AN ETHNOLINGUISTIC PORTRAYAL OF THE ARABIC-SPEAKING ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY OF ANTAKYA, TURKEY

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Abstract

Results of the last census in Turkey showed that the total number of Arabic speaking population was 1.20% that is 5% less than the results of the 1960 census. One third of all Arabic speakers in Turkey reside in Antakya (Antioch). Although the population of the Arabic speaking communities in Turkey is in decline, research is needed to understand to what extent such linguistic change occurs. Hence, the purpose of this study is to study the status of the use of Arabic among Arabic-Speaking Orthodox community of Antakya while investigating the factors contributing to a possible shift from Arabic to Turkish. Fifty members of an Orthodox Christian Church established in Antakya participated in the study by answering a five-point Likert scale that was translated into Turkish and Arabic and was given to the participants in both languages. Results show that almost all participants find their reading and writing skills in Arabic weak or very weak and participants' language skills in Turkish have started to be stronger across all generations as younger generations use Arabic less successfully. Results also imply that Arabic language is threatened rather than it is well maintained when our results are considered from an intergenerational perspective.

Keywords: Ethnolinguistic Vitality, Language Shift, Multilingualism, Regional Languages

Özet

"Arapça Konuşan Ortodoks Hristiyanların Etnodilbilimsel Bir Portresi"

Türkiye'de yapılan son sayımların gösterdiğine göre Arapça konuşan nüfusun toplamı % 1.20'dir ki bu da 1960'da ki sonuçlardan % 5 daha az demek oluyor. Arapça konusanların üçte biri Antakya'da ikamet ediyor. Her ne kadar Türkiye'de Arapça konusan kişi sayısı azalsa da, bu dil değişiminin ne derece olduğunu anlayabilmek için araştırmalara ihtiyaç var. Bu çalışmanın amacı Arapçanın Antakyadaki Arapça konuşan Ortodokslar arasındaki durumunu ortaya çıkarmak, ayrıca Arapçadan Türkçeye olan dil değişimine neden olan faktörleri irdelemektir. Antakyada bulunan Ortodoks Hristiyan kilisesinden elli kişi Beş-Ölçekli Likert

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ölçegine cevap vererek bu çalışmaya katkı sağlamıştır. Söz konusu ölçek Türkçeye ve Arapçaya çevrilmiş ve katılımcılara her iki dilde dağıtılmıştır. Sonuçlar göstermektedir ki hemen her katılımcı Arapça okuma ve yazma becerisini zayıf ya da çok zayıf bulmaktadır ve katılımcıların Türkçedeki dil becerisi nesiller boyunca daha iyi olmaya başlamıştır. Ayrıca genç nüfus Arapçayı daha az konusabilmektedir. Sonuçlar daha genel bir perspektifle ele alındığında şunu göstermektedir ki Arapça korunamamaktadır ve tehlikededir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Etnodilbilimsel irilik, Dil değişimi, Çokdillilik, Bölgesel diller

Introduction

Antakya (Antioch) is located in Turkey's Hatay province in the southernmost part of the country, on the Syrian border. Just like its world famous mosaics composed of many colors, Antakya continues to be a very diverse community of people who have various ethnic and religious backgrounds. People in Antakya are composed of Muslims, Christians, and Jews, each including a variety of denominations. Despite religious variety in Antakya's mosaic-like structure, the city seems to have a noticeable linguistic and cultural unity. Due to the reasons stemming from historical and geographical matters, Antakya has predominantly been under the influence of Arabic cultures in both linguistically as well as culturally (Neyzi, 2004). Arab speakers living in Antakya have long known to be Turkish-Arabic bilinguals. While no questions on language use have been included in Turkey's national censuses since 1965, the results of the last census attempting to investigate the number of the speakers of other languages in Turkey showed that the total number of Arabic speaking population was 1.20% of the entire population of Turkey that is 5% less than the results of the 1960 census (Önder, 2007). The largest portion, almost a third, of this number resides in Antakya region (Dündar, 1999).

