

# LANGUAGE USE AND LANGUAGE ATTITUDES OF BILINGUAL TURKS IN BULGARIA

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## Abstract

In this paper is summarized a study of language practices and language attitudes of bilingual ethnic Turks in Bulgaria. As assumed, speaking Bulgarian in small Turkish village settings is not common, and speaking Turkish in urban, and otherwise predominantly Bulgarian settings is frowned upon. Since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Bulgaria's language policies aimed to restrict Turkish language and this study confirms that these long-term policies are successful.

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**Keywords:** Language policy, language attitudes, language use

## Introduction:

This study is about a population on which there is no documented sociolinguistic study: the ethnic Turkish minority in Bulgaria. There are about 800,000 Turkish people in Bulgaria, the progeny of Ottomans who ruled Bulgaria for over five centuries. Since Bulgaria's independence from Ottoman rule in 1878, the Bulgarian government has had various nation-building policies, the most effectual of which was an attempt of total assimilation of the Turkish minority in the 1980s, by "proving" their Bulgarian origins and denying all ethnic minority rights, including forcing all Turkish people to take Bulgarian names and prohibiting the use of Turkish. Since the fall of communism in 1989 and establishment of Bulgaria as a democratic state thereafter, most ethnic minority rights have been restored and this is precisely why it is interesting to see how bilingual Turkish people use their two languages now that they are free to speak both in public.

## I.

This study concerns the language use and language attitudes of bilingual Turkish people in Bulgaria, structured as a comparison between a major predominantly Bulgarian city, and a small Turkish village. Quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to determine how Turkish bilinguals manage language, the complex factors which affect their language use, their attitudes towards Bulgarian and Turkish, and whether language use in a rural environment differs from that of an urban environment.

Data were gathered in two places Northeastern Bulgaria: Varna, Bulgaria's third largest city; and Lopushna, a small Turkish village.

Data collection included observation of 4 participants and their language environment, audio recording, video recording, and informal interviews. A questionnaire for quantitative data from a broader group of people in Lopushna and Varna was also conducted.

It was found that most bilingual ethnic Turks in Bulgaria intuitively know which language is appropriate for which situation, which person, at what location, and at which time. They also know when it is appropriate to switch and for what reason. Language use in a rural environment differs from that of an urban environment in the case of Lopushna and Varna. For example, when they are in a village like Lopushna where the population is predominantly Turkish and Turkish is the language most spoken, Turkish becomes their main

language of use, while Bulgarian is used occasionally with Bulgarian work associates or during trips to the city.

If, on the other hand, they live in a city where the population is predominantly Bulgarian and have lived there for a prolonged period of time, Bulgarian becomes an important language to speak at work, in restaurants, in shops, or in public places, and many even speak it at home with family. The Bulgarian culture inevitably becomes a part of their identity, while Turkish is reserved for use whenever they go to their native village or during specific occasions such as religious holidays. Most Turkish people who have lived in the city for a prolonged time and rarely go to their native villages or see their relatives, and are surrounded by Bulgarian neighbors, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, shop clerks, and city services employees, rarely use Turkish; Bulgarian has become such a natural language to them that it is carried over to their home as well. Additionally, most Turkish people do not go to mosque, so speaking Turkish for many Turks in the city is rare.

Among people who are in the city temporarily, or have lived there for a short period of time, there is more juggling of languages, while they learn language etiquette and societal rules for given domains and situations. People who have moved to the city recently or live in the city during the week and go to their village during the weekends are more likely to speak Turkish in public places than people who have lived there for a long time. The longer they live in the city, the more Bulgarian they speak. Also, people who have moved to the city later in life are more likely to continue to use Turkish at home than younger people, who usually make a quick shift to Bulgarian.

Yet, whether in a city or village, the language of school is Bulgarian, and Turkish people study all subjects in Bulgarian, except if it is studied as an optional mother tongue class.

The language of work in cities is Bulgarian, and in many places speaking Turkish at the workplace is forbidden.

Basically, Turkish people know that they are expected to speak Bulgarian when around Bulgarians, at school, and in public places, government buildings and hospitals in cities. They also know that they should speak Turkish when they are in the village (Lopushna or their native Turkish village), mosque, home, and around only Turks. Arabic is another language of use, used exclusively for Muslim prayers.

