

The Linguistic and Historical Trajectory of the Afrini Dialect of Kurmanji Kurdish

The Afrini dialect of Kurmanji Kurdish—classified under the ISO 639-3 standard as [kmr] and specifically demarcated by the IETF language tag kmr-x-HIS22521—represents a highly complex, historically layered, and structurally unique linguistic node within the broader Western Iranian dialect continuum.¹ Historically anchored in the northwestern Syrian enclave of the Afrin District, a geographical territory traditionally referred to in historiographical literature as Kurd Dagħ, Kurd Mountain, or Jabal al-Akrad, this dialect occupies a critical intersection of Middle Eastern geopolitical history and advanced dialectology.² Positioned as a prominent sub-branch of the Southwestern Kurmanji dialect group, Afrini exhibits a fascinating constellation of phonological retentions, radical morphological innovations, and a localized lexicon that has been fundamentally shaped by centuries of relative geographical isolation, specific administrative architectures under imperial rule, and intense, multi-layered language contact.⁴ An exhaustive academic analysis of the Afrini dialect requires a rigorous, multidisciplinary approach. It is necessary to bridge the macro-historical dynamics that forged the demographic sedimentation of the Afrin region with the micro-linguistic phenomena that define its spoken reality. The origins of the dialect are not the product of a single, uniform settlement event; rather, they are the culmination of successive waves of pastoral and agrarian migration, decentralized imperial administrative policies under the Ottoman Empire, and the profound sociopolitical severing of the Middle East during the French Mandate era. Furthermore, contemporary empirical research—most notably the extensive data collected via the Manchester Database and the dialectological frameworks established by Haig and Öpengin—has systematically dismantled previous assumptions regarding a monolithic "Syrian Kurmanji" dialect, revealing instead that Afrini operates as a highly distinct linguistic ecosystem.⁶

Historical Origins: The Ottoman Architecture of Kurd Dagħ

To accurately trace the origins of the Afrini dialect, the demographic and administrative sedimentation of the Afrin Valley and its surrounding highlands must be situated within its historical context. The region, known as *Oinoparas* in the Seleucid era and *Ufrenus* during the Roman period, has served as a strategic geographical corridor between the Anatolian plateau and the Levantine plains for millennia.⁹ While the Afrin enclave is not geographically contiguous with the primary continuous landmass of Kurdish settlement extending across southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq, historiographical records and primary archival evidence demonstrate that a cohesive, sedentary Kurdish presence in the Afrin valley was firmly and irreversibly established by at least the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁹

The Canpulat Emirate and Feudal Autonomy

The incorporation of the Levantine corridor into the Ottoman Empire in 1516, following the pivotal Battle of Marj Dabiq, marked a critical turning point in the sociolinguistic history of the local Kurdish tribes. During the zenith of Ottoman territorial expansion, the imperial administration in Istanbul frequently utilized a strategy of indirect rule, successfully negotiating the allegiance of local Kurdish feudal lords. These lords were integrated into the provincial administrative apparatus, particularly within the Aleppo Vilayet, while being granted a substantial degree of local autonomy over taxation, agrarian management, and internal tribal governance.¹¹

Stefan Winter's extensive historiography regarding Syrian-Kurdish intersections during the Ottoman period illuminates the prominent role of the Canpulat (or Janpulat) clan, a powerful Kurdish feudal dynasty that exercised dominion over the Jabal al-Akrad and Aleppo regions for nearly a century.¹¹ The administrative organization of the Afrin region—which primarily fell under the jurisdiction of the Kilis Province—facilitated a highly specific sociopolitical environment. Leaders of the Canpulat dynasty, such as Hussein Janpulatoğlu, who was officially appointed as the governor of Aleppo in 1604, wielded significant localized influence.¹¹

This decentralized feudal governance allowed the rural Kurdish communities of the Kurd Dagh region to consolidate their agricultural settlements and social structures without facing the immediate, homogenization pressures of linguistic assimilation that characterized later, highly centralized state-building projects in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁹ The rugged, mountainous terrain of Kurd Dagh further insulated these agrarian communities. The relative geopolitical stability and administrative autonomy provided by the Ottoman system during this prolonged era allowed the local Kurmanji variety to stabilize, acting as the primary and undisputed medium of communication among the peasantry, pastoralists, and local elites, thereby laying the foundational phonetic and morphological groundwork for what would become the Afrini dialect.

