

KARAY (KARAIM) SYNTAX  
IN THE WORKS  
OF THE LATE  
HAZZAN MYKOLAS  
FIRKOVIČIUS

(1924–2000)    ⦿    *Timur Kocaoğlu*

This study aims to draw the attention of the scholars to the special case of the Karay (Karaim) syntax in the works of late Hazzan Mykolas Firkovičius (1924–2000). The syntax model used in the works of Firkovičius differs largely from that of the other Karay works in both religious and secular contents. The paper compares the syntax of the Firkovičius' works with other Karay publications, especially the ones in the journal *Karaj Awazy* of the 1930s. This paper, however, does not claim a final conclusion on the subject, but expresses a need to a more thorough research and analysis of the works of Firkovičius in regard to their syntax structure.

The works of late Hazzan Mykolas Firkovičius (1924–2000), published in the 1990s, take a significant place within the modern history of the Karay language publications in the twentieth century. He is not only the most productive author of several books in both religious and secular contents, but also the one who has made a very important contribution regarding the syntax of the modern Karay literary language.

In various grammatical works, the sentence structure of Trakai Karay (Karaim) is usually highlighted as not in line with that of general Turkic languages in regard to the position of the predicate in a sentence.<sup>1</sup> This assumption is partially correct when one examines mostly the religious texts written in Karay. The Karay religious texts do exhibit a non-Turkic syntax structure when the predicate (or verb) is moved to the middle or the beginning of a sentence. In his grammar of Karay, Firkovičius stressed that this feature is entirely dependent on the translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew language:

<sup>1</sup> Chiefly Мусаев К. М., Кенесбей М. Краткий грамматический очерк караимского языка. Москва, 1977; Мусаев К. М., Кенесбей М. Синтаксис караимского языка. Казань, 2002 (Москва, 2004); Özlem Kazan, Litvanya Karaylarına Ait Dini Metinler. I–IV. İstanbul: Marmara Üniversitesi [unpublished PhD dissertation], 2002; Csató Éva A., Syntactic Code-copying in Karaim // Ö. Dahl and M. Koptjevskaja-Tamm (eds.) The Circum Baltic Languages: Their Typology and Contacts. Amsterdam, 2000, p. 265–277; Csató Éva A. Karai.i A High-copying Language // M. C. Jones and E. Esch (eds.) Languages Change. The Interplay of Internal, External and Extra-Linguistic Factors. New York & Berlin, 2000, p. 315–327; Csató Éva A. On Word Order Differences Between Turkish and Karaim // Dilbilim Araştırmaları. Ankara, 1994, p. 54–61.

„In the course of many centuries, Karaim was deformed in its religious and secular literature, since the language of these writings was mostly based not on its spoken form, but on the literal translations of the Bible from the totally unrelated Hebrew“.<sup>2</sup>

During one of our conversations in 1999, Firkovičius asserted that the former Karay Ullu Hazzans (Religious Leaders) used to preach in the Karay language while reading the Old Testament in Hebrew at the religious ceremonies. This kind of simultaneous translations on the scene from Hebrew into Karay, obviously, led to changes in the Karay sentences by adapting the Hebrew structure. We can illustrate this with the following phrase from a religious text: *Maxtav béremin Ténrige har vaxt* (I praise God always). This sentence in the correct Turkic syntax structure should be one of the following: *Ténrige har vaxt maxtav béremin* or *Har vaxt Ténrige maxtav béremin* (as the predicate “maxtav béremin” being moved from the beginning of the sentence to the end).

The Kazakh-born famous Turkolog Kenesbay Musaev indicates three different types of syntax in the Karay language: one in the daily spoken language, the second in the language of the religious books, and the third in the contemporary written language. According to Musaev, the language of the religious books demonstrates a strong inclination toward the old Hebrew syntax forms which are contrary to the general Turkic syntax.<sup>3</sup> In his latest work on a detailed analysis of the Karay Syntax, Musaev shows various examples of a strong foreign language influence on the Karay syntax, namely Old Hebrew and Slavic languages, chiefly Russian, Polish, and Ukrainian.<sup>4</sup> Among the various examples in his book, Musaev explains that the correct form of the Karay sentence *Aytat ol maya bügün* (He talks to me today), displaying mostly the Indo-European SVO (Subject–Verb–Object) syntax structure, should have been as follows: *Ol maya bügün aytat* in order to conform to the general Turkic syntax SOV (Subject–Object–Verb).

