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Thoughts around the Table

*To Jan Reychman who loved to toss off
little notes on etymological questions*

The four-legged, three-legged, even one-legged contraption that squarely stands on the ground and occupies a central position in our conference rooms, dining rooms, libraries, nurseries, courtrooms, playrooms, offices, kitchens, and so on, had no place in a nomad's tent. Before the Turkish tribes became sedentary in Anatolia they took their frugal repasts over a roundish piece of leather which they would spread out between them on the ground and which they would then, after having had their fill of the food, carefully fold together (so as not to scatter the crumbs and other remnants of the meal) and hang up high on a pole or wall. For this piece of equipment they would use the term *sofra* or (in more refined language) *süfre*, a term borrowed from the other great nation with a tent-dwellers' tradition, the Arabs.

Sedentarization did not automatically produce the necessity for more solid furniture. In rural areas people continued to serve food on small (*tepsi*) or large (*sini*) trays down to the 20th century. These trays had the advantage of being easily brought in, often being placed on a likewise portable foot, and of being removed when no more needed; they were therefore convenient space-savers in the multi-purpose family room or guest room. Only when certain circles of non-Turkish middle-class Ottoman subjects became wealthier and developed a more European taste in their life style, the table in our sense of the word became known and its usefulness was recognized by the corresponding Turkish classes, too. The term *sofra* was transferred to them, if used for dining. Other terms were taken over from the languages of the non-Turkish users of them. The 17th century lexicographer

M e n i n s k i lists for a dining table the words *süfret*, vulgo *sofra*, furthermore *sini* and others, and for a wooden table (*mensa lignea*) the terms *tyrāpeze*, from Greek τράπεζα, and, ex Hungarico, *astal*. The Hungarian word derives, of course, from the widely spread Slavic term *stol* 'table'.

Whether the two terms for a wooden table differed only through their regional distribution or whether there was also a semantic difference (e.g., a Greek-style table as against a Hungarian-style table) we do not know. The former is however likely since the term *astal* disappears soon and has left no trace in the modern lexicon (Artin H i n d o g l u lists *astal* besides *terapéze* and *sofra* as equivalents of French *table* in his *Dictionnaire français-turc* of 1831, but this may be a carry-over from M e n i n s k i's *Lexicon* of 1680; in his *Dictionnaire abrégé turc-français* of 1838 H i n d o g l u does not mention the term). Other dictionaries or language guides of the 18th and the first half of the 19th century have only *tirapeza*, *tirapeze*, and *sofra*, *sufra*, *ta'am sufrasi*. Alexandre H a n d j e r i (Moscow 1840—1841) defines the French word *table* as 'ayaklu sofrā'. A practical language guide of 1852, the *Nouveaux dialogues français-turcs* par Eram G u z e l - o g l o u, membre du Bureau des traducteurs au Séraskiérat, offers a dialogue in which a customer says to a seller of furniture: "Je n'ai besoin que de deux lits, une table à manger, un secrétaire, une garniture de salon en fauteuils et en chaises, deux glaces et quelques autres petits meubles." The term he uses for the dining table in the Turkish translation is *taam soufrasy*.

Soon after this date a new term makes its appearance, the term which is today the exclusive designation for the table as a piece of furniture: *masa*. As far as I can see, it is first given — characteristically for a new loanword, in three different spellings — in J. Th. Z e n k e r's *Dictionnaire turc-arabe-persan* of 1866, with the laconical definition 'table'. Ahmed V e f i k's *Lehçe-i osmāni* of 1293/1877 describes it as 'small *trapeza*' (*trapezenin küçüğü*). In Mehmed A t u f's *Dictionnaire français-turc-italien* (Constantinople 1868), in M. M a l l o u f's *Dictionnaire français-turc* (Paris 1881), and even in Adolf W a h r m u n d's *Praktisches Handbuch der osmanisch-türkischen Sprache* (Giessen 1884), which contains a glossary of the Turkish words most needed in conversation, the concept 'table' is rendered exclusively by the term *sofra* (and compounds like *taam sofrasi*, *yemek sofrasi*). No notice is taken of the new term *masa*. However, Chemseddine S a m y - B e y F r a s c h e r y's *Dictionnaire turc-français* of 1885 lists *masa* (with two spellings), and the same author's Turkish-Turkish dictionary (*Kāmūs-u Türki*) of 1317—18/1901—02 has this entry: *masa* [Lâtince *mensa*] yemek yemeğe mahsus banko, alafranga sofrā, trapeze. He thus makes no distinction between the terms *masa* and *trapeze*. James R e d h o u s e (*A Turkish and English Lexicon*, Constantinople 1890) defines *masa* as 'a dinner-table; any table', and similarly J. C h l o r o s in his Turkish-Greek dictionary of the same year. C h l o r o s also indicates that the word is stressed on the first syllable, a stress pattern typical for European loanwords, preserved until today. Ant. P. T i n g h i r and K. S i n a p i a n's *Dictionnaire français-turc des termes techniques des sciences, des lettres et des arts* (Constantinople 1891—92) has under

