

A Linguistic History of the Kurds: Spoken Vernaculars and Written Traditions

I. Introduction: The Complex Linguistic Tapestry of the Kurds

A. Defining the Scope

The Kurdish people constitute a significant ethnic and linguistic group primarily inhabiting a mountainous region often referred to as Kurdistan, which traverses the modern borders of southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq, northwestern Iran, and northern Syria.¹ Historical Kurdish populations also exist in northeastern Iran (Khorasan), the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia), and Central Asia, supplemented by a substantial modern diaspora, particularly in Europe.¹ This report aims to delineate the historical trajectory of the languages associated with the Kurdish people, encompassing both their native spoken vernaculars and the second languages acquired through contact and political circumstance. A central focus will be placed on the history of *written* languages used by Kurds, examining the emergence and evolution of literacy in Kurdish dialects alongside the adoption of other regional languages for literary, administrative, and scholarly purposes.

B. Spoken Diversity vs. Written Traditions

The linguistic landscape of the Kurds is characterized by considerable internal diversity. Kurdish is best understood not as a monolithic entity but as a dialect continuum, a chain of related linguistic varieties spoken across Kurdistan.¹ The variation between these dialects can be significant, sometimes impeding mutual intelligibility between geographically distant groups.¹ This inherent spoken diversity stands in contrast to the historical patterns of written communication among Kurdish elites. For extensive periods, particularly before the 20th century, formal written discourse, literature, administration, and scholarship were often conducted not in Kurdish vernaculars but in the dominant prestige languages of the surrounding empires and cultural centers – primarily Arabic, Persian, and later, Ottoman Turkish.⁶ This historical preference reveals a significant sociolinguistic dynamic where linguistic identity, grounded in speaking Kurdish, did not automatically translate into the use of Kurdish for high-status written functions.¹ The established literary traditions and political dominance of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish often overshadowed the Kurdish vernaculars in formal domains, highlighting the complex interplay between language, power, and cultural practice.⁶ This historical pattern inevitably influenced the trajectory of Kurdish literacy, delaying standardization and contributing to the challenges faced in modern language development efforts.

C. Methodological Considerations

Reconstructing this linguistic history relies on a multidisciplinary approach, integrating evidence from comparative and historical linguistics, analysis of extant texts (literary, religious, historical), epigraphic data where available, and the findings of scholarly research conducted over the past two centuries.⁵ Several challenges complicate this endeavor. The relatively late emergence of widespread, preserved written materials *in* Kurdish dialects means that much of

the earlier linguistic history must be inferred or reconstructed.⁷ Furthermore, the study of Kurdish language and identity is often intertwined with contemporary political sensitivities and national narratives within the states encompassing Kurdistan, requiring careful, evidence-based analysis.²

D. Report Structure

This report will proceed systematically to unravel this complex history. Section II delves into the origins of the Kurdish language within the Iranian family and examines its major dialectal branches, including the debated status of Zazaki and Gorani. Section III traces the emergence and evolution of written Kurdish itself, focusing on the key literary dialects, schools, and scripts used. Section IV explores the significant historical phenomenon of Kurds utilizing non-Kurdish prestige languages (Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Turkish) for written purposes, highlighting notable contributions. Section V examines the broader context of multilingualism, detailing Kurdish interactions with neighboring languages like Aramaic and Armenian. Section VI provides a synthetic chronological overview, integrating the findings on spoken and written language use across different historical periods. Finally, Section VII offers concluding remarks, summarizing the key findings and emphasizing the multifaceted factors shaping the linguistic heritage of the Kurds.

II. The Kurdish Language: Historical Roots and Dialectal Branches

A. Origins and Classification within the Iranian Language Family

The Kurdish language group belongs to the Iranian branch of the Indo-Iranian languages, itself a major division of the larger Indo-European family.¹ Within the Iranian languages, Kurdish varieties are generally classified as belonging to the Northwestern Iranian (NWI) subgroup.¹ This places Kurdish alongside languages such as Balochi, Tati, Talyshi, Gilaki, Mazandarani, Zazaki, and Gorani, distinguishing it from the Southwestern Iranian (SWI) group, whose most prominent member is Persian.¹⁸

However, the precise phylogenetic position of Kurdish has been a subject of ongoing scholarly discussion. While its core features align with NWI languages, Kurdish exhibits a substantial number of characteristics shared with SWI languages, particularly Persian.¹ This overlap is widely attributed to millennia of intense and sustained contact between Kurdish-speaking populations and Persian speakers, leading to significant borrowing and convergence.¹

Consequently, some linguists propose an intermediate status for Kurdish between NWI and SWI, or posit an NWI origin followed by a heavy SWI overlay.¹ Theories linking Kurdish to unattested ancient languages like Median (an ancient NWI language) or suggesting a Parthian (a Middle NWI language) substratum or origin have also been advanced, though direct evidence remains elusive.¹ Windfuhr, for instance, identified Kurdish dialects as essentially Parthian, albeit with a Median substratum, while others like Frye suggested an eastern origin for Kurdish, relating it to eastern and central Iranian dialects.¹

This persistent debate about classification underscores the complex history of the language group. The linguistic profile of Kurdish appears to be the result of intricate historical processes involving migration, language contact, and likely language shifts, rather than simple linear descent from a single, clearly defined proto-language branch within Iranian.¹ This inherent linguistic hybridity, shaped by prolonged interaction in a geographically pivotal

region, makes neat categorization challenging and points towards the dynamic nature of language evolution in zones of cultural and political convergence.

Further complicating the picture is the distinction between the origins of the Kurdish *language* and the Kurdish *people*. Some recent genetic studies suggest that the ancestors of the modern Kurdish population may derive from indigenous Neolithic groups of the Northern Fertile Crescent, who were later linguistically Iranianized through contact with migrating Indo-European (specifically Iranian-speaking) groups.²⁰ While this remains a hypothesis, it aligns with the linguistic uncertainty surrounding the direct Old or Middle Iranian predecessors of Kurdish; no known attested language from these earlier periods can be definitively identified as the direct ancestor of modern Kurdish.¹¹ The historical ethnonym "Kurd" itself is subject to debate regarding its origins, with certain attestation dating to the period of conversion to Islam in the 7th century CE, though potential, contested connections to earlier groups like the Kardouchoi mentioned by Xenophon (401 BCE) or the Guti of Mesopotamian records have been suggested.²

