaces of domesticity and intimacy color whether a bilingual woman gravitates toward learning to read in one code or the other? What factors shape the way “officialness” gets cast or “authenticity” heard?

Key to my analysis here is the idea of the *public dispensability* of a language. By this I mean the apportioning of particular language codes to contexts deemed public by their speakers, and the dialectical, productive potential for language forms to assemble and shape publics of varying durability and form. The work of linguistic representation, as phenomena described in this dissertation demonstrate acutely, produces not only the people involved as participants in communication, but also the groupings to which they belong, against which they mobilize, through which they live their relationships to the world. These representational processes are deeply internalized and reproduced at both the most unremarkably quotidian and unabashedly spectacular scales. Investigating such processes demands careful attention to spoken and textual practices of many kinds, the posing of explicit questions, as well as implicit observation.

### *Research Design and Ethnographic Context*

I conducted 23 months of continuous ethnographic fieldwork between June 2005 and May 2007. Further media-based research was conducted from 2007-present, with additional short fieldwork visits to Turkey in 2010, 2013, 2014, and 2015. The majority of the research took place in the city of Diyarbakir, with additional fieldwork conducted in Istanbul, Turkey's largest city; the capital, Ankara; and Çorum, a provincial city in central Anatolia.

Diyarbakir [*Diyarbakir* in Turkish, *Diyarbekir* or *Amed* in Kurdish, *Diyarbakîr* or *Tigranakert* in Armenian] is a densely populated and politically fraught city, one of the largest cities in Turkey. It is populated predominately by formerly rural Kurds who fled their villages in the 1980s and 1990s during the violence that overtook the countryside in those decades, as well as with sizable garrisons of military personnel and civil administrative forces from elsewhere in Turkey. Most of the Kurdish population arrived in the city after being forcibly displaced by state security forces during fighting between the Turkish army and guerillas associated with the Kurdistan Worker's Party, popularly known as the PKK (*Partîya Karkerên Kurdistan*). Waves of migration have strained municipal infrastructures to near-breaking point, and poverty and unemployment levels remain high.

Although the worst of the fighting has since ended, most of these rural refugees have not been allowed or able to return to their villages. The city continues to struggle to accommodate its new population, the vast majority of which lives in extreme poverty, scarred by widespread experiences of violent trauma and ill-equipped to make a smooth transition to their newly urban environment. Unemployment is rampant – at some estimates, exceeding 70% – and the city's beleaguered municipal authority strains to provide adequate services to its residents. At the time of my fieldwork the political party that governed the city was Democratic Society Party

*(Demokratik Toplum Partisi, or DTP).*<sup>3</sup> The DTP is hampered by limited tax revenue and federal financial support, on the one hand, and by equally constrained political resources on the other, as the party faces continual threats of closure, prison sentences for its leaders, and accusations of supporting “terrorism” from much of the mainstream Turkish establishment.<sup>4</sup>

Arguably the metropolitan heart of Kurdish Turkey, Diyarbakir is home to a community of speakers whose communicative practices belie any easy suturing of language community and attendant ethnopolitical grouping. Kurdish and Turkish – taken for the moment as distinct denotational codes – mix and mingle on the tongues of the city’s inhabitants. Careful observation will extract patterns of use for which code is used where, by whom, in what way.<sup>5</sup> Socially meaningful relationships between speakers are enacted in the uneven movement between codes, and the lines of social differentiation – according to gender, generation, economic class, political orientation, and birthplace – are presupposed and reproduced in these linguistic interactions; the forms these relationships take will be elaborated at more length in the chapters below.

The data on which the dissertation is based consist in transcriptions of recorded audio files (formal interviews and informal conversations, as well as recordings of class sessions),

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<sup>3</sup> At the time of my fieldwork (2005-2007), the DTP controlled the Diyarbakir municipality, as well the municipal leadership in most of the cities and towns in the region. The DTP also had a small but politically significant representation at the National Parliament in Ankara. (MPs ran as “independents” in order to bypass Turkey’s extremely high 10% election threshold, which bars any representation by a party that fails to achieve at least 10% of national vote; after being elected as independents, the DTP members re-registered themselves in their party.) I discuss more recent developments in the political party later in the dissertation.

<sup>4</sup> The political party in power at the national level, the *The Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party, or AKP), came to national power in 2002. It benefitted from a groundswell of support from a wide swathe of Turkish society, most notably the modest lower- and newly-middle-classes of the provincial Anatolian heartland, as opposed to the Western coasts, which tended to be strongholds of the Republican People’s Party, the party founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, or the East and Southeast, where a long run of pro-Kurdish parties struggled to be allowed to enter parliament against enormous odds – typically banned for “aiding terrorism” or similar accusations.

<sup>5</sup> I discuss these patterns at greater length elsewhere in the dissertation. For more on the sociolinguistics of Kurdish in present-day Turkey, see also Coşkun, Derince, and Uçarlar 2010; Güçin and Öpengin 2008; Haig 2004; Öpengin 2009a; 2012; Scalbert-Yücel 2006.

extensive field notes, and textual media. During my fieldwork, I attended daily adult literacy classes for women taught by volunteers from the Mother-Child Education Foundation (*Anne Çocuk Eğitim Vakfı*) and held in a variety of locations (the Bağlar Women's Center, a community center funded by the Diyarbakir municipality, and other community women's centers, including informal classes held in a public laundry facility), as well as courses that operated directly through the National Education Ministry (*Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı*) and took place after hours in elementary schools. I also participated in Kurdish classes, which often tended to operate more informally, hovering at the margins of official recognition. These took place in community centers, the offices of local NGOs, and private homes, as well as on university campuses in Istanbul. I interviewed participants, teachers, administrators, and community leaders involved in literacy and Kurdish education, as well as members of the wider community – sisters, husbands, sons, and neighbors, political activists and community leaders. My interlocutors included those who saw in these classes new opportunities for emancipation and self-transformation, and those who decried these pedagogical practices as misguided and assimilating.

In addition to the research conducted in educational settings (both formal and informal) like these, much of my ethnographic attention was devoted to attending to the public presence of Kurdish more widely: from the circulation of new genres of Kurdish-code texts (from billboards and street signage to poetry volumes and newspapers), to debates over bilingualism and mother tongue education, to quiet grumblings and privately expressed anxieties about linguistic competence and authority.

A qualitative ethnographic project relies on careful notation of interviews and conversation, attention to the spaces and sites of encounter, and ongoing, reflexive analysis between researcher and interlocutor. I have transcribed and analyzed hours of recorded conversation, and I have many more hours of note taking from conversations where audio recording was not possible.<sup>6</sup> Textual analysis also plays an important role in my research: from policy reports to teacher training manuals, from analysis in academic publications to Op-Ed columns and news reports in a variety of newspapers (in both Kurdish and Turkish). In addition to these explicit and formal discussions, I also pay close attention to more quotidian forms of textual paraphernalia – the billboards and signs of the city, text messages and graffiti, municipal health pamphlets and children’s books, hand-scrawled posters at political rallies and comments on electronic social media. All of these help constitute the “textual landscape” that surrounds would-be learners and shapes how they encounter the written word.

My first field encounters with this textual landscape – and the stitching-together of forms of linguistic practice, institutional setting, and kind of person that emerge within it – were characterized by a series of baffling juxtapositions and seemingly unanswered questions. Like many an anthropologist before me, I had gone to the field with a series of prepared research questions and interests, only to discover that what was happening on the ground before me was simultaneously more confusing and more interesting than anything I had prepared from afar.

One cluster of questions rapidly emerged around the public role of Kurdish, particularly surrounding Kurdish textual production and who could, or could not – or would not – read it. As

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<sup>6</sup> In a context as politically fraught as this, it was not appropriate to insist on audio recording for all interviews; I sought to ensure fidelity to events by asking, as much as possible, my interlocutors to share with me their interpretations of these encounters as I took and reviewed my notes. This proved to be a productive catalyst for further reflection and collaborative interpretation.

I began to explore reading practices around all sorts of textual materials in Diyarbakir I became intrigued by a recurring cluster of distinctions being put forth by the people in the communities in which I was working: between language codes in which it is possible to readily imagine literate practices, and those in which it is not. Let me now turn to that distinction, and explore how ethnographic confusion – on my part, but sparked by the bafflement expressed by many of my interlocutors – illuminated a way into a deeply revealing field of social practice, conviction, and debate.

*The Conundrum of Kurdish Literacy: or, Who Gets to Have an Illiteracy Problem?*

Typical mornings in Diyarbakir saw me headed to the Bağlar Women’s Center, or another similar community center, to attend *okuma-yazma*, or literacy, classes. Typically sponsored either by a national literacy non-profit or by the Ministry of Education, these were classes designed for women and girls who had not gone to, or had not completed, elementary school. I also attended Kurdish language classes, whenever I could find them and for however long they lasted (in Chapter Three I describe some of the challenges these courses faced in staying afloat from week to week). These often took place in a neighborhood community center, or the offices of a Kurdish cultural organization or NGO. Much of my own Kurdish learning took place in quite small settings – a tutor and me, or a handful of interested participants gathered around a chalkboard after hours in a tutoring hall. On extended visits to Istanbul I attended classes held at universities – some officially announced and registered, others operating more marginally and discreetly.

On the face of it, these were very different kinds of classes: “literacy” on the one hand, and “Kurdish class,” on the other. Indeed, when I mentioned my attendance in such classrooms, most people in Diyarbakir understood these to be two different endeavors. They generally greeted my participation in Kurdish classes with equal parts approval and misgiving: the former a reflection of the important role that “language” has come to play in a Kurdish social-political project; the latter due to suspicions that I might be part of a larger nefarious American project of meddling in regional politics. Even granting the latter possibility, however, my learning Kurdish was widely considered to be a substantive, worthwhile endeavor – even as many people also expressed frustration that such classes should be necessary at all for a population whose “mother tongue” was supposed to be Kurdish.

My attendance at literacy classes, on the other hand, typically met with a shrug of disinterest or mildly condescending approval. Insofar as I had explained an interest in “women’s issues” and women are understood to be the primary target of “literacy campaigns” on the part of the Turkish state, for many interlocutors literacy classrooms constituted an obvious, if fairly inconsequential, research site. Literacy campaigns have stood at the center of longstanding Turkish state efforts of “modernize” and “develop” the nation’s citizenry, targeted particularly at those who, from the perspective of state officials in urban Ankara and Istanbul, reside in the impoverished hinterlands.

There were, however, residents of Diyarbakir – particularly among the politically engaged – who took issue with literacy classes for adult women, arguing that government efforts to encourage literacy training could not be understood outside of a longer context of Turkish

state intervention into Kurdish lives, including a century-long project of cultural and linguistic assimilation.

When introducing myself and describing where I spent my time, most of those I encountered were puzzled by why I was interested in spending time in these two kinds of classrooms. What, they wondered politely, did “literacy lessons” have to do with “Kurdish class”? How were these two connected, other than perhaps at the broadest level of critique against Turkish education policies? I often replied by saying that I was interested in “Kurdish literacy,” in whether and how people read and write in Kurdish, and how, more generally, people in Turkey read, write, speak, and think about language. Most people greeted this statement with a baffled shake of the head, and as often as not, changed the subject. The phrase I used, “literacy in Kurdish,” while technically – referentially – comprehensible, just didn’t make sense. This was the case whether I said it in Turkish (*okuma-yazma kürtçede*), or in Kurdish (*xwendin û nivîsandin bi kurdî*). Clearly, their headshaking indicated, this foreign researcher still had trouble making herself understood.

The blank stares and confused looks that greeted the notion of “Kurdish literacy” began to pique my interest: what was it about the linking of the two, *Kurdish* and *literacy*, that struck people as odd, bordering on incomprehensible? After all, despite the historically widespread use of spoken Kurdish by millions of citizens in Turkey, its presence as a written language – the appearance of Kurdish in printed form – is relatively new and has come to play a key role in Kurdish social and political activity. For many years texts published in Kurdish were extremely rare but textual production in Kurdish has soared over the past couple decades. Hundreds of



books, journals, and a daily newspaper circulate in Diyarbakir; the textual landscape includes billboards, “Do Not Litter” signs, and signage in park names and historic monuments in Kurdish.

As a result, whether and how one can access these textual materials is now a question confronting almost everyone who lives in the city, in some shape or form. Indeed, as I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Four, this explosion of Kurdish-language textual production has been accompanied by ever more commonly expressed insecurities about skill, competence, and authority in that language. As the parameters of expected language use shift, so too do the stakes of competence in respective codes.

Intrigued by the widespread assumption that “literacy” only made sense in reference to Turkish-code texts and settings, I began to explore the social significance of literacy in Diyarbakir – and the code(s) in which it made ethnographic sense to assume it could (or could not) take place. Examining the comparisons between Turkish literacy and Kurdish language classes, I considered the activities undertaken in each classroom setting. In both contexts, new alphabets were inscribed on the board, new vocabulary acquired, answers written on a chalkboard and unfinished homework sheepishly confessed. And while there were cases where students in the Kurdish classrooms were encountering that language from a position of limited speaking ability, this was also frequently the case for the encounter with Turkish in the literacy classroom. More often, however, students in both contexts were more or less conversationally fluent in the code being used, and were learning to read and write in that code.

To be sure, in many of the “Kurdish classrooms,” students were also being introduced to new vocabulary and grammatical forms, but the same could be said of many of the “literacy” classrooms, where the code of pedagogical instruction was not the code of first reference for

many students. Likewise, while in the literacy classrooms most of the students were learning to read and write for the first time in any language, in the Kurdish classrooms the situation was more mixed: some of the students were already familiar with writing (in Turkish), while others did not know how to write at all. The range of competencies, in other words, spanned a broad spectrum in both contexts. On a more abstract level, as I will demonstrate in more depth below, inextricably connected to both kinds of classrooms – and the larger social milieus of which they were a part – were questions of inclusion and exclusion, pedagogy and correctness, gender and citizenship, “tradition” and “modernity.” Throughout the dissertation I explore the ways that language practices implicate precisely these questions, revealing both the role of language in ideological processes and the ideologies that guide and shape language use (Kroskrity 2000; Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994).

The early months of fieldwork led me to ask not so much what is or should be done about the “problem” of illiteracy in any given code, but to explore whether and how “literacy” becomes a social fact, and “illiteracy” a social problem. To do this, I investigated the semiotic connections that wed problems of inscription to categories of people, questions of language code to histories of state intervention.

Over the many months I spent alongside students in both kinds of classrooms, I continued to encounter this same sense that “literacy” just did not apply to “Kurdish.” In conversation after conversation, it became increasingly clear that something prevented most people from conceiving of “literacy” and “Kurdish” as conjoined in any but the most glaring of statistical ways – that is, that the regions where Kurdish is most prominent are also the regions with the highest “illiteracy” rates. Insofar as “literacy” means something ethnographically particular in

Turkey, it is inextricably connected to the “problem” of “illiteracy” – associated with particular categories of people and social-geographic regions of the state.

As I discuss throughout the dissertation, “Kurdish,” too, is connected to categories of people and regional distinctions, but it is inflected very differently in its relationship to governmental interventions and statecraft. *Okuma-yazma* is inextricably imbricated with certain kinds of government practice – paternalistic, authoritative, and deeply committed to a developmentalist modernizing project (Caymaz and Szurek 2007; Lewis 1999; Perry 1985). To extend “literacy” beyond these contexts, then – to imagine a “Kurdish literacy” – is to juxtapose realms of state practice that are rarely brought together: *Kurdish*, which in Turkish state practice has been many things (see Chapters Three, Four, and Five) but is frequently characterized as an unavoidably marked code – political, unmodern, potentially threatening, and linked to exclusive identity; and *literacy*, for decades a central plank in the government’s program of national development – understood by many observers to be universal, modernizing, practical, and necessary. In other words, the juxtaposition of *Kurdish* and *literacy* conflates issues of national sovereignty with issues of national welfare, domains that appear locally to index different concerns (and kinds of people).

As I demonstrate, this is due in great measure to widely held (academic and popular) understandings of “literacy” as primarily a set of technical skills, taught in a “literacy lesson” to pupils who lack the ability to decipher graphic inscription. According to this view, these skills can be contrasted to those acquired in “Language [X] class,” where one learns a new language code, be it “French,” “English,” “Kurdish,” etc. Yet as I argue below, the very capacity to

distinguish between these sets of “skills” itself relies on a number of revealing ideological linkages between forms of linguistic practice, kinds of people, and features of personhood.

Part of the goal of this dissertation is to analyze both ethnographic and analytic understandings of these terms – *Kurdish, language, literacy*, and so forth. Examining the linkages between these objects and practices – including the moments of dissonant connections and uneasy sutures – is an entry to a wider analysis of the politics of language use in contemporary Turkey. To understand the contextual presuppositions that shape how a “language” comes have a “literacy problem” requires examining the processes through which something called “Turkish” has emerged as one such self-evidently consolidated “language” – and one for which the merely “technical” definition of literacy can apply (see Chapter Two).

I suggest that just as literacy might best be understood as *literacies* – with an emphasis squarely placed on their historically grounded multiplicity (Collins 1995; Street 1993) – so, too, might we investigate *illiteracies* as equally multiple, contingent, and historically emergent. The aim of this project is not so much to re-define (il)literacies, as analytic terms to deploy across contexts, but rather to examine the emergence of “literacy” and “illiteracy” as ethnographic objects, and in so doing, refine their analytic contours. Another way of provoking this discussion might be to ask: What would it take for the language called “Kurdish” to *also* have an “illiteracy” problem? What transformations to the extant linguistic ideological landscape will be required, and with what associated effects?

The puzzled responses that greeted my professed interest in “Kurdish literacy” reveal more than just an awkward fieldwork moment or dilemma of translation. Exploring the disjuncture in these terms opens a window onto the shifting field of language politics in Turkey

today: the institutionalization of “languages,” and their uneven capacity to structure and scatter speakers in a field of social distinctions.

I draw on a broadly interdisciplinary range of perspectives in grounding my ethnographic approach. Inspired by calls within literacy studies to investigate “the nature of socially mediated literacy” (Daiute 1993:2; Cook-Gumperz 1986; Street 1984), and by linguistic anthropology’s concerns to understand how ideologies about language frame language-in-use (Silverstein 1979; Woolard & Schieffelin 1994), I investigate the forms of subjectivity presumed by and engendered in new relationships to text (from hospital forms to text messages, novels to grammar books). How, for example, does a family hierarchy shift when a child is charged with managing bureaucratic encounters at the pharmacy or benefits office? How do we understand what causes an educated office worker to stumble when she tries to read words she is used to encountering orally, as when picking up a Kurdish newspaper? How do feelings of shame, dismay, or loyalty shape the ways that a young man learns to read Kurdish as a heritage speaker, or an elderly woman attempts to decipher a Turkish bus route or street sign?

*“We Are Frankly Nationalist”: Creating the Modern Turkish Nation-State*

Scholarship on the emergence of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 has long focused on the radical nature of societal transformation in that period, the pervasive and utterly thoroughgoing character of Republican efforts to transform the newly national populace; while evaluative assessments of that transformation range from the generally laudatory (e.g., B. Lewis 2001) to the sharply critical (e.g., Zeydanlıoğlu 2007; Üngör 2012), the general scholarly consensus is that the early-mid-twentieth century marked a time of radical transformation in the social fabric

of the former Ottoman Empire.<sup>7</sup> With the fragmentation and collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and the transformation of what remained of it into the Turkish Republic in 1923, the leaders of the new Republic were confronted with what appeared to them a dismaying social heterogeneity, one that extended across linguistic, economic, regional, and religious domains (Zürcher 1993; Cizre 2001; Zeydanlıoğlu 2007).<sup>8</sup>

Into this historiography is woven the story of Kurds, which tends to depict a long and fractious history of treaties brokered and broken, loyalties pledged and uprooted, characterizing the centuries of involvement between Ottoman rulers based in Istanbul, Safavid leaders in Iran, and Kurdish leaders in the mountainous hinterlands of those respective empires (Sasuni 1992; Hassanpour 2005; McDowell 2004; van Bruinessen 1992). Aspects of this history have been variously incorporated into Kurdish nationalist historiographies; the extent to which those earlier revolts can be characterized as “Kurdish” or “nationalist” is a matter of heated debate for both scholars and other commentators (e.g. Bozarslan 2002; van Bruinessen 1993: 90; Olson 1992; Vali 2003; 2005). The stakes of being able to claim centuries of resistance, based on acknowledging communitarian identity with those who fought in various 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century revolts, for example, are obviously significant in contemporary claims to territorial, linguistic,

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<sup>7</sup> Some recent scholarship has pushed back against arguments that emphasize only radical breaks with earlier traditions and absolutely pervasive state control over, for example, the Kurdish regions, pointing out both continuities with earlier social forms (e.g. Özoğlu 2011; 2012) and the unevenness of actual state “success” in the Kurdish hinterlands, pointing to the relative failure of many efforts to consolidate state rule and integrate Kurds (Aslan 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Scholarly descriptions of early Republican concern with societal heterogeneity often echo, in their own voice, a similar taken for granted assumption that the form this heterogeneity took was of self-evident concern: that is, similar categories resonate across these descriptions of what a modern nation-state might look like, and what would constitute challenges to its success. Thus the Ottoman period is often described as a “mosaic” with an “embarrassing diversity” of “ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian attachments” (Cizre 2001: 229), or otherwise critics of the assimilating logics of Turkish language policy often themselves presume “language [to be]...the most important [...] point of reference for both individuals and society (Coşkun et al. 2011: 13-14),” where “language” is understood as a bounded code associated with a given group of people; see Chapter Five for more elaboration of this point.

and historical sovereignty (Sheyholislami 2011; Hassanpour 1992; 2003). Both scholarly and more popular accounts of Kurdish political history often start with a recitation of the history of revolts and uprisings, first against Ottoman rulers in Istanbul and later against Turkish Republican leaders in Ankara.<sup>9</sup>

In the transition period between these, the Young Turk cultural revolution (roughly 1913-1950) was noteworthy for deliberate and systematic efforts to extend the reach and purchase of Turkish nationalism throughout the citizenry of late Ottoman period and the young Turkish Republic (Zürcher 1992; Üngör 2012; Zeydanlıoğlu 2007). Historiographical accounts of the period vary in their assessment of Young Turk educational and cultural policies: some offer more muted assessments of the actual success (Lieven 2002) or of the explicitly racist content of the policies (Winter 1984), while others foreground cultural policies of the early Republic as openly oppressive and racist toward non-Turkish [mostly] Muslim populations, particularly Kurds (Hassanpour 1991; Çapar 2006), using terms such as “colonization” and “cultural genocide” to describe assimilationist policies in eastern regions of Turkey (Beşikçi 2004; cited in Üngör 2012: 129).

The Armenian Genocide of 1915-1917 (Akçam 2004; Dadrian 2004) and the population exchanges between Greece and Turkey in 1923 (Aktar 2000) had achieved some homogenization on the basis of religion, with the death, exile, and/or exchange of millions of people no longer considered legitimate citizens. The nationalist cadres of the new Republic, however, remained convinced that greater societal uniformity was still called for, and they set to work constructing

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<sup>9</sup> Bulloch and Morris 1993, whose journalistic account, “No Friends But the Mountains: the Tragic History of the Kurds,” exemplifies this tendency; see also O’Leary, McGarry, and Salih 2005; Izady 1992). For a critique of the “Orientalist” tendency to frame Kurdish issues almost entirely within the framework of “rebellion” see Özsoy 2013.

the kind of nation-state they deemed necessary for success on the world stage. Secularism, nationalism, and unshakable societal unity were understood to be the cornerstones of national success (Çağaptay 2006; Matçupyan 1998); a by-now extensive scholarly and popular literature exists detailing the ways that early national leaders sought to establish a Turkish nation that would meet their standards of ethnic and religious homogeneity and secular modernity (Zürcher 2003; B. Lewis 1961; Keyder 1987).

To meet these goals, far-reaching reforms were put into place, aimed at intervening in virtually every aspect of social life: from the abolishment of the Caliphate and the installation of secular forms of legal authority, to the imposition of mandatory surnames and the outlawing of forms of dress associated with Ottoman social distinctions. Among the most ambitious and fiercely promoted of these reforms were those that intervened into the language practices of the new nation, promoting linguistic unity and purity and forcibly establishing Turkish as the sole, self-evident, and necessary language of the modern Turkish state (Aydingün and Aydingün 2004; Çolak 2004; Caymaz and Szurek 2007; Sadoğlu 2003). These language policies will be examined in more detail below, following a brief overview of the broader transformations that took place in the early decades of the Turkish Republic.

The military and civilian bureaucratic elite – known as *Kemalists* following Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk), the founder of the Turkish Republic – who oversaw the political organization of the young Republic in the years following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire were deeply influenced by the ideological tenets of nationalism and modernization circulating widely at the time (Zürcher 2003; Gulalp 2005), and they saw their task as one of bringing what they perceived as an inadequately modernized populace into, in Atatürk's own words, “the



contemporary level of civilization” as swiftly as possible (Zeydanlıoğlu 2007: 100). Top-down, elite-driven, and fiercely ambitious, this was, famously, “Enlightenment by fiat” (Gulalp 2005: 352). Among the most pressing questions facing these new elites was determining the foundations for the kind of secure and powerful nation-state they hoped to establish; having rejected the “communitarian,” heterogeneous Imperial structure as prone to collapse and insufficiently modern (Muller 1996), the founders sought answers in an increasingly strident ethnic-racial definition of Turkishness (Çağaptay 2006; Caymaz 2008), and in ever more deliberate efforts to “Turkify” (*türkleştirmek*) the citizenry.

These perspectives and policies predated the founding of the Republic, extending back into the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when nationalist intellectuals began commissioning sociological and anthropological studies “to justify the Turkification of Anatolia in general and Kurds in particular” (Zeydanlıoğlu 2007: 101; Dündar 2001), and publicly proclaimed the desirability of “annihilat[ing] all the languages of our country except Turkish” (Arai 1994: 18, cited in Zeydanlıoğlu 2007: 100-101). (Members of the Committee of Union and Progress, the late Ottoman nationalist party to which most of these elites belonged, would go on to become the Kemalists of the Republican period.)

Inaugurated in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these policies were continued, systematized, and extended by the Kemalists, who sought to anchor their new nation-state in the kind of long historical trajectory deemed necessary for successful modernization. Crucial to that project was establishing the definition of the “real Turk” and establishing “Turks” as primary –

indeed, many argued, sole – legitimate citizens and political actors.<sup>10</sup> The national leadership began a lengthy process of what its architects called *le turquisme*, seeking to orient the affective, practical, and linguistic norms of the entire citizenry toward a singular national framework.

The question, therefore, of how to address and acknowledge the existence of particular forms of social heterogeneity within the national population became particularly fraught. Increasingly, the Turkish leadership claimed the inhabitants of Turkey – barring the limited populations officially deemed “minorities” under the terms of the Lausanne Treaty (essentially, non-Muslims like Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Jewish communities) – to consist of Turks (Çağaptay 2006; Işın and Işyar 2005). Over subsequent decades the extent to which the existence of non-Turkish populations was acknowledged varied and shifted, with explicit mention of “Kurds” and “tribal peoples” in the early years gradually replaced in later years with more oblique references to “mountain Turks,” “backwards citizens,” “citizens in the Southeastern regions,” and, eventually, “terrorists.”

In an oft-cited passage from 1926 addressing the Second Conference of Turkish Hearths, İsmet İnönü, a prominent statesman and loyal Kemalist leader, stated that no alternative to absolute loyalty to the Turkish nation would be tolerated:

*Biz açıkça milliyetçiyiz... ve milliyetçilik bizim yegâne birleştirici faktörümüzdür. Türk çoğunluğu karşısında diğer unsurların hiçbir etkisi yoktur. Ülkemizde yaşayanları ne pahasına olursa olsun türkleştirmeliyiz. Ve 'le turquisme' veya Türklerine karşı çıkanları yok edeceğiz.*

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<sup>10</sup> Yeğen (1999; 2004) has analyzed the changing parameters of the legal definition of, and legislation around, who exactly constituted Turkish over the first decades of the Republic, noting the persistence of these inconsistencies – a kind of definitional “undecidability” - across decades and respective Turkish Constitutions (2004: 62).

We are openly/frankly nationalist... and nationalism is the sole factor of our unity. No other element has any influence other than the Turkish majority. No matter what, it is our duty to Turkify all those who live in our country. And we will annihilate those who oppose Turks or Turkishness [*le turquisme*] (cited in Yıldız 2004: 155-156).<sup>11</sup>

The frankness of İnönü's nationalism was widely shared by government leaders across the country; Atatürk himself called for the creation of "a Turkish youth strong enough to battle other nations" and impervious to "influences foreign to our own character," and enthusiasm for a radical civilizational shift echoed across institutional settings, from lecture podiums to ministry hallways, from parliamentary proceedings to academic reports (Üngör 2012: 130). In a speech about the importance of "national education" [*millî eğitim*], İnönü bemoaned the lack of a sufficiently united and homogeneous social order: "the people still do not exhibit the appearance of a monolithic [*mütecannis*] nation" (Yücel 1994: 25). "There can be," he continued, "no other cultures in this nation...[I]f we are to live, we shall live as a monolithic nation. That is the general aim for the system we call national education."

In another typical example of how "education was the centerpiece of the Young Turk party's political platform for the 'internal colonization' (*dahili kolonizasyon*) of the eastern

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<sup>11</sup> The Turkish Hearths (*Türk Ocakları*) were cultural/pedagogical centers established across Anatolia in order to disseminate Turkish nationalist principles and promote linguistic competence in Turkish. The stridence of the nationalism expressed by the delegates to these annual conferences (published annually in conference proceedings) is noteworthy even in a time of widespread and sweeping nationalist fervor; see Üngör 2012: 130-137 for analysis and examples.

provinces” (Üngör 2012: 130), the Interior Minister, Şükrü Kaya, gave a speech before Parliament in 1934 in which he clarified the goals of a “national education”:

No matter what happens, it is our obligation to immerse those living in our society in the civilization of Turkish society and to have them benefit from the prosperity of civilization. Why should we still speak of the Kurd Mehmet, the Circassian Hasan, or the Laz Ali. This would demonstrate the weakness of the dominant element... *If anybody has any difference inside him, we need to erase that in the schools and in the body politic, so that man will be as Turkish as me and serve the homeland. (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi zabıt ceridesi 1934: Vol. 2(71):249; cited in Üngör 2012: 131, emphasis in Üngör)*

As in comparable settings elsewhere, education of the newly national populace was deemed crucial to the nation-building project.<sup>12</sup> Mustafa Kemal Atatürk himself launched national campaigns for education, propounding his role as “Teacher in Chief” throughout the 1920s and 1930s (Yücel 1993). Photographs and statues of him in explicitly pedagogical roles – pointing at the new Latin alphabet with a ruler, standing before a chalkboard – were widely disseminated and continue to be displayed in Turkish schools, parks, and public squares. The reach of the new institutions of pedagogy was extensive and pervasive, stretching from urban centers to villages and rural settlements far from the new capital in Ankara. Both Turkish and outside scholars praised the ambitious reach of these education campaigns, calling education “the greatest success” of the Turkish modernization effort more broadly (B. Lewis 2001; Kazamias

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<sup>12</sup> The literature on this subject is vast; see Tilly (1994); Gellner (1983); Anderson (1983); Hobsbawm (1990) for canonical political science overviews of the subject; see Coşkun et al (2011); Kazamias (1966); Lewis (2001) for overviews of the Turkish case.

1966), and describing with enthusiasm the dramatic rise in school attendance and literacy rates, particularly for men. That the core message of this education system was the inculcation of nationalist values, including absolute loyalty to the Turkish nation-state and to its unshakable principles of ethnic homogeneity, secularism, and territorial indivisibility, has been amply described (Copeaux 1998; Zürcher 2003; Matcupyan 1998; Çağaptay 2006; Işın & Işyar 2005; Yıldız 2004; İ. Kaplan 2002; S. Kaplan 2006).

Within this system, literacy was prioritized as both index of and means to modernization. Perduring associations between the ability to decipher printed text and particular forms of subjectivity continue to this day; Chapter Two takes these up in more detail, particularly as they relate to the gendered construction of the modern, loyal, and literate citizen.

One of the most dramatic reforms enacted by early Kemalist leaders – and certainly one that drew worldwide contemporary attention and continues to feature prominently in historiographies of the period – was the replacing of the Arabic script used in Ottoman Turkish with the Roman alphabet and associated language reform that led to the creation of Modern Standard Turkish (G. Lewis 1999; Caymaz and Szurek 2007; Ertürk 2012). I discuss the consolidation of modern Turkish as the anchoring code of its affiliated language community in more detail below; in discussing education in this section I also wish to point out the several related, relevant aspects of alphabet reform on the modern education project more widely. Alphabet reform was considered crucial because the leadership wished to install a system that more resembled “modern,” European writing traditions (G. Lewis 1999). The new system was also deemed to more “accurately” reflect the phonological particularities of Turkish, itself also the object of major explicit standardizing intervention, as detailed below, although this is of

course more revealing of the ideological contours of the contemporary linguistic landscape when it came to the iconic linkages of script and various social qualities than of any inherent phonological necessity.

Equally crucial, as Lewis (1999) and Caymaz and Szurek (2007) point out, the replacement of the Arabic script with the Latin also enabled a decisive visual and pragmatic-institutional break with the Ottoman past. This took place at the visual level of script, transforming the graphic landscape of the country – signage on roads and in transit centers, on buildings, stores, schools, offices, and government ministries. In three weeks between 8 and 25 October 1928, for example, government officials across the country were evaluated for their competence in the new letters. Two days later, on the first of November, the Grand National Assembly passed Law No. 1353, “On the Adoption and Application of the New Turkish Letters.” It mandated that all documents in the new Roman script be accepted immediately; the use of books in the former script was forbidden, all government correspondence would have to take place in the new letters, and Deputies to Parliament suddenly discovered that membership in the Grand Assembly was prohibited to ‘*Türkçe okuyup yazmak bilmiyenler [sic]*’ (those who do not know how to read and write Turkish) (Lewis 1999: 37-38). The replacement of the alphabet thus effectively disrupted entire sprawling systems of pedagogical, religious, and textual authority. New elites were created – those who could navigate this new script and new orientations of pedagogical authority – and old ones undercut.

With the *Tevhid-i Tedrisat* (“Unification of Education”) law of 1924, public education in Turkey was officially prohibited from taking place in any language other than Turkish, with the exception of schools serving minority communities as designated in the Lausanne Treaty, i.e.

what few members of Greek Orthodox, Jewish, and Armenian communities who remained following the population exchanges, genocide, and exile immediately preceding and following the founding of the Republic. The closing of all Islamic schools, including the *medrese* in Kurdish-speaking eastern regions of the country, also had important consequences. In the *medrese* setting, Kurdish was commonly used both inside and outside the classroom. Although it was “the medium of communication but only partly a medium of instruction (Öpengin 2010: 68)” – i.e., a language of communication more than the object of pedagogy itself (a distinction that is important and will be covered in more detail in Chapter Three), the abolition of a primary context where (male) children encountered Kurdish in settings of authoritative, formal pedagogy was hugely consequential. Indeed, this seems to have been an explicit goal of the abolition of these *medrese* – the aim was not just to disrupt existing sites for the reproduction of religious authority, but also to transform linguistically diverse contexts of pedagogy into Turkish-only.

The sense of strangeness that interlocutors in early 21<sup>st</sup> century Diyarbakir conveyed to me during my fieldwork, when describing how disconcerting it felt to sit in a classroom, at a desk, with blackboards and notebooks, listening to Kurdish, is a legacy of these policies: the ideological conditions for that “strangeness” trace back to a long and often violently imposed history of ensuring that Kurdish was not a language of pedagogy in Turkey; the circumscription of Kurdish was not limited to places of schooling, of course, but extended into and across vast swathes of social life. The broader language policies of the Turkish state have, as will be discussed in more detail below, been devoted to ensuring the exclusive allocation of Turkish as the language of the national public. To understand those processes – as well as the long history of efforts to transform and disrupt them – we turn now to examine the implementation of

language policies in the Turkish Republic, beginning with the founding of the republic and continuing into the present. This field of shifting legal and institutional policies frames the field within which Turkish and Kurdish have consolidated as relatively standard linguistic forms.

*“A Sacred Treasure”: Turkish Language Reforms and Policies across the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

Under the Ottoman *millet* system, communities were defined largely in terms of religious commitments (e.g., a Greek-Orthodox *millet*, an Armenian *millet*, a Jewish *millet*, a Muslim *millet*, and so on), and much of the governance of these communities was largely left to their leaders (Zürcher 1993; Çolak 1994). One repercussion of this system was that Ottoman Turkish (*Osmanlıca*) had not disseminated widely among non-Muslim subjects, although it often operated as a second language of non-Turkish Muslim elites, including Kurdish tribal leaders (Sadoğlu 2003: 61). The lands governed by Ottoman rule included a wide array of languages spoken, religious traditions practiced, and relationships to the Imperial capital. For the post-independence leaders of the early Turkish Republic, the plurilingualism of the Ottoman system was considered symptomatic of a wider problem: an unacceptably heterogeneous social fabric, whose multi-ethnic, multi-communitarian, multi-cultural structure was blamed for imperial collapse, and deemed incompatible with future success as a modern nation-state.<sup>13</sup>

Obsessions with more concretely defining national identity – and doing so through the championing of Turkish – had already begun in the late decades of the Ottoman empire; they extended into and picked up pace during the early decades of the Republic (Balçık 2002; Çolak 2004). The ability to not only speak Turkish, but to identify it as a distinct and bounded language

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<sup>13</sup> This is not to claim that Ottoman Turkish was itself self-evidently one singular code, interpreted by those who encountered and spoke it in the same way; there was tremendous variation in both its linguistic and ideological aspects; for examples, see, among others: Akiba 2007; Ertürk 2012; Lewis 1999; Oualdi 2007.



and to develop an appropriately proprietary and affectionate relationship to it, became part of the definition of a “true Turk.”<sup>14</sup> Atatürk declared the importance of language in building the new nation – and a population of people suitably loyal to it – in the following words:

The Turkish language is also a sacred treasure for the Turkish nation because the Turkish nation knows that its moral values, customs, memories, interests, in short, everything that makes it a nation was preserved through its language despite the endless catastrophes it has experienced (Virtanen 2003: 13).

In a paper presented at the Second Congress of Turkish History, one scholar made the following claim, one in which the language practices and historicity of the citizenry appear grounded in two simultaneous but not necessarily overlapping kinds of claims – biological links to groupness, and/or the belief in those biological links; actual lived and shared experience, and/or the adoption of claims to shared experience. In all of these, however, claims to affiliation are paramount: loyalty must be felt and explicitly stated:

The Turkish nation consists of citizens who speak Turkish, who carry Turkish blood in their veins or who believe [themselves] to descend from Turks, whose forefathers have experienced the good and bad days of Turkish history or who have adopted those memories, how are attached to Turkishness with their heart and soul and who state that they are Turkish (Maksudyan 2005: 55; cited in Çoşkun et al. 2011: 27).

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<sup>14</sup> The historical specificity of this ideological quality of some language codes – to operate as anchors, in this sense, to particular language communities – will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

These overlapping efforts to consolidate the national and linguistic homogeneity of the citizenry increasingly relied on enforcing the ubiquity of the Turkish language in all places and settings across the country. This took place through an array of means, including the proscription of non-Turkish languages in public settings (Kaplan 2002; Yıldız 2004), the Turkification of personal and geographic (i.e. village and regional) names (Aslan 2007), and the establishment of a wide range of cultural policies and community centers through which “Turks speaking foreign dialects” (in the words of one Interior Minister in the 1930s) would acquire Turkish as their mother tongue (Bayrak 1993: 506-509; cited in Coşkun et al. 2011: 28). As will be discussed in more detail in the chapters that follow, the notion that a mother tongue – a *new* or *replacement* mother tongue – might be obtainable only makes sense at a certain population level, and cast over a broad temporal span. The paradox of acquiring through institutional means that which is otherwise definitionally understood to be pre-institutional (acquired in the bosom of the family, prior to the encounter with institutions of the state) becomes more acutely apparent when considering given biographical individuals. Yet the commonplaceness of this claim – that of not speaking one’s own mother tongue – is not only widespread among Kurdish citizens in Turkey, it is, perhaps, one of the most dominant idioms through which the politics of language currently plays out.

The apportioning of Turkish to spaces and settings of public life was accompanied by thoroughgoing reforms into the language itself (Lewis 1999; Ertürk 2012). Purging Turkish of “foreign” words followed the alphabet reform and continued for decades. This was not simply a matter of creating more “Turkish” equivalents to newly necessary lexemes (i.e., for technological objects like typewriters or political formations like parliaments) but replacing widely circulating

constructions deemed too “Persian” or “Arabic” to have legitimate place in a modern, West-facing standard language. This effort, which was launched with the Laws on the Unification of Education (1924) and the Adoption and Application of the New Turkish Letters (1928), arguably reached its apex in the 1930s.

It was in this decade that the Turkish Language Society (*Türk Dil Kurumu*) was established to “reveal the genuine beauty and richness of the Turkish language and to promote it to the high position it deserved” (Uçarlar 2009: 121; Çağaptay 2002: 250). Scholars associated with the TDK were proponents of *Öztürkçe*, or “Pure Turkish,” and many vigorously promoted language reform, including, especially, the replacing of “foreign” (but especially Arabic and Persian) words with “pure Turkish” equivalents. They also promoted elaborate theories about the foundational role Turks had played in the development of world civilization, including the since oft-mocked “Sun-Language Theory” and “Turkish History Thesis.”<sup>15</sup> Although the most ambitious of these claims were themselves relatively short-lived (by the beginning of the 1950s, both history and sun-language theories had been abandoned), historians of Turkish language policies argue that their legacies still linger in school textbooks (Coşkun et al. 2011: 31), as well as in national history curricula (Ersanlı 2006; S. Kaplan 2002).

These theories, which had their origins in ostensibly scholarly institutions and academic departments, were accompanied by campaigns that extended outside the academy and sought to explicitly intervene in the daily speaking practices of the population. The “Citizen, Speak Turkish!” [*Vatandaş, Türkçe konuş!*] campaigns, for example, began on a university campus in

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<sup>15</sup>The “Sun-Language Theory” that emerged at this time in conjunction with the equally far-reaching Turkish History Thesis essentially placed the origin of all the world’s linguistic and civilizational developments at the feet of the Turkish language and people. For more, see Sadoğlu 2003; Ersanlı 2006.

Istanbul, and included the posting of banners and signs in mass transportation ( ferries, buses, and trams) that that urged citizens to speak only in Turkish (Aslan 2008; Çağaptay 2006). Although the campaign initially targeted local non-Muslim minorities in Istanbul, it soon expanded both geographically to other cities, and programmatically to include both “non-Muslims and Muslim communities whose mother tongue was not Turkish...As a result people who spoke little Turkish attempted to speak Turkish in public, even if poorly” (Coşkun et al. 2011: 31).

The Settlement Law enacted in 1934 further entrenched the government’s efforts to intervene into the transformation of the citizenry, with a three-part plan to shift populations around the country according to linguistic practices and community affiliation, with the goal of “creat[ing] a country that speaks a single language, thinks the same and feels the same” (Sadoğlu 2003: 287). It was followed with the nationalization of place names and personal names (Aslan 2007; Hür 2009) at a vast nation-wide scale – over 12,000 villages (approximately 35% of the total number) in Turkey have undergone a name change since the founding of the Republic, including hundreds of name-changes as recently as the 1980s (Tünçel 2000: 27-29).

The middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the entrenchment of the ideological underpinnings of the kinds of language policies described above, even as the political system underwent considerable changes – from the introduction of multi-party elections for the first time in 1950 to a series of military coups aimed at securing the Kemalist (i.e. nationalist, secularist) foundations of the political order. Following the 1960 coup d’état, a shifting series of reforms were put into place, revoked, and reinstalled, regarding the intensity with which state institutions sought to intervene into the “purity” and ubiquity of Turkish in daily life (Balçık 2002; Lewis 1999).

Rising political discontent of the 1960s and 1970s sharpened the stakes of the language issue, as state-supported right-wing groups sought to violently suppress an emergent oppositional politics that challenged official narratives of ethnic, religious, and linguistic homogeneity. On September 12, 1980, the Turkish Armed Forces took control of the country. The coup d'état decisively extinguished such political rebellions, and coup leaders forcibly addressed themselves to virtually every contour of social-political life in the country: political parties, trade unions, student organizations, and virtually all other forms of group activity were banned, and thousands were killed, detained, or forced into exile. In 1982, a new constitution was put into place that severely curtailed political and social expression across the board. In this new constitution, as in all previous constitutions, Turkish was stipulated as the official language; the new constitution of 1982, however, went a step further, declaring that the statute on official language not only could not be amended, but *proposals* to amend were also forbidden (Uçarlar 2009; Öktem 2004).

These stricter rules about the use of “languages prohibited by the Constitution” effectively banned the public presence of Kurdish, including both spoken language and textual publication. This banning took places across contexts and scales, as interlocutors in Diyarbakir never tired of telling me: villagers were fined by the local gendarmerie for conversing with each other in the only language they knew; prisoners in the infamous Diyarbakir prison were reduced to communicating by sign language with visiting family and friends, lest they be beaten or have their visits curtailed for speaking, again, in the only language they knew. The possession of cassette tapes of Kurdish music, or signing a document with a name spelled *Şivan* instead of *Şivan*, became the grounds of potential imprisonment. A conversation between two friends on an Istanbul street corner might lead to a visit to the local police station, where the guilty parties

would be roughed up and released after a detention only as arbitrary as it was terrifying; who knew whether anyone would know how to track you down, if you were whisked off without witnesses? The corpora of public settings – spatial, textual, interactional, institutional – were overtly and decisively marked for the use of Turkish, and Turkish only.

The militarization of the entire eastern and southeastern provinces of the country took hold, with armed battles between leftist Kurdish guerillas and Turkish state security forces leading to the destruction of thousands of villages and farms, and the migration of millions into cities like Diyarbakir, Izmir, and Istanbul; entire provinces of the country were declared to be under martial law.<sup>16</sup>

The ongoing consequences of this military conflict continue to this day, with over 40,000 dead, thousands imprisoned, millions forcibly evacuated from their homes, their livelihoods and social networks radically transformed. These facts are crucial to understanding the militarized contours of the politics of language in contemporary Turkey. The “Kurdish Question” (*Kürt sorunu*) in Turkey is almost ubiquitously framed, in both state and mainstream popular discourses, in terms of threats to national sovereignty. Efforts by Kurdish activists to create the contexts for a more public presence of Kurdish, therefore, necessarily wrestle with these politicized parameters. Allegiance to a Kurdish code – regardless of capacity to deploy it – is deeply implicated in larger frameworks of cultural and political value in Turkey, formulations that position the issue of a “mother tongue” (as it is increasingly framed) at the heart of projects of cultural legitimacy, moral authority, and political sovereignty.

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<sup>16</sup> The official “State of Exception” (*olağanüstü hal*) was still in place in certain places during my fieldwork. And, although those designations (and accompanying latitude for “extraordinary measures” on the part of the police and military) were lifted, they have since been reinstated in particular towns and areas of the countryside following the recent uptick in violence in the summer of 2015.

These circumstances raised the stakes of challenging the Turkish nationalist narrative, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and vigorous political efforts to control popular understandings of the existence of Kurdish began to replace mere scholarly references to “inferior varieties of Turkish.” In a not uncommon ironic twist, however, these increasing efforts by state officials to enforce the ban on “languages prohibited by the Constitution” might well be understood as having helped constitute what had previously been un-admissible – providing points of articulation, defiance, and (eventually) legal contestation in a variety of increasingly public settings, from domestic and European Union courtrooms to mediatized political events, musical concerts, and political protests.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, the story of the consolidation of the Kurdish language is a far rockier one than that outlined above regarding the production and dissemination of a seemingly self-evident Turkish. Kurdish, as a code, has confronted obstacles ranging from the outright bans and legal persecution described above to ongoing implicit devaluation and dismissal. Despite the efforts of a few committed elites in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, notably members of the Bedirxan family, no single bounded Kurdish code has emerged with institutions of enforcement and reproduction like those underlying Turkish. For decades, the same official state policy in Turkey that proclaimed Turkish the sole official language of the country also denied the existence of a “language” called Kurdish, claiming that the “Turkish” spoken by “mountain Turks” (*dağ türkleri*) was simply an irregular and degenerate variety of Turkish, irredeemably corrupted by vulgar Persianisms and Arabicisms (Hassanpour 1992; Çolak 2004). As has already been detailed above, in the

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<sup>17</sup> See Haig (2004) for a discussion of the “invisibilisation of Kurdish” in official Turkish language policies over much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The shift toward ever growing visibility along the lines mentioned above – court cases, direct defiance of existing bans, etc. – marks a decisive contrast to these earlier policies, and is due in no small part to the active, ongoing, and often personally risky political actions of Kurdish activists.

governmentalizing logic of the time, it was considered a matter of urgent necessity to bring the national body as swiftly and efficiently as possible into a linguistic unity of modern, standard Turkish, and to do so at the explicit expense of the other languages spoken in the country, e.g. Kurdish, Laz, Armenian, etc. (Aslan 2007; Aytürk 2004; Çapar 2006; Üngör 2012; Zeydanlioğlu 2012).<sup>18</sup>

Although the days of exiling or imprisoning individuals for merely possessing Kurdish-code texts are over (with the lifting, in 1991, of the ban on the use of Kurdish in public), the official status of Turkish remains constitutionally enshrined and enforced. The third article of the constitution states that “the Turkish state, with its territory and nation, is an indivisible entity. Its language is Turkish.” It is worth noting the distinction that emerges in these constitutional formulations between “official language,” i.e., Turkish, and “tongues traditionally used by Turkish citizens in their everyday lives,” the legal rubric under which Kurdish, Laz, Ladino, Arabic, and other non-majority languages in Turkey are collectively cast.

This distinction between “official” language and “traditional, everyday tongues” (in Turkish there is no lexical distinction between “language” and “tongue” – both are *dil*) was articulated more explicitly in the current formulation of the Law on the Establishment of Radio and Television Enterprises and Their Broadcasts (*3984 Sayılı Radyo ve Televizyonların Kuruluş ve Yayınlar Hakkında Kanun*, revised and amended in 1994 and 2004), which governs media broadcasts and is also used as the foundation for interpreting “public” language use more generally. The law states that while Turkish remains the language of “official” (*resmi*) contexts,

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<sup>18</sup> That these language policies emerged in tandem with logics of national homogeneity and exclusionary policies aimed at non-Muslim minorities in Turkey is a crucial point; for more, see Bali 1999; Çağaptay 2002; van Bruinessen 1997.



“the use of different languages traditionally used by Turkish citizens in everyday life” (*Türk vatandaşlarının günlük yaşamlarında geleneksel olarak kullandıkları farklı dil*) is permitted as long as such broadcasts do not “contradict the fundamental principles of the Turkish Republic, enshrined in the Constitution, and the indivisible integrity of the state with its territory and nation” (*Bu yayınlar, Cumhuriyetin Anayasada belirtilen temel niteliklerine, Devletin ülkesi ve milletiyle bölünmez bütünlüğüne aykırı olamaz*).

Despite important changes in the legal parameters afforded to Kurdish in recent years – brought about at least in part due by pressures related to Turkey’s efforts to join the European Union, but also crucially as a result of ongoing and unrelenting political efforts by Kurdish citizens and members of the pro-Kurdish political party – the status of Turkish as the country’s sole official language remains both firmly established and the object of considerable political contestation (Akin 2006; Derince 2013; Zeydanlıoğlu 2012).

Amid ongoing political changes, and throughout the waxing and waning cycles of violence devastating the landscape of the southeast, however, “cultural” interventions into the Kurdish issue were emerging apace.<sup>19</sup> Building on the work of Bedirxan and other early 20<sup>th</sup> century elites, whose works were reprinted by Kurdish Institutes and other cultural presses throughout the 2000s, and drawing on the notions of bounded language code that are features of “Standard Average European” (and which characterize ideologies of language in the self-consciously modernizing Turkish context), self-identified Kurdish elites in Turkey and the European diaspora began the process of transforming hitherto largely oral communicative

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<sup>19</sup> An extensive literature now exists addressing the question of how “culture” has emerged in recent decades as a particularly potent (and complicated) category of political and social intervention; for insightful analyses in the Turkish context see Brink-Danan 2011b; Karaca 2009; Koğacıoğlu 2011; Tambar 2014.

practices into an inscribed lexical-orthographic system (Scalbert-Yücel 2006; 2007; Malmisani 2006). Following the repeal of the language laws in 1991, small groups of language workers have picked up the pace, creating “Kurdish Institutes” in cities with large Kurdish populations, holding conferences and seminars to discuss education policy and the standards for creating standards, and producing an increasingly expansive array of texts.

One of the challenges of writing a narrative about Kurdish, in particular, is to do so without assuming either the terms of the historiographies or the ideological telos of both its proponents and detractors: the self-evidence of its code-ness; the obviousness of its centrality to political struggle and identitarian claims. These are what is at stake in any discussion of Kurdish – these are symptoms indeed of its unsettled, institutionally insecure status. The ongoing dynamics and ramifications of these questions – of what kind of a social fact Kurdish is – are explored throughout the dissertation.

Critical to this discussion is the point that the decades during which these debates have taken place – the context of “language policy” debates and interventions– were also years of massive military struggles, resettlement campaigns, forced evacuations, and internal migration; they were decades that witnessed the absolute and all-pervasive militarization of the eastern and southeastern regions of the country. The emergence of the P.K.K. was initially organized around an explicitly leftist/socialist framework and largely dismissed what would come to be identified as “cultural” issues like language as superficial, irrelevant. The Kurdish question – in almost all domains – has been largely framed as a question of national security in both government policy and mainstream perspectives.

The open and unsettled question of what is “cultural” and what is “political” is a deeply revealing ethnographic question: how and where those lines are drawn, and with what content on each side, are matters of tremendous importance on the ground on the ground in Turkey. The lines shift and change, with important stakes (Karaca 2009; Koğacıoğlu 2011; Tambar 2014). Language – as means of semiotic communication as well as object of pragmatic intervention - is uniquely suited to playing an endlessly complicated and central role in all this; language issues are both the means and ends of cultural and political work in Turkey.

I do not assume the relationship between speaking Kurdish and affiliating with Kurdish identitarian commitments as a given but rather begin the discussion here, noting that Kurdish language practices and affiliations have often occupied a central role in defining Kurdish identity and politics. But that role has not always been constant, nor has it always meant the same thing. Later chapters of the dissertation track some of the recent iterations of the centrality of language to these definitions not only of political struggle (Chapters Five and Six) but of individual and community self-understanding and relationships with one another (Chapters Two and Three).

The question of the consolidation of Kurdish as a language is addressed throughout the dissertation. The relative importance of “language” within the Kurdish struggle and in the definition of Kurdish identity has varied greatly across the history of the Turkish Republic, although in virtually all scholarship on Kurdish politics and social history – both explicitly nationalist and otherwise – Kurds are identified with speaking Kurdish, and language has been assumed to be one of, if not the key, marker of Kurdishness (e.g. Vali 2003; McDowall 2004; Kreyenbroek and Allison 1996; Hassanpour 1992).

What is often identified as “Kurdish” is divided, as Sheyholislami and others point out, among distinctive varieties, across which the differences range from minor lexical variations to mutual unintelligibility (Sheyholislami 2011: 28; Öpengin 2012). The terminology used around this is deeply fraught, particularly in the region where Iranian speech communities exist within Turkey: are these different languages? Dialects? Varieties? Examples abound of scholars being castigated for suggesting that “Kurdish” consists of more than one “language” (e.g. Kreyenbroek 1992; Jenkins 2001), while the vast majority of scholars writing about Kurdish use “dialects of Kurdish” to refer to existing linguistic variation (Hassanpour 1992; McDowall 2004; Van Bruinessen 2000a). The diversity in spoken language extends to the scripts used to write in Kurdish varieties: Sorani speakers in Iraq use a modified Arabic alphabet system; Kurmanji speakers scattered across northern and southern regions of Kurdistan use both Arabic modified (in Iraq) and Roman scripts (in Turkey, Syria, and parts of Iraq); Kurds from Central Asia and the Caucasus (in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan) use Cyrillic. “The influence of dominant languages on Kurdish,” writes one sociolinguist analyzing the regional variation in Kurdish, “is not only evident in different writing systems of Kurdish but also in very important aspects of the language such as vocabulary, phonetics, grammar, and style. The internal diversification of Kurdish language has been intensified by the state repression of the language (Sheyholislami 2011: 61).”

Cross-regionally, efforts to “unify” Sorani and Kurmanji varieties (e.g. Nabaz 1976) have been largely unsuccessful; Kurmanji-speaking Kurds in Turkey often assured me, however, that it was “only a matter of time” before Kurds living in Iraqi Kurdistan currently using an Arabic script switched over to the obviously more “modern” Roman script. The confidence with which

this was asserted belies the relevant observation (described in more detail in Chapter Four) that relatively few people in Turkey's Kurdish regions actually read or write in Kurdish at all – quite unlike the situation across the border in Iraq, where by all accounts (Haig, personal communication, Öpengin 2012), Kurdish-language textual production flourishes and Kurdish is used in schooling from the elementary through the university level.

Although, as described above, Kurdish was officially banned in Turkey in 1938, it continued to be spoken widely; efforts to write in and standardize Kurdish were undertaken by by Kurdish intellectuals in diasporic communities, first in Syria (1942-1945), when Syria was still under French Mandate, and then in Europe. According to Sheyholislami, “it is safe to suggest that today's Kurmanji Kurdish was mainly developed, codified, and flourished in the West, notably in Germany and Sweden (2012: 61).” The singular prominence of the diasporic publishing community changed after the lifting of the official ban on writing and publishing in Kurdish in 1991, when many of these diaspora journals either migrated to Turkey or ceased publishing (Olson 2009). The reading practices these texts are meant to incite – and the varying ability of their target public to consider themselves hailed by such textual address – is a question explored at length in the chapter that follow. I turn now to an outline of those chapters.

### *Chapter Summaries*

Since the government of the newly organized Turkish Republic launched the Turkish language reforms of the 1930s, a concern with the literate practices of the national population has preoccupied government planners and policymakers (Caymaz and Szurek 2007; Heyd 1954; Lewis 1999). I argue that this concern with popular understandings of orthography and other

inscription-related practice has served in part to define the very populations that would then require intervention. “Villagers,” “the masses,” “women,” “those without reading-writing” – these are but a few of the categories of population and personhood that have emerged in part through government efforts to reshape the (Turkish) national body.

In the chapters that follow I explore some of these efforts, investigating the ways in which a “literacy problem” operates in the present moment as a category of government intervention. From literacy classes hosted at women’s centers in impoverished neighborhoods of the city to Kurdish language classes held across a variety of contexts, I explore the assumptions that underlie the conceptions of literacy and language prevalent in these pedagogical contexts. I amplify the ethnographic observations introduced here in Chapters Three and Four, which explicitly address the subject-constituting consequences of these literacy programs as articulated and experienced by participants, both students and teachers. I explore the ways in which particular ideological understandings of literacy – as technical skill, as emancipatory project, as governmental intervention, etc. – presuppose and reproduce wider language ideologies about the relative publicness of Turkish and Kurdish, their respective capacities to act “beyond denotation,” and ultimately to anchor language communities and linguistic projects.

In later chapters of the dissertation I build on the questions of relative “publicness” to examine the insertion of Kurdish into ever more contexts deemed “public” by a variety of actors. I examine moments of public Kurdish and the expectations of code, context, and kind of person they presuppose, transform, or reproduce. I explore efforts by Kurdish language workers to cultivate and construct a fully “developed” standard language, and the unexpected hierarchies that result. In all of the contexts I examine – from literacy classroom to a Kurdish class, from

government offices to kitchen tables, from coffeehouse tables to political podiums – I investigate the logics that anchor certain codes not only to certain kinds of spaces, but also to certain kinds of people, their qualities of personhood and social position.

If asked, most of people in Turkey would characterize literacy first and foremost as a “technical skill” – the ability to read and write. But when asked to talk about *illiteracy*, they immediately start describing certain kinds of people and practices. For example, the appellation “illiterate” (*okuma-yazma olmayan*, *okuma-yazma bilmeyen*) has in Turkey (as elsewhere, e.g. Hoffman 2003) increasingly come to index a particular kind of female person of rural origins and economic disadvantage; at the same time – and folded into precisely these same indexical structures – a consolidation takes place, I argue, regarding the code in which literacy or its absence takes place.

If literacy is widely ideologically understood to be a “technical” skill accompanied by a series of potential psycho-social consequences (first on individual level, then on group and societal levels), then the question of the denotational code in which literacy instruction and practice takes place should not, in principle, matter: literacy is a matter of learning to inscribe and decipher.

And yet, insofar as literacy campaigns operate on the ground through a series of well-recognized institutional practices and procedures – and these are institutions intimately and (almost) exclusively associated with the Turkish state, which operates only through a Turkish language code – the unspoken code for these campaigns is assumed to be Turkish. The practices *do* get to be “just technical,” at least some of the time, but only because they take place in a language code that is unmarked for the institutional setting in which they take place.

The critical reaction on the part of some community members to government-run literacy campaigns in places like Diyarbakir emerges from the recognition by some of these observers that literacy programs contribute to reproducing a linguistic landscape where Turkish gets to be the default and exclusive language code of the unmarked “public,” and where Kurdish cannot be but marked and indexical (in an overdetermined way) of exclusive political identity.

I take up this question of language code, community, and the ability to speak for, to, and as a public in the latter half of the dissertation. I turn to efforts to create a Kurdish language fully commensurate with other “standard average language.” In the absence of a nation-state with its welter of institutions and practices, Kurdish language workers are trying to effect these institutional interventions themselves, to enact a literary language with the kinds of registers and genres that ideologically characterize modern standard languages, in which “illiteracy” would be a social issue and for which literacy interventions could be proposed.

Despite the assertions by language workers, politicians, and ordinary citizens that Kurdish is “a language,” on par with, equal to, commensurate with any other “language” – be it Turkish or English or any other – the unequal status of these codes relative to each other is starkly revealed not only in moments of active repression. It is also revealed in the moments when the taken-for-granted code of inscription-interventions is Turkish; when something characterized as merely a “technical” skill of inscription and its deciphering is carried seemingly transparently in one code but not the other.

That Turkish is widely considered a self-evidently consolidated, stable language code in a world of equivalent language codes is, in fact, a remarkably recent achievement. Drawing on historical scholarship on the language reforms of the early Republic, I describe the dramatic



transformations that took place over the early and middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; alternately lauded or decried, the intensity of Turkish state intervention in linguistic practice stands out even in a century marked by similarly ambitious efforts around the globe. And yet, for all that official linguists affiliated with ministries of linguistic standards wrangle over purification struggles, or intellectuals lament the replacement of old lexemes with new, it is undeniably the case that something called “Turkish” exists to operate ideologically as the code of denotation, the medium of communication, on the grandest of official scales and the most intimate of quotidian ones.

### Chapter Two: “Did They Tell You Why They’re Here?”: The Communicative Logics of Literacy in Turkey

In Chapter Two of the dissertation I examine literacy practices as processes of self-cultivation and subject-constitution, and explore the ethical impasses that confront feminist activists confronted with conflicting demands of “improving lives” and resisting “assimilation.” The chapter is ethnographically focused on the daily adult literacy classes for women taught by volunteers from the Mother-Child Education Foundation (*Anne Çocuk Eğitim Vakfı*) and held in a variety of locations (community women’s centers, a public laundry facility, and elementary schools). The unmarked and taken-for-granted code for these classes was always Turkish, even as participants come to the courses with widely divergent skills in that language.

The ability to posit literacy as kind of “technical skill” – a cognitive capacity to decipher inscription, if you will – is linked not only to particular categories of person (typically female, variously poor, rural, underdeveloped, traditional, in need of help, disadvantaged in urban setting, etc.) and particular practices and sites of government practice/intervention (e.g., schools,

statistics bureaus, ministries, standardized examinations) but also, less explicitly, to particular *codes* and not others. This is the case even though the same “technical” lack – ability to decipher inscription – and often the same categories of people (female, poor, etc.) are involved in both Turkish- and Kurdish-code contexts. The linking of illiteracy to a Turkish code but not to Kurdish is itself revealing of the differential status of these two codes. It does not, however, simply reveal their differential status (a claim that itself presupposes to some extent the equivalent “code-ness” of each), but also their differential capacity to claim to *be* a code, a fully-fledged language, so established that the lack of capacity to write in it can itself be viewed as a problem to be addressed and intervened into.

As an ethnographic category, *okuma-yazma* operates in a number of important ways: as a category of self-identification – (*okuma-yazmam zayıf, az, yok, iyi değil*, - my literacy is weak, limited, nonexistent, poor) that describes degrees and forms of accuracy, familiarity, orientations to text; as a category of ascription, a way of describing certain kinds of people and their capacities, through the invocations of numbers, statistics, and aggregates but also “the woman without reading-writing” (*okuma-yazmayı bilmeyen kadın*) – who she is, what she is like, where she is from, how she came to be newly urban; as a platform of government intervention; as a means of assimilation into a Turkish political, linguistic, and cultural mainstream.

Through in-class observations and interviews with participants, teachers, administrators, community activists, and family members, I describe the ways in which literacy is vaunted or decried by different actors as a technical skill, path to emancipation, or means of assimilation. I explore how assessments of the “promises” of being/becoming literate compete with other valuations of cultural authenticity, proper kinship norms, and community transformation. In

both this and the following chapter, I investigate how these pedagogical processes build upon and transform existing relationships to text, self, community, and polity.

Chapter Three. “They don’t know where to put learning Kurdish in their lives”: Pedagogies of Kurdish in Transition.”

I conjoin my discussion of literacy classes with an investigation of the sites and contexts of Kurdish classes, from group courses of widely mixed ability located in community centers and political party offices, to more private lessons pitched in terms of individual cultivation and self-improvement.

Someone who wishes to remediate her lack of literacy – in Turkish – avails herself of widely available governmental programs. She signs up for *okuma-yazma* classes, which are free, takes tests, and receives certificates. She engages in practices that carry a number of meanings: some deemed “merely technical,” others of which are granted more inchoate transformative powers – greater freedom, greater independence, the ability to take on responsibility, to be released from the constraining bonds of kinship and tradition. She is often understood to be entering a new world of relations to modernity, urbanity, technology, and authority. It is rare that people recognize illiteracy in *Kurdish* as a similar set of technical skills leading to personal transformation, at least along these particular axes.

What “Kurdish class” is understood to be is more difficult to characterize neatly. On the one hand, it is learning the “mother-tongue” (*zimanê zikmakî, anadil*) that one always-already has. Or *should* have, by virtue of “being a Kurd” (see Chapters Five and Six). The projection of a linguistic code difference is one of the primary means by which categories of people known as “Kurds” and “Turks” are distinguished in Turkey today, a practice that runs into trouble given

the widespread contraction of the domains in which a Kurdish code operates. As Kurdish language and political activists in Turkey never tire of reminding their listeners, Kurdish lacks the institutional grounding that would make it a language of education, politics, and the public sphere.

The chapter investigates those who have decided to cultivate their Kurdish language skills, exploring how and why particular kinds of individuals find themselves drawn to attending such classes, or studying on their own. These include a number of interlocutors who availed themselves, as “individuals,” to self-study with the newly available textbooks and underground teaching resources that began to emerge in the 1990s and early 2000s. Typically a young man in his late teens or early twenties, formally educated in the Turkish public school system, and relatively middle class, these students framed their learning in terms of self-cultivation.

Some group classes, like the one I describe earlier in this introduction, are composed of young adults, many of whom have a moderate passive understanding of spoken Kurdish but are communicatively comfortable in most Turkish language settings. They also are “literate,” in the sense of possessing the technical skills of inscription and reading that allow them to proceed through the Turkish educational system. (It goes without saying that the code of all these interactions is Turkish.) Other Kurdish classes, aimed at a more general community audience and often taking place in community centers (*halk evleri*) or Kurdish Institutes (*Enstîtuya Kurdî*, *Kurt Enstitüsü*), include a more diverse range of speaking skills, from mostly monolingual Kurdish speakers to mostly monolingual Turkish speakers. Participants also varied widely in age, from very young children to elderly members of the community. In these classes, the possession of

“literacy” is more uneven, ranging from those who have rarely encountered formal instruction in inscription practices to those who have made their way through state education system.

I describe how for many interlocutors it seemed impossible to “simply learn to write” in Kurdish, to curve pencil tips around letters, to trace out upper cases and lower, to fill out forms, sign a name, comprehend a street sign or hospital form. To do those things using Kurdish lexemes, to reproduce Kurdish syntax while copying sentences from a book, is to do something else – at once political, emotionally charged, intimately and necessarily connected with identity in an ethnonational project. It is less simply “skill,” rarely a matter of “practical necessity for navigating urban life.” Kurdish in contemporary Turkey cannot, in many cases, but be marked as overdeterminately about code-ness once it enters the classroom setting, once there are pencils and teachers and whiteboards involved.

#### Chapter Four: Hefty Dictionaries in Incomprehensible Tongues: Commensurating Code and Language Community in Turkey.

In this chapter, I move out of the classrooms and into the wider community to consider one aspect of the larger linguistic-political project of rendering Kurdish an “equivalent” language in a world of standard languages: the material contours of text artifacts, and their commensurating capacities. In Turkey, where Turkish has long been the sole officially sanctioned code of public life, the project of asserting equivalence takes place in no small part as a function of an increasingly textualized and widely circulating Kurdish. Inserting Kurdish, both spoken and printed, into ever more arenas – disrupting the expectations of which code goes with which context – has become an ever more central plank in a Kurdish political project.

Yet, it turns out, relatively few people actually read the texts in question. The circulation of largely unread Kurdish texts allows us to investigate how material qualities of text objects – shape, sheen, heft, etc. – contribute towards the assertion of particular forms of linguistic commensurability. I examine how textual forms anchor affiliations of loyalty and allegiance to language community, even without necessarily transforming speech practices and norms of pragmatic usage.

In the Kurdish project of commensurating codes, the circulation of textual artifacts – stacked newspapers, glossy street signs, hefty dictionaries, paperback novels – works to signal the presence of the genres they are presumed to contain. At least three commensurating processes are at play here: between spoken Kurdish and its textual equivalent; between “Kurdish” and “Turkish” as the orienting codes of their respective language communities; and between “Kurds” and “Turks” as members of those communities, participants in a fiercely contested struggle over sovereignty and resources. At stake in these assertions of linguistic equivalence – the normative purchase of a would-be newly commensurate Kurdish – are politically and socially consequential mappings of groupness, polity, and political legitimacy.

#### Chapter Five: Public Kurdish and the Politics of Legitimate Language

In Chapter Five, I examine moments of public Kurdish, and the expectations of code, context, and kind of person they presuppose, transform, or reproduce. The chapter concentrates on questions of “public” language — both language used to constitute more-and-less concretely projected publics, and language used in public. I describe a series of moments of public language

use and analyze some of the expected and expectable forms of hearing, listening, and speaking that framed their production, reception, and circulation.

I focus on several moments of “public Kurdish,” from a parliamentarian’s oath of office to a publicly televised speech by the mayor of Diyarbakir, filmed amidst the rubble of violent street protests that erupted following the funerals of four Kurdish guerillas in the spring of 2006. Amid the general sense of urgency and urban disorder depicted in the broadcast of the mayor on Turkish television, I concentrate on the mayor’s choice of language code, both as it unfolded in the real-time event, and as it was reported on and discussed in subsequent entextualizations locally and nationwide. At stake in this publicly mediated switch of code and its noteworthiness to a watching (inter)national audience are complicated histories of publicly expected language use in Turkey, the licensing of Turkish for situations and speakers deemed official and public. In both the mayor’s speech and an earlier, widely publicized controversy surrounding a new parliamentarian’s use of Kurdish during her swearing-in ceremony, the status of the speakers as “public officials” was critical to framing how their moments of codeswitching were received.

In setting up this ethnographic discussion, I take up an analytic conversation about the forms and features of “legitimate language.” This is a conversation that has been compellingly explored by a raft of scholars since Pierre Bourdieu (1991) extended the concept, and my work relies on their persuasive use and critiques of his original formulation. Seemingly over-determined questions of “official” and “unofficial” language in Turkey can be usefully parsed, I want to suggest, by reference to the scholarship in legitimate language and its domains.

What I seek to add to that discussion in the Turkish case is also an analysis of the different deployments of public language, and their capacity (limited, emerging, contradictory, fraught) to

constitute publics through these modes of address. Here, my discussion will make recourse to ongoing scholarly insights into the framing and footing effects of codeswitching (Blom and Gumperz 1972; Goffman 1979; Gumperz 1982), understood not only as an interpersonal question of code alternance but as a communicative practice with broadly circulating (Gal 1987; Gal and Woolard 2001) – and perhaps public-constituting – reach. It is here that I elaborate what I mean by public dispensability, and the apportioning of code and context it describes.

### Conclusion. The Moral Dimensions and Political Limits of a “Mother Tongue.”

In this, the concluding chapter of the dissertation, I discuss the ever more prevalent idiom of “mother tongue,” and its attendant affective and naturalized identifications of self and identity, to explore the capacity for a would-be public Kurdish to index a truly “anonymous” public authority. As “language” has come to occupy an ever-more central plank in the project of promoting Kurdish political and cultural sovereignty, new dynamics and dilemmas are emerging around questions of linguistic identity, authenticity, and competence. I end with a series of open-ended questions regarding the stakes of framing projects of politico-cultural sovereignty around language pitched as a “mother tongue,” and the emergence of public Kurdish that must navigate the sometimes competing poles of semiotic authority, as anonymous channel of denotational communication and as authentic property of a unique social group.

Along the way I describe a series of exchanges I recorded during a “public forum” in an Istanbul park in June 2013. The forum was one of dozens of similar public gatherings held in cities across Turkey in the weeks following the Gezi Protests of the summer of 2013, when



Turkey was rocked by massive street protests directed at the ruling government. I analyze the conversations that emerged during this particular forum as revealing of many of the central dynamics that shape the politics of public language in Turkey today: from pedagogy to protest, from authority and assimilation to belonging and the contours of social difference.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “Did They Tell You Why They’re Here?”:

#### The Communicative Logics of Literacy in Turkey

*“[T]hat one can take sides for or against literacy is an illusion; literacy is, for better or worse, a global phenomenon and, at least on that global level, there is no boundary to cross, no inside to be opposed to an outside. Sides can be taken only in concrete antagonistic situations of conflict or of domination/submission and, given the conditions that prevail, taking sides will have to be done (if it is not to remain a purely personal moral gesture) publicly, that is by acts which, sooner or later, involve the use of literacy.” Johannes Fabian (1993: 83-84)*

*“Functional literacy is not just a skill or knowledge, and its acquisition encompasses more than learning a number of technical skills. Being functionally literate is more than simply decoding script, or producing essays; it is also taking on the identities associated with these practices...[It] is a competence which goes beyond grammar and semantics. It is an essential condition for participation in democracy and economic life.” Fatoş Gökşen, Sami Gülgöz, and Çiğdem Kağıtçıbaşı (2000:3)*

*“Most of these women, it’s actually hard to even know what they come here for.”  
Mine, volunteer literacy instructor, Diyarbakir, Turkey (2007)*

A fairly typical morning at the Bağlar Women’s Center (BWC) in the Bağlar neighborhood of Diyarbakir found me sifting through the morning newspapers and chatting with the center’s director, assistant director, and clinically licensed therapist. Outside the curtained windows, the traffic rattled noisily down the busy street that bisected Bağlar, one of Diyarbakir’s largest and poorest neighborhoods. The girls and women who came to the women’s center each day for classes and socializing spilled through the hallway, crowding into the kitchen to refill the teakettle and smoke cigarettes, exchanging greetings and affectionate kisses. A handicrafts [*el*

sanatları] class was underway in the arts and crafts room, and a literacy [okuma yazma] lesson was about to begin in the small cramped classroom next to the director’s office where we sat.

Ayşe abla, a lanky woman in her mid-twenties, leaned over my shoulder to peer at the headlines before thanking one of the teenaged volunteers out in the hallway for bringing us fresh tea.<sup>1</sup> As the assistant director, Ayşe was responsible for helping the director, Gülten abla, with the day-to-day tasks of running the center. Together with a social worker, Lale, the women also provided psychological counseling services [psikolojik hizmeti] and guidance or leadership training [rehberlik danışmanlığı], “consciousness raising” workshops [bilinç yükseltme eğitimi], and other cultural and educational classes for the women and girls who attended the center. With the help of their volunteers, they also organized events in the wider community, such as commemorations for International Women’s Day (8 March), protests against violence against women, and demonstrations in support of increased cultural and political rights for Kurds.

On this particular morning, the topic had turned to literacy and to the class assembling next door. I had been attending literacy classes at the center for several months, with the slightly puzzled blessing of the staff and class participants. While Gülten had cheerfully granted me access to any center activity I might be interested in, she and the others expressed mild curiosity that I continued to attend literacy classes with regularity. Prompted by her question on this particular morning – pitched as a concern that I might be getting “bored” in a setting for which I had no visible personal benefit – I responded with some questions of my own. In conversations outside the center I had encountered people who expressed doubts about the merits of okuma-

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<sup>1</sup> Abla, or “sister,” is polite (and friendly) Turkish form of address used when interacting with women who are close in age or slightly older than the speaker. For the sake of ease in reading the English I will only use these terms of address the first time a speaker is introduced, rather than on each occasion. Teyze or “father’s sister” is typically used for women older than the speaker; xwişka and xaltî are, respectively, their Kurmanji equivalents.

yazma courses such as those sponsored by the Bağlar Women’s Center. These criticisms seemed to range along a number of themes, and I was curious how Gülten, Ayşe, and Lale might respond.

Taking up one such theme, I asked how they felt about the criticism, expressed by one of their own volunteers, Ayşegül, that literacy classes were contributing to the “assimilation” of Kurdish women. This young woman had told me that she would never consider volunteering to teach a literacy class, despite having the education, skills, and time to do so, because she considers literacy classes for women in a context like Diyarbakir simply another means [araç] employed by the Turkish state to assimilate [asimile etmek] its Kurdish citizens. On another occasion a stranger at a café had interrupted my conversation with two friends – we had been recounting our days and I had mentioned coming from a literacy course – with an extremely pointed interjection, describing the national organization that provided free literacy courses to women as having the goal of “assimilating Kurdish girls by teaching them reading and making them into Kemalists [Kürd kızların okutarak ve kemalist olmalarını sağlayan bir dernek].”

Neither of these examples seemed to take Gülten or her co-workers by surprise. Gülten sighed, but before she could speak Ayşe broke in first, glancing at the other two before stating bluntly, “At this point we have to do it [zorunda kaldık]. We have to teach it [literacy] to them. People can say what they want but until we live in a different – until the world we live in changes, basically, they have to know how to read and write.” Lale nodded in agreement and added,

“We’re living here, at this point. It’s good, it’s bad – this is where they are now, and we can’t – you can’t tell me to tell them they shouldn’t learn [literacy]. I mean, they live a

city life at this point [*artık şehir hayatı yaşıyorlar*], they need this ability. Or else how are they supposed to manage everything?”

Gülten joined her colleagues with a characteristically thoughtful rejoinder along a commonly expressed theme – the empowering effect, for attendees, of participating in the center’s activities. Waving her hand in the direction of the classroom next door, while noisy chatter from the hallway threatened to drown out our conversation, she said,

For them, personally speaking [*kişisel olarak*], these classes are really important. They come here without really having confidence in themselves, with all kinds of problems and struggles. And it’s true that if they aren’t literate [*okuma yazması olmazsa*], they have a lot of problems in this environment.”

A conversation ensued about the range of challenges that they felt they faced, as organizers and administrators of a new kind of social gathering space like the Bağlar Women’s Center. Funded by the local municipality, overseeing a paid staff of only three alongside a cadre of volunteers, explicitly female-only yet coordinating activities with a variety of other municipal institutions (including cultural organizations, social service providers, and the local pro-Kurdish political party), Gülten and her teammates were experienced navigators of multiple demands and constituencies. As the conversation proceeded, Gülten put down her glass and turned the question to me.

“So, what do they tell *you*, Kelda? Have you asked them why they come to these classes?”

I had indeed asked this question, in conversations before and after the lessons themselves but also in contexts outside the women's center. The range of responses I encountered and the variety of settings in which literacy practices emerged as a topic of conversation are topics that merit contemplation. I had sat as elderly women showed me the smudged pages of their notebooks from literacy classes, the lines painstakingly filled with wobbly lists of the AAs, BBs, CCs, ÇÇs of the Turkish alphabet. Young women recounted to me their fierce desire for the certificate that marks primary school equivalency and their despair at not being able to pass the necessary exams. Middle-aged mothers shrugged their shoulders at the fact that their teenage daughters, like they, abandoned school in the first years of elementary school. Brothers uneasily dismissed the relevance of school learning in their sisters' lives, fathers expressed pride in their daughters' schooling successes, and at least one friend told me straight out that my attendance at literacy classes was a waste of my time, a wrong-headed focus in a time of deep political crisis. Volunteer literacy teachers described their experiences in the classroom as often exasperating, occasionally fulfilling, and sometimes hopeless. Literacy seemed to operate in Diyarbakir variously and simultaneously as a technical capacity for decoding text, as a horizon of evaluation and ascription, and as morally-inflected narrative of development, both individual and collective. Literacy was capable of mobilizing a wide range of material resources and standards of judgment. It described populations, it referred to emancipatory possibilities, it promised social transformations. It was valorized, it was decried, it was dismissed and embraced.

This chapter explores the ideological contours of literacy in a Kurdish city in Turkey. It examines the frameworks and content of literacy pedagogical materials, and the cascading series of consequences literacy is presumed to entail, according to those who develop and undertake

literacy pedagogy. It also explores the varied and ambivalent responses to, and characterizations of, these literacy campaigns and pedagogical practices by a variety of individuals, from participants in *okuma-yazma* classes to family members, political activists, and members of the wider community.

I argue that literacy in contemporary Turkey operates as, simultaneously, a technical skill, a means of measurement and evaluative horizon, and a moral narrative. I follow each of these three ideological axes as components of a broader communicative logic, one that includes histories of state interventions, institutional practices, social mobilities, rhetorical styles, and affective compartments. Perhaps the main communicative logic of literacy at play in Turkey today is an ideological understanding of literacy as a neutral technical skill with deep moral consequences at both individual and collective levels. This understanding is evident in Turkish state discourses, literacy campaign and pedagogical materials, and how many participants and community members talk about literacy.

I examine the purported consequences and affective values of literacy – as practice, as evaluative framework, as identity – in a context of ongoing violence and deeply fraught contests over political sovereignty. Examining literacy in this way reveals the variation and diversity of how differently positioned actors respond to and characterize the promises or pitfalls of literacy. It also sheds light on the increasing inescapability of literacy as a horizon of evaluation and a metric of measurement, not only for “state-centered epistemologies of enumeration” (Cody 2009a: 352; Foucault 1991) but as a communicative logic that shapes how individuals and communities seek to navigate, and sometimes transform, their social settings. This communicative logic has been avidly analyzed by a wider scholarly community concerned with

identifying the social implications of being able to read and to write, at cognitive, historical, subjective, and political levels.

*What Literacy 'Does': Inscription, Its Features and Consequences*

Recent scholars concerned with analyzing “those ways with text we call literacy” (Collins 1995: 76) have increasingly sought to distance themselves from early approaches that defined literacy primarily in terms of a technical repertoire, according to which human histories and cultural practices worldwide could be plotted, compared, and evaluated (e.g., Goody 1986, 1987). The normative implications of these studies – according to which forms of inscriptive practice had necessary and often transformative consequences for human cognition (Greenfield 1972), social-political organization (Goody and Watt 1963), and relations to authority, tradition, and truth (Havelock 1963; Olson 1977; Ong 1982) – have been persuasively criticized by scholars who challenge both the foundational premises and normative conclusions of much of this scholarship (e.g., Gough 1968; Heath 1982; Street 1993).

Early historical accounts written in broad strokes, such as Goody and Watt’s 1963 classic, “The Consequences of Literacy,” argued that the rise and spread of alphabetic literacy had enormous consequences for both subject formation and social organization. According to this argument, the transformation of oral narratives of the past into written textual accounts introduced new notions of objective reasoning and critical scrutiny. For Goody and Watt, there is an immediate and direct relationship between symbol and referent in nonliterate social groups. Whereas in “literate culture” words “accumulate the successive layers of historically validated meanings,” in an “oral culture” this relationship is flattened, operating through a cumulative,



concrete process of face-to-face transmission (1963: 306). As a result, they suggest, “the totality of symbol-referent relationships is more immediately experienced by the individual in an exclusively oral culture, and is thus more deeply socialized” (1963: 306). This not only affects the nonliterate peoples’ range of vocabulary and the complexity of their cultural “categories of understanding,” but also their capacity for objectivity, nuance, and critical reason. The fact is, they argue, “writing establishes a different kind of relationship between the word and its referent, a relationship that is more general and more abstract, and less closely connected with the particularities of person, place, and time, than obtains in oral communication” (1963: 321).

In Goody and Watts’ account, the first social group to develop socially pervasive alphabetic literacy was likely the Greeks of the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. The significance of this achievement is hard to overstate, they suggest, for “it was only in the days of the first widespread alphabetic culture that the idea of ‘logic’ – of an immutable and impersonal mode of discourse – appears to have arisen” (1963: 321). Concomitant with this development was the emergence for the first time of a distinction between “myth” and “history,” that “sense of the human past as an objective reality” (1963: 321). Perhaps most significant of all, for the authors these developments led to an ever-greater rejection of social dogma, skepticism towards authority, and valorization of individual autonomy (1963: 331-335, 344-345).

The themes introduced in this early essay continued to preoccupy Goody long after its initial publication (see Goody 1968; 1986; 1987). He was joined in this endeavor by others interested in the cognitive, philosophical, and historical consequences of literacy. Among the most prominent of these were literary scholars Eric Havelock, David Olson, and Walter Ong. Although each of these scholars focused on different empirical materials (Homeric traditions, the

Protestant Reformation and development of the modern essay and novel, and technologies of printing, respectively), they shared a commitment to the transformative effects of literacy, the power of technologies of inscription to transform human relationships to language, truth, history, and authority.