Agrarian Settlement and Linguistic Insulation

The dialect's origins are deeply intertwined with the transition from pastoral nomadism to sedentary agriculture. The economic backbone of the Kurd Dagh region historically relied on olive cultivation, viticulture, and the harvesting of grains and figs, supplemented by localized animal husbandry.¹⁵ This agrarian economic model necessitated permanent, generationally stable village settlements. Unlike highly mobile nomadic groups whose dialects are constantly subjected to leveling through widespread contact across vast geographic expanses, the sedentary nature of the Afrin peasantry fostered a linguistic "retention zone." In such zones, older morphological features and inherited vocabulary are preserved due to the high density and multiplexity of local social networks, and the relative absence of exogenous linguistic disruption. Consequently, the Afrini dialect began to diverge organically from the more mobile, pastoralist Kurmanji varieties of the eastern Anatolian highlands, crystallizing its distinct phonological and lexical identity.

Ethno-Religious Stratification and Dialectal Preservation

The demographic and linguistic fabric of the Afrin region was profoundly enriched and complexified by the historical presence and subsequent localized migrations of distinct Kurdish-speaking religious minorities, particularly the Yazidis and Alevis. The stratification of these groups within the broader Sunni Muslim majority created a multi-confessional society where the Afrini dialect functioned as a unifying, cross-sectarian *lingua franca*, while simultaneously benefiting from the extreme linguistic conservatism often associated with marginalized ethno-religious groups.

The Yazidi Substratum

The Yazidis, an indigenous, endogamous religious group, have maintained a deeply rooted historical presence in the Kurd Dagh region for centuries. British travelers traversing the region in the late sixteenth century recorded encountering populations in the mountainous terrain between İskenderun and Aleppo whom they described in terms consistent with contemporary external, often pejorative, perceptions of the Yazidi community.⁹ The Yazidis of Afrin, inhabiting specific villages primarily clustered in the Jabal Siman and Kurd Dagh areas, have historically utilized Kurmanji as their exclusive liturgical and vernacular language.¹⁷

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the Yazidi presence in Afrin served as an anchor for linguistic conservatism. Because the Yazidi faith relies predominantly on the oral transmission of sacred texts, hymns, and religious narratives, and because their strict endogamous social structures severely limit intermarriage with exogenous populations, their speech communities are highly resistant to rapid linguistic change. The preservation of archaic Kurmanji vocabulary, specific phonetic realizations, and older syntactic alignments within the Afrini dialect can be partially attributed to the continuous, uninterrupted presence of this conservative Yazidi substratum, which insulated pockets of the language from the broader areal shifts affecting the Levant.¹⁸

Alevi Migrations from Dersim to Maabatli

In the twentieth century, the demographic and linguistic landscape of the Afrin enclave was further altered by the influx of Kurdish Alevi refugees. Following the violent suppression of the Dersim rebellion by the Turkish Armed Forces in the late 1930s, significant numbers of Kurdish Alevis fled persecution in eastern Anatolia and sought refuge across the newly established border in the French Mandate of Syria. A substantial concentration of these refugees settled in the Afrin District, specifically establishing communities in the sub-district of Maabatli (also known as Mabata).¹⁰

This migration introduced entirely new linguistic nuances to the region. The Alevi refugees from the Dersim region brought with them northern Kurmanji varieties and potentially Zaza-influenced phonetic and lexical traits. The integration of these Alevi populations into the existing Sunni and Yazidi Kurdish matrix of Afrin created a complex, localized dialect contact

scenario. Over successive generations, the accommodation and leveling processes between the native Afrini Kurmanji speakers and the incoming Alevi populations likely contributed to specific morphological innovations and lexical borrowings, further distinguishing the Afrin enclave from its neighbors. Despite these differences, the Afrini dialect absorbed these influences, maintaining its role as the central mechanism for inter-communal cohesion and political solidarity.¹⁹

The French Mandate and the Severing of the Dialect Continuum

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire following World War I and the subsequent imposition of the French Mandate over Syria and Lebanon in the 1920s fundamentally and irreversibly altered the geographic and linguistic trajectory of the Syrian Kurds. The drawing of the modern Syrian-Turkish border—a geopolitical demarcation designed by colonial powers without regard for ethnolinguistic continuity—effectively severed the Kurdish populations of northern Syria from the broader, contiguous Kurdish populations in Anatolia.²³

From Millet to Minority: Reorganizing Linguistic Borders

Under the administrative architecture of the French Mandate, the sociological conceptualization of populations shifted dramatically. The Ottoman *millet* system, which organized communities primarily based on religious affiliation rather than ethnolinguistic identity, was replaced by the modern, European construct of ethno-national "minorities".²⁴ The mandatory authorities played a highly complex, often instrumentalist role, occasionally tolerating or even tacitly encouraging Kurdish cultural expression in order to counterbalance the rising tide of Sunni Arab nationalism emanating from Damascus and Aleppo.

