

Discussion of Orthographic Principles at the First Turkology Congress

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the scholarly views on orthographic principles discussed at the First Turkology Congress, held in Baku from February 26 to March 5, 1926, with the participation of 131 delegates. The study aims to identify the theoretical foundations of orthographic debates and evaluate their historical and linguistic significance in the development of Turkic language policy. The research is based on a systematic analysis of the stenographic records of the sixth and seventh sessions of the Congress and employs descriptive, comparative-historical, and interpretative methods. The study analyzes theoretical approaches to phonetic, morphological (etymological), historical, and ideographic principles, the methodological relationship between alphabet and orthography, and the spelling of loanwords. The positions of Shcherba, Zhirkov, Ibrakhimov, Aghazade, Baitursyn, Yakovlev, Omarov, Rakhimiy, Usmonov, and Shamil are comparatively examined. The findings demonstrate that the balance between phonetic and etymological principles constituted the central theoretical issue of the Congress debates. The study concludes that orthographic issues were considered not only linguistic problems but also essential components of broader educational, political, and cultural processes, and that the historical experience of the First Turkology Congress remains an important theoretical foundation for contemporary language policy and orthographic reform.

Keywords: First Turkology Congress; orthographic principles; Turkic orthography; phonetic principle; morphological (etymological) principle; loanword spelling; literary language unity; vowel harmony (synharmonism); social significance of orthographic principles

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the issue of orthography in the Turkic languages emerged as one of the most pressing scholarly-theoretical and social problems. Questions concerning language reform, the simplification of writing systems, and the improvement of literacy began to be widely discussed. The need to bring written speech closer to the general public and to make it phonetically precise and practically convenient became increasingly evident. Debates surrounding writing and orthography were not confined solely to the linguistic sphere; rather, they also acquired cultural-educational and socio-political significance. In particular, the question of whether the existing Arabic script corresponded to the phonetic features of the Turkic languages gave rise to intense discussions in scholarly circles. In this important historical context, the First Turkological Congress, held in Baku from February 26 to March 5, 1926, acquired particular significance in the history of language policy and script reform among the Turkic peoples.

The congress was organized with the aim of examining, on a scholarly basis, the accumulated problems in the history, ethnography, literary language, alphabet and orthography, and, more broadly, the cultural life of Turkic peoples, as well as developing ways to address them. In this respect, the event represented an important turning point in the history of Turkic peoples and went down in history as the First Turkology Congress.

The chairman of the congress, the Azerbaijani Samad Hasan oglu Aghamalioglu, assessed this conference as the first large-scale convergence of science and social practice, as well as the practical realization of the scholarly potential of the peoples of the East. Professor Sergey Rudenko, who delivered a report on

the ethnographic study of Turkic tribes, also interpreted the issue of language and alphabet as a natural process of historical development. According to him, changes in the writing and orthographic system are closely connected with people's cultural development and social needs, and this process should be regarded not as an artificial initiative, but as a historical necessity [6: 79].

At the congress, the existence of two fundamentally opposing views on the issue of writing – the position of those who supported a reformed alphabet based on the Arabic script and that of those who advocated a complete transition to a new alphabet based on the Latin script – further intensified the discussions. Therefore, in the stenographic record, the issues of writing, alphabet, and orthography are noted as among the most controversial and urgent problems on the congress agenda.

During the debates, the chairman of the congress particularly emphasized the importance of relying on deep scholarly reasoning when putting forward formulas such as “either this or that” or “both this and that” [8: 8]. At the same time, the literary scholar Huseynov, who participated in the congress on behalf of the Transcaucasian government, specifically noted in his speech that one of the most important tasks facing the Turkological Congress, alongside issues of history, literature, and Turkic philology, was to solve the problem of mass literacy [8: 15]. On this basis, the issue of writing reform was interpreted as a broad social necessity.

