“Tooth Money” – A Small Clash of Civilisations

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Abstract

An exquisitely polite Turkish phrase, traditionally used by generous hosts at Ramadan celebrations, has through literal misunderstanding become an emblematic symbol for excesses in the Ottoman exploitation of the peoples of the empire. It is well entrenched in Bulgarian usage, but also found in the writings of Western travellers in the Ottoman Empire.

1. “Tooth money” in Bulgarian dictionaries

The term diş parasă, with the variant diş chakă, is found in several dictionaries of Bulgarian, for instance Mladenov 1951: “from diş ‘tooth’ and para; chak ‘right’: payment for wear on the teeth from eating, right of teeth, ‘tooth money’. During Turkish times a Turkish master would not only impose himself as a guest on a subordinate Christian, but would also demand payment for having worn his teeth from the free food.” (Translations in this article are by the author except where mentioned.)

From the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences' dictionary of loanwords, RČDBE (1982) one could almost get the impression that this was a part of the regular fiscal system of the Ottoman Empire: “A tax for wear on the teeth from eating, which the subordinated peoples had to pay to the Ottoman enslavers when they catered for them”, while the dictionary of loanwords by Milev et al. (1978) suggests that it was done as a matter of injustice: “Money that arrogant Ottomans would take from Christians who had catered for them on the pretext of having worn down their teeth while eating”. Rečnik na ezika na Christo Botev defines it as pure and plain “a tax for wear of the teeth“ (“Danâk za izchabjvane na zâbite”), while Gerov (1895) explains:
“When the Turks passed around in the villages, they ate and drank with the Christians for free, but sometimes they demanded and got money as payment for having taken the trouble to eat: this is diş parasă or diş chakă, teeth payment.” The one-volume BTR (1963) says: “Money that a Turk would take from Bulgarians who had fed him, [purportedly] for wearing down his teeth in eating”. The etymological dictionary BER (1971) defines the term on a fiscal note again: “a tax collected by the Turks from the enslaved population for having worn down their teeth when eating for free” and derives it from Turkish diş hakktı, diş parası, explained as ‘tax, money for the teeth’. Djuvernua (1885) explains the term with a quote from Rakovski’s “Comments” to his Gorski pătnik: “Term for a tax, the levying of which is explained in the following way by Rakovski: ‘[Delii was the term for Turkish horsemen from Asia] [...] They went about Bulgaria, eating and drinking, also taking diş chaka (payment for their teeth, since they had had the trouble of eating!)”.

Eyewitness reports of such instances seem to be hard to come by now, but we have second-hand reports: ”The old man approached us with tears in his eyes and started slowly and told us in his woeful doddering voice that three Turks had come to his house like angry dogs; he had served up what food he had, but dissatisfied with the fare, they wanted him to pay diş parasă (reimbursement for his toil in eating and wearing down his teeth) to one of them, as he was wont; and since the old man had no money, he asked the innkeeper to lend him some to get him out of trouble, because otherwise they would kill him, they had said.” (Makedonski 1896)

2. Not only in Bulgarian

Western travellers to the Ottoman Empire have also noted this phrase. In 1716, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, travelling with her husband, who was to take up the post as British ambassador to the Supreme Porte, wrote in a letter dated 1 March at Adrianople:

The desart Woods of Servia are the common refuge of Theeves, who rob 50 in a company, that we had need of all our Guards to secure us, and the villages are so poor that only force could extort from them necessary provisions. Indeed, the Janizarys had no mercy on their poverty, killing all the poultry and sheep they could find without asking who they belong’d to, while the wretched owners durst not put in their claim for fear of being beaten. Lambs just fall’n, Geese and Turkeys big with Egg: all massacre’d without distinction. [...] When the Bassas [sic, read: pashas] travel ‘tis yet worse. Those Oppressors are not content with eating all that is to be eaten belonging to the peasants; after they have cram’d themselves and their numerous retinue, they have the impudence to exact what they call Teeth-money, a contribution for the use of their teeth, worn with doing them the Honnour of devouring their meat. This is a literal known Truth, however extravagant it seems; and such is the natural corruption of a Military Government, their Religion not allowing of this barbarity no more than ours does.
The British archaeologist Austen Henry Layard writes in *A Popular Account of Discoveries at Nineveh*:

