Structural and Typological Variation in the Dialects of Kurdish

Edited by
Yaron Matras · Geoffrey Haig · Ergin Öpengin

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Jaffer Sheyholislami is a faculty member in the School of Linguistics and Language Studies at Carleton University. In both Kurdish and English, he has published extensively on a variety of topics concerning the Kurdish language, especially in sociolinguistics. He is the author of *Kurdish Identity, Discourse and New Media* (Palgrave, 2011) and co-editor of a special issue of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* (*IJSL*) devoted to the sociology of Kurdish (2012). In addition to over a dozen chapters in edited volumes and major handbooks, he has published in *IJSL*, *Language Policy*, *Discourse & Society*, and *Language and Politics*. He is co-editing *the Oxford Handbook of Kurdish Linguistics*.

Rahim Surkhi holds a PhD from Salahaddin University, Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan (KRG), specializing in Kurdish language and sociolinguistics, where he taught discourse studies, semantics, and pragmatics for 14 years. Since 2017 he has been an adjunct research professor in the School of Linguistics and Language Studies at Carleton University in Canada. He

is the author of *Critical Discourse Analysis of Kurdish Journalism (1918–1932)*, 2013, and of *Process of Mass Communication (Language, Model and Methodology)*, 2008, and translator of *Pragmatics by George Yule* from English to Kurdish, Jamal Erfan, Sulaymaniyah 2016, and has also published several articles in Kurdish academic journals. His research focuses on critical discourse analysis, language policy, and Kurdish ethnicity and culture.

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Introduction

Yaron Matras, Geoffrey Haig, and Ergin Öpengin

1 The MDKD in the Context of Kurdish Linguistics

The present volume brings together contributions with an innovative focus on a systematic, comparative approach to the study of Kurdish dialects. They rely heavily on the Manchester Database of Kurdish Dialects (MDKD), a resource for the documentation of Kurdish varieties covering mainly Northern and Central Kurdish (Kurmanji-Bahdini and Sorani).

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From its beginnings, Kurdish linguistics has been conducted on the margins of better-established disciplines, with a chronic shortage of institutional support. Nevertheless, it has flourished over the last decades, as evidenced in a growing outcome of publications, the establishment of an international conference series (International Conference on Kurdish Linguistics, ICKL), and most recently, the MDKD.[1] The earliest research on Kurdish published in the West stems from what can broadly be referred to as the European Orientalist tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, the work of Karl Hadank and Oskar Mann on Gorani and Zazaki (Mann and Hadank 1930, 1932), Prym and Socin (1887, 1890), or Fossum (1919); see Blau (2009) for an excellent summary. The mid-twentieth century marked the era of what have been known as 'sensibly prescriptive' grammars (Gündoğdu et al. 2019, p. 1), for example, Sorani (Wahbi 1929) and Kurmanji (Bedir-Khan and Lescot 1970), or Bakaev (1965), which were often the precursors to efforts at codifying and standardizing orthographies (Matras and Reershemius 1991). The first attempts to apply a structuralist/descriptivist approach to Kurdish, largely divorced from didactic considerations, were the studies by McCarus (1958) and MacKenzie's (1961–1962) landmark survey of Kurdish dialects, which covered most of the Sorani and Bahdini-Kurmanji dialects of Iraq. MacKenzie's work not only identified a number of important isoglosses that served to define the main varieties of Kurdish, it also became an important reference for comparative historical syntax, sparking the line of diachronic research initiated by Bynon (1979, 1980), which has continued to the present (Haig 2008, 2017; Karimi 2014, among many others). Early generative approaches to Kurdish include Fattah's dissertation (1997) for Sorani, while Dorleijn (1996) is a pioneering study that combines a Government-and-Binding analysis of Kurmanji syntax with an empirical study of language contact effects in Kurmanji. Generative approaches have more recently gained traction, for example, through recent work on Sorani syntax by Karimi (2007, 2014), and Atlamaz and Baker (2018) and Gündoğdu (2018) on Kurmanji.

