

Minority Language Education and Policy in Turkey: The Case of Cankiri Poshas

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### Abstract

It is common to observe, within a given context, a group of people who differ from the majority of the community, in terms of appearance, lifestyle and traditions, and even their language. The focal group for this study is located in the middle of Anatolia, in the city of Cankiri, and is known as “gypsies” (*cingene*) by the general public, but self-identifies as “Poshas” (*Posa*). The motivation for this study comes from a linguistic field work on the language and culture of Poshas. Another source of motivation is the one of the authors’ linguistic background combined with an interest in the language and culture of the Posha community, a community that neighbors her childhood home. We attempted to address the question whether the Posha community, living in partial isolation from the rest of the local people, had a distinct language. Although we were not immediately welcomed into the community, we were able to communicate our intentions for this research study, and eventually establish rapport. After our first few encounters, we were convinced that the Posha language showed distinctive qualities, making it a language, and not a dialect of Turkish (Demir & Üzüm, 2017).

Cankiri Poshas are a bilingual community. They speak the Posha language within the community, enabling the transfer of cultural knowledge from one generation to another. However, children in the Posha community currently face challenges in acquiring this language, because of political and social issues. Additionally, the Posha language has a limited lexical repertoire, hindering discussion of some topics, and it does not have a written form. According to the vitality and endangerment criteria determined by UNESCO, this designates Posha as an endangered language. Because the Cankiri Poshas are a bilingual community, with a relatively low level of education, the present study addresses such questions as: How is the Posha language affected by Turkish (the language of education)?, how does language policy impact the Posha

language?, why do many Poshas not continue their education beyond secondary school?, and how does the isolation of the community affect students' school preferences after elementary school? In addition, we will use the Posha language as an example to briefly discuss the process of how a language becomes endangered, when it is not used in formal education.

*Keywords:* language acquisition, bi-lingual, endangered languages, Posha language

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### **Introduction**

In this paper, we briefly overview the local languages in Turkey, and discuss more specifically the case of Poshas, a minority community in Cankiri; the status of their language and their educational problems. Cankiri is a small city located in the middle of Anatolia and to the north of Ankara, the capital of Turkey. The Posha community, with approximately 2000 members, lives on Alibey Street, in a neighborhood north of the city center. The data for this paper were collected through observations, audio and video recorded interviews and field notes. The study was funded by the Turkish Science Foundation (TUBITAK) as an empirical research project, with the funding number 112R021, in an effort to explore the language and culture of the Posha community, from 2011 to 2014.

The Posha language will be explored in light of the literature on endangered languages and language death, as well as the educational problems of Posha youth. It is important to note that the Posha language is not used in schools and there are not any qualified people to teach the Posha language or produce language learning materials. Poshas are few in numbers and their literacy rate is typically low. In addition, there is no awareness, efforts, or resources to teach Posha at schools. For these reasons, we will not make any attempts in this paper to argue for education in Posha students' first language, or for how Posha language should be taught. Instead, we will discuss the linguistic minorities in Turkish sociocultural context and the educational opportunities afforded to these minorities and how the language of education affects other languages spoken in Turkey. We will also emphasize the need for further research to document the linguistic repertoire of Posha language through ethnographic studies, in order to maintain its

continuity. For this study, we aimed to interview with various informants at different ages from 5 to 75, gender, language proficiency, and education levels. In terms of data collection, participants were informed about the objectives of the study and invited for an interview. They agreed to meet with us in their house and address our questions in an informal conversation.

### **The Ottoman Heritage**

The Turkic speaking people lived through the history from the China to the wester Europe, from Siberia to the Persian gulf in a multilingual environment. Even the Ottoman Empire (1299-1922) preceded the Turkish Republic, was a multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural state. Despite the diversity, there was a basic division between Muslims and non-Muslims within the Ottoman population. According to a nation based categorization, Armenians, Greeks, and Jews made up what was known as *millet-i selase*, or “the three nations.” Ideologies such as Ottomanism, Islamism, and Turkism emerged during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, in an effort to keep the empire and its people united, but none were successful. At the end of World War I, the absolute collapse of the Ottoman Empire opened a path for the Turkish Independence War, and the subsequent proclamation of the Turkish Republic. The foundation of the Turkish republic was confirmed and recognized by the European countries with the Lausanne peace treaty, which was signed on July 24, 1923 in the city of Lausanne, Switzerland.