My first step on reaching Mosul was to present my letters to Mohammed Pashaw, the governor of the province. Being a native of Candia, he was usually known as Keritli Oglu (the son of the Cretan), to distinguish him from his celebrated predecessor of the same name. The appearance of his excellency was not prepossessing, but it matched his temper and conduct. Nature had placed hypocrisy beyond his reach. He had one eye and one ear; he was short and fat, deeply marked by the small-pox, uncouth in gestures and harsh in voice. His fame had reached the seat of his government before him. On the road he had revived many good old customs and impositions, which the reforming spirit of the age had suffered to fall into decay. He particularly insisted on dish-parasi;[footnote: Literally, “tooth-money.”] or a compensation in money, levied upon all villages in which a man of such rank is entertained, for the wear and tear of his teeth in masticating the food he condescends to receive from the inhabitants. (Layard 154, 12)

Similarly, in an article entitled “Why Brigands Thrive in Turkey”, Emma Paddock Telford, an American returning from teaching in Turkey, writes:

[...] the peasants had fled or fallen a prey to the wild beasts or more ferocious men who roamed the land. Most celebrated of these dare-devils was Osman Pasvanoglu, who established himself as Pasha of Vidin, levied taxes, and coined money on his own account. He had a large army at his heels, and was even meditating a descent on Constantinople, when he died. His followers then entered the service of the government and quartered themselves upon the villages, demanding “tooth-money,” or dyschak, for the wear and tear of their teeth on the hard bread of the poor peasants whose unwelcome guests they had been. This reign of terror was an episode in brigandage, not to be confounded with its usual history. (Telford 1902, 573)

German-language reflections of this concept are found even earlier. In Joseph von Hammer’s history of the Ottoman Empire we find the following description under the period 1623–1656:

His [İbşir Mustafa Pasha’s] three trusted assistants, Sidi Pasha, Gurd Mohammed and Tajjaroghli, whom he had installed as vojvodas to rule over provinces of Asia Minor, were sucking the land dry with all the pains of war, and whenever they had devoured the wealth of some place, the last farthing was extorted under the name of tooth rent. On top of it all, they demanded rent for the teeth used during the feast, so as to add insult to injury. (von Hammer 1829, 627, with attribution to *Naima tarihi* by the seventeenth-century Ottoman historian Mustafa Naima)

In a German volume on gastronomic delights, published in 1851, the following brief paragraph is inserted between descriptions of lavish Oriental feasts:

A grim institution in Turkey is that of the so-called tooth money, *diş kirasi* – that is the name for the sum that a village has to come up with for the reason that the pasha has used his teeth on the victuals delivered to him for free. (von Vaerst 1859, ch. 8)

[Eine schlimme Einrichtung in der Türkei ist die vom sogenannten Zahngeld – Disch-Kirasi --; so wird die Summe genannt, die ein Ort dafür entrichten muß, daß der Pascha an den ihm
umsonst gelieferten Lebensmitteln sich die Zähne abgenutzt hat.]

And, in satirical novel from 1809: “The king of Makoko […] is every day served with (according to Dapper) 200 simmered and roasted subjects. How wicked! Would it not be enough and slightly similar if he either, like a throughpassing guzzling pasha collected tooth money for the use of his canines, or conscripted extraordinary taxes for the lack of same?” (Richter 1809, 79)

3. “Tooth money” in Turkish dictionaries

These two terms are not to be found in Turkish dictionaries as fixed compounds. They do occur in modern Turkish as two-word combinations, but then in contexts that have to do with dentistry and expenditure on it. The closest equivalent to the Bulgarian expressions is diş kirasi, literally ‘tooth rent’, translated into English in Redhouse as “presents given to guests after a meal, esp. in Ramazan”, and in Çağdaş Redhouse with two senses: “1. presents or money given to guests after a meal in Ramadan, 2. a side benefit (in addition to one’s wages)”. TS (1998) also lists two senses: “1. Gifts or money given to guests after the iftar meal [the ritual breaking of the fast in the evening during Ramazan] in palaces or wealthy houses 2. Money or gifts given in excess to somebody”.

