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Struggling against language shift: Kurdish language education in Turkey

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Abstract

This article, largely based on interviews with language activists, investigates Kurdish language-in-education policy in Turkey since the early 2000s. It attempts to answer the following questions: How has Kurdish language education developed in Turkey from 2004 to 2020? What has been the impact of the educational activities on reversing the language shift from Kurdish to Turkish? I argue that the most important contribution has been on the elite or academic level with a widening of the Kurdish-reading and writing elite. Yet, the language shift from Kurdish to Turkish continues.

Keywords: Language policy; language-in-education; Kurdish; civil society; reversing language shift

Abstract in Kurmanji

Têkoşîna li hember guhastina ziman: Perwerdehiya zimanê kurdî li Tirkîyeyê

Ev gotar, ya ku bi giranî xwe dispêre berpeyvinên ligel aktîvîstên ziman, ji destpêka salên 2000î û vir ve li Tirkîyeyê li polîtîkaya perwerdehiya zimanê kurdî an jî di nav polîtîkayên perwerdehiyê de li cihê zimanê kurdî vedikole. Gotar, hewl dide bersiv bide van pirsan: Ji sala 2004an beta 2020an li Tirkîyeyê perwerdeya zimanê Kurdî çawa bi pêş ketiye? Bandora çalakîyên perwerdehiyê yên li ser berovajîkirina guhastina ziman ya ji kurdî bo tirkî çi bûye? Ez nîqaş dikim ku tevkarîya herî girîng li ser elîtan an jî asta akademîk bûye bi berfirebbûna elîtên xwîner û nûserên kurdî. Lê guhastina zîmên a ji kurdî bo tirkî berdewam e.

Abstract in Sorani

تێکۆشان له دژی زمان گۆڕین: پەرۆردەهی زمانی کوردی له تورکیا

ئهم بابەته، بەزۆری لەسەر بنه‌مای چاوپێکه‌وتنه له گه‌ڵ چالاکوانانی زمان، لێکۆڵینه‌وه له سیاسه‌تی پەرۆرده‌یی دهره‌ق به زمانی کوردی له تورکیا له ٢٠٠٠-کانه‌وه ده‌کات. بابه‌ته‌که هه‌ول ده‌دات وه‌لامی ئهم پرسیارانه بده‌ته‌وه: چۆن پەرۆرده‌ی زمانی کوردی له ٢٠٠٤ تا ٢٠٢٠ گه‌شه‌ی کردوه؟ کاریه‌گری چالاکی پەرۆرده‌یی له سه‌ر پێچه‌وانه کردنه‌وه‌ی زمان گۆڕین له کوردیه‌وه بۆ تورکی چی بووه؟ من ئارگومێنتی ئه‌وه ده‌که‌م که به‌شدارییه هه‌ره گرنگه‌که‌ی له‌سه‌ر نوخه‌ یان ئاستی نه‌کادیمی دا بووه له‌گه‌ڵ فراوانبوونی نوخه‌ی خوێنه‌ر و نووسه‌ری کوردی. به‌لام، هه‌شتا زمان گۆڕین له کوردیه‌وه بۆ تورکی به‌رده‌وامه‌.

Abstract in Zazaki

Duşê ravuriyayîşê zîwanî de lebitiyayîş: Tirkîya de perwerdeyê kurdî

Bi roportanê çalakîkeranê zîwanî ra, nê nuştayî de serê 2000an ra nat polîtîkaya Tirkîya ya perwerdeyê kurdî ser o çiğrayîş yeno kerdene. Na xebate kena ke cewabê nê persan bido: 2004 ra beta 2020 perwerdeyê bi zîwanê

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kurdêî Tirkîya de senî aver şîyo? Tesîrê çalakîyanê perwerdeyî yê ke ravurîyayîşê zîwanê kurdêî bi tirkî bîro apeygirentene, çi bî? Ez ana ver ke tesîro tewr muhîm beşdarîya elîtan yan zî senîyeya elîtan a akademîk a ke wendoxî û nûstoxîya kurdêî kena hîraye. Ancî, ravurîyayîşê zîwanî yê kurdêî ver bi tirkî hîna dewam keno.

Introduction

According to a widely used definition by Bernard Spolsky (2004, 5), language policy consists of three components: (1) the language practices of the speech community, i.e. what language codes are used in what kinds of situations, (2) the beliefs about language and language use (ideologies), and (3) any specific efforts to modify or influence that practice by any kind of language intervention, planning, or management. Following Spolsky's division, this article aims to map Kurdish² language education-related efforts that aim to change the practices and related language beliefs of Turkey's Kurds during the past 15 years or so.

Initially, studies on language policy and planning (LPP) focused on the national language planning level and the work of official agencies, such as the Turkish Language Society (Türk Dil Kurumu, TDK) with explicitly stated aims and official policy documents. Turkey's ambitious language reform starting in the 1920s can in many ways be considered a typical example of a nationalist, modernist, and developmentalist LPP effort, where the aim was a homogeneous monolingual society.

By the early 2000s, the relationship between nationalism and languages, "minoritized" languages, minority language rights and language shift (May 2006), as well as multilingualism and language revitalization in different contexts (McCarty 2018; Fishman 1991, 2001) had become important topics in LPP studies. There was an increasing recognition of the alarming rate of language loss among minority language speakers around the world (May 2006). Part of the modernist nation-state building projects tended to be the institution of national, official languages to be used in the public sphere or high domains, and minoritized languages were banished to the private sphere (Kamusella 2018) or low domains. This hierarchization tends to gradually lead to language shift when speakers of minoritized languages learn the national language instead of their own (May 2006).

In Turkey, the state's repressive policies towards minority³ languages such as Kurdish have also been investigated as a part of the state's language policies (Haig 2004; Coşkun et al. 2011; Zeydanlıoğlu 2012), but have been trickier to investigate as their motivation or the measures employed were not explicitly formulated in state directives since the state denied the existence of the Kurdish people and language (Haig 2004). The investigation of current Kurdish LPP is also complicated in light of all the different actors who undertake deliberate efforts to influence the language behaviour of others.

