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Introduction

Kurdish: Linguicide, resistance and hope

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Finally Kurdish has made it to the pages of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*.¹ This is an event in the history of Kurdish language studies. There is no article about the language in thirty-six years of publishing since 1974.² And *IJSL* is not alone in its omission of Kurdish. In fact, this is the first time in the West that a whole issue of a linguistics journal is devoted to its study.

If we move from journals to books, the picture does not change. Kurdish is visibly missing in the growing literature on the sociology of language and sociolinguistics even though in recent years research on the politics of the language (e.g., Hassanpour 2000; Olson 2009), its linguicide in Turkey (e.g., Hassanpour 1993; Skutnabb-Kangas and Fernandez 2008), Iran and Syria (Hassanpour, Skutnabb-Kangas and Chyet 1996), its struggles over standardization and officialization (e.g., Hassanpour 1992), its use in the media (e.g., Sheyholislami 2010), its general description (e.g., Kreyenbroek 1992) or its gendered lexical heritage (e.g., Hassanpour 2005) has been published in books, dissertations and disparate journal articles. In a “sociology of language” approach to the study of Kurdish, we may address questions about the precarious life of this language which many philologists and linguists have ignored, quite often deliberately (Hassanpour 2000). The story of the preparation of this special issue of *IJSL* brings to light significant

1 In writing this Introduction, we have drawn on our ongoing research on the language including Hassanpour (1992, 2011), Sheyholislami (2010, 2011, 2012, forthcoming) and Skutnabb-Kangas (2000, 2008).

2 There are special issues on, for instance, Berber (*IJSL* 123), Slovene (*IJSL* 124), Macedonian (*IJSL* 131), Estonian (*IJSL* 139), Serbian (*IJSL* 151), Quechua (*IJSL* 165) and on the sociolinguistic landscapes of Turkey (*IJSL* 165), Iran (*IJSL* 148) and Arab countries.

social facts about the position of the language both in the evolving world linguistic order and within the Kurdish speech community. We are confident that there is no conspiracy to ignore Kurdish in either *IJSL* or hundreds of journals devoted to the study of language. It is, in fact, the absence of conspiracies that is of sociological interest. We intend to reflect, here, on the social life of the language, its troubled history, and the intricacies of undertaking research on it.

In terms of the number of speakers, Kurdish ranks fortieth among the world's 6,600 to 7,000 languages.³ The numerical strength of the language has, however, been undermined by the division of its speech area and speakers among five neighboring countries of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Armenia, and the adoption, by these states, of policies ranging from deliberate killing of the language or linguicide (Turkey since 1925, Iran, especially during 1925–1941, Syria since the mid-1960s) to tolerance (Syria in the mid-1930s and World War II to 1958) and officialization (locally in the USSR, 1921–1992 and Iraq, 1918–1991, and on the national level in Iraq since 2005). Under this heterogeneous, uneven geopolitical division of power, Kurdish is now one of the two official languages of Iraq while it is denied many rights including mother tongue medium education in all neighboring countries.

The Kurdish speech area is in Western Asia, now comprising part of what is known as the “Middle East”. Kurdistan, ‘land of the Kurds’, comprises part of the region, southern Iraq and Mesopotamia, where writing in its alphabetical form was invented some six millennia ago. The archeological record including inscriptions in the mountains of Kurdistan are full of written texts in diverse languages which are, with a few exceptions, extinct. It is not well known how Kurdish survived in a region which is both a mosaic of ancient written languages and their burying ground. Having co-existed with the rich literary tradition of Arabic, Persian, Syriac, Armenian, Ottoman Turkish and spoken languages such as Neo-Aramaic, Kurdish had a rather late beginning in writing. The earliest known evidence dates back to the sixteenth century when two dialects, Kurmanji and Hewrami, began a literary tradition, predominantly in poetic form. Later in the early nineteenth century, another dialect, better known as Sorani (Central Kurdish) since the 1960s, developed its written tradition, followed by occasional writing in other dialects.

The three literary traditions were largely poetic with only a few prose works, which were mostly non-narrative. This literary spark in the mountains of Kurdistan, much like that in Azeri, Pashtu or Baluchi languages, was overshadowed

³ This ranking is based on an estimation of the number of speakers at 20 million in the early 1980s (Leclerc 1986: 55, 138). According to one calculation (Krauss 1992: 7), the median number of speakers of a language is about 5,000 to 6,000.

by the brilliant and rich literary traditions of Arabic and Persian, the dominant classical languages from northwest Africa to Central Asia and West India. While literary Kurdish was born and survived under the hegemony of these literary languages, it suffered immensely when they became the official languages of the modern states of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. If in pre-modern times, these languages inspired the Kurds in launching their literary tradition, the modern states imposed them on Kurdish speakers in linguicidal projects aimed at creating Turkish, Persian (Iranian) and Arab (nation-)states (see the articles in this issue).

