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Constructing Kurdishness in Turkey: Passive exposure as a boundary marker

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Abstract

This article discusses the under-researched sonic aspect of belonging to Kurdishness in Turkey: listening to or hearing the language, so-called passive exposure, without necessarily speaking it. Drawing on ethnographic, in-depth interviews and participant observation across five different field sites in Turkey, this article illustrates that in Turkey, where the public space for Kurdish soundscape is limited, passive exposure to the Kurdish language within family environments acts as major means of transmission of belonging. This discussion contributes to the literature on boundary-making by illustrating that the absence of passive exposure hinders some of the means of boundary-making such as self-ascription.

Keywords: *Kurdish; belonging; language; family environments; sound*

Abstract in Kurmanji

Avakirina Kurdîniyê li Tirkiyeyê: Merûziya pasîf wekî nîşaneke sînorê

Ev gotar hêla dengî ya aîdiyeta Kurdîniyê li Tirkiyeyê, ya kêm-lêkolînkirî nîqaş dike: guhdarîkirin an bihîstina zimên, ango merûziya pasîf, bêyî şertê axaftina bi wî zimanî. Li gor hevdîtinên kûr ên etnografîk û çavdêrîkirina beşdarî ya li 5 qadên cuda yên li Tirkiyeyê, ev gotar nîşan dide ku dema qadên giştî ji bo derdora dengî ya kurdî bisînor bin, merûziya pasîf a zimanê kurdî di nav derdorên malbatî de dibe rêya sereke ya raguhastina aîdiyetê. Ev nîqaş tevkariya edebiyata li ser çêkirina-sînoran dike bi nîşandana wê yekê ku nebûna merûziya pasîf dibe asteng ji bo hin rêyên çêkirina-sînoran; bo nimûne, ji bo xwe-lêbarkirinê.

Abstract in Sorani

بونیادنانی کوردبوون له تورکیا: ئاشکرای پاسیڤ وهک نیشانهی سنوور

ئهم وتاره گهنگهشهی بواره کهم-توێژینهوه بۆ کراوی دهنگی دهکات له پرسی ئینتیمای کوردبوون له تورکیا: گوێگرتن یان بیستنی زمان، ئهوهی پێی دهگوترێت ئاشکرایی پاسیڤ، بێئهوهی بهناچاری قسهی پێبکرێت. لهسهر بنهمای ئهتنۆگرافیک، دیداری قوولّ وه چاودێری بهشداربووان له پێنج بواری مهیدانی دا له تورکیا، ئهم وتاره ئهوه رووندهکاتهوه له تورکیا، که فهزای گشتی بۆ دیمهنی-دهنگی کوردی سنووردارە، ئاشکرای پاسیڤ بۆ زمانی کوردی له ناو ژینگه خێزانییهکان دا کاری ئامرازه سهرهکییهکانی بلّاوکردنهوهی ئینتیما دهکات. به روونکردنهوهی ئهوهی که غیابی ئاشکرای پاسیڤ رێگری له ههندێک له ئامرازهکانی سنوور-دروستکهر، لهوانهش خۆ-دانهپیاڵ، دهکات، ئهم گهنگهشهکردنه بهشدار دهبێت له ئهدهبیاتی سنوور-دروستکهر دا.

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Abstract in Zazaki

Tirkîya de Awankerdişê Kurdbîyayîşî: Marûzîya Pasîfe Sey Nîşanê Sînoran

No nuşte cîhetê vengî yê Tirkîya de kurdbîyayîşî yo ke bes cigêrayîş nêdîyo, ey ser o vindeno: marûzîya pasîfe, yanî bê ke merdim yew ziwan qisey bikero, la ê ziwanî biheşno yan goşdarî bikero. Bi reportajanê xorînanê etnografîkan û panc waranê Tirkîya yê cîya-cîyayan de nîyadarîya beşdaran ra, na meqale musnena ke rayapêroyîya Tirkîya de ke tede manzaraya vengî ya kurdkî sînorkerdî ya, uca dorûverê keyeyan de ziwanê kurdkî rê bi hewayêko pasîf marûzbîyayîş beno wasitaya weşanê endamîya komelî ya bingeyêne. Na munaqeşeya ke kemerêk nana ro lîteraturê sînorronayîşî ser, nawnena ke eke marûzîya pasîfe çin bo, tayê îmkanê sînorronayîşî, sey xotedehesibnayîşî, asteng benê.

Introduction

On May 31, 2020, Barış Çakan, a twenty-year-old Kurdish man living in Ankara, Turkey, was stabbed in the heart and killed in a public park. Whilst his father denied the initial allegations that his son was attacked because he was listening to Kurdish music, some family members stated that the family was pressured to cover up the reason for the murder, with the official narrative now being that Barış Çakan was murdered because he asked three men to turn down the volume during the evening call to prayer. Thus, the murder was framed as both an anti-Islamic and a non-ethnic one. This is not an isolated incident in the history of Turkey. The Kurdish language,[2] even though its official ban in Turkey was lifted in 1991, has continued to be a controversial topic. Many Kurds have been victimised, throughout the years, for speaking and singing in the Kurdish language or listening to Kurdish music. The Kurdish language has been frowned upon due to it supposedly not being a "real" language but merely a "dialect" of the Turkish language, even though linguistically, Kurdish and Turkish are from different language families; and Kurds, within the official narrative, were long considered those who had forgotten their native language of Turkish. For a long period, this narrative was justified by Turkish elites through their desire to build a mono-national and mono-lingual nation-state.

