Bai Ganyo’s Revenge
The Persistence of Turkisms in Modern Bulgarian

Catherine Rudin
Wayne State College

In translating *Bai Ganyo* (Friedman 2010), a crucial challenge was getting the language right: capturing the nuances of the different styles of language used by the narrators and characters, representing different social classes, the nineteenth century idioms and cultural references, and especially the colorful language of the (anti)hero, Bai Ganyo Balkanski himself. One of the most characteristic features of Bai Ganyo's speech, and one which caused both grief and delight to us, his translators, is his use of Turkish vocabulary. At the time when Konstantinov (known universally to Bulgarians as “Aleko”) was writing, Turkish borrowings were deeply entrenched in the Bulgarian language, as in all of the other Balkan languages, and carried a variety of connotations and a distinctive flavor. The impact of a Turkish word or phrase in Aleko’s work could be negative or positive, but generally emphasized the perceived “Eastern,” Balkan side of Bulgaria and the Bulgarian people; simultaneously more backward or primitive and more full of vitality, warmth, and personality than the “European” norm. In our individual chapter translations and in group sessions aimed at making the work read smoothly as a whole, we wrestled repeatedly with how best to convey this special flavor in English.

Perhaps surprisingly, given that they were already felt as a link to the Ottoman past more than a century ago, Turkisms are still used in nearly identical ways in 21st-century journalistic prose, conveying sometimes positive, sometimes negative, but seldom neutral connotations. Consider the sentence in (1), from a recent article about proposed restrictions on smoking. A group of Bulgarians visiting Italy is warned by their guide that “no smoking” really means NO SMOKING in Venice; if they stubbornly ignore the regulations they will actually be fined. The underlined word is a Turkism.¹
Mlada, no veče dostatāčno patila ot tvǎrdoglaveto na bǎlgarite, osobeno v čužbina, ženata se opitvaše da ni predpazi ot tipičnija ni balkanski inatlǎk.

‘The woman, young but already experienced enough in the bull-headedness of Bulgarians, especially abroad, attempted to warn us off our typical Balkan stubbornness’ (Perperikon 8, 2/26-3/5/2010, p. 2 [Nov Život supplement]).

The Bulgarian writer uses the purely Slavic word tvǎrdoglavie for the concept of ‘stubbornness, obstinacy’ in the first clause, but switches to a Turkish synonym, inatlǎk, later on. This switch could be simply for variety, but it is particularly apt since the stubbornness here is positioned as a specifically Balkan characteristic; the phrase balkanski inatlǎk makes the point so much better than balkansko tvǎrdoglavie would.

This is not far removed from Bai Ganyo’s use of a Turkish synonym for the less refined, unsophisticated, but spicy and characteristically Balkan version of a common food, as seen in (2).

(1) Tova kakvo li e, supa li e? A, az običam supa. Čorbata e tursko jadene. I nj sega poveče supa jadem. [...later after adding peppers ...] — Ja mi podajte ošte edno kǎsče hlebec. Vij sǎvsem bez hljab jadete — učudva se baj Ganjo. — Na bǎlgarijata daj hljab; nie mnogo hljab jadem; da ne se hvalja, ama s takvazi čorba, pǎrdon, s takvazi supa cjal samun hljab uzjadam. Bas dǎrža.

“‘What’s this, is it soup? I love soup. Soup is a European dish, but čorba is Turkish. Nowadays, we eat more soup than čorba.” [...] “Hey, pass me another piece of bread, will ya? You people eat with no bread at all,” marveled Bai Ganyo. “As for us Bulgarians — we eat a lot of bread; I don’t want to brag, but with a čorba like this, pardon, with a soup like this, I can eat up a whole loaf. You betcha”’ (Bai Ganyo at Jirechek’s pp. 52-53).

(2) It is strikingly ironic that, after a century of attempts to rid Bulgarian of its Turkish vocabulary, the use of Turkisms in Bai Ganyo is far from outdated or foreign to the

21st-century Bulgarian reader. While some other aspects of Aleko’s Bulgarian, both its lexicon and grammar, now seem stilted or odd, his use of Turkisms has stood the test of time quite well.