The urgency of the alphabet question was also acknowledged by Musabekov, Chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the former USSR, and Pavlovich, Chairman of the All-Union Scientific Association under the Central Executive Committee of the USSR. In their speeches, writing reform was interpreted as a strategic task at the state level. This indicates that the issues of writing and alphabet were viewed not merely as linguistic problems, but as integral components of a broader political and educational process.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Regarding the issue of orthography in the Turkic languages, N. Zhirkov notes that Professor Shcherba's general theoretical views on orthographic principles do not fully cover certain specific orthographic problems characteristic of Turkic languages. Therefore, he emphasizes the need to consider the distinctive issues relating to Turkic languages separately. In Zhirkov's view, one of the most complex aspects of Turkic orthography is connected with the spelling of numerous loanwords borrowed from Arabic. He argues that even if a theoretically perfect alphabet were created, not all issues of Turkic orthography would be resolved automatically: "If words belonging to the native layer of Turkic languages can be regulated relatively consistently and systematically on the basis of the law of vowel harmony, the borrowed layer, especially Arabic elements, does not fully conform to such phonetic harmony. For this reason, they create complexity within the orthographic system" [3: 38].

With regard to the issue of orthography, the Tatar scholar Olimjon Ibrakhimov stated that he had divided his report into three parts and, first of all, critically examined historical orthographic systems. He analyzed Uyghur, Orkhon, and ancient Arabic writing systems, seeking to reveal the roots of modern reforms. In particular, while addressing the possibilities and limitations of the Arabic script, he drew attention to the problem that vowel sounds were not fully represented in Arabic writing, noting that out of the ten existing vowels, only three were graphically reflected [8: 217].

Ibrakhimov emphasizes that the internal laws of the language must be taken as the basis for clarifying Turkic orthography. First, he identifies the law of vowel harmony as a key criterion and notes that, in constructing orthography, it is necessary to take into account the fact that words and affixes in Turkic languages follow the harmony of hardness and softness. In doing so, he argues that orthography should be built not simply on a phonetic basis, but on the phonological laws of the language. At the same time, the scholar advances the priority of the morphological factor in the orthographic system. In his view, especially under

the conditions of literary languages with many dialects, the absolute application of the phonetic principle may lead to the dominance of one dialect as the norm. Therefore, he stresses that the orthographic system should preserve phonological harmony while also ensuring morphological stability [8: 219].

In addition, the scholar places special emphasis on the need to coordinate principles among Turkic languages. In his opinion, issues concerning the introduction of new words or letters should be resolved through mutual agreement within the framework of Turkic literary languages. This approach is based on the idea of preserving common Turkic terminological and graphic unity.

In Rakhimiy's view, the issue of orthographic reform cannot be considered separately from the issue of the alphabet. In this respect, his views differ somewhat from Shcherba's position: while Shcherba proposed distinguishing orthography and graphics methodologically, Rakhimiy emphasized their direct interconnection. He argued that the difficulties of adapting the system based on Arabic script also intensified orthographic problems [4: 220]. Therefore, particular emphasis was placed on the need to address issues of writing and orthography in a comprehensive manner.

In addition, in order to form phonetic orthography systematically, he proposed compiling group dictionaries for Turkic-Tatar regions and, later, generalizing them into a single dictionary that would encompass the vocabulary and orthographic features of all dialects.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Discussion of orthographic principles at the First Turkological congress

The main ideas concerning the principles of orthography at the congress were put forward by Shcherba during the sixth session, held on March 1, 1926, under the chairmanship of Korkmasov. He first noted that, in scholarly literature, issues of alphabet and orthography are often interpreted in a mixed manner, and he substantiated the need to distinguish these two concepts clearly.

According to Shcherba, the fact that the Russian letter “o” is pronounced as “a” in certain cases is not a problem of the alphabet, but rather a phenomenon related to orthographic principles. For example, in the word *voda*, the letter “o” is written not on the basis of pronunciation, but according to morphological and historical regularities. By contrast, in French, the different pronunciations of the letter “g” before various vowels are regarded as a specific feature of the alphabetic system itself. He includes within the alphabetic system hieroglyphic and syllabic principles, as well as such phenomena as monography – one letter for one sound, digraphy – two letters for one sound, and trigraphy – three letters for one sound. Orthography, in his view, is formed on the basis of four principles: phonetic, etymological or morphological, historical, and ideographic [7: 208].