There is no central official agency coordinating Kurdish LPP, as the TDK is only responsible for Turkish. Some of the actors involved are public bodies such as the Ministry of National Education (Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı, MEB), which coordinates Kurdish elective courses at schools, appoints teachers, and produces primers. Micro-level acquisition planning is undertaken by individual schools and teachers, employees of the MEB. There are also public

² By Kurdish I refer to Kurmanji (Kurmanci) and Zazaki (Zaza, Kirmanckî), though more attention is given to Kurmanji.

³ The word minority is shunned in Turkey, but I have chosen to use it since Kurdish-speakers constitute a numeric minority and are in some ways in a subordinate position *vis-à-vis* the majority.

universities with Kurdish language programs, overseen by the Council of Higher Education (Yükseköğretim Kurulu, YÖK).

The municipalities ruled by the pro-Kurdish political parties⁴ have worked on status, acquisition, and prestige planning⁵ by providing municipal services in Kurdish, initiating private Kurdish-language schools, founding multilingual pre-schools, and promoting and organizing Kurdish cultural activities. On the national level pro-Kurdish political parties have worked on improving the status and prestige of Kurdish through political and discursive mechanisms. And finally, there are numerous civil society organizations (CSO), private publishing and media companies, as well as individual intellectuals involved in a wide range of activities that aim for the revitalization of Kurdish.

By revitalization I refer to activities that attempt to halt or reverse the decline of the uses and users of Kurdish.⁶ These activities aim to encourage Kurdish speakers to use Kurdish more, or to cultivate new speakers in a situation where intergenerational transmission of the language has been partially disrupted (see McCarty 2018, 358), i.e., not all Kurds learn it as the first language at home.

Much of this article is based on either informal discussions or semi-structured interviews with Kurdish language activists or language authorities, who have recently been or are currently involved in activities such as organizing courses of Kurdish or in Kurdish, compiling dictionaries, or publishing books. The interviews were carried out in 2019 and 2020. My questions centered on what kinds of language-related activities the organizations have been engaged in, what is not being done and why, what the intellectuals think should and can be done to reverse the language shift, and how they view the current situation of the Kurdish language in Turkey.⁷

Formal, recorded interviews were made with the linguist Sami Tan (currently at the Mesopotamian Foundation, Diyarbakır), Eyüp Subaşı (the Kurdish Research Association), Mükrima Avcı (the İsmail Beşikçi Foundation), and Süleyman Çevik (Nûbihar publishing). Non-taped formal interviews were made with the author and teacher Merdan Newayî and teacher of MEB Ahmet Seyari (Batman), who is involved in making Kurmanji primers, and with two lecturers at the Artuklu University in Mardin, who wished to remain anonymous. In addition, I had one-on-one background discussions or shorter interviews with seven relevant individuals in Diyarbakır (Amed in Kurdish)⁸ and three in Istanbul. I also met with members of the secretariat of the newly founded Kurdish Language and Culture Network (Kürt Dili ve Kültürü Ağı/Tora Ziman û Çanda Kurdî) and representatives of Eğitim Sen (the Educators and Science Workers Union) Diyarbakır branch. I had informal coffee talks with several other

⁴ A series of pro-Kurdish political parties has ruled many of the Kurdish majority cities. In the local elections of 2009, the pro-Kurdish party of the time, the DTP (*Democratic Society Party - Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, 2005-2009) won the mayorship of 96 municipalities but was closed by the Constitutional Court the same year. In the local elections of 2014, its follower, the BDP (*Peace and Democracy Party - Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, 2008-2014) won 97, and in 2019, the latest incarnation, the HDP (*People's Democratic Party - Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, 2012) won 65 municipalities. Most of these were replaced by state appointed trustees (*kayyum*) following the 2016 coup attempt.

⁵ The standard classification of LPP activities is into status, corpus, and acquisition planning, with prestige planning sometimes added (from Kaplan & Baldauf 1997).

⁶ Alternative labels include language maintenance or reversing the language shift (RSL, Fishman 1991, 2001, 2012).

⁷ For a more detailed discussion of the work on reversing the language shift from Kurdish to Turkish from the perspective of Fishman's 8-stage model see Leinonen (2021).

⁸ The largest city of the Kurdish region.

activists as well as students of MED-DER in Diyarbakır and the Institute of Living Languages of Artuklu University.⁹

The next sections give a short overview of what little we know of the ongoing language shift from Kurdish to Turkish and an outline of the development of Kurdish-language activism in the 2000s. In the subsequent sections I look at Kurdish-language classes in adult education, Kurdish studies at universities, elective language courses in public education, and the brief experience of Kurdish-language private schools.

In the subsequent section, I evaluate the impact of these activities. The doyens of LPP studies have pointed out the difficulty of managing language (Spolsky 2004) and especially reversing language shift (RLS), which rarely succeeds quickly or sufficiently (Fishman 2001, 12). There are comparatively few cases where language management has produced its intended results, at least when not supported by a powerful state (Spolsky 2004, 223). Based on my research and the views of the activists themselves, I argue that the main contribution of the Kurdish language education activities has been on the elite and academic levels. As a result of these activities, there exists a wider Kurdish-reading and writing elite and a committed community of language activists. Yet, the efforts have not managed to change the daily language practices of the masses, and the language shift continues. The final section ponders the future of Kurdish in Turkey and points out that reversing the language shift is quite unlikely without state support, affirmative action, and strong language policy.

Language shift: “I cannot speak, but I understand”¹⁰

Kurdish is a Western Iranian language, traditionally spoken in Kurdistan (Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran). Kurmanji and Zazaki variants of Kurdish are the two largest minority languages in Turkey. The Turkish state’s consistent nationalist and assimilationist language policies *vis-à-vis* non-Turkish speaking minorities led to the invisibilization of Kurdish (Haig 2004). Since the founding of the republic, the spheres within which Kurdish could be used have been severely limited. Not acknowledged as a (minority) language, Kurdish could still be used in the low domains of family and neighborhood and had limited use in the market, but could not be used in the high domains of administration, education, academia, business, and media. This hampered the development of Kurdish as a modern urban language, and the standardization of orthography, vocabulary, and grammar. Thus, despite an important literary tradition, Kurdish in Turkey remained mainly an oral language until the 1990s.