In parallel to the formal and structuralist approaches, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed growing scholarly interest in the sociolinguistic context of the Kurdish speech community. Within linguistics, research on

language planning, language ideologies, minority languages, and multilingualism burgeoned in the 1970s and 1980s, and it was abundantly evident that the situation of Kurdish speakers in their respective nation states offered rich insights for these sub-disciplines. Work within sociology and anthropology on identity was likewise influential, in particular the seminal study of van Bruinessen (1992, based on his thesis submitted in 1978), which continues to inspire sociological and anthropological research on Kurdish to this day. Prominent publications by Skutnabb-Kangas and associates (Skutnabb-Kangas and Bucak 1994; Hassanpour et al. 1996) within a linguistics human rights paradigm brought the Kurdish predicament to the attention of the broader scientific community, while Hassanpour's (1992) dissertation highlighted the role of nationalist ideologies in shaping the current sociopolitical context of Kurdish. This line of research, blending linguistics, cultural anthropology, political history, and critical discourse theory, continues to thrive and diversify (Sheyholislami 2011; Jamison 2016). Somewhat surprisingly, empirical variationist sociolinguistic case studies, aiming at identifying correlations of linguistic features with social factors, remain in short supply, with the noteworthy exception of Öpengin (2012) and Çağlayan (2014), both in the context of Turkish Kurdistan.

Within the diverse and vibrant research landscape sketched in the preceding paragraphs, serious work on regional variation is most noteworthy for its comparative absence. In the sixty years since the publication of MacKenzie (1961–1962), the sole survey of comparable scope is Fattah's (2000) overview of the varieties loosely referred to as Southern Kurdish. For Northern Kurdish, two papers by Öpengin and Haig (Öpengin and Haig 2014; Haig and Öpengin 2018) provide a provisional dialect division of Northern Kurdish. Although Fattah's overview of Southern Kurdish equals MacKenzie's in sheer volume, it exhibits certain methodological and analytic shortcomings, while Haig and Öpengin's work projects to a broad-brush dialect classification from a comparatively small, though probably fairly representative, cross-section of dialects, and is thus more tentative in nature. However, it is largely restricted to Northern Kurdish dialects of Turkey, while dialects of Syria and Armenia were not sampled. Consideration to Syrian Kurmanji is given for the first time in Matras (2019), based on an initial evaluation of MDKD data,

also offering a new approach to the postulation of major isoglosses and diffusion zones of structural innovations.

2 MDKD Design and Methodology

MDKD emerged as the principal output of two research projects led by Yaron Matras at the University of Manchester, in collaboration with Andrew Koontz-Garboden, Salih Akin, and Ergin Öpengin.[2] At the time of writing MDKD is publicly accessible via a University of Manchester website.[3] The project's approach was inspired by the Romani Morpho-Syntax (RMS) database (Elšík and Matras 2006; Matras et al. 2009), which used questionnaire elicitation to capture dialect variation producing a comprehensive online database. A pilot questionnaire tested in 2011–2012 contained around 200 items, selected based on variation in samples of connected speech from around 50 recorded interviews with speakers from Turkey, Iraq, and Iran and on variation documented in the literature. Elicitation was carried out in south-eastern Turkey and northern Iraq as well as among recent migrants in Europe. The questionnaire was then extended in 2014–2017 to cover 400 items (lexemes and phrases). The questionnaire items were read out to speaker-consultants in a second language (Turkish, Arabic, and Persian, and in some cases English and French) prompting verbal translations into their home dialect of Kurdish. This was accompanied by semi-structured interviews prompting narrations and descriptions of village life, marriage customs, migration, personal history, and traditional tales. The project collaborators trained native speaker fieldworkers, students of Kurdish language and linguistics at universities in Europe, south-eastern Turkey, and northern Iraq, to record data. Over 200 speaker consultants were recorded in over 150 locations.

The material was transcribed by trained native speaker transcription assistants using a system based on the Hawar alphabet used for literary Kurmanji, but marking additional phonological distinctions. This was intended to ensure accessibility to wider audiences while keeping a uniform, cross-dialect system that reflected relevant phonological distinctions (for a critical discussion see Anonby, this volume). The questionnaire

phrases were entered into a template that was pre-tagged for anticipated structures. The data were imported into an open-source database (utilising MySQL database and PHP web interface software) made accessible online. The interface allows the user to filter transcribed phrases by sample number and location, the content of Kurdish forms, English elicitation phrase, and a system of morphological tags. Sections of 5–7 minutes were selected for transcription and translation from the free speech samples and included in the MDKD online resource.

