

R E V I E W

A COLLECTION OF SCHOLARLY ARTICLES ON THE KARAIM LANGUAGE

Karaim Language in Use (A Collection of Scholarly Articles), edited by Dr Karina Firkavičiūtė, Natela Statkienė, and Dr Šarūnas Rinkevičius, Vilnius University Proceedings: 2024. 168 pp.

With a speaker base reduced to only several dozen individuals, the Karaim language currently stands as one of the most critically endangered languages in Europe. Given its fragile status, the publication of any scholarly or practical material pertaining to the Karaim language assumes crucial importance, not only for the documentation of the language but also as a strategic tool for its revitalisation and broader promotion. Each new publication contributes to the survival of the language by fostering scholarly interest, providing resources for language learners, and enhancing public visibility.

The volume in question primarily stems from the proceedings of the international academic conference ‘The Karaim Language in Use’, which took place at Vilnius University in May 2022. This gathering brought together scholars and researchers dedicated to various aspects of the Karaim studies, and the resulting book offers a thorough examination of contemporary research and methodologies concerning the preservation of the language. Featuring the contributions of eleven distinguished authors, the book offers a balanced and comprehensive overview of current trends in the Karaim studies, with special emphasis placed on key research areas that reflect the evolving discourse around endangered languages.

The book is structured into three distinct sections, each targeting a different yet interrelated facet of the Karaim studies. The first section focuses on the Karaim language studies and preservation efforts by providing a critical analysis of both historical and contemporary approaches to safeguarding the language. Through detailed linguistic investigations, the section sheds light on phonological, morphological, and syntactic features of Karaim that are essential for language documentation and revitalisation projects.

The second section, ‘Living Resources of Karaim’, shifts the focus toward community-based resources and intangible cultural heritage that support the resilience of the language. Here, the contributors delve into the role of Karaim-speaking communities, cultural initiatives, and the use of digital technologies as tools for maintaining linguistic vitality in a highly endangered context. This section highlights how the intertwining of language with cultural practices can foster sustainable revitalisation strategies.

The third and final section, titled ‘The Karaim Language in Bible Translations’, provides an in-depth examination of religious texts, particularly Bible translations. Given that many endangered languages, including Karaim, have relied on religious texts as repositories of linguistic knowledge, this section analyses the ways these translations serve not only as artifacts of linguistic history but also as pedagogical tools that contribute to the survival of the language.

Through these comprehensive contributions, the book encapsulates the current state of the Karaim language studies by offering both a scholarly resource and a roadmap for future research and revitalisation efforts. Its importance is underscored by the fact that each chapter contributes to a broader understanding of how highly endangered languages can be studied, preserved, and promoted in the modern world.

The authors emphasise the significance of the discussions held among native speakers during the conference, highlighting this as a particularly noteworthy aspect of the event. These conversations evoked memories of a time when speaking Karaim was an integral and natural part of daily life: when families communicated exclusively in Karaim both within their homes and in social interactions with relatives. The contrast with the present situation is stark. Today, such a scholarly conference served as a rare and necessary occasion for native speakers to engage in a meaningful dialogue in their ancestral language. This emphasises not only the critical state of Karaim but also the importance of creating intentional spaces where the language can still be spoken and preserved (p. 9).

The opening article features Henryk Jankowski's take on the development of the Karaim language studies. The benefit of this entire academic guide lies in the diversity of the nature of the texts. The introductory text can serve students, professionals, and all readers in general not only as an accurate list of current trends in the Karaim studies, but also as an overview of already published materials and the necessary bibliographic data related to them.

Furthermore, Jankowski brings up a very interesting observation. Although much work has been done on the research in the history of Karaim, there is still much to be done, since, in Jankowski's words, among the studies listed, there are some materials that are unreliable and of low quality. This is especially true for those written or compiled by amateurs without philological or linguistic knowledge. They published their books to serve their community. This somewhat differs from the publication of another similarly endangered language – Livonian, the indigenous language of Latvia. The earliest Livonian texts predominantly had a scholarly value and were not meant to be read by the broader public, such as, for example, Andreas Johan Sjögren's *Livische Grammatik nebst Sprachproben (Livonian Grammar and Exercises)* and his *Livisch-deutsches und deutsch-livisches Wörterbuch (Livonian-German and German-Livonian Dictionary)*, both published in 1861.

A substantial portion of the publication is dedicated to honouring the memory of the individuals who made significant contributions to the enrichment and development of Karaim social and cultural life. Their lasting impact on the community is recognised not only for their efforts in preserving Karaim traditions but also for fostering the continuity of the language through active engagement in social, intellectual, and cultural spheres. The impact that Simon Firkovič (1897–1982), Mykolas Firkovičius (1924–2000), and Alexandr Dubinski (1924–2002), the three great personalities of the twentieth century, had on the development of Karaim society is undeniable and deserves to be recorded and remembered. Mr Markas Lavrinovičius (1938–2011), the Hachan of the Karaim community from 2009 to 2011, also greatly contributed to Karaim language preservation.

