

KURDISH DIALECT CONTINUUM, AS A STANDARDIZATION SOLUTION

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Abstract

Kurdish is a multi-dialect language, and has faced a linguistic challenge i.e., lack of a united linguistic policy, due to the absence of united authority of the Kurds. Also, there is not an adequate suggestion to standardize Kurdish language because of having opposite views. This article examines dialect continuum among Kurdish dialects by applying those words that were collected in the field of the research in some Kurdish populated towns and cities starting from the town of Pawa in Iran through some Kurdish populated areas in Kurdistan Region in Iraq to Zakho on the border with Turkey, underlining the necessity of a linguistic comparison between neighbouring towns phonetically. This is because dialect continuum might observe the changes between two dialects, and the border between A and B is called the area of the continuum. The question is that would the continuum area between main Kurdish dialects have ability to represent standard Kurdish, and would it resolve the standardization issue between both Sorani and Kurmanji dialects?

Keywords: Kurdish language, Dialect continuum, Kurdish dialects, Standard language, Sorani (Central Kurmanji), Kurmanji (Northern Kurmanji), Kurdistan.

Introduction

In present-day, sociolinguistics uses the term dialect to refer to or define varieties within a language. As Mesthrie (2000, p.45) has discussed, dialects can be classified into two main groups; regional and social dialect. This paper is more concerned with regional dialect, which is more about the speech characteristic of an area.

Generally, linguists have drawn a border between two dialects or more, which is seen commonly among Kurdish linguists (H.Khurshid, 1985) (Khoshnaw, 2013). In contrast, many believe that there is not a sharp border between dialects of a language (Tait, 1994) (Bloomfield, 1933). According to the second vision the area between two dialects is called

dialect continuum. Dialect continuum or dialect area was defined by Leonard Bloomfield as a 'range of dialects spoken across some geographical area that differ only slightly between neighbouring areas, but as one travels in any direction, these differences accumulate such that speakers from opposite ends of the continuum are no longer mutually intelligible' (Quiles & Menchero, 2011).

This paper will present arguments on dialect continuum among Kurdish dialects. The research, excluding the introduction, has been divided into four sections; First, Kurdish language and its dialects according to the previous researches will be examined. Second section will study the words that were collected in the field of the research and highlights dialect continuum among them. Third, Dialect continuum area will be shown as the solution for Kurdish standardization issue. The final section is a conclusion to sum up the main points.

1. Kurdish language and its dialects according to previous researches

Kurdish is a multi-dialect language. Traditionally, there are orientalist's views about Kurdish dialects e.g. a trained linguist Mackenzie, classified Kurdish dialects into three groups; the northern group i.e., 'Kurmanji', the central group i.e., 'Sorani' and the southern group or 'Kermanshahi, Ardalani and Laki'. He claimed that the Sorani and Kurmanji differences are the result of Gurani influence in the past (MacKenzie, 1961, pp. 68-85). Moreover, Gurani and Zaza were not classified as Kurdish dialects; they were categorized under Iranian independent languages (MacKenzie, 1961).

Martin V. Bruinessen who is contemporary researcher in his book 'Agha, Shaikh and State' thought in the same way and classified Kurdish dialects into the same groups. Also he showed some significant differences between Kurmanji and Sorani (1992, p. 47-48).

Although those non-Kurdish researchers demonstrated some essential points in their projects, it is believed that some of them could not hit the target. This might be due to the political structure of the Kurdish society or their inability to speak Kurdish language fluently. This is because Kurdish speakers are spread among some countries and their language is not the official language in their countries, for instance Kurds from Turkey, Iran and Syria. Even it was banned to be spoken from time to time (McDowall, 2004, p.410). However, it has

become one of the official languages in the second half of the last century in Iraq (McDowall, 2004, p 327). Another factor that has become an obstacle in the way of non-Kurdish researchers to research about Kurdish language is that most of them did not know Kurdish fluently, as mentioned previously, or if they had known, they might have been confused between Kurdish dialects. Moreover, some researches might have been biased due to the fact that the dominate languages in the area, namely Turkish, Arabic and Persian, have not accepted the reality of Kurdish language. Furthermore, they have worked to separate Kurdish dialects from the main root which is Kurdish. As such, it can be said that most of the classifications were not fully scientific (Hama-amin & Ali, 2006) (M.Azeez, 2005) (Khoshnaw, 2013). Even though, some of the very well-known non-Kurdish researchers have not been successful in categorizing Kurdish dialects. This might be because of their little awareness and ability to read and write the language and this defect has deprived them of reading the new researches that have been done or written regarding Kurdish language in Kurdish. Consequently; they have resorted to the traditional sources, take David McDowell (2004, p.10) as an example.

