Power and solidarity through language choice at select minority-run Istanbul restaurants

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Beginning with the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, policies to promote Turkish as the single official language were accompanied by systematic attempts at linguistically (and culturally) assimilating non-Turkish speaking citizens such as the Kurds (Gunther 1990, Içduygu et al. 1999, and Co351;kun et al. 2011) Despite the currently legal status of Kurdish in non-state affiliated settings, open use of the language in public spaces may still carry considerable stigma (Saraço287;lu 2009, 2011 and Güzeldere 2011). In thus way, language choices among the Kurdish-speaking community in Turkey take into consideration a history of subordination at the macro-political level and on-going stigma as the community level.

The current investigation analyzed the code-switching patterns of Kurdish workers in eleven Kurdish-owned and operated eating establishments in Istanbul. As the high positions of the workplace hierarchies were filled by fellow members of the subordinate group and a number of customers were also Kurdish, these sites could be categorized within Woolard’s (1985) and Heller’s (1994) notion of alternative marketplaces for its workers’ freedom to deviate from the norms dictated by the dominant culture. Transcript data from kitchen and dining room-situated interactions were analyzed to assess workers’ language choices across eight discourse functions. Follow-up interviews with managers and workers [N=40] addressed the reasons for these language choices.

These data associated Kurdish with solidarity and collaboration in both worker-worker and manager-worker conversations. This link reflects the traditional relationship between the shared minority language and low social distance (Cavallaro & Chin 2009). On the other hand, Turkish was associated with power-driven, one-sided communication: authoritarian managers often chose Turkish to make face-threatening complaints and demands. These findings reflect deeply rooted connections between the Turkish language and authority as well as Bourdieu-based predictions of managers’ reproduction of the social hierarchy despite the alternative workplace context.

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