Living under the shadow of Arabic and Persian, both associated with Islam, literary Kurdish was the vehicle of two autochthonous religions of Kurdistan known, in the West, as Yezidism (*Meshefa Reş* [Black Book] and *Kitêba Cilwe* [Book of Revelation] in Kurmanji) and Ahl-e Haqq (various texts in Hewrami).⁴

Kurdish has been written in a variety of alphabets, including Armenian, Arabic, Cyrillic, Roman and Syriac. The first printed translations of the Bible into Kurmanji were published in the Armenian alphabet.⁵ Kurmanji texts have also been written in the Syriac alphabet (see, for instance, Fuad [1970: 121–123]). This diversity reflects the complex linguistic and literary life of West Asia,⁶ as well as the post World War I division of Kurdistan among states ranging from monarchical Iraq to socialist USSR, where the choice of alphabets was primarily a political event decided by the government.

The Kurdish speech area (c.f. Figure 1) has experienced many divisions, the more permanent one being the border between the Ottoman and Iranian states in 1639. By the mid-nineteenth century, a small enclave of Kurdish population came under Russian rule. While this border has survived until now (forming Iran-Turkey and Iran-Iraq borders), the Ottoman Empire was dismantled by the end of World War I, and Britain and France created a number of states out of the provinces they occupied. The Ottoman part of Kurdistan was re-divided among Iraq (under British Occupation, 1918–1920, and Mandate, 1920–1932), Syria (under French Occupation, 1918–1920, and Mandate, 1920–1946) while the rest remained under Ottoman rule until 1923 when the Turkish nationalist leader Kemal Atatürk abolished the Ottoman regime and replaced it by the Republic of Turkey. The

4 There is a controversy on whether Yezidism is rooted in a written or oral tradition; it is argued, more recently, that the written texts date back to more recent times, e.g., nineteenth century. See, for instance, Kreyenbroek (1995: 1–25).

5 This was a translation of the Gospel of Mathew published in 1856 in Constantinople.

6 There has been little research interest in comparative studies of the literary and oral traditions of the peoples of West Asia – Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, Jews, Kurds, Persians, Turks and others.

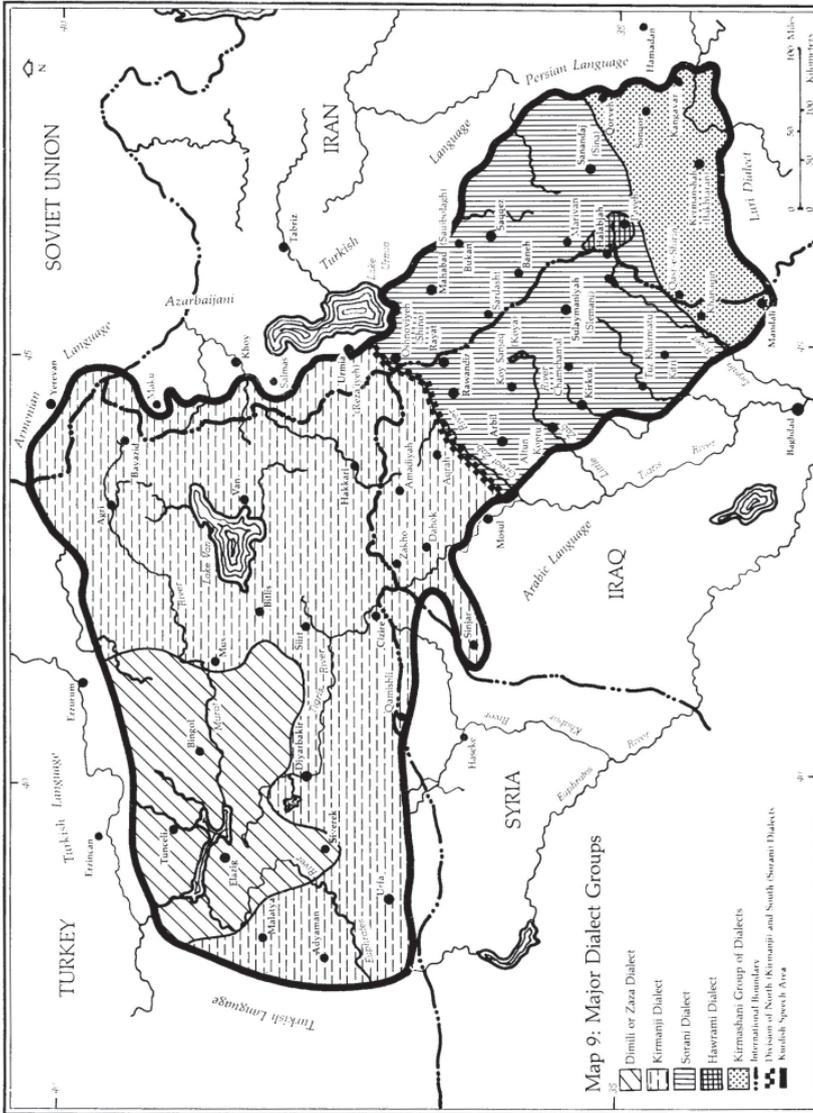


Fig. 1: Major Kurdish dialect groups (Hassanpour 1992: 22)

Kurds of Caucasus became part of the USSR, after Soviet power was extended to Caucasia in 1921.