This article focuses on the role that language plays in the construction of Kurdishness in Turkey. In Turkey, the Kurdish language remains the one factor that is most recognised, discussed, and contested when it comes to what marks Kurdishness. The historical roots of this lie in the early Republican period of Turkey (1923-1938). Seeing themselves as the bearers of Western ideals and Western modernisation, the Kemalist[3] elites during the early Republican period constructed a "linguistic engineering" (Çolak, 2004: 68) plan that aimed to completely break with the Ottoman past and heritage. Kurds, many of whom adhered to local authority figures like tribal and religious leaders and who spoke Kurdish, were one of the targets of the Kemalist nation-state building process. The paternalistic Kemalist state took on a "White Turkish Man's Burden in order to carry out a civilising mission on a supposedly backward and traditional Anatolian society" (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2008: 4), of which Kurds were a constitutive part.[4] For decades, the Kurdish language was made invisible and/or inaudible within the

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[2] There are two major variants of the Kurdish language in Turkey that are widely spoken: Kurmanji and Zazaki. Haig and Öpengin (2014) note that speakers of Zazaki and Kurmanji both see their languages as belonging to the larger-order entity "Kurdish", and that native speakers see Zazaki speakers as Kurds. Since the data in this article comes from Kurmanji-speaking respondents, however, "Kurdish language", throughout this article, refers to Kurmanji.

[3] Kemalism is the ideology that is built upon the main principles of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey.

[4] Şengül (2018) and Zeydanlıoğlu (2008) discuss the Kemalist ideology and its obsession with Kurds in more detail.

official discourse in Turkey. Policies of "invisibilisation" of Kurdish have taken different forms, such as physical assimilation, virtual assimilation, and denigration (Haig, 2003). While the lift of the ban on the Kurdish language in 1991 is important, in practice Kurdish still remains a site of contestation and discrimination. In fact, incidents such as the one that opened this article, Kurdish being declared "an unknown and incomprehensible tongue" by judges to forbid the use of Kurdish by defendants (cited in Jamison, 2016: 32) in 2010, or the Kurdish language being documented as "X" on the minutes of the National Assembly as recently as 2020 suggest that the public recognition of the Kurdish language is still limited.

While language has been recognised as a key marker of Kurdishness in Turkey both by academics and in much public discourse in Turkey, the focus of most existing literature has been on *speaking* Kurdish as a marker of Kurdishness. This article, by contrast, argues that *hearing and listening* to the language are equally if not more important elements in the making of Kurdishness in contemporary Turkey. Kelda Jamison (2016) argues that a Kurdish language community emerges in Turkey through engagement with Kurdish-language texts. But because literacy in Kurdish is very low, this community emerges not by reading Kurdish texts but by engaging with texts as material objects in the form of books, brochures, and banners. While Jamison highlights the role of Kurdish "non-readers" in the making of Kurdishness, this article focuses on the role of "non-speakers." Being a speaker of the Kurdish language not being the *sine qua non* for cultivation of belonging to Kurdishness in Turkey has already been discussed within the literature (Şengül, 2018). Şengül (2018) illustrates the construction of Kurdishness amongst both speakers and non-speakers of Kurdish in Turkey albeit in different forms. This article illustrates that Kurdishness is mediated by Kurdish sounds even if people do not actually speak Kurdish, and it discusses listening to and hearing the language (passive exposure to the language) within micro-contexts such as family environments as one of the boundary markers of Kurdishness in Turkey.

It is important to note that language is of course not the only factor in the making of Kurdishness in Turkey. Aras, in his anthropological research, discusses how "political violence, fear of the state and lived experiences of pain have operated profoundly" (2014: 189) in the formation of Kurdishness in Turkey. Ünlü, in his discussion of the "Turkishness Contract", defines Turkishness as "ways of seeing, hearing, feeling and knowing – as well as *not* seeing, *not* hearing, *not* feeling and *not* knowing" (2016: 2), inspired by definitions of whiteness within Whiteness Studies. Kurdishness and the Kurdish movement in Turkey, this suggests, have been constructed by challenging the fundamentals of this contract and resisting it. In addition, Güvenç illustrates that everyday experiences of urban space in Diyarbakır contribute to a feeling of Kurdishness (2011: 38). Notably, the Kurdish language and its sounds are in many ways central to these various experiences, conditioning urban environments, shaping Kurdishness in opposition to Turkishness, and acting as one element that has exposed Kurds to violence and fear.

This article is based on fieldwork conducted in 2013-2014 in five different field sites in Turkey (Istanbul, Diyarbakır, Mardin, Derik, and Ayvalık), as will be detailed below. It draws on interview material and participant observation. In what follows I will first outline the theoretical grounds that establish passive exposure to linguistic sounds as an important aspect of identity formation and the making of ethnic boundaries. Next I discuss how diasporic and non-diasporic Kurds in Turkey both experience linguistic discrimination within the public space, which amplifies the importance of family environments for the Kurdish language. This

is followed by a section that focuses on how family environments act as places of constructing belonging even where all-Kurdish-speaking parents have non-speaker children. At the end, this article also questions if this discussion can be applicable to the Kurdish diaspora outside Turkey.