Alongside the theoretical content of orthographic principles, Shcherba also paid particular attention to their social significance. According to his views, the phonetic principle, which is based on the pronunciation of words, appears as the simplest and relatively most democratic principle. However, Shcherba considers this principle effective within a relatively small speech community where unity of pronunciation is preserved. For example, within a particular dialect or a narrow social group, the principle of “writing as one speaks” may not create significant problems. Yet, since language functions as a complex system within a broad social space, the emergence of pronunciation differences across various regions and social strata is natural.

From this perspective, it is emphasized that if everyone were to write on the basis of their own pronunciation, sharp variation would arise in the writing system; and if writing were to become fully dependent on pronunciation, the common literary norm could be disrupted [7: 210]. This approach shows that the absolute dominance of the phonetic principle may create certain risk factors for the stability and normative unity of the writing system.

In explaining the morphological principle, Shcherba emphasizes that, according to this principle, words are written

not on the basis of pronunciation, but according to their origin and structure, that is, their related forms – more precisely, the unity of roots, prefixes, suffixes, and endings. He analyzes this principle in comparison with the phonetic principle. In his view, strict adherence to the phonetic principle may turn writing from a consistent system into a mechanical means of recording individual pronunciation, since the phonetic principle does not sufficiently manifest internal necessity: the written norm is shaped more by pronunciation, and normativity is often ensured through external regulation. By contrast, the morphological principle explains the spelling of words through the internal structural laws of the language and strengthens the unity of writing by ensuring the stability of the graphic system.

Then attention is turned to the historical principle. According to this principle, words preserve the form in which they were previously written in subsequent periods as well. As the scholar notes, there may not always be a clear justification for this from the point of view of pronunciation; however, the continuity of written tradition emerges as an important factor. For example, in the Russian words *kogo* and *chego*, although a different sound is heard in pronunciation, the historical form is preserved in writing. Shcherba notes that the historical principle is especially strong in French and English, explaining this by the continuity of earlier pronunciation and writing traditions. In his view, historical orthography is closely connected with the experience of previous generations and makes it possible to maintain uninterrupted access to the literary heritage. If the historical principle is rejected abruptly, serious disruption may arise in the ability of a newly literate generation to read and understand earlier written heritage. Therefore, Shcherba regards the historical principle as a socially significant factor for peoples with a rich cultural heritage and places particular emphasis on the need to preserve a balance between innovation and tradition in the process of writing reform.

As for the ideographic principle, Shcherba connects it not with sound, but directly with meaning. According to this principle, the written sign bypasses the phonetic form and serves to express meaning. For example, in French, although the plural

form is often not perceptible in pronunciation, the meaning of plurality is clearly expressed through writing [7: 211]. Shcherba notes that the ideographic principle has an interethnic character and regards it as a phenomenon that stands above dialects and even national boundaries. However, he views this principle as a complex and wide-ranging issue for the future.

Shcherba warns against excessive reliance on the phonetic principle. In his view, it is not correct either to abandon the phonetic principle entirely or to accept it as the sole and absolute criterion. Otherwise, instead of facilitating literacy acquisition, the writing system may turn into a process of meaningless memorization. The etymological, or morphological, principle, by contrast, makes writing systematic and comprehensible, and helps reveal the internal logic of the language [2: 72-73]. For this reason, he identifies the balance between the phonetic and etymological principles as the most appropriate path for Turkic peoples.

