

# Towards Orthographic Unity In The Turkic World: Historical Attempts At A Common Written Language And The Contemporary Role Of The 34-Letter Common Turkic Latin Alphabet

Zaripboyeva Nafosat Maratovna

English teacher at the “Nanoshka-Karusel” NTM in Yangihayot district of Tashkent, Uzbekistan

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**Abstract:** This article examines the historical evolution and contemporary significance of efforts to establish linguistic unity among Turkic peoples, focusing particularly on the question of a shared alphabet and the viability of a common written language. The study argues that the most urgent task today is the widespread adoption of the 34-letter Common Turkic Latin Alphabet across all Turkic written languages, followed by a reasoned discussion on whether any single Turkic written language can serve as a common medium of supra-national communication. Rather than advocating an unrealistic unified Turkic written language, the article highlights the pragmatic goal of increasing shared terminology among existing Turkic languages.

Historically, two major initiatives shaped the discourse on linguistic unification: İsmail Gaspiralı's late nineteenth-century vision of a single Turkic written language for all Turkic peoples, and Mustafa Chokay's early twentieth-century project for a unified written language exclusive to the peoples of Turkistan. While both movements left deep intellectual and cultural imprints, the Soviet reorganization of Turkic linguistic space—first through transitional Arabic and Latin alphabets, and later through the imposition of distinct Cyrillic alphabets—fragmented previously shared written traditions rooted in Göktürk, Karakhanid, and Chagatai heritage.

Through a historical-comparative analysis, the article demonstrates how political interventions, alphabet reforms, and emerging local identities facilitated the proliferation of separate written languages among Turkic communities. The study concludes that, despite this diversity, orthographic convergence through a common Latin alphabet remains both feasible and essential for enhancing linguistic compatibility, cultural cohesion, and interregional communication in the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** Turkic languages; Common Turkic Latin Alphabet; orthographic unity; İsmail Gaspiralı; Mustafa Chokay; Chagatai; written language history; Soviet language policy; alphabet reform; Turkic linguistics; language standardization; Turkistan studies.

**Introduction:** The most critical issue for the contemporary Turkic world is the adoption and active use of the 34-letter Common Turkic Latin Alphabet by all Turkic written languages. Following this, the next major question concerns which Turkic written language—if any—should be recognized as a common medium of international communication. Finally, rather than pursuing an unrealistic project such as designing a single standardized Turkic written

language, the most feasible and effective goal is to increase the number of shared terms across all Turkic written languages.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the eminent Turkic thinker İsmail Gaspiralı (1851–1914) sought to establish a common Turkic language for all Turkic peoples, demonstrating this ideal in practice through the language used in his newspaper *Tercüman*. However, after his death in 1914, and especially

following the October Revolution and the establishment of Soviet rule across all Turkic regions between 1918 and 1924, Gaspıralı's project for a unified Turkic language was halted. Instead, the Soviet authorities developed new and mutually distinct written languages for each Turkic community.

During the transitional period, before Soviet linguistic policies became fully consolidated, Turkic communities within the USSR experienced two alphabet systems. The first was the adapted ("simplified") common Arabic alphabet used between 1921 and 1926, in which only Muslim Turkic peoples employed an alphabet incorporating nine distinct Arabic characters corresponding to the nine Turkic vowel phonemes (a, ä, e, i, ı, o, ö, u, ü). The second was the period of the Common Turkic Latin Alphabet (1926–1938), which was adopted even by non-Muslim Turkic groups and functioned as a unified alphabet designed to accurately represent the vowel system of Turkic languages. However, after 1938–1940, Soviet linguistic policy became definitive: the shared Latin alphabet was abolished, and each Turkic community was compelled to use a different Cyrillic (Russian) alphabet. These alphabets have survived into the present day.

To understand the language question within the Turkic world, it is necessary to briefly examine the history of the general Turkic language. In the eleventh century, the Turkic linguist Mahmud al-Kashgari stated in his *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk* that numerous Turkic communities spoke different Turkish dialects. Even earlier, in the eighth-century Göktürk inscriptions written in present-day Mongolia, the names of many Turkic groups were recorded. Some of these ethnonyms have survived to the present, while others disappeared or changed in various historical periods. Based on available written sources, several general observations can be made:

Throughout history, Turkic peoples have possessed multiple spoken varieties of Turkish that have diverged to varying degrees; these differences persist today.

Despite this diversity of spoken varieties, before the thirteenth century most Turkic peoples shared a single written tradition. This written language reached the level of a highly developed literary language in the Göktürk Inscriptions of the eighth century. Works from the Karakhanid period (eleventh–twelfth centuries) continued this literary tradition. Karakhanid Turkish—including its later phases labeled "Karakhanid Turkish," "Old Kipchak Turkish," "Khwarezm Turkish," and "Chagatai Turkish"—is a continuation of the eighth-century Göktürk Turkish and endured until the nineteenth century. Thus, the period between the Göktürk language (eighth century) and the end of the

Chagatai tradition (nineteenth century) constitutes the most crucial era of written language unity among Turkic peoples.