Arabic speaking Christians have been a part of the population of Antakya since the arrival of Christianity to this land. Indeed, it is the city of Antakya where the Gospel of Matthew was written, Peter and Paul converted the 'gentiles,' the followers of Christ were called the first Christians, and where one of the oldest churches of Christianity still welcomes visitors. While all these have always made Antakya a sacred place for those of Christian faith, the region has gone through vast changes since the early 1900s, resulting in drastic decreases in the Christian population in the area.

After WW I, in 1920, Hatay and its vicinity were occupied by France for 16 years. When the occupation ended, Hatay declared independence and remained as an independent state until its unification with Turkey in 1939. This was when, according to Khoury (1987), many Christians immigrated in large numbers to Syria, Europe and the Americas. Today the estimated number of Christians living in the area including the neighboring provinces is somewhere around ten thousand, 85% of whom resides in Antakya and its vicinity (Karimova & Deverell, 2001; Kalkan, 2009). Among the entire Christian

population, those of the Orthodox faith make up the largest denomination within the city's Christian community (Kalkan, 2009).

It should be noted that although they are referred as 'Greek Orthodox' in many sources, the Arabic-Speaking Orthodox community of Antakya (ASOC hereafter) has notable differences with the other Orthodox communities in Turkey. An example that signifies this difference is the fact that, different from the Orthodox community living in Istanbul who speak Greek, the liturgical language for ASOC remains Arabic (Ortaylı, 1987; Owens, 2000) notwithstanding the linguistic imperialism that they were exposed by Greeks during the Ottoman times (Masters, 2001). From a historical point of view, it can be said that their linguistic and cultural connections with their Muslim Arab neighbors helped ASOC members keep their indigenous heritage among which their language is the most significant (Masters, 2001). However, according Komondrous and McEntee-Atalianis (2004), many members of ASOC continue moving to Istanbul 'as economic migrants' and join the Greek Orthodox Community 'due to their shared religion'; as they attend Greek schools and churches there, they inevitably 'become assimilated' into the Greek Orthodox community of Istanbul (p. 370). It is also noted that there has been an 'influx of Arabic-speaking Greek Orthodox Christians from South East Turkey (Antakya region) who have moved as economic migrants' to Istanbul who 'due to their shared religion, become assimilated into the community' (Komondouros & McEntee-Atalianis, 2007, p. 370). While this influx from Antakya to Istanbul gives, so to say, a 'fresh breath' to the Greek Orthodox Community of Istanbul—which has been significantly shrinking for the last five decades—it creates concerns regarding the future of ASOC, a so far protected indigenous community and an important color to the diversity of the region.

Literature Review

Turkey has a notable place in the UNESCO's (2009) 'Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger' with two already extinct (Mlahso and Ubykh), four vulnerable (Abkhaz, Adyge, Kabard-Cherkes, Zazaki), seven definitely endangered (Abaza, Homshetsma, Laz, Pontic Greek, Romani, Suret and Western Armenian), two critically endangered (Cappadocian Greek and Hértevin), three severely endangered languages (Gagauz, Judezmo and Turoyo). In the map, while the country is dotted with symbols used for displaying the location of these languages, there is no reference to the Arabic language spoken around Antakya. Nonetheless, this should not mean that it is on the safe side—not because there is an explicit threat against its existence but because 'in the world of languages, change is the rule rather than the exception' (Muffi, 2002, p. 387).

Research shows that when a minority language in a society contacts a majority language, the inevitable result is either language shift or language maintenance

depending on the type of the interaction between the two (Latomaa & Boyd, 1996). Fishman (1968, p. 56) explains language maintenance and language shift as 'the study if language maintenance and language shift is concerned with the relationship between change (or stability) in language usage patterns, on one other hand, and ongoing psychological, social or cultural process, on the other hand, in populations that utilizes more than one speech variety for intra-group or for inter-group purposes.' Language shift, according to Winford (2003), takes place when a group starts to abandon using their language in favor of another group's language. Hence, while a monolingual community may become bilingual after such language shift, language loss might take place if the group members totally abandon their native language and a bilingual community might turn into a monolingual one.

