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Kurmanji and Zazaki Dialects: Comparative Study on their Phonetics

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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

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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
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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>
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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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