'table' the Turkish equivalents *sofra*, *masa*. The term *trapeze* (*tirapeze*, etc.), recorded since the 17th century, is slowly becoming obsolete. Diran Kélékian's large *Dictionnaire français-turc* (Constantinople 1911) still lists both words, *trapéza* and *masa* (here transcribed as *maça*), but after World War I the former term disappears completely. While the Arabic loanword *sofra* applies only to 'table' in its metaphorical use as the setting for a meal (as in 'to set the table', 'to be at table', etc. — whether the meal is actually being held on a table or improvised on a turned-over wicker basket is irrelevant), the term *masa* becomes, and today still is, the sole designation for the table.

The origin of Turkish *masa* is not obscure. Although by Zenker, and by many others that followed him, derived directly from Latin *mensa*, or indirectly from Latin via a (non-existent) Italian derivative, it was already identified as a borrowing from Rumanian by Franz Miklosich in his *Die slavischen, magyarischen und rumunischen Elemente im türkischen Sprachschätze* (Wien 1889), see also Gustav Meyer, *Türkische Studien* I, Wien 1893, p. 46. The Rumanian word is itself derived from Latin *mensa* (see the article *masă* in *Dicționarul limbii române, serie nouă*, vol. VI, fasc. 2-a, București 1965, pp. 154—158, with old records).

The Rumanian word is today spread over a wide area. Apart from Turkish it is also firmly entrenched in Bulgarian and Macedonian, and traces of it can be found in Greek (the dictionary of 1890 by Chlōros mentioned above gives it as a Koine-alternate to the general term *τράπεζα*; it is also used in the Pontic dialect, see A. A. Papadopoulos, *Historikon lexikon tes pontikes dialektou*, Athens 1958—61) and perhaps also in Serbocroatian (at least, it is listed by Anton Knežević in his *Die Turzismen in der Sprache der Kroaten und Serben*, Meisenheim am Glan 1962, p. 212). In view of the massive impact of Turkish on the vocabulary of these languages and because of reasons of chronology it seems possible to consider Turkish as an epicenter from which the word may have spread to these other languages. The history of Slavic Macedonian is not well explored, but for Bulgarian the chronology looks as follows: The *Bălgarsko-frenski rečnik* of 1871 by I. A. Bogorov does not know the word, nor does the 5-volume *Rečnik na bălgarski yazyk* of 1895—1904 by N. Gerov, but in the latter's supplementary volume of 1908 *mása* — today the standard term for this *Sache* — is given. It thus seems that the word came to Bulgarian only about 40 years after becoming known in Turkey. It is possible that it spread from the Ottoman capital north to the Slavic speaking areas of Bulgaria and Macedonia and possibly also some part of Serbia. It is not known in Albanian. To the Turkic dialect of the Gagauz it may have been transmitted through Bulgarian (on Gagauz of Bulgaria, see Włodzimierz Zajączkowski, *Vocabulaire gagaouze-français*, "Folia Orientalia", VII, 1965, 29—73) or, in the northern part, found access directly from Rumanian (cf. N. A. Baskakov, *Gagauzko-russko-moldavskiy slovar'*, Moscow 1973, s.v.). The narrow foothold it has (or had) in Greek clearly points to Turkish influence. Owing to its late appearance in Turkish it has not reached the Arabic-speaking areas of the Ottoman Empire; in the modern Arab dialects reflexes of Greek *τράπεζα* and, above all, of Italian *tavola* dominate.

