



## Article

International Journal of Kurdish Studies

6 (1), pp. 35 – 51

<http://ijoks.com>

### Kurmanji and Zazaki Dialects: Comparative Study on their Phonetics

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Received: Nov 30, 2019

Reviewed: Dec 04, 2019

Accepted: Dec 04, 2019

#### Abstract

Kurmanji and Zazaki are dialects of the theoretical language known as Kurdish. The various Kurdish dialects affirm the dialectical richness of the word and its sound, and show no indication of a decline in the spoken language. In general, the phoneme is thought to indicate the proximity or remoteness of language or its dialects – Kurdish is considered to date far back into antiquity. The present study is divided into three parts. It aims to reveal some phonetic characteristics of Kurmanji and the older dialect, Zazaki. The first part deals with the actual sounds of the phonemes; the second part is on the interchangeability of sounds in the Zazaki of different regions; and the third part compares Kurmanji to Zazaki, making use of modern linguistic resources in systems of language.

**Keywords:** Kurmanji, Zazaki, Kurdish phonetics, Structuralism, Sorani, Kurdish Dialects

#### Recommended citation:

Karacan, H. (2020). Kurmanji and Zazaki Dialects: Comparative Study on their Phonetics.

*International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 6 (1), 35 – 51

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.21600/ijoks.653812>

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## Introduction

Structuralist theory, attributed to the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) is accepted as being a language system. As a structuralist, de Saussure distinguishes between what he calls *langue* and *parole* (language and word, that is, unarticulated structures and speaking). He himself as a linguist focusses on *langue* rather than *parole*. *Langue* and *parole* would later be reinterpreted as *signifier* and the *signified*, and in particular the literary theorist Roland Barthes (1915-1980) in working within the science of semiotics, and thus focussing on signs, the signified, would again find de Saussure's structuralist distinction to be crucial. From here, when reducing structuralism down to its various elements, we find that the smallest element spoken is a sound unit that the science of phonetics calls a phoneme, and that although we may be able to pronounce and relate to 200 sound units, speakers use only 40 such elements for thousands of words (Kiran, 1996: 27).

Each word or sound entity has its own unique root meaning, and in the Kurdish dialects we see that each sound entity has its own essential sense – or unrelated senses. Ultimately, the unit of sense that we call language, is then formed by bringing together words within the language system structure. This unit of sense delivers a message. It should, however, be borne in mind that as I.A. Richards wrote:

Language, well used, is a *completion* and does what the intuitions of sensation by themselves cannot do. Words are the meeting points at which regions of experience which can never combine in sensation or intuition, come together. They are the occasion and the means of that growth which is the mind's endless endeavour to order itself. . . Language is no mere signalling system (*The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. London: Oxford University Press, pp. 130-131).

Sounds and words in Kurdish dialects are not fixed. A further glance at Kurdish dialects also tells us that actual vocabulary is retained, but that the same vocabulary is used in different ways as time progresses. Thus, we have ended up with an extensive vocabulary to say, for example, the “sense of smell”: *vinî, zincî, pirrnike, pîrnos, poz, vinike, difn, bêvil, kepoz, lut, birnax*; or, we can mean “catarrh” using the words, *zekem, bapêş, persî, şobe, asirm, zikam, peta, miqaw, nezle, baper*; or, we can use the following words to say “root”: *kok, reh, bineke, resen, rêl, rîşe, retewe, binetu, rek, binye, reya, rîçik* (Veroj, Uçaman, 2002: 146).

Sometimes the way a word is voiced, that is uttered, changes, and the change in voicing causes a new word to evolve; this manner of change is an important feature of Kurdish. For example, we have the word *kin*, that becomes also *nik*, *lêr / rêl*, *befr / berf*, *pirasî / parsû* – and there are many more such examples to be found. Moreover, as said above, with the emergence of structured language, sounds become subject to change in terms of how they are voiced and word formation itself can be influenced. As a result of such changes in voicing, differing language structures come to the fore.