Similar commitments can be found in the work of historians like David Lerner (1958), Ernest Gellner (1997), and Bernard Lewis (1961) who, although not explicitly theorizing literacy *per se* in their broader analyses of “modernizing” Muslim societies, nevertheless start from the assumption that popular literacy can be decisively linked to definite socio-political configurations and intellectual orientations. Even more notable for his efforts to link forms of popular literacy and new political formations is, of course, Benedict Anderson (1983), whose arguments and the debates they generated will be discussed at more depth in Chapter Five.

As was noted in the opening to this section, the assumptions and conclusions of this body of scholarship have been vigorously challenged by a range of scholars who question both the assumption that literacy can be treated as an “autonomous technology,” disentangled from its particular manifestations and contexts, and the argument that literacy has necessary consequences for social organization or individual subject formation (see Collins 1995 for an important overview of these critiques). Among the most systematic critiques of the “autonomous” model of literacy is found in the work of Brian Street, who in a series of publications over several decades (e.g., 1984; 1993; 1995) has long argued that literacy practices – that is, “the social practices and conceptions of reading and writing”– cannot be understood outside of their ideological embedding in a particular cultural context (1984:1).

Street has been joined by other scholars of literacy practices who draw on ethnographic research in a diversity of contexts to explore the many “ways with text” that infuse and inform social practices around reading and writing around the world (e.g., Digges and Rappaport 1993; Kulick and Stroud 1993; Messick 1993; Sarris 1993; Schieffelin and Gilmore 1986).

Yet despite the persuasiveness of these scholarly critiques of the autonomous model of literacy with its emphasis on pared-down technical skills and assertion of concomitant cognitive, social, or developmental consequences (on both individual and societal levels), many literacy programs – those with an emphasis on implementing literacy pedagogies in classrooms – continue to operate within this autonomous model. For those seeking to intervene into perceived “illiteracy problems” on a social scale, literacy is frequently understood to be primarily a matter of technical skill, accompanied by a more or less robust series of psycho-social consequences. In Turkey, literacy typically appears as a self-evident category of policy assessment or pedagogical practice: enumerating percentages of illiterate citizens; evaluating the government’s success in implementing literacy programs; measuring deficits in individual students (Başgöz 1968; Nohl & Sayılan 2004; Öz 1995).

Even with the recent development of volunteer-run programs that explicitly emphasize a language of empowerment/self-transformation in their program design (Durgunoğlu et. al 2003), the focus in Turkey remains on literacy as a kind of technical skill – a matter of deciphering inscriptions, from a pedagogical perspective, and a measure of national modernity, in the government’s view. As we shall see in the Turkish case, these notions of literacy – its presence or absence, and its association with particular kinds of people and populations – are pervasive

even among those who would otherwise take a critical stance toward the proponents of literacy intervention.

These perspectives are of course legacies of the ambitious education policies described in the introduction, where modernization was understood to be both brought about and indexed by far-reaching social reforms at every level of the population. I turn now to the more recent of these reforms in the Turkish context, those that have taken the shape of repeated literacy campaigns, which now primarily target adult women from the conflict-ridden and impoverished Southeast – i.e., the same clientele who regularly attend and participate at community women’s centers like the Bağlar Women’s Center.

*“Herkes İçin Okuma Yazma”: Literacy for Everyone*

On June 16, 1983, a new law came into force in Turkey that addressed the needs of illiterate citizens who were of non-traditional school age. The law also formally identified the responsibilities of the Ministry of National Education (*Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı*, MEB) toward illiterate citizens outside of formal school settings, and established a General Directorate of Apprenticeship and Non-Formal Education as the governing body for sponsoring literacy-related interventions on behalf of the state.<sup>2</sup> It also stipulated that other government bodies, including the military, and the private sector should cooperate with the MEB in promoting national literacy education; cooperation in this regard meant these organizations were required to inform the MEB about illiterate workers in their labor corps and to allow said workers to attend literacy classes.

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<sup>2</sup> Law No. 2841, “The Law To Make the Citizens Literate Who Are Outside of Compulsory Education Age And To Provide Training and Teaching At The Primary Education Level;” *Zorunlu İlköğretim Çağı Dışında Kalmış Okuma-Yazma Bilmeyen Vatandaşların Duruma Getirilmesi Veya Bunlara İlkokul Düzeyinde Eğitim Öğretim Yapılması Hakkında Kanun*. Established 16 June 1983.

The law also made attendance mandatory. A separate law on trade unions, Law 2821, established a month earlier, had required trade unions to establish literacy courses for their illiterate members.<sup>3</sup>

As I charted in greater detail in the previous chapter, this legal frame sits within a longer trajectory of state-led literacy courses and campaigns that have played a great role in increasing literacy rates across the history of the Republic (Başgöz 1968; Nohl & Sayılan 2004; Öz 1995). These interventions were part of general intensive efforts on the part of the central government to bring a largely rural and linguistically, ethnically, and religiously diverse citizenry into homogeneous national body (Ahmad 1993; Aslan 2007; Çağaptay 2002; Keyder 1987; Lewis 1961; Zürcher 2001). In this project, education played a leading role – from alphabet reform (replacing Arabic script with Latin) aimed at radically undercutting previous forms of (religious) authority (Heyd 1954; Lewis 1999), to the creation of a national educational curriculum that emphasized Turkey’s military conquests, developmental trajectory, and internal homogeneity (Kaplan 2006; Kazamias 1966; Heper 1985).

The early Republican government’s intense focus on education and host of social reforms was aimed not only at homogenizing the national body and creating a loyal citizenry, but also at creating a modern, productive labor force as rapidly as possible (Hale 1981; Heper 1985; Öz 1995). Public education – focused initially primarily at male citizens but with a growing intensity on female citizens as well – was understood to be crucial both for inculcating modern, nationalist values, and for technical skills that could be transformed into economic productivity (Kazamias 1966). This simultaneous demarcation of and presumed interconnection between “values” and

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<sup>3</sup> Law No. 2821, “The Law on Trade Union;” *Sendikalar Kanunu*. Established 5 May 1983.

“skills” would continue to shape national discourses around, and ideologies of, education for decades to come. One of the contributions of this chapter is to track how, when, and with what stakes, distinctions are presumed between “technical skills,” on the one hand, and other moral narratives, on the other. Compulsory primary education and education courses for illiterate adults were established simultaneously in 1924, with subsequent literacy campaigns organized repeatedly over the decades since, e.g., in 1928, 1960, 1971, 1981, and 2001 (Sayılan & Yıldız 2009; Nohl & Sayılan 2004).

The laws that came into force in the early 1980s provided literacy education for Turkish citizens who are not of the compulsory school age, to be held in People’s Education Centers (*Halk Eğitim Merkezleri*) run by the MEB’s General Directorate of Apprenticeship and Non Formal Education. The laws instated two levels of adult literacy courses, provided as parallels to the primary education curriculum in elementary schools. The first level course (90 hours) is meant to provide basic literacy skills while the second level (180 hours) covers a broader curriculum. Those who graduate from the first level literacy course are allowed to continue on to the second level. With the successful completion of the second level course, graduates receive a certificate that counts as equivalent to a 5<sup>th</sup> grade primary education. Those who graduate from the second grade course are also allowed to enroll in open primary education courses [*açık öğretim kursları*], which include a variety of vocational and scholarly subjects. Many of the young women who came to Bağlar were enrolled in such courses; the collective mood at center fluctuated between excitement and despair in tandem with the announcement of examination results and diplomas issued or denied.

Although literacy education targets the whole illiterate population, since the early 2000s official priority has been targeted at the following groups: the economically active population between 14 and 45 years of age; women; and poor people in the urban and rural regions with the highest illiteracy rates, i.e., the East and Southeast (cf. Nohl & Sayılan 2004: 11). That these are the regions with the highest Kurdish population is a crucial point and merits some attention. The inclusion of women (and girls) as particular targets for literacy interventions (on the part of both governmental and non-governmental actors) is also an important factor to consider in some contextual depth before returning to the particulars of the Bağlar Women's Center.

*“Come On, Girls, Let's Go To School!”*

On May 17, 2003 the General Director of UNICEF, Carol Bellamy, and Turkey's Minister of Education, Huseyin Çelik, officially inaugurated a new campaign aimed at increasing the percentages of girls attending school in Turkey. Entitled *Come On, Girls, Let's Go to School!* [*Haydi kızlar okula!*, hereafter HKO], the campaign involved a nationwide media campaign with teacher training, television commercials, glossy posters, booklets, and billboards. Financial incentives of various sorts were put into place to encourage female primary school attendance, including punitive fines for not sending girls to school as well as financial rewards for doing so (assistance with uniforms, books, and fees, and salary supplements). Famous singers and other celebrities lent their voices and images to the project's ambitious media campaign, and politicians across the country praised the effort as an important step in rectifying the gender imbalances that continued to show up in government statistics on the country's schooling and literacy rates, employment patterns, and economic conditions.

HKO was joined two years later by another campaign also aimed at lessening the gap between male and female school attendance in Turkey. This campaign, *Dad, Send Me to School!* [*Baba, Beni okula gönder!*, BBOG], similarly employed catchy graphics, celebrity endorsements, and politicians' support to encourage donations by private citizens and corporations, promising donors that "with a small donation, the power to change the life of one of our girls is in your hands" [*Küçük bir bağışla bir kızımızın hayatını değiştirmek elinizde*]. In addition to significant support from international bodies (e.g., UNICEF, UNDP, and the EU), the campaigns also received generous funding from multinational corporations like Danone and Nestlé. In Diyarbakir, the presence of these campaigns was widely notable, from billboards and posters to a general public awareness of the campaigns and a growing sense that girls' attendance at school was a matter of newly intensified institutional scrutiny.

In addition to the efforts aimed at girls of primary school age – the main targets of these two campaigns – there were also increased efforts to intervene into the percentages of adult and young adult women who had not had much or any exposure to formal schooling, and to shift the significant gender gap in literacy percentages among this adult population. The volunteer literacy program whose curriculum and participants I will examine most closely in this chapter, the Mother-Child Education Foundation (*Anne-Çocuk Eğitim Vakfı*, AÇEV), was founded specifically to improve literacy outcomes for adult women, providing both first and second level literacy courses that covered a broad range of topics in addition to the fundamentals of decoding and writing. Other literacy programs, such as those sponsored by the MEB itself and by the Rotary Club, also developed courses specifically for women and girls (Nohl & Sayılan 2004).



In part as a result of increased encounters with Turkish state institutions through obligatory military service, enforced primary schooling, employment opportunities, and widespread rural to urban migration within Turkey, male illiteracy rates dropped dramatically over the middle and final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Öz 1995; Nohl & Sayılan 2004). Female illiteracy rates, however, did not show the same steep decline, and for decades the figure of “our illiterate girls and women” (*okuma yazma bilmeyen kızlarımız ve kadınlarımız*) has circulated widely in Turkish media, political, and popular discourse. The image of this woman – typically pictured wearing clothing that marked her as rural, poor, and “traditional” (with facial tattoos, clothing, and headscarves in colors and styles found especially among older generations of certain Kurdish and Arab communities) – continues to adorn posters and flyers advertising literacy campaigns and reports.

As critical commentators have pointed out, these images index a host of longstanding tropes in mainstream Turkish discourse around the “underdeveloped Eastern [i.e., Kurdish] woman,” in need of salvation through development and modernization (Derince 2012; Akşit 2005; Yeşil 2003). Indeed, the historical roots of these discourses run deep, extending back to the foundational narratives of the early Republic (Sirman 1989; Arat 1997; Kandiyoti 1991). The “development” of women – important both instrumentally as mothers raising future citizens and symbolically as an index of the achievements of national modernity – has long been a central preoccupation of the state.

The perspective of women as transmitters of both familial and national culture – and of educating girls in particular in line with these responsibilities – comes through quite clearly even in recent statements by prominent state officials; consider the following statement by then-Prime

Minister and current President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, on the website for *Come On, Girls, Let's Go to School*:

While the education of boys is of concern only to the boys themselves, the education of girls is of concern to their family, too. When children grow, they receive their education from their mothers. The education of women is important in terms of the education they will provide in future to their children.

One prominent critic of Turkish language and education policies is a young academic and Kurdish language instructor named M. Şerif Derince. In a recent critical report examining gender and education, Derince cites the aforementioned passage from the former Prime Minister, and continues,

[S]ince [in the prime minister's speech] girls are charged with very important roles, it is of critical importance that they are educated in line with the dominant ideologies. Girls who are not exposed to the state's official education are classified as children who are not sent to school by underdeveloped, ignorant fathers with a tribal mentality and thus it is emphasized that these children need to be "saved" by the state and "reintegrated into society." However, if girls are "saved" by the state, they are positioned as guardians who will maintain the state's masculine mentality, rather than individuals who will shape social perspectives (2012: 27).

Derince levels a critique at the Turkish state's insistence that the only legitimate and legal language of education can be Turkish. Arguing that one of the primary goals of the current Turkish public education system is to assimilate Kurdish children – forcing or encouraging them to replace Kurdish with Turkish, and to adopt Turkish national symbols and narratives as their

own, Derince and other Kurdish critics of state education policy echo the kinds of narratives of assimilation that I raised in my conversation with the three administrators of the BWC.

Other stories of embarrassment and shame, particularly surrounding first encounters with Turkish schoolteachers as young children, circulated widely in Diyarbakir and throughout Kurdish Turkey. Appearing in contexts ranging from politicians' speeches to private conversations, many people had tales to tell about unsympathetic teachers who denounced, denigrated, and even physically punished them for speaking Kurdish in class or for not understanding Turkish instructions. Derince considers this the legacy of Turkish education, and he brings that to bear directly on the subject of educating girls and women, linking recent literacy campaigns to longer histories of "developing" female citizens from the state's least nationally integrated provinces.

When we think of how gendered, discriminatory, and racist, especially in terms of Kurdish children, schools are, it should be said that the aim of campaigns like Come On, Girls, Let's Go to School is to take control of Kurdish social and cultural sphere, where the state's ideology is currently not dominant. Thus, the aim of ensuring that Kurdish children (and girls in particular) attend schools is not to help Kurdish children improve their communities, but rather to encourage Kurdish children to be ashamed of their past and reject it. In fact, studies have shown that Kurdish children who attend school are embarrassed to be Kurdish, that they perceive the Kurdish language as a burden that they

need to rid themselves of, that they are embarrassed of their families, and that they consider themselves to be “underdeveloped” as a people (2012: 28).<sup>4</sup>

As Derince and others point out, there is an almost complete absence in government discourses of any mention of linguistic heterogeneity among the population. Yuksel’s analysis (2006) of early republican government statistics regarding vocational training in the eastern and southeastern regions of the country reads “against the grain” to track the linguistic divisions implicitly referred to in these government literacy and vocational training campaigns. In the campaign literature I examine – as well as the Turkish mainstream academic research that evaluates it (e.g. Durgunoğlu et al. 2003; Sayılan and Yıldız 2009) – there is almost no mention of the language background of the targets of these literacy campaigns, nor any concomitant indication that questions of code might be relevant for pedagogical purposes, much less of reasons like identification, solidarity, and pride. This is a theme I will return to in more detail later in the chapter.

It is also worth remembering the discussion in the introduction that addressed how rarely linkages were made between questions of Kurdish language politics and literacy/illiteracy. Because – as evidence in this chapter further demonstrates – literacy so emphatically calls to mind institutional contexts of the state, as well as a widespread ideology of literacy as a neutral

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<sup>4</sup> These senses of shame, of backwardness, etc. at not wielding what are understood to be the appropriate communicative codes and registers are of course not unique to Kurdish Turkey; descriptions of similar contexts around the globe abound in the linguistic anthropological literature across the globe (e.g., Henze and Davis 1999; Hoffman 2006; McEwan-Fujita 2010). Further scholarship from a range of disciplines has amply demonstrated the way that the politics of recognition is not only, or often even primarily, about material redistribution (Fraser 2000; Markell 2003; Povinelli 2002), but often about grappling with or overcoming senses of shame (Hankins 2014) or injury (Brown 1995) that have historically been fostered by the dominant or mainstream society.

technology of decoding graphic inscription, the notion of a Kurdish illiteracy problem was rarely considered in public discourse. Again, this is a question that will be revisited in the discussion below.

### *The Mother-Child Education Foundation*

I turn now to an examination of the institutional histories of the two main kinds of literacy classes offered outside formal school setting (primarily to women and girls) in Diyarbakir at the time of my research. These included both MEB materials and AÇEV materials, with a focus mainly on the latter. I will also examine briefly the teaching method, as well as the content of the teaching materials, discussing the extent to which teachers are offered guidance and explanations for why they do what they do.

While this deserves its own more extended elaboration, I offer here a brief discussion of the phonological debates surrounding the teaching of literacy (in Turkish code) through phonemes and syllables vs. whole-word/sentence memorization. I describe the differences between the MEB curriculum and the AÇEV curriculum, in terms of how they understood the pedagogical process of teaching literacy as a decoding skill as well as what they understood to be the other relevant components of literacy pedagogy, particularly since both MEB and AÇEV literacy curricula were committed to teaching what they called “functional” literacy”: thematic concepts included aspects of navigating a city (reading signs, getting on a bus, etc.); civic duties; hygiene; child development and raising; history of Turkey; democratic participation; and stories of a “typical” family confronting “typical” issues (illness, migration from the village, schooling, employment, etc.)

I then move away from the content of the materials at this level to ask: what were the understandings of literacy at play here? What was being taught – what kinds of practices were being pedagogically presented? What, in this material, was presented as – merely – instructing students in the technical skill of literacy, i.e., decoding graphic inscriptions. How and to what extent were technical skills understood to be separate from and/or related to something called “content,” where a focus on *message* was delineated from the means of its transmission. What, in other words, were the consequences understood to extend from learning to decode, and how were these understood to differ or lead to other transformative capacities for the newly capable reader/decoder?

In the years since the foundation’s inception, academic researchers affiliated with AÇEV have devoted considerable time, energy, and research experience to crafting their curricula, and they make their annual reports chronicling progress and evaluations of the program widely available (Durgunoğlu 2000). The organization is committed to a pedagogical program that emphasizes what the research authors call a “functional approach” to literacy, one that integrates both “cognitive” and “social-constructivist” approaches to understanding how literacy learning, particularly among adult learners, takes place (Durgunoğlu 2000:5; Durgunoğlu, Öney, and Kuşcul 2003).

In self-conscious contrast to what they saw as the overwhelming tendency of previous adult literacy programs to focus on memorization of entire words and phrases, the authors of the textbook used in the literacy programs taught at BWC emphasized “the explicit teaching of phoneme-grapheme correspondences through direct instruction of decoding skills, exploiting the high correspondence between letters and sounds in the Turkish writing system (Durgunoğlu

2000: 6).” It is this “systematic correspondence between symbols and sounds” that allows “Turkish beginning readers” to “effortlessly” make the connections necessary for the progress (2000:6).

Indeed, this understanding of Turkish as a language with relatively transparent correspondence “between letters and sounds,” and likewise as readily broken into syllables, forms an increasingly prevalent plank in literacy pedagogy nationwide. In literacy classes I occasionally attended in Çorum, a central Anatolian town many hundreds of miles from Diyarbakir (also for adult female learners, all of whom were, in this case, monolingual Turkish speakers), the mainstay of the lessons was the repetition of lists of syllables differentiated phonemically. The teacher of these classes noted to me that these syllable lists were drawn from new guidelines sent down from the Ministry of Education, and were meant to contrast with the whole-word and sentence-level memorization that had previously dominated literacy pedagogy in Turkey.

The program creators were also keen, however, to underscore that learning to read and write requires more than the technical matter of decoding. Again, here they sought to draw a distinction between the ways the literacy has often been taught in Turkey and their own approach. The focus on “functional literacy” was not only meant to “involve an awareness of literacy in everyday life” but to “emotionally enrich” the lives of participants, and to do so while respectfully acknowledging the lived knowledge and experiences that the women brought with them to the classroom, even without skills in reading and writing (2000:6). What those lived experiences might have looked like, and how they might shape relationships to the code of instruction, however, were rarely if acknowledged, even implicitly, in this literature. I turn now

to the site where most of my ethnographic explorations of literacy practice in Diyarbakir took place, the Bağlar Women's Center mentioned above.

### *The Bağlar Women's Center*

The Bağlar Women's Center was one of several similar centers located in the sprawling and congested neighborhood of Bağlar. Like the rest of the city, Bağlar was inundated in the 1980s and 1990s with people fleeing the devastation of their villages, as Turkish armed forces and Kurdish separatist guerillas battled for control of the countryside. Support for the Bağlar Women's Center came primarily from the local municipality, which helped pay the rent (the center was originally a private apartment located in a modest apartment building) and modest salaries for the few employees. The simple meals prepared by volunteers (bulgur pilav, yogurt, lentil soup) and tea leaves to fill the endlessly bubbling teakettle came from donations by center attendees and whatever pennies could be saved from rent and salaries. Materials for literacy classes – workbooks, textbooks, etc. – were subsidized by the national foundation that sponsored the courses, and the teacher was a volunteer trained by the same foundation (see below).

About a year into my fieldwork the BWC moved locations, from the cramped apartment in an old building along the district's main thoroughfare to more spacious quarters in a new, still-unfinished apartment block in a more residential neighborhood. The new center included space for two classrooms rather than one (in what would have been the salon and master bedroom), and offered a much more formal and impressive director's office for hosting visitors. The entrance to the new building faced a large courtyard, where children played and neighbor women sat outside preparing their evening meals. Center attendees were well aware of the watchful, curious eyes of



these neighbors. Some felt that the constant coming and going of center participants would normalize relations with the neighbors, who might otherwise assume the worst about the free and unsupervised circulation of women and girls. Others simply felt the weight of dozens of eyes as they entered and left again, and wistfully recalled the more inconspicuous entryway to the older building.

As self-professed feminists and committed community organizers, the three women who ran BWC faced a particular dilemma when it came to these evaluations of *okuma yazma*. On the one hand, they were sympathetic to the critical observation that such classes were the one of primary means by which these women encountered (and improved their skills in) a language code – Turkish – that was rapidly overtaking the communicative repertoire of this newly urban milieu. On the other hand, they witnessed these same women struggle daily to manage the demands of an environment that included countless confrontations with written language: building signage; placards in the windows of buses and communal taxis indicating their routes; countless forms and documents including hospital records, social security forms, utility bills, and school reports.

Even beyond the programmatic materials prepared by educators and planners associated with formal literacy campaigns or volunteer organizations, literacy is understood to have far-reaching consequences, ones that include what is understood to be a technical capacity to decipher graphic inscription, but crucially, to extend beyond merely the capacity to decode. For those most involved in the planning and institutionalizing of organizations like AÇEV, the effects of literacy are simultaneously cognitive and social: being literate helps a woman learn to think critically, to retain knowledge, to parse and evaluate media discourses, and to make more

informed decisions. She becomes a more democratic participant in political life, and even a better citizen; in the Ministry of Education curriculum this is explicitly framed in terms of knowledge of- and therefore loyalty-to Turkish historical and national narratives. For AÇEV planner, women will, they hope, learn through their training to become more critical, more aware of their citizenly rights, and more capable of critically interpreting the kinds of media discourse to which they are exposed, asking questions where before they would have just accepted the narrative presented to them.

For many program administrators and volunteers in organizations like AÇEV, the process of becoming literate was one filled with promise; the rewards of becoming literate were obvious, significant, and straightforward. Not only would women be better able to navigate their newly urban lives – from boarding the correct city bus to filling out required bureaucratic forms – they would also be better able to assist their children with schoolwork and to become more engaged with their children’s teachers. As wielders of written language, they would be potentially employable in ways foreclosed to them otherwise. They would make more informed decisions at the grocery store, the doctor’s office, the hospital, the municipality. They would have improved self esteem, greater confidence at home and in their community, be better able to articulate their own needs, desires, and grievances. Beyond the immediately practical, an ineffable sense of well-being and social connection was understood to derive from more deftly navigating the world of text. In the words of one of the architects of the functional literacy program, “reading and writing are not only for acquiring knowledge, but also for emotional enrichment, to lift our spirits, to make us feel empathy, anger, joy, interest, curiosity, and in short, to make us human (Durgunoglu 2006: 6).”

In a telling and typical example, Ayten, a retired middle school teacher from Istanbul whose brother was stationed in Diyarbakir for several years in the 1980s, recalled the rural families flooding into cities across the country with a weary shake of her head. Over pastries in her Istanbul home she explained to me, “Nothing will change until the literacy levels move up, fifty percent, seventy percent, eighty percent.” She told me she doubted literacy in “the Southeast” would reach 100%, at least in her daughter’s lifetime, but she emphasized again and again her belief in the power of reading and writing. In doing so, Ayten moved seamlessly from a capacity to decipher and reproduce text to other kinds of capacities: the emancipation of women from forms of social connection that, for Ayten, figured as constraint. The bonds of “traditional life,” the fact that “these women live in traditional families” [*geleneksel aileler*]. “Most of them [women in the region] can’t even leave the house without asking their husbands’ or sons’ permission first,” she told me sternly. “In that kind of situation, what do you do? You’ve got to get them out of the house, you’ve got to give them places to go,”

In Diyarbakir itself, however, particularly in within the context of the Bağlar Women’s Center (and similar settings around the city, where literacy classes were regularly held – these included public laundry facilities subsidized by the municipal government, as well as other women’s centers similar to BWC), the political and historical context typically ignored by national level Turkish academics and planners was less easily set aside. There, the promises of literacy practices were more ambiguous, positioned within a wider context of competing logics of cultural authenticity, emancipatory politics, and technical skill.

### *Inside the Literacy Classroom*

For Mine, a volunteer literacy teacher who was originally from a small city on the Aegean coast, the time she spent in Diyarbakir figured as half-exile, half-adventure. Restless and, in her words, “a little too solitary” without a family of her own, she decided to spend her free time acting as a volunteer literacy teacher in the city. She began her training with AÇEV not long after her arrival in Diyarbakir three years before I met her, and divided her time between the elementary school where she taught children each morning and the afternoon literacy classes she led for adult women at the Bağlar Women’s Center.

Sitting in the dusty classroom after the students had left for the day, Mine shared with me the teacher’s handbook that she used to guide her classes. Over the weeks that followed, we met regularly after class to discuss the training she received, the teaching guides she was expected to use, and the experiences she had since teaching the first courses after completing her training. Mine admitted that she sometimes tweaked the lesson plans to better accommodate what she saw as the emerging – and divergent – skills and interests of the women in her class, and confided that she often felt as though she were making things up as she went. Her official training was primary education, and she struggled to know how to address the challenges that came from teaching young and adult women whose experiences, capacities, and expectations differed from those of younger children. “Most of these women,” she told me, “it’s actually hard to even know what they come here for. Sometimes I don’t know what they want to learn from me, or even if that’s what they come for.”

One of her former – and even then, only occasional – students was a long-time volunteer at the BWC, and someone whose relationship to literacy learning was a revealing study in how

literacy can work as a metric of evaluation, as producing not only new relationships to the printed word but to deeply internalized senses of self and the wider community.

Nermin was not sure, but she guessed that she was about 36 or 37 years old. Her family moved from a village about 40 miles away when she was around eight, and she said no one really kept track of things like birthdays until they moved to the city. A regular fixture at the women's center, she moved easily between the kitchen, the crafts room, the balcony where strings of eggplants dried slowly in the dusty summer sun, and the front door, which she opened for the visitors who waited patiently to be buzzed in from the outside gate. But one place she rarely spent time was the classroom in the back of the warren of rooms that made up the old center. As women and girls trooped in for the thrice-weekly literacy classes held there, Nermin greeted familiar faces but almost never joined the classes herself. Yet I knew – having spent many hours in her company, both inside the center and at the tiny apartment she shared with her elderly mother – that Nermin did not read well, and that this fact pained her greatly.

She told me stories of little humiliations, public and private, like the brother-in-law who mocked her, “What, are you retarded?” when she asked for help with an electricity bill. The salesperson at a scarf shop in Ofis who rolled her eyes when Nermin asked about the written words that made up a scarf's design. Or the fact that she felt she could not keep up with the niece and nephew she helped to raise, after their father was murdered by shadowy forces (“you know who I mean, right?”) in the late 1990s, when Diyarbakir was full of political assassinations and mysterious deaths.

This niece was Nermin's pride and joy, a bright young fourteen year old who dreamed of being a forensic pathologist (a career choice I am was initially puzzled by, until I remembered

how her father and so many others died during the years she was growing up). This was a girl who sailed off to school each morning from her apartment in the same middle class neighborhood I live, who brought home report cards and essays bedazzled with high scores. It was these reports and papers that Nermin could not read, that filled her with simultaneous pride and wistfulness. “I’m so proud of her,” she whispered to me when we visited the apartment. “She is doing something I could never do.” Later she told me that she felt like she raised those children, but then she got nothing for it. No one will ever know what she did for them, she said, and one day they will be ashamed of her. When I pressed her for what she means – why shame? Surely there is love, the affection so palpable between them? – she shrugged. I should know what she meant, the gesture implied, without having it spelled out. She was too young to have the excuse of age – no one expects a 60 year old woman with a rural past to necessarily know how to read and write, but a woman in her late thirties navigated different expectations. Too old to have been likely sent to school as a child, but too young to have the obvious excuse of age and generation, women like Nermin occupied an uneasy in-between space, one brought about in part by the violent dislocations and urban migrations of the 1980s and 1990s.

But it is too late, she said, too late to learn how to write letters and remember them. It is the remembering that is hard, she told me. And although once I remember seeing one of the younger girls try to cajole Nermin into joining them for the literacy classes in the backroom, more typically the separation took place without being remarked upon: some headed back to the classroom, others remained at the crafts table, or in the kitchen prodding tea leaves in the kettle and washing up leftover glasses. Nermin’s shame, however, came up often in our conversations – a mixture of futility (“it’s too late, for what should I learn?”) and estrangement, from the

possibilities she both projected and discarded: that she might keep up with her niece, that she might not be left behind in those much-admired successes, that she might be able to write letters to me when I left for America.

But then, on other occasions, Nermin pointed out with some stubborn pride that she managed just fine with the amount of literacy she had. She and her mother got by, eking out a modest existence on her dead father's pension, calling upon friends and relatives to assist when reading was required. This, in fact, was the absence that seems most strongly felt: the presence of a man in the house, a husband to anchor Nermin's social position, to guarantee her security and to provide for her mother, to make possible her deepest hope of having children. The kind of social mobility marriage would provide was not merely greater economic prosperity for Nermin; it was literally the capacity to be differently mobile in the city – to shop at the market, to visit the city walls, to promenade in the evening securely attached to the arm of a legitimizing spouse.

It is apparent from even this brief example of Nermin – her ambivalence, her shame, her uncertainties about how she fit into a urban economy of circulation and risk – that literacy is vested with deeply felt moral consequences, not only those projected by campaign planners and supporters but by the women who are the targets of those campaigns themselves. By “moral” I mean imbued with normative evaluative resonance along political, personal, and institutional scales. These include valuations along morally inflected metrics like modernity and backwardness; emancipation from and embeddedness within kinship networks; self-cultivation and connections to values understood as universal; and a wide landscape of political consequences from democratic participation to critical media consumption, good citizenly duty

to commitment to political ideals and narratives of belonging (both Turkish-state and Kurdish alternative figurations).

As the examples from the planning literature have shown, many of the most explicit of these moral consequences can be found in the discourses of literacy campaigns, both by the government and non-governmental organizations (including those, like AÇEV, that often otherwise take some critical distance from government approaches). The linking of literacy as a particular kind of capacity to decode with other capacities – cognitive, emotional, political, etc. – and consequences is, not surprisingly, perhaps most sharply made by proponents of literacy education at the institutional level. But these connections and linkages do not stop there; these are normative frameworks that circulate and shape how all kinds of people understand the promises and limits of literacy skills, including the women and girls of BWC, and the family members that support (however enthusiastically or grudgingly) their attendance at the center.

*To Move Around the City: Literacy as Liberating, Literacy as Emancipatory*

One of the greatest opportunities the Bağlar Women's Center afforded its clientele was a destination, a place to safely head to and return from during the day, with relatively minimal risk of opprobrium from nosy neighbors or unfriendly gossip. This aspect of the women's center – that it provided women and girls a place to spend time, to make friendships, to attend courses or meetings (or private counseling sessions) – was both lauded and mildly derided by center observers. Zehra, the director of the center in a nearby neighborhood mentioned above, was keenly aware of both the derision and praise. “The comrades [*heval*],” she noted, accused them of providing women with harmless – and frivolous – distractions.



A friend, Deniz, told me the “Bağlarler” would do better to spend their time on political organizing and protesting than handicrafts and literacy lessons. He was among those who were most frustrated by my work in literacy classrooms. His investment in me was a serious one. He had taken me around town, introduced me to people who were civically active in the city, allowed me access to conversations in his home where plans were made and policies debated. And he worried that my time spent at the women’s center, if not wasted, might be at least misspent. Making crafts and learning to read and write – in Turkish! – were not going to change the things that needed to be changed, in his view. He pressed me as to “what else” happens at the center – were they “involved” (*katılıyorlar mı?*), i.e., did they attend protests, meetings, demonstrations? Or were they just whiling away the days until they got married, headed off each day to a relatively safe space where their fathers and brothers would not balk at their absence from the home?

Yet what for Deniz constituted a somewhat superficial endeavor whose energies would be better spent in other ways, was for many center participants a hard-won achievement. Getting to and from the center – or attending any number of other literacy classes or activities in the city, for that matter – entailed forms of circulations, with its possibility of stranger sociability, that were often fraught with risk for many of the women and girls. Many of them mentioned the scrutiny to which they were continually subject, by curious neighbors or siblings and other family members sensitive to becoming the objects of neighborhood gossip, while yet others in the neighborhood worried about the corrupting influences the girls might encounter, away from the watchful eyes of family. In a moment of acute meta-reflection, Filiz, the former director of Bağlar, told me that she hesitated to even tell me about the kinds of concerns expressed by

family members worried about letting their daughters and sisters come to the center. I don't want you to think Kurds are like this, she told me – so conservative and “honor”-bound. You probably already think that's true, she sighed – and shrugged as if to say, Who am I to dispel all stereotypes at once? And isn't it true that this is a fear we hear all the time?

The possibility of circulation in the city afforded by attending classes at Bağlar raised a host of deeply charged issues for center attendees. One young woman was quite succinct: “The one [parent] who trusts their child, sends them [to literacy classes]” [*Kimi çocuğuna güvenip de gönderiyor*]. Another frequent participant in center activities told me that although she had managed to persuade her father to allow her to come to Bağlar – he approved of its association with the local municipality and sponsorship of pro-Kurdish political events – her movements to and from the center were strictly monitored. The “gossip mechanism” [*dedikodu mekanizması*], as she wryly called it, of watching neighbors and older brothers lounging around the courtyard ensured that she walked with a friend from her apartment building to the center and back, with no stops or trajectory changes along the way.

Remzi and Mehmet, two underemployed, restless young men in their early twenties echoed some of these contradictions: on the one hand, they thought it was important that these girls had a place to go to (“obviously one that is female only”). On the other, they were not sure they would want their own sisters to go. Mehmet dismissed the notion by saying that his sister could read “a little” and was, anyway, too busy with two small children to worry about such things. Remzi shrugged and said that it was not so much that he would mind, but his father would, and the neighbors might say things. “You know, where are they going every day, who are they meeting with, things like that.” When pressed, neither of the men were quite willing to say

that their female relatives should *not* know how to read and write, but they were not exactly convinced that it was strictly necessary, either. Or, at the very least they remained unconvinced that the presumed benefit to their sisters outweighed the potential cost in social opprobrium.

And that opprobrium could, indeed, carry a high cost. Mercan was a seventeen year old with a middle school education; she was forced to drop out of school after a painful series of events several years earlier. After becoming pregnant and undergoing a hushed and forced abortion at fourteen, Mercan essentially lived under house arrest, leaving her home only in the company of members of her family. She picked hazelnuts and cotton as a seasonal worker with members of her extended family in the summer, and spent her winters in her parents' house in an impoverished neighborhood of Diyarbakir. I met her through mutual friends – girls who came to the women's center regularly and thought Mercan and I would like to speak to each other. She was presented to me as a kind of case story – an example of someone whose life would benefit from participation in center events, someone who was inextricably entangled in a series of social structures that were considered somehow both exemplary and exceptional: Kurdish “traditional” mores, with the simultaneous sense of anachronism and relevance, and Kurdish feminist possibilities (in this case foreclosed).

Mercan told me a story of a transition from happy, capable schoolgirl, one whose teachers continually expressed their surprise as her capabilities, to a farm laborer who saw no opportunities for herself, who felt hopeless about the possibilities of a brighter future. Because she had a middle school diploma she could, in theory, have worked as a sales or checkout clerk in a shop. When I asked whether there was something the staff at Bağlar could do to help her (they often stepped in to negotiate delicate matters with families, or arranged for someone from

the municipality or another organization to do so when they thought it might help), she shrugged. I asked if she might be able to look to one of these organizations for help in continuing her schooling, she replied:

I would love to, myself, but my family would never give permission. I'm a middle school graduate. I could work in a store as a secretary, I dunno, I could work in a shop instead of burning under the 40 degree sun from morning to night, some kind of secretary job in a cool place, right? Because I have a middle school education. But my family would never let me. Because my father's trust in me is broken. If my family gave permission, my biggest wish would be to study. But at this point, if heaven and earth came together my father wouldn't let me.

When asked what might help, what she would need most, Mercan continued:

First of all I'd say, I would study. When a person reads it's like wings beating toward freedom [*Zaten okuyunca insan ilk başta özgürlüğe kanat çırpıyor*]. My family used to say, "this one is studying, let's leave her be." Going forward I would build my own life. Not with anyone else's money, with my own terms, my own efforts, I would eat with what I had earned myself. Then I could put my struggle into whatever topics I wanted. We Kurds, when we don't teach our girls, the girls are beaten down yet again. Our women are constantly beaten down. Getting beaten up, tradition crimes, getting separated from those they love... it all keeps happening. [*Kadınlarımız sürekli ezilecek. Yok dayakmış, töre cinayetleriymiş, sevenleri birbirinden ayırmakmış sürecektir*] But a person

who studies doesn't face this pressure... When girls study it solves everything, I think. The things she studies... For example, we Kurds are really self-interested [*menfaatçi*] people, like, if someone said, said to my father, look my own father, "Send your daughter to school, and we'll give you a stipend," there's no way he would say "no." Look, my dad, he's a self-interested guy. I think if that were the case — "send your daughters to school and we'll supplement your salaries" — definitely, even babies would be sent to school, I swear.

We talked about the fact that in addition to Bağlar there were other centers around the city that offered courses, activities, learning opportunities. She replied,

I asked my father. I know they have carpet[making] classes, computer classes, a whole lot of things. I talked to my father about it, he said, "Oh, daughter, I wouldn't say a thing," he said. "If it were in my hands I would send you to school," he said. "But the neighbors..." [*çevre*, lit., surroundings, environment]...Someone said to me, why are you out there hoeing, why don't you work as a nanny? My dad said, "daughter," he said, "I would let you work inside a house, instead of burning out there under that sun. I mean, they already gossip about you when you are out there working, it's [bad] enough that you've lost your reputation [lit. your name has gone out], they would/will gossip about you even more..." Basically what keeps my dad from letting it happen is the environment around us. The talk in the neighborhood, the gossip makes my dad...["*Sen orda çalıştığın zaman zaten senin dedi adın çıkmış yeterince daha çok dedikodu yapacaklar*" dedi. Yani

*babamın da bütün çekingenliği çevre. Çevrenin konuşmalarından, dedikodularından  
babam şey...* [her voice drifts off.]

In some ways, Mercan and Nermin each had, respectively, one of two precious and much-valued capacities: Mercan had access to a world of text, of schooling, of potential employment possibilities, but could not move through the city to take advantage of them. Nermin could circulate – within fairly delimited boundaries, to be sure – but did not have access to the world of the printed word. Neither could fully take advantage of the possibilities held out as promises by literacy lessons at the Bağlar Women’s Center, but they yearned for both what they understood as the technical capacity to read and the social-moral permission to take advantage of that capacity, to move through the city.

### *The Communicative Logic of Literacy in Turkey*

There was one line of critical engagement with the widespread ideological understanding of the “neutrality” of literacy as a technical skill, that criticized literacy campaigns as efforts by the Turkish state to assimilate Kurdish people, particularly women. This critical vantage point struggled to articulate itself, however, because it ran counter to a number of substantial logics at play. First of all, it needed to highlight the code of literacy instruction (Turkish) in a context where longstanding historical reasons meant this code was largely taken for granted. Secondly, it had to point continually to past histories (of violence, disruption, and dislocation) in a context where the pedagogical literature and founding institutions of literacy pedagogy never mentioned this history, as well as where the temporal orientation of moralizing literacy frameworks more

largely (i.e., that of many Kurdish feminist organizations as well) were pitched in future-oriented terms around capacity-building and the “practical necessity” of a capacity to navigate newly modern [Turkish code] lives. It also was forced to argue against emancipatory frameworks of freeing women from patriarchal bonds and limitations in a context where most of the critics shared a feminist sympathy to this argument, or were at least leery of being understood as arguing *for* the circumscription of women to their homes and hearths, given that literate capacities are necessary for many aspects of contemporary life and for economic mobility, and since literacy is also firmly entrenched as an evaluative ascriptive horizon for being a modern person.

Indeed, as scholarship on linguistic standardization – a related topic that will be addressed more fully in the next chapter – has pointed out (Gal 2006; Milroy 1999), one consequence of vesting literacy with so many transformative consequences on the personal and population level is that one then more firmly entrenches it as a standard along which to evaluate and measure people; like other metrics of measurement and evaluations, it creates the normal and the deviant, the standard and the nonstandard. New hierarchies thus emerge alongside deeply felt and internalized relationships to these norms and standards.

These feelings of shame and pride, modernity and skill at navigating urban life, could be experienced as overlapping, simultaneous, conflicting, or all-encompassing. For planners, literacy was an unambiguous good, a basic necessity for managing modern city life, for becoming a better, happier, more developed person. The women who were the targets of literacy campaigns and interventions had a necessarily more ambivalent range of reactions to these promises: Were they, in fact, likely to lead measurably easier lives, as a result of being able to

decode text? How many quotidian contours of their lives were likely to be different as a result of being able to read? Would there actually be jobs to employ them? Did they *want* jobs outside the home? (Being employed outside the home was a complicated question, after all, for many women in Diyarbakir: it raised all sorts of questions about whether their families could provide for them, what kinds of circulations and interactions were appropriate and respectable, what kinds of opportunities were available and how desirable they actually were.) Would there be adequate housing, schooling opportunities for children, or safe streets as a result? Would there be expanded political opportunities? Would their guerilla children return from the mountains? Would literacy practices mean they would no longer go to jail for protesting government action, or that their political leaders would be allowed to remain in office? Would they be safe from violence in the home or the streets? What amount of literate capacity was required, in fact, to trigger the kinds of capacities for democratic transformation and humanist connection promised by the most far-reaching of literacy's advocates? What genres of discourse must be mastered to score high on the examinations that are the sharp-edged gate-keepers of upward mobility in Turkey?