Furthermore, Kurdish has hardly any social capital value as Turkish is the sole linguistic medium for economic and social success (Öpengin 2012, 158-160). Already this hierarchical relationship constructed between the languages would likely have led to gradual language shift (on majority-minority language relations, see May 2006), but in addition, using Kurdish was actively discouraged, and a derogatory image of Kurdish as not suitable for use in the high domains was propagated by the state (Haig 2004).

According to the 1965 census, the most recent one from which we can obtain information on mother tongue, almost 8 per cent of people chose Kurdish as their mother tongue and another 6 per cent chose it as a second language (Sirkeci 2000, 154). The numeric data on Kurdish speakers after 1965 is more limited. In a study based on the data from the Turkish

⁹ Except for one informal background discussion, all were conducted in Turkish.

¹⁰ This is a very common description of one’s deficient Kurdish skills (Karaduman 2015).

Demographic Health Survey of 1993, it was found out that 15.2 per cent of the (ever married female 15-49 years old) respondents gave Kurdish as their mother tongue and 17.8 per cent of respondents gave it as the mother-tongue of at least one family member (Sirkeci 2000, 155-156).

According to a much-cited survey conducted in 2006 (Konda 2007), about a fifth of those adults classified as Kurdish or Zaza in the study did not use Kurdish or Zazaki as the main language in their daily lives. This is corroborated by the findings of a more recent survey, according to which almost 80% of Kurdish parents of children aged 3-13 living in the predominantly Kurdish-populated region consider themselves proficient in Kurdish (Rawest 2020). However, according to this later survey there is a serious disruption in intergenerational transmission of Kurdish as only 24% of the parents use Kurdish as the main language of communication with their children (Rawest 2020).¹¹ Based on the data on mother tongue and second language from the censuses of 1945 and 1965, Zeyneloğlu et al. (2016) have concluded that there was a degree of language shift from Kurdish to Turkish already taking place at that time, especially in the urban centers of the predominantly Kurdish-speaking region.

According to a recent survey, less than half of today's urban Kurdish youth (18-30-years old) stated that they can speak Kurdish and use it regularly among their peers. Only 18% of the respondents of the survey could both read and write their mother tongue (Rawest 2019).¹² A study combining analysis of data from the 2000 census and the 2003 Turkish Demographic Health Survey points out that apparently "both education and migration lead to an increase in the share of monoglot Turkish speakers among Kurds." (Zeyneloğlu et al. 2016, 44).

There is little sociolinguistic research on the use of Kurdish, but there is indication that use of and proficiency in Kurdish varies greatly: Kurdish is used more in the rural areas and when speaking with grandparents or other relatives, while it is used less in urban contexts and with siblings or friends (Öpengin 2012). As Ergin Öpengin (2012) states, "[...] Kurdish is no longer the default language of communication for all of its speakers: the younger the speakers are, and the more formally educated and out of the immediate social networks they are, the less Kurdish they use" (176). There seems to be a consistent generational pattern of language shift, typically seen elsewhere in migrant families: grandparents are monolingual in Kurdish, parents are bilingual in Kurdish and Turkish, and in the children's generation Kurdish is no longer a language of everyday life (Cağlayan 2014, 63).

Kurdish language activism and the auspicious circle

Following earlier articulations during the late Ottoman and early Republican periods, in the late 1960s and 1970s Kurdish nationalism in Turkey started to arise from within the country's leftist and student movements.¹³ The Kurdish movement¹⁴ that emerged out of these circles in the 1980s put some effort into fostering Kurdish cultural activities. With a gradual easing

¹¹ Previously, parents were discouraged by schools from using Kurdish with their children (Çoşkun et al. 2011, 68). For an in-depth analysis of the unstable diglossia and use of Kurdish in different domains, see Öpengin (2012).

¹² Kurdish literacy correlates with bilingualism and biliteracy. Kurdish is never the primary literary language (Matras & Reershemius 1991, 108).

¹³ The roots of Kurdish nationalism can be traced to the Sheikh Ubaydullah uprising in 1879-1881. There were important Kurdish nationalist actors and organizations during the late Ottoman and early Republican periods, and early Kurdish corpus planning took place in exile. (For more on the emergence of Kurdish nationalism, see Olson 1991)

¹⁴ The Kurdish movement is understood here in a wide sense to cover all legal and non-legal actors demanding Kurdish rights or promoting Kurdish culture, language, or identity. With the term "Kurdish political movement," I refer to legal pro-Kurdish political parties.

of some of the legal restrictions, in the 1990s the movement managed to create a limited Kurdish cultural sphere with several organizations, Kurdish-language publications, (at the time illegal) language courses, music, dance, and theater groups (Scalbert-Yücel 2017). However, cultural or language policies were not the primary focus of the Kurdish movement led by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which until the 2000s aimed for an independent state.

Mehmet Şerif Derince has argued that in the early 2000s there was a general paradigm shift in the movement, whereupon language and culture became much more emphasized (Derince 2017, 186). The new emphasis on language was partially due to an increasing awareness of the language shift and coincided with the start of Turkey's EU-membership reform process, which offered a possibility for accommodating cultural diversity (Derince 2017).

The most important language-related demand has understandably been that of mother-tongue-based education, which is usually considered a basic minority language right and has been documented to bring cognitive and academic benefits and help learning other languages (Cummings 1991). The first wide-scale campaign took place in 2001–2002, when university students petitioned for elective Kurdish courses in universities, and Kurdish parents campaigned to have Kurdish language teaching in primary schools. The petitioners signed and handed thousands of petitions to university rectors and school boards. The Turkish state establishment concluded that the campaign was organized by the PKK and treated it as a threat to national security: the officials refused to receive the petitions and the police detained thousands of petitioners and peaceful demonstrators (Leinonen 2017, 184–192).

An organized language movement focusing on language education emerged from 2006 onwards (Sidal 2019). The central organizations in it were TZP Kurdî (Tevgera Zimanê Perwerdahîya Kurdî) and Kurdi-Der (Komeleya Lêkolîn û Pêşvexistina Zimanê Kurdî), supported by other actors such as the Kurdish institutes in Istanbul and Diyarbakır (Diyarbakır Kürt Enstitüsü/Enstîtuya Kurdî ya Amedê and İstanbul Kürt Enstitüsü/Enstîtuya Kurdî a Stenbolê), the Educators and Science Workers Union (Eğitim Sen), and the pro-Kurdish political parties (the BDP and later the Democratic Regions Party, DBP). The movement aimed to “[...] empower the Kurdish language cause, raise language awareness with the Kurdish community, advocate for Kurdish-medium education, teach the language to the people and finally encourage the community in order to raise a demand of education in Kurdish.” (from Derince 2017, interview with a representative of TZP Kurdî in 2012).

