A TURK INVENTED THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL AUXILIARY LANGUAGE

The Bālaybalan language was the world’s first Esperanto.

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Ahmed Ekmekçizâde, who was a cavalry soldier from Edirne when he joined the Ottoman Treasury, rose rapidly through the ranks, and eventually became Minister of Finance during the reign of Sultan Ahmed I [1603–1617]. He served in this position for many years without hiatus.

This man had a brother named Mehmed Muhiddin. That man took a keen interest in both science and philosophy. He had received a diploma in reading from the ʿulemā of Edirne. Later, he drew himself to one side, and devoted his studies to religious, mystical, and philosophical works. At the same time, namely the year 1573, Çivizâde Efendi, who was famously opposed to those expounding philosophical and mystical views, was appointed to the kadılık [municipality] of Edirne. One day, seeing Mehmed Muhiddin engrossed with reading a book at the mosque, the Kadi Efendi called him over and asked him which book it was. Mehmed Muhiddin handed it over to him. Çivizâde Efendi examined the book and realized that it was the famous work named the Fusūs [or Ringstones of Wisdom], belonging to the great Muslim Sufi ibn ʿArabi [1165–1240].

He thereupon asked, “Why are you reading this book?”

The other one said modestly, “To learn something.”

“This is not a book that you will understand and the people who are unable to understand the knowledge within it will take the wrong path.”

“I think I do understand it.”

Çivizâde, furious with this response, read some passages from the book and asked him to explain them. Mehmed Muhiddin explained them so well that he finally said,

“Very well, you got it… in fact, I must admit that you even understood what I could not understand.”

After a few years had passed, Mehmed Muhiddin Efendi rose to the rank of treasurer in Egypt [in 1552], together with his brother. A little while later, he performed the Hajj. Once again he returned to Egypt. There he became associated with the Gûlşênîzâde Sheikh, Seyyid Ali Safvetî Efendi, and became his son-in-law. Thereafter, he dedicated his whole life to reading and writing, so that he produced twenty-six works in total. Finally, he passed away in 1605.

Mehmed Muhiddin supported the idea that all people, or at least all the peoples of the Middle East, should find a single common language, even though at the time the Turkish, Arab, and Iranian scholars knew the languages of these three peoples; Arabic and Persian were necessary to learn. On the other hand, the books written in these three languages could be read by the scholars alone, and those who were only moderately literate and especially the common folk could not understand a thing, while those who knew these languages knew only enough to read and sometimes to write them, and were not capable of speaking them. For example, a Turkish scholar, who knew Arabic with all of its subtleties, who could read, understand, and even write it, could not speak it. Consequently, it was common in the Middle East that the common folk within the nations speaking these three languages had no way to deal with each other, despite their shared religion, scholarly tradition, and to an extent even their cultural unity.

Enter Mehmed Muhiddin, who vowed to demolish this barrier. The first goal was to develop a common language for all the peoples of the Middle East. He hoped that this language would spread to the whole world over time. He immediately began to work towards this end; however, this was no easy task. For this language, a single alphabet, rules of grammar and syntax, and vocabulary were needed. He chose to use the Arabic alphabet that was commonly used at that time among the peoples of the Middle East. This was not, however, the simple alphabet of the Arabs, the Turks and Iranians also used such letters as p, č, and ž. The rules of its grammar were completely invented. He adopted the syntax used by the Arabs to organize sentences. As for the vocabulary, he himself says in his book:

“People are the builders of languages. They do this by means of the power given to them by God. In the Noble Koran, it says that God taught people the names of all things; therefore, we are the ones who create the words. The most perfect language is Arabic. After that comes Syriac. Turkish was originally one of the languages spoken in Asia; but there is [also] a huge difference between Arabic and Persian. As for this language, either its words were created on my part, with divine inspiration, and left as they were, or they were taken from other languages and modified [from their original forms].”

Mehmed Muhiddin explains these things in the preface to his book, which has now passed into our hands. This book consists of a grammar and a dictionary. We have not come across another copy in any library catalogue. We have received word of a

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2 This is likely Sheikh Ahmad Ḵayâlî, who was the son of Ebrâhîm b. Mohammad b. Ebrâhîm b. Šehâb-al-Dîn Golšanî (d. 1534), the founder of the Golšanî order. See T. Yazıcı, “Ebrâhîm Golšanî,” Encyclopædia Iranica XI/1, pp. 111–112 and XI/2, p. 113.