Let us assume that the chronology and the overall routes of migration of the Rumanian term as outlined above are correct. Such a hypothesis raises two hard-to-answer questions. In the first place, how can the fact itself be explained that a new term is introduced and that this new term is able to hold its ground against a well-established term and within about half a century completely to oust it? Here we are confronted with a question of semantics, but unfortunately our sources afford only skimpy evidence as to the exact meanings of the terms. Obviously, a *masa* must have been, at the time when the term was introduced, an entirely new concept of a table which could not be identified with the *trapeza*. At least one of the dictionaries of the time when the term was new says that the *masa* was smaller. A definition quoted by Lazăr Şaineanu in his *Influența orientală asupra limbei și culturii române* (vol. 1, Bucharest 1900, p. XXXV) describes the Turkish term *masa* as 'a low table with a single foot'. Perhaps a study of the styles in 19th-century furniture could bring light to this question. It must have been a strikingly new and fancy creation that imbued its name with so much glamor that after some years every new specimen of a table had to be marketed under this new name, the new and the old terms thus slowly becoming synonymous. From there it was only a small step to the final stage in which the old-fashioned term is completely forgotten and the new term has become "the household word". Although we have not really answered the first question, we have, I think, at least shown that it is a solvable problem.

The second problem is much more puzzling. How can we explain the bizarre phenomenon that a commodity which is certainly locally produced and not imported is called by an imported name and that this name is borrowed not from a language that could add refinement and glamor to this commodity, but from one that might at best imply rustic sturdiness? Moreover from a language from which borrowings of a general character were extremely few? As a matter of fact, Şaineanu (loc. cit.), who draws upon the two studies by Miklosich and Meyer cited above, lists only a total of 13 Rumanian loanwords in Turkish, out of which 8 are terms for local institutions or products of the Rumanian lands. Only the remaining five can be called terms of a general character: *barda* 'cooper's ax', *kalas* 'beam, rafter', *kasatura* 'bayonet', *kaşer* 'a kind of cheese', and *masa* 'table'. A longer list is offered by Ion Matei in his article *Mots d'origine roumaine en turc*, "Revue des Etudes Sud-Est Européennes", vol. 4, 1966, p. 223—232, which includes expressions from local Turkish dialects, frequently brought from the Balkan countries by immigrants. It is noteworthy that a number of these loanwords are related to the lumber trade and wood processing: *barda* 'cooper's ax' was already known to Meninski (1680); *kasatura*, today the term for 'bayonet', is derived from Rum. *custură* 'knife' (However, the etymology of this word is obscure. Tache Paşağî, *Dicționarul dialectului aromân*, 1963, suggests a Turkish-Persian derivation. An early record of *kasatura* (کساتوره) in the 15th century Persian chronicle *Kitāb-i Diyarbakriya* of Aq-Qoyunlu history by Abū-Bakr Tihrānī, ed. Necati Lugāl and Faruk Sümer, Ankara 1962—64, vol. 1, p. 84, is uncertain); *kalas* 'beam, rafter' from *kalas tahtası* 'planche de Galatz', "after the famous lumber

that was exported from Galați to Constantinople", as Ş a i n e a n u remarks (loc. cit.); *talpa* 'planche épaisse et large, longue d'environ 1 m et demi' (see M a t e i, op. cit., p. 230); *masa* 'table', and finally *pat* 'lit, sofa' (M a t e i, op. cit., p. 229 f.). It has to be noted, however, that in case of *talpa* and *pat* a Slavic language can be considered the immediate source of the Turkish words.

There are consequently indications that the timber export from Rumanian ports may have had an influence on the terminology of the raw materials. But this could not have affected the finished products of the cabinetmakers in the capital. Two possible explanations remain: One of them would be that the table-makers in the Great Bazaar of Istanbul traditionally recruited their manpower from the trans-Danubian provinces just as other lines of trade or artisanry each had its specific area of recruitment. Unfortunately, we have no indications that would confirm such a hypothesis. The second possibility that comes to mind would be to seek the cause for the migration of the *Wort* in the migration of the makers and users of the *Sache*, namely in an influx of Ottoman *muhacirs* from Rumanian speaking territory to the heartland of the Empire, presumably after the Crimean War. We know of a considerable immigration of Tatar and Circassian refugees in that period (see Roderic H. D a v i s o n, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire 1856—1876*, Princeton 1963, p. 151). Some of these immigrants may have come from Bessarabia and may have brought with them their term for table just as the later *muhacirs* brought their term for bed, *pat*. It is also conceivable that some of these immigrants were absorbed by the industrial quarters of Istanbul and there found the possibility to apply their craftsmanship.

My deliberations around the Turkish words for table have ended in speculation. It had, however, not been my intention to set up new etymologies. I only wanted to put some flesh of cultural history around the bones of etymology and in this way to show where the real problems of understanding the historical process of language contact lie.