The main aim was mother-tongue education guaranteed by legislation and adoption of Kurdish in all spheres of life from politics and parliament to the economy, trade, and local services (Sidal 2019). The movement organized seminars, conferences, Kurdish language courses, and campaigns to further its aims. The most visible activity was the school boycotts organized to support the demand for mother-tongue education in 2008, 2009, and 2010 (Sidal 2019). An estimated two million children took part in the boycott of the first week of school in September 2010 (Derince 2017, 187).

From 2002 to 2015 a series of legislative changes were made to widen minority linguistic rights (Kolcak 2015, Öpengin 2015). The changes included a new media law in 2011 (Law No. 6112/2011, art. 5), permitting use of all Kurdish names in 2014 (Law No. 6529/2014, art. 16[e]), restoration of original place names in 2014 (Law No. 6529/2014, art. 16[a]), changes

in elections and electoral law in 2010, and in 2014 allowing the use of Kurdish in political campaigning (Law No. 6529/2014, arts. 1 and 16[b]) (Kolcak 2015).

However, these reforms did not give legal recognition to Kurdish and were implemented unevenly. Furthermore, they were conceptualized only as individual rather than collective rights. The ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) government did not seem sincere, as some of its top politicians continued to denigrate Kurdish language in public. The legal reforms made by the government fell short of the demands for Kurdish language rights (Derince 2017, 179) and did not signal an end to the assimilationist logic of the state (Öpengin 2015).

The period from 2009 to 2015 can be considered an auspicious circle, during which developments in different fields fed into each other. This was an optimistic time, during which there were intermittent peace negotiations between the state and the PKK, and there seemed to be hope that the AKP-led state could come to terms with Turkey's multilingual reality. Due to the legal reforms, i.e., changes in language status, Kurdish became increasingly used and visible in the high domains of broadcast media, research, education, politics, and local administration.

Currently, at least in theory, it is possible to publish and broadcast in Kurdish. Use of Kurdish is legal in political campaigning such as posters and speeches as well as in courtrooms. It is taught and researched at several state universities. There is the state-run TRT-Kurdî, a 24/7 Kurdish-language public broadcasting TV channel, although its content is government-moderated, while private Kurdish-language TV channels have been shut down in the past. The main thing falling short of basic language rights is the right to mother-tongue education as Article 42 of Turkey's 1982 Constitution, still in force today, provides that "no language other than Turkish shall be taught as a mother tongue to Turkish citizens at any institutions of training or education" (Constitution 1982; Zeydanlıoğlu 2012, 110).

The auspicious circle was halted when the peace process between the state and the PKK collapsed in 2015. The reasons for this collapse include the difficult and protracted process of negotiations, the emergence of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Rojava), as well as the electoral success of the pro-Kurdish HDP in the 2015 parliamentary elections, which was not in the interests of the AKP. Heavy-handed repression of Kurdish was restarted with the state of emergency declared after the failed coup attempt in July 2016. Once again, intellectual and cultural activities promoting the Kurdish language became equated with terrorism and were persecuted under terror-related charges. Organizations promoting Kurdish were closed and individuals were expelled from their public sector jobs, prosecuted, and imprisoned.¹⁵ The state of emergency remained in force until July 2018.

Bilingual literates: learning Kurdish as an adult

Kurdish courses for adults have been the most long-lasting and widespread type of Kurdish-language activity in addition to publishing. Often referred to as workshops (*atöhye*), language courses have been organized in Turkey since the mid-1990s (Öpengin 2012, 161), even though illegal until 2003. The first legal private courses were begun in 2004 amid much controversy and bureaucratic red tape and were discontinued a mere 1.5 years later. During their brief

¹⁵ Especially Kurdish studies at universities and the teachers' syndicate Eğitim Sen were hit hard by the expulsions (interview with Tan 2019)

existence they achieved remarkable results and had over 2000 registered students and 1056 graduates with course certificates (Bozarslan 2005, interview with Newayi 2019).

The most important CSOs involved in adult education have been the Kurdish Research Institute in Istanbul (founded in 1992) and Kurdi-Der (closely associated with T'ZP Kurdî, founded in 2006) with its over 30 local branches, mostly located in the Kurdish provinces (Tan 2012a, interview with Tan 2019). It is very difficult to confirm the numbers of participants or the level of language proficiency achieved. According to one estimate, Kurdi-Der taught Kurdish to 25,000 students during its ten years of existence (Derince 2017, 190) and according to another estimate, organizations connected to T'ZP Kurdî had as many as 10,000 students per year (Tan 2012b). The Kurdish Institute in Istanbul is said to have had 1000 students per year at the time it was closed in 2016 (interview with Subaşı 2020). Also, numerous other organizations such as pro-Kurdish political parties, the Diyarbakır Chamber of Architects and various Eğitim Sen branches, have organized language courses for their members over the years. The numbers cited should be taken with a grain of salt as there may have been political motivation to give inflated figures. However, all in all, tens of thousands of mostly young¹⁶ Kurds have studied Kurdish at the courses since 2004, and some of them continued to an advanced level to become teachers themselves (interviews with Tan 2019, and Subaşı 2020).

Despite the obvious difficulties involved in the standardization of a minority language under a repressive state, by now there exists a standardized variety that carries a certain prestige and is considered to be “proper” literary Kurdish.¹⁷ It is governed by systematic morphological, phonological, syntactic, and semantic rules and its lexicon displays little evidence of its contact with Turkish, i.e., it has only limited number of loanwords from Turkish, unlike colloquial Kurdish. However, only a limited number of Kurdish speakers can fully understand this standardized variety as it is not spoken at home (Schluter 2017, 12-13). Most of the media use this variety, which is taught at Kurdish-language courses to both those individuals who did not learn spoken Kurdish as children (new speakers, Kurdish as second language [L2]) as well as those who already speak a dialect of Kurmanji (Kurdish as first language [L1]). Most participants know at least some Kurdish before attending a course. All in all, the question of “fluency” in Kurdish is interesting. For example, elderly native, monolingual Kurdish speakers can feel uncertain of their competences as they are often not literate and may not understand the standard variety (Jamison 2016).