MDKD thus offers the first comprehensive comparative overview of Kurdish dialects, with a much denser grid of data points particularly for Northern and Central Kurdish than had been previously available, and samples of both free speech and controlled elicitation freely accessible online. Nonetheless the project and its digital output have a number of limitations. First, the questionnaire reflects the project's theoretical research questions, which were impacted by the conditions set by the funding policy of UK research councils at the time. These required the project to adopt a formal linguistic hypothesis in addition to a functional-typological and general documentation agenda. The hypothesis was adopted that morphological alignment may correlate with a scale of predicates and participant roles, one that reflects participant affectedness as described by Beaver (2011). Given the limitations on resources for fieldwork and transcription, testing that hypothesis took up considerable space within the questionnaire, reducing opportunities to explore other areas of structure.

The corpus shows a slight bias towards young, educated males, reflecting in part the profile of the fieldworkers and their access to speaker consultants. Influence of the Standard languages (Kurmanji and Sorani) has been minimized thanks to the spontaneous elicitation using a second language as source, but cannot be entirely ruled out, though the emerging geographical patterns of structural features offer strong evidence of the non-randomness of speakers' responses. In a small number of cases, the effect of the source language can be detected in the organization of complex clauses (see Matras, this volume). Some structures were lost due to mistranslations or other misunderstandings in individual samples, marginally limiting the ability to compare, as it was not always possible to return to speakers in order to obtain clarifications. Protocols and

control stages were used to minimize variation in transcription, but some variation inevitably remains due to a variety of influences on transcription assistants including standard language norms and different levels of experience. The data collection and archiving relied on the input of fieldwork and transcription assistants who were native speakers. The project was able to engage speakers of Northern and Central Kurdish, but gaps remain for Southern Kurdish as well as Zazaki, which might be supplemented in the future. While the grant application contained a data management and sustainability plan as required by the funding body, in recent years UK higher education institutions have been adopting a policy of offering long-term maintenance for digital outputs only if continuous funding can be secured. However, funding schemes dedicated for long-term maintenance of established resources are virtually non-existent. At the time of writing the MDKD remains accessible online but its long-term future is unclear.

The extended survey was launched just as ISIS' campaign of terror was spreading across many of the Kurdish regions making some locations inaccessible. We were unable to carry out fieldwork in Syria, but our assistants approached recently displaced persons in their places of refuge across the borders and in some cases family members and friends from Syria who had recently taken refuge in Europe. This allowed the project to collect the first-ever systematic set of data on Kurdish from Syria (see Matras 2019). By making verifiable control samples available, the online resource also allowed the creation of a new forensic protocol for Language Analysis for the Determination of Origin (LADO) that was applied successfully in numerous appeals to the English courts by Kurdish refugees (Matras 2018). The MDKD has also inspired various new research initiatives and has been drawn on in a number of recent research publications (e.g. Haig and Bulut 2017; Matras 2019; Haig 2018; Akin and Bouveret 2021).

3 The Chapters

The collection of chapters seeks to give representation to a range of different structural phenomena in lexicon, phonology, and morpho-syntax, with all chapters taking a cross-dialect comparative approach and relying heavily on the MDKD resource as well as on other sources. It opens with Jaffer Sheyholislami and Rahim Surkhi's contribution on Lexical variation and semantic change. Examining a selection of lexical forms it finds that about half of the items are shared between all or most Iranian languages, while identifying some that are unique to Kurdish, and identifies the factors that correlate with lexical variation including geography, political division, population movement, cultural borrowing, and modernization. Erik Anonby discusses phonological variation in Kurdish, pointing out a stable set of core vowels and consonants, alongside peripheral phonemes that demonstrate a high level of variation in geographic distribution and frequency. Segments with significant distributional restrictions include front rounded vowels, uvular consonants, a contrastive aspirated stop series, emphatic alveolar obstruents, and the pharyngeals /ʕ/ and /ħ/. An analysis of these patterns gives modest confirmation of the well-known Northern vs. Central Kurdish dialect division, but shows that the phonological distinction between the two is best characterized in terms of tendencies rather than exact, regular correspondences, pointing to the local nature of phonological changes.

