



KERMANSHAH VII. LANGUAGES AND DIALECTS

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vii. LANGUAGES AND DIALECTS

Kermanshah province (henceforth Kermanshahan, for brevity and distinctness from Kermanshah, the city) is linguistically characterized by a triad of Kurdish, *Gurāni*, and Persian within a multifaceted, areal-tribal-social setting. These are supplemented by *Neo-Aramaic*, which, until recently, was spoken by Jewish residents in scattered pockets of the area, as well as an isolated Turkic dialect spoken in the Sonqor valley.

The languages of Kermanshahan spread into the neighboring provinces and across the national border into Iraqi Kurdistan, forming a complex set of dialect continua and isolated pockets. Kermanshahan's linguistic arrangement has not been systematically studied in detail, nor is the number of speakers of individual dialects known.

In broad terms, Kurdish forms the linguistic backdrop of the province; *Gurāni* is spoken in several western and northwestern settlements; and Persian is a means of formal and written communication, including mass media, but also a vernacular in urban centers, especially Kermanshah. Turkophones are reportedly notable only in Sonqor. In such a milieu, bilingualism in Kurdish and Persian is the norm. As *Gurāni* villages are usually within larger



Kurdophonic settings (Figure 1), the Gurān are typically trilingual in Gurāni, Persian, and Kurdish. Gurāni is steadily losing ground to Kurdish (Šahbāzi, 2013).

KURDISH

The main Kurdish language groups spoken in Kermanshahan are Sorani or Central Kurdish in the northwest and Southern Kurdish in the rest of the province (Figure 1). The Sorani-speaking parts of Kermanshahan stand slightly offset north of a line connecting Qašr-e Širin, Dohāb (Zehāb), and Ravānsar, and running further northeast, along the provincial border to Kāmyārān and Qorva in Kordestān (Fattah, map on p. vi). The town of Kerend is Sorani-speaking, and there are Sorani speakers in Pāva and Nowsud along with speakers of [Avromani](#) and Gurāni. See Figure 1; see also Figure 1 in [KERMANSHAH i. GEOGRAPHY](#), above.

Southern Kurdish is also known as Kermanshahi Kurdish (see, e.g., Morgan, p. xvi), even if the latter term more specifically corresponds to the variety spoken in and around the city of Kermanshah (see below). The Kurdish dialect of Kermanshah is known locally as Kermāšāni after the Kurdish name of the city (see, e.g., [Ḳorsand](#); [Šams](#)). Kermāšāni enjoys high prestige in the province, especially the variety spoken in the inner city of Kermanshah. It was based on this contemporary urban variety that Partow Kermānšāhi composed verses and the nationally acclaimed singer Šahrām Nāžeri sang his Kurdish songs.

Other Southern Kurdish dialects in the province are most commonly named after traditional tribal groupings rather than their location or linguistic position. Thus Kolyā'i is current in the northeastern sub-province of Sonqor, which was until lately known as Sonqor-Kolyā'i. The Zangana dialect, also a tribal namesake, has speakers in the valleys to the south of the city of Kermanshah. Kalhori, itself a broadly spread variety named after the [Kalhor](#) tribe, prevails in the southern sub-provinces of Eslāmābād (formerly Šāhābād), Gilān-e Ġarb, and southern Qašr-e Širin, as well as in adjoining areas of [Ilām province](#) and Iraq's Diyala (Diāla) Province. Sanjābi is a tribe and dialect in the north of the province, without toponymic association, as do other tribes mentioned above. Another Kurdish dialect continuum that spreads across southwestern Kermanshahan–Ilām–Iraq is known as Feyli; however, Mohammad Aliakbari et al. propose 'Ilāmi' as an alternative designation, on the grounds that the province of Ilām (formerly known as Poštkuh) is home to most of its speakers, but also to avoid confusion with Feyli, a Northern Lori



dialect (see [LORI LANGUAGE i. LORI DIALECTS](#)). It appears that the Southern Kurdish Feyli owes its name to the Little Lor governors (*wāli*) in the Qajar period, who administered Poštkuh of Lorestān, corresponding to the modern province of Ilām (cf. Fattah, pp. 70-74). All these Southern Kurdish varieties, as Ismaïl K. Fattah shows in his broad study *Les dialectes kurdes méridionaux*, are interrelated and largely mutually intelligible.