As Cody argues, “it is the narrative of development-as-pedagogy that holds out the promise of a future alignment of communicative frameworks, technologies, and participant roles, allowing for the transparent self-representation of an already constituted citizen (2009a: 350).” Yet it was the conditions of this alignment – or perhaps, better, the characteristics of the alignment possibilities offered by a Turkish mainstream development organization (one that did not address the political historical context of newly-literacy-demanding-lives) that was challenged by Kurdish community activists who criticized the “assimilating” consequences of



literacy instruction. There was, in the spoken criticisms of people like Deniz and Ayşegül, an effort to situate current literacy education campaigns (especially at the national level, campaigns like *Haydi Kızlar Okula, Baba Beni Okula Gönder*) within a longer history of Turkish state efforts to transform a heterogeneous population into a suitably homogenous, loyal, compliant citizenry. They considered grassroots level campaigns like this one, operating through volunteers and at an oblique angle to official state ministries like the MEB, not as a retreat of state power as much as the dissemination of governmentalizing political rationalities (still committed to a state-sanctioned alignment of communicative technologies, political framework, and subjective orientation) across a wide swathe of social domains.<sup>5</sup>

The normative frameworks of different institutions involved in literacy pedagogy do vary, and those variances are not insignificant. MEB teacher training materials not only operate through different formal pedagogical techniques for literacy instruction (e.g. whole sentence learning) but with differently pitched material content: kinds of instructional materials, narrative anecdotes, and content. The emphasis on obeying the state, on being a good citizen understood as gratefully receiving the benefits of a secure, strong, unified nation-state, etc. AÇEV teacher training and course materials (as well as – perhaps especially in regard to the developers’ understanding of what they intend their pedagogical program to enable) explicitly draw on both different techniques for teaching decoding but also for subject material, discussion frameworks, teacher-student relationship, and the anticipated goals, benefits, or promises of “success” in the program.

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<sup>5</sup> These are examples of what Trouillot (2001), Ferguson (1994) and other anthropologists of the state have called state effects, practices and consequences normally ascribed to the state that are taken on by non-state, non-governmental entities.

Yet even across the significant differences we can identify in the pedagogical approaches and course materials of these respective literacy programs there are important shared logics, about the promises of literacy, about the characteristics of the non-literate citizen, about the series of consequences understood to unfold, one from the other, in the act of deciphering written text. There are also shared silences regarding the social conditions that frame the act of navigating a textualized world, a world in which at least “functional literacy” is an unavoidable horizon of evaluation and ascription (of both self and other).

What Cody (2009a) and others (e.g. Chakrabarty 2000) have argued is particular to specifically postcolonial regimes of administrative power like that in India – “that the strategies of a specifically developmental governmentality rest on the persistent premise that all people do not yet have the full capacity to represent themselves as rights-bearing citizens” (Cody 2009a: 352) – applies, to a certain degree, in a context like Turkey (whose first century as a national republic has been notably marked by intense investment in modernizing, governmentalizing developmental logics by a central and authoritarian state). As Tambar (2014) has argued, a discussion of the Turkish case must also include both a history of the violent repression of social movements resisting the homogenizing narrative of Turkish nationalism, and a history of quieter regimentations of inclusions and exclusions. These form the conditions in which literacy campaigns have emerged (repeatedly at various moments in Turkish republican history) and through which they are understood. In fact, the extent to which historical conditions – and which historical conditions – are understood as relevant to framing illiteracy in this context is itself a revealing diacritic of political engagement. The specifics of a history of the state-sponsored violent removal of people from their homes and communities, and specific markers of ethnic

identity – e.g., “Kurd” or “Kurdish” – are rare to nonexistent in the Turkish literature on literacy practices.

This is true at the curricular level (where an argument could be made for introducing literacy practices in the code of actual linguistic competence and/or identitarian value). It is also true at the pedagogical level, of how classroom practices take place, what kinds of issues – of hunger, of trauma, of insecurity – might be framing the experiences and potentials of participants. The absence of any mention of these also takes place at the most obvious level, that of explaining how and why particular kinds of people find themselves without literate knowledge and yet in contexts where such knowledge is increasingly demanded of/expected of them.

This chapter took up these questions in order to better understand the kinds of logics at play in a cascading series of consequences of literacy, as built into and developed by the practitioners and advocates of literacy campaigns for women and girls in a place like Diyarbakir. To do this I examined the frameworks and content of literacy pedagogical materials, ethnographic interviews, and media discourses around the promises of literacy. I also investigated the varied, ambivalent, at times seemingly contradictory responses to and characterizations of literacy campaigns and pedagogical practices, by a variety of individuals interpellated by these practices, from participants in literacy courses to family members, community activists, and non-participants. I did this in order to better understand the stakes of literacy, how these stakes are parsed along axes of “necessity,” “emancipation” and “assimilation.”

To examine the purported consequences of literacy – as practice and as identity – as laden with affective value in a context of development-as-pedagogy and deeply fraught contests over

political sovereignty reveals the variation and diversity of how differently positioned actors respond to and characterize the promises or pitfalls of literacy. It also sheds light on the increasing inescapability of literacy as a horizon of evaluation and metric of measurement, not only in terms of state-centered epistemologies of enumeration, wider communicative logics, and moral narratives of development, but also for individuals and community actors seeking to transform their social settings.

There is a relevant shift apparent in the logics of literacy campaigns, from a primary emphasis on literacy as means to technical skill building and development (Yüksel 2006) to a more recent emphasis on literacy as a transformative emancipatory practice, at least on the part of certain recent literacy campaigns like AÇEV. This is not to say that literacy has not long been imbued with transformative capacities in excess of a limited technical capacity for inscriptive denotation – as Nohl & Sayilan (2004) and others have pointed out, education in general and literacy in particular have long been deemed instrumental means of creating an appropriately modern and developed citizenry, a loyal and compliant national body. So in that respect, literacy has long been understood to have transformative power. But earlier campaigns were noteworthy for their combination of literacy training with other kinds of vocational training – literacy was, in this sense, often understood as a necessary prerequisite for creating a better laborer, a more skilled worker, a more capable economic producer.

In more recent campaigns like the AÇEV one, which takes its inspiration from many sources including international scholarly literature on adult education and a feminist lexicon of empowerment, respect, and voice, there is an emphasis on the power and potential of literacy beyond skills-building in a narrowly technical sense. Literacy education is understood to also

carry the potential to cultivate other capacities as well – for critical thinking, for reflection, for self-awareness. It is understood to cultivate a kind of nonparochial connection to human universals of emotions and feelings, uniquely accessible through individual reading practices. Learning to read and write also means being more receptive to and aware of psycho-social developments and values, from early child development to domestic hygiene, from issues of women’s health to conflict-resolution in the home. Literate female citizens are better suited to the demands of democratic participation and community transformation.

From the perspective of those who vest literacy with these transformative powers, the transformation of self versus the acquisition of practical skill is less a tension than the poles along which the positive potentials of literacy practices are understood to lie. For those who critique current Turkish literacy campaigns as assimilating practices of state control, however, another pole is proposed, along which literacy practices should be understood. This critique, in turn, is tenable only when pitched in certain limited terms – a concern with context, an insistence that the historical context of literacy’s necessity should include the story of state violence against its Kurdish citizens and its refusal to allow them political sovereignty. But this critique is hard to maintain when pushed to its logical limits: can even its most ardent supporters really maintain that it is preferable for a woman to not know how to read? To *not* be “able to navigate urban life”? To be “limited” to house and home? Because the normative and institutional parameters within which literate capacities are already so firmly established, these are the questions that such critics face – on the relatively rare occasion that the argument is pushed to this level.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### **“They don’t know where to put learning Kurdish in their lives”: Pedagogies of Kurdish in Transition.**

*“Many people see learning Kurdish like an obligation. They don’t know where to put learning Kurdish in their lives.”*  
- Hatice, age 29

*“Everyone should know his own mother tongue.”*  
- İbrahim, age 41

*“When they first said we could have Kurdish classes, everyone was pleased, we said this was a new beginning. But then we saw that they were going to make us pay. Why should we pay to learn our mother tongue? So no one went back to the classes, no one goes there anymore.”*  
- Vedat, age 43

In the sunlit classroom in a prestigious public university in Istanbul, a small group of college students watches as their instructor writes Kurdish verb conjugations on the board. Called upon to convert the written examples into the negative, they shift uneasily in their seats and tentatively offer their responses.

*Ez nalîzim. Tu, uh, nalîzî..? Ew nalîze... [I don’t read. You, uh, don’t read...? He doesn’t read...]*

*Ez naxwazim. Tu naxwazî. Ew naxwaze... [I don’t want. You don’t want. He doesn’t want...]*

The instructor, a fellow undergraduate and self-taught *mamoste* (teacher) of Kurdish, joins his erstwhile students for paper cups of tea from the canteen after class. Stretching out on the sun-

dappled lawns overlooking the Bosphorus, they continue a conversation in mostly Turkish, making plans to meet later at a favorite pastry shop.

On the far opposite side of the country, in a dingy reception hall of a community center in the Bağlar neighborhood of Diyarbakır, a Kurdish class is held every Wednesday evening. Men, women, and children of all ages sit on the floor before a whiteboard and a volunteer teacher. Conversations in Kurdish and Turkish rumble continuously amid a prevailing ethos of congenial chaos. The teacher, meanwhile, speaks over the hubbub, gamely making his way through the alphabet. He pauses to emphasize the letters Q, X, and W before urging his students to practice writing the alphabet at home and dismisses the class.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in Diyarbakır, a city hall employee lowers the volume on the television, turning her attention from the Turkish-subtitled American sitcom to the Kurdish newspaper on her lap. Narrowing her eyes in concentration she sounds out the words quietly as she reads, stumbling over certain letters before tossing the paper aside in frustration a few minutes later. She glances at me – her foreign friend, busy jotting Kurdish vocabulary onto homemade flashcards – and groans in amused irritation. “*Ooofff*,” she sighs. “I’m just not used to it. I suppose I should try harder.” She and her husband decide they will once again reinstate their previously imposed – and subsequently abandoned – family goal of reading only Kurdish newspapers from now on. Even half an hour a day, she proposes, will make a big difference. It’s not like she doesn’t *know* the words – Kurdish is, after all, her “mother tongue.” She is just not used to *reading* them. But she will get used to it. She really will try harder.

In this chapter and the three that follow, I turn my attention squarely to what I call the *public dispensability* of Kurdish: that is, with the ways that given language varieties (in this case,

Kurdish and Turkish) fit into or unsettle particular contexts of usage deemed “public” by their users. I provide a broad portrait of the emergent transformation of Kurdish into a new kind of public language, and the heterogeneous spaces of consolidation, cultivation, and contradiction that accompany these shifts. Chapter Four examines efforts by Kurdish language workers to cultivate and construct a fully “developed” standard language, one equipped with the registers, genres, and text-artifacts that would indicate equivalence in a world of standard languages. In Chapter Five, I examine moments of “public Kurdish” and the expectations of code, context, and kind of person they presuppose, transform, or reproduce. The conclusion takes up new shifts in the landscape of public language in contemporary Turkey, examining the dynamic capacities for a would-be public Kurdish to index different forms of authority.

In this chapter I focus on the spaces and settings within which learning Kurdish takes place. I examine the practices of Kurdish pedagogy, from community classes aimed at groups of widely mixed ability to individuals who sit alone with grammar books. The analysis here explores the political-economic contours and moralized imperatives of knowing and not knowing, of learning and resisting learning, of cultivating standard practices and dismissing them.

In addition to providing a broad overview of the field in which transformations in public dispensability take place, and building on the discussion of classroom practice in the previous chapter, I also hone in on the ethnographic emergence of Kurdish into an object of pedagogical intervention. How do people experience the look and sound of Kurdish when it enters a classroom or is read from a textbook? How do previous experiences with practices of pedagogy – sitting at desks, taking notes, being tested – shape the would-be learner’s encounter with



pedagogical Kurdish? And what, indeed, does knowing Kurdish – a textualized, standardized, pedagogically-pitched Kurdish, at least – make possible? To what does it grant access, and for whom?

As outlined earlier, the lifting of the ban on the use of Kurdish (in both speech and publication) in 1991 marked a significant turning point in the public circulation of Kurdish in Turkey. The years following the lifting of the ban on Kurdish, including official (albeit highly restricted) permission to allow instruction of the language, have witnessed the increasing availability of contexts in which Kurdish is the object of explicit, formal pedagogical attention: teach-yourself-Kurdish books, formal classes organized and taught through Kurdish Institutes around Turkey, news reports of individuals who have turned to the internet to learn the language. Kurdish is, in this sense, newly something that can be taught in classrooms.

The repeal of the language laws that had, up till then, made it illegal to teach Kurdish as a language or to provide education in it had profound effects on the linguistic landscape in Turkey. Within weeks of the pronouncement, newly founded Kurdish Institutes (*Enstîtuya Kurdî*, *Kurt Enstitüsü*), across the country, from Istanbul to Diyarbakir, Izmir to Van, announced that they would be holding Kurdish language classes. The early courses were flooded with enthusiastic participants, and enthusiasm was high among many Kurds that the ruling and subsequent pedagogical opportunities might lead to widespread transformations in the linguistic – and political – landscape of Turkey.

Yet within months of the language law repeal, many of the languages courses had closed and widespread frustration and disgruntlement had replaced the earlier enthusiasm. The Kurdish Institutes, as a collective, issued a statement announcing that they were officially shutting down

the Kurdish courses until the government took steps to lift the many restrictions that had been placed on how the courses were allowed to operate. Several young people from the suburban outskirts of Diyarbakir described for me the opening of these classes. They talked about the pervasive and general sense of excitement that many Kurds felt about the ban being lifted and a cautious optimism about what kinds of changes it might entail. They, like many others, spoke of the time when Kurdish was banned as a period when it had indeed felt fraught to display public signs of Kurdish, both spoken and written. To study Kurdish, to pass along Kurdish cassette tapes or attend performances where Kurdish was sung or spoken, felt fraught, transgressive, and risky. Those elements of risk and frisson carried over into the early weeks of the first Kurdish classes. “Everyone wanted to sign up for them,” Mehmet said. Or as Osman, a forty-something former teacher told me in another context, “At first every one wanted to go. We thought, this is a big thing, an important thing. We can finally study our mother tongue, we won’t be forbidden any more.”

But the excitement and fervor did not last long. Quickly the enthusiasm and excitement began to fade into something more cynical and bitter, as stories began to circulate about the restrictions being placed on the institutes that hoped to offer classes. The list of grievances was long and extended to several key matters: there was widespread frustration with the lengthy list of official restrictions put into place around how the classes could take place, which made it extremely difficult to actually hold the courses. These ranged from forbidding anyone under 18 from attending the courses, thus preventing the consolidating of Kurdish language skills among those arguably most capable of rapid and effective language learning, i.e. young children) to strict parameters on the shape and size of window frames and doors. The only people allowed to

teach these courses were those who had received education certificates from the Turkish Ministry of Education – a catch-22, given that until this point no formal instruction in Kurdish had been legally permitted within the country. This also meant that available cadres of qualified Kurdish language teachers with actual pedagogical training and experience from the Kurdish diaspora in Europe were ineligible to teach in Turkey.

Many also expressed the cynical belief that that the language repeal had only been installed in order to give the impression to the outside world, particularly the E.U., that changes were taking place without actually having to make those changes. As a kind of “window-dressing,” the ruling party could point to these legislative changes as evidence of reform, while quietly imposing significant logistical restrictions that made it hard for any real transformations to take place. To participate in the language classes in this context, therefore, would be to tacitly support minimal reform rather than radical and necessary change, and would allow the government to claim moral high ground without actually ceding much by way of real change.

But one of the final straws appeared to be the cost: the Kurdish classes, run as they were as private courses, would cost money. And beyond the very significant economic hardship that defines the lives of many if not most Diyarbakir residents, the fact of *paying* to learn “one’s own mother tongue” galled many otherwise interested participants. As if it were a “foreign language,” they exclaimed indignantly! Like English or French! As if we should have to pay to learn what we (should) already know!

Packed into this critique of the idea of paying to learn a mother tongue is a host of bundled ideological understandings about what language is and how languages can be broken down into constituent parts and compared. I take up the comparative questions in more depth in

the next chapters, where I examine the social practices through which languages come to be set against one another. In considering the fraught politics of “paying to learn one’s mother tongue” here, I unpack the relative alienability of these different ideologies of language, from the commodified tongue that can be acquired through private lessons to the morally-grounded, pre-political “mother tongue” whose alienability can be mobilized as an indictment of hegemonic language politics. Examining these tells us much about the relationships understood to obtain between speaking subjects, the array of potential communicative codes on offer, and forms of moral and political authority. In the final section of this chapter I return to this question, examining new relationships to Kurdish – emerging in a landscape in which language politics increasingly take place through idioms of “mother tongue.”

For all the significant restrictions that accompanied these legal changes, however, the early 1990s marked the beginning of a new chapter in the circulation of public Kurdish, including Kurdish language learning. I now turn to describing some of the contexts in which this kind of learning took place in Diyarbakir at the time of my fieldwork. In doing so I unpack the social historical emergence of Kurdish as an object of pedagogical intervention, the spaces and settings where this takes place. The classes that emerged in the wake of the closure of the 1991 and 2003 legal rulings included community classes run by volunteers and held for participants of widely mixed ability, ages, and backgrounds. Other classes were held for students with more exposure to formal education, often college students, and held in conjunction with university-related student organizations, social networks, and campus locations. Finally, there were also many Kurdish learners in Diyarbakir whose learning practices did not (primarily) emerge within

these kinds of classroom settings but took place at home, on an individual basis; I also examine the discourses of “self-cultivation” that these practices often explicitly drew upon.

*‘They Don’t Know Where to Put Learning Kurdish in Their Lives’: Community centers, group lessons, and new encounters with pedagogical Kurdish*

Rabya was a regular fixture at the Bağlar Women’s Center, spending every spare minute she could with her friends, young women in their mid-late teens who formed the core group of center volunteers. Eager participants in the consciousness-raising [*bilinç yükseltme*] group, Rabya and her friends also devoted themselves to the smooth running of the center, sweeping floors, making tea, answering the doorbell, and welcoming new visitors. The fourth-eldest of a large family, Rabya’s ability to spend time at the BWC depended a great deal on whether her mother could spare her from household duties; two of Rabya’s older siblings were “in the mountains,” i.e., fighting with the P.K.K., and her remaining older sister was almost exclusively homebound, caring for their younger siblings. Their family had come to Diyarbakir relatively recently – a decade before, when Rabya was about seven – and neither of her parents had attended school for more than a few years. They were among that increasingly rare percentage of Diyarbakir families who spoke almost exclusively in Kurdish at home, with even the school-aged children responding to their parents in Kurdish rather than Turkish, at least much of the time.

When I met her, Rabya had completed the first level of the state-sponsored literacy course; she sporadically attended courses for the second level, as time and family obligations permitted. She was one of the few attendees at the women’s center who regularly spoke to me in Kurdish, frequently expressing her delight at my efforts to learn and demonstrating a rare

patience with my many early mistakes. When she learned that I was attending Kurdish classes held at one of the community centers in an adjoining neighborhood she excitedly made plans to come along, securing permission from her parents and even managing to bring along several of her siblings, including her elder sister. We carefully made plans to go to and return from the center together (under the guise of ensuring my safety, the siblings' travels to and fro were also being coordinated under their parents' watchful eye).

The first lesson we attended was a great social occasion for the three girls and their brother. They arranged themselves shyly on the floor together and listened attentively to the teacher as he welcomed those assembled to their *dersên kurdî*, or Kurdish lessons. Wide-eyed, they stared at the whiteboard as the *mamoste* began the lesson, beginning, as always, by reviewing the Kurdish alphabet. Encouraged to contribute words that began with each letter, the girls whispered and elbowed each other with their ideas as other members of the class – and their ten-year-old brother – shouted out possibilities.

The class eventually ended in a manner I had come to expect from attending many such classes: in a state of generalized mild chaos. The younger children, long since restless from sitting, had started running around the seated group, jumping and leaping along the classroom walls. Meanwhile the mothers, many of whom had come with nursing babies and young children, huddled their heads together in rapid conversation, while the young unmarried women and men giggled and smirked across the room at one another. Lesson plans largely forsaken in the face of an ever-rising tide of conversation and ambient noise, the *mamoste* raised his voice loud enough to encourage his students to return the following week with their own “word lists” like those created in the session, and ready to write their words on the board. He also promised

that the next few lessons would include an introduction to Kurdish grammar and some practice reading the Kurdish daily newspaper.

Making our way home at the end of the evening, the siblings were enthusiastic about how exciting it was to have attended the class. They told me stories of various relatives who had been fined for speaking Kurdish by local gendarmerie forces in the 1990s, before their family had fled to Diyarbakir and Batman. Their stories were familiar ones: virtually every Kurdish person I encountered in Diyarbakir and even elsewhere in Turkey could and did conjure up strikingly similar stories of a generalized punitive disciplinary regime around the use of Kurdish in spaces of encounter with the Turkish state. They stressed to me the importance of Kurdish for “the struggle,” noting that while their siblings “in the mountains” already knew Kurdish before they went, there were many *heval* [comrades] who had to learn Kurdish as one of the first steps of becoming a guerilla.

As we walked to their home, I mentioned noticing that their own family’s television always seemed to be turned onto the Kurdish satellite station, and they nodded. Zehra, the eldest sister, mentioned how exciting it had been, years earlier, to turn on the TV and hear Kurdish coming out. Like many others I met, she considered Kurdish satellite channels not only a necessary source of constant ambient sound during waking hours (music videos on endless loop, interrupted by occasional news reports and political roundtables) but also the only reliable and trusted source of news about ongoing current events.

The siblings reported their activities at the class to the rest of the family as we gathered to share tea and sunflower seeds upon our return to their home. As we sat on cushions on the floor in the family’s living room, which also served as the only communal space in the house as well

as a bedroom for six of the children (the parents and two youngest shared a tiny bedroom opening off the living area), two of the middle children had their notebooks open and homework sheets scattered over one corner of the living room.

The evening progressed in a mixture of Kurdish and Turkish, anecdotes about the Kurdish class making way for more stories about persecutions for speaking Kurdish and other injustices meted out by Turkish authorities. Gesturing to the children's notebooks resting on the corner pillows, I asked Rabya whether she had had homework when she was attending literacy classes at the women's center. She nodded but said she rarely managed to complete it. She was always having to do something to help at home – the cooking or cleaning, minding her siblings, etc. – and even if she started to try, it never really worked out. I knew from previous conversations that she dearly hoped to be able to complete the second level of the state literacy courses, to be then eligible to take classes from the public education centers (*Halk Eğitimi Merkezi*) run by the Ministry of National Education and, eventually, possibly, acquire a school diploma. But I also knew that she had struggled to pass even the first level of the *okuma-yazma* courses at Bağlar Women's Center; from her tone of mixed resignation and regret in the conversation about homework it was clear that she was pessimistic about the possibility of actually achieving a diploma.

Over the next few weeks, Rabya, her younger brother, and one or two of her sisters continued to accompany me to the course held at the community center. The center was located in a section of Bağlar that was poor even by that municipality's standards, and as the days grew shorter it grew harder to navigate the poorly lit streets that led there. The lessons continued to focus primarily on the alphabet and basic vocabulary. The number of participants – initially in



the several dozens – dwindled down to a handful within a few weeks. Eventually the class wound down several weeks before the allotted schedule had run its course. The siblings continued to enjoy attending, and were disappointed the evening we arrived to learn the class – and all remaining classes – had been cancelled.

When prodded to reflect on their experiences attending the course, they were quick to underscore the importance of having such classes available. When I asked whether attending the class had affected their own language skills in Kurdish, Rabya’s younger sister Nûdem shrugged and pointed out that they already spoke Kurdish at home most of the time. Still, Rabya was quick to again add that it was good that they had these courses for people to attend, because so many people in Diyarbakir were “forgetting their mother tongue.”

Her father Îbrahim, who was reclining on a cushion nearby, joined the conversation. Jabbing his finger into the pillow for emphasis, he looked sternly at me and said, “A person should know his mother tongue. I mean *everyone*.” [*Divê mirov zimanê dayikê zanibe . Herkes, yani.*] Îbrahim’s was a sentiment I heard countless times in Diyarbakir and indeed, the assertion that one could simultaneously possess and yet not necessarily be able to wield the code determined to be one’s “mother tongue” was extremely widespread. This seemingly logically contradictory combination of identification and (in)capacity is worth exploring in greater depth, and I do so in the third section of this chapter.

The experience of this community class – launched with enthusiasm only to dissolve within a relatively short time – was not exceptional; many group classes I attended met similar fates and interlocutors commonly described a similar phenomenon in their own experiences. Teachers sighed and explained that it was hard to maintain momentum: “You never know who

will come back the next week.” The reasons provided for this varied, from the bluntly practical to more political and personal. Interest waxed and waned; families gave then withdrew permission for younger members to participate. Even factors like earlier sundown in the winter months meant having to be out after dark, which inhibited the participation of many (particularly female) participants.

The teachers, all volunteers, who led classes in these kinds of settings (often as part of the TZPKurdi Kurdish language initiative mentioned above) had typically received little to no formal pedagogical training, and relied primarily on their own prior knowledge and self-training (Haig 2004; Öpengin 2010). Mîrxas, a *mamoste* in his early 30s who occasionally volunteered for these community courses, described to me the challenges he faced teaching his classes. In the absence of financial resources to provide proper classrooms and equipment, even basic logistical needs were hard to meet. Reliable heating and electricity were not always a given, nor were there textbooks, blackboards, and other teaching tools. Like most of his fellow teachers, Mîrxas had not actually received much formal pedagogical training; he had attended some classes held by the Kurdish Institute before they were shut down but admitted that most of what he knew he had taught himself.

Mîrxas ultimately held that the proper locus for Kurdish language pedagogy was in schools (i.e., public, government-run elementary and secondary schools) themselves – without *anadil eğitim* there could be no political progress, in his view. But the courses – however haphazardly arranged they were – nevertheless provided, in his opinion, an important setting for Diyarbakir residents to realize the importance of their “mother tongue.” He pointed out that many of those attending the community classes actually spoke Kurdish already; what they

needed, he argued, was to learn to read and write Kurdish and, perhaps most importantly, to learn to *value* Kurdish, to refuse to accept the linguistic assimilation of their families and community into Turkish. He described how people in Diyarbakir did not necessarily give value to their mother tongue [*anadiline değer vermek*], and did not take ownership [*sahip çıkmak*] of their role in preventing assimilation, arguments that echo those encountered in the previous chapter regarding the assimilating risks of literacy learning.

It was not just the teacher, however, who came to Kurdish class with little formal training. Equally or perhaps even more crucially, those attending the courses typically had little by way of formal schooling themselves – not (only) in Kurdish but at all. Rabya and her next youngest sister, for example, had attended school only sporadically through the fifth grade, and her elder sister not at all. They had lived in a village in Bingöl province before being forcibly evacuated in the late 1990s; a combination of remoteness (the nearest school was several kilometers away, with no reliable means of transportation), family obligations, and the upheaval caused by region-wide violent conflict meant that the eldest siblings had not attended any school before they arrived in Diyarbakir and were forced to adjust to a new urban setting. It did not occur to the children to take notebooks with them to the community Kurdish class we attended; even if it had, it is not a given that they would have had writing instruments at home to take, other than borrowing the younger children's school notebooks.

Derya, another young volunteer at the Bağlar Women's Center did, in fact, show up to one community class with a notebook in hand, and wrote down every word the instructor put on the board. She vowed she would go home and memorize them all; given that she both spoke Kurdish well and was taking high school courses through the National Ministry of Education's

“open education” [*açık öğretim*] system, her familiarity with certain kinds of classroom habits (manipulating writing tools, taking notes, reviewing materials covered in class, etc.) is less surprising. She did not, however, continue taking Kurdish classes; her family’s already existing concerns about her being out in the evening sharpened into flat refusal as the city erupted into street protests following the public funerals of four P.K.K. guerillas. (The violent crackdown by police in response severely curtailed most forms of public mobility for almost a month; see Chapter Five.)

In most of the classes I attended, the participants typically came without any of the accouterments of classroom learning that might otherwise be expected. As I described above, many attendees spent much of their class time engaged in conversation with friends and neighbors; others participated enthusiastically in the teachers’ solicitations and discussions, but did so as a collective, informally shouting out responses. All of these interactional styles contrasted sharply with “the officially proscribed canons of representation [and] performances of hierarchy” typically found in a Turkish school setting (Kaplan 2003: 401; 2006; Yaylı 2009; Çakıroğlu and Çakıroğlu 2003).

When I asked another *mamoste*, Halil, why so much of his and other teachers’ classroom time was devoted to reviewing the alphabet and to greetings/simple sentences, his reply was revealing: the alphabet was important because people needed to learn to read and write in Kurdish, but it was also a topic that was “enjoyable” and “easy” for his students. Halil was keen that participants liked coming to his classes; he wanted everyone to feel welcome regardless of their prior school knowledge or Kurdish capacities. “I’m not here to make people feel uncomfortable,” he told me. “I want [the experience] to be positive.” Unspoken but implicit in

his statement was the acknowledgement that his students came from a wide variety of backgrounds, and that their comfort in the classroom depended at least in part on his ability to deemphasize the kinds of teacher/student hierarchies that might otherwise obtain. Particularly given the age-range in many of the community classes – where participants might be a decade or more older than the teacher – otherwise relevant conventions of address and interactional style could be placed at risk or called into question.

The general unfamiliarity with contexts of schooling and pedagogy preceded and exceeded these language-learning contexts. Participants did not typically come prepared for and expectant of a kind of engagement with Kurdish as a pedagogical object – as they did, for example, when attending English tutoring classes (at least for the rare few who attended such courses, that is – usually in preparation for passing university entrance exams.). Most attendees were not engaged in schooling, formal or otherwise; they did not bring notebooks, they did not take notes, they often did not even consider these things. Many were uncomfortable with the practices of writing, even of holding pens, and of the call and response of a teacher to students. I had seen the discomfort and visible awkwardness with which many of the middle-aged and older women had held onto their pencils in the literacy classes described in the previous chapter; on the rare occasion that someone brought a notebook to a community Kurdish class that awkwardness often also shone through.

On other occasions participants reacted with visible embarrassment, even shame, at being called upon to give an answer or example. People who were chatting fluently in Kurdish to the neighbors sitting on the carpet beside them froze when asked to come up with three words that started with “P” or to complete the conjugation of a verb. The very terms of the latter request, for

example, made little sense to participants for whom this classroom setting might have been one of the first encounters with Kurdish presented in this way, as an object of formalized pedagogy. Many participants could probably have easily recounted a personal anecdote using many forms of the verb “to go,” but asked to complete a decontextualized table written up on the whiteboard, they ducked their heads and waved for the teacher to pass them by. The exercise demanded a form of metalinguistic knowledge articulated in terms with which most of them had no experience.<sup>1</sup>

As *mamoste* Halil implicitly made clear in his commitment to his students’ comfort, the classroom setting also contained the potential for disrupting socially conventional behavior. Men in their 50s or 60s, for example, would normally expect particular forms of deference from younger interlocutors, yet these latter often demonstrated visibly greater familiarity with the participant structure of a classroom setting, and took up those structures with relative ease. Likewise, forms of competence extant in community contexts of speaking – being able, for example, to produce poetic-musical forms like *stran*<sup>2</sup> or even to recount jokes in Kurdish – found relatively little place in the classroom, and indeed speakers deploying these forms sometimes confronted standards of pedagogical correctness that made them falter. The encounters in the classroom setting not only provoked new relationships toward and understandings of Kurdish as a particular kind of communicative code, but also brought people into potentially unsettling new relationships of authority and competence.

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<sup>1</sup> As the many ethnographic studies of schooling have demonstrated, these are spaces with very “strong pragmatic, linguistic, and interactional expectations and presuppositions” (Gal 1989: 351; see also Gumperz 1978; Heath 1983; Collins 1995; Mehan 1979; Wortham 2008, among others). Participants in these Kurdish classes were often unfamiliar or uncomfortable with these interactional dynamics and presuppositions – all the more so when newly encountering Kurdish as an object of formal pedagogy.

<sup>2</sup> *Stran* are bardic poetic recitations, sung-spoken and often accompanied by the *saz* or *bağlama*, stringed instruments similar to the lute.

Halil's tendency to review the alphabet, week after week, grew out of his understanding that the background knowledge he could expect from his students varied widely according to age, generation, experience in formal schooling, etc. He was even more reflective on this subject than some of the other volunteer teachers, explicitly framing his pedagogical choices in terms of the students' comfort. Other teachers were more explicitly invested in presenting aspects of Kurdish grammar that they felt needed reinforcement or correction, like the proper use of the ergative or more "authentically Kurdish" lexical items to replace common "borrowings" from Turkish. These discussions, however, tended to take place in settings where the participants came from more homogenous educational backgrounds, whose knowledge of both the explicit terms of discourse and the implicit contextual assumptions of classroom interactional styles better prepared them to accept and engage with these presentations of formal Kurdish pedagogy (see below).

*Apê* [Uncle] Remzi, for example, shook his head when I asked once if he had ever considered attending a Kurdish language class. A shopkeeper in his mid-late 50s, he broadly supported a Kurdish political project that included emphasis on Kurdish language rights and education. He did not, however, imagine himself attending a class taught by someone the same age as or younger than his own children. He also had clear memories of being required to attend literacy classes during his obligatory military service in the Turkish army as a much younger man; the experience was a humiliating one, taught by an instructor who was consistently condescending to his (mostly Kurdish) students. Remzi managed to run his small neighborhood shop with the assistance of his sons, both of whom had completed high school, but he held himself at a distance from the aspects of the store that required more sustained literacy skills. He

referred to himself, semi-jokingly, as a “*gundi*” [villager], and often noted that he was a man of simple, traditional tastes and expectations.

Like many of his generation and background, in fact, the same factors that contributed to Remzi’s high level of Kurdish competence (e.g., growing up in a rural setting, little or no exposure to government schooling in Turkish, etc.) also shaped his lack of familiarity with textualized literacy practices, in either Kurdish or Turkish. His wife was an even more acute example of this: in contrast to her husband, who had become fairly fluent and conversationally comfortable in Turkish as a result of his military service and almost three decades circulating in Diyarbakir’s public spaces), *xaltî* [aunt] Semra was a monolingual speaker of Kurdish. She therefore wielded the kind of communicative competence that Kurdish language workers loved to celebrate, but she was unreachable by the forms of textual production they embraced and promoted (see Chapter 4).

In contrast to Remzi’s unwillingness to consider attending Kurdish classes, however, *apê* Abdurahman, another neighborhood figure in his mid-50s who also vocally supported Kurdish political action, had in fact attended a community Kurdish class. He, like many, spoke of the widespread enthusiasm that had greeted the original opening of public Kurdish courses following the repeal of the language law in 2003. That enthusiasm, on the political level, was of course short-lived, as I discuss elsewhere. It was also, on a more personal level for Abdurahman, equally brief: he had himself only attended the first class and did not return for more. Although he subscribed to and read the *Azadiya Welat*, Kurdish language daily newspaper, he dismissed the classes themselves as “mostly political,” taught by people who didn’t know what they were doing. Abdurahman himself was somewhat notable in the neighborhood for sitting with the



newspaper prominently unfurled on his knee, as he joined his two brothers and assorted neighborhood men whiling away their mornings on small stools outside a market and café. Indeed, the younger men who worked in the nearby shop rolled their eyes at what they considered his mildly ostentatious positioning of himself as a reader of that paper; one of them jokingly suggested that he (the uncle) was just doing it to impress me, the foreign researcher. (This comment said as much, in my mind, about the younger men's anxieties about their own capacities in Kurdish as it did about the likelihood of the uncle's performance for my sake, a point to which I return in the final section of this chapter.)

It is worth pausing to note that the kind of enthusiasm that initially greeted community Kurdish classes – the sheer possibility of sitting in a classroom officially learning that which had for so many years been banned and denigrated – had, by the time of my fieldwork a few years later, started to shift into a more ambivalent array of reactions. Encountering the opportunity to attend Kurdish classes also meant confronting new metrics of evaluation, including the limits of one's own knowledge and capacities. These metrics emerged from the promulgation of Kurdish as an object of pedagogical intervention in new ways, and the increasingly widespread sense that there were, therefore, better and worse ways to deploy it. These evaluative standards were even more visible in one of the other primary sites of Kurdish language learning, group classes that were more explicitly oriented to formal language learning.

Situated on university campuses or at least composed primarily of high school and university students, these too, were group settings, but they gathered different kinds of learners and relied on different sets of pedagogical expectations and habits. Many of them had a moderate passive understanding of spoken Kurdish but were far more communicatively comfortable in

Turkish language settings. They also were “literate,” in the sense of possessing the technical skills of reading that allow them to proceed through the Turkish educational system. (It goes without saying that the code of all previous school interactions was Turkish.) Already well habituated to the compartments and registers of formalized classroom learning, the students in these courses were, at least in theory, differently equipped to encounter Kurdish as an object of pedagogy.

Most if not all had studied a language like English or French before passing the university entrance exams, and all of them had successfully completed years of formal schooling including Turkish language and literature classes. The terminologies and categories of language learning deployed in Kurdish language courses were, at least to some degree, already familiar: verb conjugations, subjects and objects, adjectives, and so on.

Yet the encounter with Kurdish in the erstwhile familiar setting of the classroom still took getting used to, and the teachers sometimes struggled to get their students to perform particular tasks they might otherwise have expected – to take notes, study for tests, complete homework, and so on. In other words, the habits and expectations of formal language learning acquired in previous contexts did not always obtain in these settings. Likewise, the transformation of Kurdish into a pedagogical object resembling English, or French, or for that matter Turkish, in the school setting gave rise to new forms of anxieties, resentments, and resistances, even as it also contributed toward the consolidation of new understandings of Kurdish’s public dispensability.

*'We came here for solidarity': learning Kurdish in the university setting*

One unusually chilly evening in early December, I sat shivering with a group of college students around a weakly effective coal stove. We had gathered for our twice-weekly Kurdish lesson (*dersên kurdî*), which was being held in a damp stone building down a narrow street in the heart of old Diyarbakir. Our attention was focused on the whiteboard at the front of the room and the man who was standing next to it, faded marker in hand. Nervous giggles rippled periodically around the room as we each take a turn reciting the short sentences in Kurmanji Kurdish on the board, from the present tense to the simple past.

*Ez te dibînim. Min tu dîtî. Tu min dibinî. Tu min ditî... na... te min dîtî, na, na, bisekine...*

*I see you... I saw you. You see me.... You saw I... no, me, no, wait, hold on...*

We were reviewing ergative verbal constructions, and everyone knew this was important. Fingers tapped pencils and puzzled brows furrowed in concentration, glancing up at the board and back down to the notebooks. In previous weeks, we had covered the alphabet, greetings, a few basic vocabulary words, and we started this class session with a review of pronouns. The teacher, a lean, slightly anxious man named Serhad, had announced at the end of the last lesson that we would work on verbs in the next class – stopping to translate the word “verb” into Turkish – and had impressed upon us the significance of this transition from nouns to the more grammatically complex world of verbs.

Kurdish, he was careful to remind us, is an “Indo-European language,” and as such, it is “very different” from Turkish. This was an observation I would encounter frequently in my interactions with language workers in Kurdish Turkey; the assertion of such “familial” ties and the significance granted to them must be understood as part of a wider project of language codification and social distinction.

Morphological alignment in Kurdish is split ergative (ergative with past tenses of transitive verbs) in its “standard” form, although both professional Kurdish language workers and ordinary speakers frequently assert that such grammatically standard use of the ergative in certain areas of Turkey (particularly around Diyarbakir and in the metropolitan cities of western Turkey, e.g., Istanbul and Izmir) is no longer as widespread as it once was.<sup>3</sup> For a number of reasons, “proper” use of the ergative in the past tense has become a central node of concern for some Kurdish language activists, who typically condemn the decline of widespread usage of the ergative and consider it a negative consequence of extended contact with Turkish (a non-ergative language, and, as has been made clear already, the primary code of state and “public” life in contemporary Turkey).<sup>4</sup>

During the break before we began the verb conjugations, four of the seven students in the class had told me that they “grew up speaking Kurdish.” All but one claimed that Kurdish was their “mother tongue.” The term used by these two students for “mother tongue” was *zimanê dayika min* [lit. “language mother-of me” or “language of my mother”]. This form was different

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<sup>3</sup> Fieldnotes; also Chyet 2003-2004: 36; Dorleijn 1996; Haig 2007: 168. This ergative usage is thus emblematic of Kurdish linguistic distinction; it is also the locus of puristic anxieties, anxieties that are increased by the oppression of Kurdish in general. As Victor Friedman notes (personal communication), there is an irony here, given that ergativity is generally not perceived as characteristic of Indo-European languages.

<sup>4</sup> Çali 2009; Farqini personal communication; see also Dorleijn 1996 for more detailed analysis of the changing contours of ergative verb marking in Kurmanji; Öpengin (2011) for an extensive overview of contact-induced code-switching patterns of pragmatic discourse markers among Kurdish speakers.

from the forms found in the most prominent Kurdish dictionary (Farqinî 2005) and commonly used by language workers I knew, who tended to prefer *zimanê zikmakî* (lit., “language of birth”) or, more rarely, *zimanê maderî*. The latter translates as “language of the mother,” but *maderî* is an uncommon form; although used in the dictionary mentioned above I rarely encountered it in speech.

In the encounter above, several other students also used the Turkish *anadil*.

*ziman-ê dayik-a min*  
 language-DEF:IZ mother-IZ 1S:OBL  
 ‘language of my mother’

*ana-dil*  
 ‘mother-tongue’

The form these students initially used, and which is widespread in spoken usage, appears to be a literal calque on the Turkish *anadil*. In conversations, I was told that *zimanê zikmakî* sounded “official” or like “book Kurdish” (*kitap kürtçesi*), a not uncommon response to many newly circulating Kurdish words. The second form, *zimanê maderî*, typically met with a baffled shrug by regular speakers. The *mader* form was brought up with me in several different conversations with an older generation of Kurdish language workers, who were invested in emphasizing the “familial” roots that, in their view, connected Kurdish with Latin, English, French, German, and so forth. As the next chapter describes in more detail, the disjuncture between dictionary forms and popular usages is not uncommon, and results in newly emergent anxieties and resistance.

Two of the students both considered Kurdish their “mother tongue” but described themselves as growing up in a primarily Turkish-speaking context. Everyone agreed with quiet

nods that the outlier was unusual – a Turkish student who considered herself leftwing and wanted to learn Kurdish “in solidarity.”

Back in the classroom, one student, Mustafa, shrugged at a missed sentence – “Me ate an apple” rather than “I ate an apple” – and remarked under his breath, “Well, I’m from Amed [Diyarbakir]” (*Wellahi ez ji Amedê me*). Mustafa’s joking interjection gained its humorous punch from the widespread reputation of Diyarbakir as a city of notoriously “bad Kurdish,” famously characterized by grammatical formulations that jarred both Turkish and Kurdish standardized sensibilities.<sup>5</sup>

Given the minimal access to authorizing institutions for its dissemination and enforcement, it is not obvious that “standard Kurdish” is the most apt description of these forms. However, in grammatically standard Kurdish, transitive verbs in the past tense use an ergative construction in which the logical subject (Agent) is put into the oblique case, and the verb agrees with the logical direct object (Patient). Mustafa’s mistake above was that he kept both the logical subject and logical object in the nominative case – grammatically unintelligible but pragmatically comprehensible in contexts like this classroom.