In her chapter on case in Kurdish, Songül Gündoğdu points out the major isogloss separating those dialects that make use of the oblique case, which include all of Northern Kurdish and a few dialects of Central Kurdish, from those that have lost it. The marking of semantic cases is subject to considerable areal variation following an approximate north/south cline with prepositional marking increasingly dominant in the south. Ergin Öpengin and Masoud Mohammadirad discuss the areal distribution, structural variation, and diachrony of pronominal clitics. Among their findings is that in the more conservative Northern Kurdish and Gorani dialects the absence of subject-marking pronominal clitics correlates with the retention of oblique case in nominal subjects, which

in turn attests to the originally pronominal status of clitics. Sara Belelli provides a cross-dialect account of Kurdish past tense categories with special reference to Southern Kurdish. She concludes that the traditional approach to the system of Kurdish past tense/aspect forms as structured on an aoristic preterit core expressing both general and perfective events, in contrast with a marked imperfective tense (imperfect), is simplistic and does not do full justice to the facts; instead, the dynamism of categories needs to be considered more carefully, especially fluctuation around the functions and indeed the presence or absence of the category 'imperfect'.

Maximilian Kinzler describes the inventory of adpositions in Kurdish as composed of a relatively small set of core and other adpositions, including several types of compound adpositions. There is considerable variation, with extreme ends in parts of the south (mostly prepositions) and the north (more postpositions). Variation is also found in meaning, and items may overlap with other adpositions and means of expressing semantic functions. Area-particular features are found across neighbouring varieties in both Northern and Central Kurdish. Geoffrey Haig investigates the areal distribution of post-predicate constituents across Kurdish. He finds that while direct objects are rarely postposed, certain other constituents regularly follow the predicate. Semantics appears to be the best predictor for post-predicate placement: constituents that express the endpoints of a state of affairs (goals and recipients) are overwhelmingly post-predicate, while the placement of addressees varies, and locational phrases with no implication of movement are overwhelmingly pre-predicate. In the final chapter, Yaron Matras discusses connectivity and complex constructions in Kurdish dialects, paying attention to clause linking, sequentiality, complements, and relative and adverbial clauses. He notes broader areal features such as finiteness and the factuality distinction as well as a shared inventory of connectors, general traits of Kurdish, differences between the principal dialect groups and some specific regional and contact developments.

Notes

1. For more detailed overviews of earlier research see e.g. Haig and Matras (2002), Blau (2009), and Gündoğdu et al. (2019).
2. The pilot phase was funded by the British Academy (award number SG101803). The extended survey was carried out as part of a research project entitled 'Structural and typological variation in the dialects of Kurdish' funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (award number AH/K007084/1; Principal Investigator: Yaron Matras, Co-Investigator: Andrew Koontz-Garboden).
3. http://kurdish.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/, last accessed 1 April 2021.

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Lexical Variation and Semantic Change in Kurdish

Jaffer Sheyholislami and Rahim Surkhi

1 Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a burgeoning interest in investigating variation across the linguistic varieties collectively known as Kurdish. This chapter examines lexical variation across Kurdish language varieties including NK, CK, SK, Hawrami/Gorani, and Zazaki, another major variety often included under the wider umbrella of 'Kurdish', but which is not represented in the MDKD. This chapter also complements the MDKD coverage in this respect (see Fig. 1). We explore variation in about a dozen every-day lexical expressions from four categories: persons ('child', 'girl/daughter', 'boy/son'), environment/nature ('mountain', 'river', 'snow'), colour ('green' and 'red') and technological-lexical innovation ('factory'). Our main interest is not to weigh in on the debate over which Kurdish varieties exist, which ones can be viewed as separate languages, or whether they or which ones comprise a historical Kurdish

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