

PEOPLE OF THE CAMPUS – ALİ ÇAĞAN KAYA

Interview – Bilge Ledum



First of all, welcome, everyone, to our interview series “People of the Campus”. In this series we will be aiming to closely get to know the people of the campus and what they do. In the first interview of this series we are here with the scientist of our campus Ali Çağan Kaya from the English Language and Literature department: — Bonjour tout le monde, hallo zusammen, hi everyone, saluton al ĉiuj, hepiniz hoş geldiniz!

Why are we having this interview with Çağan?

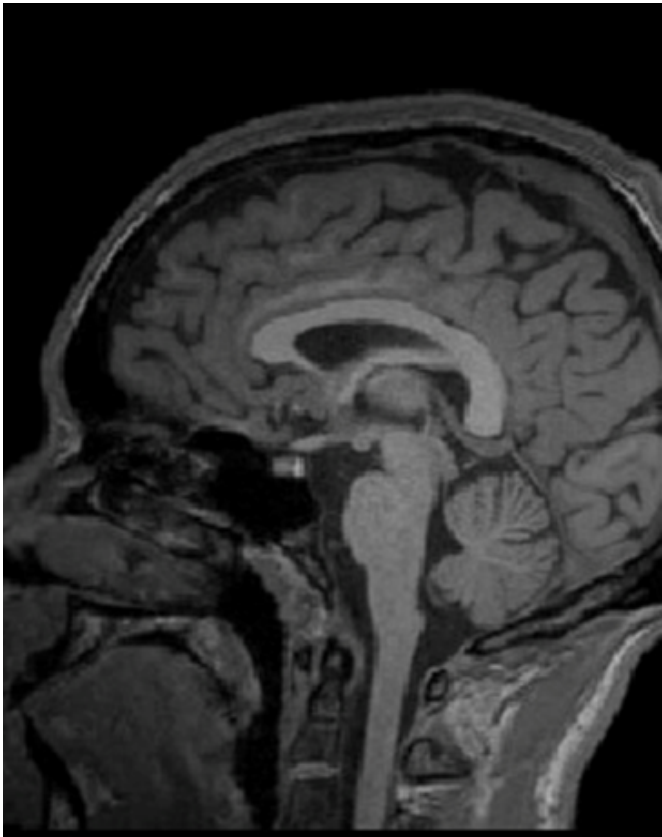
Çağan is a successful scientist who carries out active studies in his field and who has a wonderful story. We wish all those who want to get to know him closely and hear his story a happy reading!

“...we need to not shut ourselves in boxes.”

Who is Çağan, in both states that we see him and in those we don't?

I've thought about this question a lot. It's interesting to think about how we shape our identities, especially considering context. For instance, if you had asked me this as an Esperantist, I could've defined myself as an activist. If you ask my musician side, I might say I'm a person who loves jazz music. But to make things easier, although I am just beginning, I will introduce myself as an academician. Then later I want to tell this in more of a personal angle.

As a researcher, I am someone who is very curious about cognition and language. With this curiosity I am doing research to make a contribution to both the literature and my friends. I can say that, personally, I have interests that seem contradictory like skateboarding, coding, playing the guitar, solving the Rubik's cube. For me, that's what freedom means. In this regard we should not shut ourselves in boxes. For example, just because I play the electric-guitar it doesn't have to mean that I can't listen to classical music. Or the fact that I skateboard does not equate to me not being able to translate poems.



“Language is a concept we disregard. We use the most but think about the least.”

Why language, why linguistics, why computers, why cognitive linguistics? What exactly is the existence and the meaning of language to you? What kind of space does it take up in your life?

When talking about language, first I would like to talk about cognition, which is the source of language. Cognition lies behind all our thoughts; and the main communication tool of cognition is language. Language is the concept we use the most and think about the least. We can approach it as a scientific object, which, of course, is important; however, for me, language is beyond just being an object. It's so multidimensional that it's quite difficult to reduce it to a single definition, which is why there are many definitions for language in the literature.

If we circle back to the side of me that we usually don't see: actually I am a very content and communicative person. Even when I don't feel well, talking to someone makes me feel better. I can say that I'm very organized in my personal life and my opinions. I don't enjoy taking myself too seriously, I'm quite a natural person. And when I'm with my friends, we have a lot of moments when we're happy and when we're laughing a lot. I'm the friend of every friend group. One thing about me that I don't enjoy much is that I'm forgetful. I especially forget the things I've done- I can be a little absentminded. The thing that brings me the most joy in every aspect of life is learning things, whether it's nuclear physics or juggling. Other than these things, I especially love cats. And in general I can say that the state of me that you've heard or read in this interview is very reflective of my real self.

