

Themes and Etymologies of Kurdish Proverbs

1. Introduction: The Essence of Kurdish Proverbs (Gotinên Pêşîyan / Pendên Kurdî)

Defining Proverbs: Universal Wisdom in Concise Form

Proverbs represent a fundamental component of human cultural expression, serving as repositories of collective wisdom passed down through generations.¹ They are generally understood as short, popular sayings, often of unknown or ancient origin, that articulate commonplace truths or offer useful guidance.³ These expressions function primarily as didactic tools, imparting lessons gleaned from ancestral experience.¹ Linguistically and structurally, proverbs are characterized by their effectiveness, which lies significantly in their brevity and directness.³ Their syntax tends to be simple, employing vivid imagery and often drawing upon domestic or familiar allusions, enhancing their accessibility and ease of comprehension.³ Memorability, crucial for oral transmission, is frequently aided by phonological features such as alliteration, assonance, rhythm, and rhyme.³

Across cultures, proverbial expressions carry various labels – adages, maxims, saws, truisms – yet all convey the central notion of embodying traditional wisdom.³ They encapsulate a wide spectrum of human experience, derived from actions, observations, or emotions.³ A key aspect of proverb comprehension lies in their dual interpretative potential: the literal and the non-literal, or metaphorical.³ While the literal interpretation refers to the basic meaning of the words, the non-literal interpretation extends this meaning symbolically to new, analogous real-life situations.³ Grasping this metaphorical layer often necessitates specific cognitive abilities, as proverbs frequently employ figurative schemes and require understanding beyond the surface text.³ Linguists like Sharazuuri defined Kurdish proverbs as combinations of short Kurdish words yielding an 'elevated' meaning, while Parsa highlighted their succinct, dramatic, and often musical nature, recognizing their guidance-offering function.¹ Proverbs thus serve not only as carriers of wisdom but also as indicators of a society's capacity for nuanced thought and expression.¹

The Significance of Proverbs in Kurdish Culture and Oral Tradition

Within Kurdish culture, proverbs, known variously as *Gotinên Pêşîyan* (Words of the Forefathers) or *Pendên Pêşîyan* (Advice/Maxims of the Forefathers), hold a place of paramount importance.¹ They are not merely linguistic artifacts but constitute a fundamental element of Kurdish cultural heritage, literature, and daily interaction.¹ Kurdish society accords significant weight to these sayings, weaving them frequently into everyday conversation, a

practice observed across lines of literacy and social standing.¹ The famous linguist Sajadi observed the ubiquity of their use, noting that among any four utterances by a Kurd, one might well be a proverb.¹ This pervasive usage underscores their role as active cultural agents rather than static relics; they continue to shape and reflect contemporary Kurdish thought and social dynamics, embodying both historical values and current norms.¹ Their active employment suggests they are dynamic components of a living culture, potentially adapting or acquiring new interpretations over time.

These proverbs serve as mirrors reflecting the multifaceted beliefs, thoughts, practices, social norms, values, and even anti-values of the Kurdish people.⁵ They act as a measure of a society's collective intellect and expressive capability.¹ Consequently, the academic study of Kurdish proverbs provides invaluable insights into cultural dimensions, social authenticity, literary aptitude, and the depth of Kurdish thought.⁹ Originating often from an individual insight, a proverb spreads through society, eventually losing its specific originator to become collective property.¹

Overview of Kurdish Linguistic Landscape (Dialects) and Proverb Collections

The Kurdish language is not monolithic but comprises several distinct dialects, including Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish), Sorani (Central Kurdish), Zazaki, Gorani, Feyli (Southern Kurdish), Laki, Ardalani, and Sulaimani, among others.⁹ Proverbs are a vibrant part of the oral tradition across these dialectal groups, and collection efforts have spanned this linguistic diversity.⁹ Systematic collection and publication of Kurdish proverbs gained momentum notably from the mid-20th century. Key published collections emerged around 1957, including Shaikh Muhammad Mardukh's compilation of approximately 900 Ardalani proverbs and idioms, Ismail Haqi Shawayis's collection of 612 proverbs from Sulaimaniya (Iraq), and Hajie Jindi's compilation of around 350 Kurmanji proverbs from the Armenian SSR.¹⁰ Other significant collectors and works mentioned in academic literature include Fatahi Ghazi, Sohrabnejad (Ilami Kurdish), Shekh Mohamad Khal, Ali Marouf Sharazoori, Hoshyar Noori Lak, and Karim Sharaza.⁴ These collections are invaluable not only for their content but also as linguistic data for dialectology, often vividly portraying rustic life and preserving diverse vocabulary.¹⁰ The motivations behind collecting Kurdish folklore, including proverbs, have evolved significantly over time. Initial interest in the 19th century largely came from external observers – Orientalists and European travelers studying the languages and literatures of 'The Orient'.¹¹ Subsequently, particularly around the turn of the 20th century, Kurdish oral tradition became a source of inspiration for the burgeoning Kurdish national movement, contributing to heritage-building efforts.¹² In contemporary times, while the nationalist undertone may persist, the primary driving force for many collectors, especially younger generations, is the urgent need for language revitalization and the preservation of indigenous knowledge.¹¹ This shift reflects a response to the pressures of assimilation and the marginalization of Kurdish languages in countries like Turkey and Iran, transforming folklore collection into a strategy for cultural survival and resistance.¹¹ This trajectory—from external scholarly curiosity to internal

national affirmation, and finally to proactive cultural and linguistic preservation—highlights the changing context and significance attributed to these oral traditions.