In speech communities where more than one language is spoken, each language is considered to have varying degrees of prestige (Ferguson, 2001). Pprestige of a language in society results from the social, educational, economic and political advantages (Fishman, 2001) it brings to its users. Often, if one language has a higher prestige for a bilingual community, language shift is observed from the lower prestige language to the higher, that is, the advantageous one. Komondrous and McEntee-Atalianis' (2004) findings about the use of Greek language among the members of the Greek Orthodox population of Istanbul are in line with Fishman's aforementioned view of the prestige of a language as there is language shift from Greek to Turkish, mostly because of social reasons. Their findings also support those of many other research studies which showed the existence of such prestige related language shift in various communities (Morita, 2003; Yağmur, 2009; Sandel, Chao, & Liang, 2006).

Language maintenance, which occurs when language shift is deflected, 'refers to relative language stability in number and distribution of its speakers, its proficient usage by children and adults, and its retention in specific domains' (Baker, 2001, p. 59). There are notably diverse factors that underlie language maintenance. The case of Maale people of Ethiopia illustrates that a strong sense of pride and identity found within a community might be one of the most effective factors for language maintenance (Barnes & van Aswegen, 2008). The cases of the Chechens of Jordan (Dweik, 2000) and the Turkish speaking minority of Greece (Sella-Mazi, 1997) show another natural way of maintaining a language: being relatively isolated or not much in contact with the majority groups. In minority communities where contact with the majority language is inevitable, there are some important factors needed to maintain the language. Initially, older generations should pass the language onto the young members of their community and for young learners to maintain it, the language, like Ferguson (2001) defines, needs to have a high prestige in the society. In addition, Baker (2001, p. 60-61) points out a range of political, social,

demographic, cultural, and linguistic factors for language maintenance to take place. These factors are as the follows:

Large number of speakers living closely together,

Mother-tongue institutions (e.g. schools, community organizations, mass media),

Cultural and religious ceremonies in the home language,

Emotional attachment to mother tongue, giving self-identity and ethnicity,

Emphasis on education in mother tongue schools to enhance ethnic awareness,

Homeland language community intact.

Fishman (1991) devices a scaled typology, named Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) that communities can use to assess to what extent their language is threatened or well maintained. Lee and McLaughlin (2001) claim that the GIDS hypothesizes 'a stage-by-stage continuum of disruptions to a language's existence and continuity' by adding 'the further the stage number from Stage 1, the greater the disruption and threat to the prospects for the language being passed on from one generation to the next' (p. 23). Hence, minority languages at stage 1 are the ones that are used in 'higher level educational, occupational, governmental, and media efforts.' On other hand, the ones at final stage, 8th , are the ones that most users of which 'are socially isolated old folks and [they] needs to be re-assembled from their mouths and memories, and taught to demographically unconcentrated adults' (Fishman 1991, 87-109).

The last stage of language shift is called language death, which means the complete disappearance of a language. Language death usually happens 'when there are no longer any speakers of that language, when the last native speaker of the language has died or the language is no longer used as a medium of communication' (Lam, n.d., p. 476). Language death is a serious threat for the diversity in the world; the world loses an indigenous language every two weeks, and almost 5000 of the languages in world will be lost by the end of the 21st centrury (Dalby, 2003). When the case of Turkey is considered, we witness language death like any other country in the world. For instance, the number of extinct languages in Turkey was two until October 7, 1992—the day when the last known speaker of the west Caucasian language Ubykh, Mr. Tevfik Esenç, passed away (Crystal, 2003).

As we have mentioned above, population of the Arabic speaking communities in Turkey has been shrinking although research is needed to understand to what extent such change in language use occurs. Hence, the purpose of this study is to study the status of the use of Arabic among ASOC while investigating the factors contributing to a possible shift from Arabic to Turkish or any other languages used in the region among its community members.

Methodology

Participant Selection

As a non-probability sampling technique, convenience sampling was used in this study. Fifty members of an Orthodox Christian Church established in Antakya, Turkey were reached through a gate-keeper who was a close friend to one of the researchers of this study. The gate-keeper was serving as the priest of that particular church for more than ten years. The gate-keeper helped in selecting the most convenient participants who could provide the researchers with the data needed.