Constructing belonging through passive exposure

Barth's work on boundaries (1969) introduced the idea that boundaries between ethnic groups could be maintained regardless of absolute cultural characteristics. Instead of objective cultural similarities or differences, Barth argued, membership to an ethnic group is determined through self-ascription; that is, if members, regardless of their overt behaviours, say that they are As instead of Bs, then they are willing to be treated as As instead of Bs (1969: 15). As Wimmer suggests, the literature on ethnic boundaries has recently shifted from the Barthian focus on maintaining boundaries towards the making of boundaries in the first place (2013: 45). Building on this Barthian framework, this article illustrates how passive exposure (or the lack thereof) to the Kurdish language plays a crucial role in ethnic boundary-making in Turkey. It focuses both on Kurds living in the eastern and southeastern parts of Turkey – a geography known as Kurdistan – and on Kurds living in the western part of Turkey who thus form part of the "internal diaspora" (Ahmetbeyzade, 2007; Houston, 2005; O'Connor, 2015). However, following Yuval-Davis's understanding of belonging as an "emotional (or even ontological) attachment" (2011: 7), this article is cautious in making group generalisations. Instead, it shifts the focus from group understandings about diasporas to individual experiences and emphasises forms of language exposure within family environments that are unique to each individual.

Within the literature on the sociology of language (Fishman, 2004; Pauwels, 2005; Sofu, 2009), the family has been identified as one crucial determinant in language maintenance, bearing in mind the simultaneous influence of broader social forces and institutions (Spolsky, 2004; Canagarajah, 2008) and interventions (Hornberger and King, 2001). Drawing on this literature, this article takes family environments as the unit of analysis, yet it focuses on the role of family environments not in maintaining the language but in cultivating belonging to Kurdishness. Discussions within the literature on the sociology of language mostly focus on the feature of speaking the language in the construction of feelings of belonging. Bloch and Hirsch (2016) discuss how the adult children of refugee parents growing up in London who do not speak their heritage languages feel disconnected from their parents and alienated from the community. Graf (2018) discusses the importance of generational transmission for the formation of identity and belonging amongst second-generation Eritreans in Switzerland. Toivanen, in her study on the role of language in identity constructions among young Kurdish adults in Finland, illustrates that knowing the Kurdish language amongst this community was linked to "ensuring the transmittance of Kurdish culture to future generations living in diaspora" (2013: 30). The sociolinguistic literature on Kurdish in Turkey has similarly highlighted the importance of domestic and private spheres as a prime site where Kurdish is maintained and transmitted. As Öpengin observes, because Turkish functions as "the language of out-of-house socialization" in Turkey (2012: 167), Kurdish is increasingly confined to use in family contexts only. This has reinforced a generational language shift, with the usage of Kurdish being the least frequent among speakers below twenty years and most frequent among speakers over forty years (2012: 173-74). Çağlayan's study similarly

investigates "the place and role of Kurdish language in daily life as well as the changing tendencies of its use among different generations" (2014: 147). Her research illustrates that even within the same home, different languages (Turkish and Kurdish) are used to communicate across three generations.

Most of this literature maintains a focus on those who speak a language. Questioning the essentialist relation between speaking a language and feelings of belonging that this focus implies, this article illustrates that Kurdishness is constructed through family environments independent of speaking Kurdish. It shows that it is not necessarily speaking the Kurdish language but being exposed to its sounds within the family–what Chrisp calls "passive exposure" (2005: 162)–that makes boundary-making effective. Thus, this article shifts the attention to the under-researched relation between passive exposure and feelings of belonging.

Methodology

The data for this research were collected during fieldwork I conducted between January and June 2013 and in June 2014. In accordance with the grounded theory approach that assumes the "interrelatedness of data collection and analysis" (Corbin and Strauss, 1990: 6), my data collection and analysis "proceeded in tandem" (Bryman, 2008: 541). After an initial analysis through coding, I went back to the field for an additional month in 2014. My fieldwork took place in five different field sites in Turkey: Mardin, Diyarbakır and Derik (Turkish Kurdistan), and Istanbul and Ayvalık (Western Turkey). Through these five different field sites with different demographics, I was able to collect different experiences in terms of linguistic transmission. The research methods consisted of ethnographic, in-depth interviews and participant observation. The respondents were chosen through a combination of methods: once I made initial contacts in the field sites, I then asked the respondents to "spread the word around" and let me know if others were willing to share their experiences. This approach, also known as "snowball sampling" (Bryman, 2008), proved to be more practical in smaller places such as Ayvalık and Derik, where I undertook participant observation. In Istanbul, Diyarbakır, and Mardin, I arranged interviews with people from various backgrounds, such as activists, students, teachers, and journalists.

The age of the respondents varied between fifteen and sixty, and the respondents consisted both of native and non-native speakers of Kurdish even though all the respondents had at least one parent they defined as Kurdish. All the interviews were conducted and all the conversations were carried out in Turkish. This was due to my lack of fluency in Kurdish and my (and my and the respondents') reluctance to work with a translator, whose presence would easily have created an atmosphere of formality and prevented the emergence of intimate conversations. Even though Turkish was not the mother tongue for many of the respondents, all were fluent and comfortable expressing themselves in that language, mirroring the extent to which Turkish exerts hegemony in public and even private spaces in Turkey. This is not to underestimate the importance of language, and it is vital to acknowledge that the language of the conversations and the interviews does have an impact on the narratives told. It is plausible to assume that I might have received different responses had I spoken Kurdish to the respondents.