Report Focus: Unveiling Themes and Linguistic Roots

This report endeavors to provide an expert-level analysis focusing on two intertwined aspects of Kurdish proverbs: the rich tapestry of **themes** they explore and the **etymological origins** of the key vocabulary employed within them. By examining the recurring subjects, values, and worldviews expressed, the report aims to illuminate core aspects of Kurdish culture.

Simultaneously, by delving into the linguistic archaeology of specific words—tracing their roots back through Proto-Iranian to Proto-Indo-European, and identifying influences from neighboring languages—it seeks to shed light on the historical development of the Kurdish language and its connections within the broader linguistic landscape. The analysis will synthesize cultural understanding derived from thematic exploration with linguistic insights drawn from etymology and observed structural patterns, utilizing a range of academic sources and proverb collections covering various dialects.

2. Thematic Tapestry: Exploring Life Through Kurdish Proverbs

Kurdish proverbs, like those of many cultures, offer a window into the collective mind, reflecting deeply held values, social norms, and perspectives on the human condition. They cover a vast range of topics, providing guidance, commentary, and observations on life's complexities.

Wisdom, Prudence, and the Value of Experience

A prominent category of Kurdish proverbs centers on wisdom (*zanîn*), prudence (*hişyarî*), and the indispensable lessons learned through experience (*ceribandin*). Practical wisdom is highly esteemed, often contrasted with mere age. The saying, "*A man is as wise as his head, not his years*"¹⁴, underscores that intellect and understanding, rather than longevity alone, confer wisdom. Foresight and careful consideration before action or speech are strongly advised: "*Listen a hundred times; ponder a thousand times; speak once*".¹⁴ This emphasizes deliberation and the gravity of spoken words. Similarly, caution is urged against premature action, as in "*Do not roll up your trousers before reaching the stream*"¹⁴, and against exceeding one's limits: "*Stretch your feet according to your blanket*".¹⁴

Experience is presented as a crucial teacher, sometimes depicted with hyperbole to emphasize resilience, such as "*Le hezar aw =î da-û-e., qul-e-pe=î ter ne=buw-a*" (He has forded a thousand waters; his ankle has not become wet).¹ The limitations of passive observation without active engagement are captured in "*If skill could be gained by watching, every dog would become a butcher*".¹⁴ Patience (*sebir*) emerges as a cardinal virtue, essential for achieving goals. "*Patience is bitter, but it bears sweet fruit*"¹⁴ acknowledges the difficulty but promises reward, a sentiment echoed in Turkish proverbs.¹⁵ A more emphatic Kurdish variant states, "*Be sebirgirtin hemu ştêk-t pê=de-krê*" (With patience all is done), using the

overstatement "all" (*hemu*) to stress its universal efficacy.¹

The power of communication, particularly tactful speech, is highlighted through overstatement in the proverb "*Be ziman-î şirin (or, qisa-î xo ş) mar le kun (d) -ê t-e der*" (By means of a pleasant tongue/sweet words, a snake will come out of its hole).¹ This proverb, emphasizing the ability of gentle words to achieve the seemingly impossible, finds remarkable parallels in neighboring cultures. Variants exist in Persian ("With a sweet tongue and kindness, you can drag an elephant by a hair" or "...drag a snake...")¹⁶ and Turkish ("The sweet tongue pulls the snake out of its hole").¹⁹ The recurrence of such specific wisdom tropes and even near-identical proverb structures across Kurdish, Persian, and Turkish traditions points towards a shared cultural milieu, significant historical interaction involving translation and borrowing, or perhaps universal human experiences finding similar metaphorical expression in the region.⁵ This cross-cultural resonance underscores the fluidity of wisdom traditions in this part of the world.

The Social Weave: Friendship, Family, Community, and Hospitality

Social relationships form another cornerstone of Kurdish proverbial wisdom, with strong emphasis placed on friendship (*hevaltî, dostanî*), family (*malbat*), community (*civat*), and hospitality (*mêvanperwerî*). Friendship is depicted as invaluable: "*A cup of coffee commits one to forty years of friendship*"¹⁴ illustrates how small gestures can forge lasting bonds, while "*A thousand friends are too few; one enemy is one too many*"¹⁴ stresses the profound importance of allies and the significant burden of animosity. This latter sentiment is mirrored exactly in Turkish proverbs.¹⁵

The value of companionship, especially during difficult times or journeys, is captured in "*A good companion shortens the longest road*".¹⁴ This theme resonates in Turkish ("No road is long with good company"²²) and Arabic ("A good companion shortens the longest road"²⁴). Proverbs offer guidance on nurturing friendships, advising loyalty to long-standing connections: "*Of everything else the newest; of friends, the oldest*".¹⁴ Caution is advised in mixing friendship with commerce: "*Eat and drink with your friends but do not trade with them*".¹⁴ The quality of friends matters: "*Better a wise foe than a foolish friend*".¹⁴ An Arabic proverb offers a starker warning: "*Be wary around your enemy once, and your friend a thousand times. A double crossing friend knows more about what harms you*".²⁵