Mustafa:

*Ez sevek xwar.*

I-NOM (AGENT) 1S apple-INDEF-NOM-

SING eat-PST-3S

-

‘An apple ate me.’

Standard:

*Min sevek xwar.*

I-OBL-1S apple-INDEF-NOM

-SING eat-PST-3S

‘I ate an apple.’

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<sup>5</sup> Other examples might include sentences like “*Sen gidiy’sen?*” (You goin’?) or “*Sen anladi?*” (You understand?), where the Turkish interrogative particle *mi/mu* was dropped from the formulation. In Turkish the interrogative particle is usually necessary to intelligibly pose a question; in Kurdish, questions can differ from declarative sentence by virtue of intonation alone, so “*Tu diçî?*” and “*Tu diçî.*” are, respectively, “Are you going?” and “You are going.”

There was general chuckling at his response to the mistake, but several people also glanced in my direction. What would the visiting researcher say? The teacher, Serhad, joined in the laughter but immediately urged Mustafa to retry the sentence. Shaking his head, Serhad too looked at me, writing away in my notebook, and said, “You see the problem we have. No one in Diyarbakir speaks properly. You can always tell when someone is from here. Now, in *Mardin*, where *I* am from, it isn’t like this...” His voice trailed off, and the lesson proceeded.

The conversation continued after class, as we made our way through the narrow streets of the old city back to the brightly lit thoroughfare on the other side of the fortress walls. People from Diyarbakir, the students told me, well, they speak “mixed” Kurdish (*karışık kürtçe*). The city was “Turkifying” (*türkleşiyor*), its inhabitants were “assimilated” (*asimile olmuş*) and I should go to the rural areas if I really wanted to hear good Kurdish, pure/clean Kurdish (*kurdîya xweş, kurdîya paqij*). This particular conversation took place mostly in Kurdish, taxing both my comprehension skills and their abilities to speak without hesitation. That we were pursuing the conversation in Kurdish was itself noteworthy – and we knew this, we were all being diligent in our efforts to avoid Turkish (with the notable exceptions of the words above: “mixed Kurdish,” “Turkifying,” and “assimilating”). There were a few unspoken rules about these classes, and one of them was that immediately pre-, during, and post- lessons, we did our best to avoid lapsing into the language of least resistance, Turkish. Later, in other encounters and other locations, we would automatically hold forth in Turkish, and only occasionally remark, wryly, on that fact. But here, in the minutes carved out for *dersên kurdî*, everyone made an effort. And away from the red marker and whiteboard, away from the pressure of watchful eyes and grammar rules, we

stumbled over the contours of the past tense. In three days we would meet again, at the same place and time, for another Kurdish lesson.

Hakan and Sînan, two students from Dicle University (the state university located on the outskirts of Diyarbakir) who attended a different class sponsored by a local Kurdish cultural organization, described their participation in the Kurdish class as an important step in making up for a major lack (*eksiklik*) in their own knowledge. More than just a communicative problem, they considered their inability to speak Kurdish properly a political issue. Indeed, as Sînan pointed out, the Turkish government's project of linguistic assimilation of Kurds into Turkish had been so successful that, pretty soon, there would not *be* a "communication issue" at all: once the current elder generation was gone, who would be left with whom to communicate? All the young people, she told me, they do not care enough that their mother tongue is disappearing. Her dissatisfaction with her less-devoted peers was explicit: "It'd be good if they could show a little effort."

Both Sînan and Hakan, as well as the other students in the class, placed the blame for their relative inabilities in Kurdish squarely at the feet of the Turkish state, which had in their view undertaken a decades-long policy of deliberate assimilation. Recounting family anecdotes of police brutality and humiliations, they were determined to improve their Kurdish. "I don't know my own mother tongue well," exclaimed Sînan. "How can I not know my own mother tongue?!?" [*Ez zimanê dayika xwe baş nizanîm, ez zimanê dayikê çawa nizanîm?!*]

Yet they and their peers, all of whom expressed similar views of the history and stakes of the Turkish state's language policies, still struggled to keep from switching into Turkish during casual conversations. They came to class each week, but they had rarely completed what



minimal assignments had been given the week before. The sentences they made were full of mistakes – even among those whose otherwise apparent comfort understanding the teacher indicated a high degree of proficiency. Even those students more familiar with habits of formal pedagogy in general did not typically bring those same habits to bear in their study of Kurdish. It seemed hard for many to see Kurdish as something with grammatical rules that needed to be studied and learned, and to approach that without being intimidated or dismissive. It was jolting to encounter Kurdish in the classroom and to find that it sometimes bore little resemblance to the Kurdish they had encountered elsewhere.

For those who “came in solidarity,” like the Turkish student who knew no Kurdish before joining the classes, a class session conducted almost entirely in Kurdish was, at first, a jaw-dropping experience. Ebru, a Turk from a small town near Bursa in northwestern Turkey, admitted to being overwhelmed the first time she sat in a Kurdish class. “I totally didn’t understand a thing. I thought, this is going to be really hard.” She explained that her attendance was spurred by the realization that Kurds were not, in fact, the terrifying “terrorists” she had grown up hearing about in her hometown. She described her family’s horror at the realization that she would be attending university in Diyarbakir, and explained it as “a natural result of how they had been trained to think [by Turkish media/education system].”

Ebru confessed to feeling apprehensive when she boarded the bus for the cross-country journey, and wondered if she would feel safe, as a Turk, in such a volatile region [*sıcak bir bölgede*]. Her own left-wing sympathies led her to engage in heated discussions with fellow students, with arguments into the night over the relative merits of class- versus nation/ethnic-based solidarity movements. The stories she heard from classmates about humiliations,

punishments, and even violence as a result of speaking Kurdish shocked her deeply, and she described her transformation in stark terms. She had not, she admitted, necessarily thought much about Kurdish as a language prior to living in Diyarbakir and encountering it in so many contexts. It was clear from her conversation that the ubiquity of Kurdish in Diyarbakir came as a real surprise – even as her classmates interjected that Diyarbakir had become a place where in fact Turkish increasingly operated as the dominant language. Ebru herself shied away from speaking in class, claiming to be too overwhelmed to understand what was being said. “I come here now in solidarity,” she told me during one coffee and cigarette break. While she could stumble her way through a brief set of conversational dialogues – Hello, how are you, I’m fine, thank you – she did not seem to expect to ultimately attain much more conversational fluency. Unlike the more communicatively competent Kurdish speakers, however, Ebru took copious notes in class, diligently copying every word the instructor wrote on the board.

Other classes I attended included those that were held on college campuses; some were informally arranged by interested students and volunteer teachers, the latter usually a fellow student who had cultivated sufficient formal knowledge of Kurdish to be able to act as an instructor.<sup>6</sup> I attended classes, for example, with a small group of students from Boğaziçi University in Istanbul who regularly gathered to study Kurdish together. One of the most prestigious public universities in Turkey, Boğaziçi had faculty willing to supervise

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<sup>6</sup> In the time since my fieldwork, several universities have started officially offering Kurdish classes as a language elective. Most of the universities that offer Kurdish lessons are private, not state-run, institutions. One exception is Artuklu University in Mardin, where a “Department of Living Languages and Cultures” was established in 2009 in order to provide Kurdish language instruction at the post-graduate (M.A.) level). The status of the Artuklu program is uncertain however, following newly volatile domestic politics in Turkey following the June 2015 elections, which saw the unprecedented political success of the pro-Kurdish political party. The electoral gains of that party – a first for any party affiliated with a pro-Kurdish platform in the history of the Turkish Republic – contributed in part to the inability of the ruling AKP to acquire a parliamentary super-majority and thus be able to change the presidential system.

undergraduate and graduate level research on Kurdish (including linguistics, history, and anthropological fieldwork) but offered no formal courses on the Kurdish language.

There, a group of young sociology/anthropology, linguistics, and education students gathered frequently to study and improve their Kurdish. In their general coursework at the university some had studied sociolinguistics, international scholarly approaches to multilingualism, second language acquisition and pedagogy, and other related topics. Many of them also took courses in the anthropology and sociology department, where a new wave of research and critical social theory took on long-established orthodoxies of Turkish social sciences, including the treatment of minorities, state violence, and “the Kurdish question.” Many were also actively engaged in community organizing at the university level. Some have since gone on to become prominent figures in the transformations of the Kurdish linguistic-political landscape, from formal linguists based at academic institutions in Europe to local language activists and paid employees of the Diyarbakir municipality.

Their relationship to an older generation of language activists is a complicated one. Many of those presently most active in Kurdish language politics, particularly from older generations, did not have opportunities like those afforded to these college students. Far from study sessions on the lawns of universities, many in the earlier generation learned Kurdish in prison, or taught themselves with whatever few books/resources they could find. The self-taught older generation’s understandings of what kind of linguistic object Kurdish is often reflect these more informal circumstances of pedagogy: they make much of supposed “family ties” between Kurdish and other Indo-European languages, using lexical similarities (e.g., “*mader*” and “mother,” “*sterîk*” and “star”) to index a kind of cultural-historical similarity or affinity that

explicitly excludes Turks and Turkish. They recount stories of suffering based on speaking Kurdish, the shame and denigration of decades of disparagement, dismissal, and outlawing. The experiences of this generation shape the way the conversation takes place in places like Diyarbakir around questions of public Kurdish. These activists are among the most vocal and most politically organized, and tensions sometimes emerge between them and some of these younger language workers, particularly those who have received formal academic training in linguistics and language pedagogy. These tensions stem not only from their different experiences of violence and suffering, but also from the different access they have had to other kind of theories of how language works and how best to promote a politics of linguistic activism.

In addition to those who attended Kurdish classes (many of whom, as I have described above, left those classes without necessarily demonstrating tremendous improvement in their language skills, either spoken or textually-based), there are also speakers whose Kurdish language capacities are cultivated in more individual settings. I turn now to these examples of Kurdish pedagogy, exploring how these learners described their relationship to language learning and pedagogy. Here we encounter idioms of self-cultivation, wherein the individual typically recognizes his or her relationship to Kurdish as possessor of a mother tongue inadequately deployed, where idioms of deficit, shame, and lack amplify a proprietary relationship to a language code and concomitant affective-political relationship. I also describe those who turned formally-cultivated capacities in Kurdish into avenues of employment; this transformation of linguistic capacity in Kurdish into economic capital is both relatively rare and not without tension. As such, it constitutes a revealingly dense ethnographic site to investigate. The final section of this chapter, then, takes up some of the tensions that emerge around the political

economy of Kurdish, exploring in particular the fraught question of “paying for your mother tongue.”

*“I always saw myself as lacking”*: self-cultivation and the individual learner.

Hatice was in her late twenties, a college graduate and middle school science teacher. She had grown up in Istanbul, where her grandparents had moved from a city in Eastern Turkey many years before. Hatice grew up in an environment that was, in her words, “integrated” [*entegreyî civak û jiyana*] – referring both to its middle-class characteristics and its largely Turkish-oriented linguistic and social life. Our interview was relatively unusual in its formality, its exclusive use of Kurdish, and in having been arranged by mutual acquaintances who thought we should meet each other and whose presence at the table added to the slightly staged quality of the encounter. She began the conversation by describing her background in terms of its class characteristics and “integration.” I asked why and how she had decided to learn Kurdish – the set-up having clearly directed me to see this as both the obvious question with which to begin and as somehow a significant contrast to the description of her social/economic background. She immediately responded, with frank emphasis,

Because it’s my mother tongue, I wanted to learn this language. Before everything else we should know our mother tongue. Because people get their culture and language from it. [*Ji ber ku zimanê dayika min e, min xwest vî zimanê fêr bibim. Pêwîst e em fêrê zimanê dayika xwe bibin. Ji ber ku mirov ji çand û zimên pêk tê.*]

Hatice continued, in response to my pressing her to explain further what she meant by this, that she saw the issue of the mother tongue as something both cultural and political. But her primary

motivation, she suggested, was a feeling of shame or lack that she felt:

“I always saw myself as lacking and said, people should learn their mother tongues [*Min her dem xwe kê m didît û digot ‘divê mirov zimanê dayika xwe fêr bibe*]. This wish was always in my heart. I told myself, ‘I am a Kurd but I don’t know Kurdish.’ This truth made me ashamed [*Min jî vê rewşa xwe şerm dikir*].

She returned again to describing the environment in which she grew up, again using the word “integrated.” The choice of this word over “assimilated” – the other common option – is telling: assimilation is a denigrating word typically used to describe others or perhaps self-deprecatingly oneself. (Some of the students described above, for example, used it in both of these senses, as part of a wider commentary on the ubiquity of Turkish in the Diyarbakir context.) Hatice noted that she never saw herself “outside the society” [*min tu carî xwe li derveyê civakê nedîtiye*], in contrast, perhaps, to those more politicized and/or marginalized members of the wider Kurdish community. Life [in places like Istanbul] “takes place in Turkish” but she always felt close to her ethnic identity. She feared that unless she took measures to teach herself Kurdish, her own children would never learn it and the language would, in a generation or two, be utterly lost.

Hatice was, in fact, notably proficient in Kurdish for someone who had, in her words, taught herself “from zero,” and who had done so in the absence of any significant exposure to the kind of multi-genred complexity of an actual Kurdish speech community. By listening to music, using whatever textbooks she could find, and with the help of a language tutor (whose instructions largely came via email or the telephone, as they did not live in the same city), Hatice had reached an impressive level of proficiency. She was also able to deploy familiarity with grammatical categories from Turkish and English classes to help understand the Kurdish

language textbooks she acquired from the bookstore at the Mesopotamian Cultural Center in downtown Istanbul. (Many of these books include extended explanations of Kurdish grammar in Turkish.)

Over the course of the conversation I mentioned to Hatice that I had attended quite a few Kurdish classes in the community that seemed to begin with great enthusiasm, only to taper off within weeks, with students failing to return to class or returning without having completed any practice or lessons at home between classes. I asked what she thought of this, whether she was also familiar with this phenomenon. She immediately nodded, and responded with the following:

I want to say something about the courses you have mentioned. Many people see learning Kurdish like an obligation [*wekî deynekî*, lit. “debt”]. [They] don’t know well where in life Kurdish will take [them]. For learning Kurdish a logical approach [*nêzîkbûneke mantiqî*] is also necessary. For example everybody knows why they go to the university, but when it comes to learning Kurdish we can’t say the same thing. In my opinion in the issue of learning Kurdish the emotional approach [*nêzîkbûna hestî*] is dominant. Again, lots of people don’t see learning Kurdish as functional [*fonksiyonel*]. Many times they said to me, why aren’t you studying English instead of Kurdish? I feel really badly about their lack of interest [lit., “about these approaches”], even sometimes became hopeless. But some people also have supported me.

There are a number of themes worth pursuing in Hatice’s response. She describes learning Kurdish as something that some people feel obliged to do, a response perhaps to a growing community-wide discourse around the importance of “the mother tongue” not only to the

Kurdish political struggle but to Kurdish individuals' own senses of cultural authenticity and personal self-worth. Even as sociolinguists document increasing language shift to Turkish-dominance across Kurdish speech communities (Öpengin 2009b; 2012), language – specifically the promotion and promulgation of Kurdish – has occupied an ever more central role in Kurdish political and cultural discourses.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these growing pressures to regard competence in Kurdish as a key component of being Kurdish and participating in the Kurdish struggle, however, Hatice notes that many people do not see Kurdish as “functional” in the same way that, for example, learning English might be. They don't know where learning Kurdish will take them – in her literal words, “they do not know where to put Kurdish in their life.” [*Baş nizanin ku di jiyana xwe de kurdî têxin ku derê.*] If knowing English might make possible certain opportunities – opportunities she leaves unspecified because they are so obvious – the utility of learning Kurdish is less clear.

What will it bring them? An “emotional” connection to the mother tongue they are increasingly reminded they should cherish? That affective component resonated with her – she began our conversation recounting the deep shame she felt for not knowing her own mother tongue, the “lack” that haunted her all her life. Hatice conveyed a sense that she had lived culture-less, even language-less, before learning her mother tongue: “[p]eople get their culture and language from [their mother tongue. [*Ji ber ku mirov ji çand û zimên pêk tê.*].”

But these “emotional approaches” – dominant as they are, even in accounting for her own

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<sup>7</sup> Öpengin (2009b; 2012), for example, argues that Turkish is exerting “its increasing presence in low domains whereas Kurdish, by contrast, has started to infringe into high domains like media and institutions.” This point – a growing valorization of Kurdish in certain domains, particularly within certain genres of political speech and text production – is taken up in greater depth in subsequent chapters. Öpengin (2012: 151) concludes that “the prevalent community bilingualism evolves to the detriment of Kurdish, leading to a shift-tended linguistic situation for Kurdish.”



motivations and life choices – were not, in her description, sufficient to make people take up the task of learning Kurdish. The implicit acknowledgement – that Kurdish is not *fonksiyonel* for many of its would-be possessors – points to a wider political economy in which Turkish (and to a different degree, English) is the code of economic mobility as well, increasingly, of wide domains of social life in general.

In addition to people like Hatice, who essentially started from a place of minimal or no knowledge in Kurdish, there were also many Kurdish learners who grew up in environments where Kurdish was spoken. Some of these were essentially monolingual speakers whose first sustained encounter with Turkish came at the start of primary school. Others grew up in settings where Turkish and Kurdish were both common; this second category was perhaps the most common, especially in Diyarbakir, a speech community where, as I have noted previously, both Kurdish and Turkish mix and mingle across domains.

Welat, Salih, and Remezhan were three young men from different regions of the country (Nusaybin [*Nisêbîn*], Mersin, and Şemdinli [*Şemzînan*]), places with either local Kurdish speaking populations or a high influx of Kurdish refugees. They grew up in families where Kurdish was the dominant language of intergenerational communication; as they made their way up through the Turkish school system they described gradually relying more and more on Turkish in conversation with siblings and peers. They nevertheless maintained a kind of casual comfort in Kurdish across a variety of genres that was rare to encounter among members of their generation in Diyarbakir; indeed, it is significant that all three grew up elsewhere, and, for two of the three at least, did so in environments where Kurdish continues to operate as the primary communicative code. At some point in their early-mid teenage years, each of the three had

started studying Kurdish with the help of textbooks that had, by then, begun circulating through bookstores in the region.

The most widely available of these texts was *Kürtçe Dilbilgisi (Kurmancî)*, a textbook prepared by combining the work of an early 20<sup>th</sup> century Kurdish intellectual, Emîr Celadet Bedirxan, with more recent adjustments and edits by a Paris-based sociolinguist, Roger Lescot. The first edition of the text was published by the Kurdish Institute of Paris in 1990, and quietly distributed in Turkey, which at that time still outlawed publication in Kurdish. With the repeal of the language law in 1991, an Istanbul press, *Doz Yayınları*, immediately published and distributed the book in April of that year. It has since gone through at least six reprintings, and remains a “classic” introduction to Kurdish grammar, aimed specifically at a Turkey-based, Turkish-speaking audience.

*Kürtçe Dilbilgisi (Kurmancî)* is noteworthy for both the (relative) density of its explanations of grammar and for the fact that all explanations take place in Turkish. More recent books often try to limit the quantity of instructional material in Turkish. The author of the textbook currently being used in Kurdish classes at Koç University in Istanbul in 2015, for example, purposefully provided instructions primarily in English, with only the occasional Turkish gloss. He explained this to me as part of a wider effort to “bypass” Turkish as the mediating language for Kurdish instruction. He and some of his fellow Kurdish language activists and scholars view this as an important step to both legitimating the scholarly presence of Kurdish as a language of academic production in its own right and as a “symbolic” (in his words) step in diminishing the ubiquity of Turkish as the unmarked mediating code of Kurdish language pedagogy. He explained that it is important for his students to “stop thinking in

Turkish” when they enter his classroom; the use of English in the texts is meant to contribute to that effort.<sup>8</sup>

All three of these young men, Welat, Salih, and Remezan, continued on to win entry into prestigious public universities in Istanbul and Ankara, where they chose fields of study (sociology, linguistics, and education) that meant they could pursue themes and topics related to Kurds and Kurdish. Welat accompanied sociology professors and research teams from his university on their data-gathering visits to parts of the Southeast, where his ability to speak both Turkish and Kurdish made him an invaluable member of the team. Salih pursued a master’s degree in education; he now designs curricula for Kurdish language pedagogy and advises the Diyarbakir City Hall on ways to implement municipality-wide campaigns to increase the use of Kurdish in city services.<sup>9</sup> Remezan, who studied linguistics at a state university in Istanbul, left Turkey for doctoral research in Europe, where he continues to research, lecture, and publish on the sociolinguistics of Kurdish, one of a small but prolific new generation of Kurdish scholars.

All three noted that they grew up within Kurdish-dominant speech communities; in Welat’s words, “we heard everything and it was natural to us: our grandmothers, the *dengbêj* (traditional bardic singer-storytellers), our friends, our satellite TV.” Or, in Remezan’s telling, however deeply Turkish also increasingly penetrated his linguistic surroundings with schooling, interactions with the local Turkish gendarmerie and other state authorities, the dominant code of his personal life in a small town in the province of Hakkâri (Kurdish *Colemerg*), nestled in the

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<sup>8</sup> It is also true that Koç University, as an English-medium private university, can and does presume a greater degree of English competence from its students; it is no accident that the two institutions to first offer – and most consistently continue to offer – Kurdish language courses are both private, wealthy, English-language institutions based in Istanbul. This instructor taught at both of them.

<sup>9</sup> I discuss the significance of these developments in more detail in the conclusion of the dissertation.

mountains along the Iraqi and Iranian borders) was, and remained Kurdish. He told me that it always amazed him how “bad” his Kurdish got when he was away, and how being home for even a week made it “good” again.

The kind of competence these three were able to deploy (e.g., the ability to read a wide variety of texts, to access lexical terms across technical genres, to engage speakers across generations and dialectical differences) emerged, of course, out a long engagement with Kurdish as an explicit object of their own sustained pedagogical intervention. They had started studying as teenagers, learning not only “the rules” of a conventionalized, standardized Kurdish grammar as presented in books like *Kürtçe Dilbilgisi*, but to see Kurdish as a language with those kinds of rules.

Their engagement with Kurdish as this kind of pedagogical object began in the late 1990s and deepened in the early-mid 2000s, as a Kurdish-language publications boomed, with small presses sprouting up in Diyarbakir and Istanbul and bookstore-cafes in those cities offering small, quickly-depleted runs of memoirs, short story and poetry collections, and grammar books.<sup>10</sup> Their successes in Kurdish accompanied – indeed were strengthened by – their concomitant successes within the Turkish education system. Fluency in Turkish and proficiency in English not only made it possible for them to transfer some of those language-learning skills to their Kurdish study, but also granted them access to the kinds of high-prestige, (relatively) politically progressive universities wherein they would be able to pursue further study, acquiring yet more cultural (and to some degree economic) capital as they went.

That Salih, Remezan, and Welat were unusual in their ability to cultivate this degree of

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<sup>10</sup> For more on these new forms of textual circulation, see Chapter Four.

competence in Kurdish, Turkish, and English – and to do so in so many registers – cannot be overstated. The vast majority of their fellow generation do not share similar “success stories” – neither those who remain in Kurdish-dominant environments like Hakkâri nor more mixed speech communities like Diyarbakir. It is not only rare that someone will acquire these kinds of capacities in Kurdish; it is even more rare that the cultivation of such capacities will be parlayed into the kind of professionalizing capital that each of these three accomplished.

Indeed, the question of what kind of a market exists for Kurdish language skills is not only a matter of academic inquiry, but a matter of ongoing and persistent political strategic, empirical concern. That knowing Kurdish is not, in Hatice’s terms, widely considered *fonksiyonel* is a widely accepted, unresolved tension confronting language activists. The public dispensability of Kurdish – its ability to operate as a language of wide domains deemed public – emerges in the unsettled and unresolved tension of widespread political valuation on the one hand, and even wider-spread economic inutility, on the other.

These are concerns taken up at broad-ranging circuits of public discourse and explicit political intervention, as Chapter Five details more closely. They are also matters that have ramifications at the most intimate of scales, in the relationships between family members and friends, in the quotidian apportioning of given code to expected context. And given the increasingly high stakes of competence in a mother tongue that an individual might claim yet not possess, the tension is not easily resolved. It finds its expression in anxieties over proper usage and shame over perceived deficits, in resentments at those claiming authority and frustration at violations of expected use. I turn now to some of these experiences, and to examining what they might reveal about the emergent transformations of would-be public Kurdish.

*Ambivalence, resentment, and resistance in new contexts of Kurdish*

These classes – and the newly circulating sense of standards that they, however implicitly, promote – are not met with universal approval. There was often resistance expressed against the kinds of self-taught experts described above. A rare handful of these experts were able to marshal their Kurdish competence into (relatively) well-paying interpretation and translation gigs, or to turn their political and intellectual commitments to Kurdish language study into careers in academia, policy-making, or cultural production (e.g., working for the municipality planning concerts and other events).

More often, perhaps, these self-cultivated capacities did not feed so directly into paid employment opportunities. But these self-taught learners were nevertheless able to deploy a variety of Kurdish that was recognizably grammatically standard and lexically complex. To the extent that they did so in settings not typically marked for use of Kurdish – at least marked for Kurdish use by the kinds of people they otherwise indexed themselves as being – they sometimes elicited rumbles of resentment by bystanders and interlocutors. Using Kurdish while on public transportation, for example, to not only address the driver of the collective taxi but also to sustain a conversation with a companion was potentially noteworthy, particularly if the speaker looked and sounded otherwise middleclass. To conduct a commercial exchange in Kurdish only – particularly at, say, the branch of a national clothing chain or supermarket – was to draw attention to that choice of code. It was, as one interlocutor describes below, to be heard as “making a point.”

Mehmet and Şeyhmus were close friends in their early twenties. Born and raised in the lower middle class suburbs outside the Diyarbakir city center, they spoke Kurdish with their grandparents but otherwise mainly communicated in Turkish. They willingly described the Turkish state's language policies as oppressive and discriminatory, and participated in some organized cultural-political activities around Kurdish issues – they attended *Newroz*, for example, and went to the annual *belediye* book fair – even bought books there or showed me the books they had accumulated in other contexts on shelves in their room. Perhaps inspired in part by my own discussion of the Kurdish classes I was been attending, the two friends joined me at a community class one evening, where they seemed simultaneously entertained by and dismissive of what took place there. “It’s just a bunch of people who want to get out of the house,” Mehmet said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Housewives and teenagers who want to go somewhere.”

This dismissal was just one component of a more generalized resistance to the pressures they felt about knowing “better” Kurdish than they did. The two friends approached the subject of knowing Kurdish – and its requisite counterpart, learning or studying Kurdish – with a complicated mixture of dismissiveness, defensiveness, and unease. They were defensive about how well they knew Kurdish – and whether or to what extent they were willing to do what it would take to speak it all the time, much less to be able to read it.

When challenged by one of Mehmet's cousins, someone who had taken up studying Kurdish with intensity in his early-mid teens and whose capacities in a kind of formal, multi-genered Kurdish were extensive enough that he acted as a translator and interpreter for visiting foreigners, they were notably frustrated and defensive. They considered this cousin, Cihan, a

show-off – always announcing his latest interpreting gig, parading visiting foreigners around like trophies, using Kurdish with both greater frequency and a wider lexical range than they ever did. “It’s actually obnoxious,” Şeyhmus told me bitterly. “To insist on speaking Kurdish on every *dolmuş* [collective taxi van] or situation, you’re just trying to make a point.” When I pressed him – weren’t there many people who lamented the linguistic assimilation to Turkish? – he shook his head in irritation. “Yeah, well, he just always shows off.” [*Yaa o zaten hep hava atıyor.*] “This is Diyarbakir,” he continued. “Everyone speaks mixed, or Turkish, or whatever. He’s just trying to make a point.”

For Mehmet and Şeyhmus, Cihan’s use of Kurdish – in both contexts and style – violated certain sedimented expectations of speaker, code, and context. Cihan’s youth and place of birth (Diyarbakir) mitigated against “natural” monolingualism, which they associated with older generations and rural environments. His education and class background – solidly middle-class, college diploma, parents able to support him – both made it possible for him to cultivate the kind of Kurdish capacities that brought him success and mitigated against the expectations that he should be someone who would speak Kurdish in public settings like buses or expensive clothing shops. He was, they felt, trying to “make a point” – and part of that point was to show up their own relative *lack* of ability, and of willingness to remedy that lack. In a context where use of the mother tongue has been vested with high political (and moral) stakes – a good Kurd speaks Kurdish – this was no easily forgiven practice.

Cihan had indeed devoted considerable time and effort to teaching himself Kurdish grammar, aided like many by an assortment of textbooks, dictionaries, short story collections, and (eventually) the daily newspaper, *Azadiya Welat* [Freedom of the Nation]. Like Remezan,



Salih, and many others who had built their Kurdish textual capacities on a foundation of previous spoken competence acquired at home, he was often critical of the kind of Kurdish found in many of these contexts, particularly the newspaper. Most of the articles in the newspaper, he told me, were just poor translations of stories published the previous day in the pro-Kurdish, Turkish-language daily, *Özgür Gündem* [Freedom Agenda]. It was less the lack of journalistic originality that bothered Cihan; the real issue was the frequent presence of syntactic formulations common in Turkish but not in Kurdish (use of the passive voice, for example). Vocabulary, as well, was often a literal translation or calque from Turkish.<sup>11</sup>

A crucial component to Cihan's personal success story was, of course, not just his abilities in Kurdish, cultivated through both a Kurdish speaking home environment and several years of dedicated self-study. The Kurdish skills on their own – even had they included wide-ranging generic competences and textual skills – would not have meant much in terms of economic capital without concomitant abilities in both Turkish and English.

It was his capacities in the latter – and his abilities to move between highly valued registers in each – that allowed him to get freelance jobs interpreting for visiting European parliamentarians, researchers, and journalists. Even the lexical terms – the kinds of metalinguistic framings specific to formal grammar study – in the Kurdish grammar books he used books resonated with the instruction he received in his elite high school, his after-school

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<sup>11</sup>Hatice's use of *nêzîkbûna* above is one example of this kind of translation. A Kurdish friend who helped proofread my transcription of the interview disparaged this particular word as derived directly from the Turkish *yaklaşım*, "to make not far." He dismissed it as an example of "that modern Kurmanji" he despised.

tutoring sessions, and the university-level English courses that he had attended.<sup>12</sup> Without its transformation into one of the two codes that dominate the political economy of public life in Turkey, Kurdish would have remained a code that circumscribed rather than opened professional possibilities for Cihan. Without Turkish or English, he might well have been limited to one of the options available to a monolingual speaker of Kurdish (as rare as such a figure is today, within his generation): a *gundî* [villager, peasant] or a small-time street merchant.

*Mamoste* Mîrxas, one of the volunteer Kurdish teachers described above, was another self-taught Kurdish speaker whose speaking choices sometimes provoked resentful reactions in certain social contexts. Mîrxas worked in cultural programming for the city municipality, helping stage theater performances for audiences in Diyarbakir and surrounding villages.

As a self-proclaimed language activist, he was not only invested in leading community classes in neighborhoods like Bağlar but also deliberately trying to insert Kurdish into contexts where it might not be the expected code. This meant that he addressed everyone, from bus drivers to city hall employees to shopkeepers, initially in Kurdish. He placed orders in Kurdish at cafes – something not entirely unexpected but nevertheless noteworthy. Like many politically active people in Diyarbakir, his default code of salutation and greeting was Kurdish. Unlike many of his acquaintances and friends, however, he often attempted to continue the conversation in Kurdish long after the expected exchange of greetings had segued into more extended discussion. More unusually, he also often attempted to use Kurdish in larger shops, even

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<sup>12</sup> For example, a randomly selected, typical sentence: “As we shall see below, all the tenses associated with the categories we have reviewed above are formed with third person singular in preterite form.” (Bedirxan and Lescot 2004:76.)

branches of national clothing and electronics chain stores, where Turkish was emphatically the default code and where his use of Kurdish stood out sharply.

As my own language skills began to slowly improve, for example, Mîrxas insisted that our interactions take place in Kurdish. His persistence even in the face of my stumbles and requests for clarification was only in part explicable in terms of his role as an occasional language teacher. As I noted above, he was notable for continuing to speak in Kurdish even after the more ritualized exchange of greetings – hello, how are you, how are things, thanks be to God, all is well, how is your family? – had shifted to other topics. This caught people by surprise, and often made them explicitly stumble to keep up. They sometimes offered apologies before switching to Turkish; the moment of apology forced an explicit acknowledgment of what more typically passed unremarked: the apportioning of Kurdish to the salutations that bookend conversations, with Turkish as the code of all that came between.

Mîrxas' use of Kurdish in this way was often interpreted by his conversational interlocutors as a kind of impolite “insistence” or “showing off.” Even a friend, Deniz, occasionally rolled his eyes at Mîrxas' language choices. One afternoon, standing on a street corner in a busy commercial district, he waved his hand in half-amused, self-deprecating dismissal, overtly marking the moment when he himself reverted to Turkish. “Yeah, yeah, your Kurdish is *reeeeaaally* good.” (*Belê, kurdiya te zeeeehhhhf xweş e!*) On at least a half-dozen other occasions, people who learned of my acquaintance with Mîrxas made some reference to this tendency of his, couched in varying terms but usually related to his language practices. Commenting on a chance encounter, accompanied by an introduction and short conversation in

Kurdish, two acquaintances later confided that they found his manner “heavy,” and that he, like “those *belediye* types,” tried to make people feel bad for not speaking Kurdish.

The fact that Mîrxas was noteworthy – infamous, even – for speaking Kurdish beyond the point in conversation where someone of his age and background would be normally expected to do so reveals a great deal about the colliding logics of public Kurdish in Diyarbakir. On the one hand, virtually everyone readily condemned linguistic “assimilation” into Turkish and lambasted the Turkish state for its hegemonic language practices. They lamented the decline of Kurdish and championed political efforts to promote Kurdish as a language of education, politics, and literature. To the extent that people acknowledged linguistic “failings” of their own, it was almost always in tones of regret or shame that they did not speak (or speak well) their “mother tongue.”

Yet these popular discourses of valorization at the level of language policy in the abstract did not necessarily rest comfortably with actual lived experience refracted through individual moments of interaction. In other words, the same person who lamented Kurdish linguistic decline was also likely to use Turkish in much of her communication. The more educated and middle-class the individual, the more likely they were to communicate largely in Turkish, particularly in encounters with strangers and in settings marked as public, from shops to transportation.

Insofar as conventions of speaking in Diyarbakir are framed around these very specific expectations of code and context, Mîrxas’ violation of those expectations was jolting, unsettling, and provocative. The use of Kurdish in unexpected contexts introduced a moralized charge: it demanded of his interlocutors that they either respond in kind (thus potentially rapidly revealing

the limits of their own linguistic capacities in their ostensible mother tongue) or, if they could not or would not, to acknowledge that refusal in what could only be terms that explicitly marked their lack: an apology, an embarrassed shrug, a sarcastic reframing.

In resentfully describing their friend Cihan as a “show off” for flaunting skills in Kurdish that they themselves lacked, Şeyhmus and Mehmet, the two young men described above, were pointing to the potential interpersonal consequences of this collision between practices of linguistic valorization and pragmatics of speech use. These young men, like many others, were simultaneously commenting on the pragmatic realities of communicative choices in Diyarbakir – a city where Turkish was increasingly dominant in most settings deemed public – and the pervasive and potentially contradictory sense that the domination of Turkish constituted a moral and political problem. Caught between tensions they could recognize but not easily resolve, their expressions of resentment and frustration echoed widely – but surreptitiously – across members of their generation. Indeed, these sentiments were politically contentious and only privately expressible: while admitting to *eksiklik* (lack, failing, disability) in one’s mother tongue is a common trope, critiquing someone for actually speaking Kurdish in public is far less popularly acceptable, even as it is perhaps widely felt.

Indeed, the far more common and available trope is that of the injustice of feeling shame *for* speaking Kurdish. The most ubiquitous version of this is the genre of story described earlier in which the narrator describes his or her first day of school: the harsh response of a teacher, the shame they were made to feel as children for not speaking Turkish well, or for using Kurdish in that institutional context. This use of the idiom of “mother tongue” (which appears to increasingly frame how activists pitch cultural demands around language) derives some of its

moral foundation from the ideological assumption that it is a communicative code acquired in the pre-political, highly affective and sentimentalized context of the family. It is, therefore, not something a child “chooses” (as opposed, say, to a “political ideology”), but something learned “at the mother’s breast” (*anne kucağı*). In other words, being able *to frame the framing of Kurdish as something shameful* is itself a powerfully moralizable mode of critical address.

When politicians or Kurdish language activists narrate stories (to me, to visiting journalists or researchers, or to national audiences) of their painful encounters with schoolteachers, for example, who mocked their inabilities to speak Turkish or who punished them for speaking Kurdish in the classroom, the narrator can indict a dominant language ideology on deeply emotional and moral terms: that the means of communication acquired in their earliest and most intimate contexts – the home, prior to entering the (Turkish, institutionalized, state) context of school – became the source of shame and injury, for the biographical individual telling the story and for entire populations and across generations.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Hefty Dictionaries in Incomprehensible Tongues: Commensurating Code and Language Community in Turkey**

On a cloudy afternoon in early November 2010, an MP from the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party [*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*] in Turkey stood on the steps of the Turkish Parliament building in Ankara with a thick red book in his hand. Holding the book up for the journalists assembled before him, MP Bengi Yıldız made note of its heft – 40,000 entries – and stoutly rebutted a judge’s claim, several days prior, that Kurdish was “an unknown and incomprehensible tongue” [*bilinmeyen, anlaşılamayan bir dil*]. The judge had made this statement in the context of forbidding the use of Kurdish by defendants in a highly publicized trial. Upon beginning to speak in Kurdish, one defendant’s microphone was summarily cut off, the action explained by the aforementioned reference to “an unknown and incomprehensible tongue.”

Kurdish exists, the MP was declaring as he waved the book at his press conference: just look at this dictionary! In the weeks following the judge’s pronouncement and the MP’s outrage, Kurdish activists took to the airwaves in Turkey with calls on Kurdish citizens to use Kurdish in all manner of public spheres, from streets to courtrooms to marketplaces. Pitched increasingly in terms of “civil disobedience” [*sivil itaatsizlik*], these recent efforts came at a time when the possibility of a solution to the so-called “Kurdish Question” in Turkey appeared at yet another political crossroads. And as observers of the political scene in Turkey have long come to expect, “language” – as object of pragmatic reflection and intervention, as well as means of semiotic

communication – occupied a crucial site for debating and contesting the politics of sovereignty and culture that defined that political moment.

In this chapter, I consider questions of commensuration to explore a notable aspect of the larger linguistic-political project of rendering Kurdish an “equivalent” language in a world of standard languages: the material contours and qualities of text artifacts, and their commensurating capacities. The project of asserting equivalence – and a *project* it is: sustained, political, and deliberate, albeit also uneven, erratically organized, and with unanticipated results – takes place, I argue, in no small part as a function of an increasingly textualized Kurdish language. From billboards lining southeastern city streets to classics of world literature lined up on bookstore shelves, from a daily newspaper to a sentimental text message, from greeting cards to baby name books, printed Kurdish is ever more visible in the urban landscape of Turkey.

With this visibility have come qualitative changes in popular understandings of Kurdish – the kind of “thing” it is understood to be, the sites of its expected encounter, the metrics according to which its equivalence to other “languages” might be judged. What centers of calculation, means of measurement, or identifiable qualities might establish Kurdish as a “commensurate code”? How does the circulation of graphic artifacts (Hull 2003), from posters to poetry volumes to dictionaries, contribute toward establishing the semiotic conditions for a commensurating project like this?

Drawing on a scholarly distinction between “language community” and “speech community” (Gal 2006; Irvine 2006; Silverstein 1997), I describe how print textualization is contributing to the emergence of a Kurdish language community. Language communities, as these scholars point out, are notable for their allegiance and loyalty to projected systematic



denotational norms; they “emerge as cultural systems in the context of heterogeneous speech communities when difference in denotational practice is ideologized as significant” (Gal 2006:182). Yet the consolidation of language community in the Kurdish context is taking place, I argue, even as very few people in fact read the texts in question. I explore here the somewhat surprising juxtaposition of a consolidating standard, taking place in and through print that very few people read. Within the social field of contemporary Kurdish Turkey, the material properties of these texts in circulation contribute to asserting equivalence between Kurdish and other languages, even without the processes of referential uptake we conventionally understand as reading.

How, then, does this happen? What conditions of recognition and circulation are presupposed and effected by this process of commensurating codes? To answer this question, I investigate the indexical cues of orthography (and of three graphemes in particular: Q, X, and W) and the material qualities of page size, shape, and textual material.<sup>1</sup> I examine the kinds of sites and locations in which Kurdish texts are typically encountered – and the varied nature of those encounters. I describe the propositional assertion of linguistic equivalence – our language is like yours – rendered in terms of norms, copiousness, and genre, all features of a “culture of a Standard” (Silverstein 1996). I also describe an increasingly pervasive sense of anxiety among speakers about whether or not they properly deploy this “book Kurdish” [*kitap kürtçesi*, *akademik kürtçe*], and what the stakes of inadequate deployment might be.

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<sup>1</sup> As will be clarified in more detail below, by “material qualities” I mean both the particular physical qualities of being made of paper, spread with ink, glued and stapled, etc., and the semiotic qualities of being read as “heavy,” “weighty,” “polished,” etc. The latter are, in this case, associated in this given context with other qualities like “weightiness,” “officialness,” etc. See Kockelman 2006; Irvine and Gal 2000; Keane 2003a; Munn 1986.

This case demonstrates the importance of disentangling processes of standardization, textualization, and the constitution of language community. Although so frequently linked as to seem empirically inextricable (see the by-now vast corpus of global scholarship on language standardization), there is much to be gained by examining more closely the actual processes by which communities of linguistic allegiance come to be. Because the ethnographic connections between, say, the consolidation of a sense of linguistic distinction and a felt belonging to a particular kind of polity-groupness are so empirically pervasive, and because our own conceptual tools for discussing groupness, language-ness, and distinction emerge squarely within these same empirical/historical contexts, it is all too easy for the connections to seem obvious. A focus on commensuration encourages close ethnographic and conceptual attention to the empirically particular, conceptually intertwined processes by which the similarities or differences backing these alignments can be projected or rejected (Yeh and Hankins 2016; Chumley 2016). Attending to commensuration as an ongoing and unfolding social project allows us to explore the conditions under which equivalence, in this case among “Languages” as a particular kind of cultural object, can be assumed, produced, asserted, or dismissed. Indeed, the particularities of the Kurdish case as I describe it below reveal how commensuration – rendering equivalence – can happen in sometimes surprising ways.

What are the metrics for rendering codes of communication as *languages*, and *languages* as entities that can be recognized, evaluated, and compared to one another?<sup>2</sup> The circulation of

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<sup>2</sup> My use of the word “code” here draws simultaneously on rather conventional usage – i.e., an organized convention of communication among a given set of users – and on a more specific set of conversations in post-Jakobsonian semiotic anthropology (cf. Jakobson 1971; Silverstein 1979). It is not meant to suggest my own hierarchical relegation of Kurdish as less-than a “language.” Indeed, I use the term “code” in order to not take for granted what is in fact the distinction at stake in the sociohistorical semiotic processes I describe: when, how, and under what

largely unread Kurdish texts allows us to investigate how the material qualities of certain text objects – shape, sheen, heft, font size, organization, display, location, to name a few – contribute towards the assertion of particular forms of linguistic commensurability and equivalence.

