



## KURDISH LANGUAGE, ITS FAMILY AND DIALECTS\*

### ZIMANÊ KURDÎ, MALBAT Û ZARÊN WÎ

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#### Abstract

Kurdish belongs to the Iranian language group within Indo-European language family. So, there are many similarities between Kurdish and other Iranian languages. Such similarities among various languages lead to categorizing languages within some families. Kurdish is unstandardized language, and it has four main dialects. In this arena, there is a huge gap and it has had negative effects on Kurds in general. Kurdish language is very linked with Kurdish identity on the same time. So, the invaders of Kurdistan work hard to deform Kurdish, then destroy Kurdish identity. The assimilation process affected many areas of Kurdistan intensively, for example; the number of Kurdish speakers has decreased significantly in Northern Kurdistan, and Turkish language has taken its place. Thus, we as a linguist try to clarify the Kurdish language situation linguistically. In this study, we discuss Kurdish language family, Kurdish dialects, mutual understanding between Kurdish dialects, and analyzing the current situation. This would be done by reviewing various sources and publishing a questionnaire among students at Koya University. With support of the student responses, we have designed a model to illuminate mutual understanding between Kurdish dialects in Southern Kurdistan.

**Key words:** Kurdish Language, Northern Kurdish, Central Kurdish, Southern Kurdish, Gorani, Zazaki, Hawrami.

#### Kurte

Zimanê Kurdî yek ji zimanên Îranî ye, ku ser bi malbata Hind û Ewropî ye. Lewma hevbeşiyên zehf di navbera Kurdî û zimanên din ên Îranî de hene. Ev wekyekî û nêzikiya navbera hinek zimanên dinê, bûye hokara destnîşankirina malbatên zimanan. Lê belê, dema yek dibêje Kurdî, dîsa ne xuya ye, ku mebesta wê kîjan zarê Kurdî ye. Çimkî zimanê Kurdî, zimanekî ne-sitandard bûye û ji çar şaxên sereke pêk tê. Ev şax jî bi zarên binavkirin. Ji vî aliyê valatîyê mezin heye û bandora wê valatîyê jî li ser tevahiya Kurda çêbûye. Zimanê Kurdî girêdirayî nasnameya gelê Kurd e. Lewma neteweyên dagîrker û hukimdarên axa Kurdistanê, ji bo têkbirina Kurdî hewl didin, heta bikaribin nasnameya Kurda jî têk bibin. Ev pîrosêsa esîmlasyonê, li gelek cihên Kurdistanê bandoreke mezin çêkirîye. Minak, li bakurê Kurdistanê jimara Kurdî axêvan kêm bûye û zimanê Tirkî di gelek

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warên cuda de cihê Kurdî girtiye. Ji ber vê yekê, em wek zimannasek Kurdî dimeyzînin û hewla ronîkirina rastiyên zimanewanî didin. Di vê gotarê de, em behsa malbata zimanê Kurdî, zarên zimanê Kurdî û têgehîştina di navbera van zaran de dikin û şiroveya rewşa heyî dikin. Ew jî bi palpiştiya çavkaniyên heyî û belavkirina formên rapirsî di Zanîngeha Koya de. Li gorî bersivên xwendekaran ku temena wan di navbera 18-30 salî de ye, me li Başûrê Kurdistanê ji bo têgehîştina di navbera zarên Kurdî de modêlek ava kiriye.

**Kilîle peyv:** Zimanê Kurdî, Kurdî ya Bakurî, Kurdî ya Navendî, Kurdî ya Başûrî, Goranî, Zazakî, Hewramî.

## Introduction

Similar with humans, there are relativity among languages as well (Chambers & Trudgill, 2004). When linguists studied that, they have found many similarities among languages. So that studies to find the relaitivities among languages have started and those languages that have resemblances catagorized in a language family. The similarities are not because of borrowing some vocabularies, it is linked with their origion (Baldi & Cuzzolin, 2015: 820). Currently, many language families have been found. Kurdish language that is in our focus is one language among Indo-European language family, which is the biggest language family (Ethnologue, 2019). Just to ensure the correctness of the categorization, we have taken some samples from the relative languages ‘Persian, Hindi and English’ and ‘Turkish and Arabic’ language as the languages from different families but in the same geographic area.

Kurdish has some dialects; we have studied the relationship among them as well. In general, there are four main Kurdish dialects; Northern Kurdish ‘Kurmanji’, Central Kurdish ‘Sorani’, Southern Kurdish and Zazaki-Gorani (Hama Khurshid, 2008; Khalid, 2015). Mutual understanding would change among them because of some non-linguistic factors. That is why there are various catagorization for Kurdish dialects. Also, not using mother tongue by some Kurds, in particular Kurds from Turkey ‘Northern Kurdistan’ is another negative point (Opengin, 2011: 136-160), it has declined mutual understanding among Kurdish dialects. To clarify the relationship between language and dialect, we have taken some examples from other languages as well.