Hospitality is presented not just as a virtue but as a source of blessing: "*A visitor comes with ten blessings, eats one, and leaves nine*"¹⁴, and "*Guests bring good luck with them*".¹⁴ The indispensability of guests is stated plainly: "*Xan nabe bê mêvan*" (A house/inn cannot be without guests).²⁶ Family ties are also central, particularly the irreplaceable role of the mother: "*One can never repay one's debt to one's mother*".¹⁴ Proverbs also touch upon child-rearing, sometimes controversially by modern standards: "*One beats one's breast who does not beat one's child*".¹⁴

Community solidarity and the dangers of isolation are recurring themes. "*Pezê bi tenê guran xwariye*" (The sheep that is alone has been eaten by wolves)²⁶ serves as a stark warning against separation from the group, a concept also found in Turkish proverbs.¹⁵ The strength

found in unity is affirmed, paralleling the Arabic sentiment "*Unity is power*".²⁵ The pronounced focus on these strong social bonds—friendship, community, hospitality—likely reflects more than just abstract ideals. Given the historical context of the Kurds, often characterized as a mountain people²⁷ navigating challenging terrains and frequently facing political instability or external pressures²⁸, these proverbs embed practical wisdom. Strong social networks, mutual support, and communal cohesion are not just desirable but essential mechanisms for survival and resilience in such environments. The proverbs thus encode vital strategies for navigating a world where interdependence is key.

Cultural Values and Worldview: Honor, Fate, Resilience, and Nature

Kurdish proverbs articulate a distinct worldview, emphasizing core cultural values such as honor (*şeref*), acknowledging the power of fate (*qeder*), celebrating resilience (*xweragirî*), and drawing heavily on the natural environment. Honor is often portrayed as paramount, even transcending life itself: "*Şeref ji jîyanê mezintir e*" (Honor is greater than life).²⁶ Integrity and truthfulness are valued, with false boasting discouraged: "*Rastiyê vemeşêr, û mebê ez im şêr*" (Hide the truth, and don't say I am the lion).²⁶

Fate and destiny are acknowledged as powerful forces shaping human lives. "*No matter where you go, your destiny follows you*"¹⁴ expresses a sense of inescapability. Divine agency is often invoked: "*Xwedê serî dibîne, kumê lê datîne*" (God sees the head, He puts the hat on it) suggests that God assigns appropriate roles or destinies.²⁶ The persistence of fate is noted in "*Roj dere qeza nare*" (The day goes, fate/calamity does not).²⁶

However, this acknowledgement of fate does not lead to passivity. Resilience, patience, and endurance are strongly advocated. "*If you are an anvil, be patient; if you are a hammer, be strong*"¹⁴ advises fortitude appropriate to one's situation. Hardship itself is seen as a teacher: "*A tribulation is better than a hundred warnings*".¹⁴ The cyclical nature of fortune is recognized, offering perspective during difficult times: "*Her hewrazêk nişêwyekî heye*" (Every uphill has a downhill)²⁹, a concept with parallels in other cultures expressing life's fluctuations ("What goes up, must come down"³⁰). This juxtaposition of fatalistic acceptance with exhortations towards active virtues like patience, resilience, and personal responsibility ("Every sheep is hung by his own leg"¹⁴; "*ç biçêni, awa aduritawa*" - As you sow, you shall reap²⁹) suggests a complex worldview. It acknowledges external constraints (fate, divine will) while simultaneously demanding individual effort, moral accountability, and the strength to endure. The natural world provides a rich source of imagery, reflecting the traditional agricultural and pastoral context of much of Kurdish society.¹⁰ "*Thorns and roses grow on the same tree*"¹⁴ speaks to the coexistence of good and bad. Seasonal observations anchor wisdom in the cycles of nature: "*Nîsan e, dew li kîsan e*" (It is April, buttermilk is in the bags).²⁶ Everyday rural life informs metaphors for social advice, such as minding one's own business: "*Ne gayê min li garanê ye, ne galgala nanê gavan dikim*" (Neither is my ox in the herd, nor do I make noise about the shepherd's bread).²⁶ National identity and attachment to the homeland (*welat*) are also expressed proverbially: "*Welat xweş e, bi welatiyan*" (The homeland is beautiful with its people)²⁶, and "*Welat ji dê şêrîntir e*" (The homeland is sweeter than a mother).²⁶ The

well-known modern saying, often cited as a proverb, "*Kurds have no friends but the mountains*"¹⁴, reflects a perception of historical isolation and reliance on geography.

Gender Perspectives: Portrayals and Expectations in Proverbs

Specific scholarly attention has been paid to the representation of gender (*zayend*) and the portrayal of women (*jîn*) in Kurdish proverbs.³¹ These studies often reveal a predominantly patriarchal perspective, where the ideals of a "good woman" (*jîna baş*) are defined in relation to social gender roles assigned by men and the community.³¹ Key expectations include proficiency in domestic duties, obedience to male authority (primarily husbands), modesty, and the ability to uphold or enhance the family's honor.³¹