In the first half of the twentieth century, we see a growth of the Karay language publications (poetry collections, stories, plays) and periodicals. The most significant Karay-language periodical was, of course, the journal *Karay Awazy* (Karay Voice) in Lutsk between 1931–1939, which had 12 issues. Many famous Karay intellectuals, writers, poets, and scholars written for this outstanding journal. Thus, an examination of the syntax types used in various articles in this journal, gives us the state of the Karay literary language in the 1930s. The forward *Uchuwcularymyzga* (To Our Readers) in its first issue starts with the following paragraph:

<sup>2</sup> *Firkovičius M.* Mien karajče ürianiam. Vilnius, 1996, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> *Мусаев К. М., Кенесбай М.* Краткий грамматический очерк..., с. 69.

<sup>4</sup> *Мусаев К. М., Кенесбай М.* Синтаксис..., с. 77–97.

„Bigin k'erdi jaryhyn kinnin burunhu kitaby karaj-wachtlyknyn. Biginden kraj-dzany kičlirek urunma baslady. Jazyłsyn bu kin sižnin sahysynyžda!“<sup>5</sup>

In the above three sentences, we find two types of syntax: one which conforms with the Turkic syntax order (the second sentence) and two which don't conform (the first and the last sentences). The predicate (*urunma baslady*) is correctly placed at the end of the sentence in the second sentence, while the verb *k'erdi* in the first sentence and the verb *jazyłsyn* in the third sentence are placed at the first part of the sentences. Especially, the very first sentence *Bigin k'erdi jaryhyn kinnin burunhu kitaby karaj-wachtlyknyn* (The first book of the Karay periodical has just appeared today) is very problematic concerning the general Turkic syntax order. Not only the verb is at the top of the sentence (the second word), but all other components of the sentence are in disorder according to the general Turkic syntax structure. If we arrange this sentence in the following two different ways, the main differences between both types can be seen better (the first line is the original form in the *Karay Awazy* and the second one is the reconstructed version of it that conforms with the type of the general Turkic word order in a sentence:

- „1) Bigin k'erdi jaryhyn kinnin burunhu kitaby karaj-wachtlyknyn.
- 2) Bigin karaj-wachtlyknyn burunhu kitaby kinnin jaryhyn k'erdi.“

In the second reconstructed version, the subject *karaj-wachtlyknyn burunhu kitaby* (the first issue of the Karay periodical) is placed at the beginning of the sentence after the word *bigin* (today) which can be moved anywhere in a sentence without disordering the general Turkic syntax structure. In the original sentence, even the words of the compound subject are in disorder: *burunhu kitaby karaj-wachtlyknyn* instead of *karaj-wachtlyknyn burunhu kitaby*, as well as the compound object *jaryhyn kinnin* (the light of the day) instead of *kinnin jaryhyn* in the general Turkic word order. Many more examples selected from the twelve issues of the journal *Karay Awazy* can demonstrate that two different types of sentence structures were used side by side in the Karay literary language of the 1930s.

Keeping in mind the impact of the Old Hebrew and the Slavic languages on the syntax and lexicon of the Karay language, Firkovičius pointed out the significance of the earlier Karay written heritage and folklore:

„As for myself, I learned Karaim as a child in my family, in the prewar school in Trakai, and I also heard it in the kenesa. In the attempts to improve my knowledge and to revive rarely or no longer used forms, I studied extant 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts. In my opinion, the comparison of these manuscripts shows that the older they are, the purer and more idiomatic

<sup>5</sup> Uchuwcułarymyzga // Karaj Awazy. 1931, No 1, p. 1.

their language is and the fewer the loanwords in them. The specimens of folklore that have been preserved up to our days demonstrate their old roots and affinity with other Turkic languages.”<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, Firkovičius, especially in his grammar book of Karay, gave various examples of the spoken Karay sentences which exhibit a truly Turkic syntax structure. Even in the prefaces that he wrote for various religious publications, Firkovičius always attempted to observe the Turkic sentence structure of SOV (Subject–Object–Verb). In the following Karay sentence and its English translation, the single underline shows the *subject*, dotted underline the *object*, and the double underline the *verb* (predicate):