The Kurdish populations placed under the French Mandate were trapped in three narrow, geographically isolated zones situated along the Turkish frontier: the Jazira in the northeast, the central Euphrates region around Kobani (Ayn al-Arab), and the westernmost enclave of Kurd Dagh (Afrin).²⁴ Because these three enclaves were geographically disconnected from one another by vast stretches of Arab-majority territory, the regular, sustained linguistic contact required to maintain a unified dialect was abruptly terminated. Consequently, the Kurmanji spoken in Afrin was cut off not only from its northern hinterland in Turkey but also from its sister dialects in Kobani and the Jazira.

The Murud Movement and Localized Identity Formation

During this period of intense geopolitical realignment, Syrian Kurdish leaders, often operating in exile or within the relatively permissive environment of the mandate, laid the vital foundations for a cultural renaissance movement utilizing the Kurmanji dialect and the newly developed Hawar (Latin-based) alphabet.²⁵ In Kurd Dagh specifically, localized religious and social movements emerged that fundamentally shaped the regional identity. The most notable of these was the Murud movement, launched by Shaykh Ibrahim Khalil in the mid-1930s. The movement was characterized not only by its anti-French sentiment but also by its direct

challenge to the traditional Kurdish landlords who had been co-opted by the mandatory power.²⁵

The success of the Murud movement in dismantling traditional tribal structures in Kurd Dagh fostered a highly cohesive, egalitarian regional identity that was inexorably linked to the local language. The social leveling achieved by this movement likely accelerated dialect leveling within the Afrin enclave itself, erasing micro-variations between individual villages and solidifying a unified, distinct Afrini dialect. The isolation imposed by the newly established international borders meant that this unified Afrini dialect began to diverge more sharply from the northern Kurmanji varieties across the border, transitioning from a localized variant into a distinct, bounded regional vernacular.

Dialect Geography: Locating Afrini within Western Kurmanji

Linguistically, the Kurdish language constitutes a northwestern branch of the Indo-Iranian language family, comprising a vast and highly variable dialect continuum broadly divided into Northern Kurdish (Kurmanji), Central Kurdish (Sorani), and Southern Kurdish.⁷ Within this macro-structure, Kurmanji itself exhibits profound regional variation, leading to extensive scholarly efforts to accurately classify its sub-dialects based on empirical, structural data rather than mere geographic or political assumptions.

Methodological Frameworks and the Manchester Database

Historically, the investigation of regional variation in Kurmanji, particularly its westernmost varieties, had been severely neglected in the academic literature.²⁸ However, recent large-scale typological projects have transformed our understanding of Kurdish dialect geography. The most comprehensive of these is the Manchester Database project, spearheaded by Yaron Matras and his colleagues between 2011 and 2017.⁵ This project utilized a rigorous data elicitation method—inspired by earlier work on Romani morphosyntax—employing structured questionnaires translated into regional contact languages (Turkish, Arabic, Persian) to capture salient variables in lexicon, phonology, and morphosyntax across more than 150 specific geographic locations.⁵

Complementing this is the foundational classificatory framework proposed by Haig and Öpengin (2014), which systematically divides the Kurmanji dialect continuum into distinct regional clusters based on structural isoglosses.⁸ According to this framework, the Afrini dialect is squarely categorized within the Southwestern Kurmanji group. This specific group encompasses varieties spoken in the Adiyaman, Gaziantep, and Şanlıurfa provinces of modern Turkey, extending southward into the Aleppo Governorate of Syria, with Afrin acting as its most prominent demographic anchor in the Levant.⁴

The Divergence of Afrin and Kobani: Deconstructing "Syrian Kurmanji"

The empirical data collected through these advanced dialectological studies has generated a critical, second-order insight: the political boundaries of the modern Syrian state do not

correspond in any meaningful way to the linguistic boundaries of the Kurdish dialects. In political, activist, and journalistic discourse, the colloquial term "Syrian Kurmanji" or "Rojava Kurmanji" is frequently utilized to group the Kurdish speakers of Afrin, Kobani, and the Jazira region into a single, monolithic linguistic entity.⁵