Proverbs illustrating the ideal of domesticity include "*Jin dîwarê hundir e, mên dîwarê derve ye*" (Woman is the inner wall, man is the outer wall), assigning separate spheres of activity.³¹ The importance of women in the home is sometimes emphasized through overstatement, as in "*Jin koî eke=î maî-e*" (Women are the foundation of home).¹ Obedience and submissiveness are implicitly praised, while women exerting influence over men can be viewed negatively: "*Mênê xeberjîn... tu tişt jê dernayê*" (A henpecked man... nothing comes out of him) suggests a man listening to his wife is ineffective.³¹ Modesty (*heya*) is deemed essential for women: "*Jîna bê heya, wek girara bê xwê ye*" (A shameless woman is like unsalted curd).³¹

Conversely, the "bad woman" (*jîna nebaş*) is characterized by her defiance of these prescribed roles.³¹ She might be portrayed as troublesome ("*Şeytanên yetîman heft in, ên jînan heftê û heft in*" - Orphaned devils are seven, those of women are seventy-seven³¹), difficult to manage ("*Jîna xerab qeyd e, ne tê kuştin ne tê berdan*" - A bad woman is a shackle, neither can be killed nor released³¹), lazy ("*Jîn hene wek mirîşka kor in*" - Some women are like blind chickens, busy but unproductive³¹), or easily deceived.³¹ Certain social statuses, like being widowed, divorced, or having eloped, often attract negative proverbial commentary.³¹ While the patriarchal lens is dominant, some proverbs introduce complexities or potential counter-narratives. For instance, "*Yê ku ji jîna xwe netirse, ne tu mên e*" (He who does not fear his wife is no man)²⁶, or its variant "*Yê ku bi jîna xwe nikare, ne tu mên e*" (He who cannot manage/handle his wife is no man)²⁶, attributes significant power or influence to women, framing it paradoxically through the definition of masculinity. Although reinforcing traditional roles, such sayings hint at the recognized agency or formidable nature of women within the household structure. The Moroccan Arabic proverb "*جاء يكحلها عماها*" (He came to help her with her eyeliner and blinded her)³³, while not Kurdish, illustrates a broader regional pattern where proverbs can also critique male incompetence, particularly in domains perceived as female. These nuances suggest that while patriarchal norms are strongly reflected, the proverbial landscape might contain subtle acknowledgements of female influence or critiques of male behavior within the traditional framework.

Navigating Life: Hardship, Fortune, and the Human Condition

Kurdish proverbs grapple realistically with the difficulties and vicissitudes of life. Hardship (*zehmetî*) is acknowledged as an unavoidable aspect of existence: "*Xerab ji kul û qotikan... xalî*

nabin" (The bad [perhaps meaning the unfortunate] are not free from wounds and beatings...).²⁶ The slow process of recovery is noted: "*An illness comes by the pound and goes away by the ounce*".¹⁴

The unpredictable nature of fortune is a recurring theme. "*Dunya* دهورانه" (Life is continuously rotating)³ and "*Dunya wêk tasi hêmamê her rojêy bêdest yekikeweyê*" (Life is like a bathroom bowl, each day held by someone different)³ use cyclical imagery to convey the constant shifts in life's circumstances. Yet, there is also hope: "*If God closes one door, He opens a thousand others*".¹⁴

Human nature, with its inherent flaws, is keenly observed. Envy is captured in "*A neighbor's hen looks as big as a goose, and his wife as young as a girl*".¹⁴ The tendency to rationalize bad behavior is illustrated by "*When a cat wants to eat her kittens, she says they look like mice*".¹⁴ Foolishness or naivety leading to danger is warned against: "*Xeber xweşa ker da guran*" (The donkey gave good news to the wolves).²⁶ The destructive power of words, particularly gossip or harsh speech, is a potent theme: "*A knife-wound heals, but a tongue-wound festers*"¹⁴, a sentiment shared in Turkish proverbs.¹⁵ The need for caution in speech is reinforced: "*zewân pâsewâne sara*" (The tongue is the guardian of the head).⁵

The sheer prevalence of proverbs addressing hardship, fluctuating fortunes, and human weaknesses suggests their function extends beyond moral instruction. They serve as vital psychological tools, providing culturally sanctioned frameworks for understanding, accepting, and coping with life's inherent unpredictability and difficulties. By encapsulating challenging realities like change, loss, and human imperfection in memorable, shared expressions, proverbs offer perspective, normalize adversity, and potentially foster resilience within the community.

Table 1: Thematic Examples in Kurdish Proverbs

Theme	Kurdish Proverb (Transliteration/Script)	English Translation	Source(s)
Wisdom	<i>Guh bide sed caran, bifikire hezar caran, biaxive carekê.</i>	Listen a hundred times; ponder a thousand times; speak once.	¹⁴
	<i>Mêr bi aqilê xwe ye, ne bi salê xwe ye.</i>	A man is as wise as his head, not his years.	¹⁴
	<i>Bi zimanê şîrîn mar ji kunê dertê. (Bi ziman-ê şîrin mar le kun (d)-ê t-e der.)</i>	By means of a pleasant tongue (sweet words), a snake will come out of its hole.	¹
Prudence	<i>Heya ku tu negihîjî çem, şalê xwe hilneke.</i>	Do not roll up your trousers before reaching the stream.	¹⁴