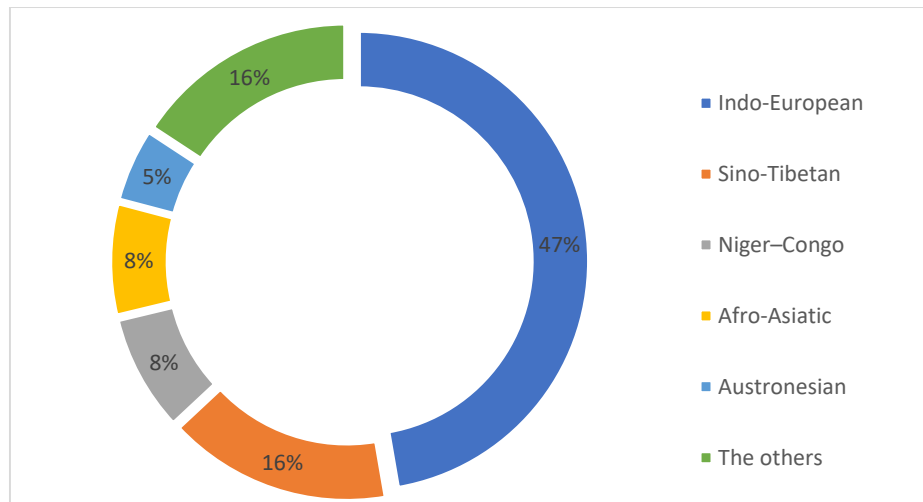
To know the role of each dialect and mapping them, we have compared many sources and have drawn a map. We also mentioned the main accents. In conclusion, the alphabetic issue also discussed. This is because, in some places, it would also become an obstacle in front of understanding between Kurdish dialects.

In this study, excluding Kurdish language family, dialects and alphabet, some questions are answered; What is the level of mutual understanding among Kurdish dialects in KRG? Is it the same level in Kurdistan, or it might change with the context? To answer these questions, we have reviewed the literature and published 100 forms among students at Koya University. Our aim was to understand mutual understanding among speakers of various Kurdish dialects in KRG – Koya University. The result may be generalized as well. We have three levels of understanding; ‘*very understandable*’ for full understanding, ‘*understandable*’ for medium understanding with some problems while speaking, and ‘*hardly understandable*’ for weak understanding and not receive the complicate message.

### 1. The language families and the origin of Kurdish

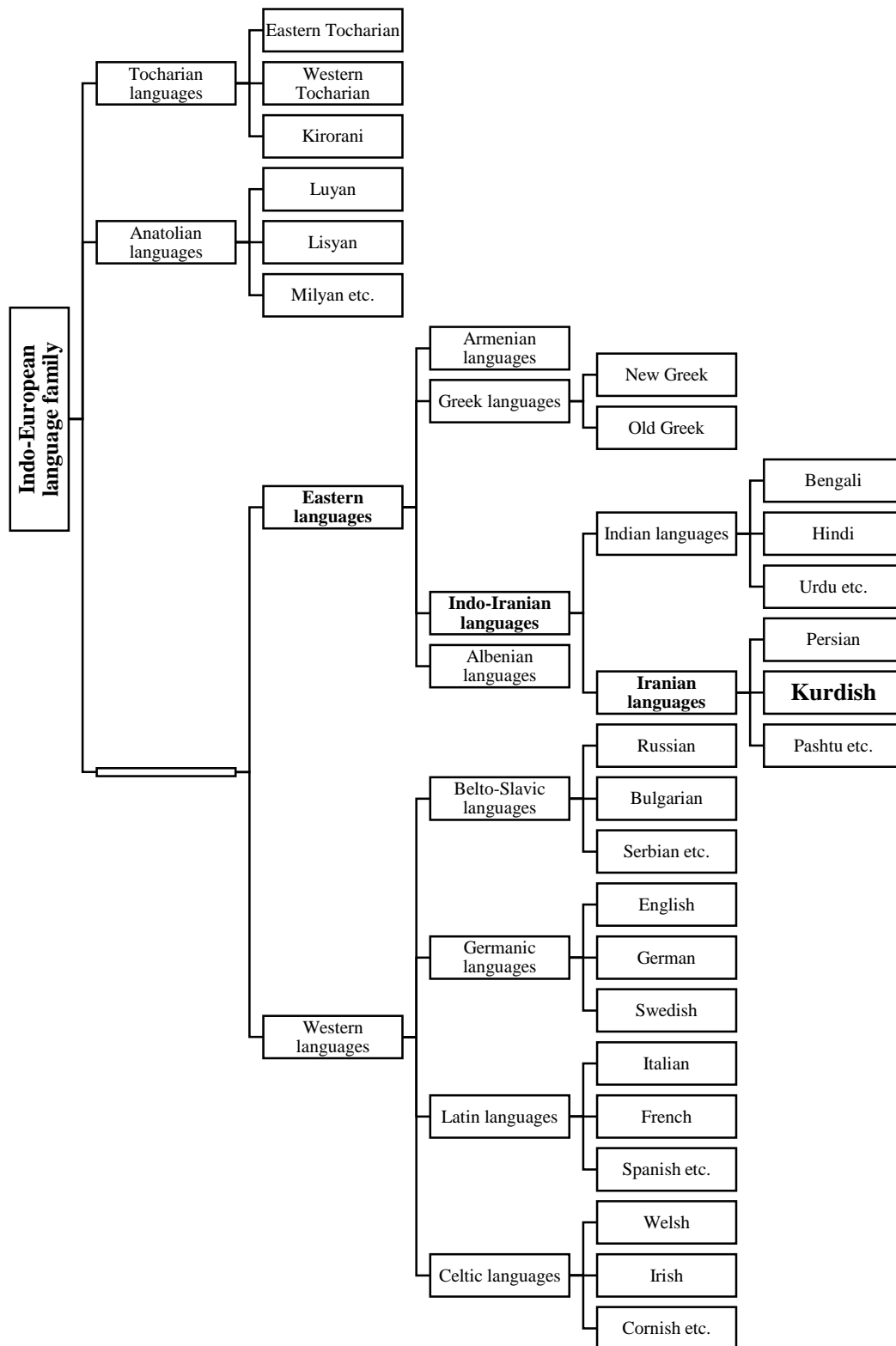
According to Ethnologue, currently there are 7111 languages (2019). There is a linkage among many of those languages. When linguists have seen the linkage among the languages and compared their historical roots, they founded that their origin are same. This outcome has led to find some groups of languages that are called ‘language family’. It is a linguistic terminology and may be divided into some sub-language groups (Baldi & Cuzzolin, 2015: 820-821). To see the main language families, look at figure 1