The Manchester Database explicitly dismantled this notion. The research revealed that despite their geographical proximity within northern Syria and their shared political context, there is no particularly close linguistic affinity between the dialects of Afrin and Kobani—both of which are paradoxically often referred to collectively as *Afrîni* by non-specialists.⁵

The structural data demonstrates unequivocally that the Kobani variety shares a robust series of morphological and lexical features with dialects recorded further north in Turkey. For example, Kobani Kurmanji exhibits a preference for lexical items such as *qîzik* (girl) and employs light verb constructions featuring specific Arabic-derived loanwords heavily adapted into Turkish Kurdish, such as *feys dibim* (I live).⁵ In stark contrast, the Afrîni dialect operates largely as an independent linguistic node. Consequently, linguistic scholars such as Ahmed (2016) have concluded that the three primary Kurdish enclaves in Syria actually mirror the three-way, north-to-south division of the Kurmanji dialects of Turkey. Afrin, Kobani, and the Jazira represent the southern, severed termini of distinct, vertically aligned linguistic corridors, rather than an east-west horizontal continuum within Syria itself.⁵

Phonological and Phonetic Architecture

The phonological system of the Afrîni dialect remains firmly rooted in the broader inherited Kurmanji framework but exhibits specific areal tendencies and incipient sound changes characteristic of the Western and Southwestern dialect innovation zones. An analysis of its phonetic inventory reveals complex interactions between archaic Indo-Iranian retentions and contact-induced phenomena stemming from sustained interaction with neighboring Arabic and Turkish populations.

The Vowel System: Tenseness, Epenthesis, and Fronting Resistance

The vowel inventory of Afrîni, consistent with general Kurmanji phonology, is typically analyzed as containing eight simple vowel phonemes, which are distinguished primarily by tenseness (and historically, length) rather than pure qualitative duration. The system comprises five tense vowels: /a/ (orthographically ⟨a⟩), /i/ (⟨î⟩), /e/ (⟨ê⟩), /o/ (⟨o⟩), and /u/ (⟨û⟩). These are contrasted with three lax vowels, which are more centralized and less prone to lengthening: /æ/ (⟨e⟩), /ʊ/ (⟨u⟩), and the central vowel /i/ (⟨i⟩).³¹

While the tense vowels are generally highly stable across the entirety of the Kurmanji continuum, the lax vowels exhibit considerable variability in quality across different regions. In Western Kurmanji varieties, including the western peripheries near Afrin, there is a documented, systematic tendency for the epenthetic vowel [i]—which frequently appears in Standard Kurmanji function words and inflectional morphemes—to be fully realized as the lax vowel [æ].³² Consequently, Western varieties often feature the indicative prefix [dæ-] (e.g., *dæ-kim* 'I do') rather than the standard *di-*, and the preposition [læ] corresponding to the standard *li*.³²

Furthermore, specific vocalic shifts define the boundaries of Kurmanji innovation zones. For example, a dynamic Southeastern Kurmanji innovation zone, with its epicenter in the Duhok province of Iraq, is characterized by the fronting of the high back vowel /û/ to /î/, resulting in shifts such as *hemû* > *hemî* ('all').⁶ In this regard, the Afrini dialect acts structurally as a retention zone, actively resisting this fronting process and preserving the older back vowel in forms such as *hemû*.⁵ Concurrently, Afrini demonstrates localized, incipient diphthongization in highly specific, high-frequency lexical items, most notably realizing the numeral 'eight' as *heyşt* rather than the standard *heşt*.⁵

Consonantal Inventories: Aspirated Stops and Lenition

A defining consonantal feature of the Kurmanji language—one that is fully present and highly operational in the Afrini dialect—is the phonemic distinction between aspirated and unaspirated voiceless stops. Unlike many geographically adjacent languages (such as standard Arabic), Kurmanji maintains a strict minimal contrast between the aspirated series /p^h/, /t^h/, /k^h/, and the affricate /tʃ^h/, against their unaspirated counterparts /p/, /t/, /k/, and /tʃ/ across all phonotactic positions.⁴ This feature represents an ancient phonetic retention that adds a layer of profound complexity to the dialect's morphophonology.