On the other hand, Kurdish writers have classified Kurdish dialects in various ways; speaking of Professor Fuad Hama Khurshid, who is a Kurdish linguist and supposed to have the adequate dialect classification and is very similar to the classification of Tofiq Wahbi (Hama-amin & Ali, 2006) (Khoshnaw, 2013) (Hama-amin & Ali, 2006) (M.Azeez, 2005). He believes that those writers who separate a Kurdish dialect from the Kurdish language might do so because of the influence of Kurdistan's invaders for example; Iran wanted to split Luri 'Gurani' from Kurdish. Therefore; the academics should be aware of these things (H.Khurshid, 2008). Khurshid categorizes Kurdish language into four main dialects, and each dialect is divided into some sub-dialects, which are:

A. Northern Kurmanji

Kurmanji or Northern Kurmanji is the biggest Kurdish dialect, which is spoken by Kurds in south-east Turkey, south-west Armenia, northern Syria, Duhok and Musil provinces in Iraq, and both Khui and Qutur cities in Iran (H.Khurshid, 1985, pp. 58-60). This dialect was very developed at the beginning of the last century .The first Kurdish newspaper was in Kurmanji and the grammar of Kurmanji was written before the other Kurdish dialects. The

first Kurdish modern poem was in Kurmanji (Nawkhosh & Khoshnaw, 2011, p.27) (Hama-amin & Ali, 2006) (M.Azeez, 2005), but Kurmanji faced serious challenges when the republic of Turkey was established and Kurds could not obtain independence or autonomy in the 1920's. This is because most Kurmanji speakers live in Turkey, and they have not been given any ethnic and linguistic rights in the Turkish constitution (Earle, 1925) (Khoshnaw, 2013) (M.Azeez, 2005) (McDowall, 2004). As such, Kurmanji was only occasionally used in some foreign publications (Sabir, 2008). Inside Turkey, even the words Kurd and Kurdistan were banned for a while and Kurds were called mountain Turks (Hassanpour, 2010).

Kurmanji sub-dialects are; 'Bayazidi – Hakari – Botani – Shamdinani – Bahdinani - Western sub-dialect' (H.Khurshid, 1985).

B. Central Kurmanji or Sorani

Central Kurmanji, which is publicly known as Sorani, is the second Kurdish dialect. Most people in southern and eastern Kurdistan, 'Kurds in Iraq and Iran', speak in Sorani (H.Khurshid, 1985, p.61). Despite the fact that Gurani and Kurmanji have had an older written history and literature (Saeed, 2008; Khaznadar, 2001), Sorani is the dominant Kurdish dialect currently. Sorani gained power in the Nineteenth Century during the reign of Baban and since then it has continued its domination because of the Kurdish administrations in southern Kurdistan in the last century and Republic of Kurdistan in the east of Kurdistan in Mahabad (Khoshnaw, 2013, p.404). Some Kurdish linguists and writers believe that Sorani has declared its standardization (Sabir, 2008; Sabir, 2009; Hama-amin, 2013; Karim, 2013). However, it has not been recognized as a Kurdish standard dialect by law yet.

Its sub-dialects are; 'Mukri – Sorani – Ardalani – Slemani – Germiani' (H.Khurshid, 1985).

C. Southern Kurmanji

Southern Kurmanji is also known as Luri. Some of its sub-dialects are disputed between Persian and Kurdish languages (Windfuhr, 2009, p.418) (McDowall, 2004, p.10) (H.Khurshid, 1985, p.40) (Khoshnaw, 2013, pp.55-60), even some people count Luri as an independent language (Curtis & Hooglund, 2008, p.94). The Persian authorities have had a fundamental role in encouraging the Lurs to isolate themselves from Kurds. In this case, I think the most important thing is to refer to the Lurs themselves and what they think about their identity, which as much as I know, they believe that they are Kurdish. Most of its

speakers are living in Iran, which starts from northeast of the Persian Gulf, extending through Khanaqin in Iraq, Qasri Shirin, Krmashan, and Malayar in Iran.

