

Front rounded vowels in the Sinemili dialect of Kurmanji – a case of language contact?

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1. Introduction

This is a report on the findings of a research project on five dialects of Kurmanji spoken in the Republic of Turkey. The dialects investigated are Kochgiri, Janbek, Shadyan, Alxas, and Sinemili, terms that also have social implications beyond dialect variation, signalling significant affinity among members. Of these, the first three, i.e. Kochgiri, Canbek and Shadyan, are spoken mainly but not exclusively in the northern sections of the mid-eastern region of Turkey, i.e. in the province of Sivas, while Alxas and Sinemili are spoken in the southern part of the region, mainly in Kahramanmaraş. Although our data analysis is not yet complete in that we are not yet able to provide a comprehensive, accurate description of the dialects, the findings of our research nevertheless reveal a number of features particular to the individual dialects. Our research also indicates the presence of a significant number of features common to larger dialect areas, giving strong support to the relevance of the construct 'regiolect' in the dialectology of Kurmanji. While it is conceivable that further research on the dialects of Kurmanji will reveal other factors such as religious affinity, i.e. whether the dialect community is of the Alevi or Sunni sect, to be also crucial in defining variation across dialects, our findings nevertheless provide evidence to the fact that geographical factors indeed do play a significant role in determining the properties of the individual dialects.

The social and economic changes Turkey has been undergoing during the last few decades have resulted in extensive migration from rural areas to urban centers, so that today the geographical distribution of Kurmanji can no longer be claimed to be restricted to the eastern part of Turkey. There are a large number of Kurmanji speaking communities in various parts of the country, particularly in the metropolitan centers. Further, a high degree of bilingualism is to be observed among the speakers of Kurmanji, with Turkish being the dominant language particularly for those who are more highly educated and have climbed the social and economic ladder. There are, however, still a significant number of speakers who can claim Kurmanji to be their dominant language. And, significantly, dialect differences are retained in urban areas, too, particularly among those speakers who have migrated recently.

A number of descriptions of Kurmanji are to be found in the literature. Among those to be cited are Bedirxan (1989), Bali (1992) and Blau (1989). However, while these descriptions reflect the linguistic properties of the standard dialect¹ of the language, i.e. the Bothan dialect (spoken mainly in the province of Şırnak), those of regional dialects, some of which exhibit significant differences from the standard dialect, are not taken into consideration at all.² It was therefore for the aim of determining the nature of the differences across the Kurmanji dialects that this research project was designed. The initial findings are focused on the phonological and lexical features of the dialects. In the second phase of the project, syntactic properties will be examined.

2. Methodology

Recordings totalling more than 100 hours were made with competent adult speakers of the respective dialects. Recordings were done both in the dialect areas and in İstanbul. For the latter group, most of the informants had recently migrated to İstanbul and had not lost their dialectal features. Most, but not all, of the informants were bilinguals, competent in Turkish as well as their own dialect of Kurmanji. For those informants whose competence in Turkish was limited, a bilingual acted as an intermediary during the interview. Informants were both male and female, with varying degrees of formal education.

Data collected consist of Swadesh-list type tokens and texts in the form of folkloric tales recited from memory. The methodology that was followed in the data collection of tokens was the interview method whereby each of the items in the list was read out in Turkish by the interviewer and the informant was asked to supply the appropriate correspondence in his/her dialect.

Transcription of the data is still in progress. Of the 100 hours of recording, roughly 25 hours of the data have been fully transcribed. Although this might seem a relatively small amount, at this point we feel that it is safe to assume that a sufficient amount of data has been analyzed to validate our hypotheses about the vowel variations of the dialects, not disregarding the fact that further analysis as well as future modifications due to possible misperception on our part during transcription might result in reformulation of our initial analysis.

- 1 Throughout the paper, the term 'standard dialect' is used to refer to the variant of Kurmanji as described by the sources referred to within the scope of this study.
- 2 The data used is part of a linguistic project being presently conducted at Boğaziçi University, İstanbul, B98401 by B.U. Research Fund.