These divisions have re-shaped the political weight of the dialects and their course of development. Kurmanji (also called Northern Kurmanji or Northern Kurdish) is now spoken by the majority of the Kurds in all countries where Kurdish is spoken. Sorani (also called Southern Kurmanji or Central Kurdish) is spoken in Iran and Iraq. The third dialect group, variously identified as Southern Kurdish and Kermashani, is spoken primarily in Iran but some of the dialects are also spoken in Iraq. The fourth group consists of Hewrami⁷ or, in European philology, Gorani (Iran and Iraq) and Zaza or Dimilki (Turkey). Each of these dialects consists of a group of subdialects.

There is no consensus on the nature or significance of these dialectal variations. While the Kurds themselves have not doubted the Kurdishness of the four dialect groups, some Western philologists in the late nineteenth century argued that the Hewrami/Zaza group constitutes a non-Kurdish language (MacKenzie 1961, 1966). More recently, some linguists have made the same claim regarding Kurmanji and Sorani assigning each the status of autonomous languages. These claims are based primarily on genealogical classifications made on the basis of a few phonetic features to the full disregard of the sociological fact of speakers identifying themselves as Kurds and their language as Kurdish (Hassanpour 1998). Equally significant from a sociological perspective is the emergence of a group of Zaza speakers since the late 1980s who claim a non-Kurdish ethnic and linguistic identity. In 2006, a group of Hewrami speakers submitted a petition, endorsed by about 500 signatures, to the parliament of the Kurdistan Regional Government (Iraqi Kurdistan) and demanded to be recognized as a “language minority”; they emphasized, however, that they considered their language and ethnicity to be “Kurdish” (Sheyholislami 2008). The rift between native speakers and (some) linguists, as well as the changing identities of some Zaza speakers, highlight the limitations of a purely linguistic approach to language which is both a social and linguistic formation.

Writing in Kurdish and its subsequent literary development began under conditions of a flourishing feudal order in the sixteenth century.⁸ The great majority of Kurds lived in rural societies, both tribal and feudal, with a small but significant urban population. And most of the rural population, the peasantry, was tied to the land in a mode of production similar to serfdom in European societies. This

7 While Kurds and Hewrami speakers call this dialect and its variants “Hewrami”, Western philologists classify Hewrami as a dialect of Gorani (see, e.g., MacKenzie 1966: 4).

8 For instance, two Ottoman sultans, one in 1485 and the other in 1515 banned the use of printing in the Arabic alphabet (Oman 1991: 795).

socio-economic system was conducive to fragmentation, diversity of dialects, and plurality of cultures and literary traditions.

The feudal order of Kurdistan had its elaborate system of principalities, i.e., mini-states which ruled over much of Kurdistan; some were independent small dynasties while others were nominally dependent on either the Ottoman or Iranian monarchs. The emergence of literary Kurdish dialects is historically associated with the rise of Kurdish political power in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This literature was born in the mosque schools and in the courts of Kurdish princes and feudal lords.

Throughout much of its written history, Kurdish literature was scribal, handwritten on paper. The Ottoman and Iranian monarchs were not interested in the use and diffusion of printing when this technology began spreading from Europe to the East in the sixteenth century. Paper and ink and even limited wood-block printing, devised in China and Korea, had made incursions into West Asia long before Gutenberg, but the first printed books in Arabic letters came from the West.

The transition from Kurdish scribal to print culture began in 1898 with the publication of *Kurdistan*, the first Kurdish newspaper in Cairo. The paper, like the ones that followed it from 1909 to 1923, was predominantly in the Kurmanji dialect.

World War I (1914–1918) and the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire changed the linguistic landscape of Kurdistan. The Ottoman state's genocide of the Armenian and Assyrian peoples in 1915–1923 virtually eliminated the Armenian and Neo-Aramaic languages from northern parts of Kurdistan where Armenians, Assyrians and Kurds had lived for centuries. After the war, the migration of the sizeable Jewish community of north-western Iraqi Kurdistan removed their Neo-Aramaic language and culture from the Kurdish speech area. Although the physical destruction of the Kurds in Turkey was much more limited than that of Armenians and Assyrians, they too were subjected to a harsh policy of linguistic and ethniccide. Under these conditions, Kurdish turned into a site of inter-state political conflict (Hassanpour 1993).