B. Major Spoken Dialects: Kurmanji, Sorani, Southern Kurdish, Laki

Modern Kurdish comprises a spectrum of dialects often grouped into three or four major branches, forming a dialect continuum where adjacent varieties are typically mutually intelligible, but intelligibility decreases significantly over geographical distance.¹

1. **Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish):** This is the largest dialect group, spoken by an estimated 15 to 20 million people, representing the majority of Kurdish speakers.¹ Its geographical distribution is vast, covering most of Kurdistan in Turkey, Syria, the northern parts of Iraqi Kurdistan (where it is sometimes locally known as Behdini), northwestern Iran (West Azerbaijan province), pockets in northeastern Iran (Khorasan), and communities in the Caucasus (Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan).¹ Historically, the Kurmanji dialect of the Botan region (around Cizre) served as the basis for the first major school of classical Kurdish poetry.⁷ Key linguistic features often include the retention of grammatical case distinctions (nominative/oblique) and gender, and the use of an ergative construction for transitive verbs in past tenses.²³
2. **Sorani (Central Kurdish):** Spoken by an estimated 6 to 7 million Kurds, Sorani is concentrated in the central and southern parts of Iraqi Kurdistan (particularly around the cities of Sulaymaniyah and Erbil) and adjacent areas of western Iran (Iranian Kurdistan province).¹ Sorani emerged as a prominent literary language, particularly from the 19th century onwards with the Sulaymaniyah-based Nali school of poetry.⁷ It enjoys official regional status in Iraqi Kurdistan and has been used in education and media there.¹⁶ Linguistically, Sorani dialects often differ from Kurmanji by lacking grammatical case and gender distinctions, and typically employ a nominative-accusative structure across tenses, though ergative remnants or variations exist.⁵
3. **Southern Kurdish (Xwarîn / Pehlewani):** This group encompasses a range of dialects spoken primarily in the Kermanshah and Ilam provinces of western Iran, extending into parts of Lorestan province and across the border into the Khanaqin district of eastern Iraq.¹ It includes numerous varieties often identified by tribal names, such as Kalhori

(south of Kermanshah city), Kolyā'i (in the Sonqor region), Sanjābi (north of Kermanshah), Zangana, and Feyli (southwestern Kermanshah/Illam/Iraq border area).²⁵ The urban dialect of Kermanshah city (Kermāšāni) holds considerable prestige within the province.²⁵ Southern Kurdish dialects exhibit their own distinct phonological and grammatical features, such as the absence of the imperfective verb marker (a-/me-/di-) in some Kermanshahi varieties.²⁵

4. **Laki:** Spoken predominantly in Iran, in areas adjacent to Southern Kurdish speakers (western Lorestan, eastern Ilam, southern Kermanshah), and sometimes extending into Iraq.¹ While often grouped geographically and sometimes linguistically with Southern Kurdish, Laki possesses several distinct features that lead many linguists to classify it as a separate branch within Kurdish, or potentially transitional between Southern Kurdish and Luri.¹ Features like the presence of ergativity align it more with Central/Northern Kurdish than some Southern varieties.¹²

The geographical distribution of these major dialect groups starkly illustrates that linguistic boundaries do not align with modern state borders imposed in the 20th century.¹ Kurmanji spans four countries and the Caucasus, Sorani bridges Iraq and Iran, and Southern Kurdish/Laki straddle the Iran-Iraq border. This geographical reality, reflecting older patterns of settlement and tribal organization, has profound implications for language vitality, standardization, and policy. Kurdish speakers using the same dialect across borders often face vastly different legal statuses, educational opportunities, and script usage (e.g., Latin script for Kurmanji in Turkey/Syria versus Perso-Arabic or Cyrillic elsewhere), fragmenting the linguistic community and hindering the development of unified standards.¹

C. The Zaza-Gorani Question: Linguistic Status and Historical Significance

Two other significant Iranian language groups are spoken within the broader Kurdish cultural region: Zazaki (also known as Dimli or Kirmancki) and Gorani (also known as Hawrami). Zazaki is spoken primarily by communities in eastern Turkey, while Gorani is spoken in the Hawraman region straddling the Iran-Iraq border and by some communities elsewhere in Iraqi Kurdistan and Iran (e.g., Kandula, Bājalāni near Sar-e Pol-e Dohāb).¹ Speakers of both languages often share strong cultural ties with their Kurdish neighbors and frequently identify ethnically as Kurds.²⁴

Linguistically, however, the status of Zazaki and Gorani relative to Kurdish is complex and debated. While earlier classifications sometimes included them within Kurdish, the consensus among most contemporary historical linguists is that Zazaki and Gorani constitute a separate branch (or two closely related branches) of the Northwestern Iranian languages, distinct from the core Kurdish group (Kurmanji, Sorani, Southern Kurdish).¹ Comparative linguistic analysis, particularly of historical phonology and core grammatical structures, reveals significant differences.¹² For instance, Zazaki and Gorani retain features like grammatical gender (shared with Kurmanji but lost in Sorani/Southern) but differ in other key areas, and they are generally considered not to have undergone the same degree of Southwestern Iranian (Persian) influence observed in the main Kurdish dialects.¹

This linguistic classification contrasts with the sociolinguistic reality and self-perception of

many speakers. The debate highlights the fact that the distinction between "language" and "dialect" is often influenced by social, cultural, and political factors, not solely by linguistic metrics like mutual intelligibility.¹⁴ Many Zaza and Gorani speakers consider themselves part of the broader Kurdish nation, and the term "Kurdish" is sometimes used as a socio-cultural or political umbrella encompassing these groups.¹⁴ To navigate this complexity, some scholars use the term "Kurdic languages" to refer to the wider group including Kurdish proper, Zazaki, and Gorani.²⁴

Historically, Gorani holds particular significance. Before the rise of Sorani in the 19th century, Gorani served as a prestigious literary language and the court language of the powerful Ardlan principality in present-day Iranian Kurdistan.⁶ It was the medium for a considerable body of poetry from the 16th century onwards.⁷ Furthermore, Gorani is the traditional sacred language of the Yarsani (Ahl-e Haqq) faith, with their central religious text, the *Kalâm-e Saranjâm*, composed primarily in Gorani.³¹ The historical relationship between Gorani and Sorani is also debated, with earlier theories proposing a Gorani substratum effect on Sorani being challenged by more recent arguments favoring prestige borrowing from Gorani into Sorani during the period of Ardlan influence.²³ The Zaza-Gorani case thus powerfully illustrates the potential divergence between linguistic classification based on historical descent and the lived reality of ethno-political identity shaped by shared culture, history, and experience.