In addition to the aforesaid varieties, there is Laki, an ethno-linguistic variety which is spoken in Kermanshahan along its border with Lorestān province, the latter being home to the main body of Laki speakers. The classification of Laki as a dialect of Southern Kurdish or as a distinct Kurdish language in its own right remains controversial in the literature (see MacKenzie, 1961, p. 79; Fattah, pp. 55-62; Aliakbari et al.).

Notwithstanding the dialectal continuity that exists between Kermanshahan and the adjoining provinces of Ilām and Lorestān (historical Poštkuh and Piškuh respectively), a recent toponymy based on the element *čam* (Borjiān, pp. 69-73) reveals that while Poštkuh and Piškuh have a solid Lori substratum, Kermanshahan is a markedly Kurdo-phonic.

Kermanshahi Kurdish. Among the amorphous varieties classified as Southern Kurdish, one may identify a fairly homogeneous group of vernaculars spoken in and around the city of Kermanshah, particularly by the Kalhor (Kalh.), Zangana (Zang.), and Sanjābi (Sanj.) tribes, which dialects constitute what I designate here as Kermanshahi proper. Kermanshahi distinguishes itself from the rest of Southern Kurdish dialects, including Kolyā'i (in Sonqor) and Garrusi (spoken in an enclave around Bijār) to its north and those of Poštkuh to its south. In the following notes, SK, CK, and NK abbreviate Southern Kurdish, Central Kurdish (Sorani), and Northern Kurdish (Kurmanji), respectively, and 'Kurd.' stands for common Kurdish.

A distinctive grammatical feature of Kermanshahi Kurdish is the absence of the imperfective marker (NK *dr-*, CK *da-*, *a-*, SK *a-*, *ma-*) as in Kalh., Sanj., Zang. *xwam*, *xwārdyâm* "I eat, I used to eat," cf. SK of Kolyā'i *a-xwam*, *a-xwārdyâm* and Laki of Kākāvand *marem*, *ma-vârd-em* "id.," Gurani *ma-řaw-im*, *ma-řaft-im* "I go, I used to go." The diversity of Southern Kurdish can be exhibited in Kalh., Sanj., Zang. *drâm*, Sahna'i *mâtım*, Kolyā'i *aünyâm*, Qorva'i *ahâtım*, Bijāri *drâtım* "I used to see." Another morphological isogloss of Kermanshahi Kurdish is the differentiation of plural personal endings, 1 *-im*, 2 *-in*, 3 *-in* (Fattah; cf. *-im*, *-in*, *-en* in Morādi et al.), in contradistinction to the merger of



the second and third plural in Southern Kurdish dialects of Kolyā'i, Qorva, and Bijār and the union of the three endings, into *-in*, in Central and Northern Kurdish.

The nominal morphology of Kermanshahi retains no case-number distinction typical to Kurdish. The plural normally employs the collective suffix *-ayl* (cf. *-gal* in other Southern Kurdish variants and in Baḳtiāri Lori), as in Kalh., Sanj., Zang. *dusayl* “friends,” *pasayl* “sheep,” *čēštayl* “things,” *kārayl* “deeds.” The suffix *-ân* serves occasionally as the plural morpheme in both subject and object positions: Kalh., Sanj., Zang. *malawaragân* “the birds,” Kalh., Sanj. *menâtagân* (Zang. *menâtayl*) “the children.” The ežāfa marker is the invariable *-ī* (Fattah) or *-e* (Morādi et al.). A residue of original Kurdish inflection is the deictive suffix *-á*, which is used in combination with demonstrative adjectives: Kalh., Sanj., Zang. *iy aspa čarmē-a* “this horse is white,” *aw bâxa* “that orchard,” *aw ženayla* “those women.” Kermanshahi Kurdish appears to be in the process of adopting the Persian accusative marker *-rā*, e.g. Kalh. Sanj. Zang. *Hasan Alī-a la nâw bâx dī* (cf. Kurmanji Hesên Elî di nava baxê de dît) “Hasan saw Ali in the garden.”