Most important organizations engaged in Kurdish-language teaching were closed in 2016. Banning an organization entails confiscation of its property, including computers, furniture, archives, libraries, and even teacups (interview with Subaşı 2020). Most language activists were not jailed, though many were expelled from their public sector jobs and/or prosecuted. Until 2018 it was impossible to openly organize language courses, though some small-scale ones were apparently organized semi-clandestinely. New organizations have gradually been founded to replace the banned ones, and activities have been revived after the end of the state of emergency. However, there are still fewer courses and fewer students in comparison to the

¹⁶ Approximately 80% of participants in Istanbul are university students (interview with Subaşı 2020) and according to a representative of MED-DER, in Diyarbakır most participants are 18-30 years old. Most students are Kurds.

¹⁷ For more on standardization, see Matras & Reershemius (1991) and Akın (2017).

pre-2016 period. Many of my interlocutors lamented the absence of Kurdi-Der with its centrally led organization and high numbers of students.

As an example of activities in 2019, in Istanbul the Kurdish Research Association (Komeleya Lêkolînên Kurdî, the successor of the Kurdish Institute) offered three-month courses with four hours of teaching a week. There were four levels in Kurmanji, followed by a one-year teacher education, two levels in Zazaki and one in Sorani. The Association had approximately 500 students per year (interview with Subaşı 2020). According to one of its representatives, the two-year old Mesopotamia Language and Culture Research Association (MED-DER) in Diyarbakır offered courses in Kurmanji on three levels and had 300-400 students per year. The association also recently started courses in Zazaki and Sorani (Tigris Haber 2019). Several organizations also offered Kurdish courses for children.

In 2019, the state-run adult education centers under the MEB began to offer courses in Zazaki (but not Kurmanji) if a minimum of twelve students requested it.¹⁸ These adult-education centers number over 1000 and in 2018 offered over 400,000 courses with more than 8 million participants (Kasap 2019); as a result, they could form a good venue for wide-scale Kurdish language adult education.

At the time of writing this article, one of the newest developments in adult education was the start of Kurmanji Kurdish certificate courses in February 2020 by the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Art and Vocational Training Courses (İSMEK) as promised by the mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, for his Kurdish constituencies. The demand greatly exceeded the 135-student quota for the first courses (Yaşar 2020); the Municipality was expected to offer more courses in the coming terms.

Studying Kurdish at university

From 2011 to 2014, Kurdish studies programs were opened at seven universities in Turkey. In four of them, the Kurdish program is taught at a so-called Institute of Living Languages and in three of them in other institutes, such as sociology.¹⁹ It is possible to study Kurdish studies from a bachelor's degree to a Ph.D.²⁰ and to submit one's thesis in Kurdish.

I will give the experience of the Mardin Artuklu institute as an example of university-level Kurdish studies. In 2009 Turkey's Council of Higher Education (YÖK) licensed Artuklu University in Mardin to establish an Institute of Living Languages²¹ to provide postgraduate education in Kurdish and other regional languages. The aim was both to carry out academic research and to train teachers for Kurdish language courses (Öpengin 2015, 14-15). First normal (requiring the submission of a thesis) and non-thesis master's degree programs were offered. The non-thesis program qualified its graduates as teachers of Kurdish. Later, Artuklu University also established undergraduate Kurdish language and culture studies, and several other universities in the Kurdish region opened their own programs.

As the field was new in Turkey, the majority of the first teachers were self-taught with university degrees from other fields (interview with two lecturers of the Artuklu Institute

¹⁸ There have been courses at least in Tunceli, Bingöl, Siverek and Batman.

¹⁹ The universities are as follows: Mardin Artuklu University, Bingöl University, Van Yüzüncü Yıl, and Siirt University, Dicle University (Diyarbakır), Tunceli Munzur University and Alparslan University (Muş).

²⁰ Bingöl University has a Ph.D. program in both Kurmanji and Zazaki, and Dicle in Kurmanji.

²¹ Note the continued avoidance of the word Kurdish in institutional names (Zeydanlıoğlu 2012, 118).

2019). According to Öpengin (2015, 15), most of the departments initially existed only nominally with relatively little academic activity due to the scarcity of qualified staff and some of them remain quite small. Until 2014 using the letters Q, W, and X (not existing in the Turkish alphabet) was still officially forbidden, which made production of teaching materials challenging in a state-run organization that had to follow the laws.²²

The first year in 2012-2013 the Artuklu University non-thesis master's program was extremely popular with 2500 applications (Doğru Haber 2012) and 500 enrolled students. Due to this popularity, the institute could be highly selective and take only students with good skills in Kurdish. As this was the first time it was possible to get a degree in Kurdish studies, many well-known Kurdish intellectuals and authors also enrolled in the programs and have received their master's degrees in Kurdish during the last few years (lecturers of the Artuklu Institute 2019).

Despite the official approval and legitimate status, the institute faced pressure by the state. Later, in the purges following the coup attempt of July 2016, several of the scholars of the institute were expelled by decree law (KHK, *kanun hükmünde kararname*). Initially the fledgling institute was not supported by the political Kurdish movement either (lecturers of the Artuklu institute 2019; Özbek 2020).

It soon became apparent that the MEB would not appoint the new graduates to teach the new elective Kurdish classes at state schools.²³ For example, in 2014 only 18 teachers were appointed (after a hunger strike and out of 1000 graduates). By 2019, only 59 teachers had been appointed: 48 for Kurmanji and 11 for Zazaki (Evrensel 2019). Since 2016 employment opportunities for Kurdish speakers have also become scarcer in other fields as Kurdish language services given by local municipalities were discontinued, many CSOs were closed, Kurdish language media banned and publications confiscated. It is no surprise that the popularity of Kurdish language programs has decreased so that the student quotas are not always fulfilled.