III. The Written Word in Kurdish: Emergence and Evolution

A. Early Traces: Debates and Evidence (Poetry, Religious Texts - Yarsani, Yezidi)

The development of a widespread, continuous written tradition in the core Kurdish dialects (Kurmanji, Sorani) is generally considered a relatively late phenomenon compared to neighboring languages like Persian or Arabic.¹ For centuries, Kurdish literary expression was predominantly oral, and formal writing often utilized other prestige languages.⁷ Early Kurdish literature consisted primarily of poetry, with prose developing more broadly only in the 20th century.¹

Claims of very early written Kurdish exist but often lack definitive textual evidence. An assertion that Kurdish began to appear in writing using a version of the Persian alphabet in the 7th century AD is mentioned in some sources, but no extant texts from this period are known, and the preference for Arabic and Persian for literary works during this era is well-documented.⁷ Similarly, a reference in the 9th-century *Shawq al-Mustaham* (attributed, perhaps spuriously, to Ibn Wahshiyya) mentions a distinct Kurdish alphabet and written works, but this claim is uncorroborated by other sources and the text's authenticity is debated.³⁰

The earliest *attested* textual evidence for literature identifiable as Kurdish or closely related languages used by Kurds generally dates from the later medieval or early modern periods. Some scholars point to a 15th-century Armenian theological manuscript (dated 1430-1446) containing a short prayer translated into what MacKenzie reconstructed as an early form of Kurdish (or "Median"), potentially representing the oldest recorded sample.¹¹

However, a more substantial and continuous early written tradition associated with Kurdish culture exists in the Gorani language. As noted previously, Gorani served as a significant

literary and religious medium. The sacred texts of the Yarsani (Ahl-e Haqq), notably the *Kalâm-e Saranjâm* and the *Daftar-e kezana-ye Perdivari*, were composed in Gorani.³¹ While the dating of the original composition of these oral-tradition-based texts is uncertain (traditionally linked to figures like Sultan Sahak in the 14th-15th centuries), the use of Gorani as a written language for religious and poetic purposes by communities identifying as Kurdish extends back several centuries.³⁵ Early Gorani poets like Mele Perîşan (fl. 14th-15th C) are cited in literary histories, predating the major figures of the Kurmanji school.²⁶

Another distinct written tradition involves the Yezidi religious community, whose primary language is Kurmanji. Their traditionally cited holy books are the *Kitêba Cilwe* (Book of Revelation) and the *Mishefa Reş* (Black Book).⁴² These texts are written in Kurmanji using the Perso-Arabic script in extant manuscript copies. However, their status as ancient, divinely revealed scriptures is heavily contested by modern scholarship.⁴² Many researchers consider the versions discovered in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to be later compilations, potentially forgeries created in response to Western interest, although they likely incorporate authentic Yezidi oral traditions and beliefs.⁴² References to Yezidi sacred writings exist from earlier periods (e.g., ascribed to Sheikh Adi in the 12th century or mentioned in the 18th century), but the direct link to the currently known texts is unclear.⁴² More concretely, Yezidi historical manuscripts known as *mişûrs*, dating back to the 13th century and containing lists of affiliated Kurdish tribes, provide evidence of Yezidi written practices from that era.⁴⁸

Therefore, while the narrative of core Kurdish dialects (Kurmanji, Sorani) becoming significant written languages primarily from the 16th century onwards holds true, it requires nuance. The broader Kurdish cultural sphere encompassed earlier and parallel written traditions, particularly the extensive use of Gorani for religious and literary purposes by Yarsani Kurds, and the distinct, albeit textually complex, written heritage of the Yezidis in Kurmanji. Acknowledging these traditions provides a fuller understanding of the history of writing associated with Kurdish identity and culture.

B. Key Literary Dialects and Schools

From the 16th century onwards, distinct literary traditions began to crystallize in specific Kurdish dialects, often associated with regional centers of power and learning.

1. **Kurmanji (Botan/Jazira School):** The first major, well-documented school of classical Kurdish poetry emerged in the Kurmanji dialect, specifically the variant spoken in the Botan region (around Cizre), which was the heartland of an influential Kurdish principality.⁷ This tradition flourished from the late 16th through the 18th centuries. Key figures include:
 - **Melayê Cizîrî** (Sheikh Ehmedê Nîşanî, 1570–1640): Often considered the founder of this school, deeply influenced by classical Persian poets like Hafez. He composed a large *diwan* (collection) of mystical and lyrical poems (*qaşidas* and *ğazals*) in Kurmanji that remain highly regarded.⁷
 - **Feqiyê Teyran** (Mela Mihemed, 1590–1660): A disciple of Cizîrî, known for his poetry and, significantly, as the first known Kurdish poet to employ the *matnawî* (rhyming couplet) form for narrative epics, such as *Şêxê Sen'an* (The Story of Sheikh San'an) and an account of the Battle of Dimdim.⁷

- **Mela Hesênê Bateyî** (1417–1491 or, more likely, late 17th/early 18th C): Hailing from the Hakkari region, he is famed for his *Mewlûda Kurmancî*, a widely popular poem celebrating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, which even became part of Yezidi oral tradition.²⁶
 - **Ehmedê Xanî** (1650/51–1707): Arguably the most celebrated classical Kurdish poet, hailing from the Bayazid region. His magnum opus is *Mem û Zîn*, a long romantic and philosophical epic often considered the Kurdish national epic.⁷ Xanî also authored *Nûbehara Biçûkan* ("The Children's First Spring"), a rhymed Arabic-Kurdish vocabulary for pedagogical purposes, demonstrating an early interest in Kurdish language cultivation.⁷
 - Other notable figures include Şerif Xan of Hakkari (1682–1748) and Mûrad Xan of Bayazid (1736–1778).²⁶ This school established a high literary standard for Kurmanji, heavily drawing on the forms, meters, and imagery of the Perso-Arabic poetic tradition.⁷
2. **Gorani (Ardalan School & Yarsani):** As mentioned, Gorani had a significant literary history, flourishing particularly from the 16th to the 18th centuries, strongly associated with the court of the Ardalan principality (centered around Sanandaj in modern Iran) and the Yarsani faith.⁶ Gorani poetry often utilized a decasyllabic meter characteristic of regional folk traditions, distinguishing it somewhat from the more Perso-Arabic forms dominant in Kurmanji.⁷ Important figures include:
- **Yusof Yaskâ** (d. 1636): Considered a founder of the classical Gorani school.⁷
 - **Mistefa Bêsarani** (1642–1701): A prominent poet of this tradition.²⁶
 - **Khana Qubadi** (Xana Qubadî, 1700–1759): Known for religious works and a renowned Gorani version of the classic Persian romance *Shirin u Khosrow*.⁷
 - **Mastoureh Ardalan** (Mestûrey Erdelan, 1805–1848): A female poet and historian who wrote in both Gorani and Persian.²⁶ The literary use of Gorani declined as the Ardalan principality weakened and the Sorani dialect rose to prominence.⁷
3. **Sorani (Nali/Sulaymaniyah School):** The Sorani dialect emerged as a major literary force in the early 19th century, centered in the city of Sulaymaniyah, the capital of the Baban principality in what is now Iraqi Kurdistan.⁷ This school marked a significant shift in Kurdish literary geography. Key figures include:
- **Nalî** (Mullah Khezri Ehmed Shaweysi Mikâ'ilî, 1797/1800–1855/56): Considered the founder of this school and the first major poet to compile a *diwan* (collection of poems) primarily in the Sorani dialect.⁷ His work set a high standard for Sorani poetry.
 - **Salim** (‘Abd-al-Raḥmān Beg Sahibqirān, c. 1800–1866) and **Kurdi** (Mustafa Bag Sahibqirān, c. 1809–1849): Contemporaries of Nalî who also contributed significantly to early Sorani literature.²⁶
 - **Haji Qadir Koyî** (Hacî Qadir Koyî, 1817–1897): A highly influential poet known for his patriotic themes and strong advocacy for the use and modernization of the Kurdish language and education, criticizing the neglect of Kurdish by the

