Standard Languages and Language Standards

The Kurdish Language
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Kurdish language

Outline

Introduction:
  • General facts about language and people
  • History of Kurdistan

Dialects
  • Sorani and Kurmanji

Kurdish people in Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Germany
General facts about the people
General facts about the people

- Estimated number of Kurds: between 27 and 36 million
- Inhabiting parts of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey
- Most Kurds are bilingual or multilingual
- Majority illiterate in their native tongue
General facts about the people

Dialects of the language are as different as English and German, still mutually intelligible

- Leads to irregularities
- Un-unified spelling and orthographic conventions

Literacy forbidden in most countries

- Acquired through literacy in the official state language
- Differ according to state of origin (historically and synchronically)
General facts about the people

- Political engagement for language distribution
- Courses in Kurdish literacy are offered as part of political activities
General facts about the language

Uses the alphabet of the state languages

- Iraq and Iran: Arabic alphabet (modified)
- Syria and Turkey: Latin
- Former USSR: modified Cyrillic alphabet

Arabic loanwords rather than Turkish loanwords; seen as "more authentic"
General facts about the language

- Grammars and journals written on personal initiative
- Small number of literary works, grammars, dictionaries and traditional prose has been printed, but distribution forbidden
History of the Kurds

First division: Self-rule in form of independent principalities was maintained

Second division: non-state nation

Middle ages:
- many semi-independent or independent states

16th century:
- Kurdish-inhabited area was split between Safavid Iran and Ottoman Empire
History of the Kurds

Before WW I: most Kurds lived within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire

WW 1:

- The Kurdish people were divided into small groups and deported into different areas
- 300,000 Kurds died (cold, famine, pestilence, killed)
- Chiefs and leaders were brought into areas where maintaining connections to them was forbidden
History of the Kurds

1918:
- Kurdish areas in five different countries with different political systems
- Different policies from linguistic genocide to promotion and official support of the language

After 1918:
- Turkey wanted assimilation of all its people
- Suppression and violent actions against the Kurds (forced assimilation, resettlement and deportation, imprisonment and execution, etc.)
Republic of Mahabad

- January 22nd, 1946:
  - Announcement of formation of the Republic of Mahabad by Qazi Muhammad

- June 1946:
  - Withdrawal of Soviets who supported Muhammad

- December 15th, 1946:
  - Iranian forces take over Mahabad
History of the Kurds

Kurdish self-rule were suppressed in treaties between all countries with Kurdish provinces

Mid-1980's:

- War for self-rule in Iraq, Turkey and Iran
- Turkey carried out military actions against Kurds in Iraq
- Iran and Iraq suppressed Kurds within their own borders, but helped the other's Kurds in order to win the war
Kurdish Dialects

Kurmanji and Sorani
General Facts

• Two main dialects and a third group

• The central group: Sorani

• Northern one: Kurmanji

• Third group (southern dialects)
General facts

• Differences among these dialects

• Kurdish people use the name of the dialect they speak to refer to their dialect or language

• “Kurdish” describes their ethnic identity
General facts

According to Philip Kreyenbroek (1992)

“It is misleading to call Kurmanji and Sorani dialects because they are in some ways as different from one another as German and English.”
Kurmanji

• Spoken by 18 million Kurds (majority)
• Spoken by Kurdish people in Turkey, Syria, Armenia, the Bahdinan regions in Iraq and Kurdish communities in the northeast of Iran
• Latin script
• The Kurmanji Kurdish dialect contains 31 letters in its alphabet:
Sorani

- Linguists often classify Sorani as part of the same Kurmanji branch of the Kurdish language
- Spoken by 10-15 million Kurds
- Central group spoken in West Iran, the central part of Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey and Syria
Sorani

• Spoken by the majority group of Kurds in Iraq and Iran

• Has an official status in Iraq → is the official language of Iranian Kurdistan

• Written in the Arabic Alphabet

• The Sorani Kurdish dialect is mainly written using a modified Arabic-based alphabet with 33 letters:

  • ى, ی, ه, وو, و, و, و, ن, م, ل, لّ, گ, ک, ک, ق, ق, ف, ف, غ, ع, ع, ڭ, گ, ڭ, گ, پ, پ, ب, ب, پ, پ, ه, ه,
Phonological Differences

- The Kurmanji aspirated distinction /p, t̡, k̡ - p, t, k/, probably borrowed from Armenian, is lacking in Sorani.