In this article I very briefly summarize the history and status of Turkisms in Bulgarian, discuss some of the Turkisms in Bai Ganyo and their treatment in our translation, and give a few more examples of the burgeoning use of Turkisms in the present-day Bulgarian press with comparisons to the usage of the same words in the Bai Ganyo stories.

Given Bulgaria’s history, it is no surprise that Turkish has had a significant influence on the Bulgarian language. As discussed in detail by Kazazis (1972), as well as by Kramer (1992) and Friedman (1996), among others, all of the Balkan languages adopted large amounts of Turkish vocabulary during the Ottoman period, when Turkish was the prestige language throughout the Balkans. Nearly all of the Balkan languages subsequently made efforts to eliminate these Turkisms as nationalist consciousness and standardized languages arose, starting in the 19th century. (Romani, which was not standardized till much later, is a special case, as is Aromanian, see Friedman 1996.) This process was underway when Bai Ganyo was written, in the 1890s. As Kramer points out, “Turkisms were still abundant, but already stylistically marked. Indeed, attempts were already being made to purge Turkisms from the literary language” (1992: QQQ).

Attempts to rid Bulgarian of Turkish influence continued through most of the 20th century with mixed success. Some Turkish words did genuinely and naturally pass out of use as the culture they referenced disappeared: vocabulary dealing with Ottoman government and military ranks, ox-cart harnesses, pre-modern household objects and technologies, outmoded rituals, obsolete currency, historical clothing and so on are still found in historical dictionaries and older literature, but are seldom if ever used in present-day Bulgarian. The examples in (3) are a more or less random handful from among the hundreds marked “historical,” “obsolete” or “folkloric” in the Dictionary of Turkisms in Bulgarian (Grannes et al. 2002).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bulgarian Word</th>
<th>Turkish Source</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fitildže</td>
<td>fitlice</td>
<td>‘candle snuffer’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tabor</td>
<td>tabur</td>
<td>‘Turkish batallion’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sjurjudžija</td>
<td>sürürçü</td>
<td>‘postillion, man in charge of post horses’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Another large group of Turkish borrowings had already become thoroughly nativized before the 19th century. Words such as kibrit ‘match,’ čadăr ‘umbrella,’ kaval ‘shepherd’s flute,’ gaida ‘bagpipe,’ pazar ‘market’ and hundreds of others are not identified as foreign words by the average Bulgarian speaker any more than table and chair are felt to be foreign in English, in spite of their French origin. Such words are not and never have been in danger of being “purified” out of the language; they are felt to be completely Bulgarian and are neutral in tone.

But a very significant portion of the thousands of Turkish borrowed words neither disappeared nor became nativized; instead, they remained in use but took on a special, marked status in the 19th century which they still retain today. In Grannes et al.’s (2002) Dictionary of Turkisms in Bulgarian, by far the majority of the words are labeled “colloquial,” “dialectal” or “slang.” This is the group of words I will be referring to by the term “Turkisms,” and the group which has at times been the target of language purification efforts.

Turkisms were banished from formal Bulgarian and virtually disappeared from published writing during much of the 20th century. In scientific prose, in newspapers, in all types of serious writing during the communist period, Turkisms were essentially nonexistent. Even in fiction they were rare. The suppression of public use of Turkish language varied from mild to extreme at different times, but use of Turkisms in written Bulgarian was always discouraged to some extent. Bulgarian dictionaries continued to list many Turkish-derived words, but generally accompanied by some kind of usage marking as archaic, dialectal, folkloric, uneducated or otherwise nonstandard. Nonetheless, although largely expunged from the official language, Turkisms were alive and well in colloquial Bulgarian usage both at Aleko’s time and later.

In the past two decades Turkisms have reemerged into the literary language as well, showing up particularly in journalistic writing. Turkisms became so prevalent in journalistic prose following the change of government in 1991 that a new dictionary of Turkish Words in the Current Bulgarian Press was published soon after (Krâsteva 2000). Apparently at least for some segments of society, the suppression of Turkisms was effective enough that this layer of vocabulary was unfamiliar; many readers of the press seem to have felt the need for a dictionary. Combined with the ever-increasing use of internationalisms and English

borrowings, the renewed prevalence of Turkisms gives quite a startlingly different feel to journalistic language than just a couple of decades ago.