Verbal consent was given by all the respondents before all interactions, and each respondent is given a different pseudonym here not to reveal their identity. In total, ethnographic

interviews with thirty-three different respondents were conducted (three in Istanbul; nine in Ayvalık; five in Mardin; four in Diyarbakır, and twelve in Derik). In addition, data also included notes that were taken during participant observation. The coding of this data was done manually by categorising the narratives in Turkish. All the narratives and quotes from the respondents here were translated into English by me. Out of thirty-three respondents, twenty-four were male and nine were female. This gender disparity amongst the respondents, an unintentional by-product of the snowball sampling, is certainly an important aspect of the data that was collected. However, gender was not a trope that came up with frequency during the interviews and participant observation that I conducted. Since I decided to follow my interlocutors in the topics they brought up when asked about Kurdishness and not to interrupt the flow of conversations, I have decided to not include gender in my analysis here. One last point should be raised about the temporal dimension of this study, and how it might have affected the data collected. The period in which I conducted the fieldwork coincided with the initial stages of the "Peace Process"[5], a period of political relaxations and a partial ceasefire between the Turkish state and the PKK, which probably contributed to the feelings of "ease" some respondents experienced.

Limits to Kurdish soundscapes in Turkey

In Turkey, the availability of Kurdish sounds in public space is complexly linked to forms of discrimination, and to how people understand and experience themselves as Kurdish. In what follows, I will outline how Kurdish sounds become differently available and carry different meanings in the field sites where I carried out research for this article. Even where the sonic presence of Kurdish in public space is more established, Kurdish sounds remain a key site where Kurdishness is established and negotiated. The specific positioning of Kurdish sounds in public space also throws into sharp relief private family environments as complementary sites where Kurdishness is established, as I will explore in the following section.

In Ayvalık, public space, including its soundscape, is heavily dominated by Kemalist principles. For instance, every Friday and Sunday at 4:50 p.m., the national anthem is played through the speakers on the streets. This tradition of "banal nationalism" (Billig, 1995), which started in 1955, occasionally results in confrontations between those less devoted to Kemalism (including Kurdish subjects) and the Kemalist locals. Mustafa, a Kurdish teacher who was born and grew up in Viranşehir, Kurdistan, and now lives in Ayvalık, narrated a story of how he, with a couple of friends, was once outside when the anthem was being played, and they continued with their businesses as usual, whereas the others around them all stopped with what they were doing and stood up during the anthem as a gesture of respect. This caused an argument, and since then, Mustafa said, he has been careful to not be outside during the hours of the anthem. The quotation from Mustafa below illustrates how becoming audible as a Kurdish speaker in Ayvalık's public space was a key experience in the establishment of a sense of belonging to Kurdishness:

> I am sure you have witnessed this [in Ayvalık] as well. If some people speak English in the bazaar, they are always envied, and people would say, "oh, how nice that they

speak English". But when *we* speak Kurdish, *they* immediately become grumpy. (Italics added for emphasis, interview, 28 February, 2013)

By using pronouns such as "we" and "they", Mustafa established boundaries around Kurdish speakers as a distinct group (of which he felt a member) vis-à-vis Turkish speakers. Notice the same usage of pronouns by Recep, another respondent from Ayvalık, when he asked rhetorically: "*we* automatically become separatists when *we* speak Kurdish, don't *we*?...Whatever *we* do, *we* cannot be good because of *our* language, because of *our* accent, can *we*?" (italics for emphasis, interview, 26 February, 2013). By referring to the accent, he included those who are native Kurdish speakers and also those who speak Turkish with a Kurdish accent even though they might not be fluent in Kurdish.[6] Recep's everyday experiences consisted of people bothering him about his accent and about the fact that he speaks Kurdish. He mentioned incidents where his Kurdish friends would be told to not speak Kurdish and to "go back to where [they] came from". Through these experiences of discrimination that Recep encountered in his everyday life, he constructed Kurdishness by including Kurdish speakers and those with a Kurdish accent within the boundaries of ethnic belonging.

Even the neighbourhood within Ayvalık which locals call "the Kurds' neighbourhood" due to the large number of Kurdish immigrants from Kurdistan settling there offers a limited public availability for Kurdish sounds. Although it provides somewhat of a "safe space" for the Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP, the leftist pro-Kurdish party within the National Assembly), most of the party's activities here, including their demonstrations or election campaigns, still take place in Turkish. This is not least due to the small number of locals (especially from the younger generation) who are fluent in Kurdish, as also illustrated by Öpengin (2012). For instance, all the demonstrations during the campaign for the municipality elections in 2014 were held in this neighbourhood. It is also where *Newroz*[7] celebrations in Ayvalık take place. Even traditions that are not specific to Kurds such as International Women's Day are celebrated separately in this neighbourhood. Emel narrated her experience of organising an event for the International Women's Day in Ayvalık:

> Because it was International Women's Day, we [HDP] wanted to celebrate it without excluding any woman or any organisation; despite everything, we still wanted to celebrate it all together. We had a meeting together with the *ulusalcı*[8] group that was in charge of organising the celebrations, and they had one condition: they did not want any slogan in Kurdish language. In fact, we invited people from all ethnicities: Greeks, Armenians, Bosnians… and we had slogans and banners in all of those languages. But the *ulusalcı* group allowed all those other languages except the Kurdish one. So, we had to celebrate separately from them as was the case in the last years. (Interview, 5 June, 2014)

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[6] Some non-speakers of Kurdish might still have a "Kurdish" accent when they speak Turkish due to the environments in which they grew up, emphasising again the importance of micro-contexts.

[7] *Newroz* (21 March) is the biggest holiday of the year for Kurds. Its celebration has always been contested in Turkey, like many other Kurdish traditions, and until 2000, celebrating *Newroz* was illegal. After the legalisation of *Newroz*, the Kurdish spelling was forbidden, changing it to its Turkish spelling *Nevruz* instead.