In 2019 Mardin Artuklu University received approximately 100 applications for the non-thesis program with an admission of 30 students. Since many accepted students failed the language exam, the actual enrollment was about 15 students for the non-thesis master's program and 20 for the regular master's degree with thesis requirement (teachers of the Artuklu institute 2019). In fall 2019, students in Artuklu believed it was impossible to find work with a BA in Kurdish studies, not even as an hourly-based teacher. Their motivation for enrolling in the studies was to learn more of their own language and culture rather than employment prospects. Over the years, many university students also had the possibility to study Kurdish language as an elective, in addition to their other studies.

Several universities started elective Kurdish language courses (1-2h/week). Among the forerunners were the private Bilgi and Sabancı Universities in Istanbul in 2009, followed by the public Boğaziçi University. All three are highly prestigious institutions in western Turkey and thus contributed both to the prestige of Kurdish and the corpus planning in the form of developing education materials. Public universities in the Kurdish provinces followed later, Tunceli in 2010 and Dicle in 2014 (Kaplan 2015). Courses in local languages (Kurdish, Arabic

²² Q, W, and X were only allowed in loanwords until 2014 (Kolcak 2015, 71).

²³ Teachers are appointed by the MEB in a centralized system.

or Assyrian) were made obligatory for all undergraduate students of Artuklu University for a while (İBV 2020, 63). Most of these courses have since been discontinued.

All in all, the establishment of Kurdish studies at the university level was an important milestone for Kurdish language rights. It had a great impact on the prestige of the Kurdish language. I was told that the negative image created for Kurdish was ingrained to such a degree that the quality of teaching attained at the Mardin Artuklu institute was a surprise to most observers, including some of the students. In a way, it was now proven beyond any doubt that Kurdish is a fully-fledged language rather than a degenerate mixture of Persian with surrounding languages as so long claimed by Turkish nationalists.

In addition to the symbolic importance, Kurdish studies also offered employment opportunities for Kurdish intellectuals, who produce new research on the language. The research is published, for example, in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Mesopotamian Studies* (<http://jms.artuklu.edu.tr/tr/>). In early 2020 there were a total of 265 master's theses and one Ph.D. dissertation in Kurdish in the YÖK database (<https://tez.yok.gov.tr/UlusalTezMerkezi/>).

Why do so few students choose Kurdish as an elective?

In 2012 Kurmanji and Zazaki as “living languages and dialects” were added to the list of electives students could choose to study for two hours per week from the fifth to eighth grade in state schools. According to the MEB, in 2012–2013 only 18,847 students chose Kurdish even though teaching was, at least in theory, available in 28 provinces out of the total of 81. The demand was highest in Diyarbakır, where 4,469 students (12% of fifth graders) chose it. In Istanbul, there were only 272 students and none in Ankara (Hürriyet 2013). In 2015–2016, a total of 77,931 students chose Kurmanji or Zazaki (Evrensel 2019).²⁴ Figures after that have not been disclosed, but a good indicator is the print run of the Kurmanji primers: the 2019 fifth-grade primer had a print-run of 16,123 copies and the sixth-grade one of 13,265. Thus, taking into account that teaching is offered from grades five to eight, one can roughly estimate that a maximum of 60,000 students study Kurmanji as an elective.

An interesting question is: why are there so few students? Don't Kurds want to study Kurdish? The size of the Kurdish population in Turkey is estimated to be at least thirteen million (Konda 2007) and is probably well over fifteen million. According to a survey study from 2015, mother-tongue education in state schools was supported fully or partially by 95% of Kurdish, Zaza, and Alevi respondents in twelve Kurdish areas (Yeğen et al. 2016, 128-9), and an estimated two million students participated in the school boycott in 2010 to demand Kurdish teaching. So what hinders the uptake of Kurdish language electives?

Bureaucratic and administrative hindrance: The MEB has been reluctant to appoint teachers of Kurdish (see above; interview with Seyari 2019). Thus, at times classes have not been given because there are no teachers, or the classes have been taught by teachers without formal qualifications, and often without the necessary skills. The local school administrators have also been reluctant to arrange the courses. Several interlocutors talked about how parents

²⁴ In addition to Kurmanji and Zazaki, in 2019 it was possible to select Bosnian, Albanian, or Caucasian languages such as Georgian, Adyghe, Abaza, and Laz (MEB 2019). Arabic was not included, but since 2017–2018 (Hürriyet 2016) it has been possible to choose Arabic (as a foreign language) from the second to the eighth grade. In religiously oriented Imam Hatip middle schools classical Arabic is an obligatory language with two hours a week.

have been discouraged from choosing Kurdish. Instead, they have been advised to select something “more suitable,” such as courses on Quran or the Prophet Muhammed’s life. The way one of my interviewees put it, many Kurds are not educated, so when the rector advises them to do something, they tend to follow the advice. The same person, who had worked in Bingöl and had a Zaza background, remarked that Kurdish courses were held in those schools, where the administration was more sensitive to language issues. One also heard of school districts where classes were not organized, despite requests by parents.

Poor image, low status, and limited functionality of Kurdish: Several of my interlocutors argued that the negative view created by the Turkish state had been internalized by many Kurds, becoming part of their language beliefs. For them Kurdish relates to poverty and backwardness (see also Çağlayan 2014; Çoşkun et al. 2011). While the Kurdish movement made the Kurdish language the single most important component of Kurdish identity, this importance is highly symbolic. When parents are choosing the electives for their children, they think about the future use of the skills to be acquired (interview Seyari 2019). My interlocutors argued that many parents do not choose it because they think it is not useful in passing the highly competitive university entrance exam (in Turkish) or finding employment.²⁵ Some parents are also hesitant about selecting Kurdish for their children because of state repression.

Lack of endorsement by the political movement: I explicitly asked about the part played by the Kurdish political actors *vis-à-vis* the elective Kurdish courses. While some interviewees believed the politicians do what they can, they were also critical.²⁶ The HDP-led political movement was seen to be too strict in its ambitions. Kurdish politicians did not embrace the elective courses because they fell short of the demanded education in mother tongue. Thus, the political movement did not engage in popular mobilization for enrollment. By 2019 this was seen to have been a mistake by many language activists, though not all.