Semantic shifts in borrowings are not uncommon. The general tendency for Turkish loans to move a notch down on the stylistic scale has been noted by a number of researchers (Stajnova 1964, Lakova 1972, Stamenov 1996). This shift seems different, so how has it come about? First of all, it seems to be well attested that there were cases of extortion by Turkish soldiers. The Turkish nineteenth-century historian Lütfi Efendi, writing about the disbanding of the deli cavalry forces in his account of the year 1829, says: “In the same way as with the Janissaries, their former patriotism and strength had become so weakened, and their unity and discipline so reduced that they became a problem for the state. Thus, when the vizier they served was toppled, or when they were discharged due to lack of provisions, and consequently no longer were in anyone’s service, they would, until such time as they were attached to another vizier, ride around in the province like vagrants, making the local population feed them for free with their livestock. Not only did they fill up their kalpaks with all the food they could not manage to eat there and then, they would also rob them of their last possessions under the pretext of wanting diş kirasi” (I am grateful to Bernt Brendemoen for helping me out with this translation).
4. Rhetorics, semantics and pragmatics of the expression

Let us now look into the rhetoric character of the expression, starting with the Turkish original. It seems at first sight to be a case of figurative speech, but if we compare it with some common figures of speech, say, metonymy: "a man keeps a good table instead of good provisions" (Webster 1913) or synecdoche (fifty sail for fifty ships; Webster 1913), we see that there is a difference – the literal reading of diş kirasi is to a lesser degree at odds with the intended meaning. There is a separate element of figurative speech, perhaps classifiable as catachresis, in the use of kira ‘rent’, similar to ‘lend me your ears’, but this element is not present in the versions that underlie the Bulgarian terms, where this noun is replaced with para ‘money’ or chak ‘right’. The implication that the eating has caused wear on the guest’s teeth is not contrary to fact, but it is of course a wild exaggeration and may be seen as a case of hyperbole. The actual wear on the teeth of the guest is miniscule, but the Turkish host at the iftar meal offers to reimburse his guest by giving them gifts to make up for the supposed wear on their enamel. It should be clear at this point that we need to analyse not only the verbal expression, but the situation in which it occurs, as it is a kind of ritualised behaviour. As such, it can be compared to saying “Bless you!” or “Gesundheit” when someone sneezes, or when talking about forthcoming events, to add “inşallah” in Turkish, or “život i zdrave” in Bulgarian. As is well known, popular lore has it that people believed that the soul could be expelled from the body when a person sneezed, and the purpose of the remark “bless you” was to keep the soul in the body.

If we try to establish a kind of rationale for the ritual of giving diş kirasi presents, and more particularly, for attaching that label to them, it seems that it could be the desire of the host to relieve the recipient of the obligation for reciprocity. Mauss (1969 [1922]) accentuates this obligation in “archaic” societies, but it was no less prominent in the Ottoman Empire, even on the level of international relations (Reindl-Kiel 2009; 2013). Bourdieu, elaborating on Mauss’ ideas, claims that a gift, with its implication of reciprocity, represents a challenge to the recipient’s honour, and that “a man who enters into an exchange of honor (by issuing or taking up a challenge) with someone who is not his equal in honor dishonors himself. By challenging a superior, he risks a snub” (1997,192). The month of Ramadan is a period when a Muslim should pay more attention than usual to moral values, including giving food and other alms to the poor. Accepting an invitation to dine in a rich man’s house represents accepting a gift, with its implication of reciprocity. By giving the guests diş kirasi gifts on leaving, the host kills two birds with one stone: he shows generosity, not only by giving this gift, but also by pretending that it
represents compensation for a loss incurred at his house, thus ‘nulling out’ the first gift of the meal.

