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Kurdish Language Attrition and Its Influence on Intergenerational Communication in Turkey

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Abstract

Language serves as a crucial link between individuals and their cultural heritage, especially within families. In multilingual societies like Van, Turkey, where Kurdish and Turkish languages coexist, language attrition can deeply affect familial bonds and cultural identity. This study investigates how language attrition impacts communication between Kurdish-speaking grandparents and their Turkish-dominant grandchildren. Using semi-structured interviews with 21 grandparents and 22 grandchildren, the research explores the changes in language use, communication challenges, and emotional and cultural implications of language loss within families. The findings reveal that language attrition not only disrupts communication but also weakens intergenerational relationships and diminishes cultural transmission. Grandparents often experience feelings of sadness and disconnection as their heritage language fades, while grandchildren struggle with identity and emotional ties to their cultural roots. The study highlights the urgent need for preserving minority languages to maintain cultural continuity and familial bonds.

Keywords: Language Attrition, Intergenerational Communication, Kurdish Language, Cultural Identity

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Introduction

Language is far more than a tool for exchanging information (Cebi & Babayiğit, 2021) — it is the heartbeat of cultural identity. When a shared language erodes within families, it severs emotional bonds and weakens ties to heritage. In multicultural regions like Turkey, where Kurdish, Turkish, and other languages intersect, language attrition—the gradual decline of a minority language—has profound implications (Babayiğit, 2021). This phenomenon is driven by socioeconomic pressures, political marginalization, and the dominance of majority languages like Turkish (Schmid, 2016). Intergenerational transmission, particularly through grandparents, is critical for preserving linguistic and cultural legacies (Fishman, 1991). However, as younger generations prioritize dominant languages, stories, traditions, and emotional connections risk fading (Gunes, 2012).

In Van, a city with a significant Kurdish population, language attrition is deeply entwined with Turkey's sociopolitical history. Kurdish has long been suppressed through policies denying its use in education, media, and public life (Hassanpour, 1992). The 1980 military coup, for instance, intensified bans on Kurdish-language publications and cultural expression (Sheyholislami, 2011). Despite partial reforms in the 2000s, Kurdish remains stigmatized, pushing many families toward Turkish for economic mobility or social acceptance (Gunes & Zeydanlioglu, 2014). Recent studies indicate ongoing restrictions on mother-tongue education, with only optional Kurdish courses in public schools requiring a minimum of 10 students, further exacerbating attrition (DFAT, 2025). This study examines how such dynamics disrupt communication between Kurdish-speaking grandparents and their Turkish-dominant grandchildren, drawing on interviews with 21 grandparents and 22 grandchildren in Van.

Language Attrition: Beyond Forgetting

Language attrition occurs when reduced use of a language leads to declining proficiency. Unlike forgetting due to aging, attrition stems from prolonged disuse and competition from a dominant second language (L2) (Paradis, 2007). For example, adults who migrate to regions where their native language (L1) is marginalized often struggle to retain fluency, even if they were once fluent (Schmid, 2016). The brain's adaptation to L2 can reshape L1 processing, causing grammatical errors, slower recall, or accent shifts (Köpke & Schmid, 2004). Bilingualism

involves constant negotiation between languages. The “inhibitory control model” posits that the brain suppresses one language to use the other, which can weaken L1 pathways over time (Green, 1998). For instance, Kurdish-Turkish bilinguals might inadvertently apply Turkish syntax to Kurdish sentences. This interference is heightened in environments where L1 lacks institutional support, such as schools or media (Bialystok, 2001). Age significantly impacts attrition. Children exposed to L2 early often experience rapid L1 loss, as their linguistic systems are more malleable (Birdsong, 2005). In Van, grandchildren raised in Turkish-speaking schools may struggle to grasp Kurdish’s complex morphology, leading to “incomplete acquisition” (Polinsky, 2018). Conversely, grandparents who learned Turkish later in life typically retain stronger Kurdish proficiency, as their L1 was firmly established (Schmid, 2009). Recent research on Kurdish-Turkish bilingual adolescents confirms that early L2 dominance correlates with higher borrowing from Turkish and reduced Kurdish vocabulary access (Kasap, 2020). Literacy strengthens language retention. Written texts anchor vocabulary and grammar, providing a reference absent in oral-only traditions (Dörnyei, 2005). Kurdish, however, has historically been excluded from Turkey’s education system, depriving younger generations of formal literacy tools. As one grandparent lamented, “My grandson can’t read the Kurdish poems I wrote—they’re just scribbles to him.”