A sound is a sensory perception of vibrations, which is to say that we perceive sound through our sense organs. Phonetics researches the physics of utterance (Oğur, 2014: 35). Words are uttered when sounds merge. Every vibration adds meaning to language, as well as creating differentiation between the words. For example, the vibrations in our mouth and throat may be distinguished or described as languagal sounds. When we alter the ultimate vibrations of the words, the meaning may not be affected, or scarcely affected, but when we change the initial vibrations, the meaning of the word will be different. For example, when changing the words *roj* and *rozruz* – the "j" and "z" sound of *roj*, or the "o," "û," "u" of *rozruz* – the meaning is not changed. However, if we attach meaning to words such as *pîr*, *bîr*, *vîr*, *tîr*, *nîr*, *jîr*, *jar*, *war*, *mar*, *har*, we will not understand the new vibrations.

Thus, the aim of phonology is to answer such questions as "what changes sounds and effects differentiation in meaning; how elements that cause differences shift; and, how vibrations coincide with the establishment of vocabulary (Rifat, 2000: 44). It is at this point that phonetics emerges in a field of grammatical study known as antagonism.

### **1. The Sounds in Zazaki and Kurmanji**

The vibrations in Indo-European languages ring clear and loud (Ward, 2006: 249). Kurmanji and Zazaki likewise have strong vibrations. Every utterance becomes meaningful according to the physical variations and tone in the phsionomy of the speaker. In recent times both Zazaki and Kurmanji are written down and recorded in a 31-letter adaptation of the Latin alphabet. It is worthy of note that another major Kurdish dialect, Sorani, uses the Arabic alphabet which is closer to being a phonetic representation, and appeals to a more élite readership.

The additional letters of the Latin alphabet include: h (hhê, hhêl), x / ğ (ğar, ğele), and there are eight vowels and twenty-three consonants.

Vowels: a, e, ê, i, î, o, û, u.

The vowels are described as being “long” or “short.”

The long vowels are: a, ê, î, o, û.

The first letter of the alphabet is the phoneme A-a. Both Zazaki and Kurmanji read "a" straight, long and wide. "A" comes out of the larynx cavity with ease – without tongue, jaw, tooth or lip contact (Uçaman, 2008: 16). See below comparative table of Zazaki / Kurmanji:

Zazaki                      Kurmanji

|       |       |
|-------|-------|
| Aw    | av    |
| Asmên | asman |
| Adir  | agir  |

**Û-û:** This letter comes out of the back of the throat and is read round, narrow and long. A few examples are given below:

Zazaki                      Kurmanji

|       |     |
|-------|-----|
| Dûr   | dûr |
| Mû    | mû  |
| Hûrdî | hûr |

**O-o:** This letter comes from the back of the throat and is read long, round and wide; it can also come before and after other vowels.

Zazaki                      Kurmanji

|       |       |
|-------|-------|
| Ox    | ox    |
| Oxir  | oxir  |
| Lorik | lorik |

**Î-î:** This letter is formed at the front of the tongue and is read in a long, narrow and flat manner.

Zazaki                      Kurmanji

|      |      |
|------|------|
| Îsot | îsot |
| Mîr  | mîr  |

Sîr            sîr

**Ê-ê:** It is formed on the front part of the tongue and is read long and flat.

Zazaki Kurmanji

Êre            êvar

Êzim           êzing

Mêrdek        mêrik

The short vowels are: e, i, u.

These letters are read the same way in both Zazaki and Kurmanji.

**E-e:** This letter is read plainly and briefly. It may come before or after a consonant.

Kurmanji      Zazaki

Erd            erd

Dev            fek

Ser            ser

**I-i:** This letter is read the same way in both Zazaki and Kurmanji. It is read straight, short and narrow.

Zazaki Kurmanji

Çirê           çima

Birik           birek

Bize           bizin

**U-u:** This letter is round and narrow. Words starting with this letter are few in number.

Zazaki Kurmanji

Kulav           kulav

Kulm           kulm

Xulam           xulam

Consonants: b, c, ç, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, m, n, p, q, r, s, ş, t, v, w, x, y, z.