In addition to these stop contrasts, the broader Western Kurmanji dialect group is characterized by a specific process of consonantal lenition affecting pre-vocalic /b/. In this region, pre-vocalic /b/ undergoes systematic weakening, typically shifting to an approximant [w] or a labiodental fricative [v]. Examples of this lenition process include the transition of *seba* ('because of') to [sɛwa:], *bibîne* ('[if he] sees') to [biwi:ni], and the noun *kitêb* ('book') shifting to [khite:w].⁶

The Pharyngeal Debate: Substrate vs. Contact Influences

A highly salient variable in Kurdish dialect geography, and one of considerable theoretical debate, is the presence, distribution, and origin of pharyngeal consonants—specifically the voiceless pharyngeal fricative [ħ] (<h>) and the voiced pharyngeal fricative [ʕ] (<ʕ>). Because Kurmanji is marked by prolonged, direct historical contact with Arabic, the heavy presence of pharyngeal sounds in both inherited Iranian and borrowed Arabic vocabulary has frequently been ascribed to contact-induced phonological borrowing, though some scholars argue for a much older pre-Islamic Aramaic substrate influence.³¹

Interestingly, macro-level dialect mapping indicates a strong tendency toward the loss or absence of the pharyngeal [ʕ] in the broader Western Kurmanji area (e.g., in the central Anatolian Elbistan varieties, where even native words prone to pharyngealization like *mar* 'snake' or *tehl* 'bitter' lack the sound).³² However, the Afrini dialect displays a highly complex, divergent behavior regarding pharyngeals. Empirical data extracted from the Manchester Database for the Afrini representative location of Basselhâya records the active use of forms such as *dîʕeyişim* ('I live') and the robust retention of the pharyngeal in *hemû* ('all') and *heyşt* ('eight').⁵ This suggests that Afrini maintains certain pharyngeal articulations far more robustly than its northern Western Kurmanji counterparts, a phenomenon directly attributable to its closer geographic proximity to, and deeper historical integration with, Levantine

Arabic-speaking populations in the Aleppo hinterland.

Morphological Innovations and Typological Shifts

The morphological architecture of the Afrini dialect is characterized by a fascinating typological duality: it meticulously preserves highly conservative nominal features that have been entirely eroded in Central Kurdish (Sorani) and severely simplified in central Kurmanji dialects, while simultaneously pioneering radical, typologically rare innovations in its verbal morphology and syntactic linking systems.

The Ezafe System: Nominal Simplification

The *Ezafe* (or *lzafe*) is a ubiquitous and defining morphological construct across Western Iranian languages. Traditionally functioning as an enclitic particle, the *Ezafe* links a head noun to its subsequent modifiers, which may include attributive adjectives, possessive nouns, or relative clauses.³⁴ In standard, prescriptive Kurmanji, the *Ezafe* is a highly inflected system, strictly marked for grammatical gender (masculine/feminine), number (singular/plural), and definiteness.

The Afrini dialect, mirroring trends in the broader Western Kurmanji zone, demonstrates a significant evolutionary trajectory in this domain toward morphological simplification. In the nominal sphere, the Western Kurmanji zone displays a pronounced tendency toward the neutralization of gender and number distinctions in specific attributive contexts. Most notably, there is a strong inclination toward the simplification of the plural attributive *Ezafe* marker, generally reducing it to the suffix *-ê*, effectively erasing the distinction between certain singular and plural nominal linkers.⁶ This morphological streamlining process is likely an areal phenomenon, accelerated by intense, long-term bilingualism with languages that lack a highly inflected, gendered nominal linking system, such as Turkish and Arabic.

The Verbal Ezafe: A Radical Syntactic Reanalysis

However, the most profound and theoretically significant typological innovation observed in the peripheries of the Kurmanji continuum—and highly active in the Afrini dialect—is the unprecedented migration of the *Ezafe* particle from the nominal domain into the verbal domain.

In the Afrini dialect, the *Ezafe* has developed the astonishing syntactic capacity to mark verbal predicates and explicitly encode tense and aspectual information. For example, in the construction *ez-î derim* ('I am going'), the enclitic *-î*—which historically functioned exclusively as a nominal linker determining gender and case—is utilized as a pre-verbal particle that attaches directly to the subject pronoun.³⁴

This syntactic leap transforms the *Ezafe* into a predicative element that introduces a verb phrase rather than merely linking a noun to an adjective.³² The typological significance of this shift cannot be overstated. It represents a fundamental reanalysis of syntactic boundaries, allowing the subject and the predicate to be bound by a particle historically reserved for intra-noun-phrase mechanics. This phenomenon challenges traditional typological classifications of Iranian morphosyntax and positions the Afrini dialect at the forefront of

grammaticalization theory.