3 According to Yazıcı (113), Moḥyî Mohammad Golšanî claims to have written one hundred different works, of which only 43 survive.
single copy in the British Museum in London.\(^4\) Mehmed Muhiddin invented a new language, to which he gave the name Bālaybalan. The date of this book’s composition is 1580, meaning that it coincides with the reign of Sultan Murad III [1574–1595], the grandson of Suleiman the Magnificent [1520–1566].

In this language, the letter m comes at the end of the infinitives. For example, baram means ‘to know.’ Bar translates to ‘know!’ With ki, it is the name of a place. Kibar = ‘a place to know’ (a school). With -ak, it is the name of an instrument. For example, kavam is ‘to open,’ so kavak means ‘an opening tool’ (key). The words for which the letters nak come at the end indicate an excess of something. Barnak is someone who knows a lot (a sage). To make an adjective from the noun, än comes at the end. For example, fanam = ‘to show forgiveness,’ fan = ‘show forgiveness!’ fanäm [sic] = translates to ‘showing forgiveness’ (Arabic rahmän).

Ka at the end of a word indicates smallness. Bar = ‘know!’ barka = ‘a little knowledge.’

When it comes to verbs, it would take too long to list them all. Let’s give a few examples:

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\begin{align*}
Baram &= ‘to know,’ bar &= ‘know!’ , \text{baras} = ‘he knew,’ \text{barar} = ‘he knows.’ \\
\text{For the form of address, ki comes at the head: kibarar} &= ‘you know,’ kibaras &= ‘you knew,’ \\
\text{ki} &= ‘you (pl.) knew,’ \\
\text{kibarar} &= ‘you (pl.) know.’ \\
\text{The letter l mainly indicates a negative meaning. For example, labar} &= ‘know not!’, \text{labaras} &= ‘he didn’t know,’ \text{labarar} &= ‘he doesn’t know.’ \\
\text{Then the b indicates the first person. For example, barasab} &= ‘I knew,’ \text{bararab} &= ‘I know,’ \text{labarasab} &= ‘I didn’t know,’ \text{labararab} &= ‘I don’t know.’ \\
\text{The sound z indicates the passive voice. For example, hadram} &= ‘to hit,’ \text{had} &= ‘hit!’ \text{hadrar} &= ‘he hits,’ \text{hadsar} &= ‘he is hit’ \text{and balam} &= ‘to kill,’ \\
\text{balsam} &= ‘to die.’^{5} \\
\text{The sound a is used to make nouns from verbs. Bar} &= ‘know!’, \text{bara} &= ‘knowledge.’ Sometimes the words that were originally a revert to the sound ā: \\
\text{Tafam} &= ‘to cry,’ \text{taf} &= ‘cry!’ \text{tâf} &= ‘crying,’ \text{barbil} &= ‘information.’ \\
\text{As for the numbers, they are as follows:} \\
\text{Ad, baz, jāl, dom, han} &= 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 \\
\text{Adyā, bazyā, jalyā} &= 11, 12, 13 … \\
\text{Adgar, bazgar, jalgar} &= 21, 22, 23 … \\
\text{Avkā, bazkā, jalkā} &= 100, 200, 300 … \\
\text{Avgan, bazgan, jalgan} &= 1000, 2000, 3000 … \\
\text{Adam,}^{6} \text{bazam, jalam} &= \text{first, second, third …} \\
\text{Ādd, kêz, jāl} &= \text{single, double, triple …} \\
\text{We understand that there are 4,000 words in the glossary at the end of the book:} \\
\text{1 – Ones with an a vowel (these are the majority):} \\
\end{align*}
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\(^4\) The British Museum’s catalogues make no reference to any such manuscript, but the 1922 catalogue of Persian manuscripts does reference an 1813 article by Silvestre de Sacy, which was the first scholarly work on Bālaybalan; see E. Edwards, Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts in the British Museum, 1, London, 1922, p. 136, and de Sacy, “Ketâb ʾAṣl al-Maqâṣid wa-faṣl al-Marâṣed: Le capital des objets rechâché de la chapitre des choses attendues, ou Dictionnaire de l’idiome Balâîbalân,” Notices et extraits des manuscrits de la bibliothèque Impériale et autres bibliothèques, 9 (1813), 365–396.

