



Diversifying the Teaching of the History of Rhetoric Series:

Turkish Rhetoric at the Intersections of Three Formative Texts

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Replica of the 8th-century Orkhon inscriptions (Kül Tigin monument)

Situating Turkish Rhetoric

In what follows, I provide a brief overview of Turkish rhetoric with a focus on three seminal texts from the pre-Islamic, Islamic, and republican periods of the Turkish rhetorical tradition: The Orkhon Inscriptions (8th century CE; the Gokturks), Yusuf Has Hacib’s *Kutadgu Bilig* (11th century CE; the Karakhanid Empire), Mustafa Kemal Ataturk’s *Nutuk* (1927; the Turkish Republic). At the end of the overview, I present a list of sources that can be used to build teaching units based on these Turkish texts. Following the list of sources, I also share a document including [sample writing/discussion prompts](#), which were previously used for classroom teaching with some of the texts mentioned in the overview.

Major Figures: Bilge Khagan (683-734); Yusuf Has Hacib (1020-1070); Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938)

Formative Texts: The Orkhon Inscriptions; Yusuf Has Hacib’s *Kutadgu Bilig*; Mustafa Kemal Ataturk’s *Nutuk*, including Ataturk’s “Address to the Youth”

Rhetorical Themes: *Özsöz* (the essential word); *Kut* (divine bliss); *Töre* (a moral rule of law)

Overview of Turkish Rhetoric

The historical roots of modern Turkish people, or the Turks, go back to the “Turkic” people, a large group of closely related Altaic tribal communities of western and central Asia. The Göktürks (i.e., Celestial Turks, a name based on the ancient Turks’ belief in a Celestial God), who formed the first official state to use the word “Türk” in its name, composed the first available pre-Islamic examples of the Turkish rhetorical tradition: the eighth-century Orkhon inscriptions. These texts referred to three four-sided stone monuments erected in



honor of the prominent Gokturk rulers (Bilge Khagan, Kül Tigin [Prince Kül], and Vizier Tonyukuk). Written in an old Turkic/runic alphabet, the inscriptions give voice primarily to Bilge Khagan's statements addressed to the Turks and situate rhetoric (i.e., the use of the written word) as the foundation and the continuance of social and political institutions in Turkic communities: "I have inscribed into the everlasting stone how a state can be resurrected or could be destroyed" (the Kül Tigin monument, south side, lines 11-13). The Orkhon inscriptions render "plain and truthful language" or "the essential word" (*özsöz*) crucial for addressing audiences--an approach that represents the definition and purpose of *rhetoric* as it was originally understood by Turks during the pre-Islamic period of their rhetorical tradition.

The value placed on rhetoric or the use of words is even more evident in the first major example of Islamic-Turkish literature, Yusuf Has Hacib's 11th-century work *Kutadgu Bilig*. Robert Dankoff, a Western scholar of Turkish studies, contextualizes *Kutadgu Bilig* as a didactic poem in the *mirror-for-princes* tradition (one that instructs a ruler on certain aspects of behavior and the rule of the state). Other Turkologists view *Kutadgu Bilig* as a text from which all individuals can draw wisdom about different aspects of life. While Dankoff suggests that the content of *Kutadgu Bilig* shows a synthesis of influences from various cultures (implying that Yusuf must have studied texts of Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, Persian philosopher Al-Farabi, the Quran, the Books of Moses, and the Biblical stories), other Turkologists suggest (and Dankoff also confirms) that *Kutadgu Bilig* is a unique reflection on Turkish culture and oral tradition and its intersections with both the author's and Turkish society's beliefs, feelings, and practices—given its frequent employment of literary tools unique to the Turkish tradition (e.g., Turkish proverbs) in its depiction of the Karakhanid Turkish culture.

Among its other teachings as a wisdom text, *Kutadgu Bilig* considers the appropriate use of language essential to living a fulfilled life, evident in its frequent references to how the word (*söz*) and the tongue or language (both denoted by *dil* in the Turkish language) should be used. The text devotes two chapters dedicated to various symbolic characters' dialogues on the appropriate use of words: "The Tongue: its Merits and Demerits, its Benefits and Harms" (the seventh chapter, verses 162-190) and "Ay Toldı Talks to the Ruler about the Virtues of the Tongue and Benefits of the Word" (the nineteenth chapter, verses 955-1044). I provide the full English translation of these two chapters in *Alternative Sources for Rhetorical Traditions* (forthcoming in 2020, presented in the list of primary sources). A more abbreviated translation of these chapters can also be found in Dankoff's work on *Kutadgu Bilig (Wisdom of Royal Glory)*—listed as part of the sources below. In addition to these two chapters, *Kutadgu Bilig* includes hundreds of additional references to the ways in which "the word" (*söz*) should be used. I also provide the English translations of some of these verses in my chapter in the forthcoming *Routledge Handbook of Comparative World Rhetorics* (presented in the list of secondary sources).