What the initial analyses of the data indicate is that while each dialect has its own set of properties, the divergences from the standard variety, particularly in their vowel systems, show similarities between those dialects spoken in the northern dialect area as opposed to those spoken in the southern dialect area. This seems to indicate that we can in fact talk about larger dialect areas of Kurmanji, i.e. northern vs southern dialect groups, in which the individual dialects can be identified on the basis of their own set of properties.

While it has been possible to identify some dialectal properties in the course of the project up to this period, the analyses are still not conclusive. Therefore, what we are presenting here is more isolated sets of facts than a conclusive report on the descriptions of the individual dialects and dialect areas.

3. Phonological systems of the dialects

Before we turn to the discussion of the vowel systems, we would like to point out some of the features of the consonantal system of the dialects.

3.1. Consonants

The data indicate that the plosive systems of the five dialects exhibit a 3-way contrast between an aspirated and an unaspirated voiceless plosive set and a voiced plosive set. The possible existence of such an opposition for Kurmanji is mentioned by Blau (1989). However, whether all the dialects exhibit this contrast to the same extent still needs to be investigated. An opposition between the aspirated and unaspirated bilabial plosive in initial position seems to be common to all the dialects in the forms [pir] 'religious leader' and [pīr] 'old woman'; however, an initial analysis of our data seems to indicate that there may be considerable variation across dialects in the number and nature of the lexical items that exhibit this contrast. Thus, for the word corresponding to 'deaf', while Sinemili has the form /kār/ with the unaspirated velar plosive in initial position, the corresponding form is /ker/ in the standard (İzoli 1992, Farizov 1994), and /kær/ in Janbek, with neither dialect possessing the unaspirated counterpart of the velar plosive.

Another feature of the consonantal system that needs to be mentioned is the tendency of the southern dialects to devoice consonants in word final position. While this has been observed in southern dialects, no northern dialect has been observed to exhibit this phenomenon to date.

3.2. Vowel systems of Kurmanji

Where the five dialects differ from one another the most seems to be in their respective vowel systems. While it is again too early in our analysis to posit conclusive vowel systems for the individual dialects, we will at this point content ourselves with pointing out certain sound correspondences across dialects and their divergence from the standard dialect as reflected in the two Turkish-Kurdish dictionaries.

3.2.1. Three proposals

Of the existent descriptions of Kurmanji, Bedirxan (1989), Bali (1992) and Blau (1989) all posit a basic eight vowel contrast for the language. All distinguish between long and short vowels and three degrees of height. Where the three descriptions differ from one another is in the nature of the short and long vowels. While Bedirxan distinguishes between the short and long counterparts of the two front vowels /i, e/, his system indicates length distinction to be relevant only for the high back rounded vowel /u/. He posits only the long variant for the mid back vowel /o/. The low vowel /a/ is long. Bedirxan's vowel system for Kurmanji is as follows:

(1) Bedirxan (1989)³

long	short		short	long
<i>î</i>	<i>i</i>		<i>u</i>	<i>û</i>
<i>ê</i>	<i>e</i>			<i>o</i>
		<i>a</i>		

The system described by Bedirxan is that of the Bothan dialect, the standard dialect of Kurmanji. As can be noted, the eight-vowel system has a typical V-shaped distribution with five basic vowels, three of which also contrast in length.

Below is the system posited by Bali (1992):

(2) Bali (1992)

long	short		short	long
<i>î</i>			<i>u/u</i>	<i>û</i>
<i>ê</i>	<i>e</i>			<i>o</i>
		<i>a</i>		

3 As pointed out by one editor, whether the discrepancies observed between the vowel systems in these three sources reflect a qualitative difference in the vowel systems proposed or are due to the differences in the symbolization used by the individual researcher to represent the sounds is an issue that needs to be ascertained and is beyond the scope of this paper. The analysis presented here is based on the information given in these sources.

As can be observed, Bali's system differs significantly from Bedirxan's. Not only is there no short counterpart of the high front vowel /i/, there is also the high back unrounded vowel /ɯ/, yielding an unsymmetrical distribution of vowels.