The 1918 re-division of the Kurdish speech area also changed the destinies of the dialects. Kurmanji's superior position came to an end with its division among five newly forming states and its violent suppression in the Republic of Turkey, which had the largest number of speakers and a flourishing modern-style intelligentsia. While the repression of Kurdish can be traced back to the late Ottoman period, republican Turkey pursued a policy of linguistic (see Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar 2010), the deliberate killing of the language, after the suppression of a Kurdish revolt in 1925 (see articles by Fernandes; Zeydanlıoğlu; Üngör, this issue). In neighboring Syria, the French Mandatory power tolerated speaking in the language and, for a few years before and during World War II, allowed Kurd-

ish publishing but rejected demands for mother-tongue medium education. In Iran, too, official policy under Reza Shah was deliberate killing of the language (see Sheyholislami, this issue).

The policy of linguicide in Turkey and Iran did not simply affect the speakers of Kurdish in these countries. Western powers, in alliance with Turkey and Iran and against the USSR, kept silent about the policy of linguicide and ethnocide and, in fact, endorsed it. While Britain and France, whose Mandatory rule over Iraq and Syria was recognized in 1920 by the League of Nations, had pledged to protect the rights of their “Kurdish minority”, they supported the policy of restricting their language rights by all means possible. This was in spite of the fact that the League of Nations had, as early as 1925, committed itself to make Kurdish an official local language in Iraq (*Question of the frontier between Turkey and Iraq*: 89).

Kurdish leaders in Iraq protested the League for failing to pressure Britain-Iraq into complying with their pledges regarding language rights. The British diplomatic correspondence of the period, 1920s to the 1950s, provides a detailed documentation of the concerns of the UK about Kurdish nationalism and how granting any “concessions” to this nationalism may play into the hands of “communists”. Moreover, France and Britain were determined to prevent the “spill-over” of this nationalism into Turkey and Iran. Many Western academics and mainstream media pursued, in unison with their states, a similar line. After the war, the state, mainstream media, and many in academia, including linguists who studied Kurdish, endorsed the criminalization of the language in Turkey, Iran and Syria in spite of the fact that the suppression of any language violated, among others, the Charter of the United Nations (paragraphs 6.11, 55), UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (paragraphs 2, 26), and the International Covenant on Economic and Political Rights (article 27).⁹ Linguists and linguistics had not yet taken linguicide seriously. Even when the conceptual and theoretical frameworks for problematizing language killing and language death began to be worked out in the 1960s and 1970s, many linguists specializing in Kurdish remained silent (Hassanpour 2000). This was in spite of the fact that the criminalization of the language came also with a ban on field work by linguists and other researchers, both native and non-native, especially in Turkey, Iran and Syria. While Western politicians endorsed the project of linguicide, linguists who studied the language decided to remain a-political and build a high wall between language and politics.

⁹ For more information on Turkey’s violation of international law see Skutnabb-Kangas and Bucak (1994: 347–370). For information and analysis of the limitations of Turkey’s recent language reforms, see Dunbar and McKay (2002).

It is, thus, not difficult to see why Kurdish was rarely taught in Europe and North America. Unlike Arabic, Persian or Turkish, it was not the language of any state. Moreover, it had been criminalized except in Iraq and the USSR. Lack of academic interest meant lack of publishing interest. Academic libraries cannot, under the circumstances, build a collection adequate for research and teaching of the language. All of this amounts to a dearth of faculty members specializing in the language, lack of teaching material, limited supervision of student research, and little funding of field work. Quite often degree programs in Middle Eastern languages are supported by government funding and, sometimes, support from Middle Eastern governments.

In 1958, the pro-Western monarchy in Iraq was overthrown by nationalist officers, an event which the US and its allies considered a shift to communism. The US, interested in the potential of Kurdish nationalism to undermine the new Iraqi republican regime, declared Kurdish a “strategic language”, which allowed funding the development of textbooks and its teaching for the purpose of familiarizing students and government personnel with the language.¹⁰ Even then, both governments and academics continued to support Turkey’s linguistic policy and endorse its claim that there was no Kurdish language and no “Kurdish problem” because the Kurds had been assimilated once and for all.¹¹

The formation of the Iraqi state under the British Mandate together with the suppression of the language in Turkey changed the linguistic landscape of Kurdistan. Britain allowed the limited use of Kurdish in the media, elementary education, and local administration. Sorani was the dialect of this official local language (Hassanpour 1992, this issue). Thus, while state policy in Turkey, Iran and Syria threatened the viability of Kurmanji, in Iraq, the status of Kurmanji was undermined by the ascendancy of Sorani. However, if the largest section of Kurmanji speech area had turned into the killing fields of the language in Turkey, the

10 The Office of Education (Department of Health, Education and Welfare) proposed in 1960 to Ernest N. McCarus, Associate Professor of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Literatures, University of Michigan, to prepare a basic course and a series of readers “for the instruction of students in that language” (Cameron 1967: iii). McCarus (1960: 325) wrote that “Kurdish today has strategic importance because of current political conditions in the Middle East, but it has long been of interest to Westerners for a variety of reasons.”

