

## Language Maintenance And Language Shift; A Case Of Kurdish People In Iraq

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### Abstract

This study aims to shed light on language maintenance and language shift among the native speakers of Kurdish in Kurdistan, Iraq. By looking at the participants' answers concerning their using of Arabic and Kurdish in various domains, and their attitudes toward both languages, the researchers' objective is to determine the degree and extent of language shift/ maintenance among native speakers of Kurdish. To find out better result the questionnaire is used for 45 participants from different majors and different contexts. The findings of the questioners of the language proficiency show that native speakers' proficiency level in their language is high. In the same fashion, participants use Kurdish language more than Arabic in most of the contexts with the varied degree. Further, the analysis of the data for language attitude shows that Kurdish people have positive attitudes toward their native language.

**Keywords;** *Language shift, language maintenance, Kurdish language, Iraqi Kurdistan*

### Introduction

Different researchers throughout the centuries explain language maintenance and language shift in various ways that is why there isn't only one definition for them.

Language maintenance is the continual using of the minority language in spite of the existing of the dominant language (Van Herk, 2012). While, Veltman, (1991) referred to language maintenance as "the practice of speaking one's mother tongue through one's lifetime as the only language in daily use". According to Fishman's (2000) a fundamental principle to guarantee language maintenance is by imposing and encouraging people to use it at home and within the community.

On the other hand, language shift is the gradual disappearing of a language that is used in a community as the dominant language in communication, education, government, and socialization (Jaspert, & Kroon, 1993). Language shift is happening as consequences of not maintain the language by the communities (Ostler, 2011). However, if language shift continues to happen and there aren't any efforts from the community and government for maintaining their language then the result will be language death. Today half of the languages in the world are spoken by less than 10,000 original speakers of the language. Even there are numerous of Indigenous language that is spoken by less than 100 target speakers in the Australia and America (Coulmas, 2005).

Researchers defined various variables that cause language shift in a community such as migrant communities, and non-migrant communities. Migrant families mostly shift their language to the dominant language of the country after some generations for their educational needs, communicational purposes, social interactions, and for getting jobs.

Language shift is not inevitably occurring as the impact of immigration. Throughout the centuries researchers explore many variables that contribute to language shift such as political reasons, economic and social change within a community, attitude toward language, language choice, demographic features, and educational support for the language (Appel & Muysken, 1987; Letsholo, 2009; Bissoonauth , 2011; Holmes, 2012).

### Socio-historical background of Kurdish

Kurds are an Indo-European ethno-linguistic group in the Middle East- Western Asia, a region known as Kurdistan, which borders Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. This is often referred to as the "homeland of the Kurds,".

Iraqi Kurdistan, formally known as the Kurdistan Region, is located in the north of Iraq and constitutes the country's only autonomous region. Bordering the Kurdish-inhabited regions of Iran to the east, Turkey to the north, and Syria to the west, it is frequently referred to as Southern Kurdistan. The region is officially governed by the Kurdistan Regional government, with the capital being Erbil (Amin, 2017)

Kurdistan has two official languages which are Kurdish and Arabic. Sorani and Kurmanji are the two dialects that are mainly spoken by Kurdish people. Sorani is used in four cities in Kurdistan: Erbil, Slemani, Halabja, and Kurkuk. On the other hand, Kurmanji is used in Duhok as well as in certain parts of Erbil's city. The Arabic language is widely understood as well as spoken by Kurdish people. The government of Kurdistan encourages linguistic diversity and rights, and schools have been set up that are teaching mostly in Kurdish, English, Turkish and Arabic. (Amin & Rahimi, 2018)

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides an insight into the language maintenance and language shift, followed by the factors that cause language shift. Further, it provides the summary of the literature review and research questions. Researchers throughout the century explained language shift and maintenance in various ways. Veltman (1991) asserted that "language maintenance is the practice of speaking one's mother tongue throughout one's lifetime as the only language in daily use". Van Herk, (2012) referred to language maintenance as the continual of using the minority language in spite of the competition with the dominant language. Overall, language maintenance refers to the idea of transferring the language from one generation to the next. In order the language to be maintained the speakers should effectively transfer the language to the next generation (Ostler, 2011).

On the contrary, language shift means giving up on the language totally by the community (Fishman, 1966). Language shift is the continuous disappearing of a language that is used in a community (Jaspert, & Kroon, 1993). Language shift occurs as the result of not maintaining the language by the community (Ostler, 2011).