When they speak Turkish, code-switching to Bulgarian is common to fill a lexical need or a set phrase, to quote, or to raise their status. Code-switching to Turkish while speaking Bulgarian may occur for solidarity, to fill a lexical item or set phrase, and for quotations.

There are many complex factors which affect language use, including participants, place, topics, situation, attitudes towards the languages, and motivation (solidarity, respect, etc.).

Language attitudes are another important factor. Because Bulgarian is perceived as a powerful, successful, necessary language, there is more motivation for its use, than Turkish, which is seen as a nostalgic reminder of one's roots or as the language to speak with relatives. Also, because Bulgarian is the official/dominant/national language, it carries prestige, while the motivating factor for Turkish is mostly solidarity.

Most bilingual ethnic Turks in Lopushna and Varna consider Turkish to be their mother tongue, a symbol of their identity, and Bulgarian their native tongue. To gain the solidarity and trust of people in Lopushna, it is important to speak Turkish. In Varna, Bulgarian is the prestigious language, and as such, it is the language in which one can gain the most respect.

Fluency in Bulgarian is essential to succeed in Bulgaria, as perceived by almost all Turks. Bulgarian is the powerful language, the written language, the language of newspapers and magazines, of books, of school subjects, of politics and work. Written Turkish is learned

by some but not all people, and Bulgarian gains more prestige because of this difference in the pattern of literacy.

Turkish is perceived as much less useful by some Turkish people. In Lopushna, teaching Turkish is seen as detrimental to the learning of Bulgarian.

Bulgarian is seen as the most natural language to speak when there are Bulgarians, in schools, and in Varna, because “We are in Bulgaria,” as many people reminded me. Almost all ethnic Turks in Lopushna and Varna believe that it is important to continue to use Turkish because it is their mother tongue and Bulgarian because they live in Bulgaria.

Bulgarian is seen as the most natural and necessary language to speak. Bulgarian is the language of success and progress, while Turkish is the language of their ethnicity and roots.

This study suggests that the process of urbanization has important consequences for language use. Life in Varna for Turks means that they have to integrate into Bulgarian life, even though they are free from having to integrate if they live in isolated villages. Thus, in addition to the cultural adjustments, they also have to make linguistic adjustments: Turkish residents of Varna must become accustomed to speaking Bulgarian actively in their daily lives, whereas it is only needed for limited purposes in the village. People who have lived in Varna for a prolonged period of time, regardless of age, are generally fluent in Bulgarian, and tend to speak it on a regular basis.

This study also shows the importance of age as a factor in bilingualism. While many people from the older generation do not speak any Bulgarian, it seems that everyone from the younger generation speaks Bulgarian to some degree, and it is preferred over Turkish in cities even more so by the younger generation.

The impact of nationalist language and assimilationist policies on the language attitudes of people is also a significant aspect of this study. Decades of harsh policies aiming to eliminate the Turkish language and conscience have inevitably influenced the way Turkish people think about their language and Turkish identity. For many years they were told that their religion, traditions and language are anti-modern and backwards. That, with the systematic discrimination by the government against them, eventually made the people realize that if they want to live a full life in Bulgaria they must embrace the Bulgarian ways of life and language. Success, then, is measured not only by individual achievements, but also by degree of fluency of the Bulgarian language and integration into Bulgarian society.

The language attitudes of the Turkish people in Bulgaria would have differed significantly if such policies were not enacted, and perhaps Turkish would be spoken much more freely and with greater pride even on the streets of Varna.

### **Conclusion:**

Based on this preliminary study, I think that urbanization, Bulgaria’s acceptance into the European Union, and the inevitable shift towards Bulgarian will put the Turkish language and ethnic identity at risk in the long term. Even now, there are no active programs to maintain Turkish, but energy is instead focused on learning Bulgarian. In Varna, many children of Turkish families speak very little, if any, Turkish. Turkish is increasingly seen as a useless language and many people tend to prefer Bulgarian for instrumental purposes. Additionally, when Bulgaria is formally accepted into the European Union, more Turkish people will be proud to be from Bulgaria, and will perhaps increasingly embrace their Bulgarian identity. Television and readily available music from Turkey in compact Turkish communities, as well as trade and commerce with Turkey may perpetuate the use of Turkish, but in the long term, Turkish will probably continue to be seen as less and less important. In the last century, in the road from Lopushna to Varna, Turkish people have learned that the limits of their Bulgarian language skills are the limits of their life in Bulgaria.

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