- The Kurmanji consonants /s, t̢, z̢/, probably borrowed from Arabic, do not appear in Sorani.
Morphological differences

• The definite suffix -eke appears only in Sorani

• The Sorani. verb suffix -ewe appears as preverb ve- in Kurmanji
Morphological differences

• The Kurmanji distinction in case and gender (masculine and feminine) in nouns and pronouns is lacking in Sorani

• Kurmanji has a full oblique case system for both nouns and pronouns

• Sorani has largely abandoned this system and uses the pronominal suffixes to take over the functions of the cases
Situation of the Kurdish Community in Iraq
Situation of the Kurdish community in Iraq

Makes up around 17% of the population
Majority in at least three provinces (Iraqi Kurdistan)
Often deported during wars in Iraq

Iran-Iraq war in 1980's:
- Anti-Kurdish policies
  - Mass murder of hundreds of thousands of civilians
- Destruction of thousands of villages
- Deportation to Southern and Central Iraq
Situation of the Kurdish community in Iraq

Campaign against Kurds: Anfal
- Led to destruction of two thousand villages and death of 50,000 to 100,000 civilians

2003:
- American troops walk into Iraq
- Welcomed by Kurds
- Suppression by Iraqis was ended
- Kurds entered national politics in Baghdad
- "Kurdistan Regional Government" (KRG) allowed

Kurdish and Arabic are both considered official languages today
Situation of the Kurdish Community in Syria
Situation of the Kurdish community in Syria

• Make up about 10% of Syrian population
• Largest ethnic minority in Syria
• Kurdish human rights activists are mistreated and persecuted
• No Kurdish political parties allowed
• Suppression:
  – Bans on language use
  – Registration of children with Kurdish names refused
Situation of the Kurdish community in Syria

– Kurdish names replaced with Arabic names
– Businesses which have a non-Arabic name are not allowed
– Kurdish private schools are prohibited
– Kurdish books forbidden
– The Kurdish flag banned
Situation of the Kurdish community in Syria

2006:

- Around 300,000 Kurds were trapped in Syria when Syria denied Kurds Syrian nationality
- No social rights
- Planning to grant citizenship, although changes are seen as threat to control of the country
Situation of the Kurdish Community in Turkey

Status of the Language in Turkey
Situation of the Kurdish community in Turkey

• 20% of the Kurdish population lives in Turkey (14 million)

• Largest minority group in Turkey

• The majority of ethnic Kurds live in east and southeast Turkey
Situation of the Kurdish community in Turkey

• Turkey's treatment of its citizens of Kurdish ethnicity has been a frequent subject of international criticism

• There were resistance movements which included both peaceful political activities for basic civil rights for Kurds within Turkey and also a violent armed rebellion for a separate state called "Kurdistan"
Status of the language in Turkey

• Kurds have largely resisted assimilation policies of the government. The main strategy for assimilation has been suppression of the Kurdish language.

• Before August 2002, the Turkish government placed severe restrictions on the use of Kurdish, prohibiting the language in education and broadcast media.
Status of the language in Turkey

• The Kurdish alphabet is still not recognized in Turkey, and use of the Kurdish names containing letters X, W, Q, which do not exist in the Turkish alphabet, is prohibited.

• In March 2006, Turkey allowed private television channels to begin to broadcast Kurdish language programs.
Status of the language in Turkey

• However, the Turkish government said that they must avoid showing children's cartoons or educational programs that teach the Kurdish language and can only broadcast for 45 minutes a day or four hours a week.

• The programs must carry Turkish subtitles.

• State-run Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) started its 24-hour Kurdish television station on 01 January 2009 with the motto of “we live under the same sky”
Situation of the Kurdish Community in Germany
Situation of the Kurdish community in Germany

• Approximately 700,000 – 800,000 Kurdish people live in Germany

• Main facts for immigration are discrimination and political persecution

• Economic migrants or asylum seekers
Situation of the Kurdish community in Germany

• Kurdish television programs

• Kurdish schools which are financed by private institutions

• Institutions where Kurdish artists/musicians, scientists or just normal people can meet each other
Situation of the Kurdish community in Germany

- Reasons: to strengthen their Kurdish culture → even if they live in a country (Germany) where they are confronted with a different culture
Language

• The older generation speaks his/her dialect or a mixture of the dialect and German

• Communication difficulties → they try to circumscribe the words

• The younger generation speaks German
Problems

• Media → creates a bad image about Kurdish people

• Only talks about them when there are fights and riots

• German public → has often a negative image of Kurds because of the media
Ethnic identification
Ethnic identification

- Distribution of different communities → difficult aspect for forming a unitary identity
- Important aspect of identity is language → a unitary language does not exist
- Many Kurdish people do not speak Kurdish → e.g. Turkey
- The language is divided into different dialects → problem of understanding
Ethnic identification

• They do not have a unified writing system
• Lacking of the language because of the different dialects and the spreading
• Nevertheless their self-perception as ethnicity is very strong
• The believe in a unified history
• Solidarity
Is Kurdish a standard language or not? What do you think?
References

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