educated elite.²⁶

- **Mahwi** (Mela Muhemmed Osman Ballkhi, 1830–1906) and **Sheikh Reza Talabani** (Şêx Reza Talebanî, 1835–1910): Major poets who continued and expanded the Sorani literary tradition.²⁶ This school solidified Sorani as a powerful literary medium, drawing inspiration from classical traditions but also increasingly incorporating nationalist sentiments and social commentary.⁷

The development of these distinct literary schools demonstrates a strong correlation between periods of relative Kurdish political autonomy and the flourishing of literature *in* Kurdish dialects. The patronage provided by the Emirs of Botan, Ardalán, and Baban, coupled with the presence of educated religious and administrative elites within these principalities, created environments conducive to cultivating vernacular literary traditions, even as they adapted forms and themes from the wider Perso-Arabic cultural sphere.⁷ The subsequent decline of these principalities and the consolidation of Ottoman and Qajar central control likely contributed to shifts in literary production and the continued dominance of imperial languages in many contexts.

C. Scripts Across Time and Space

The writing of Kurdish languages has employed a variety of scripts, reflecting the diverse political, cultural, and geographical contexts of Kurdish communities.

- **Perso-Arabic Script:** This script, adapted from Arabic and likely transmitted via Persian, represents the earliest and historically most widespread system used for writing Kurdish.⁷ Its use dates back potentially to the 7th century, becoming standard for the classical Kurmanji and Gorani literary traditions.⁷ Today, it remains the primary script for Sorani and Southern Kurdish in Iraq and Iran.¹ A significant adaptation occurred in the 1920s for Sorani, primarily credited to Sa'îd Kaban Sidqi and Taufiq Wahby.²⁹ This "Sorani alphabet" (or Kurdo-Arabic alphabet) modifies the standard Perso-Arabic script to represent Kurdish vowels more systematically, making it function more like a true alphabet than an abjad.²⁹
- **Latin Script (Hawar Alphabet):** In the early 1930s, driven by the language reforms in the new Republic of Turkey and the desire for a script better suited to Kurdish phonology, Kurdish intellectuals in exile, led by Celadet Alî Bedirxan (with collaboration from Roger Lescot), developed a Latin-based alphabet.⁹ Promoted through the influential journal *Hawar* ("The Call") published in Damascus, Syria (1932-1943), this script became known as the Hawar alphabet (or Bedirxan alphabet).⁹ It consists of 31 letters (using diacritics for sounds not represented in the basic Latin alphabet) and is designed to be largely phonemic.³⁰ The Hawar alphabet is now the standard script for writing Kurmanji in Turkey and Syria and is widely used by the Kurdish diaspora and increasingly online for all dialects.¹ A "Kurdish Unified Alphabet" (*Alfabéy Yekgirtû*), also Latin-based, has been proposed by the Kurdish Academy of Language to accommodate all major Kurdish varieties.²⁹
- **Cyrillic Script:** For the Kurdish (primarily Kurmanji-speaking) populations within the Soviet Union, particularly in the Armenian SSR, a Cyrillic-based alphabet was developed

in 1946 by the Kurdish linguist Heciyê Cindî.¹ This script, consisting of 40 letters, was used for publications and education among Kurds in the FSU.²⁸

- **Armenian Script:** Prior to the adoption of Latin and Cyrillic scripts in the Soviet sphere, a modified version of the Armenian alphabet was used to write Kurmanji in Soviet Armenia for a brief period, from 1921 to 1929.¹
- **Yezidi Script:** The Yezidi community possesses its own unique script, distinct from the others mentioned.³⁰ Its origins are obscure, possibly dating back to the 13th century or earlier, although the earliest known manuscripts using it are from the 17th century.²⁹ It has been used historically, albeit not extensively, for writing religious texts in the Kurmanji dialect. There have been recent efforts to revive and standardize its use, particularly by Yezidis in Georgia.²⁹

The multiplicity of scripts used for Kurdish highlights the fragmented political history of Kurdistan and the influence of surrounding state policies on language practices. The choice of script often carries political and cultural significance, reflecting affiliations and historical trajectories.