11 See, for instance, article by Morgan Philips Price, Member of British Parliament, in the *Manchester Guardian* (September 1950): “There is no doubt that the Turkish method of national assimilation coupled with political freedom is bringing results, but it is a drastic remedy that only a strong Government can attempt. . . I doubt now if the Russians will succeed in making any mischief among the “mountain Turks” (the Turkish name for their Kurds) of Anatolia. They may be more successful however, in Persia and Iraq” (quoted in *Bulletin du Centre d’Études Kurdes*, No. 13, September 1950, p. 11).

dialect was promoted, under Soviet rule, in the small enclaves of Kurdish population in Caucasia from 1921 to 1937. Here, Kurmanji was the only dialect spoken. Unlike Turkey, where an urban modern intelligentsia had been in the making after the 1860s, the Kurdish society in Caucasia was tribal, rural and predominantly orate. Numerically, it was the smallest Kurdish population of the five countries; moreover, Kurds were scattered throughout Caucasia and Central Asia, with a larger concentration in Armenia. Progress was swift, however. If illiteracy rates remained high in Turkey and the rest of Kurdistan, literacy was achieved among the Kurdish community of the USSR by the early 1940s when the first generation of the intelligentsia had already emerged.

The first conference on planning the development of Kurdish was convened in Yerevan, capital of Armenia, in 1934. It was decided that Kurmanji would be the language of writing, education and publishing. The norm chosen was the language spoken by the Kurdish working class of Armenia which would be developed on the basis of the “literary school of Eḥmedê Xan”, the prominent poet of the seventeenth century.¹²

Kurdish publishing was more advanced in the USSR than in Iraq, Iran and Syria. Between 1920 and 1985, the number of books per 1000 persons was 2.17 in Iraq, 0.14 in Iran, 0.09 in Syria, 6.41 in the USSR, and 1.13 for all four countries (Hassanpour 1992: 218). Of all Kurdish periodicals published between 1898–1985, 72.4% were in Iraq, though most of them were ephemeral. However, if we use the more accurate measure of the number of journals per 100,000 persons in 1985, the USSR with one regularly published paper, *R’ya T’eze* [New Road], emerges as the most active site of Kurdish journalism.¹³ In broadcasting, too, Soviet Kurds were ahead of the rest if measured by the number of broadcasting hours per units of population (Hassanpour 1992: 296).

Kurdish publishing and education were brought to an end between 1937 and 1945 when many Kurds from Armenia and Azerbaijan were deported to Central Asia in 1937 followed by the deportation of Georgia’s Kurds to Central Asia in 1944. Although this World War II-era policy was reversed and publishing and radio broadcasting resumed in 1954, the promotion of the language never returned to the peak of pre-war years.

¹² For a report on this conference, see Vil’chevskii (1936) and a summary of the report in Nikitine (1956: 289–293).

¹³ The USSR with one newspaper and a Kurdish population of 115,858 ranked first (0.86%), Iraq with eight journals and a Kurdish population of 3,105,000 (1980) ranked second (0.25%), and Iran ranked third (0.05%) with two magazines and a population of 3,500,000 (1980). For sources and more detail see Hassanpour (1992: 246).

The access of many languages of the world to the new media of motion picture and broadcasting has been quite limited even decades after their emergence. Radio broadcasting and cinema lend themselves to state control, and in the Middle East, broadcasting emerged as a state monopoly. In fact, in Iran and Turkey, broadcasting and film were in the official languages only, and used to Turkify and Persianize the Kurds and other non-Turkish and non-Persian peoples. Still, broadcasting overcame the barrier of borders, and acted as a major factor in creating a national listening public. At the same time, under conditions of the Cold War, Western powers interfered in the destinies of Kurdish language broadcasting (Hassanpour 1992, 1996).

If printing was a late-comer to Kurdistan, Kurdish had an early start in broadcasting which began in the mid-1920s in Soviet Caucasia. Some fifteen years later, Britain and France allowed Kurdish broadcasting under conditions of World War II. This was a response to the extensive Nazi radio propaganda which had begun before the war. Radio Baghdad launched its programming in 1939 with a brief daily Kurdish broadcast. Later, the British-sponsored Sharq al-'Adna [Near East] station operating in Palestine launched a Kurdish program. Both were in Sorani but a French-sponsored program began broadcasting in Kurmanji in Beirut. These war-time stations came to an abrupt end by the end of the war, although Radio Baghdad continued and expanded its predominantly Sorani program to three hours just before the fall of the monarchy in 1958 (Hassanpour 1992: 281–303; 1996).