Zhirkov noted that the spelling of loanwords was addressed differently across various Turkic languages: "in some cases, they are preserved in a form close to the original source, while in other cases they are adapted to the local phonetic system. This difference is not accidental, but is determined by historical and social factors" [8: 214]. The scholar emphasized that the influence of the upper social strata was strong in the formation of Turkic literary languages, showing that units borrowed from Persian and Arabic were often consolidated in a form close to their original shape. In his view, the complexity of spelling loanwords is connected with excessive adherence to the historical-etymological principle. On this basis, Zhirkov raised the question of whether Arabic loanwords should be preserved in their etymological form or written on a phonetic basis. On this issue, he also stated his own position: "Personally, I am in favor of applying the phonetic principle" [8: 214]. Here, the scholar advances practical convenience and simplicity as priority criteria in the process of orthographic reform. It is precisely on the basis of these criteria that he regards the phonetic principle as superior. He particularly emphasizes the need for a simple and stable writing system under conditions of low literacy. Criticizing the

insufficient development of the orthographic system in Turkic languages, he notes that normative instability is causing disorder in written speech. In his view, writing Arabic loanwords on a phonetic basis would be easier for the broader public than preserving them in their original graphic form.

Zhirkov expresses the social significance of orthography in a figurative manner: abandoning generally accepted writing norms is equated with “stealing the nation’s time.” Through this, he shows that normative instability may cause large-scale social harm. Thus, the issue of orthography is interpreted not only as a linguistic matter, but also as a factor of social and cultural significance.

Although Uzbek scholar Shokirjon Rakhimiy delivered a report on orthography and its social significance, it was not included in the stenographic record. His views are presented only briefly in translation by Usmonov. Rakhimiy emphasizes the existence of the law of vowel harmony in Turkic languages, particularly in Uzbek. According to him, although this law had partially weakened in urban speech under the influence of Tajik language, it had been relatively preserved in the speech of the rural population. It is also noted that in some dialects the number of vowel sounds may reach 6-8, or even 13. However, the lack of sufficient graphic means to represent them in the existing alphabet as well as the number of vowel sounds officially defined as six were regarded as one of the shortcomings of Uzbek writing system.

The Azerbaijani educator and researcher of the Committee for the New Turkic Alphabet, Farhad Aghazade, first delivered his speech in a Turkic language and then presented the theses of his report in Russian. His presentation was distinguished by a strictly normative approach. The scholar emphasized that exceptions should not be allowed in orthography and argued that all words belonging to Turkic language, including Arabic loanwords, should be written according to a single orthographic rule. In doing so, he opposed the parallel functioning of two different norms within the orthographic system. In his view, preserving a separate rule for the borrowed lexical layer undermines the unity of writing.

Among the principles of orthography, Aghazade identified the phonetic approach as the most suitable principle for Turkic languages. According to his views, the writing system should be based on the living phonetic structure of the language. The scholar emphasized that phonetic orthography should be formed not on the basis of a theoretical scheme, but through the observation of actual speech. In this regard, the sound structure of the language, vowel harmony, and the combinatory features of sounds within words should serve as objects of practical analysis. Thus, he argued that the orthographic system should be developed not as an abstract construction, but on the basis of living speech material.

With regard to Arabic loanwords, Farhad Aghazade took an even more categorical position: he supported not the preservation of their phonetic and graphic features specific to Arabic, but their complete adaptation to the laws of Turkic phonetics [8: 221]. This approach implies abandoning etymological spelling and supporting the priority of the phonetic principle.

Aghazade notes that the old and reformed Arabic alphabets do not meet the requirements of phonetic writing. In his view, the new alphabet adopted in Azerbaijan corresponds more closely to the criteria of phonetic writing. In this context, he lists a number of advantages of the new alphabet: the possibility of writing proper names and geographical names with capital letters; the convenience of clearly distinguishing simple and compound words through the system of letter connection; the possibility of correctly dividing words into syllables and transferring them from one line to another; and the facilitation of correct reading and writing in children's primers by marking stress on vowel sounds. At the same time, he enumerates seven conditions necessary for introducing phonetic orthography on the basis of the new Turkic alphabet and notes that European loanwords entering Turkic literature should also be subordinated to the laws of Turkic phonetics [8: 528].