Table 1: Major Kurdish Writing Systems

Script Name	Primary Dialect(s)	Key Period of Use/Development	Main Regions of Use	Notable Features/Developers
Perso-Arabic (Sorani)	Sorani, Southern K., Gorani, Early Kurmanji	7th C-Present (Adapted 1920s for Sorani)	Iraq, Iran	Vowel representation improved (Kaban Sidqi & Wahby)
Latin (Hawar)	Kurmanji	1932-Present	Turkey, Syria, Diaspora, Online	Phonemic focus, 31 letters (Bedirxan & Lescot)
Cyrillic	Kurmanji	1946-Present (Soviet Era)	Former Soviet Union (esp. Armenia)	Developed for Soviet Kurds (Heciyê Cindî)
Armenian	Kurmanji	1921-1929	Soviet Armenia	Brief official use before Latin/Cyrillic
Yezidi	Kurmanji	17th C-Present (Older roots?)	Yezidi communities	Unique script, primarily religious use, revival efforts underway

IV. Writing as Kurds: The Adoption of Prestige Languages

A. The Historical Dominance of Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish in Writing

A crucial aspect of Kurdish linguistic history is the long-standing practice of Kurdish

intellectuals, scholars, poets, and administrators choosing to write not in their native Kurdish dialects, but in the dominant literary and official languages of the wider region: Arabic, Persian, and, particularly during the Ottoman period, Turkish.⁶ This phenomenon persisted for centuries, even during periods when Kurdish principalities enjoyed relative autonomy. Several factors contributed to this linguistic choice. Arabic, as the language of the Quran and Islamic scholarship, held immense religious prestige and was indispensable for theological and legal studies.⁶ Persian possessed a rich and highly influential literary tradition, particularly in poetry and historiography, and served as a language of high culture and administration across a vast area, including within the Ottoman Empire for certain periods and functions.⁶ Ottoman Turkish, evolving from earlier Turkic forms, became the primary administrative and increasingly literary language of the Ottoman state, which ruled over the majority of Kurds for centuries.⁵² Writing in these established "high" languages offered Kurdish elites access to wider audiences, participation in broader intellectual and religious discourses, and pathways to political influence and social prestige that writing in Kurdish vernaculars, lacking standardization and official status, could not easily provide.⁶

Historical accounts confirm this trend. The Ottoman chronicler Shamsaddin Sami observed in the late 19th century that educated Kurds often dedicated themselves to mastering Arabic and Persian while neglecting their own language.⁶ A telling example is Sheikh Marifi Node Barzinji (1733-1838), a prolific Kurdish Islamic scholar who authored over 46 significant works on diverse subjects in Arabic and Persian, but wrote only a single small Arabic-Kurdish glossary in his mother tongue, intended to help his son learn Arabic.⁶ Even within independent or semi-independent Kurdish principalities, Kurdish was often not adopted as the official language of chancelleries or formal record-keeping, although it remained the language of the court and daily life.⁶

B. Notable Kurdish Contributions in Non-Kurdish Languages (Literature, History, Scholarship)

Despite the limited use of Kurdish for formal writing during long stretches of history, individuals of Kurdish origin made substantial and lasting contributions to the literary, historical, and scholarly traditions of Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish. Their work demonstrates not merely linguistic assimilation but active participation and influence within these dominant cultural spheres.

- **In Arabic:** The legacy of Kurdish scholarship in Arabic is significant, particularly in historical and religious sciences.
 - **Ibn al-Athir** (ʿIzz al-Dīn Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī, 1160–1233), born in Cizre (Jazira), was one of the most important Muslim historians of the medieval period, famed for his monumental work *al-Kāmil fī al-tārīkh* (The Complete History).⁸
 - **Abu'l Fida** (Ismāʿīl ibn ʿAlī, 1273–1331), a Kurdish prince of the Ayyubid dynasty branch ruling Hama (Syria), was a distinguished historian and geographer.⁴⁹
 - **Al-Shahrāzuri** (Shams al-Din Muhammad, fl. 13th century), likely from the Shahrizor region, was a prominent philosopher and historian of philosophy, known for his biographies of physicians and philosophers.⁴⁹
 - **Zain al-Din al-'Iraqi** (ʿAbd al-Raḥīm ibn al-Ḥusayn, 1325–1404), of Kurdish

ancestry, was a major Shafi'i scholar of Hadith (Prophetic traditions) based in Egypt and Syria.⁴⁹

- While **Saladin** (Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb, 1137–1193), the founder of the Ayyubid dynasty, was primarily a military and political leader, his Kurdish origins are notable, and the administration during his reign relied heavily on Arabic.²
- **In Persian:** Persian, with its deep historical roots in the region and its status as a language of high culture, was another major vehicle for Kurdish intellectual expression.
 - **Idris Bitlisi** (Mawlānā Ḥakīm al-Dīn Idrīs ibn Ḥusām al-Dīn 'Alī al-Bitlīsī, d. 1520), a high-ranking Ottoman official and scholar of Kurdish origin, played a crucial role in integrating Kurdish emirates into the Ottoman Empire. He wrote his history of the first eight Ottoman sultans, *Hasht Behesht* ("Eight Paradises," completed c. 1506), in Persian.⁸
 - **Sharaf Khan Bidlisi** (Sharaf al-Dīn ibn Shams al-Dīn Bidlīsī, 1543–c. 1603), the Kurdish prince (Amir) of Bitlis, authored the *Sharafnama* (Book of Honor, completed 1597), a foundational work of Kurdish history detailing the genealogies and chronicles of various Kurdish dynasties and principalities. He wrote this seminal work in Persian, the dominant literary language of the time, aiming to preserve the history of his people and assert the status of Kurdish rulers.⁸
 - **Şerif Xan** (1682–1748), a member of the ruling family of Hakkari, composed poetry in both Persian and Kurmanji Kurdish.²⁶
 - **Mastoureh Ardalan** (Mah Sharaf Khanom Kurdistani, 1805–1848), a noblewoman from the Ardalan court, was a celebrated poet and historian who wrote works in both Persian and Gorani Kurdish.²⁶ The profound influence of Persian literature is also evident in the works of poets who *did* write in Kurdish, such as Melayê Cizîrî's emulation of Hafez or Khana Qubadi's adaptation of Nezami's *Shirin u Khosrow* into Gorani.⁷
- **In Ottoman Turkish:** As Ottoman Turkish solidified its position as the administrative and increasingly cultural language of the empire, Kurds within Ottoman domains also participated in its literary life.
 - The translation of Sharaf Khan Bidlisi's Persian *Sharafnama* into Ottoman Turkish in the late 17th century reflects the growing prestige of Turkish even within Kurdish princely courts. Two separate translations were commissioned: one by **Muḥammad Bēg b. Aḥmad Bēg**, a great-great-grandson of Sharaf Khan himself in Bidlis, and another by **Sham'ī**, a secretary at the court of Pālū.⁵² The translators explicitly noted the shift away from Persian towards Turkish in Ottoman Kurdistan.⁵²
 - In the later Ottoman period and early Turkish Republic, Kurdish intellectuals were involved in broader Ottoman and Turkish intellectual and political currents. **Ziya Gökalp** (1876–1924), a sociologist and writer from Diyarbakir with mixed Kurdish and Turkish ancestry, became a major ideologue of Turkish nationalism and a key figure in the *Milli Edebiyat* (National Literature) movement, advocating for language simplification and writing influential works in Turkish.⁵⁸ While his legacy

is complex regarding Kurdish identity, his prominence highlights the participation of individuals from Kurdish backgrounds in Turkish intellectual life.