My interlocutors argued that the number of enrolled students would multiply if the Kurdish parties put their weight behind the courses. Large-scale enrollment could bring several benefits. It would normalize the use of Kurdish for children and their parents. If you study the language in a classroom, you can speak it elsewhere in the school as well (interview with Tan 2019). Becoming a widely used language of education would be beneficial for the prestige, status, and functionality of the language. It would help in raising a new generation of Kurds, who can both speak and write at least some Kurdish, and it might slow down the language shift. It would also force the MEB to appoint Kurdish teachers, making Kurdish more useful for employment. Furthermore, high levels of interest could perhaps, with time, be used to demand more classes and even education of Kurdish as a mother tongue.

If the politicians could really influence enrollment, and high enrollment could possibly bring so many benefits, why were they not out there campaigning? In the opinion of the language activists I interviewed, who had devoted much of their working life to the Kurdish language, one reason is the advanced stage of assimilation: the Kurdish political movement is already too Turkish. The main language of the movement is Turkish and many politicians are not fluent in Kurdish and prefer to make their public addresses in Turkish (Derince 2016), partly because many in their audience are not fluent in Kurdish either. For them, Kurdish identity is

²⁵ For criticism of the division into symbolic and identity-related value of minoritized languages versus the instrumental value of the majority language, see May (2006, 263-4).

²⁶ Similar complaints against the political movement were one of the reasons for the emergence of the autonomous Kurdish language movement fifteen years ago.

a political one and language is a symbolic part of that identity rather than a functional tool of communication. A case in point is Selahattin Demirtaş, the much loved, imprisoned co-leader of the HDP (2014–2018), who has written and published his fiction in Turkish. Many interviewees complained about the lack of Kurdish skills of public figures in general, including singers and actors who perform in Kurdish but switch to Turkish offstage. Researchers publish exclusively in Turkish and English.

In the absence of large-scale public campaigns, only 30% of Kurdish parents were aware of the elective Kurdish courses in middle school (Rawest 2020). Thus, the issue at this stage is not only about convincing parents to select Kurdish, but of informing them of the option. Alas, the language movement is not a mass movement and cannot reach the public directly without the assistance of the political movement.

Closed and sealed: private schools

Several private schools teaching in Kurdish were opened in September 2014 after a change in legislation made this possible (Kolcak 2015, 73). They were initiated by the local municipalities, Eğitim Sen and Kurdi-Der/T'ZP Kurdi (Ekinci 2014).²⁷ There was constant pressure on the schools, which were closed several times (Aslan and Sunar 2014). By October 2016, all schools teaching in Kurdish had been closed (Berk 2016; Diren 2019). To my knowledge, no Kurdish-language private schools existed officially at the time of writing this article, though one of the schools continued education in Kurdish without any official status (Diren 2019).

Diyarbakır Municipality, among other municipalities, also founded multilingual pre-schools in 2015. However, they were transformed into Turkish-only in February 2017 by the centrally nominated trustee (*kayyum*), and the Kurdish-speaking teachers were fired (Evrensel 2017). This was in line with the more general policy, with trustees also ending online services in other languages besides Turkish, closing the cultural organizations, and purging the public libraries of Kurdish-language books (Yeni Yaşam Gazetesi 2019). In the fall of 2020, there was only one private Kurdish pre-school in Diyarbakır (discussion with Diyarbakır-based activist 2020). Kurdish language revitalization efforts are obviously much hampered by the state's intolerance towards these local initiatives.

Evaluation of impact: the difficulty of language change

In the beginning of the paper I listed Spolsky's (2004, 5) three components of language policy: (1) the actual language practices of the speech community, (2) the beliefs about language and language use (ideologies), and (3) the specific efforts to modify or influence language practice by any kind of language intervention. Most of this article was devoted to mapping the development of Kurdish language education, i.e., education-related efforts to influence the language practices of Turkey's Kurds. Now is time to evaluate their impact on language revitalization.

There is wide agreement among language activists that the most important achievements have been at the academic or elite level. Adult education language courses and university-level Kurdish studies have contributed to the creation of a Kurdish reading and writing elite, in

²⁷ It is not clear how many schools were opened. I was told by one activist that there was a total of 36 schools. Another source spoke of 16.

addition to their contribution to corpus planning. To follow Spolsky's classification, the activists agree that the efforts have managed to modify the language practices of *an important section* of the speech community.

Part of this promising development has been the increased presence and prestige of Kurdish in the high domains, in this case, those of academia. Yet, it is questionable to what extent the increased public presence influences the actual language choices of everyday life.²⁸ My interlocutors agreed that the language shift continues among the masses, which was often expressed along the lines that "one hardly hears Kurdish spoken on the streets of Diyarbakır." Following Spolsky, the language management efforts have not changed the actual language practices of *most members* of the speech community.

One reason behind this is most likely the continued negative or conflictual language beliefs. While 88% of Kurdish parents would like their children to learn Kurdish, only 23% spend considerable effort to ensure this (Rawest 2020). As was discussed above, often Kurdish is not viewed as a useful tool of communication in a Turkish-dominated society, and thus little effort is given for its cultivation in practice. Even many of the language activists and Kurdish intellectuals I spoke with struggled with ensuring their children's fluency in Kurdish and ended up themselves all too often using Turkish. In the cities of Western Turkey, many avoid speaking Kurdish if there are Turks present, as it is feared to be offensive (Schluter 2020, interview Avcı 2019).

It is also possible that as a result of the ongoing language shift, everyday use of Kurdish may already be beyond their level of proficiency and/or Turkish might be the stronger language they are more comfortable in (interview Avcı 2019). Research on multilingual Basque speakers has shown that multilingual individuals tend to prefer the language they are most competent in (Azurmendi et al. 2001, 247).

The impact of the elective Kurdish classes is not great. The activists I spoke to viewed the two hours per week of elective Kurdish as mere window dressing. It enabled the AKP government to claim that it provides minority language rights while only doing so in a superficial manner (discussion with representatives of Eğitim Sen Diyarbakır branch 2020). Yet, they might act as a potential step for further language rights.

Future prospects: the community, activists, and the state

After the collapse of the peace process in 2015 and the proclamation of the state of emergency in 2016, the oppression of Kurdish language re-intensified. Books in the Kurdish language have been regularly banned, the only Kurdish-language daily newspaper *Azadiya Welat* remains closed,²⁹ as do all private television channels broadcasting in Kurdish or by Kurdish ownership, except for the children's channel *Zarok TV*. Kurdish language private schools remain closed. Centrally appointed trustees rule the local municipalities and pro-Kurdish politicians have been prosecuted and jailed *en masse*. Scholars have been expelled from the Kurdish-language programs at universities, which struggle to attract students due to weak employment prospects upon graduation. Parents have been discouraged from enrolling their children in elective Kurdish classes.