Kazakh scholar Akhmet Baitursyn evaluates the issue of orthography not within the framework of a complex theoretical debate, but from the perspective of practical effectiveness. Addressing the relationship between orthography and alphabet,

he noted that their interdependence arisen mainly in cases where the alphabet was phonetically imperfect. Using examples from Russian writing, he criticized the mismatch between graphic signs and sounds. Among the principles of orthography, Baitursyn identified the phonetic principle as the most appropriate and complete model. However, he did not absolutely reject other orthographic principles. In his view, the etymological principle may be necessary in some languages, but since Turkic languages, particularly Kyrgyz and Kazakh, possess a system in which phonetic laws operate consistently, there is no need to apply the etymological criterion as the main principle in orthography.

Baitursyn also placed particular emphasis on the practical advantage of phonetic writing in matters of education. According to him, a writing system based on the phonetic principle facilitates the process of literacy instruction and contributes to the faster and wider spread of literacy. Thus, in determining the criteria of orthography in Turkic languages, pedagogical effectiveness emerges as an important social factor in Baitursyn's conception.

Responding to the supporters of the historical principle, Baitursyn rejects the idea of preserving traditional writing elements absolutely. In his view, accepting the elements inherited from the Arabic script as unchangeable and inviolable has no scholarly foundation.

In addition, with regard to the issue of loanwords, the scholar stated his support for phonetic adaptation, asking: "Why should we preserve this word as Europeans pronounce it? Attention should be paid not to the origin of the word, but to the people's pronunciation" [8: 222]. He emphasizes that the actual pronunciation of the word in the language of the people should be accepted as the main criterion rather than its origin.

Responding to Baitursyn's views, the Russian scholar Professor Yakovlev did not deny the connection between orthography and the alphabet. He noted that there was a certain functional relationship between graphics and orthography. He also regarded the predominance of phonetic orthography in languages where phonetic laws operated consistently as a natural

process. In his view, peoples whose writing systems are only beginning to take shape are compelled to rely on the phonetic principle at the initial stage of development. Thus, orthographic principles are not a universal phenomenon, but a process connected with the historical stage of language development. While the etymological principle may predominate in languages with an established written tradition, the phonetic principle occupies a leading position in languages whose writing systems are still being formed. Whereas Baitursyn justified phonetic orthography on the basis of educational and social effectiveness, Yakovlev explained this phenomenon from a historical-linguistic perspective and linked the relative priority of phonetic and etymological principles to the stage of language development.

Although Gabitov and Sa'diy spoke in Tatar, and Rakhimiy, as noted above, spoke in Uzbek on the interrelation between alphabet and orthography and on the main principles for determining orthography in Turkic languages, their speeches were not fully reflected in the stenographic record of the congress. At the same time, while the main theoretical considerations concerning orthography were presented during the sixth session, the debates on this issue became even more intense at the seventh session.

Omarov notes that there were views which regarded the phonetic principle as characteristic of "culturally less developed peoples," but he considers such a classification conditional and relative. He argues that the development of Kazakh language is determined not merely by the simplification of orthographic rules, but by the natural process of the language development. The central idea of Omarov's speech consists in interpreting language as a living system in constant development. From this perspective, etymological spelling is assessed as one of the factors hindering linguistic development. As a result, the phonetic principle is justified as a model corresponding to the natural evolution of the language.

Omarov emphasized that the non-inflectional character of Turkic languages, that is, the relative stability of the root, constituted an important structural basis for applying phonetic orthography. In his view, since the root does not change, the need

to appeal to the etymological principle decreases. However, Omarov also noted that the introduction of phonetic orthography was not without problems. In particular, phonetic processes such as palatalization or assimilation may create difficulties in determining written norms. Therefore, he stressed the need for a thorough linguistic analysis of the system of affixes, word formation, and the laws of word change in order to introduce phonetic orthography fully [8: 223].

At the next stage of the discussion, Usmonov and Shamil returned to the issue of the relationship between orthography and the alphabet. They emphasized that separating the issue of orthography from the alphabet methodologically did not mean denying their interconnection. Thus, the existence of a functional relationship between graphics and orthography is noted. According to them, “if the graphic system is sufficiently perfect from a phonetic point of view, the difficulties associated with orthography will also decrease” [8: 227]. On this basis, they put forward the need for a more perfect graphic system and defended the idea that writing reform should have a fundamental and systematic character.