	<i>Lingê xwe li gor betaniya xwe dirêj bike.</i>	Stretch your feet according to your blanket.	¹⁴
Patience	<i>Sebir tal e, lê berê wê şîrîn e. (sebr talê, beri şîrîne)</i>	Patience is bitter, but its fruit is sweet.	¹⁴
	<i>Bi sebirgirtin hemû tişt pê tê kirin. (Be sebirgirtin hemu ştêk-t pê=de-krê.)</i>	With patience all is done.	¹
Friendship	<i>Fincanek qehwe xatirê çil salî heye.</i>	A cup of coffee commits one to forty years of friendship.	¹⁴
	<i>Hezar dost kêr in, yek dijmin pir e. (Bo dost hezar keme, bo dujmin yek zore.)</i>	A thousand friends are too few; one enemy is one too many.	³
	<i>Hevalê baş rêya herî dirêj kin dike.</i>	A good companion shortens the longest road.	¹⁴
Community	<i>Pezê bi tenê guran xwariye.</i>	The sheep that is alone has been eaten by wolves.	²⁶
Hospitality	<i>Mêvan bi deh xêran tê, yekê dixwe, nehê dihêle.</i>	A visitor comes with ten blessings, eats one, and leaves nine.	¹⁴
	<i>Xan nabe bê mêvan.</i>	A house/inn cannot be without guests.	²⁶
Fate	<i>Tu bi ku ve biçî, qedera te li pey te ye.</i>	No matter where you go, your destiny follows you.	¹⁴
	<i>Xwedê serî dibîne, kumê lê datîne.</i>	God sees the head, He puts the hat on it. (God assigns roles/fates appropriately)	²⁶
Resilience	<i>Her hewrazêk nişêwyekî heye.</i>	Every uphill has a downhill.	²⁹
	<i>Ger tu hesîn î, sebir bike; ger tu çakûç î, xurt be.</i>	If you are an anvil, be patient; if you are a hammer, be strong.	¹⁴
Honor	<i>Şeref ji jiyane mezintir e.</i>	Honor is greater than life.	²⁶

Gender	<i>Jin dîwarê hundir e, mêt dîwarê derve ye.</i>	Woman is the inner wall, man is the outer wall.	³¹
	<i>Jin koî eke=î maî-e.</i>	Women are the foundation of home.	¹
	<i>Yê ku ji jîna xwe netirse, ne tu mêt e.</i>	He who does not fear his wife is no man.	²⁶
Human Nature	<i>Mirîşka cîranan wek qazê ye, jîna wî wek keçekê ye.</i>	A neighbor's hen looks as big as a goose, and his wife as young as a girl. (Envy)	¹⁴
	<i>Birîna şûr baş dibe, lê birîna zîman na.</i>	A knife-wound heals, but a tongue-wound festers.	¹⁴

3. Linguistic Archaeology: Etymological Roots of Proverbial Vocabulary

Understanding the full depth of Kurdish proverbs involves not only grasping their thematic content but also exploring the linguistic history embedded within their vocabulary. Etymology, the study of word origins and development, provides a powerful lens for this exploration, revealing connections to ancient linguistic strata and patterns of cultural interaction.

Kurdish Word Origins: Connections to Proto-Iranian and Proto-Indo-European

Kurdish is firmly situated within the Indo-European language family, specifically as part of the Iranian branch.³⁵ Its linguistic ancestry can be traced back through Proto-Iranian (the reconstructed common ancestor of Iranian languages) to Proto-Indo-Iranian (the common ancestor of Iranian and Indo-Aryan languages), and ultimately to Proto-Indo-European (PIE), the hypothetical ancestor of most European and many South and West Asian languages.³⁶ While the precise lineage connecting modern Kurdish dialects directly back to specific attested Old or Middle Iranian languages remains a subject of scholarly discussion, and no direct textual predecessors are known before the 16th century CE ³⁸, the methods of comparative linguistics allow for the reconstruction of Proto-Iranian forms and the identification of cognates across related languages.³⁶ This process reveals that many core words used in Kurdish proverbs possess deep historical roots, reflecting millennia of linguistic evolution.⁴¹ Investigating these origins requires consulting specialized etymological dictionaries (such as those by Chyet, Tsabolov, or Cheung) ³⁹, leveraging online linguistic databases and resources (like Wiktionary, Lexilogos, Kurdayety) ³⁵, and drawing upon comparative studies of Iranian and Indo-European languages.³⁶

Etymological Analysis of Key Proverbial Terms

Examining the etymology of specific words frequently encountered in the proverbs discussed earlier illuminates their historical depth and semantic nuances:

- **ziman** (tongue, language): This fundamental word traces back to Proto-Iranian **hižwáh*, derived from Proto-Indo-Iranian **jij^hwáh*, ultimately from PIE **dnǵ^hwéh₂s*. Its cognates across Indo-European languages, such as Persian *zabân/zovân*, Pashto *žəba*, Avestan *hizuuā*, Sanskrit *jihvā*, Hindi *jībh*, Russian *jazyk*, French *langue*, and English *tongue*, highlight the ancient link between the physical organ and the concept of speech.⁴¹ The Kurdish form *ziman* (instead of an expected **zivan*) likely results from phonological constraints disallowing a -v- following -z- before -m-.⁴¹ This connection between the physical and abstract ("tongue" and "language") across such a wide family demonstrates how etymology can reveal deep-seated conceptual metaphors.
- **heval** (friend, companion): This word is a compound derived from Proto-Iranian elements: **ham-* meaning "together" or "joint," combined with **Hárθam*, meaning "affair," "object," or "purpose." This second element descends from Proto-Indo-Iranian **Hártham*. A parallel construction exists in Sanskrit *samartha*, meaning "having a similar or suitable aim or object".⁴² The etymology thus suggests a deeper meaning than mere companionship; a *heval* is someone with whom one shares a common purpose or endeavor, adding a layer of shared intentionality to the concept of friendship in the context of proverbs like "*A good companion shortens the longest road.*"
- **rê** (road, way, path): This word descends from Proto-Iranian **Hrāθáh*, from Proto-Indo-Iranian **Hrāthás*, ultimately from the PIE root **Hret-*. It is directly cognate with Persian *rāh*.⁴³ Its ancient lineage underscores the fundamental importance of paths and journeys, both literal and metaphorical, in human experience, reflected in proverbs about guidance and life's course.
- **dûr** (far, distant): This adjective traces back to Proto-Indo-Iranian **duHrás*. Its presence with consistent meaning across various Kurdish dialects (Central, Southern) and closely related languages like Zazaki, Gurani, and Talysh points to its ancient origin within the Iranian language family.⁴⁴
- **her** (every, each): This common determiner derives from Proto-Indo-Iranian **sárwas*, meaning "all, whole." It has clear cognates across Central and Southern Kurdish dialects.⁴⁵
- **agir** (fire): The word for fire originates from Proto-Iranian **HáHtrš*, from Proto-Indo-Iranian **HáHtrš*, ultimately from PIE **h₂eh₁ter-*, all meaning "fire." It shares this ancient root with Avestan *ātar*, Persian *ātaš*, and Pashto *or*.³⁵ Interestingly, *agir* is a doublet (a word with the same etymological root but different development) of the Northern Kurdish word *ar*, also meaning fire.⁴⁶
- **ba** (wind): This word comes from Proto-Iranian **HwáHatah*, from Proto-Indo-Iranian **HwáHatas*, derived from the PIE present participle **h₂wéh₁nts* ("blowing"), from the root **h₂weh₁-* ("to blow"). Cognates include Avestan *vātō*, Persian *bād*, and Sanskrit *vāta*.³⁵

(Note: Etymologies for *mar* (snake) ⁵⁷, *kun* (hole) ⁵⁸, *şîrîn* (sweet) ⁵⁹, *baş* (good) ⁶⁰, *nêzîk* (near) ⁶¹, *hewraz* (uphill) ⁶², *nişîv* (downhill) ⁶³, and *ka* (straw) ⁶⁴ were not available in the specific Wiktionary snippets provided or were inaccessible, requiring consultation of broader etymological dictionaries for confirmation.)

Influence of Neighboring Languages: Loanwords in Kurdish Proverbs

Due to centuries of geographical proximity, cultural exchange, political interaction, and shared religious heritage, Kurdish dialects exhibit significant lexical influence from neighboring languages, primarily Persian, Arabic, and Turkish.⁵ Armenian influence is also documented, particularly in Northern Kurdish.⁶⁶ This borrowing is reflected in the vocabulary used within proverbs.

Comparative studies highlight these influences: the Ardalani dialect shows strong Persian lexical penetration, whereas the Sulaimani dialect reveals more Turkish and Arabic loans.¹⁰ Ilami Kurdish, spoken near the border with Iraq, naturally shows considerable Arabic influence.⁵ A comparative study of Kurmanji and Turkish proverbs found 178 shared items, with 33 being direct translations, indicating substantial mutual influence.⁶⁵

Identifying loanwords requires careful comparative analysis and reference to etymological resources.⁴⁸ Common loanwords in proverbs might include:

- **Religious/Philosophical terms:** Often from Arabic or Persian (e.g., *qeder* - fate, *şeref* - honor, terms related to God - *Xwedê* itself being of Iranian origin, but concepts might show external influence).
- **Social/Administrative terms:** Potentially from Persian or Turkish, reflecting historical administrative structures.
- **Everyday objects or concepts:** Borrowing can occur across various domains.

The presence and nature of these loanwords within the body of Kurdish proverbs serve as linguistic markers. They signal periods and domains of intense cultural interaction, indicating how external concepts, technologies, or social structures were integrated into Kurdish society and subsequently embedded within its traditional wisdom. For example, a high frequency of Arabic loanwords related to Islamic concepts would point to the profound impact of Islam, while Persian or Turkish loans might reflect periods of political dominance or cultural prestige associated with those empires. Analyzing the semantic fields of these borrowed words offers valuable clues about the history of cultural exchange and influence.

Table 2: Etymology of Selected Key Words in Kurdish Proverbs

Kurdish Word (Transliteration)	Meaning in Proverb Context	Likely Etymon (Root/Source)	Key Cognates / Related Words	Source(s) for Etymology
ziman	tongue, language	PIE: <i>*dnǵʰwéh₂s</i> > PII: <i>*jǵʰwáH</i> > Plr: <i>*hižwáH</i>	Pers: <i>zabân</i> , Skr: <i>jihvā</i> , Eng: <i>tongue</i>	⁴¹
heval	friend, companion	Plr: <i>*ham-</i> ('together') +	Skr: <i>samartha</i> ('having similar	⁴²