To a large extent the resurgence of Turkisms in journalistic usage reflects the new role of the media. Far from being a stodgy, boring government mouthpiece, as they were during the communist era, newspapers and magazines in Bulgaria today are a freewheeling marketplace, competing for readers’ attention through pictures, content and lively, catchy language. The same is true for broadcast and online media. The stylistic functions of Turkisms – identified by Friedman 1996 as “irony, local color, humor” and other emotional, non-neutral connotations – are perfectly suited to livening up a news story. Turkisms tend to be emotive, evocative, colorful, eye-catching and ear-catching … just what the media want.

Very much the same was true in Bai Ganyo: Turkisms carried much of the color and humor of the work. In translating Bai Ganyo we struggled with the special position of Turkisms in 19th-century Bulgarian and their effect on 20th-century readers. How best to translate Turkish words and phrases into English in a way that would capture their distinctive flavor? For a few words our decision was to simply leave the word untranslated; these are listed in a brief glossary at the back of the book (pp. 159-160). The untranslated words included a number of typically Balkan cultural items that Bai Ganyo wears, carries or consumes, shown in (4), with translations as given in the glossary.

(4) kalpak          a high, circular, brimless, woolen cap with a peak in the center, typically worn by peasants in Bulgaria and neighboring regions.

kilim             a flat-weave Turkish rug, often with geometrical patterns. In this context it serves as a sort of rural sleeping bag.

disagi            a kind of saddlebag made from a rectangular piece of colorful, heavy woven cloth. The ends are folded and sewn at each side to create two sacks that can be slung over the back of a pack animal or the shoulder of a person.

muskal            a measure of rose oil equal to one and a half or three drams, the glass phial containing such a measure of rose oil.

Other items we chose not to translate are connotation-rich vocabulary ranging from ethnic insults, in (5), to Bai Ganyo’s characteristic goal of finding the elusive free lunch, in (6).

(5) chifut Jews (derogatory)
    chingene Gypsy (derogatory)

(6) kelepir free lunch, windfall
     kyoravo something for nothing

We also kept a number of Turkish-style names and terms of address, including the rhyming names of Bai Ganyo’s three unsavory henchmen in some of the later stories shown in (7); the ending -oolu represents the Turkish suffix -oğlu ‘son of’; see Friedman 2010:104 for details on the significance of the names themselves).

(7) efendi ‘sir’
    Bochoolu, Dochoolu, Gochoolu names of Bai Ganyo’s henchmen

For the vast majority of Turkisms in Bai Ganyo an English translation is given. We chose to translate some with English colloquialisms or idioms, attempting to capture their slangy or folksy sense; others are simply translated with fairly neutral English, depending on the word and the context.

In the remainder of this article I compare some of the Turkisms used in Bai Ganyo and in the current press. As a way to organize the huge amount of data, I limit attention to one journalistic source, the online newspaper Nov Život, and to a handful of selected words which appear both in the Bai Ganyo stories and in recent issues of this newspaper. The particular words chosen are not unusual or particularly notable; indeed, their interest lies in the very fact that they are so typical; similar examples could have been given of dozens of other Turkisms. In each case we see that not only are the same lexical items used in the two different time periods (and in different genres – fiction vs. journalism), the way they are
used is strikingly parallel. In each group of examples below, the selected word is
given in boldface, followed by its usage labels in two dictionaries, Grannes et al.
(2002) and in Krăsteva (2000), in parentheses. Below this are examples of its use
in Bai Ganyo and in Nov Život or its supplement Perperikon.

The first Turkism I examine, the word inat ‘stubborn,’ has already been
presented above, in (1); the operative phrase repeated as (8a).