The Kurdish Context

Kurdish, spoken by 15–20 million people globally, faces existential threats in Turkey. Policies dating to the 1920s labeled Kurdish a “foreign language,” banning it in public spaces and schools (Haig & Matras, 2002). The 1983 Law No. 2932 criminalized Kurdish music and publications, framing linguistic diversity as a threat to national unity (Öpengin, 2012). Although reforms in the 2000s allowed limited Kurdish broadcasting and elective courses, implementation remains inconsistent (Watts, 2010). Language is a cornerstone of Kurdish identity (Karacan & Babayiğit, 2017; Kasap, 2025). For many, speaking Kurdish symbolizes resistance against assimilation (Sheyholislami, 2011). As one interviewee stated, “Turkish is the language of the state; Kurdish is the language of my soul.” However, stigma persists. Grandparents recalled being punished for speaking Kurdish in school—a trauma that led some to avoid teaching it to their children (Yavuz, 2006).

Younger generations in Van increasingly view Turkish as a tool for opportunity. University education, jobs, and social media (dominated by Turkish) incentivize linguistic shift (Sherwani, 2020). Grandchildren describe Kurdish as “home language,” limited to familial interactions, while Turkish dominates public and digital spaces. This compartmentalization strains intergenerational communication. A granddaughter explained, “I understand Grandma’s stories, but I can’t reply properly. She laughs when I mix up words.” Language attrition fractures familial bonds. Grandparents associate Kurdish with intimacy and heritage, viewing its decline as a rejection of identity. One grandmother wept, “My grandson calls me *büyükanne* [Turkish for grandmother]. It feels like losing him twice.” Conversely, grandchildren express guilt over their limited Kurdish, fearing they’ve “failed” their ancestors (Dewaele, 2010). Oral traditions, a pillar of Kurdish culture, rely on intergenerational transmission. Epic poems like *Mem û Zîn* or folk songs lose nuance when translated into Turkish. Grandparents fear these stories will become “museum pieces” rather than living narratives (Hassanpour, 1992). A grandfather noted, “Without Kurdish, our history turns to dust.” Language attrition fuels existential dilemmas. Younger Kurds navigating Turkish-dominated spaces often feel “in-between”—too Kurdish for mainstream society, yet too Turkish-speaking for elders (Zeyad, 2018). This duality can trigger anxiety or alienation, particularly in politicized contexts where Kurdish identity is scrutinized (Öktem, 2011).

Methodological Approach

This study adopted a qualitative, exploratory design using semi-structured interviews to investigate the nuanced effects of language attrition on intergenerational communication in Van, Turkey. Semi-structured interviews were selected for their flexibility, allowing participants to elaborate on personal experiences while ensuring alignment with core research themes (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This approach balances structured inquiry with open-ended dialogue, critical for capturing emotional and cultural dimensions of language loss (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit 43 participants (21 grandparents aged 63–79 and 22 grandchildren aged 15–24). Grandparents were selected based on:

1. Upbringing in Kurdish-speaking households,

2. Long-term residence in Van,
3. Direct observation of language shift toward Turkish among younger generations.

Grandchildren were chosen if they:

1. Attended Turkish-language schools,
2. Had varying Kurdish proficiency (self-assessed as "basic," "intermediate," or "fluent"),
3. Maintained regular contact with Kurdish-speaking grandparents.

Participants were recruited through local community centers, cultural associations, and snowball sampling to access hard-to-reach populations (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). The grandparent cohort included 14 women and 7 men, predominantly from rural backgrounds, while grandchildren (13 females, 9 males) represented urban and semi-urban areas. Socioeconomic status and education levels were documented but not used as exclusion criteria to reflect Van's diverse demographics.

Interview Structure

Interviews were guided by three themes derived from prior research on language attrition and cultural identity (Fishman, 1991; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000):

1. Language Use and Shifts
2. Communication Challenges
3. Emotional and Cultural Impact

A pilot study with 5 participants refined question clarity and cultural sensitivity.