		<i>*Hárθam</i> (‘purpose’)	aim’)	
rê	road, way, path	PIE: <i>*Hret-</i> > PII: <i>*Hrāthás</i> > Plr: <i>*Hrāθáh</i>	Pers: <i>rāh</i>	⁴³
dûr	far, distant	PII: <i>*duHrás</i>	C. Krd: <i>dûr</i> , S. Krd: <i>dûr</i> , Zazaki: <i>dûrî</i>	⁴⁴
her	every, each	PII: <i>*sárwas</i> (‘all, whole’)	C. Krd: <i>her</i> , S. Krd: <i>her</i>	⁴⁵
agir	fire	PIE: <i>*h₂eh₁ter-</i> > PII: <i>*HáHtr̥š</i> > Plr: <i>*HáHtr̥š</i>	Aves: <i>ātar</i> , Pers: <i>ātaš</i> , Pashto: <i>or</i> , N. Krd: <i>ar</i> (doublet)	³⁵
ba	wind	PIE: <i>*h₂weh₁-</i> (‘to blow’) > PII: <i>*HwáHatas</i> > Plr: <i>*HwáHatah</i>	Aves: <i>vātō</i> , Pers: <i>bād</i> , Skr: <i>vāta</i>	³⁵
Xwedê	God	Plr: <i>*xwadāy</i> (‘lord, god’)	Pers: <i>xodâ</i> , O.Pers: <i>xwadāya</i> (‘lord’)	(Common knowledge, cf. Wiktionary/Chyet)
mar	snake	<i>Etymology requires further research</i>	---	⁵⁷ (Not found)
kun	hole	<i>Etymology requires further research</i>	---	⁵⁸ (Not found)
şîrîn	sweet	<i>Etymology requires further research</i>	Pers: <i>şirin</i>	⁵⁹ (Inaccessible)
baş	good	<i>Etymology requires further research</i>	---	⁶⁰ (Not found)
nêzîk	near	<i>Etymology requires further research</i>	Pers: <i>nazdik</i>	⁶¹ (Inaccessible)

(PIE = Proto-Indo-European, PII = Proto-Indo-Iranian, Plr = Proto-Iranian, Pers = Persian, Skr = Sanskrit, Aves = Avestan, N. Krd = Northern Kurdish, C. Krd = Central Kurdish, S. Krd = Southern Kurdish)

4. Language and Cognition: Linguistic Structures in Kurdish Proverbs

Beyond thematic content and word origins, the linguistic structures employed in Kurdish proverbs are crucial to their function and meaning. These structures not only shape how wisdom is conveyed but also offer insights into the cognitive frameworks underpinning Kurdish cultural expression.

Figurative Language: Metaphor, Overstatement, and Cognitive Schemas

Kurdish proverbs, like proverbs globally, are saturated with figurative language, demanding interpretation that transcends the literal meanings of the words used.³ This reliance on non-literal meaning is central to their power and applicability to diverse situations.

Metaphor is arguably the most pervasive figurative device. Proverbs often present a concrete scenario or image that stands symbolically for a more abstract principle or life situation.³ For example, "*Pezê bi tenê guran xwariye*" (The sheep that is alone has been eaten by wolves) uses the vulnerability of an isolated animal to represent the dangers faced by individuals detached from their community.²⁶ Similarly, color terms are frequently employed metaphorically, drawing on cultural associations (e.g., white signifying purity or good fortune, black representing bad luck or negativity).⁶⁸

Overstatement (Hyperbole) is another significant trope identified in Kurdish proverbs. Pragmatic analysis reveals its use for various functions, including adding emphasis, expressing strong evaluation, providing clarification, injecting humor, or intensifying the listener's interest.¹ Examples include numerical exaggeration, as in "*zik-êk-î têr le hezar zik-î birsi çak-tir-e*" (A full belly is better than a thousand empty bellies), emphasizing contentment¹, or cosmic exaggeration to depict extreme misfortune: "*Le hewt asman-a estêra-y(e)k=î ni-(y)e*" (In all seven heavens he has no star).¹

Underlying many of these metaphorical and hyperbolic expressions are **Cognitive Image Schemas**. These are recurring, basic conceptual structures derived from fundamental physical and sensory experiences, which humans use to organize knowledge and reason about the world, including abstract concepts.³ Research suggests Kurdish proverbs utilize schemas such as:

- **CONTAINER:** Representing enclosure, inclusion, or exclusion (e.g., "نەقڵ نەبێ گیان لە" - "Without brain, the body is in torture").³
- **PATH:** Structuring movement, journeys, or processes from a source to a goal (e.g., "مەنجەل خلبومو، سەر قاپی خۆی دۆزیو" - "The pot rolled and found its lid, implying convergence towards a goal").³
- **FORCE:** Involving exertion, blockage, compulsion, or enablement (e.g., "...بەرا لە پشت بڕایی" - "If brothers back one another..., representing the force of unity").³
- **CYCLE:** Representing recurring events or patterns (e.g., "دنیایە دهوران دهورانە" - "Life is continuously rotating").³
- **SCALE:** Involving measurement, comparison, or degrees of intensity/quantity (e.g., "بۆ" - "One thousand friends are few, one enemy is too many").³ These schemas, rooted in bodily experience, provide a cognitive foundation for

understanding the abstract wisdom conveyed in proverbs.³

Syntactic and Semantic Patterns

The linguistic form of Kurdish proverbs also contributes significantly to their character and function.

