“Why do I learn “my” language?”
Languages and National Identities among Kurds in the UK

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Kurds
Alphabet

1. Latin (mainly used in Turkey and Syria);
2. Cyrillic (in the former Soviet Union);
3. Arabic (in Iraq and Iran).

- Kurdish appeared in writing in a version of the Persian alphabet during the 7th century AD.

- The first well-known Kurdish poet was Ali Hariri (1425-1495). Between 1920 and 1929 Kurdish was written with a version of the Armenian alphabet in Soviet Armenia (Hassanpour, 1992).
Language Policy

• The linguistic policy in Iran on Kurdish is described as “a case of restricted and controlled tolerance” (Sheyholislami, 2012:19) as the use of Kurdish is not totally banned but restricted in publications and education.

• Kurdish is an official language in Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq.

• In Syria, Kurdish media is available, but the language is not used in public schools (however, after the uprisings Kurds are establishing language schools)

• In Turkey, after the nationalist founding of the Turkish Republic, the status of Kurdish deteriorated and was officially accepted as a “nonexistent” language. This is changing...
Fieldwork
Nation and discourse

‘A national culture is a discourse, a way to construct meanings which influence and organise both our actions and our perceptions of ourselves. National cultures construct identities by creating a meaning of ‘the nation’, with which we can identify; these are contained in stories that are told about the nation, in memories which link its present to its past and in the perceptions of it that are constructed’ (Hall 1996:613).
Mimicry

[...] ‘colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which “appropriates” the Other as it visualizes power’. (Bhabha 1984: 126)
Ambivalence

‘It is from this area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double that my instances of colonial imitation come. What they all share is a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same, but not quite) does not merely "rupture" the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a “partial” presence. By “partial” I mean both “incomplete” and “virtual”. (Bhabha 1984:126)
Discourse, identity and nation

Cillia et al. (1999:158) observe five semantic macro areas that relate to the Austrian identity and nation:

1. the idea of a “homo austriacus” and a “homo externus”,
2. the narrative of a collective political history,
3. the discursive construction of a common culture,
4. the discursive construction of a collective present and future,
5. the discursive construction of a “national body”.
Data analysis

The step-by-step procedure that I have employed, based on (Gumperz 2001), in my qualitative analysis could be summarised as follows:

• ethnographic immersion where I gained insights of the communicative context;
• determining the recurrent patterns in relation to language and identity;
• interviewing the participants in order to find out about their interpretations of my observations;
• transcription of the recorded material paying particular attention to code, prosody, lexical choice, paralinguistic cues so on.
The model: “Big-I” and “small-i” identities (Yilmaz, 2016)
Results

Four micro-semantic areas emerged in my data in connection to the construction of a distinct Kurdish national identity and its interrelationship with language learning.

(1) “almost the same, but not quite”
(2) distinct culture, history and identity;
(3) reconnection with roots/ past- and not feeling like a “bastard”;
(4) pressure in the UK context: “if you call yourself a Kurd why do you speak in Turkish”;
(5) language as cure for “pathologies”.
1 “Almost the same, but not quite”

Yıldız

Niye “ji davîk bûn” {KR} diyoruz {TR}? Yani niye dünyaya geldi demiyoruz? {TR}

<Why do we say “ji davîk bûn”? Why don’t we say “dünyaya geldi” came to this world/was born?>

Mikail

Diğer dillerde öyle {TR}… Öyle qullanılýor...

Yani Türkçedede diğer dillerdede … öyledir … {TR}

<It is same as other languages. That’s how it’s used. In Turkish, as well as in other languages it’s the same. it’s a pattern>

Mikail

Yani qalýttı {TR} <It is a rule/pattern>

Axasîn, peyîvîn, qisî kirîn, qazîn {KR}

((synonyms of “to talk”))
2 Distinct Culture and Identity

Mikail

Kêfa min ji londra re të ok? I like London. Kêfa min ji londra re
naye. I don’t like London. Tê naye.. Tê naye.. Ez ji londra
hezdikim {KR} <I like London ok? [repeats in English] I like
London… I don’t like London ((repeats in English)) I don’t like
London. Like don’t like. Like don’t like. I love London>