#### Factors that Cause Language Shift

There are some factors that make the community shift their language to another language such as migrant communities, and non-migrant communities. In Habtoor's (2012) study the reasons that make many teenagers experience language shift from Tigrinya to Arabic was because of migrant minorities. These participants used the Arabic language rather than their native language most of the times. Their reasons for using Arabic go back to the fact that speaking in Arabic is necessary for their communication, education, and getting jobs. Finally, their level of proficiency in their mother tongue reduced compared to their proficiency level in the Arabic language. And those who proficiency level in Arabic is higher compared to their native language prefer to use more Arabic in their daily life. As a consequence of this, their language shifted to the Arabic language.

Language shift isn't happening all the times as the consequences of migration. Literature proposed many variables that speed language shift such as political reasons, economical and social change within a community, attitude toward language, language choice, demographic features, and educational support for the language (Appel, & Muysken, 1987; Letsholo, 2009; Bissoonauth, 2011; Holmes, 2012).

In Letsholo's (2009) study educational system, language choice and participants attitudes toward their native language are the most significant variables that caused language shift from Ikalanga to one of the two official languages Setswana or English in Botswana. The finding reveals that the participants in this study used more Setswana and English language than their native language because they are the two official languages of education there and students are encouraged to use them as they are the only two languages that accepted in the educational system. Further, approximately 25% of the participants indicated that they are not fluent in their native language because using of their native language is mainly restricted to a particular situation or to home. Furthermore, participants attitudes such as embarrassing, and feeling toward using their native language correlated to language shift.

In the same fashion, Bissoonauth's (2011) study shows that what caused language shift from Indian ancestral languages into Creole and Europeans languages (French and English) are non- migrant communities factors such as their attitudes toward other languages, language use, educational policy, and their social interaction with the peoples from different backgrounds. When participants required to chose the language they frequently use it at home they chose Creole, French and English. Their choice for choosing Creole and French refer to the fact that they are the domain languages at home. Beside this,

education system based on the British system and Indian ancestral languages doesn't accept by the government as the official languages for education. Further, Mauritius' populations are from different backgrounds such as (African, Chinese, Indian, and European) their social connection between the groups additionally contributed to language shift.

**Summary of Literature Review**

Language maintenance is continual of using one's native language in spite of the competition with the dominant language. While language shift is continual shifting one's native language to the other languages for various reasons. Language isn't only linguistic phenomena but it is political, social and economic features. Literature defined several factors that can cause language shift in a community such as migrant communities, and non-migrant communities (i.e. political and economic power of language, social change within a community, attitude, language choice, demographic features, and educational policy).

Much research associated with language maintenance and language shift in different communities. There is little research focused on language maintenance and shift among Kurdish people. Therefore, this research aimed to answer these questions. What is the level of language proficiency of Kurdish native speakers in Kurdish and Arabic? What language do Kurdish native speakers use in the different domain? What is the attitudes of Kurdish native speakers to (toward the official languages: Kurdish and Arabic) Kurdish and Arabic?

**METHODOLOGY**

This section outlines the study of methodology, it also contain the context of the study, the explanation of research questions, participants, instruments, procedures for data collection, and data analysis.

**Context of the Study**

This research study was administered at Eastern Mediterranean University, which is located in North Cyprus. As well as Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan.

**Research Questions**

The study was carried to investigate language maintenance and language shift among the native speakers of Kurdish. Therefore, in this study the researcher aims to provide the answers to these following questions.

- 1-What is the level of language proficiency of Kurdish native speakers in Kurdish and Arabic?
- 2-What language do Kurdish native speakers use in the different domain?
- 3-What is the attitudes of Kurdish native speakers to (toward the official languages: Kurdish and Arabic) Kurdish and Arabic?

**Participants**

The populations of this study consist of 45 native speakers of Kurdish living in the north of Cyprus and Erbil (Capital of Iraqi Kurdistan region). All of them studied Arabic from the fourth grade at primary school. Arabic is an obligatory course in Kurdistan region and is taught from the fourth grade in schools till the university level. And it is studying like Kurdish lesson five times a week.