Language is not just a tool for communication; it's used in a lot of areas besides its referential function. However, what's really important to linguists is the study of language. We can inspect language from different perspectives: When we consider it as a positive science, we examine language with empirical observations and experiments. On the other hand, the place of language in social sciences can reveal itself, for example, through literary criticism.

Language is the filter of cognition. According to Wittgenstein, the extent to which we can express ourselves depends on the limits of language. For example, if we can think in ten units but only talk in four units, that is, if we can communicate in four units. This means that we can only put four units out there and the remaining six are left to live trapped in the brain. I can say that in this sense, language is one of the most important phenomena in our lives.

I learned to read at a very young age, on my own. The first word I'd ever read was "phh... pha, pharmacy!". Maybe ever since that day, my interest in language persisted. Hearing someone speak in a foreign language, being able to express themselves in a different way fascinated me. When I was in grade school the only member in my family that could speak English was my uncle and I wanted to learn things, in English, from him constantly. Google Translate had only recently come out and I would keep translating different words looking up how they were pronounced in different languages.

Towards the end of middle school and the beginning of highschool I started having more of a scientific interest in linguistics in addition to my interest in coding. At that time, I was interested in philosophy, sociology and linguistics, but my interest in linguistics was exceptionally predominant. I had many foreign friends I communicated through e-mail, I still keep in touch with some of them.

That way, in addition to knowing English as a lingua franca, I discovered how different your sharing can be when you speak in someone else's native language. I started with learning Polish, because I loved the songs in this language. Then I moved on to French and continued learning it throughout high school. Then one day, a friend of mine who knew I was interested in languages showed me an interesting text. We discovered that it was Esperanto. I was very intrigued that someone had created a language like that. I studied on my own for about four months. I watched videos on YouTube, I met people who spoke this language by sharing Esperanto related content on Instagram. Then I met Alp from the Turkish Esperanto Community. He taught me some Latin, and I taught him Esperanto. During that time, I had the opportunity to do a few book reviews in the Turka Stelo (Tr. Turkish Star) magazine, and I reviewed Umberto Eco's interview "Esperanto and a Multilingual Future". My love for learning languages led me to research how languages are created and how they are processed in the mind. During this process, artificial languages caught my attention. For example, I learned a language made up of only 123 words called "toki pona". Its philosophy was based on how one could live with such simple thoughts. After that, I became interested in logical artificial languages Loglan and Lojban. For a while I tried to create a language of my own. When I was studying for a university most of my teachers wanted to guide me towards positive sciences, but I wanted to study linguistics. I was sure of that. Eventually, I chose the Department of English Linguistics in Hacettepe University. I am very happy and proud to be here right now.

Röportaj – Bilge Ledum

· Can you tell us a little about your academic projects and achievements?

I can say that my main interests are phonology, phonetics, cognitive linguistics and computational linguistics. I aim to fill the data gap in the field with my project “Vowel Formant Frequencies of Standardized Turkish” that I am conducting at Hacettepe University. My dear teacher Emre’s support in this has been exceptional. He’s been the biggest supporter of my curiosity and enthusiasm in every aspect. He’s taught me a lot as a researcher, as a teacher and as a human being. I also work at Ankara University on my dear teacher Pınar’s “Acoustic Phonological Views Related to the Production Processes of Compound Words in Spoken Language in Turkish” project as a research fellow. I contribute to data collection and analysis in different laboratories. Knowledge I gain from these projects, further my interest in the area. In the future, I plan to work in areas like pupillary distance measurement and EEG. I have some ideas and studies in the area but as I am not the only writer, unfortunately it will not be ethical for me to share them. I think it would be appropriate to mention "VowSpace" here. The application I developed with the inspiration I got from one of my teacher Emre’s classes. VowSpace, simply put, is an app that allows us to reach meaningful conclusions based on the vowel sounds of one or more speakers.

