

# DaZ—Deutsch als Zweitsprache and the Politics of Silence

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¶<sub>1</sub> Few decisions influence the future of a child with a so called *Migrationshintergrund* in Germany more than placement in a *Deutsch als Zweitsprache* (German as a second language) class. Those selected for *DaZ* must carry, throughout their whole schooling, an institutional mark—an implicit reminder that they had to be taught German before they could participate in the same spaces as their peers. I was not selected for *DaZ*, although most other children of immigrant families at my school were. There was not a lot that made us different: we all had immigrant parents and nearly all of us were born in Germany. My German teacher had explained that I could join the regular German classes and forgo the *DaZ* lessons because my Turkish/Kurdish parents had ensured that I understood the German language—which she referred to as “our language”—perfectly. In that moment, “our” did not mean both hers and mine, but rather denoted the language of those who truly belonged. At the time I accepted this as a compliment, a marker of success. Only later did I realize what it implied: that my parents’ decision not to pass on their own languages to their children was what secured my place in the mainstream classroom.

¶<sub>2</sub> After elementary school I continued with my education, eventually finishing my *Abitur* with German language as my main subject; I even considered studying it at university. This trajec-

tory was at least in part structurally produced: my “success” was less an individual achievement than compliance with normative linguistic expectations. It exemplifies how linguistic assimilation is rewarded within the German school system: speak flawless German, leave your own languages behind, and the institution will grant you advantages accordingly, first with teachers, then grading systems, and later, academic gate-keeping mechanisms. As Fatima El-Tayeb argues in *Undeutsch: Die Konstruktion des Anderen in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft*, migrant and racialized communities in Germany are persistently positioned as the “others” who do not belong, no matter how fluently they may speak German. Belonging is not granted through language proficiency alone but is regulated through racialized boundaries of who is imagined as “German” in the first place. My exemption from *DaZ* did not grant me full inclusion. It merely rendered me an exception within a system that continues to mark children like me as linguistically and culturally “undeutsch.”<sup>1</sup>

¶<sub>3</sub> Back then, it seemed only logical to me that I should turn this into a sort of academic capital, and continue studying German at university. However, I ultimately decided to turn to Media

1— Fatima El-Tayib, *Undeutsch: Die Konstruktion des Anderen in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft* (Transcript Verlag, 2016), 216–217.

Studies instead, and began working on projects that engaged with archives, memory culture, and Kurdish history in Germany. This was not just a shift in academic interest, but also the first moment when I began to confront the structural conditions that had shaped my linguistic biography, and when I finally understood how deeply the politics of *DaZ* are connected to broader systems of linguistic hierarchy and repression.

¶4 One of the projects I work on is *Dersim 1937/38*. This project, inspired by the work of scholar Yasar Kaya and his colleagues, was set up by the German Federal Government's Commissioner of Culture and Media Claudia Roth, and has since been based at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum.<sup>2</sup> This oral history project records testimonies from survivors of the 1937-8 Turkish military campaign against the Alevi Kurdish population of Dersim, a region in eastern Turkey. Working on this project brought me back to languages I had never been able or allowed to fully speak. My separation from these languages was not due to lack of interest, but the result of fear, repression, and diasporic survival strategies. *Dersim 1937/38* revealed to me that speaking and translating a language is never merely a linguistic matter, but political, always shaped by histories of violence and archival power.

¶5 Just as the *DaZ* placement test reflects institutional hierarchies by deciding which languages are legitimate, and which mark someone as the "other," translation reproduces many of the same hierarchies; it determines which voices are to be preserved and which must depend on the dominant

2— Yasar Kaya is a member of the project's steering committee and an active advocate for Dersim-related issues. For over 25 years, he has volunteered in archiving and making materials on the events in Dersim publicly accessible. Originally from the region himself, he has conducted numerous video interviews around the world with Dersim witnesses over several decades; these now form the central foundation of the project.

languages. Both *DaZ* and the translation work in the *Dersim 1937/38* archive operate as systems of linguistic gatekeeping: one determines who may belong in the classroom, the other, whose voices can be accessed in the archive. Translating testimonies in the *Dersim* project is not just a matter of moving words across languages, but of navigating histories shaped by bans on Zazakî/Kurdish; archives that systematically marginalized Kurdish voices; and state repression that resulted in generational silence. Translation, therefore, becomes a negotiation with these histories, not a neutral transfer.