Its sub-dialects are; ‘Pure Lure – Bakhtyari – Mamasani – Kohglo – Lak –Kalhur (H.Khurshid, 1985)

D. Gurani

Gurani is another Kurdish dialect that is widely spread across Kurdish inhabited areas in the Middle East. Its sub-dialects are not linked together geographically in a continuous chain (M.Azeez, 2005); take Hawrami and Zaza as an examples. Zaza speakers are living in Turkey, but the Hawrami speakers are in Iraq and Iran. Despite the fact that some believe that Gurani is not a dialect of Kurdish language and they claim that Gurani culture and religion are different from Kurdish, Gorani speakers think of themselves as Kurds, even though they are aware of speaking dialects which are not mutually comprehensible with Kurmanci or Sorani, and in some cases, of having a distinct religious and cultural tradition (Edmonds, 1957, p.10).

Gurani sub-dialects are; ‘Pure Gurani – Hawrami – Bajalani - Zaza’ (H.Khurshid, 2008).

2. Dialect continuum among Kurdish dialects

As it has been discussed before, dialect continuum is an area between two dialects that covers most similarities between them. Understanding will decrease with travelling to any direction from the area. Kurdish language dialects could be one of the best examples for this continuum, geographically Kurdish starts at Khorasan in northern Iran next on the border with Turkmenistan, which is a separated region geographically with other Kurdish speakers, then starts again in the west of Iran and extends to north and northeast of Iraq, north Syria and southeast of Turkey with smaller groups in some other countries (Windfuhr, 2009) (H.Khurshid, 2008) (M.Azeez, 2005). This entire territory is inhabited by Kurdish speaking peoples who speak in the four main dialects that mentioned previously.

This project has collected the phonetics of some Kurdish words from Pawa to Zakho. Look at the figure 1.

A town of Pawa from Iran and a town of Byara from Iraq are neighbouring areas within two different countries. Their population are speaking in the same sub-dialect, which is Hawrami or Hawramani. The phonetics of both towns are very similar, however, there are minor differences with each other, which is believed to be due to different language policies. For example, the word ‘zanko’ is used to refer to ‘university’ in the Iraqi part, but the word ‘danishgah’ is used in Iranian part. This is because ‘university’ is a new word for Kurdish-Hawrami dictionary. People of Pawa are under Persian domination and received ‘danishgah’ from Persian language while Hawrami people in Iraq are affected by Kurdish-Sorani and use ‘Zanko’ that was coined by Kurdish academy in Iraq. Speaking about other examples in these two destinations, they are very similar or have very minor differences. Look at the table 1.

In spite of the fact that most Hawrami speakers know how to speak Sorani, but the gap between Sorani and Hawrami is huge. This gap gives an idea to some researchers to say that Hawrami is not Kurdish (Windfuhr, 2009, p.589). Nonetheless, I think Hawrami is a sub-dialect in Kurdish language and very similar to another Kurdish dialect namely Zazaki which is spoken by some Kurds in Turkey.

There are some crucial factors that increase the level of divergence among Kurdish dialects; above all Kurds have not been independent politically. As a result, the dominant languages in those countries that Kurds live in, have worked hard to destroy Kurdish language and melt it in their languages. Another factor could be that both Sorani and Kurmanji dialects have also tried to be a representative of Kurdish language and they have pushed aside some other Kurdish dialects and sub-dialects, including Hawrami. As such, the Hawrami speakers have wanted to keep their sub-dialect far from Sorani to survive. As a result, fundamental differences between Hawrami and Sorani have appeared. In the table 2 Halabja phonetics-nearest place to the Hawrami areas- have been exhibited.

Also, there are speakers of the two dominant Kurdish dialects on the field of the research, which are Sorani and Kurmanji. Sorani starts from Halabja, extends through Sulaimani, Dokan, Koya, and Shaqlaw. While Kurmanji starts from Akre on the other side of the Zab River through Duhok, Zakho and continues through many towns and cities in Southeast of Turkey. Both sides of the Zab River are the area of continuum, which could be taken as a satisfactory solution for the Kurdish language standardisation issue. This is because the

language of the neighbouring areas is much more similar than other areas. Look at the table 3 that shows the linguistic changes among Sorani and Kurmanji accents.