While Britain and France closed down their Kurdish broadcasting stations by the end of the war, in the USSR, Kurdish publishing resumed in 1945 and broadcasting began on Radio Yerevan in 1954. The half-hour Kurdish program of Radio Yerevan was entirely in Kurmanji and for a while in the early 1950s, Radio Baku allowed the leaders of the Iran's Kurdistan Democratic Party, who lived in exile in Azerbaijan, to broadcast their anti-Shah and anti-US speeches and party positions in Kurdish. During decades of harsh suppression of the language in Turkey when possession of recorded Kurdish music and listening to foreign broadcasting were criminalized, many Kurds tuned in to Radio Yerevan. In the dark years of violent repression in Turkey, listeners saw a ray of hope every evening when the station began with *Yerevan xeber dede* [Yerevan speaks]. In sharp contrast, the United States and Britain treated this program as well as broadcasts from Radio Baku as Soviet propaganda aimed at "stirring Kurdish nationalism". The confidential diplomatic correspondence of the period as well as some Western media reports indicate that the US and UK were entertaining the idea of broadcasting in Kurdish in order to neutralize the impact of Soviet broadcasting. However, this project did not materialize because both governments came to the conclusion that broadcasting in the language, even if the content was American and British

propaganda, was not politically desirable. It is clear from this correspondence that Turkey regarded British or American broadcasting detrimental to its policy of forced assimilation of the Kurds. The British government agreed and was actually interested in population movements and ethnic cleansing of the Kurds. A secret dispatch from the British Legation in Damascus writes:

I realise how extremely touchy the Turks are about their Kurdish minority and, indeed, one can appreciate their point of view. Such broadcasts would tend to discredit their policy of complete assimilation. The process of assimilation is going on equally, though less rapidly, in Syria. There is a possibility that it might be speeded up if the Syrians ever succeeded in increasing the population of Jezireh [a mostly Kurdish region] by a settlement of Palestinians or by other means.¹⁴

Instead of Kurdish broadcasting by USA or UK, the Iranian Army launched two local stations in Sanandaj (1951) and Mahabad (1953), both in Sorani. However, this moment of the Cold War, fought over the language of airwaves, further intensified when Radio Cairo began a half-hour program in Sorani in 1957. This, too, was seen as a conspiracy by the Soviet Union and United Arab Republic paving the way for a “communist takeover” of the region. While Iran, Turkey and Iraq were actively engaged in diplomatic and propaganda campaigns against the station, the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown by nationalist officers in July 1958. Radio Baghdad’s Kurdish program was extended to four hours and joined Radio Cairo in exposing Britain, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Turkey, US and UK as enemies of the Kurds and other peoples of the Middle East.

The leaders of Iraq’s Kurdistan Democratic Party, under attack by the government, launched an armed struggle for autonomy in 1961 which continued until the first US-led war on Iraq in 1991. One of the major demands of the autonomists was language rights including mother tongue medium education on secondary and tertiary levels. By 1991, when a major part of Iraqi Kurdistan came under the control of Kurdistan Regional Government, Kurdish was used in some secondary schools though the Ba’thist regime’s Arabization policy continued. Textbooks and teaching were in Sorani Kurdish.

While Iraqi Kurds launched their longest armed struggle in 1961, the Kurds of Iran did the same in 1979 (see Sheyholislami, this issue), followed by the Kurds of Turkey in 1984. One of the central demands in these autonomist movements was the officialization of the language, and its use as the medium of instruction. These demands have been ignored in Iran, Turkey and Syria. While this issue was going

14 Secret dispatch No. 10622/8/50 from W. H. Montagu-Pollock, British Legation, Damascus, to G. W. Furlonge, Eastern Department, Foreign Office, 16 November 1950 [FO195/2650], reproduced in Destani (2006: 251).

to the press in 2011, none of these three countries allowed the language to be used as a medium of instruction in either public or private educational institutions.

During these armed conflicts, Turkey destroyed no less than 1300 villages and hamlets, and Iraq eliminated 4,009 villages in the course of a genocide known as *Al-Anfal*. The rural population moved into cities in Turkey and was transferred into concentration camps on major highways. These “forced urbanization” projects have diminished the rural bases of the language, and changed the dialect mosaic, a situation that remains to be studied. Far from being a matter of civil war, the autonomist struggles turned into regional and international conflicts, and the status of Kurdish continued to be a question of international politics.