The system posited by Blau differs from those of Bedirxan and Bali in that she posits length contrast for the low vowel [a] but not for the mid front vowel [e]. Blau's system is given in (4):

(3) Blau (1989)

long	short		short	long
[i:]	[i]		[u]	[u:]
[e:]				[o:]
		[a]	[a:]	

Blau notes that these sounds are found in all dialects but they have different realizations.

What these three descriptions have in common is that there is the basic vowel system with a V-shaped distribution of the eight vowels, with unrounded front vowels, rounded back vowels and a low vowel. Bedirxan (1989) and Bali (1992) both posit a short counterpart for the two front vowels as well as the high back vowel.⁴

Blau's system varies slightly from those of Bedirxan and Bali. While she too posits a basic 8-vowel system, the nature of the short vowels is different from the former two, reflecting a more symmetrical distribution of the vowels.

3.2.2. Vowel correspondences

Dialects exhibit a considerable degree of variation in their vowel systems, differing from one another with respect to the nature and degree of divergence from the standard dialect. Variation, observed mainly in the low and mid vowels, with high vowels showing a relative constancy across dialects, involves all parameters of vowel quality, i.e. height, position as well as rounding, the latter most likely attributable to language contact with Turkish.

Correspondences of back vowels

Height variation is observed for both front and back vowels. However, while the variation holds for front vowels in Kochgiri, it holds for back vowels in Sinemili. This is observed in the following forms:

4 The representation of one of the short vowels by the symbol undotted <i> in Bali must be a typological error, so that we can basically assume the systems proposed by Bedirxan and Bali to be very similar to each other.

(4) Correspondences of /a/

Gloss	İzoli	Farizov	Kochgiri	Sinemili
'mother'	<i>dayêk</i>	<i>dê, inê</i>	<i>dai</i>	<i>dɔi</i>
'grandmother'	<i>dapîr</i>	<i>dapîr</i>	<i>dapîr</i>	<i>dɔpîr</i>
'aunt' (mother's side)	<i>xalti</i>	<i>jinxal, xatî</i>	<i>xalti</i>	<i>xɔlte</i>

Note that İzoli and Farizov list differing realizations for the word 'mother'. While İzoli's entry *dayêk* has a two-syllable structure with the low vowel /a/ in the first syllable and the long mid front vowel /ê/ in the second, Farizov's corresponding form *dê* is a monosyllabic item with the long mid front vowel /ê/. The two dialects under investigation, on the other hand, possess forms which differ significantly from both of the forms cited for the standard dialect. Both dialects have progressive diphthongs in contrast to the single vowel of Farizov's, /ai/ in Kochgiri and /ɔi/ in Sinemili. Note that the two dialects also exhibit variation in the quality of their respective diphthongs. Kochgiri has the low vowel [a] as the first member of the diphthong, while Sinemili has the lax rounded back vowel [ɔ].

Note that the low back /a/ as opposed to the mid back /ɔ/ vowel correspondence across dialects is also observed in the words meaning 'grandmother' and 'aunt', which are respectively *dapîr* and *xalti* in the standard. For both of these words, the dialect that possesses forms closer to those of the standard cited in İzoli and Farizov is Kochgiri, *dapîr* 'grandmother' and *xalti* 'aunt'. With a complete change in the vowel quality in these words, Sinemili is the more deviant dialect, *dɔpîr* 'grandmother' and *xɔlte* 'aunt'.

The list contained in (5) gives correspondences in the dialects of the two larger dialect groups of the high back vowel /u/ of the standard dialect. The forms representing the northern dialect are from Janbek, which shows great similarities with Kochgiri in these forms:

(5) Correspondences of /u/

Gloss	İzoli	Farizov	Janbek	Sinemili
'head'	<i>kur</i>	-	<i>ku:r</i>	<i>ku:r</i>
'wolf'	<i>gur</i>	-	<i>gur</i>	<i>gur</i>
'deep'	<i>kûr</i>	<i>kûr</i>	<i>kûr</i>	<i>kûr</i>

Note that there is minimal divergence in the realization of /u/ in the regional dialects from the features of the sound in the standard dialect. The three dialects exhibit minimal variation in the production of /u/.

