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WHERE LANGUAGE IS RIPPED APART: ABSENCE AND ILLEGIBILITY IN BILGE KARASU'S *THE GARDEN OF DEPARTED CATS*

Abstract:

This essay explores the linguistic and figural repertoire of the postmodern Turkish novelist Bilge Karasu (1930-1995), historicizing Karasu's textuality amid efforts in the Republic of Turkey to engineer a 'pure Turkish' ('öz Türkçe') cleansed of the multilingual Perso-Arabic expressions of Ottoman and early post-Ottoman belles-lettres. Dickinson argues that Karasu's texts embrace and exploit precisely this engineered language, in order to then critique and defamiliarize the ideologies of language that engendered it. More broadly, the essay meditates on linguistic purity and modern monolingualism not only as constraints on meaning and literary craft, but also as a potential reservoir for the poetic and civic imagination.

Keywords:

Linguistic engineering ♦ Turkish literature ♦ postmodernism ♦ language purism ♦ translation

A medieval monk, having arrived at a present-day caravanserai after the gates have been closed, scans its solid stone walls until a gap from another time opens. Entering through this space, he encounters a traveler who, in turn, describes his own whispers as hieroglyphs that must be deciphered (50). The traveler proceeds to read the monk like a hieroglyphic image, rendering him two-dimensional in an imaginary frame in the air. Yet as soon as the traveler attempts to sign this image, the monk begins to cough, spitting up the contents of his stomach, then dark clots of blood, and finally his lungs, piece by piece (50).

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Reading this scene from the third fairytale of Bilge Karasu's *The Garden of Departed Cats* (*Göçmüş Kediler Bahçesi*, 2003 [1979], hereafter referred to as *Garden*) reveals an aspect of Karasu's literary language that has been left largely under-researched thus far. Much scholarship has focused on Karasu's brilliant use of *öz Türkçe*, or 'pure Turkish.'¹ Yet scholarship has not yet questioned how and why Karasu uses precisely this radically pure form of modern Turkish to develop the self-translative narratives of travel and metamorphosis so characteristic of *Garden*. As the story of the medieval monk illustrates, Karasu's language plays on the trope of legibility. By vomiting into the frame of his face, the monk resists being made legible, and both his whispers and his image are left indecipherable. Yet this same act of violent self-destruction renders the monk's body simultaneously hyper-legible; turning himself inside out, the monk literally lays himself bare before the traveler. As such, his 'arrival' at the caravanserai actually prefigures his disappearance.

In this article, I ask what it means to create a literary language that highlights its own nonimmediacy, given a monolingual paradigm based on the promise of linguistic "purity" and legibility. Reading the stories in *Garden* within the history of Turkish language reform reveals a Republican desire for legibility insistent on the erasure of difference. Whereas nationalist rhetoric emphasized the natural and essential character of the new language, its origins are actually conditioned by various modalities of translation, ranging from script adaptations to broader translation movements from the Ottoman period through the early Republican years and beyond. By opening up spaces of potential illegibility and contamination, *Garden* questions what has been obscured, othered and rendered alien in the history of Turkish linguistic modernization through its adoption of a monolingual paradigm. Like the medieval monk, Karasu's texts constantly threaten to turn themselves inside out, interrogating the notion that language can constitute a present, contained and recognizable speaking populace. As such, he reveals the impossible purity of his own language, by rendering *öz Türkçe*—and its myth of an original and authentic Turkish vernacular—Other to itself.

Writing Beyond Language Reform

With the founding of the modern Turkish Republic in 1923 on the model of a Western European nation state, the ruling regime now known as Kemalism instated a series of nationalizing and secularizing reforms.² In the realm of language this entailed the top-down implementation of a monolingual paradigm,

through the production of an *öz Türkçe*, or an ostensibly pure Turkish vernacular. This project was largely enabled through the establishment of state organizations such as the Society for the Investigation of the Turkish Language (*Türk Dili Tetkik Cemiyeti*). With the main goal of “uncovering the essential beauty and richness of the Turkish language” (“*Türk dilinin öz güzelliğini ve zenginliğini meydana çıkarmak*”), the establishment of this society in 1932 marked the triumph of a radical purist agenda over more moderate proposals for reform.³ Over the following three years, the Society set out to purge all foreign vocabulary and grammatical structures from the new language.⁴ In place of words removed from the language, the committee was charged with 1) collecting vocabulary from older Turkish language texts that had since fallen out of usage, 2) creating and clarifying methods for the creation of new words in accordance with Turkish roots, and 3) uncovering words of purely Turkish origin that could be used as replacements for foreign words (Lewis 2010, 49). A “mobilization to collect words” (“*söz derleme seferberliği*”) was initiated to achieve this final task; committees consisting of teachers, doctors, army officers, and various government officials were established throughout the provinces to collect and record words currently in use amongst the Turkish population. The widespread use of military terminology to describe the mission of language reform paved the way for a Republican comparison of linguistic purification to the Turkish War of Independence: “The Turkish nation” declared Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, “which knows how to establish its government and its sublime independence must save its language from the yoke of foreign languages” (Çolak 2004, 75). Ironically, the inherent epistemic violence of this attempt to unify and purify the language and nation was met at the time with an undeniable heterogeneity of Turkish dialects. Together with material gleaned from older Turkish texts, vocabulary from 126,000 documents submitted through the mobilization effort was compiled and published in a registry called the *Tarama Dergisi* in 1934. It is now a matter of general consensus that this mass of largely undigested linguistic material brought about a state of linguistic chaos. In many cases, upwards of 27 possible “Turkish” equivalents were offered for a single Persian or Arabic loan word. Intermediary writers were often required to “translate” newspaper articles and official documents into modern Turkish with the aid of the registry, and in many cases vocabulary substitutes were made at random.

