

Spreading of the Kurdish Language Dialects and Writing Systems Used in the Middle East

Givi Tavadze

Vakhushti Bagrationi Institute of Geography, Ivane Javakhisvili Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia

(Presented by Academy Member Revaz Gachechiladze)

ABSTRACT. The Kurdish language belongs to the Indo-Iranian linguistic group, which in turn is a part of the Indo-European linguistic family. Living for centuries in a vast area of the Middle East, where harsh physical-geographic and political environment prevailed, was one of the main causes of division of the Kurdish pra-language into several distinct dialects. These dialects continued to subdivide, which resulted in the appearance of distinguished subdialects. Besides the three main dialect groups (Northern or Kurmanji; Central or Sorani and Southern Kurdish), there are two more languages or dialects – Zaza (Zazaki) and Gorani. They are used in the remotest parts of the Kurdish ethnic region and a number of western and Kurdish specialists even consider them as not related to the Kurdish language. However, the speakers of Zaza and Gorani consider themselves Kurdish. Three dialects developed their own literature and two of them – Kurmanji and Sorani – are competing for superiority. This competition became even more complicated as both of them use different writing systems. Besides, the competition does not occur between the groups living in different states, but in the Kurdish area with quasi-statehood, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which was achieved for the first time in the newest history. Such a competition complicates the consolidation of the largest minority in the Middle East. © 2019 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

Key words: Kurmanji, Sorani, Southern Kurdish, Gorani, Zaza

The Kurdish people live in the Middle East, in the central area of the region, and are the autochthonous population. The Kurdish/Kurdistan ethnic region occupies about 350 000 km² [1], which comprises parts of modern Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq. Besides the ethnic region, an important Kurdish-inhabited area in the Middle East is the area along the Iran-Turkmenistan border, the northern part of North Khorasan and Rezavi Khorasan *ostans* in Iran. The Kurds live in big cities of the Middle East as well and there are

large Kurdish diasporas in some other Middle Eastern, post-Soviet, European and North American states.

There is contradictory information about the number of Kurdish population in the Middle East, which is estimated as being between 25 and 40 million. According to some data, there were 12-13 million Kurds in Turkey at the end of 20th century. The same source confirms that 5-6 million Kurds lived in Iran, 3.5 in Iraq and 0.8 in Syria in the same period [1: 308].

Urmia Lake (in Iran) borders the Kurdish ethnic region from the East; Al Jazeera (in Syria and Iraq) from the South; Eastern Taurus Ridge (in Turkey) from the West. The northern border of the Kurdish ethnic area in Turkish Eastern Anatolia is rather vague and its physical-geographical boundary is not clear.

In Turkey the majority of Kurds live in the provinces (*ils*) of South-Eastern Anatolia and Eastern Anatolia regions, where they usually represent the overwhelming or comparative majority of the population. In addition, a part of Kurdish population lives in Central Anatolia Region and in urban centres.

In Iran the main Kurdish-inhabited area is the western part of the state, mostly the provinces (*ostans*) bordering Turkey, northern part of Iraq (Kurdistan Region). Some Kurds were resettled in Iran's Khorasan region in 17th century.

In Iraq the Kurds reside compactly in its northeastern part, where they achieved an actual autonomy ruled by the Kurdistan Regional Government (the four governorates/muhafazas of Duhok, Arbil, Al-Sulaimaniyah and Halabja comprise around 47 thousand square kilometres).

The Kurds populated northeastern and northwestern parts of Syria, but after their success in the war against the terrorists of the "ISIL", they took over almost the whole Al-Hassakah province, and the northern parts of Raqqa and Aleppo provinces, where they established the de-facto autonomous region called "Rojava" [3].

The Kurdish language belongs to the Indo-Iranian linguistic group, which in turn is a part of the Indo-European linguistic family. Living for centuries in a vast area of the Middle East, where harsh physical-geographical and political environment prevailed, was one of the main causes of division of the Kurdish pra-language into several distinct dialects or dialect groups: Northern (Kurmanji), Central (Sorani) and Southern. There are two more Kurdish languages: Zazaki and Gorani, which are not considered as Kurdish by

many European and Kurdish philologists, but people who speak these languages believe that they are Kurds [2]. So, we can conclude that the Kurdish language is divided into "3+1+1" parts.

Despite the fact that the major part of the Kurdish Ethnic Region is mountainous and the contact with the distant Kurdish-inhabited areas is limited, the people had to live in two or more confronting empires during almost the whole period of their history and had neither physical nor political force to unite and gain independence. Due to all these factors, the people speaking the same language were locked in their own living areas and many cultural characteristics (language, religion etc.) became regionally different.

The Central (Sorani) and Southern dialect groups, as well as Gorani, are spread in Iraq and Iran. The Northern dialect group (Kurmanji) is the most widely spread. It is spoken in the *ils* of Turkish South-Eastern Anatolia and Eastern Anatolia, in the whole Kurdish-inhabited area of Syria and in the Erbil province of Iraq. Besides, the mentioned dialect is spoken by South Caucasus Kurdish diasporas, while Zazaki is used only in Turkey. The most numerous South Caucasian Kurdish diaspora lives in Armenia – about 50-60 thousand people at the end of 20th century [1: 308].