Correspondences of /e/ and /ê/

Correspondences of the mid front vowels /e/ and /ê/ of the standard dialect exhibit variation in different parameters. In Kochgiri and Janbek, the two northern dialects, /e/ of the standard corresponds to the low front vowel /æ/, while in Sinemili, it corresponds to the lowered and velarized vowel /a/. This is illustrated in (6):

(6) Correspondences of /e/

Gloss	İzoli	Farizov	Kochgiri	Sinemili
'father-in-law'	<i>xezûr</i>	<i>xezûr</i>	<i>xæzûr</i>	<i>x^wanzur</i>
'aunt (father's side)'	<i>met (apa)</i>	<i>met</i>	<i>mæte</i>	<i>mate</i>
'deaf'	<i>ker</i>	<i>ker</i>	<i>kær</i>	<i>kar</i>
'donkey'	<i>ker</i>	<i>ker</i>	<i>kêr</i>	<i>kar</i>
'chin'	<i>çen</i>	<i>çene</i>	<i>çeŋ</i>	<i>čan</i>

Note that in these words, both dialects have diverged considerably from the standard which has [e]. What is significant is the nature of the divergence from the standard dialect. While Kochgiri exhibits only a change in vowel height in *mæte* 'aunt', *xæzûr* 'father-in-law', and *kær* 'deaf', retaining the front nature of the vowel—(lack of height change in *çeŋ* subject to re-testing)—Sinemili has the lower velarized /a/ counterpart of the vowel in these words. Interesting to note is the occurrence of the labialized velar fricative in the Sinemili dialect in the case of *x^wanzur* 'father-in-law'; whether this is an instance of anticipatory rounding in the environment of the /u/ vowel in the second syllable is not conclusive at this point.

It should also be noted that while the form *ker* 'deaf, donkey' is a lexically ambiguous form in the standard dialect according to our two sources, the two dialects under investigation in fact do make a phonological variation in these two items. What is interesting is that there is a difference in the strategies the two dialects have employed in disambiguation; while the distinction is made by a difference in vowel quality in Janbek, Sinemili seems to have opted for the contrast between aspirated versus unaspirated plosive in initial position, (further research in this respect would be necessary to substantiate this claim).

Distinctions between lexemes based on length differences of the mid front vowel of the standard dialect, such as the /e/ in *ker* 'deaf, donkey' and /ê/ in *kêr* 'knife' are encoded differently in the two regional dialects. The distinction between 'deaf' and 'knife' is expressed by a difference in vowel length in Janbek, i.e., but by a difference in vowel quality in Sinemili.

With respect to the correspondences of the long mid front vowel /ê/ of the standard dialect in the regional dialects, the phenomenon seems to be slightly more complicated, with no clear pattern of correspondence having emerged yet. Those lexical items that have /ê/ as the root vowel in the standard dialect seem to have differing correspondences in the regional dialects, a fact which is blurring any underlying generalizations at the moment. Note that, as illustrated in the following set of data, sound correspondences for /ê/ in Kochgiri and Sinemili seem to be in complementary distribution:

(7) Correspondences of /ê/

Gloss	İzoli	Farizov	Kochgiri	Sinemili
'husband'	<i>mêr</i>	<i>mêr</i>	<i>mêr</i>	<i>mær</i>
'knife'	<i>kêr</i>	<i>kêr</i>	<i>kæ:r</i>	<i>kêr</i>

As can be observed, the forms *mêr* 'husband' and *kêr* 'knife' of the standard are realized differently in the two regional dialects; the former is realized with the low front vowel /æ/ as the root vowel in Sinemili, but with a root vowel with the same vowel qualities as the standard in Kochgiri, i.e. /ê/. When the lexical item corresponding to 'knife' is considered, on the other hand, the vowel correspondences are observed to be reversed. However, note that, in both instances, the nature of vowel correspondences is significant; in both of the regional dialects, the corresponding sounds are /ê/ and /æ/. Where the two dialects differ from each other is in the nature of the items that have these two sounds. The predictability of the correspondence pattern still needs to be investigated.

