

Regional

Turkish language a bridge to understanding

Turkish is a language hardly heard in this country, but it is a language with a long and important history. Today it is spoken mostly in a nation that because of its geopolitical significance has made world headlines for the last century or so.

Someone who not only teaches about Turkish as a language but also about the culture and history of Turkey itself is Nazli Aggun, a Fulbright visiting scholar at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. A native of Samandag, in southern Turkey, she is working on her master's degree in English language teaching at Cag University in southern Turkey. She is learning how to teach English as a second language despite the fact that English is not her native tongue.

"When you are teaching a language it is all the same idea," she said. "Like teaching the vocabulary and practice and study grammar, as well as to reinforce skills such as writing, reading and speaking. So it is not very different. I don't have many difficulties teaching Turkish, because it is very similar to how to teach English." Regardless of its ease, just how receptive have the students at SIUE been to learning Turkish?

"It is nice to see that there are people interested in Turkey," Aggun said. "My students are also very interested in Turkish politics, family and food. They really want to learn everything. And I feel very happy to teach these things. It is fun. I like it."

Turkish is an evolving language. In 1928 Atatürk (the first president of Turkey) decreed the change from the Ottoman script to the Latin script. Today, the majority of Turks do not know Ottoman Turkish. The country's recent history is equally as interesting.

"First it was the Ottoman Empire," Aggun explained. "And then it became the Turkish Republic and Atatürk was considered to be the leader of the Turkish Republic. And it changed a lot because during the Ottoman Empire it was just the Ottoman family ruling the country, but then it became a republic. Atatürk



Professor Nazli Aggun

wanted Turkey to be similar to Western countries, to be secular. He said that you can practice your religion at home, but we do not want to rule our country with religion and Islam." Turkey is not a homogeneous country when it comes to culture and that has brought with it political issues.

"A lot of people think that Turkey is a very Islamic country, but if you go to Istanbul the people look a lot like Europeans," Aggun said. "So there is a

big mixture of everything. When you talk about Turkey it is not only Turks. For example, my ancestors are Arabic and I can speak Arabic. In my home town we have an Armenian village and we also have Kurdish villages." The latter, she explained, have not always been happy about assimilation.

"They wanted to say, 'Ok, we are in Turkey. We are all Turks.' But on the other hand people such as the Kurdish wanted to speak Kurdish as well. So there was a

bit of a struggle between the Turks and the Kurdish. But now they have the right to speak Kurdish in the schools again. It is very complicated, because then religious things started to become a problem. Those sorts of things just started to become very important in Turkey in the last five years." In Turkey there is the Turkish Language Association that tries to keep the purity of the Turkish language.

"Yeah, but I don't think they are working very hard at that," she said. "Unfortunately

Picture courtesy of Ryu Sinberg

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

there are many words that come from English. We are really trying to learn English as a country and it is a very good thing. But if you are speaking your mother tongue, it must be your pure mother tongue.

"Things get more complicated when trying to use modern terminology such as 'CDs,'" she said. "People want to look Western, they want to look cool, so they are so willing to use English words." Turkish people cannot always be identified by region based on their accent.

"Some people are really good at that," she said. "They can say, 'Oh, this person must be from the east part of Turkey.' But it is not really that obvious. It is like the same difference in the U.S. It is similar in this sense. It is like when someone speaks with a southern accent or a New York accent. It is similar to that." When asked if she feels that Turkish is not as popular or in demand like other languages such as Spanish, Arabic, or Chinese, Aggun said that there are always people interested in learning Turkish.

"I would really recommend it for history majors because it is like an open museum," she said. "It is full of history. I have a history student and I told him he should keep learning Turkish and he should go to Turkey to see all the museums and historical sites and it would be very exciting." She added that there are also some practical reasons why learning Turkish could be important.

"If you're a business major, the relationship between the U.S. and Turkey is very good," she said. "So if you're a business major surely it could help find you a job."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.