Kurmanji is the most widely used dialect, which is spoken by most of Turkey's Kurds (about 10 million people), all the Syrian Kurds (maybe about 1-1.5 million people), a part of Iraqi Kurdish society (about 1-1.5 million people) and a part of Iranian Kurds (about a million people), including the Kurd society of the North-Eastern Iran. Kurmanji is spoken by the South Caucasian Kurdish diasporas and it is spread in such urban centres of the Middle East as Istanbul and Damascus. Besides, Kurmanji is spoken by some Kurdish diasporas in the European Union (France, Germany, Sweden). The dialect is spoken by about 65% of the Kurdish Ethnos [2.p.31].

Kurmanji is divided into two groups of subdialects:

1. Badini is used in the Erbil Governorate (Iraq), Hakkary province (Turkey) and in the north-west of West Azerbaijan province (Iran), around the town of Urmia and to its north.

2. The second group of subdialects is further subdivided into: “Central Kurmanji” (spread in: Mardin, Batman, Diyarbakir *ils*, Al Hassaka Governorate of Syria and Yazidi-populated Nineveh Governorate’s Sinjar district of Iraq, east of Mosul), “West Kurmanji” (spread in: Syria, north of Aleppo; Gaziantep, Adiyaman, Kahramanmaras and Malatya *ils*), “North Kurmanji” (spread in: Tuncel, Bingol, Mus, Agri, Erzurum and Kars *ils*, also in Iran, north of Urmia Lake and Kurdish diasporas of Georgia and Armenia).

Kurmanji is spoken by the Yazidi religious group, who consider themselves as a separate ethnic group – Yazidis.

Sorani is only spread in Iraq and Iran. It is estimated that Sorani texts were written 200 years later than Kurmanji and Gorani texts, however, Sorani gained superiority as a main literary dialect group. Despite the fact that Kurmanji has passed through its “renaissance”, Sorani is still a major literary dialect group of journalism, radio, education and administration. The superiority is supported by the fact that Sorani is used in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Like Kurmanji, Sorani is divided into four subdialects: “Babani”, which is used in Sulaymaniyah (Iraq) and the nearby territory; “Hewlery” is also used in Iraq, Erbil Governorate, near the town of Rawanduz and its vicinity; “Mukriyani” is spoken in Hamadan *ostan*, Iran, in the so-called “Mukriyan Region”; “Ardalani” is spoken in Iran, in the town of Sanandaj and in the nearby territory. According to this information, the first two subdialects are used in Iraq, and the last two in Iran. However, despite all the above-mentioned factors, the subdialects used within one state are not similar, while “Babani” and “Ardalani” show significant likeness as they are

northern, and “Mukriyani” and “Hewlery” as they are southern. “Babani” and “Mukriyani” are standard sources for the basis of Sorani.

Like Sorani the South Kurdish dialect group is spread only in Iran and Iraq. This dialect is not as active as North Kurdish or Central Kurdish, but it is still used by social media and journalism. South Kurdish has four subdialects: “Kermanshahi”, which is spread in the city of Kermanshah and the surrounding area; “Garrusi”, which is used in the town of Bijar and its vicinity; “Laki” – spoken in the southern part of Kermanshah and Ilam *ostans* and in the northern part of Lorestan *ostan*; “Feyli” is spread in some parts of Ilam and Kermanshah *ostans* and in the southern part of Iraqi Kurdistan.

The views regarding the naming of Gorani are divided. Despite the fact that by some western and Kurdish philologists Gorani is not considered to be a Kurdish language, people who speak it believe that they are Kurds. The language is spoken in the south-western part of Kurdistan *ostan*, Iran and in the Halabja district of Iraq. Gorani has the oldest literature of all *Kurdish languages*, which is dated to 16th century. It was the official language of Ardalan principality – a semi-state Kurdish monarchy in the Middle Ages, which was a vassal of the Safavid Persian Empire. Many Gorani speakers are followers of “Yarsanism”, a branch of Shia Islam. Its religious texts are written in Gorani.

Another Kurdish “language” Zazaki has various names and some specialists do not consider it as Kurdish, but like Gorani speakers, Zazaki speakers also claim that they are Kurds. About 2-3 million people in Turkey speak Zazaki. The language is divided into three subdialects: northern, central and southern. The northern subdialect is spread in Tuncel and Erzincan *ils*, central – in Bingol and Diyarbakir *ils*, southern – in the Diyarbakir *il* and in one part of Urfa *il*. From the 1980s, Zazaki speaking diasporas started to develop the literary language and create dictionaries, libraries, journalism, TV and social media, as well as internet sites.

The Kurdish language dialects use two writing systems: the Kurds residing in Turkey and Syria use the Latin alphabet, while the majority of Kurds living in Iraq and Iran employ a modified Persian-Arabic script. This fact hinders the unification process of the Kurdish ethnos, as the absence of one common alphabet creates additional difficulties, because even if a person decides to learn a new dialect, he/she will have to learn a new script.