The consonants can be divided into four parts according to their mouth exit.

a) Consonants that come in contact with the lower lip and the upper lip in contact with each other: b, f, m, p, v, w.

Zazaki                      Kurmanji

|      |        |
|------|--------|
| Berz | bilind |
| Ferd | fer    |
| Mar  | mar    |
| Pel  | pel    |
| Veng | vala   |
| Wişk | hişk   |

b) Consonants resulting from the contact of the teeth with each other: d, l, n, s, t, z.

Zazaki                      Kurmanji

|      |       |
|------|-------|
| Dar  | dar   |
| Lehî | laser |
| Name | nav   |
| Say  | sêv   |
| Tarî | tarî  |
| Zuwa | zuha  |

c) Consonants formed by the contact of the front part of the stem and the tongue: c, ç, ş, j, y

Zazaki                      Kurmanji

|         |         |
|---------|---------|
| Ca      | cî      |
| Çem     | çem     |
| Şew     | şev     |
| Jahr    | jahr    |
| Yewndes | yanzdeh |

d) The vowels from the throat: h, q, x

Zazaki                      Kurmanji

|     |     |
|-----|-----|
| Hak | hêk |
|-----|-----|

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Qelew                      qelew  
Xençer                      xençer

e) Consonants from the distance: g, k

Zazaki                      Kurmanji

Ga                              ga  
Kehan                      kevn

Voiced "r," "rr" actually report motion – "r," "rr" are in both Zazaki and Kurmanji. In general, "rr" is read between two vowels or when used after a vowel. Some examples are:

Zazaki                      Kurmanji

Bar                              bar  
Rem                              rev  
Rûven                      rûn  
Pirr                              pirr  
Virr                              virr/derew  
Birmayîş                      bîrrîn

(Kurdo, 1991: 21, Bedirxan & Lescot, 2009: 4)

**2. Change of some sounds according to regions in Zazakî**

Kurmanji is stable where words that alternatively take the sounds of "b" and "v" in Zazaki vary according to region . Some examples are:

Pîran                      Dersim                      Çewlig  
  
Hesab                      hesav                      hesav  
Kitab                      kitav                      kitav  
Yewbin                      zuvin                      yobîn/juvin  
Xirabe                      xirave                      xirawe

(Yilmaz, 2015, Verroj & Uçaman, 2002).

Zazaki pronunciation variants are the letters "z," "j," "y" and "c." Celadet Ali Bedirxan writes: "There are in essence two types of Zazaki. The distinctive sounds and rules are self-evident.

As regards sound, "j" is seen in the Siverek vernacular, but not in Kurmanji. In some words, "j" is not used with the Palu – "z" or "c" being used instead:

| <u>Zazaki</u>  | <u>Palu</u>         |
|----------------|---------------------|
| Mij/miz        | Zewac/zewaz         |
| Nêzdî/nijdî    | Yewbin/jewbin/zuvîn |
| Mizgîn/mijdane | Yewna/jewna         |
| Roj/roz/ruc    | Ziwa/jiwa           |
| Berzîn/berjîn  | Jew/yew             |

(Bedirxan, 1998: 23)

Voiced to unvoiced is common in Zazaki. Words that take the "k" and "ç" in the Dêrsim vernacular and other regions vary.

| <u>Pîran/Çermug</u> | <u>Dêrsim</u> |
|---------------------|---------------|
| Keye                | çeye keyna    |
| Çeynakeber/ber      | çeber Kêf çêf |

The voiced "ş" used in Zazaki's other regions is pronounced as "s" in the Dêrsim vernacular, as for example:

|         |               |         |           |         |
|---------|---------------|---------|-----------|---------|
| Weş/wes | Derguş/dergus | Şeş/ses | Şima/sima | Şew/sew |
|---------|---------------|---------|-----------|---------|