Although not as linguistically and culturally diverse as was the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish Republic is also comprised of a multilingual and multicultural population. In the Lausanne treaty, people of the republic were defined through a religion based definition, similar to the Ottoman concept of *millet* (nation). For example, the non-Muslim minorities such as Armenians, Greeks, and Jews were recognized as minorities, and their language rights were

identified in articles 39, 40, and 41. In spite of the religion-based definition of minorities, the language rights of Turkish nationals who were not defined as a minority were also identified in the treaty. Article 39 in the treaty is as follows:

Turkish nationals belonging to non-Moslem minorities will enjoy the same civil and political rights as Moslems. All the inhabitants of Turkey, without distinction of religion, shall be equal before the law. Differences of religion, creed or confession shall not prejudice any Turkish national in matters relating to the enjoyment of civil or political rights, as, for instance, admission to public employment's, functions and honours, or the exarchate of professions and industries. No restrictions shall be imposed on the free use by any Turkish national of any language in private intercourse, in commerce, religion, in the press, or in publications of any kind or at public meetings. Notwithstanding the existence of the official language, adequate facilities shall be given to Turkish nationals of non-Turkish speech for the oral use of their own language before the Courts (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1923).

In spite of the conditions listed in the treaty, several problems have emerged within the signing countries, regarding the treatment of religion based minorities and those who see themselves ethnically and socially different from others. For example, the Turkish minority in Greece and the Muslim minorities who speak a different language in Turkey have come across several problems with the use of their language (Demir, 1996; Demir & Weber ,1996, Demir & Yılmaz, 2014). The treatment of minority languages in Turkey shows variation depending on context. In 1925, Jews waived their language rights (Kılıç, 2010, p.181; Toktaş, 2005, p. 398).

Since 1928, “Speak Turkish” campaigns have fueled and emphasized the expectations for minorities to speak Turkish (Akdoğan, 2012). However, in the last few years, there is a much less stringent environment, and there have been several efforts and initiatives to teach local languages. With the laws passed on July 30, 2003, the obstacles that prevented the instruction of local languages were removed. On February 4, 2007, *Resmi Gazete* (the official announcement of new laws) presented bill 5580, titled “Private Education Institutions,” allowing private institutions to identify any language as the language of instruction. Based on this law, bill 28239, titled “National Education, Private Education Institutions”, revised the status of instructional languages in minority schools (Ministry of National Education, 2012). In item 50:

(2) In these schools, the ministry of education decides on which courses can be taught in languages other than Turkish, considering the curriculum and activities of the schools in affiliated countries. The types of these courses and their curriculum can be further revised in the same manner.

(3) The ministry of education decides on the number of weekly hours of instruction in a language other than Turkish as well as the weekly hours of instruction in Turkish.

Beginning in 2012, students in grades 5-8 were offered an elective course titled “The Living Languages and Dialects”. The languages taught in these courses included Caucasian and Indo-European languages like Kurdish, Zaza, Laz, Adyghe, Abkhaz, and Georgian. In 2017, Bosnian and Albanian were also added to the curriculum. In addition, for the high school entrance exams, the religion questions were edited in content, as well as in language, to address a variety of minority groups. This included optional questions on Judaism, in Turkish, in 2014, and on Christianity, in Armenian, in 2015. However, our focus group, Poshas, differ from these

minority groups due to their sociocultural context (e.g., living in small groups, permanent or mobile residents). Most importantly their low literacy rate and educational problems impact their living conditions. Being bilingual has been problematic for this group, and their isolation from others has prevented their access to the possibilities that the modern world offers. The only way to address these difficulties is through literacy and education.