It uses various mathematical and statistical calculations for this. Thanks to this app we can perform faster and more reliable audio analysis in forensic linguistics or work more easily with big data in areas like collective phonology. I had the opportunity to present this app at the 17th Linguistics Student Convention, the 37th National Linguistics Congress and Boğaziçi University. It really received a flood of attention and I’ve got some valuable feedback. In this subject I’ve especially received questions from my friends who just started to show interest in this field. I answered the questions at length and with pleasure. As a result of this, great organizations like the Linguistics Student Platform invited me to talk about the intersection of linguistics and software. It makes me very happy to spread knowledge and help people.

I share VowSpace and my other applications as open source. I believe in the importance of cooperation and transparency in science; it provides faster and more permanent development. I believe that favouring solidarity instead of personal gain and sharing knowledge ensures progress. This is an incredibly important value for me. Transparent science. That’s why I make my work public by publishing it, mainly, on my website. Concerning literature I have a project I’ve been working on for over a year, with Paul and Dolunay, where we’ve been translating all of Cemal Süreyya’s poetry to English. Paul is a dear friend of mine who’s retired from the University of Amsterdam. He doesn't speak Turkish, but he has an incredible knowledge of poetry. Dolunay and I translate six or seven poems every two weeks, and then Paul adapts them to English rhymes. We evaluate Paul's adaptations, check how well they retain their Turkish meaning, and finally add them to our archive.

· How do you spend a day when you've got all these ongoing projects and classes? How do you manage your time?

These days I've been very busy. Usually I have to be in a lab two or three days a week. I have to make time for both data analysis and my own projects. Unfortunately there are some classes I miss from time to time. I have to catch up on these from notes. These days I don't have a lot of time to enjoy myself. But my ability to manage my time, not miss any important dates is partly due to being organized. That's the benefit of being forgetful: If I don't sit down every Sunday and write down everything for the upcoming week, day by day, hour by hour, I can sometimes have a hard time staying organized. If I don't act according to the plan, even by neglecting to meet up with a friend, something I've agreed to do, it feels like it takes away from my self-esteem.

"...as linguists our goal is not to teach people the right way to speak. It's to study and understand the language in the way they speak it."

So what is it like to work so intensively with linguistics? Especially when language is something you hear and exposed to all the time; do you ever feel like you're going crazy? No matter how you look at it, at the end of the day, it's a job that never ends and has no breaks. Is this enjoyable or chaotic for you?

I can say that being so involved with linguistics also brings some professional deformations with it.

Especially those who work on discourse will understand me; there is sometimes a tendency to constantly search for a meaning in what someone says. Like, why did this person say this? They may have not expressed it correctly but sometimes I still try to find a meaning behind it. Lately, parallel to my phonetics studies, any change in someone's speaking style or if they have a regional accent, it immediately catches my attention. For example, some people have very different pronunciations and by force of habit, I get a desire to record and examine it. Of course, as linguists our goal is not to teach people the right way to speak. It's to study and understand the language in the way they speak it. In that sense, the deformation that comes with being a linguist can sometimes be funny or challenging.

· Do you believe in talent or hard-work the most?

I believe in hard work. But by this point, I usually get the question "intelligence or talent?". Intelligence is a notion that has a very controversial definition and over the years its definition has blurred a little. Right now, I really like the definition of the late Stephen Hawking: "Intelligence is the ability to adapt and change.". I think the most basic definition of intelligence is the ability to adapt and change without being too strict with the current conditions. I believe that intelligence or talent cannot go anywhere without hard work. But with hard work, it's definitely possible to go somewhere over time. The most important thing is to cling to what you do with enthusiasm and passion. If you're not doing something with passion, you're facing real hardship in your life. I'm tied to what I do in fields like linguistics and computer science, with a great love so sometimes working feels more like a hobby than a job. Of course, there are tiring moments, but working with passion makes everything much easier

I truly understood this when I was solving the Rubik's cube. I had the opportunity to participate in national competitions, it was a field I was interested in. I was getting statements from everyone like "what a smart person, he solved it in 10 seconds!" but only I knew how much I worked, how I solved hundreds of equations and how many hours I spent learning algorithms. Most people we call smart are actually very hard working, determined people when you look under the tip of the iceberg. I think it's more important to appreciate hard work rather than assuming that it's a god-given quality.

"Scivolemulo."