It also raises the question of what, in this case, reading might be *for*. It joins ongoing scholarly investigations of the variable conditions and effects of “discourse-mediating materials” (Hull 2003: 290) beyond a reductionist focus on writing as primarily about predication and semantic meaning (Cody 2011; Noy 2008; Silverstein and Urban 1996). What qualities of textual form make possible the recognition of texts as objects, as equivalents, and as indices of denotational distinctness? How are these forms transfigured across circulatory routes and paths, and how do they anchor affiliations of loyalty and allegiance to language community – even without necessarily transforming speech practices and norms of pragmatic usage?

In the Kurdish project of commensurating codes, attention to the “interior content of aesthetic form and message” is subordinated and deemphasized in favor of “the exterior political and social commitment to the circulation of [the] form and message” (Gaonkar & Povinelli 2003: 393). In this case, I argue, the circulation of these forms – stacked newspapers, glossy street signs, hefty dictionaries, serial journals – works to signal the presence, asserted and defended, of the genres they are presumed to contain.

As recent anthropological analyses of commensuration demonstrate (Hankins 2016; Yeh 2016; Chumley 2016), commensuration establishes relationships not only between two terms but between sets of them, an “assertion of proportionality that sets up boundaries with the promise of equalizing what lies on either side of them” (Yeh and Hankins 2016). An axis of distinction –

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circumstances certain conventions of communication (i.e. codes) can emerge as “languages,” with all the rights and benefits those entail, and when they cannot.

this thing over here, that thing over there – must be socially achieved; it takes work for distinction to appear as a point of departure rather than a horizon of aspiration. The commensurating processes I describe here seek to establish equivalence along three related and co-extending axes of distinction: first, between spoken Kurdish and its textual equivalent; second, between “Kurdish” and “Turkish” as the orienting codes of their respective language communities; and, third, between “Kurds” and “Turks” as members of those communities, participants in a fiercely contested struggle over sovereignty and resources. At stake in these assertions of linguistic equivalence – the normative purchase of a would-be newly commensurate Kurdish – are politically and socially consequential mappings of groupness, polity, and political legitimacy.

#### *Speech Communities, Language Community*

As already described in previous chapters, Diyarbakir is a densely populated and politically fraught metropolitan center of Kurdish political and social life, located in the Anatolian southeast. Arguably the metropolitan heart of Kurdish Turkey, Diyarbakir is home to a community of speakers whose communicative practices belie any easy suturing of language community and attendant ethno-political grouping. Kurdish and Turkish — taken for the moment as distinct denotational codes — mix and mingle on the tongues of the city’s inhabitants. Socially meaningful relationships between speakers are enacted in the uneven movement between codes, and the lines of social differentiation – according to gender, generation, economic class, political orientation, and birthplace – are presupposed and reproduced in these linguistic interactions.

Yet if Diyarbakir's inhabitants might be said to constitute a heterogeneous speech community, characterized by shared regular and socially meaningful patterns of interactive practice, regardless of code (Gumperz 1972; Irvine 2006; Silverstein 1996), membership in their respective *language* communities is marked by distinctly uneven possibilities of allegiance and practice. I want to linger briefly on the concepts of speech community and language community that inform this discussion.

Although the terms are often used interchangeably, here I take up an analytic distinction between them to better parse the Kurdish case at hand. While a speech community can be assessed in terms of "indexical facts of repertoire deployment and their associated norms of use" (Irvine 2006:695), *language community* is usefully conceived in terms of allegiance to a presumed "shared" denotational code, a matter of loyalty and affiliation as much as – or more than – the pragmatics of use (Silverstein 1996). My focus on affiliation here draws on the third of four (distinct and not necessarily coinciding) aspects of language practice proposed by Hymes and Gumperz in their pioneering studies of linguistic community: (1) *knowledge* of a code (the ability to interpret its denotational value); (2) the *deployment* of that code in practice; (3) *claims to affiliation* with it; and (4) knowledge of *rules of use*, i.e., "understanding the social distribution and appropriate deployment of codes" (see Irvine 2006: 692; also, Garvin and Mathiot 1960; Gumperz 1962; Hymes 1968).

Importantly for the discussion at hand, language communities are noteworthy for their orientation to "language" in its "Standard Average European" folk sense: lexically distinct, grammatically regular, referentially driven, and neatly bounded (Whorf, 1956:138, cited in Silverstein 1996:285). Allegiance to the "language" of a given language community is not

necessarily defined primarily as a matter of capacity to speak it, but rather to assume its normative, delineated existence “out there,” and to measure individual acts of communication against its presumed standard.

A given individual might, of course, be the member of more than one language community (in terms of professing allegiance) while inhabiting a single speech community (in the sense of negotiating contextually specific norms of usage). We can imagine that individuals frequently navigate different norms of speech, as they move through contexts of communication and the genres appropriate to them (for example, a neighborly encounter in the variety of Kurdish appropriate to spaces of domesticity, a televised public address in formal political rhetoric in Turkish, or a devotional rite that moves between Arabic and sermonic Turkish).

A crucial feature of this notion of the language community is thus the evaluation of better and worse speakers – regardless of whether actual, biographical “best speakers” in fact exist (Silverstein 1996: 285). Increasingly, in the Kurdish case, the question of “best speaker” is open to debate – is this the elderly rural woman, understood to speak a “pure” variety of Kurdish, one deemed authentic, colorful, particular? Is it the self-taught young man who can write an academic article in Kurdish, or interpret a parliamentary discussion? Or the metropolitan speaker in Diyarbakir, whose Kurdish is self-professedly and defiantly “mixed” – a designation that indicates a robust sense of the denotational distinctness at stake in this very project of equivalence?

Delineating these strands makes it possible to understand the emergence of a form of Kurdish language community in Turkey even as relatively little change is visible in patterns of

spoken usage, or as popular knowledge of the content of an emergent standard remains scarce.<sup>3</sup>

As the previous chapters have described in some detail, the extent to which inhabitants of Diyarbakir use Kurdish for the various communicative functions of their daily lives varies greatly according to a wide range of sociological and semiotic factors; the limited sociolinguistic research that has been conducted at a broad scale seems to suggest both widespread contraction of Kurdish and language shift toward Turkish, and an emergent valorization of Kurdish (within perhaps more limited “high culture” domains) as vital to a wider project of Kurdish political and cultural sovereignty (Öpengin 2009a; 2012; Çoşkun, Derince and Uçarlar 2010). The functional subordination of Kurdish code to limited contexts means that Kurdish continues to operate in many public settings primarily as an index of social identity or position, rather than as a purportedly neutral medium of predication with the simultaneous capacity to project both authenticity and universality – two sources of authority and value that “standard languages routinely enjoy” (Gal 2006: 166; Gal and Woolard 2001).

As Gal (2006:164) has noted, the circulation and enforcement of standardization regimes typically depends upon a network of “centralizing institutions of education, labor markets, mass media, and government bureaucracies that inculcate in the population a respect and desire for such linguistic forms.” Processes of standardization evaluate certain linguistic practices over others as normatively “correct,” as “good speech,” etc.; in so doing, they typically further establish a sense of bounded denotational codes (see, for example, Frekko 2009; Gal and Woolard 2001; Jaffe 1999; Woolard 2006). An idealized formality and referential function, and the “fit” between them, scaffold most 20<sup>th</sup> century standards, as Lucy (1996) and others have

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<sup>3</sup> See Öpengin (2009a; 2012) for sociolinguistic overviews of broad-scale usage patterns.

reminded us. At the level of named languages, the emblematic function of a national standard frequently serves as an icon of societal homogeneity – particularly in symbolic systems of representation at the national and international level.<sup>4</sup>

Although the days of exiling or imprisoning individuals for merely possessing Kurdish-code texts are over, the official status of Turkish remains constitutionally enshrined and enforced. The third article of the constitution states that “the Turkish state, with its territory and nation, is an indivisible entity. Its language is Turkish.” It is worth noting the distinction that emerges in these constitutional formulations between “official language,” i.e., Turkish, and “tongues traditionally used by Turkish citizens in their everyday lives,” the rubric under which Kurdish, Laz, Ladino, Arabic, Neo-Aramaic, and other non-majority languages in Turkey are collectively cast. Despite important changes in the legal parameters afforded to Kurdish in recent years – brought about at least in part due to pressures related to Turkey’s efforts to join the European Union, but also crucially as a result of ongoing and unrelenting political efforts by Kurdish citizens and members of the pro-Kurdish political party – the status of Turkish as the country’s sole official language remains both firmly established and the object of considerable political contestation (Akin 2006; Derince 2013; Zeydanlıoğlu 2012).

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<sup>4</sup> It is therefore worth stressing again that the analytical designation *language community* as I am using it describes the folk-conventional understanding of language/social grouping we most readily recognize as members of precisely such communities: to the extent that we ourselves assume the existence of “languages” out there, defined by their propositional-referential capacities, stitched together by authoritative norms, and linked to distinct communities of speakers, we too are talking about language community. Likewise, the seeming self-evidence with which “Turkish” appears as a consolidated code in Turkey, while “Kurdish” navigates a more unsettled terrain, is a result of the kind of political-institutional factors described here; it is not, of course, due to inherent formal differences between the codes.



As described in the introductory chapter, an energetic output of “cultural” interventions into “the Kurdish question” was taking place alongside the political upheavals of the 1980s and 1990s. Chief among these was the concentrated effort – by both Turkey- and Europe-based Kurdish intellectuals – to produce a textual corpus, to transform a hitherto largely oral communicative practice into an inscribed lexical-orthographic system (Scalbert-Yücel 2006; 2007; Malmisanij 2006). Following the repeal of the language laws in 1991, small groups of language workers picked up the pace, creating “Kurdish Institutes” in cities with major Kurdish populations, holding conferences and seminars to discuss education policy and the standards for creating standards, and producing an increasingly expansive array of texts.<sup>5</sup> Before turning to a closer look at some of these texts – their forms and features, the sites and stakes of encounters with them, the ways in which they seek to render equivalence along the three axes mentioned above – I want to consider briefly the significance of print as medium, and reading as a practice, for the kind of commensurating project taking place here.

### *On Not-Reading, and Other Practices of Print*

That the consolidation of the public presence of Kurdish in Turkey takes place in and through ever more widely visible textualization is not inherently given; as many scholars of language remind us, there is, of course, no necessary relationship between any given linguistic form and its social meaning (e.g., Scheffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998). Often, what are understood to be “oral” forms of a linguistic variety are valorized and promoted in direct contrast to textual, printed, or literate forms (Finnegan 1988; Fox 2006; Rumsey 2000). At the same time,

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<sup>5</sup> Although this chapter focuses on text-artifacts, other media forms like radio and satellite television have also obviously played important roles in consolidating forms of Kurdish collective identity and practice (Scalbert-Yücel 2007; Sheyholislami 2012).

the fact that printed Kurdish (whether typed in a book, emblazoned on a street sign, or scrawled on a poster) has been placed front and center in the project of commensurating codes in this context is not surprising. A by-now vast body of scholarship has outlined the robust ideological linkages among assertions of linguistic, national, and political sovereignties (e.g., Anderson 1991; Bauman and Briggs 2003; Gellner 1983; Scheffelin, Woolard and Kroskrity 1998). That text-artifactualization is a primary technology of the language/nation equation is so empirically and ideologically commonplace as to appear self-evident.

Historicizing the linkages between technologies of standard language like print and forms of social polity is obviously crucial. So, too, is detailed and contextually specific examination of the sedimented histories of relating to text (Cody 2009b; Silverstein and Urban 1996). There is more, Briggs and Bauman (1992) remind us, to the “consumption” of a text than deciphering its semantic content. Likewise, Boyarin (1993: 3) urges us to explore varieties of reading practice that challenge “the still-prevalent literary tendency to analyze reading in terms of disembodied decoding of inherent meanings” (Blommaert 2004; Messick 1993). A number of recent studies have usefully explored the heterogeneous relationships between mass-mediated forms (both print and electronic) and the kinds of cultural practices they engage and enable (e.g., Cody 2011; Eisenlohr 2004).

To understand the non-readers of Kurdish Turkey, however, we will need to find ways to think about the social effects of textual encounters that take place via yet other features of circulating text-artifacts. What happens when relatively few people are “reading” at all? In a Pakistani bureaucracy, Hull (2003) argues that it is the physical properties of files – their transportability, inscribability, erasability – that allow collective forms of authority to emerge. In

the Kurdish case, I argue, it is as much the shape and size and sheen of text-artifacts in Diyarbakir as their denotational content that make them recognizable as “dictionary,” “banner,” “novel,” and make them mobilizable as tokens of linguistic equivalence. The judgments of similarity that make these objects recognizable – and recognizably artifacts of a modern, standard Language – rest in no small part on longstanding acquaintance with those same physical properties in Turkish-code versions of signs and books and banners. These qualities also make possible their movement through spaces of the city, the way these objects come to constitute part of the urban textual landscape: their placement on wooden shelves, their brandishability in argument, their looming presence in a public park. As such, they play a central role in the labor of commensurating codes. We turn now to the sites and spaces of encountering Kurdish in print.

*“Em Bixwînin! Em Binivîsin!” [Let’s Read! Let’s Write!]: Textures and Types of Kurdish in Print*

Visitors to Ofis, Diyarbakir’s main commercial and entertainment district, will almost certainly encounter evidence of the ever more prolific Kurdish textual production in any number of sites: in cramped, smoke-filled coffeehouses, for example, and the bookstore-cafes that line the central pedestrian thoroughfare and narrow side streets. Book-lined shelves are scattered among the tables and chairs where customers sit, drinking tea, playing backgammon, and conversing animatedly. The slender white spines of poetry volumes, colorful novels, and collections of short stories jostle for space alongside sterner journals of history, grammar, and politics. The red, green, and yellow covers of children’s books – *Let’s Read! Let’s Write!* – add nationalist color and playful heft to the pale delicacy of the novels and the bulk of a mighty, two-volume Turkish/Kurdish dictionary set (that very same dictionary hoisted aloft by the MP at the

start of this article). Grammar books, literary magazines, and political tracts are also available for perusal and purchase, all artifacts of the expanding scale of Kurdish-language texts in Turkey today.

On the face of it, such textual production seems to indicate a thriving market for Kurdish-language materials, and indeed, the years following the lifting of the ban on publication in Kurdish in 1991 have seen dozens of small and medium-sized publishing houses established and hundreds of volumes printed (Malmisanij 2006). The products of these new publishing houses – what Silverstein (1997:129) has called “the text-artifactual paraphernalia of standardization” – include dictionaries, grammars books (Aydogan 2006; Berbang 2006; Denîz 2008; Tan 2000), and novels and collections of short stories (Cewerî 2003; Uzun 1995). Translations of the classics of world literature (Chekhov, Poe, and Shakespeare, for example) are now available for purchase in Kurdish translation, as well as collections of short stories and poems by writers writing both in original Kurdish and in translation from Turkish and other languages. In a genre-distribution that is worth investigating in more detail (see below), the publishing profile of these presses leans heavily toward literature (especially poetry and short stories) and language-learning resources like dictionaries and phrasebooks, rather than non-fiction like memoirs, history, or current events.<sup>6</sup>

A semi-annual book fair now takes place in a municipal exhibit hall, where stacks of Kurdish-language texts perch on tables in increasing numbers, and patrons flip through the pages (before, often, returning the books to their stacks unpurchased). The book fair – sponsored by the city hall – is advertised widely in posters and billboards throughout the city’s neighborhoods,

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<sup>6</sup> Malmisanij, for example, notes (as of 2006) some 308 poetry books and works of fiction compared to 23 works of history, politics, and reportage (2006: 23).

perhaps especially in the densely populated, poorer neighborhoods in the city center, more so than the rapidly expanding, wealthier suburbs increasingly characterized by gated apartment complexes and large superstores.

Although crowded bookshelves are not typically a feature of many Diyarbakir homes – given relatively widespread poverty, illiteracy, and minimal formal schooling – ever more households are devoting a shelf or two (often stacked next to the resident schoolchildren’s textbooks and exercise books) to books in Kurdish. Some of these might be children’s books acquired during an event hosted by the local municipality, or copies of phrasebooks in Kurdish-Turkish translation. Collections of poetry are also popular, like those containing poems written by well-loved poets like Feqiyê Teyran, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Kurdish poet whose poetry is widely enjoyed and referred to during cultural events like the annual city-wide Festival of Arts and Culture that takes place each June.

In addition to the products of publishing houses it is now increasingly possible to encounter printed Kurdish in other sites of the urban landscape. In an effort to transform the textual landscape where Turkish is the primary publicly dispensable code, local municipal authorities led by the pro-Kurdish political party have launched banner and poster campaigns, distributed health pamphlets and tourist brochures, and installed “Do Not Litter” signs in public parks, all in Kurdish. Glossy banners wishing citizens a joyful end to Ramadan stretch across city streets, while billboards announcing the time and location of annual Newroz (Kurdish New Year) celebrations confront drivers on the main highways entering the city.

Yet at the same time that Kurdish-language texts are increasingly visible in cities like Diyarbakir, the readership of such texts is less clearly evident. In my own field experience, for

example, aside from a handful of interlocutors – who, as I discuss below, were frequently, and not coincidentally, the authors or translators of some of these texts and were typically young, formally educated, and almost always male – I rarely encountered anyone reading them. Everyone knew about the books, and those who could afford it often owned a text or three. But rarely did I encounter an actual reader, even among those who could claim that uncommon combination of literacy in print media and (more or less) fluency in spoken Kurdish.

This was the case as well for the Kurdish language daily newspaper, *Azadiya Welat* ([Freedom of the Nation/Country], henceforth, AW), which began publication as a daily in August 2006. Even more than the books, however, which were occasionally visible in a few shops, homes, or bookstore-cafes, the newspaper was everywhere in Diyarbakir. It lay next to the wide array of Turkish language news media on the wire shelves of most corner markets in the city, and was delivered to my door every morning. It graced the director's coffee table at the women's center where I spent much of my time, and the desks of the mayor's staff at City Hall. Roving salesmen held copies aloft during political rallies and press conferences in the city park, hoping to make a sale. At forty *kuruş* per copy – about 30 American cents – it was only slightly more expensive than the cheapest dailies, and around the same price as the more prestigious national broadsheets.

Yet despite plentiful opportunities to acquire a copy of AW, only rarely did I encounter a dedicated reader, even as many congratulated me on my own efforts to decipher its pages. The limited presence of a Kurdish reading public has, of course, everything to do with the history of public language practice in Turkey referred to above. Indeed, the majority of able speakers – women and older generations who grew up in monolingual rural settings – are also the least

likely to have had formal schooling or to have developed comprehensive literacy skills. In the face of decades of denial, bans, and ongoing restrictions on the use of Kurdish in public spaces, including the absence of institutional underpinning in schooling, bureaucratic administration and governance, and mass media, it comes as no surprise that a Kurdish mass reading public does not exist in Turkey.

Given this history, it is also not surprising that an internalized sense of deficiency finds its echoes in the undervaluation that many native speakers of Kurdish routinely express. This takes place both explicitly (but typically voiced in the third person and past tense, as in “people used to think Kurdish was just bad Turkish,”) and implicitly, as when parents actively encourage their children to speak Turkish at home instead of Kurdish, even when that means linguistically excluding (particularly elder) members of the family. Alan (2008) traces links between these internalized perceptions and the dramatic rise in Kurdish textual production, describing what he calls *berterefkirina kêmasiyekê*, a kind of deeply-felt sense of deficit or lacking on the part of many Kurdish translators and authors.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the sheer novelty of encountering Kurdish code publication is palpably expressed among many older citizens, who remember very clearly the violent suppression of Kurdish textual production in the very recent past. This sense of novelty emerges not only in moments of anxiety expressed about “proper” usage (which is ever more common), but also in the reactions of pride and satisfaction that greet the sight of printed Kurdish. The memory of banning is still fresh, and the sight of Kurdish in new contexts can still jolt, startle, provoke – a phenomenon that is positive or unsettling according to the viewer’s attitudes toward Kurdish political sovereignty.

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<sup>7</sup> For more on undervaluation of Kurdish by native speakers as a legacy of Turkish language policies see also Öpengin (2009b, 2012) and Coşkun et al. (2010).

Moreover, despite ongoing relaxation of laws around Kurdish media production, Kurdish-language presses, editors, journalists, and writers continue to face harsh reactions from state authorities, including imprisonment, often with extended pre-trial detentions and harsh sentences. Although the charges these days tend to be levied for “publishing terrorist propaganda” – a focus on the ostensible semantic content of the text (as opposed to the choice of code) – to publish in Kurdish in Turkey is to necessarily operate with highly politicized parameters.<sup>8</sup>

Yet at the same time that relatively few people read Kurdish (and, increasingly, ever fewer people speak it as well), the sense of Kurdish as a consolidating code, with a defined standard, is ever more widespread. The signs of a circulating standard ripple throughout spoken conversations, can be overheard on buses, and percolate into after-dinner conversations over tea. Even elderly women who primarily operate in Kurdish – whose speech practices, in other words, exhibit all the range of registers that might be expected from a competent adult speaker – frequently expressed to me their anxieties that they made “mistakes” or struggled to understand *kurdiya rastî*, “proper Kurdish.” Mingled pride and anxiety marked many conversations about the increasingly visible public presence of Kurdish. Like standards in general, which “set up hierarchies of discrepancy, of variance from a sanctified norm” (Yeh and Hankins 2016), the widely-perceived emergence of a standard Kurdish has ramifications for individuals, for institutions, and for politics in general.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> According to Reporters Without Borders, Turkey has one of the highest rates of imprisoned journalists in the world ([http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2013\\_1054.html](http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2013_1054.html)). While not all of these are Kurdish or write on Kurdish issues, many are (Derince 2013; Özsoy 2013).

<sup>9</sup> The linguistic anthropological literature is by now replete with usefully comparative studies of language maintenance and revitalization campaigns globally and historically, cases that richly document both the variety



*“I don’t know Book Kurdish” : Anxiety and Authority in a Kurdish Language Community*

The “non-readers” whose pride and anxiety I describe here came from a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds and political orientations. They included both those who were actively committed to furthering a Kurdish political project, and those with more tenuous (or nonexistent) links to political organizing. All of these are the sites and circuits, the agents and actors, of public dispensability. Efforts to make Kurdish a public language – the language of public space, of public speech, of public linguistic interaction across genres – have these diverse effects. Kurdish is, of course, already a language of public circulation in certain neighborhoods of Diyarbakir – the poorest, the most “traditional” neighborhoods, including the narrow streets of the inner old city, within the UNESCO-heritage basalt walls. When the effort to make Kurdish public extends into contexts write as official (see the next chapter), or commercial, or bourgeois – like many of those described just above – then the effects are varying in all the ways I outline here. In homes, cafes, office buildings, and marketplaces, expressions of unease and insecurity about one’s capacity to wield Kurdish permeated countless conversations, from speakers who otherwise seemed (to my eye and ear) quite comfortable holding forth in Kurdish, to those who commanded a more limited repertoire of registers.

Confrontations with textual media in particular elicited these reactions, as people navigated this creeping sense of correctness. Here, the ongoing project of commensurating

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across and similarities among many of these contexts (see insightful overviews and comparative discussions in Eisenlohr 2004; Duchêne and Heller 2007; Brincat et al. 2003). Themes that emerge in the Kurdish case I describe make their appearances elsewhere, from purist efforts that accentuate conflict, create new hierarchies, and lead to widespread alienation of speakers (e.g., Gal 2006; Hill 2002; Hornberger and King 1999; Dorian 1994), to the emergence of new forms of linguistic anxiety, nostalgia, and pride (e.g., Cavanaugh 2004; Crowley 2006; Jaffe 1999; McEwan-Fujita 2010).

familiar forms of speech with their newly textualized equivalents reveals itself as fraught with awkward mismatches and puzzled questions. “What’s the right way to say that word again?” they wondered. “How do I write this text message?” Perhaps most frequently, the messages that circulated through social media like cell phones or Facebook were simply forwarded from one user to another. Indeed, sending sentimental “text-poems” to one another’s cell phones was a popular pastime among the young girls at a local women’s center. Frequently, the Kurdish versions of these (which were frequently sent along to me as well) displayed syntactic formulations that often baffled me – postpositions haphazardly affixed to the nouns they governed, for example (instead of separated from them), or words rife with Ws and Xs (when “standard” spelling – according to the textbooks that lined café bookshelves and to which I, as novice language learner, made frequent reference – would have suggested Vs and Hs).<sup>10</sup>

The letters Q, X, and W have, in fact, come to index Kurdish orthographic – and attendant social – difference in the wider public sphere. Found in the standard Latinized-version of the Kurmanji Kurdish alphabet but not in the Turkish one, these three graphemes have come to index Kurdish difference inflected along several lines – political, linguistic, legal. Parents have been given jail sentences for giving babies names that contain these letters, and elected officials in southeastern municipalities prosecuted for distributing holiday cards wishing recipients a happy *Newroz*, rather than *Nevruz*. In the ongoing struggle over the limits and possibilities of Turkish pluralism, these three graphemes have taken on heightened political significance (see

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<sup>10</sup> Postpositions in Kurdish are clitics, not full words, so they are pronounced together with the preceding noun. Coupled with the effect of the Turkish spelling of similar-form case suffixes (e.g., –de/-da) it is very much what one might expect from Kurdish speakers who are transposing their speaking skills into writing without formal literacy training.

Jamison n.d.).<sup>11</sup> In the distribution of text message poems, or on posters hoisted aloft at political rallies, the mere presence of a Q, an X, or a W serves to assert and mark a given text's denotational difference – even if the content of that denotation was often inscrutable to a given sender or receiver.

In the Diyarbakir settings described here, such text messages relied upon and mobilized any number of social connections and functions: establishing intimacy between sender and recipient, to be sure, but also marking both as members of shared projected ethno-political community. Since only Kurdish people are presumed to understand Kurdish (excepting the occasional foreign researcher) – even as not all Kurds can be assumed to speak, understand, or (certainly) read Kurdish – the link established by the message relied on a projection of shared commonality. It also implied a concomitant positive orientation toward a Kurdish social-political project that is increasingly pitched in terms of “cultural” and “human rights” issues – of which “language” has been mobilized as a foundational plank.

One afternoon at a neighborhood women's center, conversation turned to the fact that another staff member had given a speech in Kurdish at a recent press conference. “How,” asked my interlocutor, “did she do that? To give a whole speech [in Kurdish], in front of cameras and all those people!” On another occasion, Filiz (the director of the women's center), and Rojbin (a freelance journalist for a local paper) spent several hours drafting a speech for an event in honor of International Women's Day. As they strategized, I sat nearby, taking notes for them and looking up vocabulary words upon request in my pocket Turkish-Kurdish dictionary. Although

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<sup>11</sup> Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party has since announced “democratization packages” that include lifting the ban on these three letters, but with significant restrictions still in place, particularly for use in registrars and official documents.

Filiz had originally planned to give the speech in Kurdish (encouraged by Rojbin), that plan was ultimately abandoned in favor of a more limited Kurdish-code performance. Over and over again, the two shook their heads at the formulations put forth – who knew that word? How would Filiz remember that one? Didn't it sound, well, odd to use *endazyar* [engineer] instead of *mühendis* to introduce another speaker?

On another occasion, a popular local singer – whose performances always took place in Kurdish – confessed that she just wasn't confident enough to give a panel presentation in Kurdish. Although she grew up in a monolingual household and regularly speaks and performs in Kurdish, she was too worried about making mistakes in a public setting like a conference. At the lunch break during which this conversation took place, she congratulated another panelist, Birgül, for sustaining her own opening remarks in Kurdish. The singer noted with particular admiration that Birgül had appeared to read from hand-scribbled notes as she spoke.

“Oh,” laughed the target of admiration. “The notes were in Turkish. I practiced translating them in my mind last night but I couldn't – well, I didn't really write them. If you talk to Vedat [her husband], he'll tell you what a mess I was. I couldn't sleep a wink! And anyway,” she continued wryly, “we all ended up speaking Turkish anyway, didn't we, even if we tried [to start out with Kurdish].”

There are a number of reasons people proposed to explain why they did not read AW, or other Kurdish language texts, even if they commanded the capacity to read in Turkish and to speak Kurdish. “It's too hard,” they would say. “It's stilted, sounds strange. I'm not used to it.” Often, I would get the response (in Turkish): *Kitap kürçesi bilmiyorum*. “I don't know book Kurdish.” My own presence as a foreigner in the process of learning Kurdish provoked frequent

references to this “book Kurdish” – usually accompanied by a shrug and a rueful reference to the speaker’s own personal inadequacy in its competent deployment. Narê’s statement below is typical:

Look, it [Kurdish] is my mother tongue, ok? But you [K.J.] probably know it better than I do, I mean, you read *Azadîya Welat*. I don’t really know book Kurdish [*Ben kitap kürtçe [sic] pek bilmiyorum*].<sup>12</sup>

As Deniz, a close friend and fellow student of Kurdish (we studied together at the kitchen table for several weeks, until he gave up in exasperation), reminded me,

You have to remember that people aren’t used [*alışkan değiller*] to seeing Kurdish like this, it wasn’t like this before. We didn’t have this before, people still can’t believe that there is a newspaper or all these books. And even if they see [printed Kurdish], how are they going to know how to read it? Where are they supposed to learn how to read it?

Deniz’s frustrations were several. He was exasperated with his own difficulties at learning the textualized forms of a code he had primarily encountered orally. The formal demands of standard Kurdish grammar, presented in the workbooks we shared at the kitchen table, baffled him – the rule of ergativity and complex adpositions, unfamiliar tense forms of verbs and conditional clauses. He was embarrassed that he deployed Turkish far more comfortably than Kurdish; as a dedicated community activist, his weakness in his own self-professed “mother tongue” lay at odds with his political expectations of himself. He also was a fierce and unrelenting critic of

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<sup>12</sup> While the standard form of this Turkish compound possessive should be – and typically was – *kitap kürtçesi*, here Narê’s non-standard formulation, without the possessed ending *-si*, was as quoted in the text above. Narê was notably hesitant when speaking in Turkish, even as she typically chose it as the code of our communication.

Turkish government strategies that, as he saw it, made it impossible for Kurdish to be a fully functioning language of public life. His defensive, frustrated rejoinder to me – “you must remember that people aren’t used to this” – emerged from this sense of political fury and structural grievance. And because his professional life involved working with the local municipal government (run by the pro-Kurdish political party), he had frequent occasion to encounter more competent wielders of Kurdish –visiting intellectuals from Europe, for example, holding forth on a conference panel, or one of the young self-trained interpreters (usually young, male, formally educated (in Turkish), and middle-class) who earned a relatively prosperous income translating for visiting academics or journalists.

People are increasingly aware that this system of standard is in place and note that fact, often with an ambivalent combination of pride and qualified hesitation. When pressed as to the specific *content* of that Standard – what *is* the correct way to render a transitive verb in the past tense? How *do* you say “engineer” or correctly wish someone a pleasant meal? – they are, perhaps unsurprisingly, typically unsure. But *that* there is such a standard is increasingly assumed by all kinds of speakers. And hence, one of the fundamental features of a language community – sense of allegiance to a language understood as denotationally distinct and formally codified– is consolidating in this context.

Before continuing, I should reiterate that, *qua* speech community, participants in any regime of communication do so not only with minimal rules of usage but also complicated evaluative schemes of what is beautiful, or moral, or false, or petty. Linguistic practices in use are always indexical of social qualities and evaluative stances. To that extent, speakers of what-

we-now-call-Kurdish, like speakers of any language, have always imbued their speech practices with evaluative charge.

What is new, I argue, to the emergence of a Kurdish language community is the increasingly commonplace sense that there exists a singular standardized code, against which current speakers can be measured, and through which “Kurdish” might now take its rightful place alongside the other constellations of people-language-place. I return, therefore, to the relation between unread books and the arguments they animate. My argument is that the material presence of these texts, the perceivable weight of this textual production, functions to produce and circulate this notion of a rule-bounded Kurdish code. What we have here is not so much a community of readers, constituted by particular practices of tracing eyes across inscriptions on a page for the purposes of deciphering referential “content” (or even of absorbing new registers, genres, and affective postures while doing so), but a community of *non*-readers, who nevertheless draw on their encounters with the material artifacts of standardized Kurdish textual production to circulate and consolidate the notion of a Kurdish code. This the emergence of a new kind of public, addressed through the circulation of texts it does not read but recognizes itself as hailed by, that demands of that public a new relationship to the publicness of Kurdish. In this process, a language community characterized by allegiance to a code whose standards it itself only uneasily deploys is consolidated and effected.

### *Commensurating Codes in/and Context*

Because of the fiercely contested political parameters within which a Kurdish language project has been forced to operate, I suggest, hegemonic language ideologies in Turkey have

come to operate through a kind of functional subordination. This is a hierarchical order that is laid out less in terms of formal or referential difference – which *used* to be the grounds of debate (“Kurdish is simply a degenerate variety of Turkish, it’s not a real language”) – but now increasingly gets waged in terms of “fit” of code to context. Thus, the arguments of *both* Turkish nationalists who wish to suppress the consolidation of a Kurdish linguistic and political project, and Kurdish activists who wish to promote it, pivot around the public presence of Kurdish in an ever wider and more hotly contested set of domains (Jamison n.d.).

Hence the defendants’ use of Kurdish in the courtroom mentioned at the start of this chapter. Hence the now-expected use of Kurdish at the beginning of political speeches. Thus the Culture Director of the Diyarbakir city hall issues a book of Kurdish baby names, and a few bilingual road signs are posted along rural highways. Diyarbakir residents encounter the occasional Kurdish billboard, or municipal health pamphlets, and even, in 2010, a low-level campaign to affix onto vegetables bins, in a handful of Diyarbakir markets, labels that said “*fringî*” rather than “*domates*.” (This, despite the fact that most of the women doing the shopping for those tomatoes are as unlikely to be able to denotationally decode the former as the latter, nor, really, to need a tag to tell them what those round red things are. And without the presence of the long-forbidden and now iconic X, Q, or W, the vegetable bin tag’s function as index of Kurdish denotational difference is potentially missable entirely.)

The Kurdish project has been dedicated, in recent years, to expanding the contexts of its appropriate and expectable function – a function of *presence*, a focus on the utterance of what can be recognized (if controversially) as *that code* in *that context*. The courtroom, the parliament, the transport thoroughfare – it is no accident that much of the focus has been these overtly



“public” spaces, sites of encounter between strangers, domains conventionally marked for Turkish. These are the contours of public dispensability: Kurdish as a language that can and should appear in public. In the next chapter, we consider efforts that project Kurdish as a language that can assemble a public, and explore the emergent consequences of those acts of address.

It is ever harder, or more transparently the shrill defense of a parochial nationalist, at least, to make the claim in Turkey that Kurdish – qua code, qua big-L language – does not exist. Even the judge’s justification for switching off the defendant’s microphone – the inadmissibility in court of “an unknown and incomprehensible tongue” – rang incongruously hollow in the national media chamber. While it was Kurdish activists who reacted most strongly, even mainstream Turkish media outlets took issue with the judge’s statement; their arguments rested on the viability and necessity of bilingual court proceedings rather than the distinctness and legitimacy of Kurdish as a separate language. (It should be obvious by now that even the use of the term “bilingual translation” in the context of public Kurdish presupposes a degree of denotational distinctness and equivalence – i.e., commensurateness – that even just a decade ago was deeply contested.)

On the other hand, in a context where the texts circulate but are rarely read, certain powerful assumptions about the relative values of codes might be reproduced. In the usefully contrastive Catalan case, Frekko (2009) has recently offered the suggestion that – at least in Catalonia – contrast at the level of named languages and national publics (emblemized in and achieved in no small part by the existence of a standard register) must be counterbalanced recursively *within* the named language and corresponding national public by the projection of

linguistic heterogeneity, at least if it is to be able to (be understood to) speak for “everyone” in that public. How an increasingly multi-genred, textualized Kurdish will navigate “speaking for everyone” within the public of its projected language community remains an open and fraught question, one with significant stakes not only for what one Kurdish linguist and friend calls “the general expressive force of the language,” but also for its capacity to take on the privileges routinely accorded to standard and official languages.<sup>13</sup>

In another productively contrastive case, Lemon (1994) has described what she calls the “hypercontextualization” of Romani in Soviet/post-Soviet Russia, where a long history of relating language prestige to questions of form demarcates those languages deemed to have formal qualities (segmentable surface features of lexicon, tense/aspect, and so forth) that can be compared and evaluated, from language varieties that can only be evaluated in terms of their phatic, emotional, or otherwise contextual functions. In other words, in the context Lemon describes, the primary form of critique and intervention available to Romani speakers concerning questions of language is in terms of its contextual function: “No one would really say *that* in *that* context.” Given widespread ideologies of the uniquely complicated and capacious “formal” qualities of Russian compared to other (minority) languages, Lemon identifies the ongoing deprivileging of Romani as an “inherently context-bound code” (1994:36).

To the extent that Kurdish often operates publicly as primarily an index of social identity, its potential to be understood as “fully equivalent” remains unsettled. Inserting Kurdish into new

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<sup>13</sup> Öpengin, 2014, personal communication. Öpengin argued that the consolidation of newly standardized Kurdish – and concomitant increased anxieties over “correct” usage – works to the detriment of the language’s “expressive force.” This is a sentiment I encountered often, particularly among a young generation of language workers and academic linguists concerned to preserve what they consider the richness of heterogeneous local forms at odds with a single-centered standard.

contexts, testing the limits of official censure, will continue to unsettle the hegemonic expectations of code and context that have marked modern Turkey's politics of language. But as Kurdish activists are well aware, what they also need are the institutional capacities to not only enforce the distribution of the text-artifacts of Language Community, but to incite their uptake, their enregisterment of multiple voices and social personae, and to assert Kurdish's own capacity to be understood as acting as "mere reference," as the apparently neutral channel for denotation of all and sundry. The commensuration of codes, in other words, is a multi-pronged project, and one rife with unexpected gaps, tense frictions, and productive excess.

*"Same-ness" in Language, Community, and Polity: The Stakes of (Triple) Commensuration*

Inserting Kurdish into ever more arenas – disrupting the expectations of which code goes with which context, of what the contours of public dispensability might be – has become an ever more central plank in a Kurdish political project. In this process, questions of the "formal" qualities of Kurdish have played a role, but it is a complicated one. On the one hand, as I discussed above, increased textual production has led to widespread circulation of Kurdish language texts along a variety of circuits. These texts are efficacious not only (or even primarily) because people are referring to the dictionary for enhancing their lexical repertoire, or reading *Azadîya Welat* to get their news, but because the existence of these objects is understood to ideologically presuppose the genres contained within them. In the struggles I have been describing, we can identify not one commensurating project taking place in relation to a Kurdish language community, but, in fact, at least three – inextricably linked though they may be. In all of these, text-artifacts play a key role. Let us examine each in turn.

Firstly, spoken Kurdish is being commensurated with its textualized counterpart. This project takes place at multiple levels – inscribing, decoding, asserting equivalence between that oral form and this written one. In the apt words of one interlocutor, “it’s how you write what your tongue says.” The emergence of heterogeneous Kurdish text-artifacts asserts that these written forms can and will and should be commensurate to the heterogeneity of speaking practices: along the double axis of similarity/difference, that thing over there – *Kurdish in speech* – is meant to be like this thing over here – *Kurdish in print*. Say, [wæla:t]. Read, *welat*. Recite a poem, tell a story, deliver an opinion. Read a poem, a novel, an Op-Ed. The registers, genres, and styles of a newly textualized Kurdish are meant to approximate, to deliver in textualized form, their spoken equivalents, equally socially specific, historically unfolding, and intertextually dense with semiotic potential.<sup>14</sup>

And of course, the commensurating project in this case is marked by both achievement and failure, by equivalences that can be newly taken for granted or rejected, and by new anxieties about measuring up. A compilation of short stories, a text-message, and the publication of a political speech all serve as (en)textualized evidence of equivalence to spoken forms. But they are also met with anxiety and unease – the newspaper articles “sound strange,” a speaker worries that she does not know “the right word,” a young man laments that the Kurdish in his exercise book “doesn’t sound like [his] mother’s.”

Secondly, “Kurdish” as the orienting code of a language community is being commensurated to its counterpart, “Turkish.” Much of this chapter – and, indeed, of the

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<sup>14</sup> Ertürk’s (2011) study of the literary ideologies surrounding the phonological relationship between word and sound in late Ottoman and early Republican literature provides a fascinating contrast case to the phenomenon I describe here, taking place almost exactly a century later.

commensurating project in general – has focused on the effort to render equivalence along this, the explicit axis of codeness: a Language over here to a Language over there. A parliamentarian brandishes a dictionary; a municipality holds a book fair; a teenager tucks a folded newspaper under his arm. City streets are festooned with banners celebrating the end of Ramadan, extolling (in huge letters) *TU BI XÊR HATÎ MEHA REMEZANÊ!* and, in a more modest font below, *Hoşgeldin Ya Şehr-i Ramazan!* The dictionary is bilingual; the book fair makes national news; the teenager’s newspaper includes a glossary. The text-artifacts are recognizable by their inextricably bundled, semiotically dense, material qualities (stiff cover/floppy pages/tiny font; glossy canvas/stretched poles/huge letters; wide shape/inky pulpy pages/two-fold pleat), and move through ever-expanding circulatory ambits. They look familiar – like “dictionary,” like “newspaper,” like “banner.” They are knowable, as tokens of text-artifactual types, types whose ability to index “modern, standard Language” has already been densely, repeatedly, globally asserted.

And as with the project of commensurating spoken and printed Kurdish, the project of commensurating codes is marked by achievement and failure, unexpected outcomes and productive gaps. The insertion of Kurdish into new public contexts both jostles and provokes, renders new familiarities and reveals startling juxtapositions. Can a billboard be understood as “mere reference” – providing information about the location and timing of a popular event? Or is it legible mostly as an index of its own insertion, evidence of a sustained project to provoke expectations of code and context? Does the dictionary’s heft speak volumes? What do the textural contours of a newspaper’s presence on the wire shelves of a market reveal about the genres and generalities contained within? The answers, of course, are as varied and dynamic as

the moments of commensurative adjudication themselves – neither settled nor singular, but dialogically transforming. As an orienting pole of a language community, however, there can be little doubt that Kurdish in Turkey has a tremendously powerful role to play.

And, finally, behind these projects of linguistic commensuration are the projected communities of “Kurds” and “Turks:” the deployers of the codes in question, the members of those language communities, the citizens and participants in bitterly contested struggles for sovereignty and power. The project of commensurating language communities both presupposes and produces the members those communities are understood to contain. At the heart of projects of linguistic commensuration – matching lexemes, publishing texts, deploying codes – are deeply consequential stakes, for politics and pride and polity, for the distribution of resources, the stratification of communities, the contours of quotidian life. The commensuration of “Kurd” and “Turk” – however understood, however defined, however vied-for or decried – looms behind and at stake in the project of commensurating codes. Recall that Kurds were long thought – and are still, by many – as “prospective Turks,” a population that could be assimilated into the *halk*, “the people” of the republican state. The commensuration of Kurd and Turk – as separate but equivalent, as two tokens of a type (“a people”) – is a crucial part of a broader project by contemporary Kurdish politicians to assert Kurds as a *halk*, a people, who have their own claim to political community.<sup>15</sup> Looming behind this third axis of commensuration lie the biggest stakes of all – the very constitutive foundation of the Turkish state project, and the contours of its future form.