The notions of *kut* and *töre* underwrite both the Orkhon inscriptions and *Kutadgu Bilig* as the pillars of performing in/with language in the Turkish tradition. A term that was first used in the Orkhon inscriptions, *kut* roughly represents a divinely sourced bliss or a blessed form

of happiness (e.g., Bilge, East 19). *Töre*, also first used in the Orkhon inscriptions as “*törü*,” refers to a certain set of moral principles (mostly unwritten) that are supposed to guide and govern an individual’s behavior—principles that, when followed, leads to an individual’s eternal bliss and, when violated, might result in his or her demise (e.g., Bilge, East 18-19). Rather than defining rhetoric as *the ability to recognize the available means of persuasion* (e.g., see Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric) or *the moral person speaking* (e.g., see Quintilian’s views on rhetoric), Turkish texts such as the Orkhon inscriptions and *Kutadgu Bilig* treat rhetoric or the word (*söz*) as a means for attaining *kut*. *Kutadgu Bilig* suggests, for example, that attaining *kut* requires subjecting the “tongue” (*dil*) to a certain rhetorical training (e.g., one has to study language so that one can properly communicate with and utilize authority and power); this process is what ensures effective communication as well as one’s morality or proper following of the *töre*.

A seminal text that represents the modern, republican period of the Turkish rhetorical tradition is a 1927 speech delivered by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder and the first president of contemporary Turkey. Delivered in more than thirty-six hours over six days (October 15-20), Atatürk’s speech presents his first-hand account of the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1922) and the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic. Atatürk composed this book-length speech in the Turkish language, which was then written in the Arabic script. The text was later transliterated into today’s Latin-based Turkish alphabet and translated into several languages for diplomatic missions and libraries throughout the world. *Nutuk* has since been considered a seminal text of Turkish political culture and oratory.



Atatürk at the Turkish Grand National Assembly, October 15, 1927

Just like the Orkhon inscriptions, Atatürk's speech can be used as both a major example of leadership rhetoric and a text with implications for the relationship between the notion of responsibility and rhetorical practice in the Turkish tradition. In his *Nutuk*, Atatürk describes the role of its orator as a leader of the Turkish people, the roles of the leading figures in the nationalist struggle, and the establishment of the Republic. Atatürk deems it a responsibility to openly explain the circumstances and his related actions. In this sense, both for Atatürk and the Göktürk khagans centuries before him, responsibility and rhetorical action are interlinked. Responsibility is at the core of the rhetorical process in that it is considered the responsibility of a leader to use rhetoric, accounting for actions and establishing a dialogue with the audience.

It is worth noting that unlike *Kutadgu Bilig*, neither the Orkhon inscriptions nor *Nutuk* presents a conscious formulation of rhetorical theory or concepts. The rhetorical preferences of the Orkhon inscriptions or *Nutuk* are embedded in the texts' overall content and how language is used to deliver that content (any specific, Turkish/non-Western rhetorical principles are to be extracted from within the texts' overall rhetorical materiality and style).

The sources on the characteristics of "Turkish rhetoric" or "the Turkish rhetorical tradition" are limited. The following sources include the major English translations of the aforementioned texts and a few secondary works on those texts. To request content for class use from the "forthcoming" sources included in the following list, please contact Elif Guler at gulere@longwood.edu.

Primary Sources - English Translations

[Atatürk, Mustafa K. *A Speech Delivered by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk 1927*. Istanbul: Ministry of Education, 1963. Print.](#)

Guler, Elif. "Turkish Rhetoric in Yusuf Has Hacib's *Kutadgu Bilig*: A Partial Translation with an Introduction and a Commentary." Forthcoming in *Alternative Sources for Rhetorical Traditions*, Southern Illinois University Press

Includes a commentary discussing some of the characteristics of Turkish rhetoric evident in Yusuf Has Hacib's *Kutadgu Bilig*.

Presents full translations of two *Kutadgu Bilig* sections dedicated entirely to rhetoric: "The Tongue: its Merits and Demerits, its Benefits and Harms" (the seventh chapter, verses 162-190) and "Ay Toldı Talks to the Ruler about the Virtues of the Tongue and Benefits of the Word" (the nineteenth chapter, verses 955-1044).

[Khass H, Yusuf and Robert Dankoff. *Wisdom of Royal Glory \(Kutadgu Bilig\), a Turko-Islamic Mirror for Princes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983. Print.](#)



[Ross, E. Denison, and Vilhelm Thomsen. "The Orkhon Inscriptions: Being a Translation of Professor Vilhelm Thomsen's Final Danish Rendering." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1930, pp. 861–876.](#)

Secondary Sources

Guler, Elif. "An Overview of *Kut* and *Töre* as the Pillars of the Turkish Rhetorical Tradition." Forthcoming in *The Routledge Handbook of Comparative World Rhetorics* (2020).

Delineates the two pillars of the Turkish rhetorical tradition evident in the Orkhon inscriptions and *Kutadgu Bilig*.

Guler, Elif and İklim Goksel. "Understanding Turkish Rhetoric in the Intertextuality of Two Seminal Texts: The Orkhon Inscriptions and Atatürk's *Nutuk*." *Advances in the History of Rhetoric*, vol. 22 no. 2, 2019. 194-207.

Delineates some of the Turkish rhetorical practices with a focus on the relationship between the Orkhon inscriptions and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's *Nutuk* (1927).

Guler, Elif and İklim Goksel. "The Pedagogical Implications of Teaching Atatürk's 'Address to the Youth' for Global Rhetoric and Civic Action in the U.S. Writing Classroom." *Reflections: A Journal of Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing, and Service Learning*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2017.

Discusses the pedagogical implications of teaching Atatürk's "Address to the Youth" (the conclusion of *Nutuk*) in the U.S. writing classroom--an endeavor which allows students in a Western context to explore and discover the rhetorical characteristics of a non-Western text.

The article includes a full English translation of Atatürk's "Address to the Youth."

Sample Writing Prompts: The prompts in this PDF document were used originally to discuss Atatürk's "Address to the Youth" in a U.S. writing classroom.