- Numerous other Kurds living within the Ottoman Empire and later Turkey would have been bilingual or multilingual, engaging with and contributing to Turkish literature and culture, though often their Kurdish identity might not be foregrounded in mainstream Turkish literary history.⁸

The extensive written output by individuals of Kurdish origin in these major regional languages demonstrates their deep integration into the broader Islamic, Persianate, and Ottoman civilizations. They were not merely passive recipients of dominant cultures but active participants and significant contributors whose works enriched these traditions. This historical reality complicates any simple narrative of purely external linguistic suppression; while pressures to use dominant languages certainly existed, there was also active, high-level participation by Kurdish elites within these linguistic spheres. Their contributions, even when not in Kurdish, form an integral part of the intellectual and cultural heritage associated with the Kurdish people. The later, more conscious turn towards developing literature *in* Kurdish dialects, particularly from the 19th century onwards, often coincided with the rise of modern Kurdish national consciousness and a desire to cultivate a distinct linguistic identity in the written domain.⁸

V. A Multilingual People: Kurdish Interaction with Neighbouring Languages

A. Historical Bilingualism and Multilingualism

Given the geographical location of Kurdistan at the crossroads of major linguistic and cultural zones, and the complex political history involving numerous empires and local interactions, bilingualism and multilingualism have been persistent features of Kurdish society throughout history.⁸ Kurds have lived alongside, and often intermingled with, speakers of various other language groups, leading to widespread language contact and acquisition of second languages.

The most significant contact languages historically include:

- **Arabic:** Contact with Arabic has been profound and long-lasting, primarily through the influence of Islam (as the language of scripture and religious scholarship) and through political administration under Arab caliphates and subsequent dynasties. In modern times, Arabic became the official state language in Iraq and Syria, leading to widespread societal bilingualism among Kurds in those countries, particularly through the education system.⁴
- **Persian:** As a major language of culture, literature, and administration in the Iranian world for millennia, Persian has had a deep and continuous influence on Kurdish. In Iran, Persian remains the sole official language, and most Kurds are bilingual.⁸ Historically, its prestige extended into Ottoman territories as well.⁸
- **Turkish:** Contact with Turkic languages began with the Seljuk migrations and intensified significantly under the Ottoman Empire, which ruled most of Kurdistan for centuries. In modern Turkey, Turkish is the sole official language, and assimilation policies have enforced its use, resulting in widespread Kurdish-Turkish bilingualism.⁸ Specific Turkic-speaking enclaves also exist within Kurdish areas, such as the Azerbaijani Turkic

dialect spoken in Sonqor, Iran, where residents are often trilingual in Turkic, Kurdish, and Persian.²⁵

- **Aramaic (Syriac/Neo-Aramaic):** Kurdistan was historically home to substantial Christian and Jewish communities speaking various dialects of Aramaic (often referred to as Syriac, Assyrian, or Chaldean Neo-Aramaic). Close interaction between Kurdish and Aramaic speakers occurred over centuries, leading to significant linguistic exchange.²⁵
- **Armenian:** Historically, large Armenian populations lived alongside Kurds, particularly in the regions of Western Armenia (Eastern Anatolia). This proximity resulted in intensive language contact and bilingualism, especially from the 16th century until the Armenian Genocide in the early 20th century drastically altered the demographic landscape.⁵ Kurdish communities also exist in modern Armenia.⁶⁸

B. Documented Linguistic Contact and Mutual Influence

The long history of coexistence has left tangible marks on the languages involved, with evidence of mutual borrowing and structural influence.

- **Kurdish-Aramaic Interaction:** The contact between Kurdish and Eastern Neo-Aramaic (ENA) dialects spoken by Christians and Jews in Kurdistan is exceptionally deep, potentially spanning over 2,500 years.⁵⁹ Research consistently shows a profound, often asymmetrical influence of Kurdish (both Kurmanji and Sorani) on ENA dialects. This influence extends far beyond simple lexical borrowing, impacting phonology, morphology, and syntax.⁵⁹ Features such as word order patterns, case marking strategies, and specific grammatical constructions in many ENA dialects show clear signs of convergence with neighboring Kurdish varieties.⁵⁹ The intensity and nature of this influence can vary depending on the specific Kurdish dialect involved; for instance, Jewish ENA dialects historically spoken east of the Greater Zab river (within the Sorani sphere) appear to have incorporated Kurdish grammatical material more directly, while Christian and Jewish dialects further west (in the Kurmanji sphere) often adapted their own Aramaic resources to match Kurdish patterns.⁵⁹ The influence of Aramaic on Kurdish is less extensively studied and appears less structurally profound, though lexical borrowing and shared areal features undoubtedly exist.⁶² Shared proverbs also attest to the close cultural contact.⁶² This pattern suggests Kurdish often functioned as the locally dominant vernacular, exerting significant pressure on the minority Aramaic languages within Kurdistan.
- **Kurdish-Armenian Interaction:** The historical coexistence of Kurds and Armenians, particularly in Eastern Anatolia/Western Armenia, fostered significant bilingualism and linguistic exchange.⁶⁶ Linguistic evidence suggests that Armenian exerted considerable influence on the Kurmanji dialects spoken in these contact zones. This influence is apparent not only in vocabulary but also in phonetics and word-formation processes, consistent with Armenian acting as a substrate language for Kurdish dialects expanding into historically Armenian-speaking areas.⁴⁰ Conversely, the influence of Kurdish on Western Armenian dialects appears to have been primarily lexical and less structurally

pervasive.⁶⁶ Kurdish has borrowed vocabulary from Armenian as well.²⁸ Some scholars also explore deeper historical connections, examining the influence of Parthian (an ancient West Iranian language related to Kurdish precursors) on the syntax of Classical Armenian, particularly the development of its perfect tense, suggesting ancient layers of Irano-Armenian contact relevant to the broader history of the region.⁶⁷