¶6 The project's video interviews are typically recorded and transcribed in Zazakî/Kurdish, before being translated first into Turkish, and then German. A direct translation of the project's video interviews from Zazakî/Kurdish into German is not feasible due to linguistic constraints. The Zazakî/Kurdish language is typically spoken fluently only by older generations, who in turn often do not have strong German skills. For a professional examination of the events which conforms to academic conventions, it is therefore necessary to introduce an intermediate step: the interviews are first translated from Zazakî/Kurdish into Turkish, and only then into German. This approach reflects the more common language competencies across generations, as older speakers are often proficient in Kurdish and Turkish, while there is a greater number of individuals who are proficient in both Turkish and German.<sup>3</sup> The workflow appears standardized: transcribers produce the initial files; we review and correct

3— Another reason for this intermediate step is that the younger generation with family background in Dersim was not taught Zazakî/Kurdish at all and therefore relies on Turkish or German to access and understand the project's content. This, in turn, opens the question of how the choice of Turkish or German as intermediary languages shapes the project's engagement with the original language—and maybe also its unintentional dissemination.

them; translators render them into the target language; and our team approves the final text for publication in the digital archive of the Freie Universität Berlin.<sup>4</sup> At multiple points, translators make interpretive decisions that shape meaning. When a Zazakî/Kurdish term has no direct equivalent in Turkish, our translators are forced to choose between approximation or omission; this decision shapes how the testimony will then be understood by readers. Even the act of transcribing pauses in a story can alter its emotional tone. As Lawrence Venuti argues, translators inevitably shape meaning through the “invisibility” of their work: the very conventions that make a translation appear “natural” are often also the ones that erase the linguistic and cultural nuances contained in the original. Our translations of the Dersim testimonies reproduce this dynamic. They render the narratives comprehensible in German and Turkish, but in doing so they necessarily also obscure elements specific to Zazakî/Kurdish speech, rhythm, and memory.<sup>5</sup>

¶7 Despite my awareness of these distortions, I rely on these translations more than most project members. I cannot read the original Zazakî/Kurdish or even Turkish transcripts, though part of my family is from Dersim. My parents never properly taught me their languages, fearing that I would face the same racism they endured for speaking a foreign language in Germany. They never taught me Zazakî/Kurdish either, also out of fear that their child would carry a stigmatized language into Turkish circles hostile to Kurdish culture. It had been precisely out of fear of such Turkish circles that my father sought political refuge in Germany in the first place; but the hostility he fled did not arise in a vacuum. Since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, state policies

of forced homogenization denied the existence of Kurdish identity altogether. Consequently, Kurdish languages like Zazakî were banned from schools, media, and public institutions. Speaking these languages could result in punishment or state surveillance. In 1926, the Turkish Ministry of Education declared in an internal memo that Kurdish could not be recognized as an official written language because it supposedly lacked a distinct structure. A few years later, in 1931, a governor publicly claimed that Kurds had no history, no national language, no literature, and no culture.<sup>6</sup> These narratives formed the ideological foundation that would justify policies of assimilation, and ultimately, the massacres in Dersim. As a result, Dersim’s historical memory could not be preserved through official archives or scholarly institutions. Speaking or writing Zazakî/Kurdish had been criminalized; producing written documentation of its history nearly impossible; and silence state-enforced, so knowledge came to be passed down primarily in oral forms and traditions: songs, poems, stories told in private spaces.<sup>7</sup>

¶8 When my father migrated to Germany in 1991, he believed he was leaving this repression behind.

6— Ismail Küpeli, *Die kurdische Frage in der Türkei: Über die gewaltsame Durchsetzung von Nationalstaatlichkeit* (Transcript Verlag, 2022), 119–120. Küpeli quotes the memo as follows: “In einem internen Schreiben des Bildungsministeriums vom 7. Mai 1926 wurde dies so formuliert: ‘Die Kurd\_innen haben keine Geschichte und haben sich bisher vom zivilisierten Leben ferngehalten. [...] Die Kurd\_innen haben ebenfalls kein Nationalideal. [...] Kurdisch kann keine Schriftsprache werden, weil diese Sprache keinen eigenständigen Charakter hat. [...] Weil die Kurd\_innen keinen Begriff von Vaterland besitzen, mögen sie den Wehrdienst nicht.’”

7— Béatrice Hendrich, “‘Im Monat Muharrem weint meine Laute!’ – Die alevitische Langhalslaute als Medium der Erinnerung” in *Medien des kollektiven Gedächtnisses. Konstruktivität – Historizität – Kulturspezifität*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (De Gruyter, 2004), 150, 160.

4— *Oral-History.digital*.

5— Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (Routledge, 1995).

Nearly forty years later, however, the same ultranationalist ideologies have taken root within the diaspora as well: Turkish nationalist organizations such as the *Graue Wölfe* (“Grey Wolves”) are now highly active in Germany, promoting an ideology that targets Kurds aggressively and with increasing frequency.<sup>8</sup> The threat my father once fled has now reappeared within the very country that was supposed to offer him safety, continuing to make the expression and transmission of Kurdish language and culture dangerous.