This period of radical purification culminated in Atatürk’s admission that the language had entered into a “deadlock” (“*çıkılmaz*” quoted in Lewis 2010, 53),

and subsequently in his official endorsement of The Sun-Language Theory (Güneş-Dil Teorisi) at the third Turkish Language Conference. Tracing the beginning of language itself to the first moment when man saw the sun and exclaimed “ah!,” this theory identified “ağ” as the first-degree radical of the Turkish language, and thus posited Turkish as the civilizational *Ursprache*. On one hand, it provided a more moderate solution to language reform, by slowing an otherwise rapid process of linguistic expulsion, arguing strategically for the Turkic origin of foreign loan words and therefore for their provisional retention. At the same time, the universalist basis of the Sun-Language Theory rested on the same denial of alterity found in radical purification, by upholding the fiction of an originary and authentic Turkish as a scientific proof. Persian and Arabic loan words that had already been “spectralized” (Ertürk 99-103) through script change were now forced into a Turkish projection of self-sameness based on an all-or-nothing approach to assimilation.

The Sun-Language Theory was eventually discredited, but the project of purification continued beyond Atatürk’s death (1938) under the government of İsmet İnönü. While its approach to the production of an official *öz Türkçe* free of foreign influence has since undergone several phases, the Turkish Language Institute—the Society was renamed as the *Türk Dil Kurumu* in 1936, hereafter referred to as TDK—continues to regulate and develop the language today. In addition to the production of official dictionaries and grammar reference books, the Institute publishes linguistic research, contemporary scholarship, translations, and literature in its bi-annual and monthly journals.

Bilge Karasu’s 1958 essay “Irresponsible Purification” (“Özleştirmede Sorumsuzluk”) offered a strong defense of the project of language purification at a time when the TDK and the very concept of *öz Türkçe* was subject to increasing debate. The public intellectual and prominent Institute member Ağah Sırrı Levend has described the 1950s as a “challenging trial period” (“çetin bir sınav evresi,” Levend 1972, 486) for the Institute. Upon the introduction of a multiparty system, the TDK was accused by the new ruling Demokrat Parti of having lost its scientific character and was cut off from government funding in 1951. The majority of the stories in *Garden*—several of which were published in the TDK’s monthly journal *Türk Dili* (*The Turkish Language*)—were written between 1968 and 1971. Amidst accusations that it had been “interfering” with the natural state of the language (“müdahale etmek”) through the “fabrication” (“uydurmak”) of new words, the Institute continued to be highly controversial during this time

period (Levend 1972, 506). Despite such prevailing criticism, Karasu's essay clearly endorses the Institute at the tail end of the 1950s. Arguing that language reform began with and is indebted to its existence, Karasu draws a connection between the different historical phases of the Institute. His characterization of reform prior to its foundation as "scattered" ("dağınık"), "individual" ("kişisel"), and "ineffective" ("sonuçsuz," 108), further figures the TDK as both a contemporary and historical necessity, echoing Republican rhetoric that asserted an historical rupture with its Ottoman predecessor.

Karasu's 1958 essay closes by underscoring the need to push forward with Turkish language reform by striving for a "Turkish of Western dimensions" ("Batı ölçüleri içinde bir Türkçe," 111). Suggesting that the Turkish language must advance along the lines of Western civilization, he argues: "In order to become Western we must think. First of all our language," ("Batılı olmak için de düşünmek gerek. Başta dilimizi," 111). Such statements suggest Karasu's general assent to the important role language reform was designed to play in the Kemalist project of modernization as Westernization, and its establishment of one official national language through recourse to an ostensibly pure Turkish vernacular. An examination of the actual content of the stories in *Garden* nevertheless suggests an additional need to interrogate just what Karasu means by the terms West and Western, and the role this plays within his own utilization of a monolingual paradigm informed by a history of epistemic violence.

In her call to read Karasu outside the national frame, Deniz Göktürk (2013) analyses *Garden* as an elaboration on the concepts of "Westernizing" and "becoming European." While depictions of a "steppe city" ("bozkır kenti") in *Garden* evoke Ankara and central Anatolia, the novel opens with the main narrator arriving in a "medieval city located in the center of this narrow peninsula that stretches like an arm into the Mediterranean" (1, "Akdeniz'in iki kolu arasındaki ensizce kara parçasının ortalarına rastlayan bu ortaçağ kenti," 9). That this geography is meant to evoke Italy is supported by the mysterious chess game with live players in *Garden* that strongly resembles that of Marostica in the region of Veneto. Emphasizing the significance of medieval Northern Italian city-states for the development of democratic and capitalist systems central to contemporary urban European life, Göktürk argues that *Garden* takes us on a journey to the center of Europe. This is, however, a Europe that is potentially Mediterranean and Levantine, one that overlaps with Turkish territory, and extends in time from the medieval to the present. Göktürk's emphasis on the

darkness of Karasu's tales suggests a potential darkness at the core of European civilization. This idea is supported by Karasu's fascination with the story of Carlo Gesualdo, which he incorporates into the 12th and final fairytale of *Garden*. A brilliant composer of 16th-century madrigals who also brutally murdered his wife Maria d'Avalos, this story reveals the "terrifying, dark savageness that often underscores modern works of art, and reminds us that this kind of violence is not absent from European civilization" ("modern yapıtların altında korkunç karanlık bir vahşet yatabildiğini, Avrupa uygarlığında da bu tür dehşetlerin eksik olmadığını hatırlatır bize," Göktürk 2013, 223). As one piece of "a fairy tale ripped apart," which itself reveals the rips and tears of a potentially pure öz Türkçe, Gesualdo's story suggests not only the potential violence of European civilization, but also the potential violence of language itself.