The phonology of Kermanshahi Kurdish conforms to general Kurdish in principle but shows notable Gurani influence as well. True Kurdish diachronic features are found in Kalh., Sanj., Zang. *čī(y)n* “to go,” *âsk/âsē* “deer,” *jüya* “barley,” *dar* “door” (cf. Paul, 2008). Even the more recent sound changes that are largely exclusive to Kurdish (idem; Asatrian and Livshits) hold true for the Kermanshahi group of dialects. These include the development of postvocalic **-m* to *w* in Kalh., Zang. *zaiü*, Sanj. *zawī* “earth” for Kurd. *zawī* (cf. Pers., Gurani *zamīn*) and Kalh., Sanj., Zang. *nâw* “name” for Kurd. *nāv/nâw* (but *nima* for NK. *nīv* “half”) and the change *-šm* > *w*, best exemplified by Kalh., Sanj., Zang. *čâw* “eye” for Kurd. *čāv/w*, comparing to Gurani *čam* and Pers. *čašm*.

Notwithstanding the above examples, which suggest a long-lasting shared history of Kermanshahi with other Kurdish dialects, there are nevertheless features that separate the former from the main body of Kurdish continuum, suggesting Gurani influence. First and foremost of the disagreements is the outcome of Old Iranian initial **w-*, which is *w-* in Kermanshahi, as is in Gurani, versus *b-* in Kurdish: Kalh., Sanj., Zang. *wâ* “wind,” *wafr* “snow,” *wē* “willow,” *wersē* “hungry,” *wēâneg* “pretext,” Kalh., Zang. *waiü* (but Sanj., Kolyā'i *bawī*) “bride,” corresponding to NK *bā*, *barf*, *bī*, *bīrcī/bīrsi*, *bihāna*, *būk* and CK *bā*, *bafr*, *bī*, *bīrsī*, ?, *būk*, respectively. Kalh., Sanj., Zang. *üš-* : *wat-* “say” (< **wāč-* : **wāxt-*) contrast with NC *bēž-* : *gōt-* (< **wāč-* : **gaub-*) and SK *lē-* : *gōt-*,



in which the present stem is suppletive. The counterexamples such as Kalh., Sanj., Zang. *bist* “twenty,” *bahayšt* “paradise,” *bafin* “to weave,” *guərg* “wolf,” *guəł* “flower” (cf. Hawr. *wilī*, Kurd. *guł*) are either residual Kurdish lexemes or loanwords from Persian.

Along the same line of sound alteration, one may consider Kermanshahi Kurdish *x* as a secondary development through contacts with Gurani and Persian: Kalh., Sanj., Zang. *xanin* “to laugh” (cf. Kurd. *k^(h)anīn*, SK of Garrus *kan-*, Gurani *xan-*), *xerīn* “to buy” (for Kurd. *k^(h)irīn*), *xar* “donkey” (cf. Kurd. *k^(h)ar*, Gurani *har*). Moreover, *-rt > ʔ appear in Zang., Sanj., Kolyā’i *pēt*, Kalh. *perd/pyaʔ*, cf. CK *pir*, NK *pir*. Also noteworthy is Kalh., Sanj., Zang. *zūwān* “language” (< OIr. **hizwān-*) which shows no irregular development as found in Kurd. *zimān*.

GURĀNI

Kermanshahan embraces the larger share of the Gurāni (Gōrāni) speaking areas. The language consists of two dialect groups, Gurāni and Avromani (also known as Hawrāmi).

