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Thoughts around the Table

To Jan Reyehman 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 (tepşî) 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
Meninski lists for a dining table the words süfret, vulgo sofra, furthermore simi and others, and for a wooden table (mensa lignea) the terms tyræpeze, 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 Hindoglu lists astal besides terapésé and sofra as equivalents of French table in his Dictionnaire français-turc of 1831, but this may be a carry-over from Meninski's Lexicon of 1680; in his Dictionnaire abrégé turc-français of 1838 Hindoglu 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 sufras. Alexandre Handjeri (Moscow 1840—1841) defines the French word table as 'ayaklu sofra'. A practical language guide of 1852, the Nouveaux dialogues français-turcs par Eram Güzel-oglou, membre du Bureau des traducteurs au Séraškiérat, 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 sofraşı.

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. Zenker's Dictionnaire turc-arabe-persan of 1866, with the laconical definition 'table'. Ahmed Vefik's Lehe-i osmâni of 1293/1877 describes it as 'small trapeza' (trapezenin kucuğü). In Mehmed Atuf's Dictionnaire français-turc-italien (Constantinople 1868), in M. Malloûf's Dictionnaire français-turc (Paris 1881), and even in Adolf Wahr mund'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 Samy-Bey Fraschery's Dictionnaire turc-français of 1885 lists masa (with two spellings), and the same author's Turkish-Turkish dictionary (Kâmûs-u Türkü) of 1317—18/1901—02 has this entry: masa [Lâtince mensa] yemek yemeğe mahsus banko, alafranga sofra, trapeze. He thus makes no distinction between the terms masa and trapeze. James Redhouse (A Turkish and English Lexicon, Constantinople 1890) defines masa as 'a dinner-table; any table', and similarly J. Chloros in his Turkish-Greek dictionary of the same year. Chloros also indicates that the word is stressed on the first syllable, a stress pattern typical for European loanwords, preserved until today. Ant. P. Tinghir and K. Sinapián'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 Kélekian’s large Dictionnaire français-turc (Constantinople 1911) still lists both words, trapeza 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 Zénker, 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, magyarschen und rumunischen Elemente im türkischen Sprachchatze (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 Choros 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 Serbo-Croatian (at least, it is listed by Anton Kněžević in his Die Turkismen 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 Bǎlgarsko-frenska rečnik of 1871 by I. A. Bogorov does not know the word, nor does the 5-volume Rečnik na bǎlgarski 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 Turcik dialect of the Gagauz it may have been transmitted through Bulgarian (on Gagauz of Bulgaria, see Wlodzimierz Zającowski, 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 trapesa. 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 Șaineanu in his Influența orientală asupra limbii 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, Șaineanu (loc. cit.), who draws upon the two studies by Miklośich 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', kașer '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 Meninskii (1680); kasatura, today the term for 'bayonet', is derived from Rum. custură 'knife' (However, the etymology of this word is obscure. Tache Papahagi, Dicționarul dialectului ăromân, 1963, suggests a Turkish-Persian derivation. An early record of kasatura (کاساتوره) in the 15th century Persian chronicle Kitāb-i Diyarbakriya of Aq-Qoyunlu history by Abru Bakr Tihrānī, ed. Necati Lugal 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 Galaţi to Constantinople”, as Şaianu remarks (loc. cit.); talpa ‘planché épaisse et large, longue d’environ 1 m et demi’ (see Matei, op. cit., p. 230); masa ‘table’, and finally pat ‘lit, sofa’ (Matei, 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. Davis, 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.