Within this context, what does Karasu's imperative to *think*—rather than to simply *think in*—'our' language mean? Rather than suggesting an inherent lack in the expressive quality of modern Turkish vis-à-vis the 'West,' I read this as a call to think the history both of öz Türkçe as a radically purified form of modern Turkish, and the ideological violence of the Western European paradigm of monolingualism upon which it is predicated. Recalling the story with which this article opens, the medieval monk renders himself inside-out at the moment the traveler attempts to sign his image. Like the name of the traveler—which cuts into the monk's bare flesh with a carver's knife—Karasu's use of öz Türkçe performatively elaborates the violence inherent in the concept of linguistic ownership that monolingualism perpetuates.

Yasemin Yıldız (2012) has shown how a concept of language as the property of those that speak it developed through an emerging understanding of language as a namable, countable object reflecting the idiosyncrasies of its native speakers; such reification of language in late Enlightenment and early Romantic philosophy paved the way for a political linkage between language and nation (7-8). Jacques Derrida's call in *The Monolingualism of the Other* for a radical form of linguistic depropriation—in which 'having' or speaking a language does not express any possession of it—emphasizes the proximity between laying claim to language and the politics of naming: "Every culture institutes itself through the unilateral imposition of some 'politics' of language," writes Derrida. "Mastery begins, as we know, through the power of naming, of imposing and legitimizing appellations" (39). Republican language reform in Turkey could be understood broadly as a project to conceptually rename and reshape society through the

implementation of myriad individual acts of naming and renaming. The 1934 Law of Surnames (Soy Adı Kanunu), for example, required all citizens to take a last name in accordance with the rules of öz Türkçe, within two years. Later that year, Ottoman titles designating social or official rank such as paşa, gazi, efendi and bey were banned, and generic Western style titles Bay (Mr.) and Bayan (Mrs.) were introduced into the language (Çolak 2004, 82).

In contrast to the Republican imposition of Turkified names, endless cycles of transformation and deferral in *Garden* suggest rather the painful process of learning to speak a language devoid of names or fixed categories of understanding. In the story “Avından El Alan” (“The Prey”), for example, a fish engulfs and eats away at a fisherman’s arm. In an attempt to come to terms with his extraordinary relationship to the fish, the fisherman searches for a name he believes to have heard in the past, but can no longer remember. This process is likened to a form of self-viewing, in which man and fish are reflected in a series of endless mirrors, each containing an image of a different “creature” (“yaratık”): “A man whose arm is the body of a fish; a fish whose mouth holds a human head; a man swallowed by a fish; a fish and a man coupling, a man who is a fish who is a man, a fish, a man, self-coupling... endlessly” (16, “Bir kolu balık bir adam, ağızından insan başı bitivermiş bir balık, bacakları arasından boğazına dek bir balığın uzandığı bir adam, bir insanla çiftleşmiş bir balık, bir balıkla tekleşmiş bir adam, kendi kendiyile çiftleşen bir balık, kendi kendiyile çiftleşen bir adam... sonu yok bunun,” 24).⁵ Only in the search for a name that cannot be found does the fisherman gain a view of himself from the outside; the text’s refusal to fix the self affords the reader in turn an external view of the öz Türkçe through which the fisherman is described.

Yet *Garden* is by no means devoid of names and naming practices. It contains rather a proliferation of uniquely descriptive names and neologisms. While each name in itself has a certain untranslatable quality, together they forge a language capable of change through its ability to turn on itself. The neologism orfinoz, for example, is actually an amalgamation of two words, but is used to depict the fish in “The Prey” as neither orfoz (grouper fish) nor orkinoz (blue-fin tuna, 18). A fish like no other, it has never been caught, seen, or heard; even after the fish “catches” the fisherman, he remains the fisherman’s secret burden, invisible to the outside world. Defined only in the negative, the word orfinoz suggests that the inventive quality of neologism can actually enact a process of unnamings, in that it expresses a peculiar indescribability. Rather than a form of fixation, it

gestures toward the self's unknowable qualities. A similar example is the mysterious "Alsemender" flower in a story so titled. A footnote informs the reader not to search for this name in the dictionary: "Even if you find it, this flower is a fabrication" (179) ("Bulsanız da, uydurmadır bu çiçek," 161)."

Yet the very idea that a "fabrication" may actually be found in a dictionary raises questions regarding the processes of linguistic regulation, and the ways reality is constructed in and through language. With both the archaic Turkish meaning of "crimson" and the poetic Persian meaning of "fraud" or "deceit," the word "al" suggests differing potential translations for the flower's compound name. Both meanings of "al" reference the mythic "Red Salamander." Born of fire, this creature was met by such disbelief it was driven to eat a single leaf of a certain flower—later named Alsemender—to change its color, conform to an accepted truth, and lead a normal existence. Like the mythical salamander, the unreal quality of this flower is highlighted in its name. Ironically, the competing, equally accurate potential meanings of Alsemender, suggest through their reference to myth and deception that names do not always accurately reflect that which they describe. As with the neologism *orfinoz*, the name Alsemender puts the very practice of naming into question by rendering etymology and the search for linguistic origins unreliable. Its combination of Turkic and Persian elements suggests rather the impossibility of uncovering a pure, singular self and points to the important role myth plays in redefining linguistic lineages.

Words such as *orfinoz* and Alsemender reveal that, for Karasu, developing the language from within entails a constant questioning of what it means to be "essentially" Turkish. They suggest the need to think through the ideological underpinnings of "purity" from within an *öz Türkçe* rendered Other to itself. My argument here is inspired by what Yasemin Yıldız has termed "writing beyond the Mother Tongue." In *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (2012), she argues that the concept of monolingualism—and the natural, organic relationship of every individual to one specific "mother tongue" it perpetuates—are too ideologically entrenched in our daily lives to simply avoid. Regardless of what terminology we choose, the concepts of origin and identity they evoke do not simply go away. In order to work through them, she argues, we cannot simply write in a nonnative language; we must "[write] beyond the concept of the mother tongue itself" (14).