Questionnaire design

As the data collection tool, a questionnaire previously used by Koumondouros and McEntee-Atalianis (2007) was used after making some minor, but necessary modifications so as to apply it in the setting of the study. Koumondouros and McEntee-Atalianis (2007) inform that their questionnaire was devised drawing on a number of precedents as they cite each and all of them in their paper. Because both Koumondouros and McEntee-Atalianis's (2007) and the present study aimed at interrogating the linguistic vitality of ASOC, the questionnaire could easily be used for the purposes of the study. The questionnaire was translated into Turkish and Arabic and was given to the participants in both languages. The five-point Likert scale included the following sections:

Introduction- rationale behind the study and instructions

Demographics- (age, sex, mother tongue, educational level, etc.)

Language network and frequency of use (three questions, each for different category of close family and other social networks). e.g., How well do you speak Arabic? Not at all; A few words only; Fairly well; Very well; Fluently. What language do you speak with (e.g. your friends)? Only Arabic; Mainly Arabic with some Turkish; Arabic and Turkish equally; Mainly Turkish with some Arabic; Only Turkish.

Language use and ability- Arabic (11 questions relating to frequency of exposure to and use of Arabic, self-assessed competence in understanding, speaking, reading and writing, code-switching between Arabic and Turkish and vocabulary difficulties). e.g. How often do you read Arabic? Never; Rarely; Sometimes; Often; All the time.

Language use and ability- Turkish (11 questions, for Arabic).

Statements relating to language attitudes- (24 statements, four covering social, economic and symbolic status of the language, institutional support, subjective vitality and identity).

Data collection and analysis

The questionnaires were distributed in and around the church at two consecutive Sunday masses during May/June 2010. Participants were volunteers and their anonymity was strictly ensured. The data were analyzed by using a statistical package commonly used in social sciences. All findings were calculated and reported in percentages.

Results

Forty-two percent of the participants are between the ages of 15-25, 16% of all were between 26-35 and 22% are between the ages of 36-45. Those who are between the ages of 46-55 make up 16% of the participants while only 4% of them are between the ages of 56-65. In terms of sex, 48% of them are males and 52% are females. When asked about their native language, 64% of the participants state that it is Arabic while 36% of them state that it is Turkish. When asked about the languages they speak, 48% state that they speak Turkish, 16% claim they speak Arabic and English, and 4% of them state they speak either Turkish or Arabic and English. Ten percent of all participants state that they do not speak any other languages other than their native language (Arabic). In terms of their birth place, 82% were born in Antakya and 6% in Iskenderun. Participants' educational background reveals that 46% of them have graduate degree, 30% of them have high school degree and 24% of all have primary/secondary school degree. Participants' occupations reveal that they are students (32%), housewives (20%), and engineers (14%), followed by others.

Results also show that Arabic language and culture is fundamentally important for the participants. Fifty percent of the participants state they visit Arabic countries, mainly Syria at least more than five times a year. When asked about their opinions on the status of Arabic, 94% of the participants state that Arabic must be preserved in their community and 90% of all participants further state that their community members should increase their interest in the Arabic language. Furthermore, 94% of them declare that Arabic will always be a fundamental aspect of their geographical location.

Participants' self-evaluation of their success in specific language skills is interrogated and it is seen that in terms of Arabic, 96% of them find their reading skills and 94% of them find their writing skills weak or very weak. This contrasts with their responses about their reading and writing skills in Turkish since none of the participants claim that they have weak or very weak skills in Turkish. It is also noteworthy that although all participants claim that they speak Turkish well or very well, only 80% of them claim the same for their use of Arabic. These results show that ASOC members' self-reported use of Turkish signals that Turkish has already started to be seen as the stronger language in terms of how skillfully it is used.