[8] *Ulusalcı* is the name given to the neo-nationalist group that has emerged in Turkish politics in recent years, which is based on three basic ideas: anti-Westernism, externalisation of Islam from Turkish nationalism, and ethnic exclusionism (Uslu, 2008). Arisen from within Kemalist ideology, the neo-Kemalist *ulusalcı* ideology constantly feeds itself by othering all non-Turkish ethnic groups, specifically Kurds.

What these experiences in Ayvalık's public space and the absence of a Kurdish soundscape in public underline is the fact that family environments become of crucial importance not only as spaces where Kurdish is *spoken* – as emphasised by Öpengin (2012) and Çağlayan (2014) – but also as spaces where Kurdish sounds are *heard* in this context. Recep and Mustafa showed their awareness of this in their narratives. Recep said that he insisted on speaking Kurdish to his three children (a thirteen-year-old, a twelve-year-old, and a ten-year-old), all of whom were born and grew up in Ayvalık, even though his wife speaks Turkish to them. Mustafa is married to a Turkish woman who does not speak any Kurdish. Hence, it was difficult, he said, for him to speak Kurdish at home. Both Recep and Mustafa, however, actively contribute to their children's hearing Kurdish sounds by sending them to their hometowns (both towns predominated by Kurds in Turkish Kurdistan) during the summers.

 Istanbul, on the other hand, provides a more complicated case compared to Ayvalık due to its size and being more multicultural. The size of Istanbul that allows for different "subcultures" to emerge makes a difference in generating Kurdish sounds in the public space. Halil, for instance, a journalist who has been living in Istanbul since 1993, insisted that he had never received negative attention in Istanbul when he talked in Kurdish outside with his group of friends, and in fact, stated that he interacted in Kurdish more in Istanbul than he did in Diyarbakır, Turkey's major Kurdish city in the Kurdish-inhabited regions. Mahsun was born and grew up in Hakkari (part of Turkish Kurdistan), and was surrounded by Kurdish language and Kurdish sounds within his family until he was eighteen years old. At the time of the interview, he lived in an upper-class neighbourhood of Istanbul (one of the few Kurds in this neighbourhood) with his wife and children (a six-year-old daughter and a two-year-old son), and he felt comfortable speaking Kurdish and declaring himself a Kurd in this neighbourhood. The comfort and the ease he felt while speaking Kurdish was evident during the interview (at his wish, we conducted the interview at the Starbucks "just around the corner from his house") when his phone rang and he started speaking Kurdish with an audible voice on the phone. Outside his own neighbourhood, however, he was more concerned as he feared negative reactions if his daughter were to speak in Kurdish in public. Kurdish was the language spoken at home within his current family. This was a conscious decision by Mahsun and his wife as they wanted their children to learn Turkish at kindergarten from native Turkish speakers. This way, Mahsun said, they would learn Turkish "without an accent" (interview, February 20, 2013). This way, the children would be bilingual, with both Kurdish and Turkish to be learnt from native speakers.

Other respondents had different experiences with regards to speaking Kurdish in Istanbul. Hasan, for instance, lived in Mardin, yet his brother lived in Istanbul. He said that when he talked to his brother on the phone, he could guess where his brother was at that moment depending on the language he spoke to him: if his brother was speaking in Kurdish, he was at home but if he was speaking in Turkish, he had to be outside or at his workplace. Murat was a primary school teacher who was born and grew up in Derik until he migrated to Istanbul with his family when he was thirteen. His experience in Istanbul was that he "felt that people were looking at him with a judgmental look if he spoke Kurdish on a train, on a bus etc." (interview, May 12, 2013).

When it comes to Turkey's Kurdish regions, speaking and hearing Kurdish in urban spaces is much more common. Nevertheless, there were still limits to Kurdish soundscapes. This was

particularly evident for the respondents in Derik, a small town in the province of Mardin in southeast Turkey with majority Kurdish population. Amongst the field sites of this research, Derik was the site where speaking Kurdish was most common. In Derik, Kurdish is commonly spoken amongst lay people on the streets and at coffee shops. Nonetheless here, too, being identified as Kurdish through one's language could have negative consequences. Bahar's narrative below is an example of how native Kurdish speakers who speak Turkish with a particular accent can be hindered. Bahar was born and grew up in Derik, and is a native speaker of Kurdish. When she looked for a job to work in a bank in the Kurdish region, she experienced these difficulties:

> *We* all speak Kurdish until *we* go to primary school, and *we* learn Turkish at school. And of course, this is a disadvantage for *us* because *we* are competing with people from the West [Western Turkey] in this sense. Compared to *them*, *our* accent is not good; in fact, it is terrible for most of *us*. Then of course, the banks would not hire *us* since *we* are so behind *them*. For instance, if I get 90 [points] in the written exam and the person from the West gets 75, they would still be more convincing in the interview, and the bank would be more likely to hire them instead of me. (Italics added for emphasis, interview, 5 May, 2013)

Similar to Recep and Mustafa mentioned earlier, Bahar also constructed the boundaries of Kurdishness by including native speakers of Kurdish as well as those who speak Turkish with a "Kurdish accent".