All the personalities discussed in this book were of great importance in the formation of Karaim culture (be it through community, religious activities, or academically, especially linguistically), and many also left a significant mark in literature (Simon Firkovič).

Some long-lasting impacts can be seen even today, such as the initiative of Aleksander Dubiński and Éva Á. Csató, whose cooperation led to Karaim language summer schools

being organised in Trakai for many years, which played a significant role in the attempts to improve the language competencies of the participants (p. 65).

There are various dialects in Karaim, namely, north-western Karaim (or Trakai Karaim spoken in Lithuania), south-western Karaim (or Lutsk-Halich Karaim spoken in Galicia and Volhynia), and eastern Karaim (or Crimean Karaim spoken in Crimea), which differ just in phonetic and vocabulary aspects (p. 7). Prof. Éva Á. Csató's contribution on the Halich dialect speakers is of the highest importance to the linguistic research on this dialect. Csató claims that

As these speakers were relatively isolated, they did not have any direct contact with potential learners. They had to avail themselves of documentary means, i.e. documenting the language in one way or another. Their documentary efforts could be realized by working with a linguist, who carried out field research and produced audio and video recordings (p. 69).

This was illustrated by the examples of Janina Eszwowicz, Amelia Abrahamowicz, and Sabina Zajączkowska, three of the last fluent speakers of Halich Karaim, who were capable of using all possible tools to document their language. The presented material is based on the author's own fieldwork materials. Although Karaim is not spoken anymore in Halich, and both Janina Eszwowicz and Amelia Abrahamowicz passed away, the cultural and linguistic richness has been preserved. Originally not characteristic of Trakai region, for a short period of time the Halich dialect was spoken also by certain individuals in Trakai region. However, due to linguistics differences, Amelia Abrahamowicz (1929–2015), the last speaker of the Halich dialect, was unable to communicate in Karaim with people around her. Yet the dialect was not forgotten. Like other entries in the collection, this one can serve as a source of hope for the reader, that even though a particular dialect is no longer in use, we have at least a written version and materials that preserve it for future generations. In the case of the Halich dialect, this is attested by the presence of Abrahamowicz's book *The Halich Dialect of the Karaim Language* and other materials, such as *Halich Karaim Grammar and Dictionary*.

Like the Livonians and speakers of other indigenous languages, the Karaims will encounter new challenges in the era of advancing technologies. On the other hand, these challenges also present opportunities to strengthen the Karaim language and facilitate its teaching to those interested in learning it. The initial steps toward this are described in the chapter dedicated to Karaim language online conversational courses for foreigners by Prof. Timur Kocaoğlu, in which he reflects on strategies to encourage a wide range of students to learn Karaim. Given that both individuals of Karaim heritage and non-Karaims with an interest in the language are often found in even the most remote areas, he suggests that establishing online language courses would be the most effective way to provide learning opportunities for all. Again, there are parallels with the experience of teaching Livonian. The process of creating new language-learning materials demonstrates that digital and remote solutions support the preservation of the Livonian language environment and address issues stemming from the loss of a unified Livonian community over fifty years ago. These tools contribute to the acceleration and effectiveness of Livonian language revitalisation while underscoring the need for systematically developed, modern pedagogical resources.(1)

(1) For more, see: Ernštreits, V.; Kļava, G. (2023). Experiences in Teaching an Endangered Language: Finding the Motivation and Means to Ensure the Acquisition of Livonian. *The Endangered Languages Yearbook*, 66.

The revitalisation processes are of vital importance for Karaim, which is highlighted mostly in the second section of the book with contributions from Assoc. Prof. Dr Karina Firkavičiūtė, Diana Lavrinovič, and Dr Šarūnas Rinkevičius.

An essential component of the book is its third section, dedicated to Bible translations, which are also of vital importance to the study of Karaim culture and language. The analysis of these translations provides a unique perspective within the Karaim studies, offering valuable insights into the multifaceted process of revitalisation, which can occur at various levels through diverse materials.

The collection of articles the *Karaim Language in Use* represents the latest and most comprehensive resource in the field of the Karaim studies. Its balanced integration of perspectives and disciplines into a cohesive whole makes this book indispensable not only for advancing Karaim studies but also for enhancing our understanding of other endangered languages.

To conclude, we can only hope that the next steps will take place in the spirit of the Karaim proverb: *Az ajtma, kieriakli kylma*. (Talking is not enough, action is needed).

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