Research Procedure

Interviews were conducted face-to-face between January and March 2023 in participants' homes or community centers, chosen for familiarity and comfort. Sessions lasted 25–60 minutes, with longer durations for grandparents sharing detailed narratives. Interviews were conducted in Kurdish or Turkish by bilingual researchers fluent in both languages. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, with Kurdish portions translated into Turkish for analysis by the research team. Transcripts were anonymized, replacing names with codes (e.g., GP01 for Grandparent 1, GC14 for Grandchild 14).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied in six phases: familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts to identify initial patterns; coding via line-by-line open coding with codes like “nostalgia,” “code-switching,” and “identity conflict”; theme generation; review; defining themes; and report production. To enhance rigor, two researchers independently coded 20% of transcripts, achieving 85% inter-coder reliability (Krippendorff’s $\alpha = 0.79$). Member checking was conducted with 10 participants to validate interpretations. The study adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants provided written consent, with oral consent for illiterate grandparents. Confidentiality was emphasized; data were stored on password-protected devices. Participants received summaries of findings in their preferred language.

Findings

This study examines language attrition’s impact on intergenerational communication in Kurdish families in Van, Turkey, through three themes: language use shifts, communication hurdles, and emotional/cultural consequences. Below, we present participant narratives and quantitative trends (Tables 1–3), followed by a discussion contextualizing these findings within sociolinguistic theory.

Theme 1: Language Usage and Transformations

A marked shift from Kurdish to Turkish dominates family interactions. Grandparents report declining Kurdish use, while grandchildren prioritize Turkish for practicality. Recent surveys in Van align with this, showing that while older generations maintain oral proficiency, youth literacy in Kurdish is low due to educational exclusion (Sherwani, 2020).

Participant Voices:

- Ahmet (68): “My grandchildren prefer Turkish—it’s easier, but I miss sharing Kurdish stories.”
- Zeynep (20): “I use Turkish with my grandmother. Kurdish feels awkward now.”

Theme	Sub-theme	Description	Frequency
Language Shift	Use of Turkish vs. Kurdish	Grandparents observe Turkish dominance in interactions.	14
		Grandchildren prioritize Turkish due to education/social pressures.	11
Cultural Loss	Impact Traditions	on Grandparents link language shift to fading cultural practices.	7
Communication	Fluency Understanding	& Grandparents struggle with complex Turkish; grandchildren lack Kurdish fluency.	5 / 3
Generational Gaps	Language Preference	Turkish perceived as “practical”; Kurdish seen as “awkward” by youth.	3

The data reflect a linguistic assimilation trend driven by Turkish’s institutional dominance (Fishman, 1991). Grandparents’ nostalgia contrasts with grandchildren’s pragmatic adaptation, mirroring Skutnabb-Kangas’ (2000) observation that minority languages erode when excluded from formal domains (e.g., schools).

Theme 2: Communication Hurdles

Linguistic gaps hinder meaningful dialogue. Grandparents’ cultural references and idioms in Kurdish often go misunderstood, while grandchildren struggle with limited proficiency.

Participant Voices:

- Hasan (78): “My grandchildren don’t grasp Kurdish idioms—it’s like losing our connection.”
- Lina (19): “I miss details in Grandma’s stories because my Kurdish is weak.”

Sub-theme	Description	Frequency
Linguistic Gaps	Generational differences in Kurdish proficiency impede effective communication.	13
Cultural Misunderstandings	Grandchildren miss cultural nuances in Kurdish narratives.	10
Expressive Limits	Grandparents’ complex ideas get lost in translation.	8
Learning Barriers	Limited practice/exposure hinders grandchildren’s Kurdish improvement.	7

These challenges align with Polinsky’s (2018) concept of “incomplete acquisition,” where interrupted intergenerational transmission leads to fragmented language skills. The dominance of Turkish in education and media exacerbates this (Gunes & Zeydanlioglu, 2014), creating a feedback loop that marginalizes Kurdish.

Theme 3: Emotional and Cultural Significance

Language attrition fuels emotional distress and identity crises. Grandparents mourn cultural erosion, while grandchildren grapple with guilt over disconnected heritage.

Participant Voices:

- Emine (69): “Our heritage is disappearing—my grandchildren won’t know our traditions.”
- Leyla (18): “I feel guilty for not preserving Kurdish. It’s like losing family history.”