Karasu arguably does just this by going beyond the limits of official language reform and the establishment of an official, national form of modern standard Turkish meant to unify the nation linguistically. He both recognizes research conducted by the TDK as an essential linguistic foundation without which the contemporary Turkish author would dead-end before the initiation of language reform, and argues further that every author must implement the new language on an individual level through his writing (see Karasu 2009, 111). Karasu does this by calling attention to the self-translative nature of his own pure Turkish, suggesting a need to reread the history of Turkish linguistic modernization in pursuit of the inherent difference-in-language that has been hidden, covered, or contained in its wake. In reference to Karasu's own essay, we might term this a "responsible" method of purification, or one that reflects on its own impossibility.

The Impossible Search for Linguistic Purity, Or Ripping Language Apart

Yıldız has shown how philosophies such as Herder's, which viewed language as inherent to the genius of a specific Volk, paved the way for a political linkage between language and a national collective. Similarly, a post-Enlightenment emphasis on the individual's organic connection to one specific mother tongue upheld a static mode of belonging that could not account for "blurred boundaries, crossed loyalties or unrooted languages" (2012, 8). On the contrary, the idea that proper self-expression was limited to the realm of the mother created a state of "historical amnesia" (9) regarding multilingual configurations.

In the Turkish case, a certain amount of willed historical amnesia regarding the multiethnic and multilingual character of the Ottoman Empire was coupled with the valorization of an even earlier history. The Kemalist regime sought to establish a new and secular Turkish over and against the image of an outdated, religious Ottoman, in part through recourse to the language of pre-Ottoman fairytales, epics, and folk literature, such as the tales of Dede Korkut and the mystical poetry of Yunus Emre. In reconfiguring myths of lineage and origin, the legibility of the new language both asserted itself against older forms of Ottoman power and elitism, and activated an older history and a submerged linguistic tradition.

At the same time, the project to forge an authentically pure form of modern Turkish out of the hybrid Ottoman language—which incorporated Turkish,

Arabic and Persian grammar and vocabulary and was written in the Perso-Arabic script—coded any necessary incorporation of difference as a natural element of the new language. The 1928 Alphabet Reform (Harf Devrimi) is an excellent example of this. The new phonetic script utilized Latin letters and diacritical markings from German, Romanian, French and Hungarian. Despite its clearly foreign origins, it was treated as a “native” element of national Turkish culture, while the old Perso-Arabic script was marked as both illegible and alien (Ertürk 2011, 91-93). Depicting the Latin alphabet as the “new Turkish letters” (“yeni Türk harfleri”) was one important aspect of the Kemalist desire to forge an independent, modern Republic that identified itself as European: “So long as Turkish was written from right to left” argued Kemal, “it could never properly express the ideals of European civilization. The picturesque involutions and intricacies of the Arabic script afforded a psychological background to the Oriental mentality which stood as the real enemy of the Republic” (quoted in Çolak 2004, 73). The language of this quotation both figures the adoption of the Latin script as a necessary measure for progress and reveals a Republican anxiety about its Other/past due to an internalization of European Orientalist depictions of the Ottoman Empire. As such, the Kemalist utilization of the Latin alphabet and the paradigm of monolingualism to forge a linguistically pure Turkish identity together signaled Turkey’s belatedness vis-à-vis European civilization.

Within this rhetoric, which identifies becoming European with containing the ambiguities of Ottoman and the Arabic script, Nergis Ertürk has identified another key element of language reform. The Republican desire to create a completely phonetic script—one in which consonant combinations such as “sh” and “ch” were rejected in favor of the single letters *ş* and *ç*, for example—signifies an attempt to eradicate ambiguity by containing the very otherness of language itself (2011, 90).⁶ Ertürk contextualizes this argument within late Ottoman debates on script reform. At the forefront of these debates was the perceived insufficiency of the Arabic script to represent the sounds of Ottoman Turkish.⁷ Diverse proposals for orthographic reform emphasized a gap between Ottoman spelling and pronunciation, and identified the ambiguity and hybridity of the Arabic script as an obstacle to literacy.⁸ While debates regarding the need to simplify or vernacularize the language asserted on one hand the cultural autonomy of Ottoman from Persian and Arabic traditions, they also revealed a tendency to control and contain the language. In its self-assertion against the authority of logocentrism, an emerging phonocentric discourse focused on the

need for a one-to-one correspondence between signified and signifier, phoneme and individual letter. Through its contemporaneity with the global communications revolution, the desire for phonocentrism actually placed new limits, through its mass distribution in new print media, on a written Ottoman language “freed” from the recitative power of authorial presence. Within this context, Ertürk argues that the process of vernacularization was not simply:

the discovery of an unquestioned nativity, but rather ...an encounter with a seductive and terrifying Unheimlichkeit. With the intensified use of language as a communicative and translative medium, the nativizing impulse of phonocentrist vernacularization paradoxically (re)exposed speakers and writers to a foreignness inherent in the “native” language itself. (2011, 43)

With respect to this history, the epistemic extremity of the Republican search for a pure Turkish vernacular cannot simply be explained as an act of Occidentalist mimicry. It reveals even more an inherent “fear of the uncontrollable difference of language itself” (Ertürk 2011, 88), and öz Türkçe’s own translative origins.