In his concluding remarks, Shcherba stated that his report concerned the general principles of orthography rather than their direct application to specific linguistic conditions. He also rejected the claims that he had allegedly taken a particular position on the alphabet question and evaluated this issue as one connected with national, cultural, and political factors. Therefore, he particularly emphasized that he did not regard himself as a competent authority on the question of alphabet choice. This position indicates that Shcherba limited his scholarly role and saw himself as a theoretical specialist presenting general linguistic principles. At the same time, Shcherba recognized the phonetic principle as a theoretically ideal model, but stressed that, in resolving the issue of orthography, the criteria of expediency and practical benefit must also be taken into account.

In his concluding remarks, Zhirkov emphasized that some of the debates had arisen as a result of misunderstandings rather than methodological precision. As a practical solution to the issues that had been actively discussed, he pointed to the need for

the emergence of highly qualified linguistic personnel from within the milieu of Turkic peoples themselves. Thus, Zhirkov shifted the discussion from the choice of orthographic principles to a broader sphere – the question of scholarly institutions, personnel policy, and intellectual independence.

At the sixth and seventh sessions of the congress, devoted to the issue of orthography in Turkic languages, the theoretical foundations of orthographic principles, the relationship between alphabet and orthography, the spelling of loanwords, interdialectal unification, and common Turkic coordination were discussed as central topics. As a result of the discussions, the main directions of orthographic policy for Turkic languages were clarified. The phonetic principle was recognized as the leading principle; however, it was noted that it should not be applied in an absolute form, but rather in coordination with morphological, or etymological, elements where necessary [8: 520]. Although writing was generally to be based on pronunciation, the need to preserve structural uniformity was not denied. In this respect, the application of the etymological principle was determined by the literary tradition of the language, the degree of dialectal fragmentation, and practical usefulness. It was considered appropriate only insofar as it fulfilled the function of ensuring stability and unification in writing.

CONCLUSIONS

The congress emphasized the methodological need not to confuse the etymological principle with the historical principle. It advanced the idea that a normative system should be created not by mechanically preserving past written forms, but on the basis of actual linguistic intuition and practical convenience. In writing Arabic and other borrowed elements, the phonetic approach based on popular pronunciation was recognized as the priority. In the context of illiteracy, phonetic writing was interpreted as a means of facilitating reading and writing. It was noted that phonetic orthography should not be understood as random spelling, but should be constructed on the basis of systematic observation of the living language and phonological analysis. At

the same time, the new Latin alphabet was presented as a favorable opportunity for the consistent formation of phonetic orthography. The necessity of preserving a single orthographic norm for the literary language was confirmed, and it was noted that tendencies toward provincialism could weaken the unity of writing. In addition, special emphasis was placed on the need to create orthographic dictionaries in order to strengthen written norms; these dictionaries were interpreted as the principal normative instruments ensuring orthographic stability. Furthermore, from the perspective of the needs of scholarly research, the development of a unified scientific phonetic transcription based on the Latin alphabet and covering the sound systems of all Turkic languages was identified as a promising task.

In conclusion, it may be stated that, despite the passage of a century, issues of writing and orthography remain relevant today. The processes of globalization, language policy, the preservation of national identity, and problems of cultural identification repeatedly bring this issue back onto the agenda. In this respect, a scholarly reanalysis of historical experience may also serve as an important theoretical basis for current processes of language reform. One of the most reliable sources of this historical experience is the stenographic report of the First Turkological Congress. The stenographic materials are of particular importance as a unique source reflecting the living scholarly atmosphere of their time. They serve as valuable historical-linguistic evidence because they directly record debates on orthographic issues, various scholarly views, and opposing positions. From this perspective, in our view, these sources provide an important methodological basis for approaching a number of scholarly-theoretical problems related to determining the orthography of the Turkic languages – problems that have persisted to the present day and continue to remain at the center of discussion.

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