On the level of rhetorics, one might say that this is an example of irony: one says the opposite of what is meant. But irony usually means conveying a negative attitude toward something by professing to have a positive attitude (“Oh, great”), and this seems not to be the case here. Also, it is too complex to be defined as an antiphrasis (The use of a word or phrase in a sense contrary to its normal meaning for ironic or humorous effect, as in a mere babe of 40 years. - American New Heritage Dictionary)

Any explanation of a given linguistic feature gains in value if it can explain more than that specific feature. I have so far found no obvious parallels to this “reversal of relation”, only a few that could possibly be explained in a similar way. One concerns another loan from Turkish to Balkan Slavic, the phraseological calque of the expression used when giving or handing over something to someone or when extending an invitation to someone: Turkish buyur/buyurun, Bulgarian zapovjedaj/zapovjedajte, and Macedonian poveli/povelete. (These have no single equivalent in English; in the case of handing over something, they correspond to “here you are”, and with invitations to “please come in/sit down/have a bite”). There is also a similar expression in Greek, and it seems that the expression originated from Persian. All languages mentioned use the imperative of a verb meaning ‘to order, command’. So instead of expecting gratitude from the recipient or guest, the giver or the host, person B, declares that person A, the recipient or guest, may exercise his will over person B by commanding or ordering him – “I am your slave”.

Another possible parallel might be the use of so-called “umgekehrte Anrede”, or inverse form of address, in Bulgarian and some other languages in the Balkans and the Near East - when a father addresses his son not as “son”, but as “father“, a mother her son as “mother”, or a grandfather his grandchild as “grandpa”. This is an intimate, affectionate form of address, and by using this form of address, the elder relative seemingly obliterates the relation of seniority and authority that holds between elder an younger relative (Sapir 1965, Farghal and Shakir 1994, Khuri 1981).

Let us now return to the borrowing of the term diş kirast. We should have established now that it represents a relatively complicated and unusual case of figurative speech. It has also entered regular usage as an idiom in the Turkish language, even to the extent that is has developed a secondary metaphorical sense (“2. Money or gifts given in excess to somebody”); i.e. unwarranted benefits or gifts being given outside the context of an iftar at Ramadan, and may be on its way to
becoming a fossilised metaphor, one where the metaphorical element is no longer readily recognised by native speakers. With non-native speakers, the situation is different. The Bulgarian victims of the deli brigands most likely understood the literal meanings of the words involved, but as they were unfamiliar with the idiom, they took this to be an incident of highly original, though cynical and cruel metaphorical language use. In other words, they attributed to the brigands a level of linguistic creativeness that they did not have - they just used a stock phrase of the language as an excuse for their excesses. It would be a somewhat similar situation if a non-native speaker of Bulgarian was invited into a Bulgarian’s house with the words “Zapovjadajte v moja dom” and later reported this as “He asked me to enter his house and told me I could command over him”.

There is also evidence that the expression was understood by Bulgarians in the sense used among native Turkish speakers:

And I again went to Lozančev’s house, to mother Anča (the mother of Anastas Lozančev); I had a snack and home- made wine, and when leaving I received as diş parası from mother Anča a pair of socks and a cloth bundle [with presents]. (Nikolov 1989)

This more correct sense has not made it to the dictionaries, where the misunderstanding lives on.

My conclusion will be that to the extent that Bulgarian dictionaries want to include this word (it is absent in RBE, BTR96 and STR), the sense that corresponds to the Turkish sense (actually both the Turkish senses) and is attested in Nikolov’s memoirs should be included as well, and the definition of the “misunderstood” sense, which after all has gained currency in Bulgarian, could be formulated in such a way that it does not credit Turkish brigands with a level of linguistic inventiveness they did not possess.

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