¶<sub>9</sub> This silence and violent break in language transmission was thus more than a personal, family choice; rather, it was shaped by, and a response to, institutional and political pressure. As Michel Foucault posits, silence is not simply the absence of speech but an effect of power—something actively produced, managed, and enforced.<sup>9</sup> In the context of my family, this power took multiple forms: the German nation-state rewarded linguistic assimilation while the Turkish state criminalized Zazakî/Kurdish identity. Social institutions—schools, media, public discourse—signaled which languages were safe to speak or socially valued, and which were perceived as threatening or unsafe because they sounded “too foreign” for the European ear. When a language becomes dangerous to speak, silence becomes a survival strategy, and translation becomes the paradoxical space where memory is both preserved and transformed. On the one hand, translation enables access: without it, the testimonies would remain inaccessible to most. On the other hand, it reproduces the conditions of loss, flattening linguistic particularity into the legibility of dominant languages.

8— Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung/Federal Agency for Civic Education. *Graue Wölfe – eine der größten rechtsextremen Organisationen in Deutschland*. Last modified August 19, 2024.

9— Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Vintage Books, 1978), 27.

¶<sub>10</sub> The archive of *Dersim 1937/38* itself reflects this dynamic. Our translations do not merely convey testimonies. They mediate between voices that are historically rendered inaudible and the dominant languages that now frame them, an imbalance in the project that reveals itself between the lines: the original Zazakî/Kurdish interviews are turned into digital files, while their Turkish and German translations become the basis for scholarship. Furthermore, who can access these voices directly and who must rely on translation is also not accidental. Access is shaped by the very same asymmetries which created the initial silence. Indeed, in many academic settings, it is the German or Turkish version of a testimony that is granted institutional legitimacy; the Zazakî/Kurdish original is usually left unreferenced, and therefore silenced. Scholars publish on Kurdish history without knowing how to speak Kurdish, and native speakers without access to universities are usually excluded from shaping how their own history is written and told. The institute of the archive itself, therefore, grants legitimacy to certain languages while sidelining others, threatening to repeat the same social and political hierarchies that had once silenced them.

¶<sub>11</sub> Sometimes, I still catch myself resenting my parents for their decision not to pass on the language of their ancestors to their own children. At the same time, however, I understand that they were forced to choose such a survival strategy due to systemic pressures. I cannot stop wondering whether it was worthwhile to spare me from *DaZ* classes when now, nearly ten years later, I must ask my German colleagues at the archive to help me decode words in Zazakî/Kurdish or Turkish, languages they know better than I do, because of their work on the project. My “successful” assimilation—my strong German skills and placement in the regular classroom—did not dissolve this boundary either. As El-Tayeb has points out, ra-

cialized minorities in Germany remain marked as non-German even when they fulfill every linguistic expectation placed on them. The pressure my parents felt to withhold their languages, as well as my own choice to focus on improving my German rather than learning the language of my family, was shaped by a society in which migrant belonging remains conditional, fragile and always under scrutiny. It was the outcome of a system that makes certain languages risky and others compulsory.

¶12 To speak of translation, then, is to speak of asymmetry. It is a practice embedded in displacement, repression, and survival. The testimonies we collect in *Dersim 1937/38* themselves are translations—of memory into narrative, of trauma into speech. The testimonies' movements across the Zazakî/Kurdish, Turkish, and German languages extend this chain. What travels across languages are not only words but the traces of violence that had sought to erase them. The *DaZ* placement test at school was never just about grammar; it was about deciding who belonged, and on what exact terms. Even though I had been relieved as a child not to be included in the *DaZ* course, considering it a privilege, I now understand the meaning of this experience. *DaZ* is more than pedagogical praxis—it is an instrument of institutional regulation that organizes access to educational spaces along linguistic lines. Its procedures of placement establish, from the very first years of schooling, a hierarchy of languages that mirror broader structures of belonging in Germany: that is, fluent German without a noticeable non-German accent, is seen as the prerequisite for full participation in society, and other languages function as markers of deficiency or foreignness. In this sense, *DaZ* operationalizes an implicit politics of inclusion and exclusion, long before young students may encounter more explicit forms of social categorization.

¶13 This dynamic also shows how language structures access, identity, and memory. The languages we in-

herit—or are denied—carry histories of violence, migration, and survival. Whether it is the *DaZ* placement test at school or the transcriptions and translations within the project *Dersim 1937/38*, they all reflect structural hierarchies that determine which languages survive publicly and which are silenced privately. Translation is, therefore, both an act of preservation and an acknowledgment of loss. What survives bears the imprint of the silences it seeks to break. Translation is responsibility. Translation is to recognize that every choice—what to preserve, what to make legible, what to leave in silence—shapes how memory circulates and how histories are told.

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