

ME AND MY DICTIONARY

Needed and needy:

My dictionary out of dictionaries

Tuncay Birkan

For 30 years I have been translating or publishing books, mostly in the field of social sciences and humanities. So I am both a translator and an editor, although in Turkey the job description of an 'editor' is quite elastic. You are supposed to deal with almost everything that has to be done in a publishing house. Firstly, you have to discover the books to be published from the mountainous pile of books or from the even taller pile of catalogues on the publisher's desk. Then, gradually, you are supposed to create your own 'series' and find the 'right' translators for the books you choose. You yourself have to write or phone them and the publishers all over the world. But, in the eyes of the average Turkish publisher, these are all 'side dishes', so to speak, i.e. nothing worthy of the mighty name 'job' and therefore, nothing worthy of separate and decent payment! Most importantly, you have to revise as many translations as possible to justify your salary. You can easily take care of all the other things some other time – preferably when you are at home.

And revise I did! Some books I had to revise so much that I now have quite

a number of 'secret' translations published under other names in addition to the over 50 books officially translated by myself. Luckily, this comedy was mostly limited to my first editorial years. Things did not go on like this because at some point I started to work with more able translators whom I myself chose. I no longer had to dedicate the greater part of my daily work to fixing basic problems related to Turkish syntax and/or decoding the intricacies of advanced English. In fact all editors must have encountered similar problems in almost every language. But one problem which I think is exclusive to the Turkish context continued to create serious problems for me – I am talking about the problem of finding or agreeing on the exact equivalents of the concepts used in these books. And this had almost nothing to do with the translators' competence and everything to do with the vicissitudes of Turkish political history.

Language as a political hot-spot

This may sound crazy to you but it really was the case! To cut a long story short – in the early 1930s the young Turkish Republic wished to radically

cut ties with its Ottoman past, and the regime adopted, in Auerbach's words, "a fanatically anti-traditional nationalism, a rejection of all existing Mohammedan cultural heritage, and the establishment of fantastic relations with a primal Turkish identity". As part of this craze, a 'newspeak' was created – almost all of the words that Turkish had borrowed from Persian and Arabic over a thousand years were suspect and they were to be replaced with the 'pure Turkish' ones that were mostly 'invented' overnight.

“language and problems of terminology were hot points of debate in the newspapers”

Of course, everything didn't go as smoothly as the regime wanted. A significant portion of the intelligentsia had to develop an ambivalent stance – while they publicly applauded the regime's bold manoeuvre and for a time tried to use these newly coined words as much as possible in their newspaper articles, they soon found it practically impossible to write comprehensibly using only these words. Even though most of them were sincerely pro-regime, they continued to resist this imposition, but wisely chose to do so without making a fuss. Meanwhile those of them who were actively enlisted

in various government commissions produced a series of specific dictionaries and glossaries full of these state-sanctioned words which were then used widely in schools and, more significantly for our purposes, in the translations of the Western classics which the Ministry of Education published throughout the 1940s.

In fact, for almost 12 years after Atatürk died in 1938, language and problems of terminology were hot points of debate in the newspapers but a balance of sorts was reached towards the end of the 1940s. This balance was upset by the Democratic Party (DP) which came to power in 1950. Their 'organic intellectuals', in a spirit of revanchism, started to practically ban the use of new words and to write in a highly stylized Ottoman Turkish that new generations hardly understood. In the ten years of their rule the DP gradually tightened its grip on the left-wing intellectuals as they grew extremely vulnerable to their criticisms. Their anti-intellectual stance had grown so oppressive that most of these intellectuals applauded the coup d'état that ended their rule in 1960.

From the 1960s to the early 1990s, most of the words in Turkish were charged with an overdose of political significance. According to the generally-held consensus, the words that had an Arabic or Persian origin were deemed 'right-wing' while the 'pure Turkish' ones were seen, in a curious irony of history, as 'left-wing'. Everyone tried to avoid using the words belonging to 'the others' while writing, translating or even speaking. This utterly irrational, even absurd rigidity, which is the product of a painful past, only started to loosen in

the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Even nowadays there are a few critics who may scold you for using both kinds of words in your translation, but they are fortunately, thank God, a minority!

Needed dictionary turned out to be needy

However, in this period, a lot of specialist dictionaries were published with this mind-set for various disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, psychology etc. And translators had to use these with considerable caution because they either contained words that couldn't find currency even within the 'purist' circles or words that had long since lost their intelligibility for most rightwing intellectuals! In either case, these words of little communicative value could seriously undermine the comprehensibility of the already difficult works we published. As well as that, you sometimes had to deform decent Turkish syntax and produce monstrous sentences merely by insisting on using such words.

I started to prepare the 'Needy Dictionary' mainly to address this problem. I wanted to help the mostly young translators I worked with to decide on whether the words they might see in a dictionary were still in active use. For example they might have thought that *başsızcı* (literally, 'the one who want no leaders') was a valid option for rendering 'anarchist' in Turkish, while it was not, as no one used it, except the person who coined it – even my grandmother simply said 'anarşist'! Such words as *başsızcı* were underlined in my primitive dictionary.

They might also have seen words such as *ekin* ('culture'), *ulam* ('category'),

edimci ('actor') and *bulunç* ('conscience') which purists insisted on using for a long time, even though they failed to gain currency. I wanted to explain that we preferred to use *kültür*, *kategori*, *aktör* and *vicdan* in their stead since these were widely understood.

I added proper names in brackets to some concepts in order to give the translators a sense of context (i.e. 'bricolage: *yaptakçılık* (Lévi-Strauss)' or 'estrangement: *yadırgatma* (Russian Formalism)'). And finally there were a lot of concepts for which satisfactory Turkish equivalents were still to be found.



'Beware of words'. Mural in Paris by Ben
Photo: Ros Schwartz



Tuncay Birkan, Turkish translator from English and editor, has translated nearly 50 books in the field of social sciences and humanities. He worked as an editor in *Ayrıntı* (1992–1996) and *Metis* (2004–2017), and was one of the founders and first chairman of the Turkish Translators' Association **ÇEVİR** (2006–2008). Birkan's essays on politics and literature have been published in various journals and websites and in 2019 he published the book *Dünya ile Devlet Arasında Türk Muharriri. 1930–1960* ('The Turkish Author Between the World and the State. 1930–1960').

Tuncay Birkan
Photo: Aslı Biçen

I included problematic concepts as well, but added '??' to indicate that we 'needed' to find better words for these and that they were all welcome to propose anything that 'needed' to be included in the dictionary. Hence the name 'Needy Dictionary'!

Since the middle of the 1990s a lot of people have contributed to this humble dictionary, especially in the 2000s when we translators started to talk to each other a lot about building an association that would protect our rights. We also consulted with each other about terminology problems and as a result the scope of our 'Needy One' has widened considerably! In the last ten years there have been almost no significant contributions, because the urgency of the terminology problem has gradually diminished thanks to the relative stability and consensus that have been reached over the years. In retrospect, I like to think that my all-too-humble efforts in the immense field of lexicography played a small role in this stabilisation process, which is why I am a bit partial to this dictionary!

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