The consonants "c" and "g" are interchangeable in other Zazaki vernaculars. Examples are:

Gan/can  
 Geno (girewotiş)/cêno  
 Bigîr/bicîgêrayene/cêreyane

“a” > “o”: This is a sound event that occurs when a flat tone of voice, known as rounding, becomes a round voice – a common sound event in Persian and Zazaki. For example, the word "bread" in Persian and Zazaki *nan*, can be pronounced as "non" and "nun" in daily conversation (Oğur, 2014: 51). This occurs not only with Zazaki vernaculars but also with Kurmanji and Zazaki as “a,” “û,” “o” and “u.” Examples are:

|                    |                   |                         |
|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Çar/çor            | Çend/çond         | Manga/monga(moga/munga) |
| Maker/moker/mûnker | Giran/giron/girûn | Panc/ponc/ponj/pûnc     |
| Varan/varon/varûn  |                   |                         |

Zazaki root words often add suffixes to indicate whether or not the words are masculine or feminine. Especially feminine words are written in this way. When these suffixes are encountered, we should take care not to confuse the simple form with the affixes.

#### Zazaki                      Kurmanji

|                    |       |
|--------------------|-------|
| Dar/dare           | dar   |
| Dew/dewe           | gund  |
| Şew/şewe           | şev   |
| Biz/bize           | bizin |
| Her/here (mankere) | ker   |
| Par/pare           | par   |

As mentioned above, the sounds "l," and "r" in Kurdish dialects are interchangeable. Similarly, with Zazaki, the "l," and "r" voices of Zazaki's versification are interchangeable.

|                 |               |                          |
|-----------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| Mîrçike/mîlçike | Rojine/lojine | Zerr/dil/dill/zil/şêrzil |
| Velg/berg       | Emserr/emal   | Perçîn/pelçîn            |
| Qereçî/qeleçî   |               |                          |

### 3. Phonetic Comparison of Zazaki and Kurmanji Dialects

As mentioned earlier, the smallest element of the language is the phoneme. Sometimes words come together only with one sound and sometimes with more than one sound. According to dialect, vernacular, and region, speakers utter the sound that is natural and easy for them. Consequently, the nature of the word itself along with changes to the word suit ongoing situations. "V" can take the place of the frontal voiced "b" consonant. Going back in history to the Iranian languages, the word *vafra* (snow) in Avesta – in Zazaki becomes *vor*, in Kurmanji *ber*, in Persian *barf*. Similarly, *vata* (wind) in Avesta becomes *va* in Zazaki, and *ba* in Kurmanji, in Persian *bad*. *Bad* occurs again as *vast* in Zazaki, *bist* in Kurmanji, and *bîst* in Persian (Oğur, 2014: 51) – in Avesta *vit* (twenty).

The consonants "b," "v" and "m" are variants of many words in Zazaki and Kurmanji. For example, instead of Zazaki's "v" sound, in Kurmanji we may see "b" and sometimes "p." Further examples are as follows (Farqini, 1992, <http://ferheng.org/tr/>):

| <u>Zazaki</u> | <u>Kurmanji</u> |
|---------------|-----------------|
| Vewr          | berf            |
| Velg          | belg            |
| Vîst          | bîst            |
| Vîr           | bîr             |
| Va/yay        | ba              |
| Varan         | baran           |
| Vaz           | baz             |
| Vela          | bela            |
| Verapey       | berûpaş         |
| Virso         | birûsk          |
| Venikyayîş    | ponijîn         |
| Zimistan      | zivistan        |
| Zama          | zava            |
| Xam           | xav             |

"V-v" is widely used in Zazaki and Kurmanji, but in Piran Zazaki the "w" sound is used instead of the "v" sound.

| <u>Zazaki</u> | <u>Kurmanji</u> |
|---------------|-----------------|
| Aw            | av              |
| Şew           | şev             |
| Awî           | avî             |
| Lew           | lêv             |
| Baw           | bav             |