Diyarbakır has been declared the capital of Kurdistan by several leaders.[9] With a population close to 1.5 million, it is "the metropolitan heart of Kurdish Turkey" (Jamison, 2016: 36). Over the last two decades, Kurdish has become more widely audible and visible in metropolitan spaces like Diyarbakır. Under the BDP[10]/HDP, the municipality started offering bilingual services, and it was possible to observe placards only in Kurdish within the city centre of Diyarbakır (Figures 1 and 2).[11] Güvenç (2011) argues that in the absence of a Kurdish nation-state, this kind of public presence of the Kurdish language in urban space contributes to a sense of Kurdishness. During the short-lived Peace Process, there were also some state-wide reforms by the AKP government such as introducing Kurdish language courses at primary schools and the establishment of a state-funded Kurdish-language TV channel (TRT 6). Nevertheless, the usage of Kurdish language in everyday life was still not common at the time of my fieldwork in 2013-14. Abdullah, who was born and grew up in Derik, told me that "Kurdish is not spoken in Diyarbakır. As much as we say it is, it is not spoken. It is spoken at homes but outside, it has just started to be spoken" (interview, 26 April, 2013). In public places such as patisseries, shops, and restaurants, Turkish is still the default language, even when Kurdish fluency is apparent through other means. For example,

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[9] Osman Baydemir, the then-mayor of Diyarbakır, stated in 2012 that "the capital city of the independent Kurdistan is Diyarbakır" (Milliyet, 2012), and Orhan Öztürk, the then-governor of Bitlis, stated in 2015 that "Diyarbakır is known for being the capital of Kurdistan" (Milliyet, 2015).

[10] *Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, BDP, or Peace and Democracy Party, was the predecessor of HDP until 2014, when the entire organisation joined HDP.

[11] At the time of revising this article (April 2022), most of the mayors of HDP that were democratically elected in the last local elections in 2019 have been forcibly removed and replaced with the governors of AKP (Justice and Development Party, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*), including Derik's, Diyarbakır's, and Mardin's, so it should be noted that these changes have now mostly been removed, and the availability of Kurdish within the public space is in total control of the government. As the data of this research was generated in 2013, however, the fieldwork data reflects the experiences of the respondents from that period.

during my fieldwork I once stopped at a patisserie with Ayşe, who worked at Diyarbakır's municipality. While she was ordering our desserts, she interacted with the cashier in Turkish, and the cashier was taking notes on a sheet of paper in Turkish yet with the Kurdish letters, W, X, and Q that do not exist in the Turkish alphabet. Words and names that contain any of these letters have long been criminalised in Turkey, and the mere presence of these letters in the written language has "taken on heightened political significance" (Jamison, 2016: 47). Hence, the fact that the cashier was using these letters in writing suggests their familiarity with Kurdish writing practices. This suggests that even those who are fluent in Kurdish still feel limited to generate Kurdish sounds in the public spaces of Kurdistan.

Mardin, in comparison, has a slightly smaller population with close to 700,000, and its demographic characteristics are also different. It is more multicultural than Diyarbakır in the sense that there is a significant Arab and Syriac population living there apart from Kurds and Turks, and during my stay in Mardin, I observed that it was more common to hear people speaking Arabic on the streets than Kurdish. In this sense, Mardin can be considered the southeastern counterpart of Istanbul: multicultural, multilingual, and cosmopolitan. The fact that it is located on the border with Syria also changes the dynamics of the city as there has been an influx of Syrian immigrants into Mardin, even back in 2013, when other parts of Turkey were still new to the idea of Syrian immigrants. In the historical old town on the hills of Mardin, where I stayed during my fieldwork, it was possible to hear Arabic frequently due to both incoming Syrian immigrants and the local Syriac population. After Turkish and Arabic, Kurdish was not as frequently heard in coffeeshops or restaurants.

Figure 1. The bilingual placard of the municipality in Diyarbakır


(*Source:* Hürriyet 2013).

The discussion in this section so far has illustrated two points: firstly, "everyday discrimination" (Wimmer, 2013) and self-ascription, two means of boundary-making widely

discussed within the literature, act as means of boundary-making regardless of field sites, yet they are also contextual, influenced by the specific characteristics of the field sites. In a place such as Ayvalık, for instance, "everyday discrimination" as a means of boundary-making is meaningful in situations where individuals speak Kurdish or where their accents in Turkish are different. In Derik, on the other hand, "everyday discrimination" is effective in encounters at public institutions such as banks. As illustrated, however, the respondents, whether they are from Ayvalık or Derik, shape the boundaries of Kurdishness through the use of pronouns such as "we" and "they" by including native speakers and those speaking Turkish with a "Kurdish accent", re-affirming the relation between the language and Kurdishness irrespective of location. In other words, "sounding" Kurdish (whether by speaking in Kurdish or with a certain accent associated with Kurdish) is a fundamental aspect of what is understood as Kurdishness in Turkey irrespective of location inside the country. The Kurdish language is identified as a key cultural marker by respondents, with ten different respondents expressing the relationship between language and culture by mentioning the words "culture" [*kültür*] and "language" [*dil*] consecutively or using them interchangeably. The respondents who were not fluent in the Kurdish language were also openly teased or made fun of by native or more fluent speakers, suggesting the centrality of the Kurdish language to the discussions surrounding Kurdishness in Turkey. Such interactions reflect the "growing importance of Kurdish as the principal index of identity and its emergence in domains and communicative settings usually ascribed to the use of Turkish" (Öpengin, 2012: 176-77). Amongst the respondents of this research, Emel, for example, was born to Kurdish-speaking parents (in fact, her parents did not speak any Turkish), yet she was not fluent in Kurdish, and in fact, had just started learning Kurdish by the time I interviewed her. In one of my visits constituting my participant observation, I witnessed her being called a "half Kurd" [*yarım Kürt*] by native Kurdish speakers because she was unable to count the days of the week in Kurdish.