Figure 1: The main language families and the percentage of their speakers (Ethnologue, 2019).



Indo-European is the biggest language family, which Kurdish is a language of it (Baldi & Cuzzolin, 2015: 823; Ethnologue, 2019). After Indo-European language family, Sino Tibetan language family is the second biggest language family, which Mandarin on of its languages and it is the formal language of China. It is the biggest language as a mother tongue in terms of its speakers (Ethnologue, 2019). Indo-European language family can be divided into two main groups, which are the Western group and the Eastern group (Ismail, 1977). The Anatolian dead languages were also a group of the family (Baldi & Cuzzolin, 2015: 824), the same is true for the Tocharian dead languages (Ethnologue, 2019). For more information, look at figure 2.

Figure 2: Indo-European language family (Bouckaert and the others., 2012), main languages included.



As it is seen, both Tocharian and Anatolian language groups are dead, only there are some available writings that were written in the mentioned languages.

Within the Indo-European language family, Kurdish is a language among the Iranian language group. So, Kurdish share a lot of similarities with Persian, Pashto, Balochi and other Iranian languages. Also, there are a lot of parallels between Kurdish and Hindi, but it is less than the parallels among the Kurdish with the mentioned Iranian languages. Furthermore, the similarities decline when we compare it with other languages from other groups of Indo-European languages.

Although, there are a lot of resemblances between Kurdish and other neighboring languages like Arabic and Turkish, the resemblances are not original. This is because their origins are not same (Ismail, 1977; Ethnologue, 2019).

To make it clearer, we have translated 10 pure Kurdish words into some languages, which are chosen randomly. We have found that the words share a lot of similarities with Persian, it also has some similarities with Hindi. But It does not have such similarities with English and they are far from Arabic and Turkish. The experiment is a very basic comparative method to find the basic information and test phonology and morphology among languages (Baldi & Cuzzolin, 2015: 821). Look at the first table:

Table 1: Some pure Kurdish words in other languages.

Northern Kurdish	Persian	Hindi	English	Turkish	Arabic
av	آب ab	पानी panî	water	su	ماء ma'
du	دو du	दो do	two	iki	اثنان esnan
dar	درخت dirext	पेड़ pêd	tree	ağaç	شجرة şecere
kirin	کردن kerden	करना karana	do	yapmak	فعل fa'al
çiya	کوه kûh	पहाड़ pahad	mountain	dağ	جبل cebel
ez, min	من men	मैं mein	I	ben	أنا ena
bira	برادر berader	भाई bihayî	brother	erkek kardeş	شقيق şeqîq
na	نه ne	नहीं nehîn	no	Hayır	لا la
duh	دیروز dîruz	बिना कल bîta kal	yesterday	dün	الامس el'emis
derî	در der	द्वार divar	door	kapı	باب bab

Those languages that are in the same language family, in particular those in are the same group, they share a lot of similarities not only in morphology. The second table shows the pronouns of Kurdish, Persian, and English.