Verbal Person/Number Syncretism: Type XVI Nested Patterns

Another area of profound morphological complexity in the Afrini dialect lies within its verbal inflection system, specifically regarding person/number syncretism in past tense paradigms. Syncretism—defined as the morphological merging or neutralization of distinct grammatical categories into a single surface form—has been mapped extensively across Western Iranic languages.³⁸

In the past intransitive paradigm, the Afrini dialect features a highly specific, partial nested syncretism, classified typologically in current linguistic literature as "Type xvi".³⁸ In this complex pattern, the dialect exhibits two distinct, simultaneous homophonous blocks: the second-person singular (2sg) merges identically with the third-person singular (3sg), while simultaneously, all plural forms (1pl, 2pl, 3pl) merge into a single, unified plural form.³⁸

Person/Number	Standard Kurmanji Past Intransitive Suffix	Afrini Dialect (Type xvi Syncretism)
1st Singular	-im	-im
2nd Singular	-î	-î (Block A)
3rd Singular	-∅	-î (Block A)
1st Plural	-in	-in (Block B)
2nd Plural	-in	-in (Block B)
3rd Plural	-in	-in (Block B)

Table 1: Comparison of Past Intransitive Syncretism showing Type xvi nested homophony in Afrini. Adapted from structural data.³⁸

This specific, highly idiosyncratic configuration of verbal endings is an exclusive characteristic of the westernmost Kurmanji varieties. It closely unites the Afrini dialect with the neighboring Mardin and Xerbi dialects of southeastern Turkey.³⁸ The presence of this shared morphological idiosyncrasy provides compelling empirical evidence for deep historical, pre-border dialectal continuity between the Kurd Dagh region and the Tur Abdin/Mardin geographical zones, strongly suggesting historical pastoral contact routes that operated freely prior to the establishment of the modern Syrian-Turkish frontier.

Prohibitive Morphology: The Retention of the *me-* Prefix

A highly distinctive and archaic morphological feature isolated in the Afrini dialect is the specific formation of the negative imperative (the prohibitive). While standard literary Kurmanji and the vast majority of its spoken dialects utilize the prefix *ne-* to negate commands (e.g., *nexwe* 'do not eat', *neke* 'do not do'), the Afrini dialect exclusively employs the prefix *me-*.³⁹ Consequently, positive imperatives such as *bixwe* (eat!), *here* (go!), and *bike* (do!) are transformed in Afrini into *mexwe*, *mere*, and *meke* respectively.³⁹ The retention of the *m-* negator is a notable and highly conservative phenomenon. It directly echoes ancient Indo-Iranian prohibitive markers—such as the Sanskrit *mā* or Old Persian *mā*—which have largely been leveled out and replaced by the standard, ubiquitous *n-* negator across the majority of modern Kurdish varieties. The survival of *me-* in Afrin underscores the dialect's status as a retention zone capable of preserving archaic features lost elsewhere in the continuum.

Syntactic Alignment and Lexical Divergence

The syntactic structures of the Afrini dialect reveal a language delicately balancing between the conservative split-ergative alignment of historical Northern Kurdish and the intense nominative-accusative pressures exerted by long-term, pervasive regional language contact.

Split-Ergativity and Case Marking Erosion

Kurmanji is renowned in typological literature for its split-ergative alignment system, which manifests exclusively in past tense transitive clauses. In this conservative system, the subject of a past transitive verb must appear in the oblique case, while the direct object is placed in the direct (absolute) case, and the verb must agree in person and number with the object, not the subject.³⁶ While this system remains highly robust in the conservative core of the Kurmanji speech zone, the western peripheries show increasing signs of systemic erosion and realignment.