„İnamlı atalarımız, biyik da aqıllı üvretkenlerimiz öz tuvmuş Qaray tilinde Ténrige yalbarır édiler, maxtavlar çozar édiler dahi bizge-de éski Qaray qol yazışların qaldırdılar.”<sup>7</sup>

„(Our faithful fathers, great and wise teachers were praying to God and were chanting eulogies in their own native Karay language; moreover, they left us the old Karay handwriting manuscripts).”<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the Karay sentences in the non-religious works of Mykolas Firkovičius, including his prefaces to the religious works, correspond to the general Turkic SOV syntax structure. When I asked Mykolas Firkovičius to prepare me ca. 700 phrases for the Karay daily conversations in 1999, he constructed the Karay daily phrases in a way to conform with the general Turkic syntax order. I have published those phrases compiled by Firkovičius in my book, *Karay: The Trakai Dialect*<sup>9</sup> along with other phrases and texts that Firkovičius published in his various books before his death.

The following few selected examples are from the self-teaching Karay grammar book by Mykolas Firkovičius which are also cited in my Karay book:<sup>10</sup>

„Kim anda kaçat? Anda mači kaçat.”  
(What is running there? There a cat is running)

„Nie bunda jatat? Bunda alma jatat.”  
(What is laying here? Here an apple is laying)

„Ol kimniñ atasy? Ol mienim atam.”  
(Whose father is he? He is my father)

„Sieñ mienim üštiunia bahynmys. Kiožliarijni janha kajyras.”  
(You are not looking at me. You are turning your eyes away)

„Dima kajikni alsyn, bierie any kiel'tirsiñ da kazychka kip any bajlasyn.”  
(Dima should take the boat, bring it here, and tie it to a pole tightly)

<sup>6</sup> Firkovičius M. Mien karajče ürianiam ... , p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Firkovičius M. Karaj diñlilarniñ jalbarmach jergialiari. Vol. 1. Vilnius, 1998, p. 5–6.

<sup>8</sup> Kocaoğlu T. Karay: The Trakai Dialect. Munich, 2006, p. 124.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 42–120.

<sup>10</sup> Firkovičius M. Mien karajče ürianiam; Kocaoğlu T. Karay: The Trakai Dialect, p. 42–120.

„Atalarymyz karaj dinimižni bižgia üvriatiadirliar.“

(Our fathers teach us our Karay religion)

„Kiokliarniñ bir Kiučliu Tieñrisi bart.“

(There is a single Powerful God of the Skies)

„Ušpu kiči tiuziuvium, karaj tiliniñ bunjaty, siuviar Bijčiamniñ Anamnyn, abajly da kierti karaj katyn kišiniñ, syjly adın sahyndyrsyn!“

(My this small work should exalt the respectful name of my beloved Lady my Mother, the caring and true Karay woman who is the foundation of the Karay language!)

„Tieñriniñ bolušluhuba ušpu kiči tiuziuviumniu “Mieñ karajče ürianiam”, karaj tiliniñ bunjatyñ, kipliatmiak üčiuñ Trochtahy karajlarnyn tuvmuš sioziurñ, kiučiumia kioria jazdym.“

(With the help of God, I wrote this small work “I Learn Karay,” the basis of the Karay language, for reinforcing the mother-tongue of the Trakai Karays, as much as I can)

„Karaj tili adietliarimiž byla birdiañ alty juž jyl tiekli bunda Lietuva Bijligiñdia bižni tuttu, kioñdiardi, bavlaštyrды.“

(The Karay language together with our traditions have held, lead, and bound us here in the Lithuanian state for about six hundred years).

In conclusion, it is very clear that the esteemed scholar Hazzan Mykolas Firkovičius made a very significant contribution into the Karay literary language in the 1990s by bringing the Karay syntax structure in line with that of the general Turkic languages. This extraordinary effort of Mykolas Firkovičius in his published works to revive and promote both the Karay spoken and literary languages in a new way, unfortunately, has not yet been noticed or evaluated by other scholars. A more thorough analysis of his published works in this respect is needed without delay.