Table 2: Pronouns in Kurdish, Persian and English

Northern Kurdish	Persian	English
ez/ min	men - من	I/ my
tu/ te	tu - تو	you/ your
ew/ wî, wê	āo - او	she, he, it/ he, his, its
em/ me	ma - ما	we/ our
hûn/ we	şuma - شما	you/ your
ew/ wan	anha - آنها	they/ their

So, we can say that putting Kurdish among Indo-European languages is supported by many facts. Those basic examples, just to show the facts. In particular between Kurdish and Persian

## 2. Kurdish language dialects

Those who studied Kurdish, divided Kurdish dialects according to their understanding. Some of them were very successful, while some of them could not be successful. For example, many of the orientalist said that Zazaki and Gorani are not Kurdish dialects (Hassanpour, 1993: 120; Khalid, 2013: 35-36). To clarify this misunderstanding, we are going to compare Kurdish with some other languages. Many orientalist depend on mutual understanding between Gorani - Zazaki with other Kurdish dialects. So, we would ask that have they seen the other language examples? Is mutual understanding the main feature for the line between language and dialect? According to the last methods, the relationship between languages and dialects does not only depend on mutual understanding. It is linked with many other factors, for example; politics, economy, culture and so on. The Norwegian, Swedish and Danish examples are meaningful here. Those languages share many similarities and there is mutual understanding among them, but they are different languages. While, there are some German dialects, there is not mutual understanding between them, but they have counted as German dialects. In the same time the standard German and Scandinavian languages are very similar, but they are different languages (Chambers & Trudgill, 2004: 3-4). So, if dialect division does not rely on mutual understanding only, why this fueature should be applied on Kurdish?

Last theories of nationalism suggests that becoming member of a group is optional and its individual decision. So, if one is a member of a group, but it refuses, we cannot force him/her to be a part of the group, and it was called immagned community (Anderson, 1999). Furthermore, we know that the Zazas, Gorans and the Hawramies play a great role within Kurdish community and Kurds also see them as a significant part of themselves (Hassanpour, 1993: 120). The role of Shaykh Saed Piran, Salahaddin Demirtash, Azad Hawrami and Yilmaz Guney is prove for what we are saying. So, by supporting the Andarson theory and the reality of Kurdish community, we accept the facts and see Gorani - Zazaki as a dialect of Kurdish language. Historically, the famous Kurdish historian Sharafkhani Badlisi catagorized Zazas

among Gorans, and he says there are for Kurdish groups; Kurmanj, Lur, Kalhur, and Goran (Şerefxanê Bedlîsî, 2014, r.62). Currently, the Kurmanjs have become two new groups, which are; Northern Kurds 'Northern Kurmanjs' and Central Kurds. Their dialects are called Northern Kurdish 'Kurmanji' and Central Kurdish 'Sorani'. Kalhur generally called southern Kurdish, which some Lurs also included. While the other Lurs do not define themselves as Kurd under Shiitism influence. Goran dialect is well-known by Gorani or Zazaki-Gorani.

So that we accept the Kurdish dialect categorization by Fuad Hama Khurshid with some minor changes. Hama Khurshid divided Kurdish into four dialects; Northern Kurmanji, Central Kurmanji, Southern Kurmanji and Gorani (2008). It is not very different with Jaffer Shayholislami who categorize Kurdish language into five dialects and he has separated Gorani and Zazaki into independent dialects (Sheyholislami, 2015: 31-36). I will count Gorani-Zazaki as a same dialect due to the fact that both dialects are very similar in terms of phonology and morphology.

I will show my understanding below, and I have mentioned the main sub-dialects as well. While there might various views regarding the sub-dialects. For example; Kochgiri and Dersim Kurmanji are very similar. So that some researchers put them into one sub-dialect while some others do not. Also, it is true for Koyi, Hawleri and Sorani sub-dialects. Historically, the famous Kurdish poet Ahmadi Khani is the first person who mentioned Kurdish sub-dialects, and he said:

Bohtî û Mihemmedî û Silivî

Hin le'1 û hinek ji zêr û zîvî (Khani, 2017, p.468).

Khani mentioned three Kurdish sub-dialects as an example of all the Kurdish sub-dialects and accents, and he said that all of them are sweet and worthy. To know more information about Kurdish sub-dialects, look figure 3.