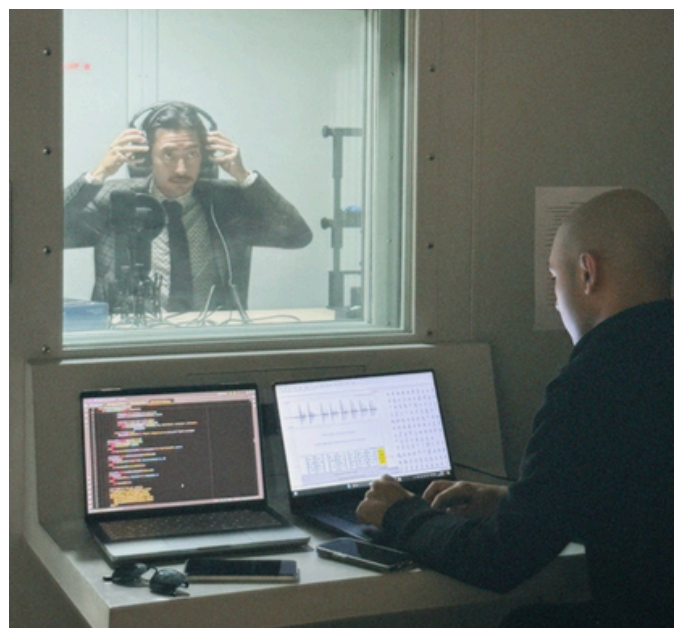
• **Can you add something in Esperanto?**

There is actually a very beautiful word that I would like to add in Esperanto: Scivolemulo. Other languages also have this word but it has always impressed me in Esperanto. Scii means to know. Voli comes from the Latin word volō, which means to want. Ulo means human. So, Sci, vole, mulo actually means "a person who wants to know". It's a term used often in Esperanto and it means curious. When we translate it to Turkish, we translate it as "meraklı", but I think curiosity is a feeling that is too strong to be described with just one word. It's an incredibly overwhelming feeling for me. That excitement and happiness when I'm curious about something, it's really indescribable. So if I were to add something in Esperanto, I would definitely choose this word.

"Outside of linguistics, looking for meaning in words and symbols is an important value for me."

• **I noticed that you choose the words when you speak and express yourself very carefully. Like when you say "computer 'science'"... Is that like a professional deformation because you're a linguist? Or does it have a special vision, philosophy, reason for you?**

Yes, I can say that I approach language very consciously. Apart from linguistics, looking for meaning in words and symbols is an important value for me. That's why I choose my words carefully. Especially as a linguist, I want to pay attention to the depth of meaning of each word I express. Of course, that's not always possible. When it comes to computer 'science', I see computers not just as tools but as complex systems that need to be studied. Approaching computers scientifically gives me a border perspective. For instance, we can say that it's architecture to build a building with stones but when it comes to studying the stones, that's stone science, geology. This use is parallel to terminology like "phonology" or "semantics." that we use in linguistics.



There is, of course, some professional deformation. In the phonetics community, conferences and academic studies we try to opt for words with Turkic origins. This is not a desire to prevent language from changing but, in my opinion, a choice to provide clearer meanings in communication. For example, instead of “kelime” (Tr. Word) we choose “sözcük”, instead of “hece” (Tr. syllable) use “seslem”. We aim to set up more of a direct form of communication by reducing the complexity and ambiguity of language. But, I don’t think this is an attempt to prevent the language from changing, because as linguists, we believe that languages are always changing. I find it natural for new words to join languages; Personally I use some words like “mefhum”, “ekseriyet” more, some people ask “what is that?” but of course everyone has their own mental dictionary, I can say that I speak in the way that’s the most natural to me. This is the individual aspect of language

“I believe that form of language that must be believed in is not the old form of language but the everliving, ever evolving version.”

• **So how do you balance the respect you have for language with the merging and the transformation processes of that language as a linguist and a native Turkish speaker?**

Actually the respect I have for language includes understanding and supporting the change and evolution it goes through. I believe that form of language that must be believed in is not the old form of language but the everliving, ever evolving version.

We must respect language itself, its ability to communicate; this is not a desire to protect a certain language or a certain era. Language inevitably changes and instead of resisting this change, it will be a more productive approach to adapt to the change and understand this process. TDK’s some attempts to create words can be insufficient in this regard because usually words are created based on literature or inspiration from old sayings where literature is born from language itself; language is not a product of literature. The words recommended about computer terms by a teacher of ours in Hacettepe University in the past are now the words accepted and settled in everyday life. For instance the word “bilgisayar” (Tr. computer) was first used by Prof. Dr. Aydın Köksal of Hacettepe University in a flyer saying “bilgisayar kiralanacaktır” (Tr. computer will be rented) and the word was quickly accepted. Why isn’t there a similar adoption of new terms? The answer to that is a question about language politics ideology.

