

# Let's learn foreign languages !

Monday 11 June 2007, by [Cengiz Aktar](#)

**Is it terrible if different intermingled communities know the other's language? With this, would not we have a better chance to know each other well ?**

A recent news report was reading: *"Turkey planning for an effective fight against the Armenian genocide allegations will train diplomats to become experts on Armenia. For the first time, Turkish Foreign Ministry sends a young diplomat abroad to learn the Armenian language. Since there is no diplomatic relation between Turkey and Armenia, this young diplomat will be sent to some other country providing language courses in Armenian."*

However, learning Armenian in Turkey is a piece of cake. It is the same for Greek too. Approximately 20 Armenian and 13 Greek schools are active in Istanbul. But these schools are only for 'regular' Turkish Armenians and Turkish Greeks. It is almost impossible for the children of mixed marriage or the children of converts to attend these schools. Even the children of about 20,000 illegal workers from Armenia whom we proudly mention about to western observers cannot attend these schools, nor can they attend any other school though. Schools for minorities work just like ghetto schools. As if they are open to all Turkish citizens, the slogan, *"We all are Armenian"* chanted during Turkish Armenian journalist Hrant Dink's funeral comes to realization, or the Lausanne Treaty will be violated! But could not these educational institutions be allowed to teach Armenian and Greek to those who are willing to learn, including candidate diplomats, by finding an interim formula, for instance via alumni associations ?

## **Better chance to know each other well**

All minorities living in Turkey automatically know or learn Turkish beside their mother tongue. But overwhelming majority of Turks is monolingual. If the easiest way to understand each other is through the language, what needs to be done is clear. Is it terrible if different intermingled communities know the other's language ? With this, would not we have a better chance to know each other well ? Foreign Ministry's project to teach Armenian looks like obeying the logic of *"learn your enemy's language to cope with him well"*. The point here is not to better understand our fellow citizens and neighbors who speak different tongues and also to benefit from intellectual richness of being multilingual. The same news story continues to read: *"As a second priority the decree points at the Middle East and Iraq. A Turkish diplomat is being sent to London in order to have a Master's degree on Iraq's social structure. Seven new diplomats will learn Arabic and have higher education on the Middle East at the Middle Eastern Technical University in Ankara. Therefore, bottleneck of having Turkish diplomats fluent in Arabic to serve in the Middle East will be overcome. The Ministry will also provide opportunities for young diplomats to learn Russian, Japanese, Chinese and Greek. So far, a total of 27 Turkish diplomats were sent abroad to learn foreign language and gain expertise, in accordance with the said decree."*

Among diplomats there are those who learn foreign languages by their own. However, there was not any planned education scheme until this decree. Though it is late, this is something to be appraised. In Turkey, foreign language level of foreign ministry, academia and public in general is well known. It is limited to dominant foreign languages. Moreover, Spanish and Russian are not among these. Since turning our face to the West, we lost even our ability to read our history ; we either forgot the languages spoken around us or failed to learn them. Learning Arabic and Persian was banned during K-12 education since 1929. With the abolishment of Darülfünun (higher education system during the Ottoman) in 1934, it was even banned in universities for a while. We have already talked about the situation in Armenian and Greek. Forget about learning Kurdish; it does not cross no one's mind.

## **Language is richness**

However, language is richness first of all, a common richness of humanity, let alone its benefits. Linguists say a bilingual or multilingual person has higher level of intellect than a monolingual. To store and keep different words in memory, to parse and pronounce them later require more brain activity. Multilingual people have broader perception and learning capacity and that make them open to innovations and change. They are more harmonious. Monolingual people on the other hand, have tendency to show negative or even aggressive reactions as they have limited perception capacity compared to multilingual persons.

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### **Sources**

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