Several developments in 1991 changed the linguistic terrain again, this time in favor of Kurmanji. By the beginning of the last decade of the century, Turkey had succeeded in threatening the vitality of Kurmanji as a spoken language. Eight decades of physical and symbolic state violence against the language, including criminalization (speaking was treated as violation of the “indivisibility” of the Turkish nation), dialectisation (claiming that Kurdish is not a language), ruralisation and de-intellectualisation (claiming that it is a rural, uncultured dialect; banning its use in print and broadcast media, even in music), has led to the loss of language among many speakers, especially in urban areas. Even when it is spoken at home, the ban on mother tongue medium education makes it difficult for many Kurds to achieve fluency in reading and writing their language, and as a result they speak, read and write in Turkish. While this policy has not changed, in 1991, in Turkey, the Kurds were allowed to speak, though not write in their language. Speaking itself was restricted and banned in government offices, parliament, or election campaigns. However, gradually, writing and limited broadcasting were also tolerated. By the end of the century, recorded music and print literature were produced in large quantities. The private teaching of the language is now allowed but under conditions that make it very difficult to help the language maintain its vitality. For instance, Kurdish cannot be taught to children younger than twelve years old (see Skutnabb-Kangas 2008). The goal of this policy is to ensure that Kurdish children first get fluency and literacy in Turkish.

Turkey’s change of direction was, in part due to pressure from the European Union, which required respect for cultural rights as a condition for Turkey’s accession to the union (Olson 2009). This led to a limited reform of the legal frameworks of linguisticicide but these policies continue by both legal and political means. For instance, Kurmanji is not allowed to be used as medium of instruction in education, and this is crucial for the vitality of any language, especially threatened ones; the legal provisions for private teaching of the language are too restrictive to allow any change in the status quo. In spite of these reforms, for

example, the use of letters *w*, *q*, *x* and *é* in writing Kurmanji is banned because, not used in Turkish alphabet, they invoke “separatism”. However, the demand for mother tongue medium education is extensive. The teaching of Kurdish language and literature, as subjects, may be allowed at selected institutions of higher education.

These demands are based on two arguments (these are considered in great detail in Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar [2010]; there are many additional examples in Skutnabb-Kangas [2000]). The first one is that the present submersion education through the medium of Turkish violates the human right to education. It can, from an educational, sociological and psychological viewpoint, be seen as genocide, according to two of the five definitions of genocide in the United Nations *International Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*,¹⁵ namely Article II(e): “forcibly transferring children of the group to another group”; and Article II(b): “causing serious bodily *or mental* harm to members of the group” (emphasis added). Subtractive dominant-language medium education for minority children prevents access to education, because of the linguistic, pedagogical and psychological barriers it creates. It often curtails the development of the children’s capabilities, and thus perpetuates poverty (according to theories about poverty by economics Nobel laureate Amartya Sen); and it is organized *against solid research evidence* about how best to reach high levels of bilingualism or multilingualism and how to enable these children to achieve academically in school. Dominant-language medium education for minority children can have harmful consequences socially, psychologically, economically, and politically. It can cause very serious mental harm: social dislocation, psychological, cognitive, linguistic and educational harm, and, partially through this, also economic, social and political marginalization. It can often also cause serious physical harm, e.g. in residential schools, and as a long-term result of marginalization – e.g. alcoholism, suicides, incest, violence, illnesses, and short life-span. This education can also be considered to give rise to *international criminal responsibility*, exploring the application of the legal concept of “crimes against humanity” (see Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar 2010: Chapter 7).

The other argument is based on the fact that solid theoretical and empirical research shows that properly conducted mother-tongue-based multilingual education can lead to high levels of multilingualism (e.g. Kurdish/Turkish/English), good school achievement (with accompanying later job prospects), a positive multilingual identity, and positive attitudes towards self and others (see, e.g.

15 E793, 1948; 78 U.N.T.S. 277, entered into force January 12 1951; for the full text, see <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instree/x1cpcpg.htm>.

Skutnabb-Kangas et al. 2009; Heugh and Skutnabb-Kangas 2010). Thus it can also be part of both poverty and conflict prevention. In addition, it is a linguistic human right.

While the legal reforms of Turkey are, in part, due to the country's application to accede to the European Union, the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 curtailed the language rights of the Kurds in the newly independent republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia; it brought the end of broadcasting and the demise of publishing in Kurmanji,¹⁶ while the 1988–1994 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh led to the further dispersion of the Kurdish population in the region.

In Iraq, once the rule of the central government was replaced by Kurdish self-rule in 1991, the Kurds were for the first time in charge of their language. Signs in the streets were now all in Kurdish – Kurmanji in the west and Sorani in the East. Although textbooks were not available at all levels, the language of instruction from kindergarten to college shifted to Kurdish. The Kurmanji speaking area of Badinan chose to use their dialect instead of Sorani. The second US war against Iraq in 2003 overthrew the Ba'hist regime and further consolidated the position of the Kurdish government and the language. The new, post-Ba'ath constitution declares Kurdish one of the two official languages of Iraq. However, Arab nationalist politicians in Baghdad pay lip service to this constitutional arrangement. In Kurdistan itself, Kurmanji speakers have insisted on the use of their dialect in education, media and administration. At present, although Sorani has the upper hand in terms of the number of publications and broadcasting channels, Kurmanji is making headway in Badinan, in the northwest of Iraqi Kurdistan, while the revival of the dialect in Turkey and the demand for language rights in Syria contribute to the enhancement of both its status and corpus. One may argue that Kurdish is, at present, a bi-standard language with two dialects Kurmanji and Sorani, while its other dialects are also struggling for access to writing, publishing and official recognition.