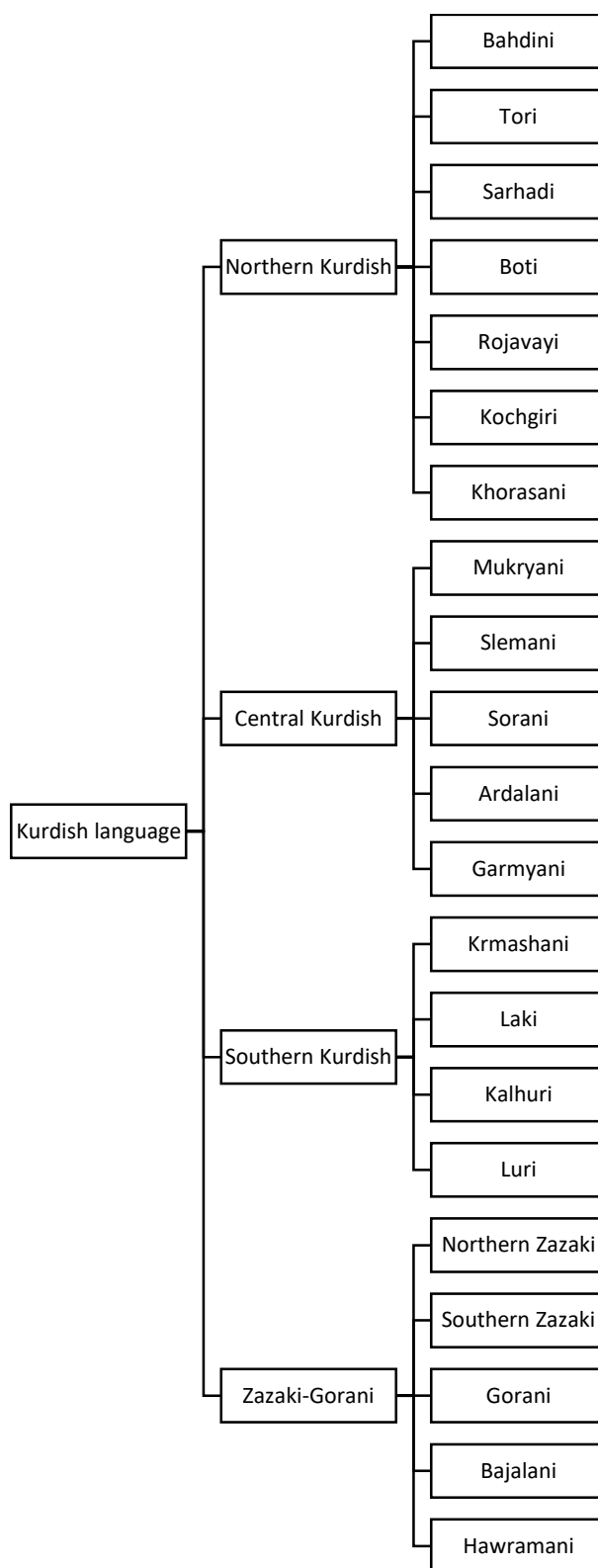


Figure 3: Kurdish dialects and sub-dialects.

Dialects are seen among all languages in the world. This feature is linked with identity and nationalism as well. Kurdish situation is different from other languages, because Kurdistan is not an independent state. So, Kurds do not have a standard language. In Iraqi Kurdistan, Central Kurdish has taken the role and it is used in formal places, education and media. Lately, other



dialects have taken some steps. People of the Duhok province wanted to use their sub-dialect, which is Bahdini in education. So they converted education into their sub-dialect (Khalid, 2013). But their decision worsened the situation of Northern Kurdish dialect and it has become an obstacle in front of locals as well. This is because they study in Bahdini sub-dialect, while ‘academic Kurdish’ has been accepted as the standard for Northern Kurmanji. The latter is widely used among Northern Kurds and in diaspora, and it is written in Latin alphabet. Currently, it is a formal language in the Kurdish de facto administration in Northern Syria ‘Rojava’. If the situation continues like that in Bahdinan region, Northern Kurdish dialect would face a new division. As such, the issue would have a negative impact on Kurdish language in general, and on Northern Kurdish in particular. So, the Northern Kurdish power would decrease in front of its competitor ‘Central Kurdish’.

To understand the impact of the usage of Central Kurdish in the formal places in KRG, we have collected data among students at Koya university. To know the basic information about participants, look at table 3.

Table 3: General information

<b>No. of participants</b>	100 university students, age (18-30)			
<b>sex</b>	43% male		57% female	
<b>Mother tongue</b>	98% Kurdish		2% Other languages	
<b>Mother dialect of Kurdish speakers</b>	Northern Kurdish 8%	Central Kurdish 78%	Southern Kurdish 7%	Gorani (Hawrami) 7%

To understand mutual understanding among Kurdish dialects, we had asked some questions. We published the questionnaires in modified-Arabic alphabet, which is the formal alphabet for Kurdish language in KRG. There were three scales to understand mutual understanding; ‘*very understandable*’ for full understanding, ‘*understandable*’ for medium understanding with some problems while speaking, and ‘*hardly understandable*’ for weak understanding. The results show that all the participants know Central Kurdish fluently. Although, the Central Kurdish speakers also have great understanding for Northern and Southern Kurdish. Mutual understanding between Northern Kurdish with Southern Kurdish, Central Kurdish for Gorani, Northern and Southern Kurdish with Gorani is weak. So, I have made a model to understand the mutual understanding between Kurdish dialects. Look at figure 4.