(8) \underline{inat} (colloq./razg.)

a. ... tipičnija ni balkanski inatlǎk (=1) ‘our typical Balkan stubbornness’
   \textit{(Perperikon} 8, 2/26-3/5/2010, p. 2)

b. Toj dobavi, če e goljam inat i zatova se nadjava, če se
   spravi s novata si otgovornost. ‘He added that he is a very stubborn person and therefore
   hopes that he will manage his new responsibilities.’
   \textit{(Nov Život} 7/28/09, p. 3)

c. Dosega da e stanal veke doktor, ama inat hora tukašnite.
   ‘He should’ve been a doctor by now, but people here are
   stubborn.’
   \textit{(Bai Ganyo in Switzerland} p. 75)

d. Ama inat čovek, razbira li ti?
   But the man is stubborn, do you understand?’
   \textit{(Bai Ganyo in Switzerland} p. 75)

e. Nikola Tǎrnovalijata e rodom ot g. Tǎrnovo i zatova toj
   ot inat za bǎlhata izgarja jurganja.
   ‘Nikola Tǎrnivaliyata is originally from Tǎrnovo, and
   therefore he’s so stubborn he’d burn the quilt to get rid of
   the fleas.’
   \textit{(Bai Ganyo Does Elections} p. 106)

\textit{Inat} is listed as colloquial (razgovorno in Bulgarian) in both Grannes et al.’s
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It is quite common in both Bai Ganyo and the current press, occurring with derived forms such as inatlǎk, with a Turkish noun-forming suffix, and a related verb zainatja ‘to dig in one’s heels’ which has a Bulgarian inchoative prefix and verbal suffix. In translating Bai Ganyo, this is one word which we translated simply with its standard English counterpart ‘stubborn.’ It was probably colloquial in tone in the 19th century, as today, but not markedly non-standard.

The next word, kef ‘pleasure,’ is also marked colloquial in both dictionaries:

(9)  

- a. Naprotiv, i vǎrlite cigarat vị se kefiha, če očite im ne smǎdjat ot dim, dokato pohapvat pica.  
   ‘On the contrary, even the hard-core tobacco-heads enjoyed not having their eyes stung by smoke while they were munching pizza.  
   *(Nov Život 37, 2/25/10, p. 5)*

- b. — Ja se pootmesti malko kǎm kraja da si složa i drugija krak. Hǎ taka! Bravo! E-e-e-h! Majka mu stara! Kef!  
   ‘Listen, move over a bit so I can put up my other leg too. Ahh! That’s it! Good! Ahhh! Eh, Goddamn! What a pleasure!’”  
   *(Bai Ganyo at the Prague Exhibition p. 38)*

- c. — Hǎ, vidjahte li sega! E-e-e-e-h! Gel, kefim, gel!  
   “Aaah, that’s more like it. Hey, hey, c’mon, let’s have some fun, c’mon.”  
   *[Gel, kefim, gel = literally ‘come, my pleasure, come’ in Turkish]*  
   *(Bai Ganyo Goes Visiting p. 69)*

- d. U edin baj Ganjov rodnina beše izpadnala edna rǎčna harmonika s klaviši, ta segiz-togiz, kato se nameri na kef,  
   i baj Ganjo si e čupil prǎstite da izkalǎpi njakoja pesen.  
   ‘An accordion had fallen into the hands of one of Bai Ganyo’s relatives, and every once in a while, when he
found himself in the mood, Bai Ganyo would pound his fingers on it trying to bang out some song.’

(Bai Ganyo Goes Visiting pp. 69-70)

There are numerous examples of *kef* in *Bai Ganyo* and it is common in the current press as well, with a very similar range of uses. It occurs both with Turkish morphology (as in the first example from *Bai Ganyo Goes Visiting*, with first-person possessive -im: *kefim* ‘my good mood, my pleasure’) and also with Bulgarian morphology, for example, *kefa* ‘the pleasure,’ or as a verb *kefja (se)* ‘enjoy, take pleasure in,’ as in (9a). This word was translated variably as ‘pleasure,’ ‘have fun,’ ‘in the mood’ in *Bai Ganyo*, reflecting the variety of its usage.