Another important development of the late twentieth century is a new wave of the dispersion of Kurdish speakers throughout the world. Refugees from all parts of Kurdistan have created new diasporic communities from Australia and New Zealand to Sweden and Canada, and have turned Kurdish into a transnational language. Equally significant is the proliferation of satellite television channels, social media, and internet use in both the diaspora and Kurdistan (see Sheyholislami 2010, 2011, 2012). The first Kurdish satellite television channel,

¹⁶ Occasionally, books are published, e.g., the translation into Kurmanji of the Georgian national epic *The Knight in the panther's skin* (Şota Rüstavêlî, *Wergirê p'ostê piling*, published in T'ibîlîsî, Georgia, 2007).

Med-TV, was launched in 1994 not by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) but, rather, by a group of Kurds from and in Britain (Ayata 2011: 173–196; Hassanpour 2003). It was a multilingual, multi-dialectal, channel though primarily in Kurmanji. Turkey has relentlessly campaigned for silencing the channel (Hassanpour 2003). Failing to do so, Ankara launched its own channel, predominantly in Kurmanji, in 2009. Soon, the two major political parties sharing power in KRG began their satellite broadcasting. There were in 2010 no less than fifteen channels (see Sheyholislami 2011).

The story of the Kurdish language, very briefly outlined above and in more detail in the rest of this issue, provides a picture of the present world linguistic order in which discrimination against languages and their speakers is the norm rather than exception. Many smaller languages are eliminated because the educational system, the media, the market and the state threaten, often in tandem, their viability in the hierarchal linguistic order. In the Kurdish case, the state more than the market, disrupts the dynamics of vitality, especially mother tongue medium education and its use in mass media and administration. Linguistics and linguists cannot remain neutral in this conflictual relationship.

The experience of preparing this special issue endorses what we have said so far. Twice in the process, which began in March 2006, we decided to abandon the idea. A major problem is the dearth of research on the sociolinguistics and sociology of Kurdish; this is in spite of the fact that political constraints over the language overshadow whatever structural attractions it may offer. This situation explains the absence of a sizeable pool of potential contributors; our first call for papers resulted in very few submissions. While a new generation of students, including native speakers, interested in the sociology of the language is emerging in the Middle East and in diasporas, it is not easy to overcome the language divide in compiling edited volumes: submissions written in Middle Eastern languages raise questions of translation and style and demand a longer and more laborious commitment.

The suppression of Kurdish makes it difficult to conduct field work which is indispensable for sociolinguistic research. It has also made it virtually impossible to access census data on the number of Kurdish speakers in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Turkey provided census figures for the number of Kurdish speakers until 1965, although the figures may have been meddled with and respondents to the census question about language had been in a difficult position to reveal their linguistic identity. Interested in creating an “indivisible nation”, these states have not allowed the production of linguistic maps or statistical data which reveal their ethnic and linguistic diversity.

Under these conditions, the contributions in this issue do not cover the fragmented Kurdish sociolinguistic landscape in a balanced manner. Kurdish in

Turkey receives more attention (see Fernandes; Zeydanlığlu; Üngör, this issue); Iraq and Iran each is covered in one paper (see Hassanpour; Sheyholislami, this issue), and Syria, Armenia and the diasporas are mentioned only in passing. This is primarily because research on the Kurdish language of each country is shaped by its political weight, numerical strength, economics and politics of knowledge production, and the state of academic freedom. Researchers' knowledge of various languages, and here not least English, also plays a role. Although Kurdish has been most repressed in Turkey, this country's interest in accession to the European Union has led to limited legal reforms which may allow more research especially in the realm of language rights.

In spite of these limitations, we hope that this issue of *IJSL* will attract more research interest to the social and political constituents of the linguistic mosaic of Kurdistan and the Middle East. This issue may also serve as a corrective or counterpoint to papers in two special issues of *IJSL* 165 on Turkey and *IJSL* 148 on Iran, each of which carries a paper on language planning. The former does not mention Kurdish at all and one gets the impression that Turkey is a monolingual Turkish society. The latter mentions Kurdish in one book review.

A dominant theme in the papers in this issue is the repression of the language especially in Turkey. Obviously, the question of language rights looms large in these studies. We hope that the advent of Kurdish into this prestigious journal, itself a product of the justice-seeking scholarship of Joshua Fishman, will enhance the study of the language and promote consciousness about the precarious nature of not only small languages but also larger ones like Kurdish.

We are aware that a new generation of researchers, both native speakers and others, trained in various "sciences of language" is emerging in the countries where the majority of the Kurds live as well as in the expanding diasporas. We are confident that in not too distant future they will produce a wealth of knowledge about the sociology and sociolinguistics of the Kurdish language.

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