Table 1. Self-evaluation of participants' language skills (%)

Self-evaluation	Turkish				Arabic			
	Very well	Well	Weak	Very weak	Very well	Well	Weak	Very weak
Reading	94	6	-	-	-	4	16	80
Writing	94	6	-	-	-	6	12	82
Speaking	92	8	-	-	18	62	14	6
Listening comprehension	88	10	2	-	32	56	4	8

Participants' evaluation of others' use of Turkish and Arabic shows that Arabic is less successfully used language by all community members. For example, although 92% of mothers and 86% of fathers are considered to be using Turkish well or very well, this number is reduced to 84% for mothers and 78% for fathers' use of Arabic. Similarly, 46% of the children are considered to be good at Turkish while only 8% of them are considered to be good at Arabic.

Table 2. Participants' evaluation of others' use of Turkish and Arabic (%)

	Turkish					Arabic				
	Very well	Well	Weak	Very weak	NA	Very well	Well	Weak	Very weak	NA
Mother	62	30	6	-	2	72	22	-	-	6
Father	58	28	-	-	14	70	8	-	2	20
Spouse	50	6	-	-	44	18	28	2	-	52
Boy/girlfriend – Fiancées/ Fiancée	20	8	2	-	70	6	10	2	6	76
Children	38	8	-	2	70	2	6	16	10	66
Grandchildren	2	-	-	98	-	-	-	2	6	92
Siblings	72	10	4		14	18	42	16	8	16

Results also show that newer generations are considered to be using Arabic less and less successfully when they are compared with older generations. Although the percentage of fathers and mothers who are claimed to be good at Arabic is around 80%, this number reduces to 8% in children and none of the grandchildren are considered to be good at Arabic. These results show that participants' language skills in Turkish have started to be stronger across all generations while younger generations use Arabic less successfully.

Table 3. Preferred means of communication at different settings (%)

	Always Arabic	Always Turkish	Equally Arabic and Turkish	Mostly Arabic	Mostly Turkish	NA
Work	-	32	12	-	10	46
Shopping	-	54	18	-	24	4
Church and for praying	20	13	39	11	14	3
Watching TV	-	64	10	-	26	-
Listening to the radio	-	64	6	-	26	4
Print media	-	74	4	-	22	-

Results show that only at religious services Arabic is used as the only language although only 20% of the participants claim so. Apart from this, Arabic is not used as the only language in the activities and settings mentioned whereas Turkish is mentioned by the participants as the only language used in these activities at varying degrees. Similarly, it can be seen that majority of the participants are exposed to Turkish especially through the media (64% for while watching TV and listening to the radio and 74% while reading the print media in Turkish). When all these results are considered, it can be seen that even when the participants go shopping, they always (54%) or mostly (24%) use Turkish.

Table 4. Preferred means of communication with community members (%)

	Always Arabic	**Always Turkish**	**Equally Arabic and Turkish**	**Mostly Arabic**	**Mostly Turkish**	**NA**
Work	-	32	12	-	10	46
Shopping	-	54	18	-	24	4
Church and for praying	20	13	39	11	14	3
Watching TV	-	64	10	-	26	-
Listening to the radio	-	64	6	-	26	4
Print media	-	74	4	-	22	-

When asked about the preferred means of communication, Arabic is used with parents (15% Always in Arabic) more than it is used with children, siblings, and friends (0% Always in Arabic). In contrast, 20% of them state that they speak in Turkish with their children continuously. Results also show that the use of Turkish increases as one moves away from the family to the circles of friends (48%) and neighbors (44%).

Table 5. Importance of Arabic (%)

	Very important	**Important**	**Not very important**	**Not important**	**NA**
Employment	20	32	38	2	8
Social respect	14	42	32	6	6
Bringing up children	36	46	8	6	4
Communicating with elders	60	38	2	-	-
Communicating with youth	16	24	38	16	6

Participants' views on the importance of Arabic are given in Table 5. As these results show, those who find Arabic important or very important for employment make up 52% whereas those who claim that it is important or very important for communicating with the elderly make up 98% of them. These results, again, show that Turkish has started to gain ground in the lives of

younger generations while older generations stick to Arabic more than their children and grandchildren do.