Generally, there were 45 students that they participated in this study. There were 30 (67%) males, and 15 (33%) were females. There aren't an equal number of males and females in this study. There are some reasons behind this such as the number of the males that studying in Cyprus are out the number of females, and most of the females didn't response to the questioner that the researcher sent to them. (see table 1)

Table 1: Frequency distribution of gender

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	30	67
Female	15	33
Total	45	100

Table 2: Frequency distribution of age

Age	Frequency	Percent
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5-10	0	-
11-20	40	9
21-30	26	58
31-40	15	33
Total	45	100

Table 2 shows the age of the participants. In generally, their age between 11 to 34 years old. And age 21 to 30 has the biggest number of the participants compare to the other ages. These participants come from the different cities in Kurdistan. (see table 3).

Table3: Frequency distribution of the region that they come from

Cities in Kurdistan	Nuber of participant	Percentage
Erbil	15	33
Sulamani	24	53
Kurkuk	3	7
Duhok	3	7
Total	45	100

The majority of the participants comes from Sulamaniyah which is the second biggest city in Kurdistan, followed by Erbil the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. Further, an equal number of the participants come from Kirkuk and Duhok. All of the participants that participated in this study are educated. (see table 4)

Table 4: Occupation of the participant

Occupation	Number of participant	Percentage
Teacher	18	40
Student	24	54
Lawyer	1	2
Engineer	1	2
pharmacist	1	2
Totall	45	100

The majority of the participants are students and teachers. Overall, there were %54 students and %40 teachers. There were only %2 lawyer, engineer and pharmacist.

**Instruments**

The instruments that used in this study employed questionnaires. The questionnaires were adapted from Tawalbeh, Dagamseh & Al-Matrafi (2013). Also, it contains background questions about students. The background questions were developed by the researcher in order to gather more information about the participant. It includes four items gender, age, occupation, and the city that they come from.

**Procedures for data Collection**

The author collected the data in two different ways. In a first way, the researcher informs her Kurdish friends about the purpose of the study she distributes the questioner to them. After filling it they give it back to the researcher. However, in the second way the researcher sent her questioner online to her Kurdish friends that she has in Erbil. After filling the questioner they sent it back to her.

### Data Analysis

The data collected quantitatively were input into the Statistic Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21 for statistical analysis. The analyses as related to this study were carefully selected as includes the percentages of the items in the questioner.

### DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This part introduces the outcomes of the study which was acquired from the analysis of the data. This section starts with language proficiency, followed by language, language attitude and conclusion.

#### Language proficiency

Table 5 symbolizes the 'Can' questions that evaluate the participants' proficiency level in both official languages: Kurdish and Arabic in Kurdistan, Iraq. Kurdish language is the native language of Kurdish people as well as is one of the two official languages in Kurdistan. Meanwhile, Arabic is one of the two official languages in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The table represents data of participants' capability in listening, speaking, reading, and writing in Kurdish and Arabic. The participants were required to rate their language capability in the four skills of language on a three-point scale. And the conceivable answers for these questions were 'yes', 'A little', or 'No'.

Table 5: Response percentages: LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN KURDISH AND ARABIC

No.	Language Skills	Yes	A little	No
1	Can you understand a conversation in Kurdish?	100	-	-
2	Can you engage in a conversation in Kurdish?	100	-	-
3	Can you read Kurdish?	100	-	-
4	Can you write Kurdish?	100	-	-
5	Can you understand Arabic?	58	35	7
6	Can you read Arabic?	89	2	9
7	Can you write Arabic?	%76	%20	%4

Clearly, the result of the study shows that participants proficiency level in their native language Kurdish is notably higher than their proficiency level in Arabic. (100%) of participants could understand a conversation in their native language Kurdish. Whereas, merely 58% of the native speakers of Kurdish could understand a conversation in Arabic language.

100% of the participants could engage, read and write in their native language Kurdish appropriately. Nevertheless, their reading Ability in Arabic language was higher than their speaking and writing. While 89% of the native speakers of Kurdish could read, merely 76% could write and 58% could understand Arabic language appropriately. This could be the reason that all the participants studied Arabic language in their primary schools and they required to read, also it can be attributed that those participants are Muslims and they read Quran.

It can be said then that the Iraqi Kurds' language proficiency in Kurdish is remarkably higher than their proficiency level in Arabic language. The outcomes of this study support the claims from the previous studies that when the participants proficiency level in their native language is reducing it is an evidence that there language is shifting (Habtoor,2012). This leading us to conclude that the Kurdish haven't experienced language shift toward the other official languages of Kurdistan, Arabic.

### LANGUAGE USE

Table 6 reveals that most of the participants use Kurdish in most of the contexts, however to different degrees. The findings of items 3 and 5 reveal that members of the family tend to use Kurdish in communication among each other. 85% of the participants when they speak with their children use 'only Kurdish', whereas none of the participants have the intention to use 'only Arabic' when they speak with their children .