In the broader Western Kurmanji area (for example, in the central plateau between Diyarbakir and Varto), there is a heavily documented loss of oblique case marking on specific nouns, evidenced by the transition of the oblique directional form *bajêr* ('to the town') to the uninflected absolute form *bajar*.⁶ However, the Afrini dialect, alongside neighboring Kobani, demonstrates localized, fierce resistance to this complete morphological erosion. Afrini acts as a definitive retention zone for the oblique case marker *-î* on masculine nouns, meticulously preserving complex forms such as the directional object *bajêr* and the fully inflected oblique noun *gundî* ('village').⁵

Despite this impressive nominal retention, the strict, systemic application of ergativity in everyday, rapid colloquial speech is experiencing a gradual decline. In colloquial usage within the Syrian Kurmanji dialects (such as the heavily studied neighboring Amuda variety, whose trends mirror Afrin's informal registers), the ergative construction is frequently bypassed in favor of a nominative-accusative alignment. In this emerging system, both the subject and the object may appear in their inflected forms without standard, rigid verb agreement, signaling a gradual syntactic shift driven by universal bilingualism and the historical lack of standardized, mother-tongue education.⁴⁰

Adpositional Preferences: The Shift to Postpositions

Furthermore, the Afrini dialect demonstrates a robust, systematic syntactic preference for postpositions over prepositions. While standard Kurmanji heavily utilizes circumpositions to denote spatial and relational concepts (e.g., *di... de* for 'in', *ji... re* for 'to/for'), the Afrini dialect frequently drops the leading preposition entirely.

In Afrini syntax, speakers rely heavily on the postposition alone, or maintain the full circumposition only in highly formal or conservative contexts.³⁹ The dialect exhibits pure postpositional phrasing, preserving the directional and locative markers as terminal particles attached to the noun phrase. This structural feature strongly aligns with the head-final syntax of neighboring Turkic languages, reflecting a deep, substrate-level contact phenomenon that has permanently altered the spatial grammar of the dialect.⁴²

Lexical Isoglosses and Analytic Numerals

The vocabulary of the Afrini dialect provides a vivid, empirical map of its historical isolation and idiosyncratic development. A comprehensive review of lexical variables reveals a lexicon that diverges noticeably, and often predictably, from the standardized Kurmanji promoted in transnational literary circles and satellite media.

English Gloss	Standard/Central Kurmanji	Afrini Dialect Variant	Source/Reference
Girl	<i>keç / qîz</i>	<i>keçik</i>	5
Walnut	<i>gûz</i>	<i>gûz</i> (retained back vowel)	5
Foot	<i>pê</i>	<i>ling</i>	5
All	<i>hemû / hemî</i>	<i>hemû</i>	5
Now	<i>niha / vêga</i>	<i>aniha</i>	5
Fifteen	<i>panzdeh</i>	<i>deh û pênc</i> (Analytic)	33
I can (verb)	<i>ez dikarim</i>	<i>ez kanim / ez karim</i>	5

Today	<i>îro</i>	<i>îro</i>	5
Expensive	<i>biha / giran</i>	<i>biha</i>	5

Table 2: Lexical Isoglosses highlighting the divergence between Standard Kurmanji and the Afrini dialect.⁵

The highly localized analytical formation of complex numerals is particularly noteworthy. For example, the use of *deh û pênc* (literally "ten and five") for 'fifteen', rather than the morphologically fused standard *panzdeh*, represents an archaic, highly localized retention specifically contained within the westernmost area of the Kurmanji dialect zone.³¹ Similarly, the shift of the modal verb 'to be able to' from the standard *dikarim* to the stem-consonant variant *kanim* delineates a sharp lexical isogloss separating Afrin from its eastern neighbors.³³

Sociolinguistics, Language Contact, and Diasporic Trajectories

The most critical aspect of the modern Afrini dialect is not merely its structural uniqueness or its deep historical roots, but its extreme sociolinguistic vulnerability. The survival of the dialect has been consistently threatened over the past century by overarching, coercive state policies aimed at assimilation, demographic engineering, and outright institutional linguicide.

Ba'athist Arabization and Institutional Exclusion

For decades under the administration of the Syrian Ba'athist regime, the Kurdish language was systematically and ruthlessly excluded from the public sphere. The Syrian state, pursuing a rigid, ideologically driven Arabization policy, explicitly banned the teaching, publication, broadcast, and official administrative use of Kurdish.²⁴ This institutionalized suppression was compounded by the notorious 1962 census in the Jazira region, which stripped hundreds of thousands of Syrian Kurds of their citizenship, rendering them stateless and further marginalizing the community both politically and economically.¹⁵

Because of this relentless institutional suppression, the Afrini dialect was denied any avenue for standardization, literary development, or pedagogical integration. It was preserved almost exclusively through oral transmission within the private sphere of the home and the tightly knit agrarian communities of the Kurd Dagħ mountains. While this isolation protected the dialect's archaic features from the homogenizing influence of mass media and standardized education, it also prevented the dialect from developing the complex registers required for modern technical, academic, and administrative discourse.