### **The Status of Minority Languages in Turkey Today**

Modern Turkey inherited a multilingual and multicultural diversity that is beyond the sum of the whole European continent. Although there is limited research and data documenting the status of local languages in Turkey, there are some resources available to form an initial database. For example, the web-based database [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com) outlines the linguistic profile of Turkey in the following statement: “The number of individual languages listed for Turkey is 40. Of these, 39 are living and 1 is extinct. Of the living languages, 15 are indigenous and 24 are non-indigenous. Furthermore, 5 are institutional, 16 are developing, 6 are vigorous, 10 are in trouble, and 2 are dying.” (Simons & Fennig, 2017). The dying languages mentioned here are Domari and Syriac. Another reputable source that explores endangered languages is UNESCO and its *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, which lists 18 languages in Turkey.

A major factor that fuels the linguistic diversity in Turkey is the ongoing immigration of Turkish speaking communities from the former Soviet Union, the Balkans, China, Afghanistan, and Iran. As a result of this series of immigration movements, Turkish have close contact to other Turkic languages like Kazakh, Uighur, Uzbek etc. Furthermore, in Turkey, Turkish has intensive contact to large language families such as Indo-European languages, Semitic languages, and Caucasian languages. In Europe, on the other hand, there are two major language

families, Indo-European and Uralic, in addition to Basque, which is not considered part of a specific language family, Maltese, and Turkic languages (Haig, 2003, p. 170-173). But in Turkey, there has been limited research on local languages. The reasons behind this may be explained with several factors that are beyond the legal limitations: a) the shortness of researchers in field of minority languages, b) the fear of discrimination for researching a language other than the major language, and c) limited career opportunities in the study of local languages. Therefore, local languages that are struggling for survival due to increasing migrations and urbanization movements are facing extinction in Turkey, similar to the situation in many other countries.

In the last decade, language problems have permeated the political discourse and helped create some public awareness. As a result of changing language policies at the national level, there have been some initiatives to research, document, and teach the local languages in Turkey. New teacher training programs have been introduced to train teachers for the instruction of these local languages. For example, on December 10, 2009, “The Institute for Living Languages and Dialects” was established at the University of Mardin Artuklu. There are also programs on local languages at this institute. However, these initiatives focused only on Syriac, Kurdish, and Arabic languages. It is important to increase the number of such initiatives and institutions, expand their focus to include many other languages, and to study endangered languages that are facing extinction.

### **Poshas of Cankiri**

There is limited literature on Cankiri Poshas. In his village inventory studies, conducted 1963-1971, Andrews (1989) explores communities in his work titled “*Gocebe ve Gezinci*

*Cingeneleler,*” (Nomadic Gypsies), listing 75 gypsy families in Cankiri who do not own land, and calculating their total population as 381. According to the same source, there is a total population of 280 gypsies who do not own land in a village. Andrews lists the cities where Poschas are located, including Artvin, Erzurum, Kars, and Rize, but he does not mention Cankiri (p. 368-369). Despite this exclusion, it is assumed that the community living in Cankiri, who are known as gypsies to local people, is a part of Poscha community, as they choose to define themselves as Poschas (see Demir & Üzüm, 2014, 2017).

The last census that included questions regarding a mother tongue, was conducted in 1965 in Turkey. According to the results, in Cankiri there were 158 Kurdish, 3 Armenian, 2 Laz, 1 Greek, and 1 Arabic speakers (Buran & Yüksel Çak, 2012, p. 254). Today, according to the local public who live in the same street with Poschas, Poscha is the only non-Turkic language spoken in Cankiri. The fact that Poschas speak a different language is not commonly known outside the Poscha community.