- **Kurdish Interaction with Arabic, Persian, and Turkish:** As discussed previously, Kurdish has absorbed a vast amount of vocabulary from these three major regional languages, reflecting centuries of religious, cultural, and political interaction.⁴ Arabic influence is particularly noticeable in religious and scholarly terminology and has also impacted Kurdish phonology, contributing sounds like the pharyngeal consonants /ħ/ (ħ) and /ʕ/ (ʕ) and emphatic consonants, possibly stemming from very early contact with Semitic languages, not just medieval or modern Arabic.⁴ Persian influence is deeply embedded due to the close genetic relationship within the Iranian family and Persia's long-standing cultural prestige; countless words related to administration, literature, and daily life have entered Kurdish.¹ Turkish influence is most pronounced in the Kurmanji spoken in Turkey, affecting vocabulary and, to some extent, syntax.²⁸

The overall pattern of linguistic influence appears somewhat asymmetrical. While Kurdish dialects absorbed substantial lexical and some structural elements from the dominant state and religious languages (Arabic, Persian, Turkish), Kurdish itself seems to have exerted a more profound, often substrate-level influence on the minority languages historically spoken within Kurdistan, such as Neo-Aramaic and regional Armenian dialects.⁵⁹ This reflects the complex sociolinguistic dynamics where Kurdish functioned as a widespread and locally dominant vernacular, influencing smaller communities, while simultaneously being shaped by the languages associated with larger political structures and literate traditions. Understanding Kurdish linguistic history thus requires appreciating its dual role as both a recipient and a source of language contact phenomena.

VI. Synthesis: A Historical Overview of Spoken and Written Languages

A. Chronological Perspective on Language Use Among Kurds

Tracing the linguistic practices of Kurds through history reveals a dynamic interplay between spoken vernaculars, adopted prestige languages, emerging literacy, and shifting political contexts.

- **Ancient/Pre-Islamic Era (Before c. 7th Century CE):** Direct linguistic evidence for this period is scarce. The ancestors of the Kurds likely spoke non-Iranian languages before undergoing language shift towards Northwestern Iranian dialects, possibly related to Median or Parthian, beginning perhaps around 2000 BCE.¹¹ Contact with Aramaic-speaking populations was established during this long formative period.⁶¹ Writing, if practiced by these precursor groups, would likely have utilized the scripts and languages of dominant regional powers (e.g., Achaemenid Persian, Parthian, Sasanian Middle Persian, Aramaic). There is no evidence of written Kurdish from this era.
- **Early Islamic/Medieval Era (c. 7th–15th Centuries):** The Arab conquests and the conversion of most Kurds to Islam introduced Arabic as a major language of religion, scholarship, and, initially, administration.⁴ Persian re-emerged and rapidly gained

prominence as the premier language of literature, poetry, history, and administration across much of the eastern Islamic world, including areas inhabited by Kurds.⁸ Kurdish dialects remained the primary spoken vernaculars for the population. Educated Kurdish elites, however, primarily wrote in Arabic or Persian, contributing significantly to the intellectual life of these languages.⁶ During this period, the Gorani dialect began to be used in written form, particularly for the religious traditions of the Yarsani (Ahl-e Haqq).³¹ The earliest, though perhaps legendary or reconstructed, figures of Kurmanji poetry (like Balûl or Ali Hariri) are sometimes placed in this era, but concrete textual evidence is limited.⁷ The Yezidi tradition may have also begun codifying texts.³⁰ Intensive contact between migrating Kurdish groups and established Armenian populations commenced, particularly from the 11th-12th centuries onwards.⁶⁶

- **Principalities/Ottoman-Safavid Era (c. 16th–18th Centuries):** This era witnessed the rise of semi-autonomous Kurdish principalities (emirates) under Ottoman and Safavid suzerainty. This relative political stability and local patronage fostered the development of distinct literary traditions *in* Kurdish dialects, primarily using the Perso-Arabic script.⁶ The Kurmanji school of poetry flourished in the Botan emirate, with major figures like Cizîrî, Feqiyê Teyran, and Ehmedê Xanî establishing a classical literary standard.⁷ Simultaneously, the Gorani literary tradition thrived, associated with the Ardalan court and Yarsani faith, producing poets like Yaskā, Bêsarani, and Khana Qubadi.⁷ Despite this vernacular literary activity, Persian maintained immense cultural prestige, and Kurdish elites continued to write historical works (like the *Sharafnama*) in Persian.⁸ Ottoman Turkish gradually increased in importance as the administrative language, leading to commissioned Turkish translations of Persian works within Kurdish courts by the late 17th century.⁵² The Yezidi script may have seen some use for Kurmanji religious texts during this time.²⁹
- **19th Century:** The gradual erosion of the power of the Kurdish emirates and increasing centralization by the Ottoman and Qajar empires marked this century. Paradoxically, it also saw the rise of the Sorani dialect as a major literary force, centered around the Baban principality's capital, Sulaymaniyah, with the influential Nali school (Nalî, Salim, Kurdi, Haji Qadir Koyi, Mahwi).⁷ Haji Qadir Koyi's work reflected a growing sense of Kurdish nationalism and advocacy for the Kurdish language.⁵¹ The first Kurdish newspapers began to appear, although often short-lived. Writing in Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish continued among the elite. This century also marked the beginning of systematic European scholarly interest in Kurdish, with the publication of the first grammars and text collections by figures like Garzoni (late 18th C), Lerkh, Jaba, and Justi.⁹
- **20th Century – Present:** The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and the division of Kurdistan among the modern nation-states of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria created divergent trajectories for Kurdish language development and literacy.
 - *Turkey and Syria:* Experienced periods of severe suppression of the Kurdish language and identity. The adoption of the Latin-based Hawar alphabet (from

1932) became standard for Kurmanji in these regions, although its official recognition and use in Turkey was restricted for decades.¹⁶ Modern Kurdish prose, including the novel, developed significantly among Kurmanji writers, often in exile or under difficult conditions.⁷ The Kurdish diaspora, particularly in Europe, became a vital center for Kurmanji literary production.⁸

- *Iraq*: Sorani Kurdish gained official regional status in Iraqi Kurdistan, especially after periods of autonomy.¹⁶ It became a language of education, media, and administration, using the adapted Perso-Arabic script.¹⁶ This fostered the development of modern Sorani literature, with figures like Abdulla Goran pioneering new poetic forms.²⁶ Kurmanji (Behdini) is also spoken and recognized in the northern parts of the region.¹⁶
- *Iran*: Persian remained the dominant official language. Kurdish (Sorani, Southern Kurdish, Laki, Gorani) continued to be spoken widely. Periods of limited tolerance allowed for some Kurdish publications (using the Perso-Arabic script), notably during the short-lived Republic of Kurdistan in Mahabad (1946), which produced major poets like Hejar and Hemin.² However, restrictions on Kurdish language use in education and media have generally persisted.
- *Former USSR (Armenia, etc.)*: Kurmanji-speaking communities maintained a distinct literary tradition, transitioning from Armenian script (1921–29) to Latin (1929–c.1946) and then Cyrillic (1946 onwards).²⁹ This environment produced notable writers like the novelist Erebe Şemo and the linguist Heciyê Cindî.²⁶ The contemporary era sees ongoing efforts towards standardization, particularly for Kurmanji and Sorani, the two main literary dialects. The use of the Latin alphabet continues to spread, especially in digital communication. Multilingualism remains the norm for most Kurds. The linguistic status and revitalization efforts for Zazaki and Gorani continue to be debated and pursued by their respective communities.¹⁴