Figure 2. City centre of Diyarbakır (Photo by author).
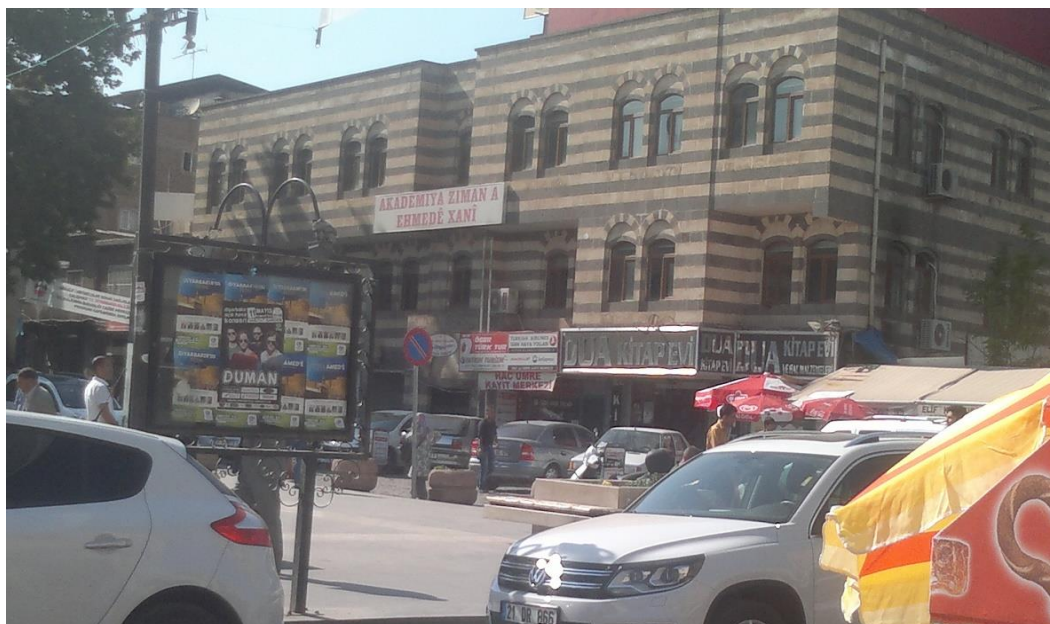
Secondly, the fact that the presence of Kurdish sounds and the Kurdish language in public remains limited across my different field sites – including where Kurds form the majority of the population – enhances the importance of private, domestic, and other non-public contexts, including family environments, in cultivating belonging to Kurdishness. For "non-speakers" of Kurdish, the limited audibility of Kurdish in public also means that non-public contexts become major arenas for the transmission of Kurdishness. The following section discusses how being passively exposed to Kurdish sounds therefore takes on crucial importance as a boundary marker of Kurdishness in Turkey.

Passive exposure within private spaces as a key boundary-marking mechanism

In Turkey, where for both diasporic and non-diasporic Kurds the Kurdish language is still mainly transmitted in private networks and through oral use, family environments become one of the most significant sites for cultivating belonging to Kurdishness. Inversely, this means that in the absence of a regular usage of the Kurdish language within private spaces and family environments (i.e. where individuals are not regularly exposed to the Kurdish language), self-ascription in terms of Kurdishness is hindered.

Out of the thirty-three respondents, Arzu was the only one who, despite having both self-ascribed Kurdish parents, was not a self-ascribed Kurd. Both Arzu's maternal and paternal grandparents were forced into exile from Dersim during the 1937-38 military operations of the Turkish state.[12] They first came to Konya,[13] where they re-met and married, and then moved to Izmir, where Arzu was born and grew up. Arzu explained that her whole family environment was so heavily influenced by Kemalism that all of them support the Republic People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP)[14] and are loyal to the Kemalist principles of the state. As a result, Turkish was spoken in her family at all times, and she grew up as a Turkish speaker. She told me that she did not feel Kurdish.

Contrasting this to Rezine's experience illustrates the importance of passive exposure to the language in order to cultivate belonging to Kurdishness. Rezine was born to a Kurdish-speaking father and a Turkish-speaking mother. She had exposure to the Kurdish language through her father's side of the family. Despite her mother's lack of fluency in Kurdish, Kurdish was the language of story-telling and pleasurable sociality in the family:

> Sometimes, we would sit at home with all the family and my [paternal] uncles would tell a funny story. We would all laugh but my mum would say, "tell it in Turkish so I could understand it as well". We would translate it to Turkish but then, all the humour in the story would be lost. (Interview, 19 June, 2014)

Rezine is a self-ascribed Kurd. She *heard* and *listened to* the language within her micro-context in contrast to Arzu, who did not have any type of exposure to the language. This also applies

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[12] Described as "genocide" (Beşikçi, 1990; van Bruinessen, 2000), the operations in Dersim in 1937 took place because Dersim was the last place in Turkey that had not been effectively controlled by the young Kemalist state (van Bruinessen, 2000: 71). The Kemalist leaders justified their acts by resorting to an "Orientalist" rhetoric that argued that the people of Dersim were ignorant, backwards, tribal, and anti-central, which was against the ideals that the young Republic was trying to impose.
[13] Konya is a city in Central Anatolia near Ankara.
[14] The Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) was established by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923 and was the sole political party in the country until the 1940s. As the founding party of the Turkish Republic, the CHP is loyal to the Kemalist principles of the Republic.

to the cases of Emel and Reyhan. In her own words, a "linguistically assimilated" Reyhan was born to parents who were both Kurdish-speaking, and Kurdish was the dominant language in her family environment. Reyhan, however, is not fluent in Kurdish. For her, the language that was spoken at school and outside became the language she is most comfortable in. Nevertheless, she considers herself to be Kurdish. Emel was similarly not fluent in the Kurdish language but she self-ascribed as Kurdish nonetheless. For Emel, her childhood experiences in Sivas,[15] where most of the population were Turks, meant that she rejected her own language to not feel excluded. Even though this, in her own words, "hurts", she "do[es] not feel less Kurdish just because [she] does not speak Kurdish" (interview, 5 June, 2014). These cases suggest that a sense of Kurdishness is transmitted even to those who do not speak it through passive exposure, that is, hearing and listening to the Kurdish language within family environments.