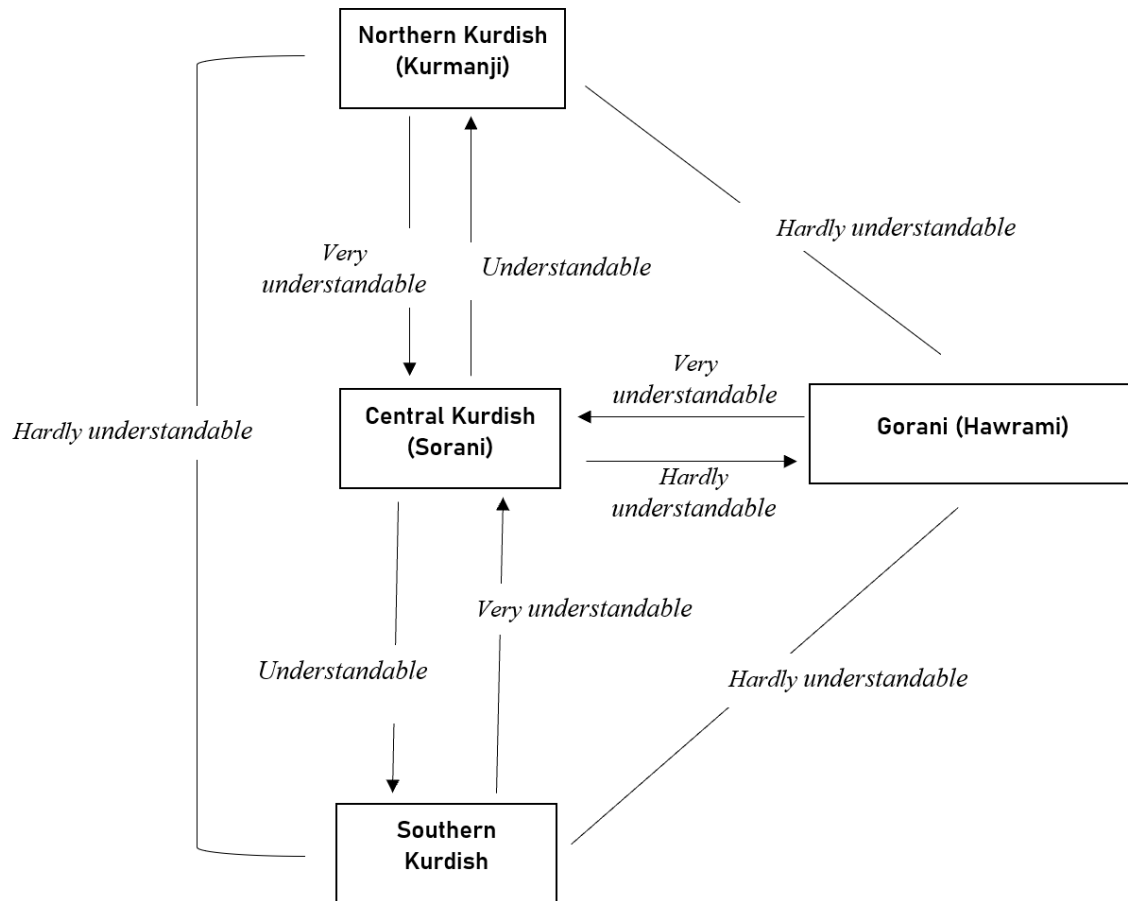
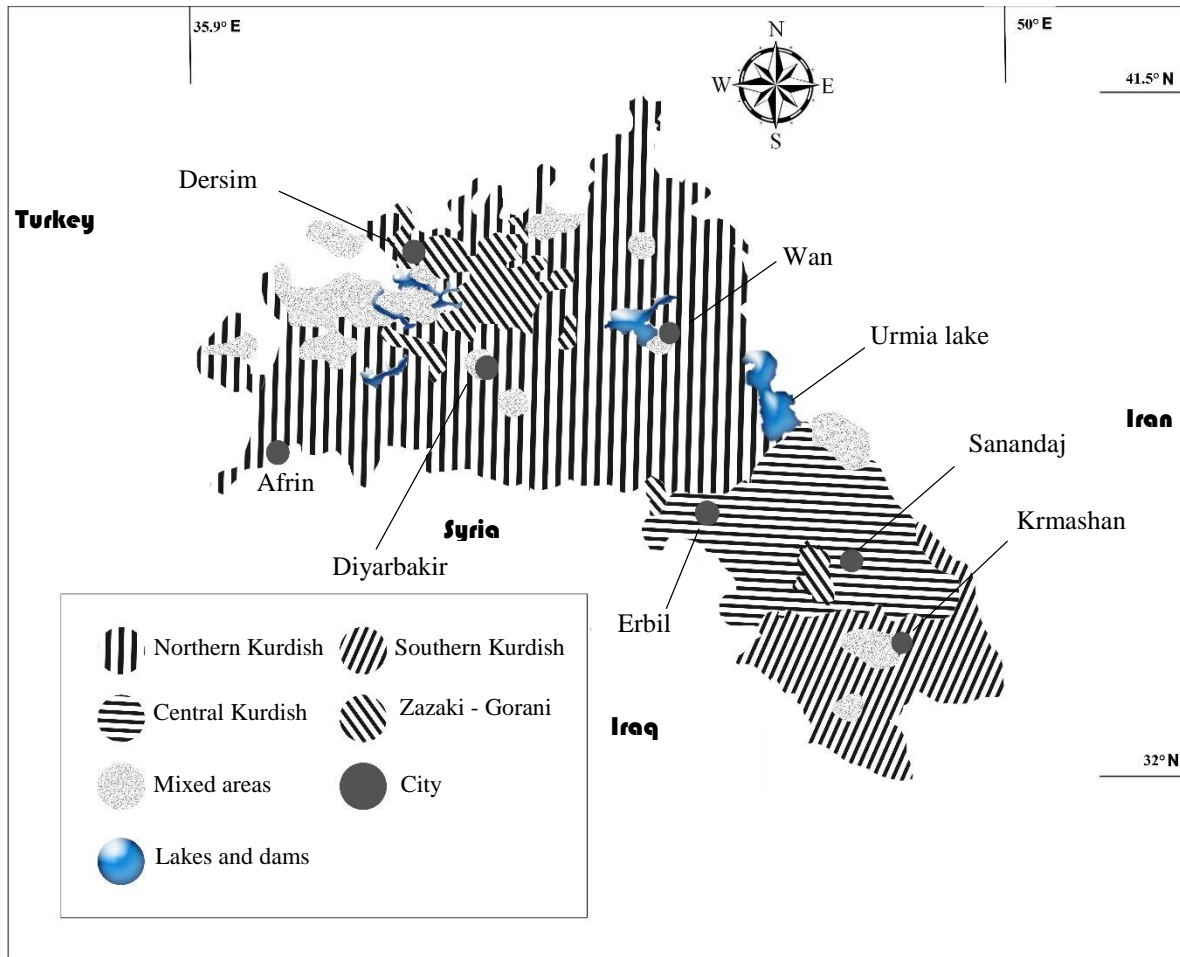