Gurāni-speaking settlements are found in three areas in western and central Kermanshahan. Within Gurān, a historical region that lies on the north side of the highway that connects Kermanshah and Qaṣr-e Širin, the Gurani-speaking villages are clustered especially to the east of Kerend and in the region around Sar-e Pol-e Dohāb and Qaṣr-e Širin (the Bājalāni dialect; MacKenzie, 1956). There is also a smaller community of Gurani speakers in Kandula, in the north-northeast of Kermanshah. Gurāni settlements are also scattered across the border into Iraq (Paul, 2007). In recent years, comprehensive fieldwork has been conducted in the villages of Gowrājub, near Kerend (Šahbāzi, 2008; Mahmoudveysi et al.), and Zarda, 12 km northeast of Dohāb (Mahmoudveysi and Bailey).

Avromani has its stronghold in Avroman, in the northwestern corner of the province. Its domain extends from Pāva northwestward, across administrative borders but not very far, into Kordestān province and Halabja in Iraqī Kurdistan (see map in MacKenzie, 1966, p. 5).

PERSIAN

Persian has strong currency in the urban centers, above all in Kermanshah. Although still understudied, the presence of Persian in the city can by no



means be recent, considering the enduring status of Kermanshah as the administrative hub of the region coupled with its commercial and transit significance. However, one cannot rule out the effect of modernism in the expanding role of Persian through schooling and mass media and its adoption as vernacular by the urban middle class as a token of social status. Language redistribution in Kermanshah occurred during the [Iran-Iraq War](#) (1980-88), on the part of the refugees who formed new, Kurdish-speaking, peripheral neighborhoods (interviews). These 20th-century vicissitudes may serve as a model of what may have happened throughout history to affect the standing of Persian in Kermanshah: Cycles of expansion and contraction of the national language could be a function of the engagement of the city with the national economy and administration during periods of political and economic stability, on the one hand, and, on the other, an influx of surrounding Kurdish tribes during urban downturns, which would result in control of the city by tribal chieftains and emigration of bureaucrats.

A recent study by Zohra Behju reveals that Kermanshahi Persian is no different from the modern spoken Persian in morphosyntax. Chief phonological features are *w* (for *v*) and *āN*, as in *kāna* “house” and *tānessan* “to be able to”; these sounds are likely to be influenced by Kurdish rather than having been inherited from Classical Persian. Some notable characteristics are the object pronouns (sg. *mana*, *tona*, *una*), verb stems (*niš-* : *nešd-* “sit,” present *bas-* “tie”), lenition (*xāwidan* “to sleep,” *ḳordo-wud* “he had eaten,” *dāšda-wāši* “that you have”), and Kurdish-driven vocabulary, such as *lavaridan* “to graze,” *šivāndan* “to stir,” *kerāndan* “to drag.”

NEO-ARAMAIC

Neo-Aramaic-speaking Jewish communities of Kermanshahan were found mainly in the rural areas and towns of Qaṣr-e Širin, Dohāb, Kerend, and Kangāvar. These communities are extensions of those in Kordestān Province of Iran and adjoining area in Iraq; hence their dialects are collectively classified under the Kurdistan Jewish branch of Northeastern Neo-Aramaic, as a language group having Sanandaj at its geographic center and Kerend at its southern frontier. The city of Kermanshah does not historically belong to this dialect area, although it absorbed Aramaic speakers from rural areas (Hopkins, 1999, 2000; cf. [IRAN vii. NON-IRANIAN LANGUAGES \(10\) ARAMAIC](#)).

The Jews of Kordestān-Kermanshahan call themselves *hulāyə* and their language *lišāna nowšān* (our tongue), equaling the exonyms *lešān-e hulāi* used



by Iranian-speaking Jews and *zwāni mūsāi* used in Kurdish. Almost all the speakers have immigrated (field interviews with informants in Great Neck, New York, August 2014). It should be noted that the bulk of the Jewish residents of the city of Kermanshah were Persophonics, having come in modern times from Mašhad and elsewhere in Persia and from Bukhara.

TURKIC

In the northwestern town of Songor, an isolated ‘Songori’ Turkic dialect is spoken within a Kurdish surrounding. [Gerhard Doerfer](#) classified this idiom as a distinctive member of Southern Oghuz or [Afšār](#) group of Turkic languages (apud Bulut, p. 245). The number of speakers of Songori is about 40,000 in the Songor valley, the large majority of whom live in the town of Songor. The residents of the town are typically trilingual in Turkish, Kurdish, and Persian (Bulut).