Language is always a part of the people and of life. Respecting it means understanding its ever changing nature and taking the steps towards contributing to the change and recording it.

• **Is there a music style, genre or musician you especially like?**

My taste in music changes a lot momentarily. These days my favourite artists include Ziad Rahbani, Fazıl Say and Will Wood. I’m a fan of the way Rahbani uses eastern and western instruments together; he unifies western instruments with eastern music or the other way around. As a genre I find jazz really special because it’s completely improvised and momentary.

That part of it is really appealing to me. I also enjoy listening to rap. These days I'm especially interested in bass-heavy and energetic music. However, depending on my mood I also turn to classical music. If I had to listen to one genre for the rest of my life I would probably choose classical music because classical music always moves me with its intensity and the emotional depth it creates.

• **You choosing a genre without any words in it.. A music without words... Isn't it a bit telling?**

Yes, but it's a bit understandable and pretty in a way. Because think about it this way; if I go and choose a genre with words it will only be understandable in one language, when I choose one without words it's understandable in every language. "Apart from academic content, my favorite author is İhsan Oktay Anar."

• **What do you like to read? What entices you about a book, the use of language or the imagination?**

Apart from academic content, my favorite author is İhsan Oktay Anar. I read his books for the second or third time and each time, what impresses me is both the imagination and the use of language. There is an incredible creativity in his works and while you're reading, it offers you a journey. Anar's skill in using the language is completely different; he captivates me with both his imagination and style. I am especially a fan of Puslu Kıtalar Atlası (Tr. The Atlas of Misty Continents), it is his best-known book, but it is very special to me.

What captivates me the most in an author's work is creativity and style. First, the creative writing impresses me; it is very enjoyable to see what someone can do with their imagination. The style adds an aesthetic touch to this creativity. That is why I find İhsan Oktay Anar's rich use of language, when combined with his creativity, truly unique. Of course, this doesn't mean that I always read serious things. Books are a media made to entertain too, after all. I really like Erlend Loe in this regard. For example, he shows beautifully how absurd everyday events actually are in "Doppler".

I love Umut Sarıkaya with his humour, writings and caricatures. The examples he gives and the things he tells from everyday-life are always things we can relate to ourselves. Like his "Benim de Söyleyeceklerim Var" (Tr. "I Also Have Things to Say") series. I also follow his "Naber" (Tr. What's Up?) magazine. Humour magazines are things I've always seen from my family from a young age. We always bought them, in our house.

• **I would like to ask you about your dreams and goals for the near and distant future. And can you tell us about your general vision and mission?**

My main goal in the near future is to hopefully graduate from my undergrad with a productive academic career. I want to complete the projects I am currently working on and contribute to our field by publishing them. During this process, I plan to apply for a master's degree and continue on the academic path by deepening my research. During my master's degree, I aim to add a new dimension to my research by combining fields like neuroimaging and electroencephalography (EEG) with my linguistic studies. I can say that my biggest goal is to increase my knowledge.

In the longer term, I have a dream to introduce linguistics as a part of positive sciences (like biology) and increase interest in this field. I want to work to establish linguistics as a science, especially in our country, and to leave a solid foundation in this field for future generations. My vision is to examine a phenomenon that presents itself in every aspect of our daily lives, like language, from a scientific perspective and to try to understand it in depth. And I can say my mission is to contribute to scientific knowledge and to the tradition that has been cumulatively built from the past to the present; to leave my mark

“Open science really means a lot to me; I see it as an essential part of academia.”

• **Can you elaborate your emphasis on “Open Science”?**

Open science really means a lot to me; I see it as an essential part of academia. Unfortunately, there can be unethical or selfish approaches in academia, it can be seen in our country as well as the world. Open science plays a vital role in preventing this kind of approach and emphasizing that science is inherently a cumulative structure. Science is not fed by the accumulation of one person, but by the common accumulations that come together; as a scientist I believe we need progress by contributing to the knowledge produced by others. With the open science approach, we are trying to prevent science from being limited to certain people and make it open to the entire community. Scientific knowledge shouldn't only be accessible to those who have certain opportunities or those who can afford it. It should be accessible to everyone.