Figure 4: Mutual understanding among Kurdish dialect speakers at Koya university.

There are many factors that encourage the speakers of the other dialects to learn Central Kurdish, which mainly are politics, media, education, economy and so on. While there are not such factors to push Central Kurdish speakers to learn the other dialects of Kurdish. The result would change in other cities, for example in Halabja or Sanandaj. This is because the Hawrami speakers and the Central Kurdish speakers live within the same cities there. While those Hawrami speaker who live in Koya, they were obligated to learn Central Kurdish. However, the Central Kurdish speakers are not in the same situation. The same is true for the relationship between the Northern Kurdish and Southern Kurdish dialects. Both of them have a strong relationship with Central Kurdish, while they do not have such contact together. The geographic factor and politics play key roles, for example there are 400 km between Duhok and Khanaqin, where their dialect isoglosses, while both cities have a long and direct border with Central Kurdish (Google map, 2019). So that, dialect continuum have increased understanding between Central Kurdish and other dialects (Khalid, 2015: 36). In contrast, there is not such geographical continuum between Northern Kurdish and Southern Kurdish, Northern Kurdish and Gorani ‘Hawrami’, Gorani ‘Hawrami’ and Southern Kurdish. With support of the map and the previous analysis (Ethnologue, 2019; Haig & Öpengin, 2015; Hassanpour, 1993; Khalid, 2015; Sheyholislami, 2015; Hama Khurshid, 2008) and finding the gaps, I have drawn the below map, which shows the map of the Kurdish dialects in Kurdistan. Kurdish is also spoken overseas, in particular in Khlorasan, Central Anatolia, Jordan, some former Soviet countries, Israel and diaspora. For more information, look at the map.



*Map: Kurdish dialect division in Kurdistan.*

Our results show higher mutual understanding among Kurdish dialects comparing with the previous studies. For example, there are some studies show the low level of understanding between Northern and Central Kurdish (Haig & Öpengin, 2015: 247), while it is medium according to our study. There are many factors for such differences; the participants of our questionnaire were university students and they have friends from various places. They have had Kurdish education from kindergarden to university. Also, media and social media play a great role in Iraqi Kurdistan. In contrast, the role of Kurdish media is less in the other parts of Kurdistan, and non-Kurdish media have taken the role; for example among Kurds in Turkey (Opengin, 2011: 146). Our result is a positive change, and it should be taken into account to increase the relationship among young generation whose speak in different dialects of Kurdish.