That *Garden* is driven by a sense of fear is evident already in the opening quote of the novel, from Talat Halman, which could be translated as both “The truest fairy tale is the one we are afraid to understand,” or “The truest fairy tale is the one we fear without understanding” (np, “En doğru masal anlamadan korktuğumuzdur,” 7). Set by itself at the bottom of an otherwise blank page, this quote gestures to the absent space above and below it. The implied fear of absence is tied to Karasu’s use of the fairytale form. The collection and revaluation of fairytales (masallar) and folk literature (halk edebiyatı) was central to the national myth of a pre-Islamic ur-Turkish Volk, and a pure Turkish vernacular prior to the establishment of the Ottoman Empire and the influence of Persian and Arabic on the language. Combing through pre-14th-century texts in search of “Turkish” words that had fallen out of usage was also an important element of the early Republican language reforms. Whereas fairytales were thus utilized both in the historical and linguistic realm to express a Turkish national collectivity, Karasu’s tales point to the gaps in this forged collective consciousness through a language that refuses to render its characters, or itself, fully present. Such tensions between absence and presence are replicated structurally in the 12th and final fairytale, which resists a sense of closure or completeness by ripping itself apart into fragmentary sections:

4.

Fear, our dirt we are most inclined to cover, our odor we must struggle to conceal.

1a.

Fairytales, (...) are always born somewhere when the habitual flow of life, when this fabric of habit is suddenly ripped apart. (254)

4.

Korku, örtmeğe en yatkın olduğumuz kırımımız, gizlemeğe en çok uğraştığımız kokumuzdur.

1a.

Masallar (...) alışagelmış bir düzen içinde akıp giden yaşamın bir yerinde, bu düzen, bu alışılmışlık dokusunun yırtılıvermesinden ortaya çıkmıştır hep. (227)

The structural paralleling of “fear” and “fairytales” in this section—of a simultaneous covering up and ripping apart staged in and through language—is also an apt depiction of the tensions in Karasu’s own use of öz Türkçe. Like the “doku,” or the woven texture of habits Karasu cites, his language is also a meticulous, tightly woven construction.⁹ Yet by suggesting that his tales are actually born at a ripping point, Karasu gestures to that which lies beneath the surface of his texts. In the essay “‘Why Fairytales?’ You Ask...” (“‘Niye Masal?’ Dediniz De...”), Karasu argues that reality is also ripped apart (“yirtilevermek”) at the point where fears and anxieties exceed our habitual routines. Forgotten movements or modes of orientation (“yönelişler”) crawl around in the muddy ooze into which they escape.¹⁰ Derived from the verb yönelmek, to orient oneself or to move toward something, Karasu’s use of the word yöneliş carries possible implications within the history of Turkish language reform. Despite the orientation of öz Türkçe toward a European model of monolingualism, it suggests the impossible orientation of language in any one specific direction. In contrast to late 19th- and early 20th-century reforms that sought to contain and limit the translative nature of the Turkish vernacular, *Garden* reveals that we can never fully control language. In the final section of this article, I offer a closer examination of what I mean by Karasu’s self-translative style, arguing that

Karasu creates his own omnidirectional mode of linguistic orientation by refusing to arrive into his own language.

Cartographies of Non-Arrival

Garden's tales of travel and metamorphosis are also marked by the themes of non-arrival, disruption, and deferral. Characters that do physically arrive somewhere find themselves in an altered state or incomprehensible situation, suggesting that something residual is always lost in the crossing. These thwarted arrivals suggest the impossibility of correct translation or successful transfer; they gesture toward a theory of linguistic relativity that asserts essential differences between languages and their modes of thought. And yet the impossibility of complete arrival is also arguably a source of creativity and freedom in *Garden*. The untranslatability of Karasu's language does not resist translation conceptually, but rather demands a process of infinite translation, thereby forging a new, transformative öz Türkçe in its wake. Here I do not mean to imply a theory of universal translatability; I read *Garden* rather in the sense of what Barbara Cassin describes as untranslatable words. While intraduisibles, she argues, are "symptoms of differences [among languages... T]o speak of [them] does not imply that words, expressions, syntactic and grammatical forms are not and can never be translated: rather, they are continuously translated, their translation is a never ending process, giving rise to ceaseless inventions [in the different languages]" (quoted in Balibar 2009, 208). Untranslatability thus enacts a movement in language that the very possibility of a complete translation would halt; suggesting a perfect and smooth transfer, the concept of completeness obliterates the heterogeneity that translation inserts into language, and denies the radical heterogeneity of language itself.

One such intraduisible is the place name "Sazandere" in "The Man Who Misses His Ride Night After Night" ("Geceden Geceye Arabayı Kaçıran Adam"). A name the protagonist has no recollection of first hearing, Sazandere is first and foremost a dreamlike projection. Though latent with the protagonist's love of water, this beach-town of his imagination does not logically describe a place by the sea: "sazan" refers to the fresh water fish carp, and "dere" to a small brook or stream, both reminiscent of a small, central Anatolian town. The incongruity of this name with the protagonist's imagined site of arrival is compounded by his inability to even depart. For 16 consecutive days and nights he searches for a bus amidst the chaos and cacophony of the terminal; lists of departures to both real

and imaginative place names suggest the impossibility of directly charting a route to or even locating Sazandere on a map. He finally boards a bus as if in a dream, describing the shiny new vehicle as a ship, gliding weightlessly to its destination. Yet when forced out of his bus in the dead of the night, the protagonist finds himself in a desert-like region, his feet sinking into fine, floury sand. In contrast to his earlier experiences swimming, in which his fish-like body became one with the water, “grasp[ing] life with [its] whole being” (25, “dirimi bütün varlığıyla duyar, kavırdı,” 31), he is overcome by a sense of curiosity and inexplicable wonder. In the utter absence of the sea, he could be described as a fish out of water—a carp in a dried-up stream—suggesting that the name Sazandere refers in some way to himself, rather than to any locatable destination. That he has indeed “arrived” at an altered version of himself is suggested again as he stumbles upon a house at the bottom of a sand dune, with elderly dwellers who have anticipated his coming for years.