²⁸ Fishman has argued that minority-language education or mass media operate too far from the nexus of mother tongue transmission to make a significant contribution for RLS (1991, 67).

²⁹ There is a new weekly named *Xwebûn*, and a variety of online media from news portals to radio.

Use of Kurdish in different spheres of life may not be illegal as such but is once again discouraged by the authorities. According to one activist based in Diyarbakır, the recent language oppression has been heavier than in the 1990s, when the scope of language rights was still much more limited.

By 2019, the organizational scene had somewhat recovered, and new dynamism was emerging around language issues despite the precarious situation of many of the activists. An example of this budding dynamism was the founding of the Kurdish Language and Culture Network in Diyarbakır in January 2020, which aims to facilitate coordination and cooperation of different actors on language-related efforts. The network proclaimed 2020 the year of development of Kurdish. Indeed, many CSOs were engaged in corpus planning, perceived as groundwork for future mother-tongue-based education: they developed better teaching materials and curricula, coined new terminology, and collected thesauruses. Also, there were several campaigns under way for encouraging enrollment in the existing elective courses and for putting pressure on school administrators to organize more of them. The revitalization efforts had not ceased under the repression but continued in a smaller and more cautious and less visible manner. It was also hoped that language revitalization could be a theme that unites the different CSOs and pro-Kurdish political actors.

The active involvement of the community in language revitalization efforts is considered vital for their success (McCarty 2018).³⁰ Fishman (2001, 16) has underlined the importance of a committed cadre of language activists (RLSers) and of community-building. A form of this community and cadre-building has taken place in Turkey, especially through the adult education language courses, which also recruit new cadres for the organizations so that most volunteer teachers are from the organizations' own training programs. In line with this, the founding of the Kurdish language movement can be traced to the earlier private Kurdish language courses (Sidal 2019). CSOs and activists have been involved in awareness-raising among Kurds, created networks of activists and volunteers, and organized highly visible campaigns for language rights. It is hard to imagine that university-level Kurdish studies could have started successfully without the preceding language education activities.

Yet, it is unrealistic to expect the CSOs and other non-state actors to be able to reverse the language shift against the repressive policies of an authoritarian state. It is questionable to what extent languages can be managed without the support of a powerful state (Spolsky 2004, 223) and reversing language shift is considered especially difficult (Fishman 2001, 12). The CSOs involved are small, operate on a narrow financial basis, and their possibilities for mass mobilization are limited. As has been detailed above, Turkey's public institutions have been quite reluctant participants in the process. As Zana Farqini (2006, 168) put it after compiling three dictionaries: "Actually, we did the work the state should have done... I think there needs to be affirmative action on Kurdish, funds from the budget need to be allocated for developing this language."

One of the relatively successful RLS cases that Kurdish could be compared to is Basque/Euskara in the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC, Spain). Basque has about 600,000 speakers in Spain and France, all multilingual in Spanish or French. The situation of Basque was in some respects similar to Kurdish: it was neglected for centuries and at times

³⁰ Historically Hebrew is the best-known case of successful language revitalization by active involvement of the community. Other cases considered partially successful are Basque/Euskara, Maori, Hawaiian, and Inari Saami in Finland.

persecuted. It remained mostly an oral language despite an important literary tradition. In the late 1970s it was spoken by about a quarter of the region's population, mainly in the rural areas with only a small Basque-speaking urban middle class (Fishman 1991, 150-152). In 1979 Basque was granted co-official status in the BAC and in 1982 a strong language policy for revitalization was adopted by the regional government, combined with active involvement of the language community. By 2008 there was a robust literate environment, and the number of Basque speakers in the BAC had risen modestly to 30% of the population, with considerably higher percentages in the younger age cohorts (Gorter and Cenoz 2011).

In 2008 most students chose education with Basque as the language of instruction and Spanish as a subject (60% in primary 6-12 grades, only 9% selected Spanish-based instruction with 4-5 hours of Basque, and the rest attended 50-50 bilingual schools). Knowledge of Basque is valued because it is required for many public-sector jobs and has advantages in the private sector as well (Gorter and Cenoz 2011, 656-7). The government supports teachers' learning of Basque and subsidizes educational material. When compared with the two other Basque regions, we see that in Navarre (NAC, Spain) where Basque has official status but no strong, centralized language policy, there was a small increase in the number of speakers. In Iparralde (France), where Basque has no official status and language revitalization efforts have been undertaken only by the civil society, the number of speakers has decreased (Gorter and Cenoz 2011, 656).

In light of Spolsky (2004), the Basque example (Fishman 1991, Azurmendi et al. 2001, Gorter et Cenoz 2011), and the experience with Kurdish in Turkey so far, it is easy to argue that civil-society and private initiatives alone are not enough to revitalize Kurdish, and neither is state neutrality. Kurdish needs strong and well-planned language policy and planning (interview with Tan 2019; for the importance of ideological clarity, see Fishman 2001) and affirmative action, including mother-tongue based education.³¹ To achieve this, wide cooperation of pro-Kurdish actors is necessary. They need to prioritize language as an end itself, not as a politicized tool in identity politics.

My interlocutors were almost unanimous in their emphasis on the need to have Kurdish taught as an obligatory mother tongue at state schools as the most important practical measure to ensure the long-term survival of Kurdish as the daily language of a significant part of the population in Turkey. Other language-planning activities were considered necessary and useful, but not enough.

However, in the context of the return to harsh Turkish nationalism in the political arena since 2015, any meaningful state support for multilingual policies does not look likely in the short or medium term, and none of the activists I spoke with was optimistic about mother tongue-based education in the short term (within five years). They had lost their hope in President Erdoğan and the AKP government. Perhaps after Erdoğan, perhaps in ten years, they were saying.

³¹ The case of Irish warns against concentrating mainly on the high domains and education. Irish has remained a second language (L2) learned and used primarily at school. About 40% of the population claims at least some knowledge of the language, but only 1.7% use it daily (Central Statistics Office 2016).

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