Here, I return to the relation between the exposure to the Kurdish language through *hearing* and *listening* and boundary-making processes. By now well-discussed in the scholarly literature (Barth, 1969; Loveman and Muniz, 2007; Schwartzman, 2007; Wimmer, 2013; Zolberg and Woon, 1999; and Serdar, 2017 for a discussion within the Turkish context), the means of boundary-making have been of enormous use in extending our understanding of how it is possible for individuals to negotiate their feelings of belonging across different contexts. This article contributes to this literature by illustrating one of the contexts in which these means are *not* effective. Without passive exposure to the language within the family, such as in Arzu's case, self-ascription and everyday discrimination, some of the means of boundary-making, are hindered. Exposure within the family acts as a boundary marker for Kurdishness even where only one side of the family is a Kurdish speaker, such as Rezine.

This results from the Kurdish soundscape being confined to private spaces across Turkey given its limited availability in public space. As the Kurdish soundscape is limited in public space for both diasporic and non-diasporic Kurds of Turkey, private spaces and micro-contexts such as the family act as major means of transmission. This transmission does not always ensure the ability to speak in Kurdish (as is the case for Emel and Reyhan). However, it acts as a boundary marker and the cultivation of belonging across generations through passive exposure to the language (hearing and listening to the sounds). Due to the existence of multiple variables and the complexity of the Kurdish society in Turkey, the discussion in this article encourages us to focus on personal, customised (Şengül, 2018), and individual experiences with regards to belonging instead of taking groups as the unit of analysis. Arzu's case, for instance, suggests that the intersection of different vectors is at play here. The contribution of the lack of exposure to Kurdish sounds within her family is intermingled with other vectors, so it would be misleading to single out Arzu's lack of passive exposure to Kurdish sounds as the single factor for her not describing herself as Kurdish. Her being a *Dersimli*[16] and *İzmirli*[17] and her family's attachment to Kemalist and CHP values should also be taken into account when discussing her feelings of belonging. While recognising that belonging is the result of unique, personal, and customised experiences of individuals within their micro-contexts, I nonetheless suggest that passive exposure to the Kurdish language

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[15] Sivas is a city in Central Anatolia near Ankara.
[16] *Dersimli* refers to people from the Dersim region.
[17] *İzmirli* refers to people from Izmir.

within micro contexts is one crucial factor that needs to be taken into account while discussing belonging to Kurdishness in Turkey.

What does this discussion suggest for the Kurdish diaspora outside Turkey and diaspora studies in general? Considering that the limited public space for a Kurdish soundscape in Turkey is key for elevating private contexts to major significance in cultivating belonging to Kurdishness, this would suggest that where Kurdish benefits from a stronger public presence, we may expect different results. Sweden, for example, where there is a significant amount of Kurdish diaspora, is considered an "extended Kurdistan" (Hjertén, 1994). Here, the possibility of regularly hearing Kurdish being spoken at events organised by the numerous Kurdish associations and organisations in Sweden or during Kurdish language classes suggests that in this particular context, the private sphere of the family might not be the major means of transmission for cultivating belonging. Thus, the discussion in this article suggests the need to be cautious in generalising the effectiveness of family environments for the cultivation of ethnic belonging across different contexts.

Conclusion

This article discussed passive exposure to Kurdish sounds as one of the boundary markers of Kurdishness in Turkey. In Turkey, where the public space for Kurdish soundscapes is limited, private spaces such as family environments emerge as the major means of language transmission. Linguistic transmission, however, does not necessarily translate into speaking fluency as some of the cases in this article illustrated. But even when the Kurdish language is not maintained across generations, the fact of "passive exposure" to the Kurdish language (listening to and hearing Kurdish sounds) within family environments acts as a boundary marker by cultivating belonging to Kurdishness. Kurdishness, in other words, becomes co-constructed through the experience of linguistic *sound*. While much attention has been paid to the ability of individuals to actively speak Kurdish, the sonic aspect of belonging deserves further attention. The complexity and existence of different vectors at play when it comes to Kurdishness in Turkey suggests that it would be misleading to single out one factor when constructing Kurdishness. While recognising the importance of unique, individual, and customised experiences, this article nonetheless suggests that discussions on belonging to Kurdishness in Turkey should take into account "passive exposure" to Kurdish soundscapes as one crucial factor that fosters ethnic belonging.

This discussion contributes to the literature on boundary-making by illustrating one of the cases where some of the means of boundary-making such as "self-ascription" (Barth, 1969) and "everyday discrimination" (Wimmer, 2013) are not effective: the absence of "passive exposure" to Kurdish sounds likely hinders these means of boundary-making. By focusing on the specific context in Turkey, where there is limited public space for Kurdish soundscapes, this article also suggests the need to be cautious in making generalisations about Kurdish diaspora communities in other countries, where family environments as means of transmission would not necessarily be as significant as they are in Turkey.

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