3. Dialect continuum area as the solution for Kurdish standardization issue

If someone wants to do research about Kurdish language or aims to learn the language, the biggest challenge he/she will face, would be the variety of Kurdish dialects. This is because Kurdish language does not have a unified and standardised language. Kurdish people are not ready to accept one of the dialects to be the standard language and the representative of other Kurdish dialects (Khoshnaw, 2013) (M.Azeez, 2005) (McDowall, 2004) (Sabir, 2008). Provided that the speakers of certain language do not agree to the standardization solution, the standard will not be formed. This is because I strongly believe that language is a social agreement before anything else.

There have been four unsatisfactory options, which are suggested by linguists and writers; First, Sorani should become a standard language. Second, Kurmanji should be a standard Kurdish. Third, Kurdish is a multi-standard language and both Sorani and Kurmanji are standard. Fourth, Surmanji need to be made by collecting both main dialects and others in a new language (Khoshnaw, 2013).

All of these suggestions have been refused by the opposite groups, and the autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq that is the only Kurdish formal authority, which use Kurdish as an official language, have not decided about the dialects yet. They had seen Surmanji as a suitable suggestion, and had started to use it in the education, but they faced protesters and failed (Chalki, 2009). It is thought that the failure was because Surmanji is not a right suggestion linguistically. This is due to the fact that Kurdish dialects are different grammatically, and one cannot collect two languages that have two difference grammars.

I believe most of the Kurdish people preferred Surmanji at the beginning, because they wanted to have a standard language similar to other languages in the world. It basically means people are not linguists, they only prefer a suitable and satisfactory solution. But the failure might be because the suggestion was not suitable linguistically, as mentioned before. The suitable suggestion would be the language of the area of dialect continuum. This theory may

succeed widely. This is because the area of the continuum is Sorani and Kurmanji in the same time. Look figure 5

If 'A' is Sorani and 'B' is Kurmanji, it will be difficult for both sides to understand each other clearly. But 'AB' is the common area between both dialects and it would be understandable for all of the Kurds. The most important point here is that Kurdish people might agree upon this solution. The dialect continuum solution is the key due to the fact that as a result of standardizing the area of the continuum, both main Kurdish dialects would believe that they have not been ignored.

4. Conclusion

The border between two dialects, which is called dialect continuum, is not sharp, and the chain of dialects is socially connected. As a result, the area between two dialects is part of both dialects in the same time and clearly understandable for both. However, Understanding will decrease with going to any direction. Underlining this point, the continuum between main dialects of Kurdish language, would resolve standardization issue among them.

Tables and Figures:

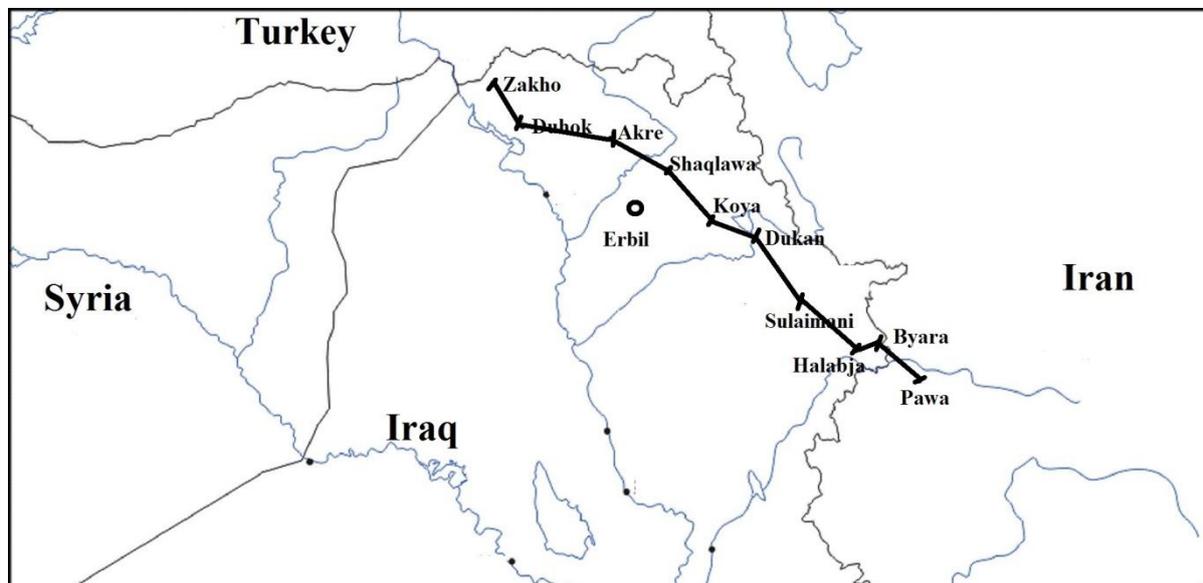


Figure 1: The locations of the 10 Kurdish dialects studied.