We see an example of this in free software. Free software means opening the source code and rights of usage of developed software to all users. I generally prefer the GNU license in my work. This license allows users to freely use, modify and redistribute the software; the only condition is that the original developer's name be preserved. In this way, both fairness is protected and an open environment is created where the community can contribute. I would like to spread this open and transparent environment in academia as well. Unfortunately, nowadays access to a lot of academic magazines are behind a paywall; although this has understandable reasons, these fees can be a big obstacle for new researchers. Although, more people having access to scientific knowledge, especially for young and new researchers, can seem like a utopia open science can be a way to reach this ideal.

“I always had an interest in science from a young age.”

• **I want you to go back to your fist age when you dreamed of going into this field and look at this conversation and all your success and experiences. How do you feel?**

Answering this question really makes me feel a deep sense of emotion. I always had an interest in science from a young age. It's very satisfying to see that I'm getting the rewards for all the work I've done. None of my efforts went unrewarded, I learned a lot from every experience, even the work I haven't done gave me really valuable lessons. I really would say this: You shouldn't get angry or upset so easily. Because sometimes things don't work out, sometimes they do, you have to go with the flow a little bit. But don't forget, work really hard, do the tasks that are given to you in the best way possible, or even better.



DON'T EVER BECOME SOMEONE ARROGANT. DO THE THINGS YOU DO FOR YOURSELF, DON'T WORRY ABOUT IMPRESSING PEOPLE, SHARE HOW YOU DO IT WITH OTHERS. Don't be afraid of being different. At the time I wasn't afraid of being different but I shouldn't have been afraid at all. It's been good to learn these at 20 years old, but I still go on with this awareness

· **Does he tell you things too?**

Looking at my younger self, he probably wouldn't have believed it. If they had asked me when I was a kid, I would have said I wanted to research the human brain, to study science. Back then I might have thought about things like medicine, but there wasn't anything set in stone in my head. Now when I look at where I am, I would definitely not want to be somewhere else. This is a source of great pride and happiness for me. The advice I would give to my younger self would be: "Be yourself, be curious, work hard, and never give up." I would also like to give this advice to my friends who are asking me similar questions right now.

I see you've learned a lot of different languages. Although not all, there are quite a few different languages among them. What attracts you to a language? How do you learn different languages? What other languages do you want to learn?

If I may, there is a subject I would like to mention: terms like "multilingualism" or "polyglotism". I don't think these terms reflect learning a language completely. There is a big difference between having a deep or superficial knowledge of a language. When learning a language the thing that intrigues me the most is the culture related to that language. For example, when I first started learning Chinese, I had the opportunity to understand a society that was very different from western culture. By learning Chinese I did not only learn the language but a lot about the Chinese nation and culture. It was interesting to see how linguistic structures in Chinese were related to social events. Beyond the language itself, communicating with people from that culture helped me understand how language really works. When learning different languages the most important thing to me is, consuming content and practicing speaking. Although it is important to learn the rules and linguistic structure of a language, the most effective way to learn a language is to communicate with native speakers and learn from mistakes. Learning by speaking helped me a lot to understand how the language is actually used. The thing that gives me the most pleasure in the world is communicating with another person, sharing information and feelings.

I don't have a definite preference for the languages I want to learn at the moment. However, I am interested in Inuit languages. They have very different syntax structures. For example, they can express a thought that we can express in long sentences with a single word.

This raises very interesting questions about how language is processed differently. I am also interested in more theoretical languages like oligosynthesis theory. I've had some experience in making artificial languages before, and I would like to work more in this area.

“Linguistics should find more place in our country as a positive science.”

· What would you like to say to all language lovers from within the field and outside of it? And what advice would you give to those who want to go into the fields you work in?

First of all, we need the field of linguistics. Language is a concept that is not studied enough. Studies on language done in fields like translation, literature departments, philology, comparative literature are important. Especially in linguistics I think that we should have more studies done about this in our country. Linguistics should find more place in our country as a positive science. I would like to say this to my friends who are going into studying language: You will not be unemployed. This is the biggest concern for people who are thinking about going into this field. If you are going to do this with love, and really dedicate time to it, you will never be unemployed. I have also done everything I have done so far with great pleasure; of course I was tired and I put in a lot of effort but I enjoyed every moment of it. Never lose this passion and enthusiasm. If you have love and enthusiasm, success will follow. I love you so much!

For more: alicagankaya.com