This unreal form of self-Othering is foreshadowed on multiple levels in the story: In his search for the right bus, the character begins to view himself as if through a camera, then later through the “keen gaze of multiple lenses” (30, “kat kat merceklerin keskin inceliğiyle,” 35). These moments of self-viewing occur in indented format; separated structurally from the main story; they nevertheless open out of and into it through paragraphs that begin mid-thought, and end without punctuation. The unique and untranslatable quality of the name Sazandere lies in its ability to replicate this process of splitting in a single word; by enacting a movement to unexpected places, meanings, and referents, it facilitates multiple possible arrivals, none complete in and of itself.

In its resistance to mapping out identifiable spaces, words such as Sazandere undermine a nationalist paradigm of öz Türkçe that connects its speakers to the redefined, bounded space of the modern Turkish Republic. A similar process of disorientation is achieved in “The Tunnel” (“Dehlizde Giden Adam”) through the distortion of an otherwise linear journey. Upon entering the tunnel, a young man walks toward a faint source of light that he assumes will open out to the other side of an island. The path is described as straight, with no curves or corners. Yet he arrives again and again at reflections of light in mirrors mounted on the tunnel wall, suggesting the existence of an angle. In his confusion, the man loses sight of what is forward and backward, entrance or exit. “What is the true light?” he asks himself, “What is it? What is its source? What will happen in the end?” (106, “Gerçek ışık neydi ki?... Neydi? Nereden gelirdi? Ne olacaktı?,”

99). Yet even as he formulates these questions, he realizes that they have become meaningless; his goal has become instead the very state of walking.

Itself subject to endless processes of deferral, the “light” of this story offers its character no coordinates of orientation. And while the story both begins and ends with reference to the sun, Karasu refuses to ever actually depict it. Even the opening paragraphs describing the natural beauty of the island focus on the sea, which “[reflects] the sun’s full heat as in a mirror” (99, “Ayna gibi güneşin bütün sıcaklığını [yansıtıyor],” 93). In contrast to the Sun-Language Theory, which reified the concept of öz Türkçe by asserting its status as the civilizational Ursprache, the journey of Karasu’s young character posits the impossibility of locating an absolute origin. And whereas the Sun-Language Theory is based on man’s utterance upon first looking at the sun, Karasu’s character finally emerges from the tunnel into the sun’s warmth, only to discover that he is blind. Rather than ever arriving into an originary language that can confirm his identity, this character can be said to arrive again and again into a perpetual state of translation—similar to that described by Derrida as “absolute translation,” or:

a translation without a pole of reference, without an originary language, and without a source language. [...T]here are only target languages, the remarkable experience being that these languages cannot reach themselves because they no longer know where they are coming from, where they are speaking from and what the sense of their journey is. (1996, 61)

For Derrida, this state of absolute translation is a reflection of what it means to speak the French language as a Franco-Maghrebian. The revocation of Algerian Jews’ citizenship under the Vichy regime not only left this minority group stateless, but also put the very concept of French as a mother tongue—or a language of birth that naturally ties one to a culture, nationality, and citizenship—into question. The concept of an “absolute translation” with no identifiable origin highlights the processes of linguistic disenfranchisement this minority group incurred through the colonial imposition of French, both from North African languages such as Berber and Arabic, and from the French language itself.

While Republican Turkey was by no means a colonial power, similar processes of linguistic disenfranchisement and alienation can be identified in its universalist approach to language politics. The 1924 constitution established the official

language of the Republic as Turkish, and recognized all citizens as Turks. It did not grant minority status to those with a mother tongue other than Turkish, nor provide a clause regarding education in non-Turkic languages (Sadoğlu 2003, 276). On the contrary, all minority language usage was restricted to the private domain, and campaigns such as “Citizen! Speak Turkish!” (“Vatandaş! Türkçe Konuş!”), utilized People’s Houses (Halk Evleri, state sponsored centers for continuing education) to “convert” non-Muslims and non-Turkish Muslims to the new Turkish language (Çolak 2004, 81).¹¹ While the Lausanne Treaty (1923) stipulated that there should be no restrictions placed on the use of non-Turkic languages by non-Muslims in Turkey, many schools run by Jewish, Armenian, and Greek communities closed in the early Republican years due to increased state interference (Sadoğlu 2003, 276). Strategic resettlement programs (in 1927 and 1934) further aimed to redistribute Kurdish linguistic communities into more densely Turkish-populated regions. Thus while various ethnolinguistic minorities—including Albanians, Bosnians, Bulgarians, Arabs, Kurds, Zaza, Circassians, Georgians, Laz and Romani—were guaranteed full Turkish citizenship, this was true only under the conditions of full, and often forced, linguistic and cultural assimilation.

While Karasu himself identified as a Turkish citizen, it is notable that he was born to an Eastern Orthodox mother and Jewish father (Karasu 2012, 6) and that his entire oeuvre of novels, short stories, poetry, and essays is informed by a sense of alterity. Whereas the paradigm of purity sought to erase difference from an otherwise plurilingual society, Karasu’s use of *öz Türkçe* negotiates the tensions between legibility and illegibility, purity and impurity through the development of a self-translative style that affirms the alterity of language itself.

In his essay “The Task of the Translator” ([1923] 2002), Walter Benjamin describes the language of translation through the relationship of form to content: in contrast to the language of an original, which covers its content like the tight fitting skin of a fruit, the form of translation is “foreign” (“fremd”) to its content, enveloping it like the wide folds of a robe (79). The multiple points of shifting contact and intersection engendered by folds suggests a language—like Karasu’s—that can not be pinned down, named, or owned.

Yet even more than a disjuncture between form and content, Karasu’s self-translative style develops through tensions within the ostensibly pure form of *öz Türkçe* itself. The short story title “Avından El Alan” is an prime example of this.