In the course of history, Kurds tried to use various writing systems. From the 15th century to the 1920s, they used the Persian-Arabic writing system. Some Kurds (basically Armenian Kurds and Yazidis) had an attempt to use the Armenian alphabet in the 1920s. Most Kurds began to use the Latin alphabet in 1927, which was caused by the alphabet reform in Turkey performed by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Georgian and Armenian Kurdish diasporas tried to use the Cyrillic script in 1945, but this idea was deemed to be a failure and it has become even less actual since 1991, when Kurds and Yazidis started to emigrate to Western Europe.

The Latin alphabet in Turkey and Syria and Persian-Arabic in Iraq and Iran were established at the end of the 1920s.

The dispute related to the issues of choosing one common alphabet began in the 1960s, though the situation appears most complicated in Iraq. There are still two main positions “pro-Latin” and “pro-Persian-Arabic”. The first position is supported by Kurmanji speakers, as the Latin alphabet is used for this dialect group. It is supported by the Kurds living in Turkey and Syria, some Iranian Kurds as well as South Caucasian and a part of the EU diasporas. They constitute about three-fourths of the entire Kurdish Ethnos. The other opinion is supported by a smaller group:

the majority of Iraqi and Iranian Kurds and a part of Iranian and Iraqi diasporas residing in Europe and North America.

In 2012, 471 Kurdish writers, poets, actors and teachers signed a petition which was sent to the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament in an appeal to adopt the Persian-Arabic alphabet as the official script for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, but it remained unanswered, as another petition was compiled to annul the first one. The other petition was signed by 472 Kurmanji speaking public figures, so the problem still remains unsolved. [2: 31].

The role of Kurmanji grew due to constant military and political activities of Turkey’s Kurds and a sharp rise in the similar activities of Syrian Kurds beginning from 2012, when they formed military groups and established the de-facto autonomy. As the role of Kurmanji rose, so did the importance of Badini (Iraqi subdialect of Kurmanji). Besides, many Sorani speakers considered that the Latin alphabet is easier for their dialect. On the other hand, a large number of Sorani speakers, who use the Persian-Arabic alphabet, felt that they can lose their superiority, which Sorani has had for many decades.

Conclusion. As the Kurdish language has many branches and as it is spread on a large territory, it becomes difficult for speakers to agree on one main dialect. Although Kurmanji is spoken by most representatives of the ethnos, Sorani has its political superiorities and both dialect groups have their own rich literature. Besides that, they use different alphabets, which makes their competition implacable and in spite of the fact that other dialects are not as active, they also have their own smaller, though significant positions.

საზოგადოებრივი გეოგრაფია

ქურთული ენის დიალექტებისა და დამწერლობების გავრცელება ახლო აღმოსავლეთში

გ. თავაძე

ივანე ჯავახიშვილის სახ. თბილისის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი, ვახუშტი ბაგრატიონის გეოგრაფიის ინსტიტუტი

(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის რ. გაჩეჩილაძის მიერ)

ქურთული ენა შედის ინდო-ევროპული ოჯახის, ინდო-ირანულ ჯგუფში. ასწლეულების მანძილზე რთულ ფიზიკურ-გეოგრაფიულ და პოლიტიკურ პირობებში ცხოვრებამ გამოიწვია გეოგრაფიულად ერთმანეთთან დაშორებულ რაიონებში ენის დაყოფა ერთმანეთისგან მნიშვნელოვნად განსხვავებულ დიალექტებად. ეს დიალექტები თავადაც იყოფიან ერთმანეთისგან ნაკლებად, მაგრამ განსხვავებულ ქვე-დიალექტებად. ასევე, სამ მთავარ დიალექტთან (ქურმანჯი, სორანი, ფეჰლევანი) ერთად, არსებობს კიდევ ორი (გორანი, ზაზაკი), რომლებიც ეთნორეგიონის ერთმანეთისგან აბსოლუტურად დაშორებულ რაიონებში გამოიყენება. როგორც დასავლელი, ასევე ქურთი სპეციალისტების ნაწილი არ თვლის ამ ენებს ქურთულის მონათესავედ, მაგრამ ამ ენებზე მოსაუბრე ადამიანთა ჯგუფები თავს უკავშირებენ ქურთ ეთნოსს. ამ ხუთი ენიდან სამს გააჩნია მდიდარი ლიტერატურა, ხოლო ორი მათგანი - ქურმანჯი და სორანი ერთმანეთს ებრძვის უპირატესობის მოსაპოვებლად. ამ „დაპირისპირებას“ უფრო ამძაფრებს ის, რომ ორივე ენა იყენებს სხვადასხვა დამწერლობას და „დაპირისპირება“ მიმდინარეობს არა ორი სუვერენული სახელმწიფოს უმცირესობებს შორის, არამედ თანამედროვე ისტორიაში პირველი, კვაზი-სახელმწიფოებრივი, ქურთული წარმონაქმნის - ერაყის ქურთისტანის ავტონომიაში. ეს პროცესი დამატებით წინაღობებს ქმნის მსოფლიოს ყველაზე მრავალრიცხოვანი ეთნიკური უმცირესობის შემდგომი კონსოლიდაციის გზაზე.

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