A remarkable characteristic of Songori morphosyntax is the substantial impact it has received from Iranian, chiefly due to its long and intensive contact with a Kurdish environment. As Christiane Bulut has demonstrated, Songori has borrowed several grammatical clitics from Iranian languages, including the adjective suffix *-tar* (as in *čuxdar* “more,” cf. Pers. *bištar* “id.”), the indefinite article *-i* (as in *ša’eri* “a poet”), the definite article *-aka* (from Kurdish; e.g., *ušaḡ-ækæ-le* “the children”). Following the Persian norm, Songori combines a nominal verb form with a Turkish auxiliary, e.g., calquing *sohbæt ile* “talk” from Persian *šoḡbat kardan*. Notwithstanding the strong Iranian influence, Bulut maintains that Songori has essentially retained its Turkic character by way of pronouns, adverbs, verbs, a minimum of case morphology, postpositional phrases, a system of verb paradigms, among other inherent grammatical features.

HISTORICAL NOTE

In his seminal article “The Origins of Kurdish,” David N. MacKenzie (having observed that Gurāni is more closely related to the [Caspian languages](#) than to the Kurdish dialects that surround them) hypothesizes an “occupation of the southern Zagros and surrounding area by the Goran,” and, “in more recent times, a secondary expansion of the Kurds, from the north, which led to their overrunning and gradually absorbing all but the surviving Goran,” but leaves the timing of these hypothetical movements at loose ends (MacKenzie, 1961, p. 86).



The question remains: What could have been the language of Kermanshahan before the coming of the Gurān and the Kurds? Neither the Achaemenid royal inscriptions of [Bisotun](#) nor the [Avroman Documents](#) tell anything about the local language, and the paucity of direct linguistic evidence makes it necessary to resort to historical geography. One may consider a ‘Median’ variety, on the grounds that at least eastern Kermanshahan was in the territory of [Media](#) (later known as Pahla/Fahla, [Jebāl](#), ‘[Erāq-e ‘Ajam](#)). This claim is attested by the toponyms Māhidašt (locally: Māyešt) and Māyen Kuh (north of Sonqor), with the element *Māh/Māy* (< OIr. *Māda-*) corresponding to Media, as well as by the early Islamic sources (where geography of the region first comes to light in some detail). Therein we learn that Qermāsīn (Kermanshah) was one of the four seats of Jebāl (Le Strange, p. 187) and that, of the eight regions that constituted the territory of Fahla (Ebn Ḳordāḍbeh, p. 57), there were [Dinavar](#), which is just to the east of [Kangāvar](#), and Mehrajān-qaḍaq and Māsabaḍān, which, according to Le Strange (p. 202), would be to the south of the present Māhidašt.

Accordingly, one expects some documentation from Kermanshahan regarding the medieval literary genre known as *fahlaviyāt*, since the provenances of some works of that type are recognized as having been in several regions of Fahla. None, however, comes closer than [Hamadan](#) to Kermanshah. This may be explained in multiple ways: an absence of the *fahlaviyāt* tradition in Kermanshahan, deficiency in documentation or preservation of manuscripts, or an early disappearance of the Fahlavi/Median language in Kermanshahan. Nevertheless, in this context, one cannot leave unmentioned the *ōrāma*, as an alternative designation for a *fahlavi* poem, and *ōrāman/ōrāmanān*, as *fahlavi* melodies (*laḥn-e ōrāman o bayt-e pahlavi*; Šams-al-Dīn Rāzi, p. 143). It is very likely indeed that this term is connected to the Avromani dialect of the Gurāni language, but whether Avromani was then spoken in its current home, Avroman (Hawrāmān), in the far corner of Kermanshahan, or somewhere along the Gurān migration route from a probable Caspian region, remains an open question.

(The author would like to thank Soruš Šahbāzi for the information he furnished from his current fieldwork throughout the province.)



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Originally Published online: June 13, 2016

[Archived version from the previous EIr. online edition.](#)
