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Lemma 5.25

Arabic Loanwords in Tatar

Arabic was a superstrate language for Volga Tatar (and the predecessors of the modern Tatar language) for over a thousand years, with economic and political ties to the Islamic world established well before the Volga Bulgars' early-10th century conversion to Islam, and the influence of Arabic on the Tatar language was significant. Up until the 19th century, Tatars shared three literary languages with the other Muslims of Russia: Classical Arabic, Classical Persian, and Chagatay. The first Arabic loanwords in Volga Turkic languages date to the early 10th century (Schnerer 1977:14, Mäxmütov 1993a:5), and the mid-19th century saw the rise of a Tatar literary language that was based on the Kazan dialect but heavily influenced by Arabic and Persian. This literary language was written in Arabic script, which had succeeded pan-Turkic runes as the regional writing system in the 10th century. As can be seen from the approximately 800 pages of Arabic loanwords found in Mäxmütov et al.'s (1993) dictionary of borrowings, by the early 20th century a significant portion of the lexicon of literary Tatar was of Arabic origin – and the majority of these words were incomprehensible to those speakers of the vernacular who were not educated in Arabic and Persian, a sociolinguistic situation much like that of 19th century Turkey.

Lexical reform begun by Tatar intellectuals in the late 19th century was undertaken with the aim of closing this gap between the literary language and the language of the people and promoted the use of native Turkic words in literary Tatar; due to this reform movement, the Arabic-Persian element of texts by many authors, which at the turn of the century could be as high as 65%, decreased significantly (Mäxmütov 1993b:797). The number of Arabic loanwords used in Tatar was then drastically reduced by politically motivated Soviet-era lexical reform, when Soviet linguists replaced most of the Arabic and Persian loanwords in Tatar with Russian loanwords, such that half of the entries in today's standard Tatar-Russian dictionaries are Russian borrowings. This relexification was accompanied by two alphabet changes in quick succession: in 1927 from the Arabic script to a Latin-based alphabet and in 1938 to a Cyrillic-based alphabet. The end result is that Arabic influence in modern Tatar is significantly less than it was a century ago. In order to be comprehensible to the reading public, pre-Revolutionary Tatar texts are now presented in the Cyrillic Tatar alphabet and with glossaries when they are reprinted in post-Soviet newspapers and magazines (e.g., Mädrıyeva 1998, where 18% of an excerpt from a 1908 article is glossed).

Arabic loanwords started appearing once more in written Tatar along with *perestroika* (in the mid-1980s), a symbolic gesture readily perceived by many Tatars as more than purely linguistic in nature (cf. e.g., Safıullına et al. 2000). The return of Arabic loanwords is part of purist post-Soviet linguistic reform on the part of the Tatar intellectual and political elite, where the implicit goal is the creation of a Tatar language that is maximally distinct from Russian. This lexical reform is therefore congruent with the highly contested 1999 Tatarstani legislation that decreed yet another shift in orthography, this time away from the Tatar-specific Cyrillic alphabet based on that of Russian to a new Latin-based alphabet similar to the one used for modern Turkish (Wertheim 2003).

Arabic loanwords, which are presented here in standard Turcological notation, have had a moderate effect on the phonological structure of Tatar and were integrated in a variety of ways. The table below shows the relevant merger and adaptation of Arabic consonants and vowels:

Arabic	Tatar
taa', ʔaa'	t
ḥaa', khaa'	χ
ghayn, 'ayn	γ
sin, ʕaad, thaa'	s
zay, ʕaa', daal, dhaal	z
long a	a
a	ä

Arabic loanwords often violate Tatar's front/back vowel harmony, and the Tatar allophones *k/q* and *g/γ* have become phonemic due to Arabic borrowings where *q* or *γ* are adjacent to front vowels. Tatar suffixes usually assimilate in quality to the final vowel of the loanword (e.g., *kitaplar* 'books' and not **kitaplär*); however, the *nisbe*-ending *i* in loanwords does obey vowel harmony, and has the front allomorph *-i* and back allomorph *-iy*, e.g. *ädäbi* 'literary', *χosuszy* 'individual'. Borrowed Arabic feminine nouns end in either *-a* or *-at* with occasional doublets that parallel those found in Persian, the source for most of these nouns (Perry 1991:142), e.g., *χäräkät* 'movement' and the now archaic *χäräkä* 'short vowel diacritic'; nouns without doublets include *χata* 'mistake', *šifa* 'medicine', *χökümät* 'government' and *säyähät* 'travel'. Borrowed Arabic nouns are freely suffixed with Tatar inflectional and derivational morphology, e.g. *möstäqillek* 'independence' (*möstäqil* 'independent' + *-lek*, the Tatar abstract nominalizer) and *χaläkara* 'international' (*χaläk* 'people' + the Tatar postposition *-ara* 'between'). In addition, the dummy verb *itärgä* 'to do' is used to create verbs from some loanwords, e.g., *däwam* 'continuation', *däwam itärgä* 'to continue', while others are created using native derivational morphology, e.g. *riža* 'agreement', *rižalašırğa* 'to agree' (where *-la-* is the verbalizer, *-š-* the reflexive, and *-ırğa* the infinitive).

The Arabic loanwords found in modern Tatar can be separated into two groups: everyday words that are encountered in regular speech and words that are used most frequently in literary registers. Words of the first sort, which are unmarked for register, were usually not removed during the Soviet-era relexification process and are generally perceived as native. These include nouns such as *däjtär* 'notebook,' *iman* 'belief,' *kitap* 'book,' *mäktäp* 'school,' and *tariχ* 'history,' and discourse-pragmatic and function words such as *älbättä* 'of course,' *ämma* 'but, however,' *qadär* 'as much as,' and *χätta* 'even.' By contrast, the majority of the archaic Arabic words that are in the process of being revived as part of Tatar post-Soviet lexical reform are more literary or formal, words primarily used to describe politics, literature, culture, and religion. Their use is not yet standardized, and more importantly, their use is not uncontroversial. The debate on the return of these archaic loanwords is played out most prominently in the pages of the daily press, which is also the primary vehicle for their reintroduction into post-Soviet Tatar. Some Arabic loanwords are found regularly in newspaper discourse, including *i žitimayiy* 'social,' *inqiyälab* 'revolution,' *iqtisad* 'economics,' *jömbüriyät* 'republic,' *χakimiyät* 'ruling power,' *mädäniyät* 'culture,' and *säyäsät* 'politics'. However, a complaint that surfaces regularly in post-Soviet Tatar discourse is that Arabic borrowings are being used overzealously, such that the language of the press is becoming increasingly alienating to average Tatar readers, or even periodically incomprehensible. Even so, the return of many Arabic loanwords to modern Tatar is a *fait accompli*, and part of linguistic reforms that are buttressed by political, cultural, and religious forces.

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