The Fragility of the Speech Community in the Modern Era

The trajectory of the Afrini dialect was catastrophically interrupted by the geopolitical upheavals of the late 2010s. The military offensives that swept through the Afrin District resulted in profound humanitarian and demographic consequences that have been devastating

for the native speech community of the Afrini dialect.⁴⁵

Prior to these events, Afrin was overwhelmingly Kurdish, having also served as a cosmopolitan safe haven for hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) of various ethnicities during the earlier phases of the Syrian civil war.¹⁰ However, subsequent large-scale population displacements fundamentally altered the demographic composition of the region. Hundreds of thousands of native Afrini Kurmanji speakers fled or were displaced from their ancestral villages, leading to a dramatic demographic shift.¹⁰

This demographic upheaval has shattered the contiguous speech communities that are absolutely essential for the intergenerational transmission of a localized, primarily oral dialect. The educational infrastructure that had briefly supported Kurdish language instruction was dismantled, and the physical landscape of the dialect—including public signage, administrative designations, and historical landmarks—was systematically altered to reflect the new political realities.⁴⁶

As a direct consequence of these events, the burden of survival for the Afrini dialect has increasingly, and precariously, shifted to the diaspora. Thousands of Afrini Kurds currently reside in IDP camps in the northern Aleppo countryside, while significant refugee populations have migrated to massive urban centers such as Istanbul, or sought asylum across Western Europe.⁴⁵

In diasporic settings, such as the Demirkapı neighborhood in Istanbul, ethnographic research has documented how displaced Afrini migrants actively utilize their highly specific dialect to forge community bonds, process collective trauma, and navigate informal economic networks.⁵⁰ The shared linguistic idiosyncrasies of Afrini Kurmanji—such as the *me-* imperative or the *ez-î* verbal *ezafe*—act as immediate, unforgeable markers of shared origin and mutual trust among refugees facing intense economic hardship and state surveillance.

However, the transition from a territorially rooted, agrarian speech community to a highly dispersed, urbanized diaspora poses an existential threat to the dialect. Without geographic contiguity, institutional support, or inclusion in formal education systems, the highly specific morphological and phonetic features of the Afrini dialect are at severe risk of rapid leveling. Younger generations in the diaspora are highly susceptible to assimilation into the dominant host languages of their new countries, or, if they retain Kurdish, they tend to level their speech toward the standardized, literary Kurmanji utilized in transnational Kurdish media and digital networks.⁴⁰

Synthesis and Typological Implications

The Afrini dialect of Kurmanji Kurdish is far more than a peripheral, localized variant of a Middle Eastern language; it is a profound linguistic archive containing centuries of complex regional history, demographic shifts, and contact-induced evolution. Its unique phonological retentions—such as the preservation of aspirated stops and specific pharyngeal articulations—combined with its radical morphological innovations—most notably the unprecedented syntactic repurposing of the *Ezafe* particle and the highly specific Type xvi verbal syncretism—provide invaluable, empirical data for typological linguistics and the study of Western Iranian language evolution.³⁴

The dialect's historical development perfectly reflects the geopolitical realities of its speakers: from the localized autonomy of the Ottoman-era Kurdish emirates and the agrarian stability of Kurd Dagh, to the profound impact of Yazidi and Alevi religious migrations, and finally, to the artificial geographical isolation imposed by the post-World War I French mandate borders.¹⁰ Tragically, the current trajectory of the Afrini dialect is one of rapid, forced decline. The geopolitical events following the military occupation of the Afrin District have resulted in the mass displacement of the native speech community and the dismantling of the contiguous, intergenerational ecosystem required to sustain a localized dialect.⁴⁵ Consequently, the preservation of the Afrini dialect now relies almost entirely on emergency linguistic documentation by researchers and the resilience of its displaced speakers in the global diaspora. Without concerted, rigorous academic efforts to record its complex morphosyntax and vocabulary before the last generation of native, territorially rooted speakers passes, the Afrini dialect risks assimilation and extinction. Its potential loss would represent not only a cultural tragedy for the Syrian Kurds but an irreplaceable loss of empirical data regarding the historical dialectology, morphosyntactic evolution, and contact linguistics of the ancient Near East.

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