Cankiri Poschas define their language as Poscha or *dilce*, which could be translated as “according to our language.” In Turkish, *dilce* includes the word “language” and the *-ce* equative suffix, to give the meaning of “according to, like, in the manner of” etc. In ethnic groups, language is critical as it is tied to one’s identity. Speakers might perceive speaking only the dominant language as a betrayal to the community they belong to, yet not speaking the dominant language as a sign of being uneducated and simple minded (Trudgill, 2000, p. 106). This also applies to Cankiri Poschas. In their own words, they view speaking Poscha as being uneducated and uncultured. For this reason, they encourage their children to speak Turkish. On the other hand, children report that they wish to learn to speak Poscha to better communicate with their

parents. Children sometimes start their sentences in Turkish and end in Posha. This is a further indication of efforts to maintain an ethnic identity that is tied to the mother tongue.

### **Poshas as a Bilingual Community**

Cankiri Poshas are a bilingual community. The speakers of the Posha language show diversity in terms of their language proficiency, age, gender, and life styles. Proficiency in Posha is especially low in the young generation. Although there were a number of migrations to other cities, Cankiri Poshas continue to live together in their community. In multilingual communities, living together as a group, in-group marriages (endogamy), and cultural ceremonies are critical to maintain the endangered languages. A desire to maintain their language and culture is an important reason behind their tendencies to live together as a community. Living as a large group fuels and motivates the maintenance of their language and culture; however, it is an individual's choice to live within the group or separately (Gibbos & Ramirez, 2004, p. 72). This preference also determines their choice of language. A speaker might wish to be in a place where they can speak their mother tongue as we have observed in Poshas, or they might prefer to speak the major language at the expense of their mother tongue.

Cankiri Poshas live in isolation from the general population. This could be explained with their preference to live away from the pressure of society and live within their own linguistic and cultural characteristics. Marriages inside the group, meaning a Posha marrying another Posha, are quite common. Poshas refer to monolingual Turkish speakers out of the community as *Tarti* and *Poo* and they differ from Turkish speakers in other qualities as well such as appearance, accent, and clothing.

It is apparent that there are several reasons Poshas choose to be a bilingual community. First, they cannot always express themselves comfortably in the dominant language. This notion is especially visible when they are tired, upset, afraid, or in other emotional moments. For example, during our fieldwork, one of our contacts screamed at her grandchild in Posha when the child was about to hit her with a *zinar* (a long sharp rod used in sieve making). In another example, when they recount an upsetting story in Turkish, they get emotional and use words like *Marik marik ah marik can tatli işte*, “mummy, mummy, o mummy, life is sweet, here” switching to the word *marik* (mummy) in Posha, within an otherwise Turkish sentence.

A second reason is social status. Poshas view Turkish as more acceptable and prestigious than Posha. During our fieldwork study, one of our female contacts recounted a story of a job interview. During the interview, she spoke Turkish and perceived that the interview was going well. However, at the end of the interview her sister approached them and asked her a question in Posha. Our informant told that the interviewer’s face changed when they witnessed this interaction, and the interview came to an end. She was not offered the job and believes that the interaction with her sister was a critical moment in the interview. For this reason, they believe that speaking Posha lowers their social status, and their mother tongue actually works against them.

A third reason for their choice to be a bilingual community is the absence of a written form of their language. Posha is only an oral language and Poshas use Turkish for written communication. For example, our informants were extremely surprised when they saw that we transcribed our interviews in Posha. They did not think that their language could be written. As we transcribed the interviews in the Latin alphabet, there were cases in which a letter did not match with a sound they made. The fact that Posha language does not have a written form is not

perceived as a drawback by the speakers. However, they value numbers especially because they engage in business. A basic mathematical knowledge is common even among those who do not speak Posha as well or who are illiterate.