Table 5: Response percentages: Language use in Different Domains

Questions	Only Arabic %	Mostly Arabic %	Arabic and Kurdish %	Mostly Kurdish %	Only Kurdish %
1.What language do you use when you write personal letters?	-	2	16	29	53
2.What language do you use when you speak with your neighbors?	-	-	9	18	73
3.What language do you use when you speak with your children?	-	-	2	13	85
4.What language do you use with the elderly?	-	-	7	9	84
5.What language do you use at home with your brothers and sisters?	2	-	4	16	78
6.What language do you use during Kurdish social occasions?	2	-	7	22	69
7.What language do you use when you meet friends in the neighborhood?	-	-	9	22	69
8.What language do you use when you meet friends at school or at university?	-	-	16	22	62
9.What language do you use most commonly when you are angry?	2	-	9	18	71
10.What language do you use when praying?	11	13	33	7	36
11.What language do you dream in?	4	-	16	9	71

Further, 78% of the participants when they speak with their siblings use ‘only Kurdish’, though nearly none of the participants (2%) use ‘only Arabic’ when they speak with their sisters and brothers. Based on this it appears that Kurdish parents have desire and willingness to transform their native language ‘Kurdish’ to their own children. It is an indication that Kurdish language is transforming to the next generation. This outcome confirms with Fishman’s (2000) declarations that a basic principle to guarantee language maintenance is to enforce and encourage its use at home and within the community.

With regards to the community, and as demonstrated in items 2, 6, 7, 8, clearly native speakers of Kurdish use Kurdish with their neighbors as a medium for their social interaction (73%); throughout their Kurdish social events (69%); with friends in the neighborhood (69%); and with companions at school or at college (62%).

The findings also shows that 53% of the native speakers use only Kurdish when they are writing personal letters, however 19% of the participants tend to utilize Kurdish and Arabic. None of them want to use only Arabic.

It is not surprising that the responses of the 71% majority of the participants when they are required to indicate the language that they dream in the choose Kurdish, only 4% of the them chose merely Arabic and 33% chose Kurdish and Arabic.

Finally, even when the participants required to choose the language that they use when they are praying only 11% of them indicate ‘only Arabic’, whereas 36% of them choose only Kurdish and 33% of them used Kurdish and Arabic. Generally, using Arabic alone doesn’t cross more than 4% in all the contexts. Expect praying that participants use 11% which is the highest situation that they chose only Arabic. Despite the fact that Arabic is the language used when praying and invoking. Further, Arabic has respective claims to authenticity as the language of the Quran. But this doesn’t make the participants use only Arabic.

Turn out to be the outcomes of this study support the claims from the previous studies that emphasized the importance of language use in different domains in promoting either the maintenance or decline of an ethnic language (Bissoonauth, 2011).

**LANGUAGE ATTITUDES**

Table 7 shows that 42% and 56% of the participants evaluate that Kurdish language is more beautiful and useful than the Arabic language. However only 4% of the participant indicated that Arabic is more beautiful than Kurdish, but nobody choose that Arabic is more useful than Kurdish. I assume the reason that make the participants not to choose Arabic is more useful than Kurdish because majority of the people that live in Kurdistan are Kurdish and not knowing Kurdish deficit a person to apply for most of the jobs because most of the jobs putting knowing Kurdish as the first criteria for getting the job. Beside this Kurdish is essential for their communicative needs in Kurdistan.

Table 7: Response percentages: Attitudes Toward Arabic and Kurdish

No.	Question	Arabic %	Kurdish %	Both %	Yes %	No %
1	What language is more beautiful?	4	42	53	-	-
2	What language is more useful to you?	-	56	44	-	-
3	What language would you prefer to use when you talk to others?	-	90	10	-	-
4	What language can you express yourself better in?	-	89	11	-	-
5	Is it important for you to speak Arabic?	-	-	-	59	41
6	Is it important for you to speak Kurdish?	-	-	-	100	-
7	Is Kurdish dying in your home?	-	-	-	-	100
8	Is Kurdish dying in your community?	-	-	-	-	100

As the table shows 53% and 44% of the participants chose ‘Arabic and Kurdish’ regarding ‘which language is more beautiful and useful’. I presume that their choice regarding choosing Arabic and Kurdish together is beautiful and useful because now days there are a lot of Arabic people lives in Kurdistan as well as every day a lot of Arabic families come for tourism to Kurdistan. Further, most of the times knowing Arabic is one of the criteria that can give a person more opportunity when they apply for a job in the companies or institutions to be taken that is why those days knowing Arabic become essential for their communications needs and getting a job. Also, I presume that those participants are educated and they are aware to the fact that knowing another language give a person another identity that is why they find Arabic language is beautiful despite the problems that Kurdish people have with the Iraqi government.