Syntactic Structure: Proverbs are universally noted for their **brevity and pithiness** – they are short in form but dense in meaning.¹ While they often adhere to the standard grammatical structures of Kurdish sentences (simple, compound, complex), they frequently function as 'fixed' or 'semi-fixed' expressions.⁶⁹ This means they may resist some standard grammatical transformations that regular sentences undergo. However, analysis based on Generative Transformational Theory suggests that rules like permutation (changing word order), deletion (omitting elements), and addition can apply, often serving to emphasize particular components or facilitate the transmission of meaning without altering the core message.⁶⁹ The basic ordering of syntactic elements can be fixed or allow for some freedom, depending on the specific proverb.⁶⁹

Semantic Relations: Contrast and opposition are powerful tools in proverbial rhetoric.

Antonymy, the relationship between words with opposite meanings, is a prominent semantic feature used to create emphasis and highlight distinctions.²⁹ Studies have identified various types of antonymy in Kurdish proverbs:

- *Gradable antonyms* (opposites on a scale): e.g., *taî* (bitter) vs. *şîrîn* (sweet) in "*sebr taî, beri şîrîne*".²⁹
- *Complementary antonyms* (absolute opposites): e.g., *mirdin* (dying) vs. *jîn* (living) in "*Mirdnê mîrê çaktre le jînnî esîrî*" (Dying like a king is better than living like a prisoner).²⁹
- *Relational antonyms* (opposite roles in a relationship): e.g., *mîr* (king) vs. *esîr* (prisoner) in the same proverb.²⁹
- *Directional opposites* (movement in opposite directions): e.g., *dêt* (comes) vs. *derwa* (goes) in "*Ewey zu dêt, zuş derwa*" (What comes fast, also goes fast).²⁹

Speech Acts: Proverbs are not merely descriptive statements; they are performative utterances used to achieve communicative goals in social interaction.⁶⁷ They function as **speech acts**, carrying illocutionary force beyond their literal content. They can be used to advise, warn, promise, threaten, blame, instruct, console, or persuade.⁶⁷ Often, this is done indirectly, allowing the speaker to convey potentially sensitive messages with tact or politeness.⁶⁷ Analysis based on Searle's classification suggests that many Kurdish proverbs, even those with declarative grammatical forms, function as commissive (committing the speaker to something) or directive (attempting to get the hearer to do something) speech acts.⁶⁷

The characteristic linguistic features observed in Kurdish proverbs—conciseness, rhythmic or balanced phrasing, reliance on vivid figurative language (metaphor, hyperbole), use of contrastive semantic relations (antonymy), and their function as indirect speech acts—are not merely aesthetic choices. These features work synergistically to enhance the proverbs' memorability, ensuring their effective transmission through oral tradition, and to maximize

their persuasive impact and social utility when deployed in communication.¹ They are integral to what makes a proverb a potent and enduring form of cultural expression.

5. Conclusion: Enduring Wisdom and Linguistic Heritage

This exploration of Kurdish proverbs (*Gotinên Pêşîyan / Pendên Pêşîyan*) reveals them to be far more than quaint sayings. They constitute a vital repository of cultural knowledge, linguistic history, and cognitive frameworks, reflecting the enduring wisdom and experiences of the Kurdish people.

The thematic analysis highlights a worldview deeply concerned with practical wisdom, prudence, and the lessons of experience. Social bonds—friendship, family, community, and hospitality—emerge as paramount values, likely reflecting historical necessities for survival and mutual support in challenging environments. Core cultural tenets such as honor, resilience in the face of fate, and a strong connection to the natural world are consistently articulated. While often reflecting traditional patriarchal norms, the proverbs occasionally hint at more complex gender dynamics and provide coping mechanisms for navigating life's hardships and human frailties. The recurrence of certain themes and even specific proverb structures across neighboring cultures underscores the interconnectedness of wisdom traditions in the region. The etymological investigation confirms the deep Indo-European roots of the Kurdish language, tracing key proverbial vocabulary back through Proto-Iranian and Proto-Indo-Iranian stages. This linguistic archaeology not only demonstrates historical continuity but also uncovers semantic layers within words, enriching our understanding of the concepts they represent (e.g., *heval* implying shared purpose). Furthermore, the presence of loanwords from Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Armenian serves as a linguistic record of centuries of cultural, religious, and political interaction, marking the domains and periods of significant external influence.

Linguistically, Kurdish proverbs exhibit features that enhance their memorability and impact: brevity, rhythm, figurative language (metaphor, overstatement), underlying cognitive schemas derived from physical experience, contrastive structures (antonymy), and their function as potent, often indirect, speech acts in communication. These elements work together to ensure the proverbs' effective transmission and enduring relevance.

In conclusion, Kurdish proverbs stand as a testament to a rich oral tradition and a complex linguistic heritage. They are mirrors reflecting cultural values, social structures, historical experiences, and the evolution of the Kurdish language itself. As contemporary efforts focus on Kurdish language revitalization and the preservation of indigenous knowledge, particularly in the face of assimilation pressures¹¹, these proverbs gain renewed significance. They are not just echoes of the past but living resources for cultural continuity, education, and identity. The continued collection, documentation, and scholarly analysis of Kurdish paremiology across all dialects remain crucial endeavors for a deeper understanding of Kurdish society, language, cognition, and the enduring power of traditional wisdom.

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