Eighty-two percent of the participants find Arabic important or very important in bringing up children. As the results related with its importance in communicating with the youth (40% finding it important or very important) is considered, it can be claimed that although the participants recognize the importance of Arabic in family bonding as can be seen the importance they attach to their language in communicating with the elderly and while bringing up children, using Arabic is not found to be important while communicating with the youth who, as we can deduce, are more likely to be communicated in Turkish as well.

Discussion and Conclusion

As we have mentioned above, the results of the last national census showed that the total number of Arabic speaking population was 1.20% of the entire population that is 5% less than the results of the 1960 census (Önder, 2007). Hence, according to these statistics, Arabic can be accepted as a language in decline in terms of the number of its speakers in Turkey. When the results of the present study are considered, it can also be seen that participants' abilities in Arabic is weaker than their abilities in Turkish and there are intergenerational gaps among these speakers in terms of their knowledge and use of Arabic. For example, while 87% of the parents are reported to have very well and well abilities in Arabic, only 16% of the spouses have very well and well skills in Arabic. If the future of Arabic is to be projected and when the knowledge of the participants' children are considered, the weakening becomes more obvious since only 8% of the children have very well and well skills in Arabic. These results show that language maintenance is a problem for ASOC in Antakya although we cannot locate the situation of Arabic in this community in terms of Fishman's (1991) aforementioned typology named Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) because of the small number of participants in our study. However, our results imply that ASOC members' use of Arabic language is threatened rather than it is well maintained when our results are considered from intergenerational perspective.

The linguistic features of the Orthodox Christian community of Antakya are similar to Fishman's (1967) much cited 'diglossia with bilingualism' case. Most, if not all, members of the community are known to be using Arabic at home and Turkish in their social lives outside their homes. The use of Arabic, however, is now expected to expand with the increasing interactions between the peoples of Turkey and the Arabic L1 neighbor Syria due to the mutual lift of visa requirements in 2009 between the countries and recent flow of migrants from the war struck Syria. Yet, there has not been any comprehensible academic research to investigate and document the evolving social, cultural and linguistic

realities of this geographical area. Hence, future research should try to reach as many ASOC members as possible with an aim of understanding their use of Arabic and Turkish in a comparative and intergenerational manner.

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	Very well	Well	Weak	Very weak	Very well	Well	Weak	Very weak
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Writing	94	6	-	-	-	6	12	82
Speaking	92	8	-	-	18	62	14	6
Listening comprehension	88	10	2	-	32	56	4	8

Table 2. Participants' evaluation of others' use of Turkish and Arabic (%)

	Turkish					Arabic				
	Very well	Well	Weak	Very weak	NA	Very well	Well	Weak	Very weak	NA
Mother	62	30	6	-	2	72	22	-	-	6
Father	58	28	-	-	14	70	8	-	2	20
Spouse	50	6	-	-	44	18	28	2	-	52
Boy/girlfriend – Fiancées/ Fiancée	20	8	2	-	70	6	10	2	6	76
Children	38	8	-	2	70	2	6	16	10	66
Grandchildren	2	-	-	98	-	-	-	2	6	92
Siblings	72	10	4		14	18	42	16	8	16

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Church and for praying	20	13	39	11	14	3
Watching TV	-	64	10	-	26	-
Listening to the radio	-	64	6	-	26	4
Print media	-	74	4	-	22	-

Table 4. Preferred means of communication with community members (%)

	Always Arabic	Always Turkish	Equally Arabic and Turkish	Mostly Arabic	Mostly Turkish	NA
Parents	15	18	28	13	16	10
Spouses	2	12	22	2	10	52
Children	-	20	12	-	12	56
Siblings	-	26	20	2	34	18
Friends	-	48	18	-	30	4
Neighbors	2	44	20	-	-	34

Table 5. Importance of Arabic (%)

	Very important	Important	Not very important	Not important	NA
Employment	20	32	38	2	8
Social respect	14	42	32	6	6
Bringing up children	36	46	8	6	4
Communicating with elders	60	38	2	-	-
Communicating with youth	16	24	38	16	6

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