This is presumably the source of Sertoğlu’s confusion, as he is seemingly unaware of de Sacy’s article and the other known Bālaybalan manuscripts, such as Ms Persan 188 in the Bibliothèque nationale de France and Islamic Manuscripts Third Series no. 265 in the Manuscripts Collection of the Princeton University Library. Yazıcı notes (113) that a copy of Loğat va-qavâ’ed-e Bālaybalan, apparently the same manuscript described by Sertoğlu, exists in the Egyptian National Library and Archives, together with Maṣâdir-e Alṣena-ye Arba’ā, a quadrilingual dictionary with a column in Bālaybalan.

\(^5\) The Paris Ms, fol. 27r, clearly glosses this root as ‘to revive’ (Ottoman dîr kurmak, Persian zeyânid, Arabic ‘elīyā) and balan with the Arabic word mohi (hence bāl-a ybalan ‘Mohyi’s language’).

\(^6\) Sic. De Sacy (374) glosses wāsam as the ordinal ‘first.’ Bausani notes that this is irregular, as in many of the natural languages of the world; A. Bausani, Le lingue inventate: linguaggi artificiali, linguaggi segreti, linguaggi universali, Roma, 1974, p. 92.

\(^7\) Sic. In the Paris Ms, fol. 141r, the form given is simply ād.
Jagam = ‘to be soft,’ kafam = ‘to sob,’ raam = ‘to flow,’ ragam = ‘to sit,’ zogam = ‘to swallow,’ safam = ‘to forget,’ vagam = ‘to shine,’ ‘to intend,’ šamam = ‘to smell, e.g. a rose.’

2 – Ones with an ā vowel:
Pākām = ‘to strike a fire,’ āfām = ‘to bark,’ tākām = ‘to sob,’ hākām = ‘to wither.’

3 – Ones with i [or e] as the first sound:
Dīnam = ‘to be summer,’ sīnam = ‘to love,’ niam = ‘to bless,’ mīnam = ‘to show gratitude,’ segam = ‘to squeeze,’ keyam = ‘to hack.’

4 – Ones with o as the first sound.
Šofam = ‘to break,’ kofam = ‘to become moldy,’ mofam = ‘to buy cheaply,’ yotam = ‘to lay an egg.’

Obviously, some of these are words taken from Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. For example, words like minam and niam are from the Arabic [words menna and neʿma], mofam (moft = ‘glutton’) is from Persian, and words like segam [sic] and keyam were derived from the Turkish [words sığmak and kıymak]. The roots of these types of words are always disyllabic.

A few sentences in the Bālaybalan language:
Danas lašamarā ni vārā = ‘Spring is here, they do not smell the roses’ (Even though spring is here, they haven’t smelled the roses).
Tākā, kākasā labararā kafam = ‘Cry, they withered away, they didn’t know to sob’ (Go cry! Those who don’t know how to sob have withered away).

By examining Bālaybalan’s quite simple, entirely orderly rules, which quickly come to remain in the mind, it is obvious that it is a language which can be quickly learned. Unfortunately, however, it did not spread, perhaps because it did not learn from any other invented ones. There are even poems of Mehmed Muhiddin written in this language. Nevertheless, the important thing is to consider that 385 years ago there was an international language and an incredible effort made to bring it about.

Midhat Sertoğlu (1913–1995) was a Turkish historian, journalist, and novelist. Known for his scholarship on Ottoman history, he lectured on this subject at the Faculty of Literature at Istanbul University, while when he was serving at the Public Records Directorate (1961–71). He received degrees in Arabic and Persian Philology, History of Philosophy, and Pedagogy from the same institution.

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With the exception of the information enclosed in brackets and provided in footnotes, the preceding was translated from Sertoğlu’s 1966 article “İlk Milletlerarası Dili Bir Türk İcat Etmişti,” which appeared in Hayat Tarih Mecmuası 1 on pp. 66–68. Sertoğlu transcribed his samples of Bālaybalan using the Turkish alphabet, for which the following substitutions have been made:

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<th>Vowels:</th>
<th>Turkish</th>
<th>Bālaybalan</th>
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<th>Consonants:</th>
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<td>Bālaybalan</td>
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8 Sic. In the examples above, Sertoğlu lists the root for ‘to wither’ as hākām, not kākam. Additionally, he translates lašamarā, kākasā, and labararā as second person forms, despite the absence of the second person marker ki.