Height differences of vowels between the standard dialect as represented in İzoli (1992) and regional dialects are summarized in the following table:

(8) Height differences between the standard dialect and regional dialects

Standard	Sinemili	Kochgiri
t'	ɔ	t'
	a	æ
ê	ê	æ/ê

Front round vowel [œ]

One of the most significant features of the dialects is the distribution of the mid front vowel [œ] across dialects. The existence of the sound in Kurmanji has been noted in Bedirxan (1989), where it is claimed that the sound [œ] occurs only in borrowed words.

Our data also confirm this claim. However, what is significant is that while the occurrence of the sound seems to be restricted to borrowed words in Kochgiri, it is also found in native words in Sinemili. These forms are given in (3.6):

(9) Correspondences of /o/

Gloss	İzoli	Farizov	Kochgiri	Sinemili
'kith and kin'	zar û zêĉ	zar û zêĉ	dæɫ dæš	
'blind'	kor	kor	kʰûr	kʰœr (kiʰr Alxas)
'throat'	hustukur/sto	stukʰûr/stû	ustʰi	stœ/ustʰu

Of the three occurrences of the sound encountered in the data, note that two of the forms, i.e. the form corresponding to 'kith and kin' *dæɫ dæš* and that corresponding to 'blind' *kœr*, are direct borrowings from Turkish. Of particular interest here is that for the former, the form that is cited for the standard dialect by İzoli as the Iranian form *zar û zêĉ* is not encountered in any of the southern dialects under investigation, but seems to exist side by side with the Turkish borrowing in the northern dialects. In the case of the speakers of the northern dialects, however, there is nevertheless a strong preference for the Iranian form over the borrowing from Turkish.

The mid rounded vowel of the standard dialect in the word 'blind' is the mid back round vowel /o/ in the standard dialect. Note that in this form too the two regional dialects differ from each other with respect to the nature of the root vowel. In the Sinemili dialect, the corresponding form is *kær*, which seems to provide strong evidence to the effect that the form is an instance of direct borrowing from Turkish. Note: Alxas seems to present an exception to this; the item is realized with the high front vowel /i/ as the root vowel. Whether this is an instance of retaining the front nature of the vowel in the borrowed word, with its unrounded counterpart, i.e. /i/ instead of /æ/, and if so, how pervasive this is as a dialect feature, or whether it reflects a totally different phenomenon needs further investigation.

However, a more significant feature of the vowel systems of the regional dialects involves the distribution of the sound in native words. This is observed in the realization of the forms corresponding to the word 'throat'. Note that the realization of the forms in the Sinemili dialect corresponding to 'throat', i.e. *stæ / ustü*, differs significantly from the realization in the standard dialect cited as *sto / stü* by the two sources. In Kochgiri, the word is a disyllabic form with an epenthetic high back rounded /u/ vowel in initial position and the high front unrounded /i/ vowel as the root vowel. In Sinemili, on the other hand, two possible realizations exist. One differs from the standard dialect only in inserting an epenthetic vowel /i/ in initial position yielding a disyllabic structure. The other realization, on the other hand, retains the syllable structure but changes the quality of the root vowel to /æ/. Note that the change is phonologically unmotivated in that there is no phonological feature that could have triggered the fronting of a back vowel. The phenomenon seems to reflect the result of a phonological borrowing of the sound /æ/ from Turkish; however, why it should appear in this word still needs explanation.

Conclusion

In closing our observations on vowel systems of Kurmanji dialects, we would like to make one last comment. There seems to be strong evidence that two larger dialect areas can be identified for the Kurmanji dialects under investigation—the northern and southern dialects. The explanation for this kind of geographical distribution of dialects most probably lies in the geo-physical structure of the region. Northern dialects have been spoken in a very mountainous region—therefore, contact with the neighboring Turkish-speaking villages must have been very restricted, while the geographical boundaries separating the various linguistic groups are not very sharp in the case of the southern dialects, which have been spoken in a region whose landscape does not offer as rough an aspect as that of the northern region.

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