"M" can evolve into a fricative semi-consonant as "v." Thus we have *gâm* (step) in Avesta, in Zazaki *gam*, in Kurmanji *gav*, in Persian *gam*. *Naman* (name) in Avesta, in Zazaki is *namê*, in Persian *nam*, but in Kurmanji is *nav* (Ogur, 2014: 52). Some other examples are as follows:

| <u>Zazaki</u> | <u>Kurmanji</u> |
|---------------|-----------------|
| Nîme/nême     | nîv             |
| Zama          | zava            |
| Hamnan        | havîn           |
| Zimistan      | zivistan        |

The “X-x” sound is present in all the Kurdish dialects, and is loud from the larynx. When the “x” and “w” sounds are used in the background, they are uttered as the diphthong “xw.” Words starting with the diphthong “xw” create softening in Zazaki, and the “x” in front of the “w” voice falls – as in the following examples:

| <u>Zazaki</u> | <u>Kurmanji</u> |
|---------------|-----------------|
| Wer           | xwar            |
| Werden        | xwarin          |
| Weş           | xweş            |
| Nêweş         | nexweş          |
| Wele          | xwelî           |
| Waye          | xwah            |
| Wendene       | xwendin         |

The “j” sound in Kurmanji becomes “z” or “c” in Zazaki. There are also variants among Zazaki’s regional vernaculars.

| <u>Zazaki</u> | <u>Kurmanji</u> |
|---------------|-----------------|
| Bazar         | bajar           |
| Cêr           | jêr             |
| Cinî/cenî     | jin             |
| Cena/cenayene | jentin          |
| Vace          | bêj             |
| Roj-roz/ruz   | roj             |
| Zî            | jî              |
| Mezg          | mejî            |

Kurmanji words with "h" and Zazaki words with "h" and "ş" vary. Examples of these variants are as follows (<http://ferheng.org/tr/>):

| <u>Kurmanji</u> | <u>Zazaki</u> |
|-----------------|---------------|
| Rohnî           | roşna/roşnayî |
| Sihur/sor       | sur           |
| Reh/rê          | rayir         |
| Pahtin          | pewtene       |
| Goh/go          | goş           |
| Mih/mî          | mêşna         |
| Tihnî           | têşanê        |

"H-h" is one of the oldest sounds of Kurdish. In today's Zazaki and Kurmanji, the "h" falls into the middle of the range of voices, with the "h" sound tending to get lighter. Some examples of this are as follows (<http://ferheng.org/tr/>, Veroj & Uçaman, 2002):

| <u>Kurmanji</u>    | <u>Zazaki</u>  |
|--------------------|----------------|
| Fireh/fire         | hambaz/ambaz   |
| Şeh/şe             | hestor/estor   |
| Goh/go             | havi/avil      |
| Mih/mî             | herê/erê       |
| Hêş/êş             | herey/erey     |
| Hêvar/êvar         | heynî/eynî     |
| Dergahvan/dergavan | hewnîya/ewnîya |
| Mêhman/meyman      | mêhvan/mêvan   |
| Mirhov/mirov       | rehwan/rewan   |

Another characteristic ongoing change with Zazaki and Kurmanji is that the old utterance of "d" common among the Kurdish peoples continues to exist as in Zazaki, but that this sound is lost in Kurmanji (Day 2013, Ciwan 2014, Stone 2013).

| <u>Zazaki</u> | <u>Kurmanji</u> |
|---------------|-----------------|
|---------------|-----------------|

|         |        |
|---------|--------|
| Kerd    | kir    |
| Kerdene | kirin  |
| Berdene | birin  |
| Werdene | xwarin |
| Sard    | sar    |
| Pird    | pir    |