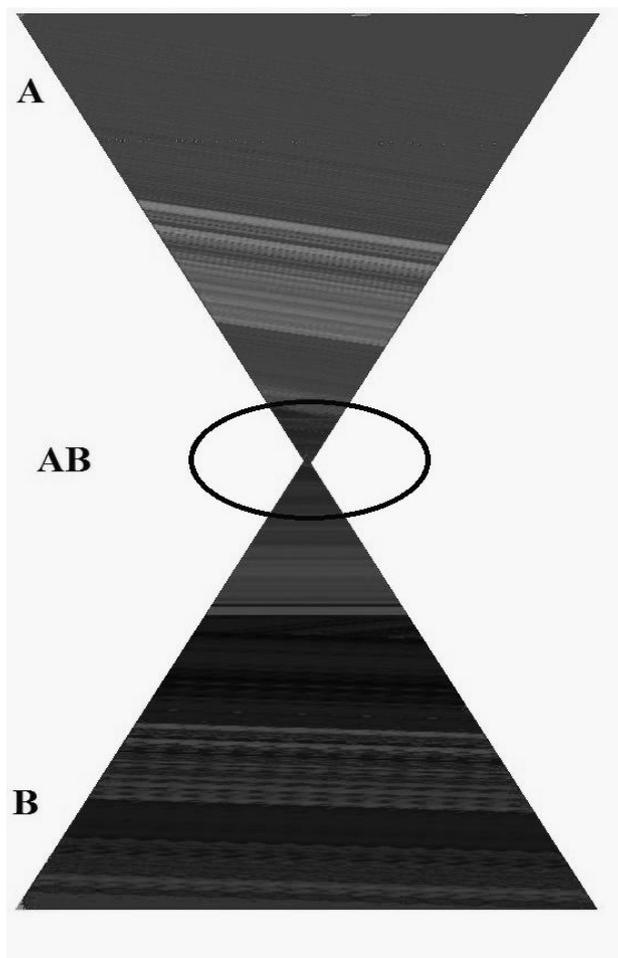


Figure 2: The area of dialect continuum between A and B.

The meaning in English	Pawa phonetics	Byara phonetics
spring	/wahār/	/wahār/
Now	/isa/	/isa/
Sleeping	/wta/	/wtai/

Table 1: The phonetics of three Kurdish words in Pawa and Byara.

The meaning in English	Hawrami – Byara	Sorani – Halabja
Spring	/wahār/	/bahār/
Now	/isa/	/istā/
I will go	/mlw/	/âcm/
Home	/yāna/	/māl/
How	/çani/	/çon/

Table 2: The phonetics of some Kurdish words in Halabja and Byara.

The meaning in English	Sorani Dialect					Kurmanji dialect		
	Halabja	Sulaimani	Dukan	Koya	Shaqlawa	Akre	Duhok	Zakho
Pillow	/pști/	/pști/	/pști/	/bālifk/	/bālif/	/bālifk/	/bālifk/	/bālifk/
Blood	/xuēn/	/xuēn/	/xuēn/	/xŭn/	/xin/	/xuin/	/xin/	/xin/
Sleeping	/xawtn/	/xawtn/	/xawtn/- /nŭstn/	/nŭstn/	/nŭstn/	/nvstn/	/nvstn/	/nvstn/
Ugly	/nāširn/	/nāširn/	/nāširn/	/nāširn/	/naširn/	/naširn/- /tāl/	/tahl/	/tahl/ /taʃl/
Yesterday	/duēnē/ /duēka/	/duēnē/	/duēnē/	/dunē/	/dunē/	/duh i:/	/dh i:/	/duhē/

Table 3: The linguistic changes among Sorani and Kurmanji.

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