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<sup>15</sup> One significant and telling example of this can be seen in the name of the pro-Kurdish political party that so broke the election threshold in June 2015: the *Halkların Demokrasi Partisi* (Peoples’ Democracy Party), known as HDP, with an emphasis on the plural possessive *Peoples*’.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Public Kurdish and the Politics of Legitimate Language in Turkey**

On a rubble-strewn street one evening in late March 2006, the mayor of Diyarbakir, Osman Baydemir, was filmed amidst a crowd of television reporters and restless, agitated youth. Standing before a phalanx of television cameras and news reporters, the mayor spoke to the crowd before him, and, as the cameras rolled, to an audience beyond. Amid distant sirens and the smoke from burning tires in the street behind him, Mayor Baydemir urged calm and restraint. Riots had been raging in the city for days, following the public funerals of several guerillas from the Kurdistan Worker's Party or PKK, killed a week earlier by the Turkish army during clashes in the mountains not far from the city. Fourteen guerillas had died in the attack, and rumors circulated rapidly that their bodies showed signs of burns from chemical weapons.<sup>1</sup>

Four of the bodies were brought to Diyarbakir for burial, and their funerals quickly became major public events, presided over by political leaders from the pro-Kurdish DTP party and attended by tens of thousands of mourners. The sight and sound of low-flying F-16 fighter planes circling continuously overhead during the funerals were interpreted by most city residents as a deliberate provocation on the part of the Turkish armed forces. Tensions, already high, turned into city-wide clashes, and for four days civilian demonstrators and a coalition of state security

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<sup>1</sup> Chemical weapons are banned by the Geneva Convention and the Convention on Chemical Weapons (CWC), to which Turkey is a signatory state. While no objective authority officially ascertained whether in fact such weapons had been used against the guerillas, the allegations of their deployment were widely believed in Kurdish circles, and added further fuel to popular fury. That the accusation involved chemical weapons was particularly salient for many protesters, given a widespread discourse of shared suffering linking Kurds in Turkey with Iraqi Kurds who were victims of Saddam Hussein's devastating chemical attacks in places like Halabja. In fact, the annual commemorations of the Halabja attacks (March 16, 1988) had just been held in places like Diyarbakir a few days before the news of the deaths of these PKK guerillas.

forces faced off over burning tires, Molotov cocktails, and, from the security forces at least, tear gas, water cannon, and both rubber and live bullets.

At the time of the episode I describe, several people, including small children, had already died in the demonstrations, and hundreds more were injured and detained in police custody.<sup>2</sup> The mayor and his staff, representatives of the DTP, had ventured out into the still clash-ridden streets to urge demonstrators to return to their homes before more casualties occurred, to acknowledge that the protesters' fury had been heard and would be heeded.<sup>3</sup>

Explicitly addressing both state security forces and the civilian protesters, the mayor spoke urgently of the need for restraint on both sides, sharply condemning the use of force by the police and gendarmerie, and begging the crowds to return to their homes. On video footage of the events broadcast repeatedly over the following days on Turkish television networks, the mayor is shown speaking before a jostling crowd of protesters and reporters. Seconds later, the mayor is seen gesturing for calm with his hands. A battered flag, the bright green banner of Kurdish confederalism, hangs from a makeshift pole at the edge of the screen. As his bodyguards hold back the clusters of masked young men who keep coming up to greet him with a kiss on each cheek, Baydemir raises his hands to ask for silence, and entreats those gathered to heed his words.

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<sup>2</sup> By the end of what came to be known as “the March Events” (*Mart olayları* in Turkish) or “Amed Uprising” (*Amed Serhildan* in Kurdish; “Amed” is a Kurdish name for Diyarbakir), thirteen people, including three children under seven, had been killed by bullets or beating, and dozens were hospitalized. Hundreds, including many underage minors, were arrested and tortured in police custody. See IHD 2009.

<sup>3</sup> The DTP (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi* or Democratic Society Party) was, at the time, the main pro-Kurdish political party in Turkey. The party was closed down in December 2009 by the Turkish Constitutional Court under charges of ties to “illegal organizations,” namely the PKK. Party closures of this sort are common in Turkey; some two dozen parties, mostly incarnations of essentially the same pro-Kurdish (as well as so-called “Islamist”) parties, have been unilaterally disbanded since the 1980 *coup d'état*. The DTP has since regrouped twice, first as the *Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi* (Peace and Democracy Party), and more recently as *Halkların Demokrasi Partisi* (Peoples' Democracy Party), known as HDP.



In both moments, the mayor's words, referentially speaking, were the same. *Please listen to me, please everyone go home, we hear you.* In repeated broadcasts of the events on Turkish television, one feature of the mayor's words was mentioned as particularly newsworthy: a switch in code that took place over the space of these brief encounters. Speaking first in Turkish and then in Kurdish, the mayor's use of the latter added grist to many a media mill, even as the riots gradually wound down.

To be sure, there were many aspects of the televised broadcast that drew the attention (and nationalist ire) of viewers across the country: the presence of the mayor, an elected government official, standing in such proximity to explicit symbols of Kurdish separatism — the confederalist flag, angry slogans, young men swathed in the black-and-white checkered scarves associated with guerilla resistance. The mayor's bodily gestures, the fact that he was literally embraced by the masked demonstrators, the exhausted tension written onto his face and body, the presence of cameras and reporters angling for view — all of these contributed to framing the event as a particular kind of public address. Amid the general sense of urgency and urban disorder depicted in this broadcast, I want to concentrate on the mayor's choice of language code, both as it unfolded in the real-time event, and as it was reported on and discussed in subsequent entextualizations locally and nationwide. At stake in this publicly mediated switch of code — and its noteworthiness to a watching (inter)national audience — are complicated histories of publicly expected language use in Turkey, the licensing of Turkish for situations and speakers deemed official and public.

This chapter extends my analysis of the public dispensability of Kurdish, concentrating: on questions of “public language”: both language used to constitute more-and-less concretely

projected publics, and language used in public. I describe a series of moments of public language use and analyze some of the expected and expectable forms of hearing, listening, and speaking that framed their production, reception, and circulation. In previous chapters I addressed this question explicitly with regard to more quotidian speech contexts, domains noteworthy in the eyes of their participants only for their ordinariness — on public transportation and in cafes, at kitchen tables and in classrooms. I also described the efforts of language workers who wish to establish and promote a Kurdish complete with regularized grammatical norms and the “textual-artifactual paraphernalia of standardization” (Silverstein 1997), and explored the challenges they confront in implementing this standard.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the dissertation, I have explored the aspects of language having specifically to do with its public dispensability, that is, with the ways in which given language varieties fit into or unsettle particular contexts of usage deemed “public” by their users. In this particular chapter, I describe several moments of “public Kurdish,” from the mayor’s speech outlined above to an earlier controversy surrounding a new parliamentarian’s oath of office. In both of these moments, the status of the speakers as “public officials” is critical to framing how their moments of codeswitching were received. These “official” moments stand in revealing contrast to the kinds of publicly circulating Kurdish I described in the previous chapter.

In setting up the ethnographic discussion below, I take up an analytic conversation about the forms and features of “legitimate language.” This is a conversation that has been compellingly explored by a raft of scholars since Pierre Bourdieu (1991) extended the concept,

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<sup>4</sup>I use “language worker” here instead of the more common “language professional” to underscore the fact that in Turkey, people who work to promote a Kurdish language project rarely do so as paid professionals; most have had little or no formal linguistics training (especially in Kurdish) and there are few opportunities to receive any financial remuneration for the work that they do.

and my work relies on their persuasive use and critiques of his original formulation. Seemingly over-determined questions of “official” and “unofficial” language in Turkey can be usefully parsed, I suggest, by reference to the scholarship in legitimate language and its domains. What I add to that discussion in the Turkish case is an analysis of the different deployments of public language, and their capacity (limited, emerging, contradictory, and fraught) to constitute publics through these modes of address. Here, my discussion makes recourse to ongoing scholarly insights into the framing and footing effects of codeswitching (Blom and Gumperz 1972; Goffman 1979; Gumperz 1982), understood not only as an interpersonal question of code alternance but as a communicative practice with broadly circulating (Gal 1987; Gal and Woolard 2001) — and perhaps public-constituting — reach.

*Authority and Expectation: official language in policy and practice*

Pierre Bourdieu’s *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991; originally published in French in 1982 as *Ce que parler veut dire*) has received considerable scholarly attention, both critical and admiring, since its publication and subsequent translation. The concepts of “linguistic market” and “linguistic habitus” that Bourdieu developed, and his insistence that language be treated as a resource of interest and practical competence indelibly informed by wider power structures, have been widely taken up since their original formulation. Bourdieu’s emphasis is on the relative intractability of the relations of power that inform and shape language use in practice. He is critical, for example, of the tendency in “interactionalist” approaches to overlook “the deep mechanisms” that tend to reproduce the structure of the distribution of linguistic capital (1991:64-65).

Most relevant to the discussion at hand, Bourdieu is skeptical of the transformative potential of speech encounters that appear, on the surface, to subvert or negate the expected hierarchies of language use. In a widely-cited anecdote — that of the provincial mayor in Béarn who briefly addressed an audience in Béarnais — Bourdieu analyzes the “strategies of condescension” that framed the incident (1991:68). Only in a context where French is tacitly but uniformly understood to be “the only acceptable language for formal speeches in formal situations” can the mayor’s brief foray into the vernacular be understood as a “thoughtful gesture” (in the words of a newspaper report at the time) (1991:68). The act of “symbolic negation” that took place — wherein an unexpected code was used in a formal setting otherwise marked for use of the official language, French — is only possible, Bourdieu insists,

whenever the objective disparity between the persons present...is sufficiently known and recognized by everyone...so that the symbolic negation of the hierarchy... enables the speaker to combine the profits linked to the undiminished hierarchy with those derived from the distinctly symbolic negation of the hierarchy — not the least of which is *the strengthening of the hierarchy* implied by the recognition accorded to the way of using the hierarchical relation (1991:68 [emphasis added]).

Bourdieu goes on to raise the implicit issue of competence that also frames this symbolic switch in code, pointing out that the mayor can only create this “condescension effect” by virtue of his otherwise uncontested authority as a titled, educated, legitimate speaker of the legitimate language. What is praiseworthy coming from the mouth of an official in his position would be, he reminds us, “totally devoid of value — and furthermore sociologically impossible in a formal

situation — coming from the mouth of a peasant (1991:68).” The fact that the mayor could, and would, normally speak “good French” is what makes his use of “good quality Béarnais” an amusing little foray that in no way threatened his formal authority.

The concept of legitimate language has been thoughtfully taken up by number of important scholars since Bourdieu’s original formulation. After exploring some of these critical engagements, I return to the field of language politics in Turkey, and to the beleaguered Kurdish mayor with whom this chapter began. The dimensions of language use in that context are illuminated by reference to distinctions Bourdieu might find familiar: between, in the words of the Turkish state authorities, “official language” (*resmi dil*), and “different languages traditionally used in everyday life” (*günlük yaşamlarında geleneksel olarak kullandıkları farklı dil*) (Resmi Gazete 1994). As outlined in more details in the introductory chapter, there are features of the Turkish case that bear a striking resemblance to the kind of linguistic landscape Bourdieu describes for France: the weight of official policy, the inextricable linkages between economic and linguistic markets, the over-determined role of educational institutions, to name but a few. At the same time, many of the same limitations of the model pointed out persuasively by later scholars apply in this case.

One sustained engagement with Bourdieu’s formulation of legitimate language can be found in Leigh Swigart’s (2001) discussion of language practices in Dakar, Senegal. Swigart charts a shifting landscape of linguistic interactions in which Urban Wolof — an “unmarked code switching that [is] expected in the context of most kinds of informal verbal interactions in Dakar” (2001:97)— underwent a significant shift in status over the course of the 1990s. She attributes this transformation in part to economic pressures from outside the local context, but

notes that the shift also entailed changing affective orientations toward Urban Wolof as a sense of “dynamism and urban sophistication” came to replace earlier, more negative associations with the code.

Bourdieu’s formulation of legitimate language, Swigart argues, would be hard-pressed to explain “how a hybrid code like Urban Wolof could assume a legitimacy of its own... despite the fact that it enjoys no formal recognition by the state nor even, very often, by its own users” (2001:91). She proposes a model of “alternative legitimacies” that could account not only for a historical dynamism underspecified in Bourdieu’s account but also for a wide range of empirical possibilities, ranging from contexts where bivalency is highly marked and strategically mobilized, as in the Catalan case described by Woolard (1998), to those like the Senegalese, where bivalent elements “blend unnoticed into the patchwork of everyday speech (Swigart 2001:100). The ambiguities of the Senegalese language scene — ambiguities shared more widely across ethnographic contexts — can then be situated in a dynamic historical context where differently-legitimate codes jostle one another in potentially surprising ways.

In an early and influential article, Kathryn Woolard takes on a number of Bourdieu’s key arguments about the workings of legitimate language — the role of educational institutions, the taken-for-granted unity of a “fully integrated linguistic market,” and the fact, and ultimate impenetrability, of a singular dominant ideology (1985:744-45). The primacy Bourdieu grants to education institutions as inculcators *par excellence* of linguistic hegemony, working in concert with the dominant structures of the economic market, does not obtain in so straightforward a fashion in the Catalan context. In Catalonia, Woolard argues, although Castilian dominates in schools and formal institutions (as in Bourdieu’s model), Catalan enjoys a superior position in

the economic realm. The result is a linguistic landscape where both Castilian and Catalan speakers respond positively to Catalan, despite its ostensibly subordinate position. The regional linguistic market is thus cross cut by contradictory evaluations, affective orientations, and shifting ambitions on the part of speakers to access Catalan as a language of solidarity and economic distinction.

Even where there is recognition of the authority of the legitimate language, there can be repudiation of the value on an important contrasting dimension. Competing sets of values exist, creating strong pressures in favor of the “illegitimate” languages in the vernacular markets, and not just an absence of pressure against them (Woolard 1985:744).

Bourdieu sees these vernacular forms as ultimately inconsequential alternative formulations, incapable of challenging in any substantive sense the dominant value hierarchies. If any such vernacular form — Béarnais, say, or Creole — one day takes up position as code for formal occasion, he argues, “this will be by virtue of its takeover by speakers of the dominant language, who have enough claims to linguistic legitimacy... to avoid being suspected of resorting to the stigmatized language *faute de mieux* (1991:69).” What Woolard’s research demonstrates, however, is that there is no necessary or universal relationship that obtains between economic relations, evaluations of linguistic forms, and recognition of social authority across a population. Faulting Bourdieu both on empirical and theoretical grounds, Woolard also stresses the productivity of vernacular practices, the fact that they “arise not from a mere bending to the weight of authority but are paradoxically a creative response to that authority (1985:745).” The Catalan case that Woolard describes is only one of many cases that demonstrate the diversity of

potential configurations among legitimate and illegitimate linguistic varieties and social groupings worldwide (e.g., Collins and Slembrouck 2005; Gal 1987; Gross 1993; Haeri 1997; Hill 1985).

The possibilities for “creative response” — what Silverstein has, more precisely, called “creative indexicality” (1976) — emerges as a key question in our discussion of the public dispensibility of Kurdish in Turkey. In later sections of this chapter, I explore the extent to which the presupposed conditions of listening that made the mayor’s codeswitch effective — an association of Kurdish both with an intimacy of exclusive groupness and with the overdetermined politicization of that group identity — might either foreclose or grant the possibility of a more expansive future public Kurdish, one characterized not only by the exclusivity of marked identity but also a more widely obtaining public authority. Before moving to that discussion, however, let us turn to the oath-taking parliamentarian, the riot-quelling mayor, and the codeswitches that provoked such controversy.

### *Illegitimate language and the Limits of Legitimate Politics*

On November 6, 1991, a young female politician representing the city of Diyarbakir walked up to the podium at the Turkish Grand National Assembly to be sworn in as a new member of parliament. Wearing a slim headband with the red, yellow, and green colors of the Kurdish movement, Leyla Zana stood before her fellow MPs and took the official oath of office. Her voice barely audible over growing murmurs from many of her parliamentary colleagues (who started shouting as soon as they noticed the colors in her hair), Zana read the Constitutionally mandated oath:



“I swear by my honor and my dignity before the great Turkish people to protect the integrity and independence of the State, the indivisible unity of people and homeland, and the unquestioned and unconditional sovereignty of the people. I swear loyalty to the Constitution.”

Amid ever louder shouts and the sound of pounding fists on tabletops, Zana unexpectedly continued, this time in Kurdish: “I take this oath for the brotherhood between the Turkish people and the Kurdish people (*Ez vê sondê li ser navê gelê kurd û tirk dixwîm*).” By this point, Zana was rushing to finish her words, her voice almost completely drowned out by roars from the assembled crowd.

The fury of the spectators present that afternoon marked only the beginning of a national scandal, as Zana’s use of Kurdish in the most official of official places — the halls of parliament — became the focus of countless newspaper reports, politicians’ speeches, and ordinary conversations. Turkish law at the time proscribed the use of any language but Turkish in official (*resmî*) contexts. Although Zana was legally protected from prosecution by virtue of her parliamentary position — brought about in the very act of oath-taking that immediately preceded her switch into Kurdish (an Austinian illocutionary act par excellence-!) — her new political career was launched in a storm of controversy. Accused of treason and of membership in the PKK, she was eventually stripped of her parliamentary immunity with the closure in December 1994 of her party, the pro-Kurdish *Demokrasi Parti* (DEP, or Democracy Party). Together with three other Kurdish MPs from DEP, Zana was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. Widespread international criticism of the sentences and repeated appeals eventually led to a ruling by the

European Court of Human Rights in July 2001 that her trial had been unfair. Despite ongoing efforts and international pressure, the Turkish courts upheld the verdicts until, rather suddenly, the Court of High Appeals overturned the case on a technicality in June 2004, and all four MPs were released.

In her defense statement at the State Security Court in Ankara, Zana mentioned the controversy that her use of Kurdish had ignited. “My worst crime,” she noted, “seems to be a phrase I spoke in Kurdish on the brotherhood of Kurds and Turks and their coexistence in equality and democracy when I took the loyalty oath in Parliament. Even the color of my clothes seems to have been a ‘separatist crime’” (International PEN 2003). Zana rejected the notion that “simply by mentioning the existence of the Kurdish people and Kurdistan,” she was “defend[ing] the aims of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party,” and insisted that her goals were peaceful. In a clear statement of criticism over how the case had been handled by Turkish authorities, the European Union awarded Zana the Sakharov Prize in 1995. In the years since her release, Zana has continued her role as political spokesperson for Kurds in Turkey, dogged by repeated accusations of violating the Turkish penal code and the anti-terror law. She was once again sentenced to ten years in prison in December 2008, accused of supporting the PKK and “spreading propaganda” (Bianet 2009).

In almost all media coverage as well as popular descriptions, for all the details of the many trials and accusations, Zana continues to be known as “the woman who spoke Kurdish in Parliament.” For many Turkish nationalists, the act was a deliberate provocation, an explicitly planned and executed challenge to the indivisible unity of the Turkish state (e.g., Öztürk 1991, Yavuz 2003). For others, Zana’s trials were yet more proof of the repressive conditions faced by

Turkey's Kurdish citizens (e.g., Öpengin 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas & Bucak 1995; KHRP 2003). The scandalized response in Turkey to her parliamentary oath has itself been frequently commented upon, sometimes offered by outside critics as evidence of not only of Turkey's ill-treatment of its Kurdish citizens but of the country's inadequate democratization more generally, and, perhaps, its unreadiness to join the European Union (for the democratization argument, albeit without the "unreadiness" component, see Lagendijk 2007). In other words, for a variety of differently-positioned actors, Zana's brief use of Kurdish and the controversy it instigated have provided material for many a subsequent political intervention. At work in the framing and re-framings of this "event" are a number of ideological assumptions about the connections among linguistic varieties ("Turkish," "Kurdish"), the features of their semiotic potential ("official speech," "mere denotation," etc.), and the social groupings to which they are linked ("Kurd," "terrorist," "democratic activist," etc.).

Almost all recontextualizations of this event characterize Zana's codeswitch as a "political" move: planned in advance, with the aim of deliberately violating the expected code of public address in Turkey. The denotational content of her speech was inaccessible to most listeners; even for those who understand Kurdish, the pace and pitch of Zana's final syllables coupled with the loud outcries of the audience and general uproar made her words unintelligible. The fact of referential opacity, obviously, in no way detracts from the significance of the event: the very fact of a switch was already enough. No one watching in the moment — or in subsequent re-broadcasts — could miss the moment she moved into the controversial code. And regardless of their opinions about the legitimacy of the speaker's motivation or her moral standing as leader or traitor, the audience registered a switch, and understood it as politically

significant, as mounting a challenge to the formal apportioning of Turkish code to official political space. They shared, in other words, sufficient contextual background knowledge and expectations of the appropriate distribution of code-to-context to register the social significance of a switch. As scholarship on codeswitching reminds us, it is this “interpretive process relating linguistic form to the indexed salient aspects of context” that participants share in a moment like the one described above (Heller 1988:14; Gal 1979; Gumperz 1982).

Let us return, for a moment, to the anecdote with which this chapter began. The mayor is on the blockaded streets of Diyarbakir, urging protesters to return to their homes before the crisis spins further out of control. The country is transfixed with images of demonstrations taking place in cities throughout the southeast (including in Batman, Siirt, Hakkâri, Van, Kars, and other smaller cities, as well as in Istanbul, arguably the largest “Kurdish city” of all in sheer population numbers). Turkish media reportage is fixated not only on the scenes of tanks rolling through the streets of the city, but also on the broken shop windows in Ofis, the city’s most prosperous commercial district. This is a focus that frustrates many Kurds I know, who consider this part of a larger strategy by the Turkish mainstream media to paint the demonstrations as the vandalism of petty criminals and hooligans, rather than as legitimate political protest. Interspersed at regular intervals on national television are the images of the mayor I described above. The actual Kurdish segment itself lasts only about twenty-seven seconds, bracketed at one end by a longer segment in which the mayor is heard urging demonstrators in Turkish to return to their homes,

and at the other by more images of shouting youth and burning tires.<sup>5</sup> In the longer Turkish segment, the mayor's words are clearly audible:

Your pain is tremendous. We know this. Our municipal mayors, our provincial organization [the DTP], our provincial mayors, our leadership, our friends, all of us share your pain from deep in our hearts. From now on, from this moment onwards, the continuation of tensions will only harm our city, our people. For this reason I beg you, from this moment forward please go home, everyone please return to your homes.

*Yaşamakta olduğunuz acı çok büyük. Bunu farkındayız. Belediye başkanlarımız, il teşkilatımız, il başkanımız, yöneticilerimiz, arkadaşlarımız hepimiz acınızı yürekten paylaşıyoruz. Bu saatten sonra, bu dakikadan sonra gerilimin sürmesi kentimize, insanlarımıza zarar verecektir. Onun için sizden isteğim lütfen bu saatten itibaren lütfen herkes evine dağılsın. Herkes evine girsin.*

At this point, the voice of the reporter cuts in to explain that the mayor, standing “in the shadow of a PKK flag just overhead, called on people in Kurdish to return to their homes (*Baydemir, hemen yanı başında açılan PKK bayrağının gölgesinde Kürtçe evlerinize dönün çağrısı yaptı.*)”

We then hear the twenty-seven seconds of Baydemir actually speaking as subtitles in Turkish scroll across the screen.

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<sup>5</sup> The following transcripts were taken from a Flash TV broadcast. Other channels (e.g., NTV, CNN-Türk, ATV, etc., showed the same video images with essentially similar commentary. Transcriptions of the Kurdish are my own from taped video clips; for the Turkish transcriptions I have also made use of transcripts released by the mayor's own press office. Translations are my own.

I ask of you, please listen for two minutes, please listen to me for two minutes. If we don't listen to each other we won't improve anything. Please, I ask of you... today, all of our institutions, our party, our mayors, we had a meeting. Up till now, up till now...[broadcast breaks off]

*Ez ji we hevî dikim, duh daqîqe guhdariyam bikin, duh daqîqe guhdoriyam bikin...ku em hel gorî hemu de nekin. Ez bawer im emê pêş nekin. Ez ji we hevî dikim, îro hemu sazîye me [incomprehensible] tevu partîya me, tevu seroka şaredariya me, me hel cîvak çêkir. Hayanî niha.. hayanî niha...[broadcast cuts off]*

The Turkish subtitles are slightly more extensive than the actually audible Kurdish:

I beg this of you. Please listen to me for two minutes. If we do not listen to each other, we can do nothing. I ask of you. We have evaluated your situation with all of our colleagues, the highest ranks of the municipality, the party leaders, the leadership. At this point everyone should return home.

*Sizden şunu istiyorum. İki dakika beni dinleyin. Birbirimizi dinlemezsek bir şey yapamayız. Sizden bunu istiyorum. Biz sizin durumunuzu alt kademe belediyelerle, parti yönetimindeki arkadaşlarımızla, diğer yetkililerle değerlendirdik. Evlerinize dönün artık.*

More extensive transcripts — of the press coverage of the mayor and his staff's travels through the city that evening, of press conferences held by the mayor and other party representatives, and

of the mainstream media's coverage of the March Events in general — can be found in the Fourth and Fifth Appendices to the *Report on Local Government and Local Democracy Dynamics Concerning the DTP Municipalities in Turkey*.

This report was compiled by Baydemir's legal defense team after the March Events, and circulated more broadly on a number of pro-Kurdish websites and NGOs. It is worth noting that the appendices to this report include literal transcriptions of the original Turkish (the language code of the vast majority of the mayor's speeches), as well as English translations of speeches originally delivered in Kurdish. The original Kurdish itself does not appear anywhere — as symptomatic a sign as any of the limits of Kurdish's public dispensability, both within the Turkish national context and in more international circuits. I am personally acquainted with the members of the mayor's press office who would have been responsible for transcribing and collating this file, and I know that they would have felt very uncertain about the “proper” way to spell the Kurdish. They also would have matter-of-factly presumed that English and Turkish were the two relevant language codes for the audiences these appendices were meant to reach. Public dispensability, in this case, is firmly anchored in the unquestioned legitimacy of Turkish and English as the codes of institutional-bureaucratic circulation on the national and international scale.

The report itself was produced as part of a dossier of reports submitted by the DTP in response to an investigation launched by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA). That investigation was publicly announced within hours of Turkish media reports about a particular sentence that the mayor repeated while urging groups of protesters to return home. Mayor Baydemir was quoted as saying, in Turkish, various versions of the following sentence: “Our

loss was fourteen, after these events it has become seventeen. We don't want it to become eighteen. (*Kaybımız ondörttu bu olaylardan sonra on yedi oldu. Artık onsekiz istemiyoruz.*)”

Subsequent recontextualizations of this statement by news reports did not show the mayor actually speaking the sentence but each report emphasized the fact that the mayor had used the first person possessive — “our loss was fourteen” (referring to the fourteen PKK guerillas killed by the security forces), thus explicitly aligning himself, the protesters, and the PKK guerilla forces. This, in the mind of the prosecution, was incontrovertible evidence of the DTP's organic links with the “terrorist” organization.

During the events themselves, the broadcasts of the mayor's switch in code received relatively little attention from the people I encountered. The sheer scale of the riots and rapidity with which the violence escalated took even seasoned witnesses of years' worth of demonstrations by surprise. Demonstrations themselves are nothing terribly unusual in certain parts of Turkey; each year around certain dates — the Kurdish New Year celebrations of Newroz, for example, and on the anniversary of the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan (the imprisoned leader of the PKK), there are often altercations between protesters and security forces. Indeed, there is certain predictability and almost ritual unfolding to many of these events, and a stock series of narratives drawn upon by the mainstream Turkish press and the Kurdish movement. Freshly decamped to Diyarbakir for the long-term season of my own fieldwork, I spent the protests inside the apartment I shared with two housemates, peering out the windows when I dared, shuttling back and forth between the living room television and the kitchen, where my housemates' friends and colleagues stopped in for food and tea before returning to the streets.



Forbidden by my housemates from venturing out myself — adding an “American spy” to the mix was the last thing anyone needed, they pointed out — I watched and asked questions. Over late nights of debriefing the day’s events and debating the next best step, the discussions centered on the question of how the events would end, and with what unforeseen effect of the current political scene. Would the state government use this as an excuse for increased crackdown? What would happen to the reform packages? Would the PKK’s status be enhanced or diminished when things quieted down? Could the municipal government, and the DTP more generally, manage to keep the people’s faith while insisting that they cease protesting? *Should* the party encourage people to return to their homes? Was the intensity of the riots a cause for celebration or concern?

I, stuck behind closed doors while the action raged outside, noticed the endless loop of reportage, including the moments with the mayor I described above. When I asked the people moving in and out of our apartment their thoughts on the news coverage, they noted the switch and nodded, unsurprised. One friend expressed a fairly typical reaction. “Of course he is speaking Kurdish out there,” he told me. “He [the mayor] has to remind them [the demonstrators] he is with them, he is one of them. These people have lost everything [during the village evacuations of the 1990s], they are losing faith in the party, too. And then what will happen?” The fact that the media kept broadcasting the moment of the codeswitch was shrugged off as symptomatic of the mainstream press’s obsession with the use of Kurdish by a public official.<sup>6</sup> It was risky, they agreed, for him to speak Kurdish in front of the cameras of the

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<sup>6</sup> An ongoing joke about the mayor circulated within the group about the mayor’s Kurdish language capacity more generally — like his Turkish, they liked to say, it wasn’t very good. This was a common jest in Diyarbakir, good-humoredly asserted about both self and others — to claim that one neither spoke good Kurdish (one’s “mother

national news media, but at this point, the mayor was understood to be pulling out all the stops in his effort to calm a rapidly escalating situation.

Throughout these events, the mayor and his staff were engaged in a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, they sought to represent the demands of their constituents to the state authorities while simultaneously securing promises from the latter to restrain the state's heavy-handed response. On the other, they wanted to quell the demonstrations before more people got hurt, and to persuade the demonstrators that their party, the DTP, would effectively pursue the people's demands through the "legitimate" political avenues of parliamentary procedure and pressure on the national judiciary and executive for ongoing legal reform.

The tense negotiations of the March Events were, in a sense, simply a heightened version of ordinary reality for the mayor and his party. Caught between pressures from the Turkish political mainstream to denounce the PKK as a "terrorist" organization, and the realities of their constituency that make such a move affectively and politically impossible, Kurdish politicians constantly confront the limits of legitimacy. This is also part of the context that frames the mayor's codeswitching moves, as he negotiates the boundaries of these conflicting demands.

### *Switching and the Politics of Public language in Turkey*

So what was the significance of the mayor's switch to Kurdish in these encounters? Given the history of Turkish language use I have described in previous chapters — ubiquitous, institutionalized, standard, prescribed in both law and practice for almost all public (particularly urban) spaces — it is safe to assume that there was no one there that night who did not

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tongue") nor good Turkish (the language learned at school and in public life). Self-deprecating humor aside, the statement is revealing of conflicting internalizations of what "competence" should look like.

understand, referentially speaking, the mayor's words when he first addressed the crowd, urging them, in Turkish, to return to their homes. The relative youth of the majority of those gathered there that evening makes the question of incomprehension virtually impossible. ("Competence" in Kurdish is notably, and increasingly, parsed along generational lines in contemporary Turkey, with younger generations more likely to conduct most or all of their daily communication in Turkish.) If anything, the switch to Kurdish might have been more likely to cause members of his proximate audience to stumble.

Scholars interested in the relationship between forms of linguistic practice and formations of authoritative publics have usefully traced the complex, historically variable connections between these processes. Gal and Woolard (2001) point out that these connections can be oppositional, co-constitutive, or mutually reinforcing, depending on the historical particularities of the institutions and contexts involved. Jane Hill, in her study of the "leaky boundary" between public and private discursive zones in the use of "mock Spanish" by some Americans, usefully identifies the way these ideological distinctions serve to protect certain powerful speakers from accusations of social censurable behavior, by classifying certain forms of speech as "inconsequential" because "intimate" and consigned to a sphere of "privacy" far from the demands of "public" discourse and relevance. One of the most important insights of Hill's study is her observation that this structure of the intimate/public boundary itself allows the projection and reproduction of a public that is – invisibly but explicitly – non-Latino, authoritative, and privileged.

In the case of the Kurdish mayor, the codeswitch also introduced a space of intimacy into the public sphere. Compared to the landscape of American language ideologies that Hill

describes and to the widely discussed case of Leyla Zana's use of Kurdish in parliament fifteen years earlier, Baydemir's use of Kurdish presents revealing contrasts. It also poses questions about the emerging contours of legitimate language in Turkey today — suggesting that even as the unmarked code of most public life continues to be Turkish, the indexical entailments of public Kurdish cannot be reduced to a mere reproduction of this existing order.

In both this and the Zana case, the kind of intimacy that codeswitch introduced into that setting emerges from the following series of indexical orderings: to speak a code called Kurdish, in Turkey, is to be a social person called Kurd. (The reverse equation, it should be noted, is far more fraught and far less given. This observation — that being a person called Kurd cannot be wholly dependent, in the social logics of contemporary Turkey, upon capacity to speak the code called Kurdish — was discussed in more detail in the previous two chapters, where I investigated the deployment of the idiom of “mother tongue,” and its attendant affective and naturalized identifications of self and identity.) To be a Kurd, in turn, is to belong to a kind of laterally extended collectivity, marked by features of an ethnic identity, which is unevenly commensurate with the boundaries of Turkish citizenship (see Aslan 2007; Aytürk 2004; Kirişçi 2000; Yeğen 2004). To speak Kurdish is to be positioned, to be marked, in a way that speaking Turkish only rarely is. Particularly in the role of an official speaker — representing political authority and before the lenses of national media — to speak Kurdish appeared to the watching audiences (both co-present and televised) as a “choice” in the code of communication, not merely its content. A switch to Kurdish, therefore, shifted the footing (in Goffman's (1979) terms) in each of these cases to (even) more explicitly invoke the exclusivity of this kind of groupness.

Yet important distinctions emerge in the reception that Zana and Baydemir's speeches elicited in the Turkish mainstream press and public commentary. Zana's use of Kurdish in the chambers of parliament was understood, by supporters and detractors alike, as an overtly political challenge to the protocols of official discourse and to the legitimacy of Turkish as its sole expected code. Recollections of the event live on in collective memory, from those who vividly remember watching clips of the oath-taking repeatedly broadcast on television to those who were too young to have actually seen the event take place. In most Diyarbakir settings, accounts of the event are accompanied by chuckles of supportive appreciation, indignant outcries at the mainstream Turkish reactions, and/or weary sighs at yet another example of the kinds of constraint placed upon the use of Kurdish in public.

Aynur's reaction was typical: a public schoolteacher and volunteer literacy tutor, she recalled the thrill of excitement she felt when reports of Zana's public switch to Kurdish first circulated. "At last," she said, "someone had the nerve to make that challenge in the place where everyone was looking. A lot courage [*cesaret*] for something so brief." In his own recollection of the event, Deniz, a municipal worker who was in his late teens at the time Zana was sworn in, shook his head at the degree of media attention that erupted at the time. "It seemed like such a big deal," he remembered. "Everyone was talking about it, everyone in Turkey suddenly knew her name." The controversy captured public attention both domestically and internationally, and the motivations, legitimacy, and consequences of Zana's act were hotly debated in widely divergent circles.

Expanding a classic analysis of codeswitching at the micro level to this mass-mediated event, we might consider this a "situational switch" *par excellence*, involving "clear changes in

the participants' definition of each other's rights and obligations (Blom & Gumperz 1972:424).” Like Norwegian villagers switching to Bokmål (the “standard” linguistic form) when a stranger approaches, “the linguistic forms employed are critical features of the event in the sense that any violation of selection rules changes members' perception of the event (1972:424).” As Woolard has pointed out, situational codeswitches may be triggered not just by a changed context, “but may actually contribute to creating that changed context (2005:76).” In illustrating this point, Woolard gives the example of a teacher in a Barcelona classroom who chatted with students in Catalan before and after class but switched to Spanish at the start of the lecture. The fact of the switch is enough to make the students fall silent, indicating as it does that that the lesson has begun (2005:76).<sup>7</sup>

In this reading, Zana decisively transformed the moment of an oath of loyalty to the nation-state (“I swear by my honor and dignity before the great Turkish people to protect the integrity and independence of the State...”) into an overt political challenge to the premise of her vow. According to the logic of legitimate language at the time — a logic shared by the national audience that witnessed the switch, even if their moral evaluations of the speaker differed — to utter a sentence in Kurdish in such a context was to challenge the legitimacy of the protocols of official political code. To challenge these protocols was, in turn, to challenge “the indivisible unity of people and homeland” to which Zana had just sworn loyalty just moments before. Zana and her supporters would defend her act as simply “a phrase [she] spoke in Kurdish,” and to

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<sup>7</sup> Woolard also points out that, in the years since Blom and Gumperz' original formulation, researchers have come to associate situational codeswitching with intersentential rather than intrasentential switching, and correspondingly to discuss this as a matter of code selection or language choice rather than switching (2005:76). I use “switching” in this chapter because the events I describe derive their ideological “oomph” (Silverstein 1996:267, cf. Woolard 2005: 89) from their intermingled proximity within what were understood to be single speech events.

insist that her actions in no way implied a challenge to Turkish state sovereignty. This argument would be effectively taken up by sympathetic observers all over the world; the insistence on the erstwhile political inconsequentiality of language choice — the “naturalness” of using one’s mother tongue, for example — would become an ever more central plank in the Kurdish political platform over the years following Zana’s controversial parliamentary oath. I elaborate this point below.

A decade and a half later after the scandal at the National Assembly, the framings of the mayor’s codeswitch during the Diyarbakir uprising reveal a number of multivalent meanings. Like Zana, the mayor instigated a change in the dynamics of the speech event by switching to Kurdish. But here the fact of the switch itself does not become the sole story in subsequent contextualizations. As my interlocutors pointed out, Baydemir drew on Kurdish not primarily because he needed to convey denotational information that otherwise would have been inaccessible, but because he needed to show the people gathered in the streets that he was “one of them.” The apportioning of code to identity in Turkey means that only Kurds speak Kurdish, and to speak Kurdish in a context of nationally circulating mass mediation is incontrovertibly to index Kurdishness (as an ethnolinguistic identity category associated with mounting the greatest challenge to Turkish nationalist narratives of undifferentiated political unity in the Republic’s history).

Given the history of state prosecution that has confronted elected officials from Zana onward, to speak Kurdish as an elected official is always to take on a degree of personal, professional risk. Anyone who viewed the mayor’s codeswitch would have been aware of this

possibility of risk; for the young men assembled on the street that night, his willingness to use Kurdish in the presence of so much national media would surely have registered as significant.

Both for the crowds that heard him that evening and for the audiences watching at home, the mayor's foray was pitched as denotationally identical to the Turkish-code utterances that bracketed it on each end. Further action on the part of the protesters would only hurt their (shared) cause; it was time to return home before more people got hurt. The party was listening; the people's fury was both acknowledged and shared by their local political leaders.

Venturing back to the Norwegian village for a moment, we might explore what Blom and Gumperz identified as "metaphorical codeswitching" – changes in language that do not signal a change in the fundamental definition of the speech event. In metaphorical switching, they suggest, participants do not transform their "mutual rights and obligations" but rather "allude to different relationships that they also hold" (Blom and Gumperz 1972:425; Woolard 2005:76). As Benjamin Bailey points out in his review of Blom and Gumperz' model, metaphorical switches might be best analyzed as a complement to situational switches, operating on a continuum rather than in strictly demarcated formal terms (2000:242-43). They can also be understood as "partially violat[ing] conventionalized associations between codes and context/activity/ participants (2000:242)." The insertion of a linguistic form into a context with which it is not typically associated "brings in some of the flavor of this original setting," in Blom and Gumperz' words (1972:425), and allows for multiple relations to mingle in the interaction at hand.

In instances of metaphorical switching, "alternative frameworks for interpreting experience and constructing social reality that are associated with a code can thus be invoked by



a switch into that code (Bailey 2000:242).” The experiment of reading Baydemir’s use of Kurdish as an instance of metaphorical codeswitching would suggest that the work being done by the switch was perhaps more multivalent than in the Zana case. If the earlier case was largely interpreted as mounting a deliberately planned and overtly political challenge to the conditions of its utterance, interpretations of the mayor’s codeswitch seem to reveal a number of different indexical features at play.

In his effort to swiftly intervene in a political crisis, Baydemir draws on a history of private Kurdish — as code of home, of rural pastness, of intergenerational communication among a subset of the citizenry — to establish his membership in an exclusive group and to anchor his authority to tell people what to do. But this solidarity function is accompanied by another emerging feature of Kurdish-in-public. Compared with previous instances of Kurdish-in-public — the Zana case, for example — and other instances of the mayor’s speech-making in Turkish (including his use of the first person plural possessive to refer to guerilla deaths —“our pain, our loss”), there is a subtle shift in the news reportage of the mayor’s codeswitch. Yes, the fact that his switching to Kurdish to make a referentially identical statement (“please go home”) was still considered newsworthy reveals Kurdish’s ongoing status as the unexpected code of official speech. But this markedness function is notably diminished from earlier instances, when the mere fact of Kurdish uttered by a public official was enough to launch criminal investigations. I am, in a sense, interested in the how *underplayed* the codeswitch was, relative to these earlier examples.

Baydemir essentially can draw on this multivalent indexical history — of Kurdish as indexing a political identity at odds with a narrative of national unity; as the natural property of

an exclusive group, a “traditional tongue” used in “daily life”; and as merely pragmatic means to express squarely “legitimate” political goals — all in the space of a twenty-seven second codeswitch on national television. Compared to guerilla activity, a codeswitch seems benign — at least to many in a watching international audience. But in Turkey, the relative *unremarkability* of a public official’s switch into Kurdish is itself a politically significant indexical achievement. The mayor switched his footing, to be sure, when he publicly switched codes. His “violation” of the expected code of public address relied for its success on its testing of the limits of legitimate public code. But the fact that *what* he said even featured in the media recontextualizations of the event at all – i.e., not just the fact of the code of its utterance – is revealing indeed.

It is impossible to state decisively that this is the case, but the research conducted for this project suggests that a gradual shift might be taking place in the public dispensability of Kurdish in Turkey. This is partly taking place in an idiom of what we might call “the pragmatics of denotation,” the growing capacity for Kurdish activists to assert the propositional “equivalence” of Kurdish qua code. The sheer centrality of the “mother tongue” issue in the Kurdish political movement since the 1990s (even as communicative competence continues to decline) points to its role as part of an effort to identify the erstwhile unmarked public of Turkish public life as in fact parochial, marked by particularist concerns with a narrow and nationalist narrative, in contrast to the more-widely cast public of international human rights. In this project, the naturalness of choosing among equivalent denotational codes plays a key role in establishing not only the would-be legitimacy of the Kurdish language, but also the internationally-anchored stature of the Kurdish political project.