The third word I examine is *sofra* ‘table.’ Krǎsteva marks *sofra* “razgovorno” (colloquial), like the previous two words, but Grannes gives it a different label, “folklorical,” indicating that it is more restricted, perhaps limited to old-fashioned or non-urban contexts, rather than just informal or conversational in tone. However, we do find it used in the current press as well as in *Bai Ganyo*:

(10) **sofra (folk./razg.)**

a. Mirisǎt na vkusnite gozbi ot dǎržavnata sofra taka go e zamajal, če iska ošte ot sega da e siguren za mjastoto si na masata.

‘The smell of the delicious dishes from the official banquet has so overcome him that he wants to make sure of his place at the table right away.’

(*Nov Život*, 7/4/09)

b. — I vaša milost, kazva se, ako ne ot mojta — ot bǎlgarska sofra vse ste jali.

“After all, your grace has certainly eaten his fill at Bulgarian tables, even if not at mine.”

(*Bai Ganyo at Jirechek’s*)

This word is different from the others I have chosen to look at, in two ways. One is that historically and to some extent still today it refers to a specific item, a different item than that designated by the non-Turkish Bulgarian synonym. Strictly
speaking, a sofra is a low, round table only a few inches above floor-level, quite different from the European-style table or masa. Although probably less and less common, the traditional sofra is still in use; I have seen it in Turkish village homes in Bulgaria, and elsewhere in the Balkans it is still in use even in old-fashioned urban homes. In some cases the choice to use the Turkism sofra could be because one is referring to this particular type of table. On the other hand, sofra in Bulgarian and in other Balkan languages often refers not to a physical table of any type, but more abstractly to a special meal, a feast, a spread, a banquet. Both of the examples in (10) seem to use it in this way. Notice in (10a) that in the second clause the actual table is referred to with the more neutral term masa, while sofra refers to the food.

The fourth Turkism I discuss is the conjunction hem ... hem ‘both ... and.’ Although it might seem unusual, the borrowing of conjunctions is widespread in situations of language contact; see e.g. (Matras 1998). The conjunction hem ... hem is quite common, both in Bai Ganyo and in the current press, in spite of the availability of synonymous Slavic paired conjunctions i ... i ‘both ... and’ and ne samo ... no i ‘not only ... but also.’ Examples (11-a-d) are illustrative:

(11) **hem ... hem (colloq./---)**

   ‘I reached that splendid age, at which you become both wiser and more talkative.’
   *(Perperikon 7, 2/20-26/10, p. 2)*

   ‘If possible, let them be not only avant-garde but also pleasing to the eye.’
   *(Nov Zivot 10/17/09, p. 3)*

c. — Ti ja čuj, momče — obârna se toj pak kâm mene, — ti hem se kâpi, hem ponagleždaj muskalite, pa gledaj i men kakvo nešto šte izkalâpja.
   ‘“Listen here, young man,” he said turning to me, “While you bathe, keep an eye on these muskali. And pay attention to me, too — don’t miss the show.”

Hem ... hem can be translated with English paired conjunctions ‘both ... and’ or ‘not only ... but also,’ but we tended in Bai Ganyo to translate it with less intrusive, less heavy English constructions, like the ‘while’ clause in (11c). In (11d), where the text actually comments on the stylistic oddness of hem ... hem in a formal letter, we attempted to catch its inappropriately colloquial flavor by translating it with the idiom ‘to boot.’ Grannes et al. (2002) mark hem ... hem “colloquial,” which seems to accord with its usage in Bai Ganyo. However, Krǎsteva (2000), which is based on post-1990 journalistic usage, gives no style label, implying that it may have become more neutral or at least is not always felt to be markedly colloquial.

The last two words I consider in this very brief survey of Turkisms are two strongly emotive words with negative connotations. The Turkism rezil ‘disgrace’ is used in very similar ways in Bai Ganyo and in Nov Život, emphasizing the shamefulness of a situation. In the two examples below it is used in almost identical collocations with the verb stavam ‘to become, fall into,’ and its usage label in both dictionaries is “colloquial.” In short, its usage seems not to have changed at all in the last century.

(12) rezil (colloq./razg.)

a. Za sǎžalenie pak stranata ni stana za rezil.
   ‘Unfortunately, our country has once again fallen into disgrace.’