Table 2: Timeline of Key Spoken and Written Language Developments for Kurds

Period	Dominant Spoken Languages	Dominant Written Languages (Used by Kurds)	Key Scripts Used (By Kurds)	Major Literary/Linguistic Events/Figures
Ancient/Pre-Islamic (Before ~7th C CE)	Precursors to Kurdish (NWI), Aramaic, Armenian precursors	Imperial languages (Old/Middle Persian, Aramaic, Greek?)	Cuneiform, Aramaic, Pahlavi?	Language shift to Iranian; Early Kurdish-Aramaic contact.
Early Islamic/Medieval (~7th–15th C)	Kurdish dialects, Arabic, Persian, Aramaic, Armenian	Primarily Arabic & Persian (by elites); Emergence of written Gorani	Perso-Arabic	Islamization (Arabic influence); Persian literary rise; Ibn al-Athir

		(Yarsani)		(Ar.); Gorani religious texts (Kalâm-e Saranjâm); Mele Perîşan (Gor.)
Principalities/ Ottoman-Safavid Era (~16th–18th C)	Kurdish dialects, Ar., Pers., Turk., Aram., Arm.	Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Turkish; Flourishing of Kurmanji & Gorani literature	Perso-Arabic, Yezidi Script?	Kurmanji School (Cizîrî, Teyran, Xanî); Gorani School (Yaskā, Bêsarani, Qubadî); Sharaf Khan (Pers.); Idris Bitlisi (Pers.)
19th Century	Kurdish dialects, Ar., Pers., Turk., Aram., Arm.	Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Turkish; Rise of Sorani literature; Early Kurd. journalism	Perso-Arabic	Sorani School (Nalî, Koyî, Mahwî); Decline of Gorani lit.; First European grammars (Garzoni, Lerkh, Jaba).
20th C – Present	Kurdish dialects, National languages (Turk., Ar., Pers.), Diaspora languages	National Langs.; Sorani & Kurmanji as main literary dialects; Zazaki/Gorani revival	Perso-Arabic (Ir./Iq.), Latin (Tk./Sy./Diasp.), Cyrillic (FSU)	Division of Kurdistan; Script divergence; Modern literature (Goran, Şemo, Cigerxwîn, Uzun); Standardization efforts; Diaspora lit.

VII. Conclusion

A. Summary of Findings

The linguistic history of the Kurdish people presents a rich and intricate tapestry woven from diverse threads of internal evolution, extensive language contact, and shifting socio-political landscapes. The Kurdish language itself, belonging to the Northwestern Iranian group but bearing significant Southwestern Iranian influence, exists as a continuum of dialects (primarily Kurmanji, Sorani, Southern Kurdish, and Laki) whose geographical distribution transcends modern state borders. Historically, a notable dichotomy existed between the widespread use of spoken Kurdish vernaculars for daily life and identity expression, and the long-standing preference among Kurdish elites for utilizing established prestige languages – Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish – for formal written communication, scholarship, and administration. This

practice, while demonstrating the integration of Kurds into broader regional civilizations, delayed the widespread development and standardization of written Kurdish. Nevertheless, distinct written traditions *in* Kurdish dialects did emerge, notably from the 16th century onwards, often flourishing under the patronage of semi-autonomous Kurdish principalities. Classical schools of poetry developed in Gorani (associated with the Ardalán court and Yarsani faith), Kurmanji (centered in Botan), and later, Sorani (rising to prominence in Sulaymaniyah). The 20th century saw the further development of modern literature, particularly in Kurmanji and Sorani, but also the fragmentation of Kurdish literacy practices due to the division of Kurdistan and differing state language policies, reflected most clearly in the adoption of multiple scripts (Perso-Arabic, Latin, Cyrillic). Throughout their history, Kurds have been a profoundly multilingual people, interacting extensively with neighboring language communities (Aramaic, Armenian, Arabic, Persian, Turkish), resulting in complex patterns of mutual linguistic influence, often asymmetrical, with Kurdish acting as both a recipient and a significant local source of contact-induced change.

B. Interplay of Factors

This historical trajectory underscores that the linguistic evolution and literacy practices of the Kurds cannot be adequately explained by internal linguistic factors alone. Political history – the rise and fall of empires and local principalities, the imposition of modern state borders, and official language policies – has profoundly shaped the status and development of Kurdish dialects and writing. Cultural prestige, particularly the powerful draw of the established Arabo-Persian literary canon and Islamic scholarly tradition, heavily influenced the linguistic choices of educated Kurds for centuries. Religious identity also played a role, fostering distinct written traditions among Yarsani (in Gorani) and Yezidi (in Kurmanji) communities, albeit with complexities regarding textual transmission and authenticity. Sociolinguistic factors, including patterns of bilingualism, education systems, migration, and the rise of modern nationalism, have further driven linguistic change and shaped contemporary attitudes towards language and script.

C. Contemporary Situation and Future Directions

Today, Kurdish languages continue to navigate a complex environment. While Sorani enjoys official status in Iraqi Kurdistan, and Kurmanji sees increased visibility and use in Turkey and the diaspora, challenges remain regarding standardization across dialects, script unification, language rights in Iran and Syria, and the revitalization of endangered varieties like Gorani and Zazaki. The historical relationship between spoken vernacular, written language, diverse scripts, and ethno-political identity remains a crucial element of contemporary Kurdish life. Further research is needed in several areas, including more detailed documentation and analysis of the less-studied Southern Kurdish and Laki dialects, deeper investigation into the early history of Kurdish and its relationship with other ancient and Middle Iranian languages, and more comprehensive studies on the nature and extent of Kurdish influence on Aramaic and Armenian, as well as the reciprocal influences on Kurdish itself. Understanding the intricate linguistic past of the Kurds provides essential context for appreciating their rich cultural heritage and the ongoing dynamics of language and identity in the region.

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