### 3. Kurdish alphabets

When we talk about language and education, the alphabet would be in the first sight. Because, we use alphabet to write languages. Alphabet is not language, it is a way to write a language (Saussure, 1998). According to Saussure method, we may analyze the Kurdish situation like that; Kurds from Iran and Iraq learn Arabic and Persian easier, while the same

languages are more difficult for Kurds in Turkey. This is because the orthography of these countries is different.

Till now, there is not a unified alphabet for Kurdish. It has had a negative impact on Kurdish language and become a complex issue, its solution is difficult as well. Having different alphabet and significant differences between Northern and Central Kurdish dialects lead to decrease understanding (Haig & Öpengin, 2015: 247). Currently, Kurds use three various alphabets: First, modified Arabic alphabet, which is used widely by Iranian and Iraqi Kurds. This alphabet is mostly used to write Central Kurdish, Southern Kurdish, and Hawrami. Also, It is used for Northern Kurdish – Bahdini sub-dialect in Duhok province. This alphabet has been more developed and many books written in it. Historically, Kurdish classic poets have used a kind of similar alphabet, for example Malay Jaziri, Nali, Masturay Ardalani and so on. Sheyholislami dates back its roots for the fifteenth century, while it is modified according to Kurdish phonetic in the last century (Sheyholislami, 2015: 36).

Second, Latin alphabet, which is widely used by Turkey Kurds and Syrian Kurds. With the emergence of Turkish republic and Kurdish defeat to build their state, Kurdish language had been prohibited by Turkey, where is a home for Northern Kurdish and Zazaki dialects. Turkish authorities were strongly against the Arabic alphabet and Kurdish language. So, Kurds were obligated to get used to with the new situation. Jaladat Ali Badirkhan has suggested the basis for Kurdish latin alphabet in Hawar Magazine in 1932 (Jawari, 1998). Kurdish Latin alphabet has been very important for Kurds in Turkey due to the fact that the alphabet is similar with Turkish alphabet. So, it helped Kurdish students to write in Kurdish by the similar alphabet that they learn from schools. Even though the alphabet is very similar with Turkish alphabet, Turkish authorities have been against Kurdish Latin alphabet and the three letters ‘Q, X, W’ had been forbidden for decades. This is because those letters are not available in Turkish Latin (Aslan, 2009: 14).

Third, is Cyrillic alphabet (Sheyholislami, 2015). The Cyrillic alphabet is the Russian language alphabet; it was used by the former Soviet Kurds as well. However, Russian Kurds who speak Northern Kurdish converted to Latin alphabet lately.

Generally, the Iraqi and Iranian Kurds are more ready for accepting the Latin alphabet because the alphabet is used in media, daily life and writing, and they educate themselves about it. Also, there are some people who support the idea of changing Central Kurdish alphabet into Latin (Sheyholislami, 2015: 36-37). While, there is not such readiness among Turkey Kurds. There are few Turkey Kurds who know the modified Arabic alphabet. The interesting thing here is the usage of Latin alphabet in Syrian Kurdistan ‘Rojava’. Currently, they are the only part of Kurdistan whose use different alphabet with their central state.

### **Conclusion**

After analyzing the literature and publishing questionnaire among Koya University students, there are some results; Kurdish language is an Indo-European language and have a lot of similarity with the other Indo-Iranian languages, in particular Persian. It has four main dialects; Northern Kurdish ‘Kurmanji’, Central Kurdish ‘Sorani’, Southern Kurdish, and Zazaki–Gorani. Mutual understanding among Kurdish dialects would change with the context, however, it does not exclude non of the dialects out of Kurdish language. Pointing Kurdish

dialects is not only a linguistic decision, it is also linked with Kurdish society whose individuals believe in their Kurdishness. There are also other examples like that worldwide, which are shown in the study.

For saving Kurdish languages, all dialects should survive. However, Kurds need a common language to understand each other clearly, just similar to all other standardized languages. To do that, a linguistic plan is needed. So, the role of both KRG and Rojava authorities is the key. They also have impact on the other two oppressed parts 'Iranian and Turkish Kurdistan'. Basic solution should start from alphabet unification, and dialect continuum areas should be on focus for the language standardization. The planners should seek for common areas, not raising the differences.

Koya university is a great example. This study suggests that if Kurdish dialects be in contact, understanding would increase. Thus, each one may speak in its dialect and understand the others as well. So that the language would take its acceptable path.

Regarding education in Kurdish dialects, there is a scientific fact; education in mother tongue is a human right, and Kurds have asked for it. However, education in dialects and sub-dialects is not a human right. No community asks for education in its village, town or city's accent.

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