Mahmut


{KR}

<Londraaa? Teacher Londra?. Teacher London ra. I believe…
Because in Turkish they say Londra. Ours is London. London>

Mikail

Te go ci Mahmut? {KR}

<What did you say Mahmut?>

Mahmut

Pirsa min ew bû… Te kir Londra {KR}

<My question was. You made it Londra.>

Mikail

Aha London. Ez ji London e hezdikim. Kêfa min ji Londone re
naye- tê naye {KR}


Mahmut

Em dibejin “nate”… ((Syrian Kurds)) “te”.” nate”… {KR}

<We ((Syrian Kurds)) say “nate” “te”… “nate”…
3 Reconnecting with roots

Birgul  Senin için Kürt kimliği ne ifade ediyor?

Gülbahar  Kök yani ... kökenlerin yani ...büyük babanın geldiği yer...

...yaşam şekli, konuşduğu dil. Yalnızlık ve isolation

düşüncelerinden uzak tutuyor. Hani piç olmamamak gibi bişey

[laughs]. Daha çok roots. Dil kimliğinin büyük bi parçası ama illaki dil

olmadanda kimlik muhafaza edilemiyo diye bişey yok. Kendimden

biliyorum [uhm]... Kürt korucularını düşünduğum zaman sadece

Kürtçe biliyorlar ama ben onları Kürt olarak düşünemiyorum.

Hani kriter değil (dil) {TR} (Interview with Gülbahar)

Birgul  What does Kurdish identity mean to you?

Gülbahar  Well it's roots ... your roots ... where your grandfather

comes from/ his way of life/ his language. It keeps you away from

feelings of loneliness and isolation. It is like not being a bastard

[laughs] ... More like roots... Language is a big part of identity but

it doesn’t mean you can not protect your identity. I know this from

myself [uhm] ... When I think about village guards, they speak

Kurdish but I don’t see them as Kurds. Well, (language) is not a

criterion. (Interview with Gülbahar)
4 Language as the Cure for Pathologies

Interview with Nihat

1. Birgul: So have you learned how to read and write? In Kurdish? How does it feel?

2. Nihat: It’s a great feeling because I have learned the (language) completely. I learned the missing parts. I have seen I have learned, I believe. Naturally this has made me feel great as I have shown myself that I have done something about my language which belongs to me. Completed the parts which were missing. Also something that belongs to you, something that you should normally know you haven’t learned due to political reasons... and
5 “Why can’t I speak my language?”
Pressure in the UK

I realised the **importance of literacy** after coming to Britain. The reason for this is the multicultural multilingual environment. This actually means **there is no problem about learning Kurdish.** It’s just the opposite, **this is richness.** For example I don’t **know my language**.. and as far as I know there are more than 380 different languages in London apart from those small colonial languages.. these are officially recognised. Councils send leaflets in Kurdish but I **don’t know my language** and **this hits you.** This kind of questioning… **I have a language and I don’t know it**
Elif: You know even foreign people in certain places you say I am Kurdish.

"If you call yourself Kurdish why do you speak in Turkish"? I am like I speak in English and that doesn’t make me English, does it? [loudly]

Birgul: Is it English people?

Elif: Yeah, even those people/ did it in certain meetings [...] I had that quite a lot. [...] ‘you have to speak in Kurdish in order for us to call you Kurdish’?

[...]

Elif: I speak in English then call me English, could you? [loudly] Do I look like English? [...] you know because you speak in a language that doesn’t make you ... this is one of the points I can’t stand. People don’t understand. Even Kurds don’t understand [frustrated]. Kurds from southern Kurdistan. Do you understand? (Interview with Elif)
Conclusion

Although there is a desire for unification of Kurdish language and identity, the historical processes Kurds underwent in each region, namely, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey, the concept of “nation” is rather problematic and “ambivalent” (Bhabha 1984).

While the data analysis shows that Kurds argue that they are different from the Arabs, Persians and the Turks, there is an ambivalent dialectic relationship with these identities too.