Question 4 is the clear evidence that native speakers of Kurdish aren’t shifting their language towards one of the official languages in Kurdistan, Arabic. 90% of the participants affirmed that they could express themselves better in Kurdish, whereas none of the participants choose Arabic. Further, participants responded that it is essential for them knowing how to speak in Kurdish, though speaking in Arabic language for native speakers of Kurdish was not given that it is important compared to Kurdish language. All of them 100% believed that it is vital for them to know how to speak in Kurdish, while 59% indicated that it is not essential for them to speak Arabic.

The data assert that native speakers of Kurdish have positive attitudes towards their native language. And the outcomes of this study confirms with state by Baker(1992) the status, value, and importance of a language is most often and mostly easily (though imperfectly) measured by attitudes to that language. To end up, the findings of this study support the stats from the previous studies that emphasized the importance of attitudes in promoting either the maintenance or decline of an ethnic language (Letsholo, 2009; Bissoonauth, 2011)

**Conclusion**

This paper examined language maintenance and language shift among native speakers of Kurdish from the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Living in different cities of Kurdistan and north of Cyprus, Famagusta. The findings of this study reveals that native speakers of Kurdish aren’t shifting their language toward Arabic, which is one of the two official languages in Kurdistan. We get to this conclusion based on the participants answer to the questioner on language proficiency, language use in different domains, as well as their attitudes toward their native language.

The findings of the questioners of the language proficiency show that native speakers’ proficiency level in their language is high. All the participants can read, write, understand, and speak their native language appropriately.

In the same fashion, the outcome of the language use in various context show that participants use Kurdish in most of the contexts with the varied degree. Overall, using Arabic alone is limited though that in Kurdistan now days using Arabic is increasing because of the all refuges from Syria, and from different parts of Iraq living in Kurdistan.

Further, the analysis of the data for language attitude shows that Kurdish have positives attitudes toward their native language. And all of them believe that for them it is crucial to speak their native language as well as all the participants’ response that Kurdish is the dominant language in Kurdistan.

**Appendix**

**Dear Kurdish people from Kurdistan region of Iraq.**

**This questionnaire is design to elicit your responses regarding language shift and maintenance of Kurdish. Kindly fill the options available in the right proportion.**

**Gender** .....

**Age** .....

**Occupation** .....

**Which city do you live in?** Irbil Sulaimaniyah Kirkuk Duhok Halabja

**1-LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN KURDISH AND ARABIC**

No.	Language Skills	Yes	A little	No
1	Can you understand a conversation in Kurdish?			
2	Can you engage in a conversation in Kurdish?			
3	Can you read Kurdish?			
4	Can you write Kurdish?			
5	Can you understand Arabic?			
6	Can you read Arabic?			
7	Can you write Arabic?			

**2- LANGUAGE USE IN DIFFERENT DOMAINS**

Questions	Only Arabic	Mostly Arabic	Arabic and Kurdish	Mostly Kurdish	Only Kurdish
1.What language do you use when you write personal letters?					
2.What language do you use when you speak with your neighbors?					
3.What language do you use when you speak with your children?					
4.What language do you use with the elderly?					
5.What language do you use at home with your brothers and sisters?					
6.What language do you use during Kurdish social occasions?					
7.What language do you use when you meet friends in the neighborhood?					
8.What language do you use when you meet friends at school or at university?					
9.What language do you use most commonly when you are angry?					
10.What language do you use when praying?					
11.What language do you dream in?					



## 3- ATTITUDES TOWARD ARABIC AND KURDISH

No.	Question	Arabic	Kurdish	Both	Yes	No
1	What language is more beautiful?					
2	What language is more useful to you?					
3	What language would you prefer to use when you talk to others?					
4	What language can you express yourself better in?					
5	Is it important for you to speak Arabic?					
6	Is it important for you to speak Kurdish?					
7	Is Kurdish dying in your home?					
8	Is Kurdish dying in your community?					

Adapted from this research Tawalbeh, Dagamseh, & Al-Matrafi, (2013)

## Thanks for your participation

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