We also observed that Posha was used as a secret language from time to time. During our field study, our informants explained that sometimes Posha saves them from difficult moments: *Allah kötü gün vermesin hemen bir gizli lafımız olunca konuşuruz. Bu dil adamı kurtarır.* “May God protect us from bad days, if we have a secret to say, we do it in Posha. This language saves us.” However, it was apparent that keeping the language secret was mostly due to their wish to be accepted into the general population. They do not want the general public to know that they speak a different language. When they are asked explicitly about who they are by outsiders, they respond *Biz Çankırılıyız. Başka dilimiz de dinimiz de yok. Türkçe konuşuyoruz. Hepimiz Türküz, Müslümanız.* “We are from Cankiri. We do not have another language or religion. We all speak Turkish. We are Turks and Muslims.” A similar case was observed in a different study conducted in Bodrum Milas on Selimiye Street, in 2006, when a Romani informant emphasized the statement in her responses *Hepimiz Turkuz ve Muslumaniz*, “We are all Turks and Muslims” (Marsh, 2008, p. 23).

Posha’s major livelihood is business. While some families travel to nearby villages and towns selling carpets and rugs in their vans, many other families have shops known as *Cingan Arastasi* “Gypsy bazaar” in Cankiri. In their business dealings, they interact with people outside the Posha community. During their interactions, they can speak Turkish comfortably, with a slight accent. While they do not speak Posha in their business selling goods, they may use it when they are buying goods from others. For example, when they are shopping at the local market, they may call a product *isiyik kesh*, “it is bad” in Posha, to alert each other that the

product is bad, without offending the seller. They recount stories that sometimes sellers get upset and warn them saying, “do not switch to the second channel,” using a TV metaphor. In our field interviews, when we visited the *Cingan Arastasi* consisting of Posha shopkeepers and asked questions about the Posha language, Poshas that we met for the first time told us that there was not such a language, in an effort to keep their language secret.

One of the most important reasons why Poshas live in a bilingual community, but abandon their mother tongue, is education. Posha parents think that Posha language doesn't have any place in education, so they do not expect their children to speak Posha proficiently. They believe that knowing only some important words (*chür* “water”, *marik* “mother”, *kesh* “bad”, *hast* or *ergate* “gun”, etc.) are sufficient. Accordingly, children are not usually interested in continuing their education after completing their elementary schooling at a local school in their own street. Children report that the reason they do not want to study any more is they wish to conduct business like their parents. When we asked parents about children learning Posha, the parents responded with phrases like, “No need. What will they even do with Posha?” They emphasize the need for learning Turkish to have a good career and life.

In summary, Posha language is used only as a community language by the Poshas living on Alibey Street in Cankiri. From a multilingualism standpoint, we observed that Poshas keep their language secret from others and use it within the boundaries of their own community.

### **Language Death and Poshas' Attitudes toward Posha Language**

Language is a concept that unites its speakers and separates them from non-speakers. It is often observed throughout history that language can also be a symbol of power and control over

people (Matras, 2003, p. 2). For small communities, it can be utilized as an exclusionary practice, depending on the sociopolitical context.

In multilingual communities, small groups might have diverse attitudes toward their own mother tongue. If a group of given languages have official status and are recognized by the public, they can co-exist more effectively. However, this is not the case for many endangered languages. In the latter case, speakers of minor languages might alienate themselves from their own mother tongue in an effort to speak the major language and have a sense of belonging. They may also partially or completely abandon teaching their mother tongue to their children, and use the major language predominantly. Another possible attitude is a tendency to use the major language only when it is required in official settings (Bosnali, 2007, p. 68).

Cankiri Poshas have partially given up passing their mother tongue to their children, and emphasize the importance of learning Turkish. It appears that they have some valid anxieties and needs that impact these decisions. Cankiri Poshas do not want to be discriminated against due to their language differences, as observed in their response, “We are from Cankiri. We do not have another language or religion. We all speak Turkish. We are Turks and Muslims.” This is also evident in the fact that they do not speak Posha outside their community boundaries, other than settings like local market, hospitals, and police stations. It is apparent that they do their best to speak Turkish other than in their private life and emergency conditions. This observation is further supported by the fact that the general public in Cankiri are not aware that Poshas can speak a second language. Poshas’ attitude toward their mother tongue is explored through a narrative told by one of our contacts. After living in Kirikkale for 10 years, she moved to Cankiri and relocated to Alibey Street, where predominantly Poshas lived. Although most of her relatives lived in the same street and she interacted with them on a daily basis, she recounts that she first