Regarding Zazaki and Kurmanji words with "d," "v," and "g," there are ongoing changes. According to Michael L. Chyet, the letter "g" in Kurmanji responds to the letter "v" in Zazaki and the letter "w" in Hewrami (Chyet, 2005: 109). Some examples are as follows:

| <u>Zazaki</u> | <u>Kurmanji</u> |
|---------------|-----------------|
| Va/vat        | go/got          |
| Vatene        | gotin           |
| Veng          | deng            |
| Verg          | gurg            |
| Vil           | gul             |
| Veleke        | gurçik          |

According to Michael L. Chyet, the "r" and "d" sounds have evolved from "l," "z," and "r" – previously "l." This holds for both Kurdish and Persian (Chyet, 2005: 110).

| <u>Zazaki</u> | <u>Kurmanji</u> |
|---------------|-----------------|
| Zerr          | dil             |
| Çar/çewres    | çil/çihel       |
| Sare/sere     | sal             |
| Serdar        | serdar/salar    |

In Kurmanji, the "d" voice as initial consonant of indicative verbs changes to the voice "t":

Derim / terim, dixum / texum, dikim / tekem, dihêm / têm

Words that have "y," "w," and "h" in Zazaki and Kurmanji dialects vary. These sounds also play a role in integration.

| <u>Zazaki</u> | <u>Kurmanji</u> |
|---------------|-----------------|
| Giya          | giha            |
| Siwar         | siyar           |
| Wûrdek        | hûrdek          |
| Hûrdî         | hûr             |
| Wirdî/herdi   | herdu           |
| Wişk          | hişk            |

In some places the sound of "e" changes to "y":

Esri / yesir (captive), Exte / yexte (workhorse)

Onomatopoeia, the formation of words from a sound associated with what is named, was clearly well-established in antiquity! Thus, we come across words calling to mind torrents and streams using "l," or "r" and "s" (Porzîng, 1990: 21). Relevant examples are as follows:

| <u>Zazaki</u> | <u>Kurmanji</u> |
|---------------|-----------------|
| Lehî          | laser           |
| Pêl           | pêl             |
| Lêl           | şêlo            |
| Liv           | liv             |
| Ing           | ling            |
| Rem           | rev             |
| Herik         | herik           |
| Ray           | rê              |
| Rayan         | rêwî            |
| Rişna         | rijand          |
| Neseb         | neseb           |
| Ro            | robar           |
| Pilor         | pilor           |

(Farqini, 1992, Veroj & Uçaman, 2002)

As said above, Dersim Zazaki voices are quite commonplace. If after the voice of the dull fricative dental “s” we have “î,” the “s” becomes “ş”: wes > weşî, kes > keşî, hes > heşî (Oğur, 2014: 51).

To reiterate, both the words of Zazaki and Kurmanji and the words of Zazaki’s vernaculars are undergoing change (<http://www.hakkarim.net/cgibin/yenisozluk.cgi/goste#üst>):

| <u>Zazaki</u> | <u>Kurmanji</u> |
|---------------|-----------------|
| Raşt          | rast            |
| Rişte         | riste           |
| Riş           | rist            |
| Rişten        | ristin          |
| Rişna         | rijand          |

## **Conclusion**

Kurdish, as do other world languages, resolves into dialects. That is to say, the existence of different dialects is assumed to be a historical reality for all languages. In the case of Kurmanji and Zazaki, the closeness or distance of one to the other is relative to the proximity or distance of the other dialects to each other. In general, these phenomena should be viewed positively, which is to say, the dialects yield an ongoing wealth of vocabulary, richness in sound, and infinite possibilities for expression and ‘stretching the language’ so-to-speak.

With the help of the science of phonetics, the proximity or distance between the various dialects can be determined. Indeed, the similarities between Zazaki and Kurmanji show that there is more dialectical closeness than that between two languages, and that we are left with only the similarities between two dialects. Moreover, we are left with no doubt that in general the dialects of Kurdish offer more similarities than differences. This reinforces the assumption that cultural and historical phenomena surrounding the dialects evolve from what is an original Kurdish language and culture from far back in antiquity.

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