Striking first and foremost for its alliterative and rhythmic quality, this title is a unique demonstration of Karasu's beautiful and literary use of öz Türkçe. The story, in which a fish swallows a fisherman's arm up to his elbow, enacts the literal meaning of the title, "taking the hand from the prey." By reconfiguring the fisherman as "prey," the title also plays on the archaic idiom 'el almak,' to take permission from a master. In this reversal of hunter and hunted, the self—and thus also the language that produces the self—is constantly rendered other. Together, the literal and literary meanings of 'avından el alan' suggest the impossibility of definitively naming the story they describe. In contrast to the romanticization of a pure Turkish prior to foreign influence, Karasu revives an archaic Turkic phrase that has fallen out of usage only to render it vulnerable to new contexts and unexpected meanings.

In contrast to the monolingual view of languages as discrete, countable systems, phrases such as 'avından el alan' uphold Derrida's understanding of language as open to constant deformations, transformations, and graftings (1996, 65). They embody Karasu's own understanding of linguistic "Turkification" ("Türkçeleştirme")—or the "transferring" of older texts into "today's language," ("bugünün diline aktarma")—as fundamentally a labor of translation ("çeviri" 2010, 61). Just as translation can never occur simply on the level of the word, the process of "Turkifying" for Karasu requires much more than simply reviving older words, or replacing Ottoman words with new Turkish equivalents. It involves creating and conveying entire systems of value from one epoch to another. In this sense, translation is not, indeed cannot be, about a transferable ("aktarılabilecek") object. The concept of transfer both suggests a smooth translatability that ignores the heterogeneity of the past and present, and suggests the existence of only one correct direction of movement. Karasu's understanding of "Turkification" suggests on the contrary that the movement from past to present is not necessarily unidirectional. His assertion that myriad elements of Ottoman Turkish reside in the new language both suggests an element of historical continuity, and posits that the very act of "Turkifying" is actually a self-translative process.

Structurally, Karasu enacts the impossibility of translation-as-direct-transfer through the cyclical method of narration in *Garden*. Structured around the hours between noon and midnight the novel undergoes one rotation of an analog clock while simultaneously suggesting that it is out of sync: The spring, or "kurgu," of the man's watch in the sixth tale is portrayed as working without unwinding.

Stopped at the noon hour, this “kurgu”—which is incidentally also the word for a work of fiction—suggests a correlation between the image of the stopped watch and Karasu’s own narrative style. Like this clock, the untranslatable quality of *Garden’s* language could alternately be described as a narrative refusal to move forward, while nevertheless progressing through a method of self-translation that refuses to move in only one direction.¹² His texts are structured rather like a multi-dimensional wheel, an image Karasu uses in the penultimate chapter of *Garden*, to describe his character’s ascent of a mountain that has never before been climbed:

Make the rim wider and extend the spokes at various angles from the hub. The first spoke meets the rim at one edge, the last one at the opposite edge, while the spokes in between are set slightly, very slightly off from one another so that only two spokes, diametrical opposites, extend to the same plane. This way, each plane is separate from but also co-exists with the others. Each signifies a different field of vision, separate from but also related to the others... (223)

Teker çemberinin yeni artırılabilir, poyradan çıkan parmaklar aynı düzlem üzerinde dizilmez. İlki çemberin bir ayrıtına, sonucusu da karşı ayrıtına gelip dayanacak, aradakiler de, ufak ufak kaymalarla, hep ayrı düzlemler üzerinde tutularak dizilecektir birinden öbürüne doğru. Ancak ikişer parmak aynı düzlem üzerinde bulunacak. Her düzlem hem ayrı olacak öbürlerinden, hem öbürleriyle kesişecek. Başka başka görgü alanlarını imleyecek bu düzlemler, birbirilerinden ayrı ama birbirileriyle ilişkili... (200)

Aron Aji reads this wheel as an illustration of Karasu’s entire creative project, which he describes as a self-referential hermeneutic system that “moves both horizontally and vertically, forward as much as inward, [and] widens as much as it deepens” (2013a, 6-7). This is also an apt depiction for the structure of *Garden*: a collection of fairytales interwoven with a title story, in which the content of each tale connects or comments on that of every other. The tales themselves were written over a period of several years but are not arranged in chronological order of composition; dates following each chapter further suggest that several of the tales were re-written multiple times over a period of up to eleven years. Like the tales in *Garden*, the multidimensional wheel moves forward, but through a cyclical process; where the narrative appears to progress, it may shift backward in time, something that appears to be new may only be a repetition. In this way,

Garden also attempts to create a new form of linguistic travel by allowing öz Türkçe, its core structuring element, to traverse the space of its stories omnidirectionally.

Rather than a language that simply refuses to arrive, I want to conclude by suggesting we could alternately understand Karasu's öz Türkçe as a "language of arrival." Closely tied to Derrida's concept of absolute translation, this is a language that only arrives from an origin that is no longer recognizable. Gürbilek has described Karasu's language in similar terms as stripped bare, or purged of its recent past and memory. It is by bringing language back to a lost, forgotten and estranged origin, she argues, that Karasu forges new modes of meaning and expression (193-194). For Derrida, this kind of language holds a promise for the future through a potentially radical depropriation of language. As such, this language is nevertheless "impossible, unreadable and inadmissible;" it produces events that are "unverifiable" and often "illegible," as they are always "promised rather than given" (66). In contrast to the illegibility of the ethnic or linguistic Other, Derrida posits a language that is illegible because it has not yet been fully conceptualized. It exists rather in a state of translation from an origin that is itself multiple.

In his article on translating Karasu, Aji describes the image of the multidimensional wheel as both an amazing ("şaşırtıcı") and impossible ("imkansız") structure that is reflective of both the invented and inventive quality of Karasu's language, which becomes purer and more clarified precisely in its ability to extend ("genişlemek") borders (2013, 20). Aji's use of the word "extend" rather than transcend is telling; whereas to transcend suggests the existence of a fixed border that can be crossed, "extend" implies the impossibility of determining and exploiting the set borders of language.