thought of people speaking Posha as “backwards.” She later got used to speaking the language and it changed her outlook on this language and ultimately helped her in her interactions with her relatives. As mentioned before, the literacy rate of Posha children is quite low. In our observations, there were no speakers older than 50 years old who can read and write. Posha children, almost exclusively, go to the elementary school (*Cumhuriyet İlkogretim Okulu*) on their street. Because they were told by their teachers not to speak Posha at school, they report that they avoid speaking Posha while they are at school. Parents are generally concerned about their children’s education, and report that speaking Posha is not important for their education and livelihood. A working proficiency to communicate among each other, especially in some emergency situations would be sufficient. Children, on the other hand, perceive Posha favorably and think that speaking Posha is a distinctive quality.

In linguistic field studies, there have been cases that attitudes toward a minor language might change throughout the course of a study (Avtans, 2007). We also observed that Poshas, who at the onset of the study wanted to keep their language secret, seemed to be developing a positive attitude toward their mother tongue in later months. At the beginning stages of the field study, parents talked about the disadvantages and stigmas associated with speaking Posha, and did not want their children to speak the Posha language. They reported that children should learn Turkish well and continue their education. However, after several months, during the field interviews, parents wanted to demonstrate a few interactions with their children in Posha. When children were not able to answer their questions, they started to get angry with them for not learning to speak Posha. Parents also recounted that they looked down on their neighbors who cannot speak Posha well, and argued that, “one needed to be stupid for not knowing Posha.”

They were also curious to see what we collected about their language, and declared an interest in learning the grammar of the language, if we could create a Posha grammar book for them.

In all scales of language endangerment and death, Posha is facing extinction. Based on the UNESCO ad hoc report and from the viewpoint of “intergenerational language transmission,” Posha is severely endangered because the Posha language is used mostly by the grandparental generation and up. Children at the age range of 10-15 know Posha at word level, and do not use it in their daily lives. From the viewpoint of “absolute number of speakers,” Posha is critically endangered because very few people speak the Posha language actively. The proportion of speakers to the total population is very low. From the viewpoint of “existing language domains,” Posha has no utility other than being a community language and has limited usage areas. Therefore, Posha can be considered “limited or formal domains.” Many people in the community can understand Posha, but cannot speak it. From the viewpoint of “respond to new domains and media,” Posha is insufficient in creating new uses and spaces. It is used only in a few new domains. In our field interviews, we collected such words as: *zarnelik* “telephone” and *zarniski* “television”. From the viewpoint of “materials for language education and literacy,” there is no orthography available to the speakers. From the viewpoint of “governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies,” there is no formal ban on using Posha, but there is not any support system for it either. A few community members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss. Finally, the amount and quality of language documentation can be considered as “fragmentary” based on our field study. We gathered some grammatical sketches, word lists, and texts that would be useful for limited linguistic research, but with inadequate coverage. There are also audio and video recordings, but

in their current form, these resources alone are not sufficient to ensure the maintenance of the Posha language.

### **Conclusion**

As we mentioned in the introduction of this paper, Turkey is a multilingual and multicultural country. In recent years, the obstacles in front of minority languages have been addressed to a great extent. However, minority languages such as Posha have a limited space to maintain their existence. Poshas, while accepting the Posha language as their mother tongue, are timid in transferring Posha to younger generations. In addition, some speakers in the Posha community have a negative attitude towards the Posha language. They believe that learning and speaking Turkish is critical and sufficient on its own for better education and life conditions. Although children seem to be interested in learning Posha, their parents' attitudes toward Posha and insistence on Turkish for their education might negatively impact children's motivation to learn Posha. Our findings, as a result of the short field study, indicate that there is a critical need for a detailed field study exploring and documenting the Posha language. Future studies should explore the Posha language and community with further details and documentation.

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