In the volatile landscape of language use in Turkey, the use of Kurdish, particularly by a public official, is an effective means to index and entail solidarity qua ethnic in-group (to borrow from Gumperz' later formulation (1982:66) about we/they-codes and minority bilingual language use). The dilemma, then, emerges in the face of efforts to assert Kurdish as a "public language" in the sense of belonging to an erstwhile "anonymous public sphere" (see Gal and Woolard 2001 for extended discussion), or as a language of fully registered capacities, conditions imagined, in a world of standard languages, as necessary "in order for a language and its corresponding national public to be able to account for 'everyone' in the projected national public" (Frekko 2009:72; also Silverstein 2000; Jaffe 1999; Gal 2001; Milroy 2000).

The association of Kurdish language use with the kind of exclusive particularity of Kurds-as-ethnic-group indexed in the public codeswitches I describe here run into challenges in other contexts when Kurdish political workers seek to assert the all-purpose denotational equivalence of Kurdish in contexts not associated with this intimacy of groupness. Gal and Woolard have usefully pointed out that this "authority of authenticity" can and often does exist simultaneously with (and in any number of potential relations to) the "authority of anonymity" that ideologically characterizes the public sphere (2001:7; see also Errington 2001; Frekko 2006; Hill 2001; Urla 2001).

Kurdish political workers, including the politicians described in this chapter, continually test the limits of officially-designated legitimate speech, drawing on multiple histories of public sanction and private intimacy to formulate a political project, one that struggles to negotiate the often conflicting expectations of domestic and international audiences. In politically linked but institutionally differentiated domains of practice, Kurdish language workers are attempting to

develop the textual materials and conditions of speaking that would indicate a consolidated, standardized, normatively bounded lexical-propositional code called Kurdish, the unselfconscious property of a people called Kurds. In doing so, they actively seek to render commensurate, along the multiple axes described in the previous chapter, Kurdish and Turkish as codes in a world of standard equivalent languages. They also assert the equivalence of Kurds and Turks as peoples in a world of nation-states – where the provocation lies precisely in the lamination of people onto nation-state, and therefore to the possibility of new forms of political sovereignty that challenge the most fundamental premises of the Turkish national project.

These language workers' efforts to create a Kurdish "language community" (in Silverstein's sense of "a population manifesting regularity of usage based on allegiance to norms of denotational code" 1997:129) constantly confront the profound limitations not only of political economy of language use that over-determines use of Turkish as code of economic mobility, but also the limited capacity for a would-be public Kurdish to index a truly anonymous public authority. To the extent that such a public Kurdish might eventually emerge, the role of the "mother tongue," ideologically characterized by its pragmatic capacities for denotation and its affective qualities as the natural property of a cultural group, will be central.

## CHAPTER SIX

### **Conclusion: The Moral Dimensions and Political Limits of a “Mother Tongue.”**

In the early weeks of the summer of 2013, Istanbul was rocked by dramatic and ongoing public protests against the reigning AKP political party, the largest since that party came to power in 2002.<sup>1</sup> Initially spurred in reaction to the government’s decision to demolish a public park adjacent to Taksim Square, Istanbul’s central plaza, the Gezi Uprising rapidly expanded into massive, ongoing street revolts that raged for days across Istanbul and other cities across the country. The brutality of the police response to the initial smaller scale protest had shocked and galvanized many otherwise unlikely protest candidates; the degree and scale of the violence of that police response continued, and many more thousands of citizens joined to voice their dismay and fury. Many parts of the city were essentially shut down for days, and Taksim Square itself became a de facto “state-free zone” for a highly visible few days, as the government temporarily stayed their forces before, finally, moving decisively to bulldoze the remaining signs of resistance and to arrest thousands of participants.<sup>2</sup>

As the uprising gradually wound down in the face of unrelenting police crackdowns and widespread arrests (although sporadic protests continued for weeks, and on subsequent anniversaries since), one related form of social organizing continued through the summer

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<sup>1</sup> The *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party), or AKP, came to national power in 2002, benefiting from a groundswell of support from a wide swathe of Turkish society, but notably the modest lower- and newly-middle-classes of the provincial Anatolian heartland (as opposed to the Western coasts, which tended to be strongholds of the Republican People’s Party, the party founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, or the East and Southeast, where a long run of pro-Kurdish parties struggled to be allowed to enter parliament against enormous odds – typically banned for “aiding terrorism” or similar accusations).

<sup>2</sup> Abundant accounts and analyses of the Gezi Protests now exist; for useful anthropological commentary see the collected essays in the *Cultural Anthropology* “Hotspot” devoted to the Gezi Uprisings, edited by Umut Yıldırım and Yael Navaro-Yashin (2013); for an insightful insider’s account of how the protests began, see Özgür (2013).

months. Called “public forums,” these informal gatherings were held in public parks across the city. Community members were encouraged to gather, to hold discussions and debates around specific and wide-ranging topics. In some locations, impromptu cafes and “community libraries” were set up to distribute tea and reading materials; meetings were held evening after evening, conversation extending into the night.<sup>3</sup>

On one such summer evening in early July 2013, I joined a group gathered under the sprawling plane trees of Yoğurtçu Park, a long narrow strip of green in Istanbul’s Kadıköy neighborhood. Over the background shrieks of children on the playground and the chatter of conversation from people staffing the temporary “Revolution Canteen” across the sidewalk, two dozen or so men and women leaned in to better hear as a free public Kurdish lesson began. This was the third or fourth class to be held in the same spot, led by the same teacher, over a two-week period. College students greeted each other in Kurdish and Turkish, and a trio of middle-aged women in fashionable sundresses adjusted their position on the grass and looked around warily. A few passersby hovered on the outer margins, smoking cigarettes and observing the gathering from a distance, neither joining the circle nor continuing on their way.

The leader smiled warmly at the group gathered before him and began speaking in Kurdish. “*Hevalno, bi xêr hatin,*” he said above the quieting chatter. “Comrades, welcome to this place, to this Kurdish class. Let us begin, let us introduce ourselves.” During the minute or two that his welcome and introduction took place, the trio of Turkish women just next to me

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<sup>3</sup> The forums were meant to extend the “commune”-like experience that was first developed in Taksim Square (called, in fact, “Taksim Commune” during the period the park was surrounded by barricades and under “the people’s” control): a re-taking of public space as the commons, with “People’s Libraries” stacked with donated books free for the taking, communal canteens serving donated food and drink, “consciousness-raising” workshops in which feminist organizers trained protesters in non-misogynist, non-homophobic alternatives for protest chants, and more. For more on Gezi Park and the commons, see Parla 2013; Özgül and Parla, n.d.; see also Gambetti 2013; Yıldırım 2013; Navaro-Yashin 2013.

noticeably stiffened, their faces openly broadcasting confusion. Glancing at each other, they smiled nervously and raised their eyebrows in exaggerated alarm. Switching into Turkish, “*Arkadaşlar, hoşgeldiniz,*” the teacher once again welcomed those gathered that evening, and thanked them for coming to learn Kurdish as part of that evening’s public forum.

The lesson continued for almost two hours. The *mamoste* took his assembled students through some Kurdish phrases, including how to greet someone and make introductions, basic personal pronouns, and the numbers one through ten. He explained that Kurdish was grammatically distinct from Turkish, bearing more resemblance to Farsi and even English. We went around the circle, introducing ourselves and explaining our reasons for attending; some spoke in Kurdish and some in Turkish. The women next to me continued to visibly project their discomfort when Kurdish was spoken and not translated into Turkish, registering their dismay in body language and facial expression.

Some of those gathered were his official students in another contexts, having taken classes at the private university where he lectures in Kurdish. Others explained their knowledge of Kurdish in the typical terms of a younger, Istanbul-raised generation: they could understand, they could speak a few words with grandparents and older relatives, but they didn’t really know how to speak their mother tongue. Yet others gathered there, like the trio of women described above, had never uttered a word in Kurdish before.

Indeed, it was a question posed by one of that trio that turned the conversation to a wider discussion of language politics in Turkey. In a tone of voice that was equal parts defensive and assertive, prefaced by a perfunctory apology for speaking in Turkish – “Excuse me, I’m just going to speak Turkish here, okay” – the woman looked at the *mamoste* and said, bluntly,

“Pardon me, I just don’t understand what the big deal is. Why do you care so much about this whole mother tongue issue? I understand that there was violence, there was discrimination or whatever. But I don’t really get the big deal about language. Look, you all speak Turkish. We all understand each other.” Pointing at one of the teenagers who had mentioned not being able to speak his mother tongue, she continued, “Why do you care so much? I just don’t get why it matters.” Her companions nodded, a bit nervously, in agreement.

The teacher began quite simply by stating that “everyone should know their mother tongue.” That to not be allowed to speak one’s mother tongue was a violation of an individual’s, a group’s, human rights. He continued in a more overtly instrumental vein, explaining that linguistic and educational research shows that children need to learn in their mother tongue, that they can’t as readily succeed at school and therefore in their subsequent professional lives if they do not learn in their mother tongue. He pointed to examples in Europe where people spoke one, two, three languages and where knowing more than one language was widely valued.

Another participant interrupted him to address the questioner and declare, with some heat, that everyone knows culture resides in language, and therefore when you kill a language, you kill a culture. Efforts to ban Kurdish, he declared, were just part of the Turkish state’s decades’ long project of assimilating Kurds and destroying their identity.

The conversation turned to the question of why the Kurdish regions of the country had not risen up in revolt in support of the Gezi supporters against the AKP regime to the same degree their western, Turkish counterparts hoped or expected; why, when Kurds seemed to protest the Turkish state all the time, were they remaining noticeably silent in the face of this state-sanctioned, state-delivered violence?



This question was indeed widely discussed during the Gezi summer. Images of Gezi protesters being beaten, gassed, handcuffed, etc., circulated on social media, along with the very public funerals of protesters who had been killed in their encounters with police. These images were accompanied by expressions of outrage and shock by Gezi sympathizers at what seemed, to many of them, unprecedented and disproportionate police brutality. In response, many Kurds took to social media to say, essentially, “Now you know what it’s been like for us for decades. Where were you when this happened to us?” One friend echoed a common sentiment: “We’ve been murdered, forcibly evacuated, imprisoned, tortured, and denied our rights for a century. The government wants to bulldoze a park and *now* you’re outraged?!” Many in the Kurdish community were also concerned about endangering the fragile and emergent peace negotiations between the Turkish government and the PKK.<sup>4</sup>

As the protests continued, and as overt outreach efforts were made to connect different forms of state violence – and to include violence against Kurds into that – more Kurdish voices could be heard joining in the Gezi movement. One Kurdish friend told me the decisive turning point for him was witnessing “white Turks” marching through the streets of Kadıköy calling for solidarity between peoples – and doing so in the Kurdish language.<sup>5</sup> The phrase – *Bijî biratiya*

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<sup>4</sup> Progress toward peace negotiations has come to a screeching halt since the Turkish government decided, in the summer of 2015, to decisively launch “anti-terrorist” operations across the border in Syria and Iraq. Ostensibly a “two-pronged” approach against both the Islamic State (IS) and the PKK, news reports indicate that the vast majority of firepower and military effort has been directed at Kurdish fighters rather than those associated with IS. These radically intensified Turkish military interventions against Kurdish guerillas and against civilians across the Southeast since July 2015 have effectively annihilated the tentative, two-year peace process and brought Turkey back to a level of violence not seen since the worst years of the 1990s.

<sup>5</sup> The phrase “white Turks” (*beyaz Türkler*) is commonly used to refer to those members of the educated, urban-dwelling Turkish middle-class most closely associated with the Kemalist elite that largely governed Turkey unchallenged until the election of more explicitly Islamist political parties like AKP; the AKP draws their much of their support in turn from wide swathes of a newly industrializing, provincial Anatolian base understood to be more pious and relatively newly represented in politics at the national level.

*gelan!* (Long live the brotherhood of peoples!) – was noteworthy not only because it was uttered in Kurdish (itself significant) but because it explicitly referred to plural *peoples*. He was also deeply moved by another slogan that circulated widely at the time, in which Gezi protesters expressed their support for protests taking place concurrently in the Kurdish city of Lice, in the southeast, where the death of a Kurdish teenager at the hands of police had led to widespread local protests. Hearing middle-class, staunchly Kemalist residents of Kadıköy shouting “*Diren, Lice, Kadıköy seninle*” – Resist, Lice, Kadıköy is with you! – was, for him, an extraordinary and transformative event.<sup>6</sup>

Back in the park, the lesson had begun to wind down; people started to rise and gather their belongings, drifting over to the canteen for more tea or heading off into the night. Pushing the stroller with my own sleeping toddler through the largely empty streets of Kadıköy to catch the last ferry home, I reflected on the evening’s events. They felt to me like combination of the surprisingly new and the deeply familiar.

If, a few years earlier, someone had told me that open Kurdish classes would be held in public parks in Istanbul – particularly in a neighborhood like Kadıköy – I undoubtedly would have dismissed the speaker’s unlikely fantasies. Barring the occasional participation in a Kurdish class by an overtly and self-consciously politicized Turk, like those described in earlier chapter, the participation of “white Turks” in anything like a Kurdish cultural or pedagogical event would have seemed beyond improbable. Yet here were some of those otherwise comfortably elite Turks sitting shoulder to shoulder with Kurdish fellow citizens, having left their houses to willingly participate in a space of Kurdish language pedagogy. Admittedly, they were still in “their” park

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<sup>6</sup> For another ethnographic description of that moment, see Schafers and Ilengiz 2013. For more on Kurds and the Gezi protests, see Bozcali and Yoltar 2013; Tambar forthcoming.

on their own turf – it is harder to imagine the likelihood of such an event taking place, with their participation, in one of the predominately Kurdish neighborhoods farther on the literal and metaphorical margins of the city.

But these lessons were taking place, at least to some extent, in forums across Istanbul, a fact that contributed to this sense of unprecedented novelty. The lessons joined other moments from the city that summer, images and episodes that became iconic symbols of the tentative hopes of the Gezi protesters: that this would be a movement bringing together truly heterogeneous constituencies united for societal transformation. They also became representative, as well, of a heterogeneity that came to be increasingly understood as doomed. Photographs circulated widely on social media of hands held aloft in the V-for-Victory sign of the Kurdish resistance immediately adjacent to hands making the “Grey Wolf” sign of the rightwing Turkish nationalist party, or of groups of middle-aged homemakers in housedresses and sex workers in heels and miniskirts, confronting police battalions in riot gear.

All of this – the juxtaposition of groups not typically aligned, from secular middle-class Turkish elite to Muslim socialists, from diehard Turkish nationalists to Kurdish resistance, even from soccer teams whose historic bitter rivalries were very publicly set aside for photo-opportunities demonstrating unity – pointed to something new, something different happening in Turkey. Indeed, widespread national and international media described, often in almost breathless terms, the radical potential and newness of this moment.<sup>7</sup> And although the lasting

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<sup>7</sup> State-run television and print media, in contrast, refused for days to broadcast news of the events; a penguin documentary ran on one of the main television networks as Taksim Square and surrounding streets went up in flames and barricades. Meanwhile, social media outlets like Twitter and Facebook were inundated with reporting, satirical responses, and images of injured protesters. The government-supported media eventually began to cover the

effects of the Gezi protests remain much under debate by its most involved participants as well as outside observers (most of it marked by bitter disappointment and abiding frustration, on the part of former protesters), the summer itself felt like a moment when new possibilities were being exercised in Turkey. The presence of Kurdish lessons in public parks was deeply iconic of the overtly public, self-consciously grassroots dimension of that moment.

At the same time, the trio of women who attended Kurdish class that evening was also iconic of an abiding and persistent dimension of Turkish language politics. They came to the Kurdish class in Yoğurtçu Park spurred, perhaps, by the transformative novelty of the discourses of Gezi, and open, at least temporarily, to a willingness to accommodate Kurdish as a code to be learned (or learned about). Yet even as they did so, they brought with them long-sedimented assumptions about what code they expected to hear in that setting. Their discomfort at being linguistically excluded in the moments when the conversation took place in Kurdish, their defensive apologetic recourse to Turkish, and their professed inability to understand why and how language figures so prominently in Kurdish moral-political claims reflect the kinds of perduring language ideologies that have described throughout this dissertation.

These include the positioning of both Turkish and Kurdish such that an insistence on the public presence of the latter figures, in many circumstances and settings, as marked and “political,” in contrast to the “merely expressive” function of Turkish. The women posing their questions above did so within their experiences of living only and always as Turkish speakers in a context where that is the unmarked code of visualizable public life. Their question reflected their capacity (or willingness) to see language as the object – and the means – of legitimate

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events, primarily in the idiom of “hooligans” (*çapulcu*) running amok, destroying property and threatening public safety.

political struggle, to acknowledge language as always-already the outcome and medium of political-ideological practice. The teacher's response, in turn, moved from an insistence on the moral inalienability of the mother tongue to an explicitly instrumental insistence that particular forms of multilingual practice were not only possible but economically and socially beneficial. His argument moved from a moral claim about an inherent cultural right to a "practical" (i.e. "non-political") argument about the cognitive and social benefits of multilingualism. The other young man joined in to insist on the equivalence between social grouping – "a culture" – and linguistic form – "a language." At work in all these claims are specific ideas about the nature and shape of language, the logics that knit linguistic practices to social, political, and moral claims about and understandings of the world.

The work of linguistic representation, as these phenomena demonstrate so acutely, produces not only the people involved as participants in communication, but also the groupings to which they belong, against which they mobilize, through which they live their relationships to the world. These representational processes are deeply internalized and reproduced at both the most unremarkably quotidian and abashedly spectacular scales.

We see this in the narratives in Turkey that consistently frame topics associated with "the Kurdish question" in terms of armed struggle, violence, backwardness, disloyalty, and so on. The sight – or sound – of Kurdish in public, particularly in settings overdetermined to otherwise take place in Turkish, whether a parliamentary building or a shopping mall – strikes many Turkish listeners as inextricably political. Here the public presence of this code is threatening not so much because it presents the possibility of denotational opacity but because it stands as an inescapable reminder of a kind of identitarian difference – Kurd – that is understood to index

possible disloyalty to the nation.<sup>8</sup> Even as the existence of Kurdish as a language is far more widely acknowledged now than even a decade or two ago, as chapters of this dissertation have described in detail, significant distinctions persist in how the status, scope, and features of the two languages, Kurdish and Turkish, are understood.

We see how some of these distinctions are drawn (by courts and legislatures and scholars and individuals), between that which belongs to “everyday life” and that fit for “public life.” The lines according to which “languages used in everyday life” are distinguished from “official language” are simultaneously vested with profound importance in the Turkish context and shifting rapidly. Courts and politicians legislate what counts as the “only culture” or “tradition” versus what is understood to be “political” and therefore potentially dangerous. Language activists aver the sacred importance of their mother tongues – and stoutly refuse to pay money to learn it. Individuals claim allegiance to a code they do not speak and flinch in the face of changing standards for what code might sound like, and where they might expect to hear it.

The ideological nature of these distinctions can seem bluntly obvious, particularly from the outside or from the assumption that what we see in Turkey is deeply familiar from other contexts around the world.<sup>9</sup> Yet the historical and ideological particulars of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century Turkish-Kurdish case both reflect some of these wider patterns and point to revealing differences. The increasing deployment of idioms of “mother tongue” in Turkey in recent years

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<sup>8</sup> Silverstein (2003; 2010) describes this phenomenon – the notion that “we don’t know what they’re saying and therefore what they’re thinking” – in other contexts.

<sup>9</sup> It is vitally important, of course, to note that pointing out their ideological nature is not to discredit these distinctions, to somehow seek a more accurate truth below the ideological trappings. There is no “under”: language ideologies are “cultural conceptions of the nature, form and purpose of language, and of communicative behavior as an enactment of the social order” (Gal and Woolard 2000:1; Silverstein 1987; Irvine 1989). As such, they are how all of this works: in Turkey, in Kurdistan, as elsewhere.

comes out of a longer and widely shared history, but it is emerging into and out its own particular circumstances, and transforming its ground in open-ended ways.

This dissertation has investigated these lines of distinction and apportioning across contexts, looking at interactions like those that took place in the park described above to unpack the grounds they presume and the claims they make. What kind of a thing is this “mother tongue”? How is it understood to be alienable, and through what means can it be reclaimed – as identification, as pragmatic communication, as object of aspiration or of loss? At what point – and through what practical, engaged interventions into a community’s spoken and textual practices – does a linguistic practice cross the boundary from “everyday” to “official” life?

The relationship between political consciousness and speaking Kurdish is not a given; the authentic speaker and the authoritative political actor are often not the same biographical individual. In fact, as earlier examples have made clear, it is often the case that those most politically active often operate primarily in Turkish. Campaigns to change this linguistic allocation have been vigorously underway for at least two decades, but the apportioning of the kind of value placed upon Kurdish and the use of it as a communicative code are not often neatly laminated onto each other, nor do they look likely to become so in the near future.

Many of the events described in the dissertation that take place in explicitly pedagogical contexts like classrooms or private lessons have been accompanied by more public displays of challenges to the expected linguistic landscape of Turkey by growing enthusiasm among many Kurds for “mother tongue education” – even as it remains unclear what that would look like and who would participate and how. The promises of this education among the general public remain

unclear, even as the more elite and educated proponents of mother tongue and bilingual education are frank in their assessment of the benefits.

The ideological logics of how language is understood to fit into the fraught, ever-shifting distinctions between the political and the merely cultural do not only affect the apportioning of Kurdish to particular contexts and the ideological rendering of it as one or the other kinds of thing (a mother tongue, the code of terrorism, mere means to denotation, index of marked subjectivity, etc.). They also, as I have described in the chapters on literacy classrooms and Kurdish lessons, shape relationships to textualized language more generally. Not only do the institutions and people most associated with promoting literacy learning in Turkey typically neglect language code – i.e., the question of which code people can function as the ostensibly neutral technical skill of deciphering the printed word – they also rarely examine or foreground the political, economic, and other social factors that account for how particular would-be learners have come into contexts where literacy is demanded of them. Access to advanced schooling and to most forms of employment, the opportunities for individual sovereignty and emancipation they are understood to entail: to the extent that any of these liberatory paths are available, it is almost always the case that they operate through learning Turkish. These material factors then inform and are further informed by the indexical associations of using one code or the other.

These associations and linkages also inform Kurdish pedagogical encounters, where questions of Kurdish language pedagogy open onto questions about the public potentialities of Kurdish – whether and how efforts to envision new and expansive modes of circulation demand new relationships to text, to standards, to ideological renderings of what language is, looks like, and is understood to be able to do. Although the pragmatic realities of the sociolinguistic



landscape are what they are – with Turkish operating as the default code for many speakers, including many of those most involved in Kurdish political-cultural organizing – there is a growing sense of a differently moralized relationship between an idealized Kurdish subject and the language s/he uses in ever-wider domains of her daily life: that to be a Kurdish patriot (*yurtsever*) one should speak one’s mother tongue. We thus have the widespread identification of Kurdish as the mother tongue of individuals who do not speak it.

Yet in a context where to speak Kurdish as a public official or in a setting marked for Turkish is to be marked as making a “political” point, Kurdish actors struggle to achieve that aspect of the modernist claim about language so perceptively described by Keane (2003b:506) in the Indonesian context, that is, the notion that:

the language is in principle available to anyone and is supposed to be semantically transparent to other languages. It should therefore be a suitable medium for the projection and fostering of a persona suitable for speaking in a public and for identification with the nation. And it should take a recognizable place in the cosmopolitan plane of other languages understood to be modern.

In the that context, Indonesian as a language was explicitly created in order to operate as the ostensible code for all precisely because it was understood to not in fact arise from, or belong to, any particular social group. Of course, as Keane and others (Errington 2000; 2001) also point out, “Indonesian” was based on Riau Malay; in other words, the idea that Indonesian has no social location apart from the nation as a whole is itself an ideological claim. Gal analyzes a similarly revealing example in 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungary, where debates over language standards revolved around the social groupings those standards were understood to emerge from: the

success of one set of arguments derived in part from its proponents' ability to champion a view of Hungarian "that they claimed would be 'everyone's' because it purported to be 'no-one's-in-particular'" (2000: 43).

In revealing contrast – at the explicit level, at least – to Turkey, where recourse to the mother tongue appears with ever-greater frequency, Silverstein has described how people in many contexts understand themselves to be giving up or subordinating their "mother-tongue" in favor of languages deemed to transcend the local in space and/or historical time. "This process, he argues, "is widespread, as linguistic standardization is recasting normal plurilingualism into a hierarchy of localities encompassed within larger linguistic spheres that explicitly aspire to hegemony" (1998: 410). In the Kurdish context in Turkey, there appears to be a concomitant rise in discourse about the "mother tongue" (in politics and the media as well as among individuals) alongside a seeming decline or contraction in the use of Kurdish in many of its erstwhile domains (Öpengin 2012).

The values ascribed to the mother tongue are thus not obvious or uniform, within or across contexts. As Kulick (1992) has argued in a geographically distant context, ties to local and other group identities may vary, with the mother tongue associated with negative character traits; Hill and Hill (1986) describe acute strains between qualities of local identity and forms of local language, with the latter under strain from the national standard.

In the Kurdish context, a new generation of language activists is caught between simultaneous and deeply antagonistic demands. They encounter, and in many cases themselves advocate, a growing moralization of the mother tongue as indexical of and necessary to the promotion of a Kurdish authentic political self. They also confront Turkish nationalist (both

explicit and implicit) depictions of Kurdish language activism as disingenuous at best, overtly dangerous at worst – harbingers of and means for the country’s dissolution.

Meanwhile, even as Kurdish has become increasingly recognizable as an expected code of cultural production in particular genres and contexts – a tremendous change over the last decade – realms of everyday usage reveal the growing encroachment of Turkish. The sociolinguistic landscape is marked by widespread contraction of the quotidian use of Kurdish, particularly among those who used to be the most likely speakers.

These activists often explicitly aspire to and celebrate multilingualism, insisting that people can wield more than one code, that the identification of code and personhood is not limited to or doesn’t necessitate monolingualism, and that there are widespread cognitive and social benefits to multilingualism in general and to being able to learn in a mother tongue at the elementary level in particular.

It is worth noting that even in celebrations of and programmatic calls for multilingualism, Kurdish is typically only envisioned as a language of aspiration for people who identify as Kurds, for those who have a relationship to Kurdish understood to exist through an ethnically-inflected, kinship affiliation. Kurdish rarely operates, even in the most utopian of linguistic-political fantasies, as a “second” or “foreign” language for which there might be non-identitarian reasons for pedagogical investment.

The discussion in Chapters Four and Five took up these questions, examining the apportioning of codes to contexts and efforts at transforming those expectations. As the legal and linguistic parameters continue to shift, it will be worth tracking the kinds of in-/we-group associations they make available. Public dispensability is not so much about rates of usage – that

Turkish is used most often in these contexts, while Kurdish is in those. It is, rather, about series of layered expectations, prohibitions, pro- and pre-scriptions: enshrined in legal documents like the constitution and criminal code, in histories of previous use-that-looks-similar, moments of stranger sociability, moments where use of code or switches between codes are explicitly marked and where they are not. These are activities, not features of domains; they are acts of marking, doing indexical work, rather than as properties of code.

It is not ultimately any objective positioning or value of a language, but rather speakers' ideological interpretation of and response to those values, that are mobilized in the kinds of linguistic phenomena described here. Because of this, codeswitching in public speech, or discomfort around standards of usage, or distinctions between "practical" and "symbolic" kinds of speech are revealing locations for understanding social and political life. These linguistic practices are not just metaphors for but themselves creating interactional, rhetorical, and socio-political effects.

Recall, for example, how different constituencies focused on aspects of Zana and Baydemir's switches between Kurdish and Turkish, how they were variously heard as "conveying a message" or "making a point." As contours of the political, legal, and social landscape continue to shift, what will be the circumstances in which Kurdish can be "heard" as "merely denotational", as simply the channel through which a message is delivered? What transformations to the extant linguistic ideological landscape will be required, and with what associated effects?

Many significant transformations have already taken place, even in the years between when the majority of this fieldwork was undertaken and the time of writing this conclusion. An

anecdote from a field experience in early March 2015 provides a revealing counterpoint to the ethnographic anecdote that introduced this dissertation, which described a Women's Day rally held in a Diyarbakir park in 2006. Likewise a rally in honor of International Women's Day, this occasion contained both familiar continuities and revealing contrasts.

The 2006 rally had taken place in a small park in the central commercial district of the city. Participation, across speakers and audience, had numbered in the several dozen, with what seemed an almost-equal number of police officers and journalists. Nine years later, the 2015 Women's Day rally was held in a broad thoroughfare that had been closed off to traffic, a frequent location for large political rallies. Streamers and flags from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkarin Demokratik Partisi* or HDP) extended in every direction over the heads of the crowd, with balloons and posters bobbing up and down as far as the eye could see. Huge banners with the faces of Öcalan, the imprisoned founder of the PKK, and female Kurdish guerillas who had been killed in fighting both Turkish and Islamic State forces, across several decades, were affixed to light posts and across the stage.

Emotions in general were running high in Diyarbakir at that time, following the recent success of Kurdish fighters (including the key presence of the female unit, the YPJ) in re-taking the besieged city of Kobani from Islamic State (IS) fighters just across the Syrian border.<sup>10</sup> Many Kurds in Turkey had watched transfixed as scenes of devastation flooded their social media feeds; for those who live within sight of the Syrian border, great clouds of smoke from the battles were visible to the naked eye. Residents of Diyarbakir described the mass exodus of Kurdish

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<sup>10</sup> The YPJ (*Yekîneyên Parastina Jin*, or Women's Defense Units) are the female brigade of the leftist Kurdish People's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG) in the Kurdish regions of Syria. The YPG/YPJ have organic and longstanding links with the PKK, which is largely based in Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan, and have been battling Islamic State fighters across northern Syria.

families from Rojava, the self-declared Kurdish polity on the Syrian side of the border, and the subsequent battles between Kurdish fighters and IS fighters as among the most devastating events they had ever witnessed.

The rally also took place on the eve of Newroz and less than three months before much-anticipated national elections. It was widely hoped (and indeed ended up being the case) that these elections would mark the first time that a pro-Kurdish party might cross the ten-percent nation-wide election threshold that had historically prevented them from gaining parliamentary representation as a party.<sup>11</sup>

Officially hosted by the HDP in honor of Women's Day (the party maintains a 50% quota for women and nominates co-chairs for leadership positions), the gathering had the feel of a political rally, with a hefty dose of music or cultural festival added on. Singers and folk dancers performed between speeches, and many of the speakers and performers were dressed in the long, brightly colored flowing gowns worn at Kurdish weddings, festivals, and cultural events. The speeches covered the expected topics: calls for peace and an end to state violence, particularly in Rojava, with cheering support of the YPJ battalions fighting IS; visions of solidarity between

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<sup>11</sup> The election threshold (known as *baraj* or *dam* in Turkish) is one of the highest in the world; it demands that any party receive at least ten percent of the vote in every province of the country in order to gain seats in Parliament. It has effectively acted to block pro-Kurdish parliamentary presence parties for decades. (To bypass the requirement, politicians from Kurdish parties often run as "independents.") The June 2015 electoral success of the pro-Kurdish *Halkarin Demokratik Partisi* (HDP, or Peoples' Democratic Party – with an emphasis on the plural possessive *Peoples* ') was an historic occasion in Turkey, not only because the HDP successfully managed to draw broad support (pitching itself as not only a Kurdish party but a leftwing coalition speaking for multiple constituencies, from LGBT to environmentalists), but because its numbers effectively denied the AKP from attaining a much-desired-for majority and therefore the ability to enact significant changes to the presidential system. The ongoing effects of this election have been profound. Following unsuccessful attempts to construct a ruling coalition from among the winning parties, new elections have been called for in late 2015. For many critical commentators, the upswing in military response can be attributed directly to the ruling regime's fury over these election losses.

women, across generation and ethnic background and social class; vigorous encouragement to vote in the upcoming elections; and so forth.

The people in the crowd – the majority of whom were women and children, ranging in age and dress – alternately cheered, danced, gossiped, wandered around looking for friends, and took breaks to sit on steps or curbs, sharing street snacks or drinks. A general air of convivial sociality reigned alongside the clapping, fist waving, and ululating expressions of support and outrage in response to the speeches from the stage.

In many ways, the event resembled a smaller, urban version of a Newroz celebration. (Newroz festivals typically take place on large fairgrounds outside the main city in order to accommodate the crowds, as well as, more cynically, to contain the possibility for post-festival protests and street action.) It certainly was an event of a much greater scale than the rally I had attended years earlier, and while there was a police presence (at the gates of entry, scanning for suspicious items, sitting in riot buses outside, and undoubtedly mixed into the crowd itself), the general sense of surveillance was muted.

Yet what struck me most about the 2015 rally was the linguistic division of labor. Many of the speeches took place at least partially – and some almost entirely – in Kurdish. Virtually all included at least greetings and slogans in Kurdish. The latter, admittedly, is not unusual – many speeches at similar events are book-ended by greetings and slogans in Kurdish. But attending a large public event where a majority, or close to it, of the speechmaking took place in Kurdish stood in contrast to earlier cases, and took me by surprise.

One noteworthy exception, however, was the speech given by the mayor of Diyarbakir, Gültan Kışanak. She took to the dais, exhorting in the practiced tones of an experienced

politician, the crowd to join her in celebrating the beauty and significance of Women’s Day. She continued to extol the measures her party, the HDP, was fighting for in the election – justice for the marginalized, peace through that ballot box rather than violence, the ongoing struggle for equality for all citizens. To my ears, at least, the fact that she was one of the sole participants to speak in Turkish, stood out dramatically. Several hours, all told, of speeches had proceeded and followed hers; aside from the translated speeches of a couple visiting European MPs and one by the Turkish co-chair of the HDP general party, Kışanak’s was one of the few to take place in Turkish. I made note of the difference, and over the next days in Diyarbakir, brought it up on numerous occasions. It also came up organically in several conversations about language use in the city.

Kışanak, was elected mayor after Osman Baydemir. She worked as a journalist before joining the Bağlar municipal council, first as a social service provider and then as a council member.<sup>12</sup> She has been active in women’s organizations since the 1990s, including in setting up the Bağlar Women’s Center discussed in Chapter Two (where we knew her as Gültan *abla* when she came by to visit). She served as city council member, then as independent MP, and finally as Diyarbakir’s first female mayor. Deeply involved in the Kurdish political movement – including spending two years as a teenager in the infamous Diyarbakir prison, where she was tortured before being released – Kışanak is widely known and respected. She also does not speak Kurdish, at least not in any public setting.

This fact has become an object of some controversy, at least in the circles of those most involved in language activism, and even among otherwise sympathetic members of the

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<sup>12</sup> Bağlar, as mentioned in an earlier chapter, is one of the largest and poorest neighborhoods in Diyarbakir, home to many of those who fled the countryside in the 1980s and 1990s.



community. I spent several afternoons during that same March fieldwork visit with members of the Kurdish Institute (*Enstîtuya Kurdî*) of Diyarbakir. Their welcome to me was noticeably lukewarm; this reaction was not entirely unexpected, and likely drew in part on a general suspicion about my nationality and interest in Kurdish. It was also likely related to the fact that I came to the meeting accompanied by a friend I will call Özgür, who worked as “language advisor” to the Office of the Mayor. A wholly new paid position, spearheaded and funded by an initiative led by Mayor Kışanak, Özgür’s job was to oversee language issues for the municipality as a whole, starting with the mayor’s office but eventually extending – he hoped – outside of Town Hall to include a wide range of institutions across the city.

Trained in linguistics, education, and sociology at one of the country’s premier public universities, natively fluent in Kurdish and Turkish with excellent English, Özgür was precisely the kind of elite new language worker I described in more detail in Chapters Three and Four. In addition to teaching Kurdish classes at private universities and conducting research on mother-tongue education in places like Diyarbakir, he had started the task of figuring out how, exactly, to transform the linguistic landscape in City Hall (and beyond), from one dominated by Turkish to one in which Kurdish might, he hoped, eventually be the default code of interaction. With assistance from research and administrative associates, he conducted surveys of all the branches of city hall, from Parks and Recreation to Transport Services, to ascertain the language capacities of city employees. They planned to draw up vocabulary lists (including identifying or creating new words, if need be) of the most-used words in each department. More controversially, he wondered about imposing mandatory language competency requirements for all employees, and pondered how such certification might take place.

Somewhat ironically, the person Özgür personally credited with making this kind of initiative possible did not herself speak Kurdish. Or, rather, she apparently did in fact know, understand, and speak some, but she was utterly daunted by the idea of doing so in public. The person in question, of course, was the mayor of Diyarbakir herself. Özgür had a keen sense of her personal linguistic capacities because part of his job was to tutor her in Kurdish each week. It's not that she doesn't know anything, he told me, but that she is, by now, so self-conscious about the fact that she does not speak Kurdish in public settings and cannot bring herself to do so.

The issue of the mayor's Kurdish has become a matter of public commentary – and indeed, at least some of the tepid welcome Özgür and I received at the Kurdish association can be traced to their outspoken criticisms of the mayor's own language practices. Other rivalries and longstanding fault lines also go some way toward explaining the lack of warmth between differently affiliated groups of language workers. I described some of these in Chapter Three; they include the divergent lived experiences of the older and younger generations. The former were, of necessity, almost entirely self-taught in any kind of formal linguistic theory; they lived through prison, torture, and the violently dangerous decades of the 1980s and 90s, when to speak Kurdish in certain settings was to risk physical wellbeing and liberty.

But even younger members of the community openly fault the mayor for refusing to speak Kurdish in her public life. An otherwise loyal supporter told me outright that he considered it deeply shameful (*çok ayıp*) that Mayor Kışanak did not try harder. There were no excuses, he said forcefully, banging his hand on the steering wheel as we zipped toward the city center from one of the many newly-sprouted outlying suburbs. She is an example, she should set a good

example, and the one she is in fact setting is shameful. She needs to make more of an effort, and that is that.

As he vigorously made his case, he pointed to the fact that he and his wife were raising their children in Kurdish even though he himself found it easier to think and speak in Turkish. I reflected aloud that he, as himself a public employee whose own capacities in Kurdish were limited, might not necessarily pass a certification program, should one be put in place. Could he really blame the mayor, I asked, for not speaking well given the overwhelming ubiquity of Turkish, particularly for someone with her political and educational background? Brushing aside concerns for his own skills, he insisted that the mayor, as a public figure, as a leader of her party, and especially as a woman, was morally obligated to be a good example. It was indeed particularly important that she, as a woman, acted a role model to other women, he declared, because everyone knows that when the women assimilate then the language is done for.

As “language” has come to occupy an ever-more central plank in the project of promoting Kurdish political and cultural sovereignty, new dynamics and dilemmas are emerging around questions of linguistic identity, authenticity, and competence. The ever more prevalent idiom of the “mother tongue” and its attendant affective and naturalized identifications of self and identity have ongoing, open-ended consequences for the capacity for a would-be public Kurdish to index the kind of “anonymous” public authority that Turkish so widely obtains. As the politics of language continue to play out in Kurdish Turkey, the question will continue to emerge: what is it that grounds the notions of difference to be tolerated, celebrated, promoted, or projected? If linguistic difference is to operate as the ground of claims to cultural specificity and political sovereignty, what does it mean to not speak one’s “own mother tongue”?

In the Kurdish-Turkish case, that question is still an open one. We see now, playing out in offices and prisons, on screens and streets and broadsheets, divergent efforts to establish what *kind* of social difference Kurdish is, and what role the Kurdish language plays in that. (Even, indeed, what kind of a “thing” the Kurdish language is and should be.) The Turkish language, as this dissertation and other scholarship have demonstrated, has long been considered by state authorities to be both an index of Turkish nation-ness and a means of creating loyalty to it. It has been understood as an inherently mutable, transformable, intervene-into-able feature of the national citizenry – and profoundly necessary to the project of cultivating satisfactorily Turkish citizens, as capable of and crucial to consolidating the affections and loyalties of the national body.

To raise the possibility of acknowledging or tolerating a citizenry that includes plural peoples, then, is to raise a host of new questions about what kind of difference this talk presupposes. Plurality presupposes a residual unassimilability – and it is this that flies in the face of the Republican narrative of a unified (majority) citizenry, founded on underlying homogeneity, with superficial differences of tongue and history to be smoothed over by modernization and a single publicly-possible language. At the heart of some Turkish nationalist resistance to “cultural reforms” and “tolerating Kurds” is a recognition that to do so produces the tolerated as a new kind of different, as substantively other and potentially immutable.

Embracing a “multicultural Turkey” that includes Kurds within that tolerating embrace threatens a logic that allowed unassimilable difference only to reside with religious “minorities,” insignificant in number and dutifully tolerated. To support the Kurdish language à la E.U. recommendations is to potentially re-shift this structure, to insert ever-more substantive cultural

(hence immutable, essential) content along another seam of social difference. Leaving aside what it would take to actually bring about a publicly commensurate Kurdish (which would indeed entail a radical transformation of the national landscape), merely considering Kurdish a language to be tolerated already changes Kurdish from a mutable index of a mutable (assimilable) social difference (“they can be made into Turks when they speak only Turkish”), into a feature of an already-existing, intrinsic immutable difference. Moreover, the capacity of Turkish to not only signal loyal belonging to the Turkish national body, but to entail that loyalty as well, begins to fray at the seams.

We are faced, then, with a set of problems that challenge the ideologies that have governed the public dispensability of language over the past century, and that will shape whether Kurdish can constitute the kind of public language that extends across contexts and genres and indexes a wide range of kinds of people. These questions remain open-ended: what are the stakes of framing projects of politico-cultural sovereignty around language pitched as a “mother tongue” in a context of rapid language shift? What will be the contours of a Kurdish pedagogical project – the training of teachers, development of curricula, and means of evaluation for Kurdish as a code of formal education? Can we anticipate the emergence of public Kurdish that can navigate the sometimes competing poles of semiotic authority, as anonymous channel of denotational communication and as authentic property of a unique social group?

Will Turks ever hear themselves hailed by an address in Kurdish, and along what terms? Will Kurdish ever be a language it is worth paying money to learn – whether or not you are a Kurd? What will it take to constitute a Kurdish public that reaches for and demands Kurdish in

all these contexts – and what institutional and ideological resources would be necessary for that to be possible?

The same summer that I attended the Kurdish classes as part of the public forums in Istanbul, I also stopped one afternoon in a Kurdish bookstore where I had been many times before. Tucked down a dark passageway extending off İstiklal Caddesi, the main pedestrian thoroughfare that descends from Taksim Square down toward the Golden Horn, this bookstore has been selling Kurdish-language books since the earliest days of the 1990s, when such transactions were at their most legally fraught and emotionally charged, when to see and hold and touch and buy a book in Kurdish was an act of personal courage and thrill.

As I chatted with the bookstore owner, apologizing for the rustiness of my language skills and being kindly (and wildly inaccurately) reassured, a customer came in and began perusing the stacks of books. He was visibly taken aback to overhear our conversation and, after a few minutes, joined in. It turned out that he was a high school physics teacher. Over the course of lamenting his limited Kurdish skills – he could understand, but not really speak that well, or read – he pointed at the rows of books along the shelves. Wouldn't it be amazing, he asked, if there was a physics book in Kurdish that he could use? If he knew how to talk about physics in Kurdish, and had a textbook to teach it with? He shook his head again, ruefully, at the very idea of a world in which a high school physics class was taught in Kurdish. A temporary silence fell over the bookstore as we each contemplated a world in which that physics book might be relevant, possible, imaginable. It was a question that asked the present to meet the demands of a future with almost no institutional mooring.

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