In the preceding argument, I have attempted to show how Karasu brings this element of language to the fore by exposing the self-translative origins of öz Türkçe, thereby undermining the authentic or originary linguistic identity the concept upholds. In forging an omnidirectional öz Türkçe that refuses to render the characters of *Garden* present, Karasu also puts into question the power of a national language to render a speaking populace present, and to enforce the borders of a nation by constituting recognizable space. At the same time, the inherent impossibility of the multidimensional wheel reminds us that *Garden*, its content, and its open-ended method of narration offers its readers a certain

promise that has not yet been, and may never be fully completed. Indeed, the very concept of completion runs the risk of reappropriating the mechanisms of possession and power in the monolingual paradigm *Garden* critiques.

At the same time, *Garden* gestures to the risk it runs of reinstating the very borders it probes and undermines. As an utterly new and unique form of expression, Derrida warns that any language of arrival harbors a certain claim to originality dangerously close to the language of the master. It is no coincidence that Karasu emphasizes the very particular nature of his narrator's journey in "Another Peak," by depicting the scope of the mountain's otherwise legendary view only at a moment when the text shifts from third to first person narrative. That this character's journey can be read as a metaphor for Karasu's own method of narration suggests also the establishment of an individual, creative, perhaps even original use for öz Türkçe amid the monolingual paradigm.

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¹ Nurdan Gürbilek, for example, has argued in "Yazı ve Arınma" that Karasu is the first author to have created a truly literary form of öz Türkçe that does not feel forced or calculated. Aron Aji has described his work as "forc[ing] the limits of modern Turkish," inventing a lexicon previously unavailable ("Discussion of *A Long Day's Evening*") (2103b). In emphasizing the dynamic quality of Karasu's language, Aji argues that Karasu "translates the creative possibilities of the [modern Turkish cultural project] into a [form of] modernist literary expression" ("Artificer") (2010).

² Reforms included but were not limited to the adaptation of the European 24-hour day, a new system of secular primary and secondary schools, creation of a family law,

increased women's rights, abolishment of the Şeriat courts and adaptation of the Swiss Civil Code.

³ "Tarihçe." Türk Dil Kurumu Official Website. <http://www.tdk.gov.tr>. Viewed August 28, 2013. See Çolak for a discussion of more moderate proposals for language reform.

⁴ Sadri Maksudi (Arsal)'s *Türk Dili İçin* (*For the Turkish Language*, 1930) was crucial to the initiation of this project. In this book he put forth a concept of öz Türkçe that could recoup the loss of Turkish national character he identified in the gradual weakening of the Turkish language. According to Maksudi, such an öz Türkçe should be established through the elimination of all foreign words from the Turkish vocabulary, the creation of new words in accordance with the rules of the Turkish language, and the collection of words currently in use by the Turkish people.

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of *Garden* are taken from Aron Aji's translation *The Garden of Departed Cats*.

⁶ A nine-member "Language Council" (Dil Encümi, Dil Heyeti, later replaced by the Language Society) was established in May 1928 to study the applicability of Latin letters to the Turkish language. A 41-page "Alphabet Report" (Elifba Raporu), written by İbrahim Grantay in the name of the council, was submitted on 1 August 1928. This report emphasized in particular questions of orthography, stressing the need for one-to-one correspondence between each individual letter and sound. It further established the Istanbul dialect as the basis for a national phonetics (milli fonetika) (Sadoğlu 225, Ertürk 90). Atatürk introduced the "new Turkish letters" shortly thereafter through a speech at the public Sarayburnu park on 9 August 1928.

⁷ The Perso-Arabic script has a total of three vowels (ا, و and ي, which can be employed as long or short vowels), in comparison to Turkish's eight (a, ı, e, i, o, ö, u, ü). It also contains consonant sounds, such as the glottal stop, that are not present in words of Turkic origin. As a result, the same Ottoman spelling may have multiple pronunciations and meanings. Perhaps the most famous example of this is اولمق, which could be read as both "olmak" (to be) or ölmek (to die). See Lewis, chapter 3, for a detailed discussion of the applicability of the Perso-Arabic script to Ottoman.

⁸ Proposals ranged from the invention of new diacritical markers to represent the vowels of Turkish or writing all letters out unconnected on the line, to the adoption of a Latin-based script. See Ertürk (39-42) for a detailed description of diverse proposals. See Lewis, Chapter 2, for an overview of the changing use of Arabic and Persian grammatical constructs in Ottoman.

⁹ Nurdan Gürbilek also makes use of this metaphor in reference to Karasu's language: "If one thread were to be pulled, it is as if the whole woven texture [of his text] would dissolve" (my translation, "Bir iplik atıverse, dokunan kumaş da sokulup gidiverecek sanki," 182).

¹⁰ Derived from the verb yönelmek, to be inclined or headed toward, yöneliş implies a form of orientation, or a movement toward something.

¹¹ These houses were also utilized to educate native Turkish speakers in the Turkish of the center, or the official Istanbul dialect of Turkish.

¹² Karasu describes "eastern narrative forms" (252, "doğunun yerleşegelmış anlatı biçimleri," 224) in a similar manner in the final tale of *Garden*: "Stories within stories" or "frames within frames" (252, "kutu kutu içinde, çerçeve çerçeve içinde anlatış," 224) move forward cyclically, heading toward the innermost story of the collection rather than progressing linearly. Deniz Göktürk has identified the tales of *Kalila and Dimna*, which utilize similar narrative techniques, as an important influence for *Garden* (*Garten* 268). Otherwise known as *The Tales of Bidpai*, this collection was originally written in Sanskrit in the 3rd century BCE and made its way into Western European literature by way of translations from Arabic and Persian.