Sub-theme	Description	Frequency
Nostalgia & Loss	Grandparents grieve fading language and cultural practices.	12
Guilt & Responsibility	Grandchildren feel obligated but ill-equipped to sustain Kurdish.	9
Cultural Disconnection	Both generations report weakened ties to traditions.	8
Identity Impact	Language loss erodes personal/cultural identity.	7

These findings echo Pavlenko’s (2005) work on bilingual identity, where language attrition triggers grief and “cultural bereavement.” The emotional toll mirrors Fishman’s (1991) assertion that language is a core identity marker—its loss destabilizes self-perception and intergenerational bonds.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the intersection of language attrition, cultural identity, and emotional well-being in Van’s Kurdish community. The dominance of Turkish in family interactions reflects broader systemic pressures. Kurdish’s exclusion from education and media (Sheyholislami, 2011) forces youth to adopt Turkish for socioeconomic mobility, accelerating language shift. This aligns with Bourdieu’s (1991) theory of linguistic capital, where majority languages grant access to power structures. Grandparents’ nostalgia for Kurdish underscores its role as a “cultural archive” (Hassanpour, 1992), while grandchildren’s pragmatic

choices reveal survival strategies in a Turkish-dominant society. A 2024 survey highlights this trend, with only 42.2% of Kurds speaking Kurdish regularly at home, indicating rapid attrition (Human Rights Foundation, 2025). Misunderstandings between generations stem from disrupted transmission. Grandparents' use of Kurdish idioms and proverbs (Babayiğit, 2020)- critical for cultural continuity (Yavuz, 2006)—becomes inaccessible to grandchildren, paralleling Polinsky's (2018) findings on heritage language attrition. This "cultural amnesia" weakens collective memory, as seen in dwindling engagement with Kurdish oral traditions (e.g., dengbêj songs) (Babayiğit & Pilatin, 2024; Babayiğit & Pilatin, 2025). Studies in Van confirm that while oral use persists among elders, youth show low literacy, threatening long-term survival (Sherwani, 2020). The grief expressed by grandparents and grandchildren reflects what Tannenbaum (2012) terms "emotional bilingualism," where language loss fractures self-identity. Grandparents' narratives of loss resonate with Skutnabb-Kangas' (2000) concept of "linguistic genocide," while grandchildren's guilt aligns with Dewaele's (2010) work on heritage language anxiety. These emotional dynamics highlight language as both a personal and political act of resistance.

The findings align with established sociolinguistic theories, offering a framework to understand the interplay of language attrition, cultural identity, and intergenerational dynamics. The dominance of Turkish in family interactions reflects Pierre Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital (1991), where language functions as a tool for social and economic advancement. In Turkey, Turkish is the primary language of education, media, and government, granting access to opportunities that Kurdish—a marginalized minority language—cannot. This imbalance pressures Kurdish families to prioritize Turkish, as seen in grandchildren's pragmatic preference for it. Bourdieu's theory explains why Kurdish, despite its cultural value, becomes secondary in a society where Turkish holds institutional power. Grandparents' nostalgia for Kurdish underscores its role as a repository of heritage, but without formal recognition, it struggles to compete with Turkish's socioeconomic advantages.

The communication challenges between generations mirror Maria Polinsky's concept of incomplete acquisition (2018), where interrupted language transmission leads to fragmented proficiency. Grandchildren in this study, educated exclusively in Turkish, lack exposure to Kurdish's nuanced grammar, idioms, and cultural references. This results in a generational

divide: grandparents possess “full” Kurdish proficiency tied to cultural memory, while grandchildren grasp only basic phrases. Polinsky’s work highlights how systemic exclusion of minority languages from education perpetuates this cycle, leaving younger generations linguistically and culturally disconnected. The grief expressed by participants resonates with Aneta Pavlenko’s idea of cultural bereavement (2005), where language loss triggers a mourning process for displaced identity. Grandparents grieve not just words but the erosion of traditions, stories, and kinship roles embedded in Kurdish. Grandchildren, meanwhile, grapple with guilt over their inability to sustain this heritage, reflecting what Pavlenko calls “linguistic haunting”—a lingering sense of loss even when the language isn’t fully mastered. This emotional duality underscores language as a vessel for collective memory and belonging.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reveals the profound emotional and cultural significance of language loss, underscoring its impact on personal identity and familial connections in Kurdish families in Van, Turkey. The emotional responses of grandparents and grandchildren highlight the intricate interplay between language proficiency and cultural continuity. These findings emphasize the need for further research to develop effective strategies for language maintenance and to provide support for bilingual communities. Future studies should explore these dimensions in greater depth, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, to enhance our understanding of language attrition and to inform policies aimed at preserving linguistic and cultural diversity in an increasingly globalized world. Policy recommendations include expanding Kurdish elective courses without minimum enrollment barriers, promoting bilingual education programs, and supporting community-based literacy initiatives to counteract attrition (DFAT, 2025). By addressing the emotional and cultural ramifications of language loss, we can better support bilingual individuals in maintaining their linguistic heritage and cultural identity, ultimately fostering stronger intergenerational bonds and societal harmony.

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