However, with the migration and settlement of large Oghuz Turkic populations in Iran and Anatolia during the Seljuk and Anatolian Seljuk periods, a separate written language emerged among Oghuz Turks under the Ottoman Empire. This new written language eventually developed independently of the general Turkic written tradition of Turkistan and the Volga-Ural region.

Between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries, despite the existence of many spoken Turkic varieties, there were essentially two written languages in the Turkic world: Western Turkish (Anatolian Turkish) within the Ottoman Empire, and Eastern Turkish (Chagatai), used by the Tatars, Bashkirs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Uyghurs, Turkmens, and other groups across Turkistan and the Volga-Ural region.

By the late eighteenth century, due to political developments, independent written languages began to emerge: an Azerbaijani written language distinct from Anatolian Turkish in the Caucasus; a Tatar written language distinct from Chagatai in Kazan; and similarly, separate written traditions among Chuvash, Yakut (Sakha), and other Turkic groups incorporated into the Russian Empire.

This process accelerated at the turn of the twentieth century, leading to the emergence of separate written languages in the Caucasus, Turkistan, and Siberia. In Turkistan, Kazakh was the first to develop independently, followed by Uzbek; after the 1920s, Turkmen, Kyrgyz, Uyghur, and Karakalpak also formed distinct written languages. Soviet colonial policy further intensified this fragmentation. The imposition of distinct Cyrillic alphabets on each Turkic community contributed to the development of separate written languages, divergent terminological systems, and even different orthographic norms. Consequently, establishing orthographic unity among today's Turkic written languages has become considerably difficult.

The most influential Turkic intellectual of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was İsmail Gaspıralı from Crimea. Gaspıralı sought to construct a common written language for all Turkic peoples. In his newspaper *Tercüman*, published from 1883 to 1914, he employed what he considered a unified Turkic language. His initiative was supported by several Tatar writers, including Musa Akyiğit, Fatih Halidi, and Muhammad Zahir Bigiyev. Critics, however, argued that the language used in *Tercüman* was not a truly new common Turkic language but simply Ottoman Turkish (Istanbul Turkish).

Indeed, Gaspıralı's Tercüman represents the most significant attempt to create a shared written language in the Turkic world during this period. Although his "Jadid" schools and his newspaper were admired by Ottoman Turks, Azerbaijanis, Tatars, Bashkirs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Turkmens, and Uyghurs, intellectuals across the Turkic world increasingly preferred to use their local written languages in newspapers and journals between 1900 and 1920. After Soviet rule became firmly established in 1925, the idea of a common written language was abandoned entirely.

Azerbaijani and Tatar intellectuals who emigrated from the USSR after the 1920s continued to use their respective local languages (Azerbaijani and Tatar) in journals published abroad. Turkistani intellectuals, meanwhile, published the *Yeni Türkistan* journal in Istanbul in 1927 using the Turkish of Turkey. Mustafa Chokay (1890–1941), a leading figure in the Alash Orda and Kokand Autonomous Government, envisioned not a pan-Turkic written language for all Turkic peoples, but rather a unified written language specifically for the peoples of Turkistan. His journal *Yash Türkistan*, published in Paris between 1929 and 1939, employed a Turkistan-oriented written language. Chokay's writings show that he did not fully adopt Gaspıralı's vision of a single common language for all Turkic peoples; instead, he advocated linguistic unity only among the Turkic peoples of Turkistan. Nonetheless, the attempt to use a unified written language for Turkistan in *Yash Türkistan* was the first major example of its kind. This initiative continued in later émigré publications such as *Milli Türkistan*, published in Berlin during World War II and in Germany in the 1950s.

In an article titled "Bizning Yol" ("Our Path"), published in the first issue of *Yash Türkistan* in December 1929, Chokay explained the political motivations behind his vision for a unified written language for Turkistan. Several passages from the article illustrate this rationale:

"We, the supporters of Turkistan's independence, are struggling for the salvation of our homeland. Our aim is to establish in Turkistan a national state in both form and substance, for only in this way can our peoples become the true masters of their own destiny in their own land."

These sentences clearly reflect Chokay's aspiration for a single national state in Turkistan, treating all Turkistanis as one "people." It remains uncertain whether he envisioned a single common written language for Turkistan in the future. Nevertheless, it can be inferred that Chokay used a unified Turkistani written language in *Yash Türkistan* primarily for political purposes—to promote the idea of Turkistan's

independence both within Soviet-ruled Turkistan and among Turkistani émigrés abroad.

In conclusion, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed two major attempts to develop a common written language in the Turkic world: (1) İsmail Gaspıralı's project for a single unified Turkic language for all Turkic peoples; and (2) Mustafa Chokay's project for a unified written language specifically for the peoples of Turkistan. Both initiatives left a significant historical legacy and generated substantial intellectual resonance among various Turkic communities.

Beyond these historical efforts, a much larger unresolved issue continued into the twentieth century: although the various Turkic peoples now possess distinct written languages, it may still be possible—and is highly desirable—to achieve orthographic unity among the at least twenty existing Turkic written languages through the adoption of a single, shared Latin alphabet.

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