   (Nov Život 12, 1/20/10, p. 2)
b. Če ostavete tâmnoto, nego koj mu gleda — ama rezil pred sârbite stanahme.
‘Never mind the darkness, who cares about that, but we’ve lost face in front of the Serbs.’
(Bai Ganyo at the Prague Exhibition, p. 35)

The last Turkism, aman, can be used as an interjection, roughly ‘alas!’, or in the collocation aman ot, where it means ‘enough of, preserve us from.’ The two examples in (13) both use the latter construction, with a very similar derogatory sense; strongly disapproving, disdaining and washing one’s hands of something.

(13) aman (colloq./---)

a. Aman ot niskointeligentni kretonoidi s ramkovo radikalno mislene kato teb!
‘Enough of unintelligent cretinoids with closed-minded radical thinking like you!’
(Nov Život 8/11/09 p. 4)

b. Aman ot suhoežbina!
‘We’re through roughing it!’
(Letter from Bai Ganyo to Konstantin Velichkov p. 149)

Krâsteva does not give this word a usage label, unlike Grannes et. al., which marks it “colloquial.” Nonetheless, the usage seems essentially identical in the 19th and 21st-century sources.

Kramer 1992 lists more than 300 Turkisms used in Bai Ganyo. Some are forms of the same word, and some are used in Macedonian or Albanian translations of the novel rather than in the original Bulgarian text, but even so it is an impressively large number, especially considering that the book is fairly short and obviously contains only a small subset of the words in common use in Bulgarian in the 19th century. The new translation weighs in at 143 pages for the text of the novel itself, so it averages out to about two unique Turkisms per page, and many of the Turkisms are used repeatedly. In short, Turkisms are a pervasive presence in the book. I have not attempted to count Turkisms in Nov Život or more generally in the current press, but they certainly run into the thousands. The density of Turkisms varies widely depending on a number of factors, including the topic
and the tone of the article and the orientation of the newspaper, but on the whole they are numerous enough to be a very noticeable presence.3

The majority of the Turkisms in Bai Ganyo appear in the speech of the main character, and they help define his personality: brash, unrefined, backward but ambitious, a hick with pretentions, funny and often appealing, even heart-warming, but also sometimes appallingly crude, embarrassing and, in the second part of the novel, even sinister. He has a complex and sometimes self-contradictory worldview; nationalism with both eastern-looking and western-looking faces. He has one foot in Europe, but as Aleko says, Evropeici sme, ama ne čak dotam ‘We are Europeans, but still not quite.’ (p. 132).

Today, most of the Turkisms found in Aleko’s time can still be found in colloquial as well as journalistic language, and they can still be seen as reflecting the character of the country. I do not want to exaggerate the comparison – Bulgaria in 2010 is not the same as in the 1890s – but there are similarities. Now as then is a period of change and of reaching out to the West. Bulgaria is in the European Union. You can get cappuccino in the local café. Everyone wears jeans and chats on Facebook. In some ways Bulgaria seems just like Western Europe; however, nationalism and ethnic tensions have certainly not disappeared, nor have historical and cultural ties to Turkey and the Ottoman past.

As a character Bai Ganyo is lively and amusing but also “associated with crudeness and vulgarity” by modern Bulgarians, as Friedman says in his introduction to the book (Friedman 2010); modern journalism also has its share of crudeness and vulgarity mixed into its mass appeal and vibrant color; and all of these are expressed to a large extent through Turkisms.

Notes

0. A version of this article was presented as a paper at the 2010 Balkan and South Slavic Conference at The Ohio State University; I would like to thank that audience for several perceptive comments which I have incorporated into the text. I also thank Ali Eminov for providing many of the examples from the current press, as well as the entire Bai Ganyo gang – Victor Friedman, Christina Kramer, Grace Fielder and Wayles Browne -- for reawakening my interest in this area.

1. Turkisms are underlined throughout the paper. Translations of Bai Ganyo examples are from the 2010 translation; other translations are mine.
2. See Eminov 1997 for a detailed discussion of language policy in Bulgaria from Ottoman times through the 1990s, including policy toward Turkish language in education, publishing and media.

3. See Rudin (in press) for more details on the usage of Turkisms as well as Anglicisms and other borrowings in current journalistic language.

References


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