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# Language ideologies and identities in Kurdish heritage language classrooms in London

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**Abstract:** This article investigates the way that Kurdish language learners construct discourses around identity in two language schools in London. It focuses on the values that heritage language learners of Kurdish-Kurmanji attribute to the Kurmanji spoken in the Bohtan and Maraş regions of Turkey. Kurmanji is one of the varieties of Kurdish that is spoken mainly in Turkey and Syria. The article explores the way that learners perceive the language from the Bohtan region to be “good Kurmanji”, in contrast to the “bad Kurmanji” from the Maraş region. Drawing on ethnographic data collected from community-based Kurdish-Kurmanji heritage language classes for adults in South and East London, I illustrate how distinctive lexical and phonological features such as the sounds [a:] ~ [ɔ:] and [ɛ]/[æ] ~ [a:] are associated with regional (and religious) identities of the learners. I investigate how these distinct features emerge in participants’ discourses as distinctive identity markers. More specifically this article examines how language learners construct, negotiate and resist language ideologies in the classroom.

**Keywords:** language learning, language ideologies, identities and Kurdish

## 1 Introduction

This article examines the language ideologies among heritage language learners (HLL) of Kurdish-Kurmanji<sup>1</sup> that emerged in two community-based classrooms in London. The data in this article draws on 18 months of classroom observations

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<sup>1</sup> Most literature uses this term; however, in the context of this article, participants used the terms *Maraş* and *Bohtan Kürtçesi* (in Turkish) which translate as ‘Kurdish of Maraş’ and

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and semi structured interviews carried out between 2011 and 2013 among the Kurdish community in London. Two varieties of Kurmanji emerged in participants' metalinguistic interpretations as salient for analysis: Bohtan<sup>2</sup> Kurmanji, often described as “proper”, and Maraş<sup>3</sup> Kurmanji, usually characterised as “not proper”. The Bohtan region covers the Kurdish populated cities located in southeast Turkey, and Maraş is a town in the southern part of Turkey. The terms Maraş and Bohtan not only refer to place of origin – two different geographical locations – but also, very importantly, mark the division between Sunni<sup>4</sup> and Alevi<sup>5</sup> Kurds.

The target language of the classroom was “academic” Kurdish, which is associated with Bohtan Kurmanji; however, most learners spoke Maraş Kurmanji. The dichotomy between the two varieties emerges in the classroom setting. This article first outlines the historical context of language development and policy that helps to explain why the Bohtan region's Kurmanji is often perceived as “authentic”, “academic” or standard by the participants. The article then draws from the theoretical literature on language ideologies (Irvine and Gal 2000; Piller 2015), standard language ideologies (Milroy and Lesley 1985), identities as products of hegemonic practices (Benwell and Stokoe 2006; Gramsci 1971; Althusser 1971; Foucault 1972) and phonological variation as expressions of social affiliation (Bell 1984; Hudson 1996) to explore the discourses that emerge from language learning, and the ways in which language ideologies are constructed, negotiated and resisted in the classroom.

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'Kurdish of Bohtan'. NB Maraş is the name of city however, the Kurmanji of the surrounding areas such as Sivas and Malatya are also categorised as *Maraş Kürtçesi* by the participants.

2 Öpengin and Geoffrey (2014) use the term “Northwestern dialect region” (NWK) which corresponds to the Kurmanji spoken in Kahraman Maraş (Maraş), Malatya and Sivas. Also, Özsoy and Yektan (2006) use the term *Sinemili* which again corresponds to Maraş Kurmanji. Participants used the term *Maraş Kürtçesi*. However, in order to avoid confusion, I will use *Maraş Kurmanji*. Also, I use IPA symbols as opposed to the transcript conventions in Öpengin and Geoffrey (2014): ž = ʒ š = ʃ.

3 This is the official name of Maraş. Most people prefer Maraş instead of Kahramanmaraş. *Kahraman*, which means 'hero', was added to Maraş after the city's resistance in the Turkish War of Independence in the 1920s.

4 Most Muslims in Turkey belong to the Sunni branch of Islam. Alevi and Sunni see each other as the “other” and intermarriage is still discouraged to this day. Although marriage between an Alevi Turk and a Kurd is acceptable, it is still perceived negatively to marry Sunni Kurds or Turks (Geaves 2003).

5 Alevism is a common faith/cultural system in central Anatolia, and the majority of Kurds in the UK come from this particular region in Turkey (Geaves 2003). The areas comprise Malatya, Maraş and Sivas and Maraş Kürtçesi is often associated with these cities.

The heritage language learners (Hornberger and Wang 2008) in this study speak Kurmanji to various degrees of fluency and attend language classes in order to improve their Kurmanji literacy skills. Heritage language learners in this study were mostly activists, and they gave four reasons for learning Kurmanji in London:

- they want to learn their language (predominantly as literacy) because they were unable to gain literacy skills due to the oppression in Turkey;
- they want to rid themselves of the linguistic experiences that made them feel powerless;
- they want to reconnect with their past;
- they feel pressure in the UK “to know their language”, as language is seen as an important part of ethnic identity in the western world (Yilmaz 2016)

As noted by O’Rourke et al. (2015: 14), in “minority language contexts, new speakers often take on an activist role, showing a strong sense of responsibility towards ensuring the future survival of the language, as well as a clear commitment to what they perceive as a situation of social and political injustice”. However, the process of teaching and learning a heritage language raises questions over which variant should be taught and whose language is the “standard”, and thus “complex identity and language ideological issues [...] are raised about the legitimacy, authority and authenticity” (Jaffe 2015: 21) of language learners. Heritage language learners therefore “not only find themselves frequently in sites of contestation of the dominant language (English) and their HL, but also needing to negotiate the use of the HL in its standard or dialect forms” (Hornberger and Wang 2008: 4).

Although the sociolinguistic situation of Kurdish as a heritage language has been studied in the United States (Sheyholislami and Amir 2016), Kurdish-Kurmanji has barely captured sociolinguists’ attention in the UK. Demir (2012: 815) argues that even though Kurds from Turkey “make up a significant proportion of London’s ethnic minority population, they constitute an ‘invisible’ diasporic community”. Most Kurds are registered according to the citizenship they hold and are therefore registered as Turkish, Iranian or Iraqi citizens, making it difficult to estimate their actual numbers. The lack of empirical work on the sociolinguistic situation of Kurmanji has been primarily due to constitutional obstacles. Article 42 of the constitution of the Republic of Turkey states that:

No language other than Turkish shall be taught as a mother tongue to Turkish citizens at any institutions of training or education. Foreign languages to be taught in institutions of training and education rules to be followed by schools conducting training in education in a foreign language shall be determined by law. The provisions of international treaties are reserved. (Article 42, the constitution of the Republic of Turkey)

Article 3 of Turkey's constitution still affirms that "The language of the country is Turkish and there can be no changes made to this article".<sup>6</sup> This law brings certain contradictions to Turkey's politics on Kurdish language and other minority languages and therefore limits the empirical work on the Kurdish language.

Kurmanji lacks official recognition and institutional support in the UK and is considered neither a minority nor an immigrant language. While local governments do provide correspondence, information and translation services in Kurmanji and Sorani (a variety spoken mainly in Iraq and Iran), many participants in the present study stated that they cannot use these services since they lack literacy skills in Kurmanji.

## 2 History of Kurmanji and language use

Kurmanji, like any other language, comprises many regional varieties. However, studies on its variation are scarce. Although there are many grammar books such as Bali (1992), Bedirxan (1989) and Blau (1989), studies on the varieties of Kurmanji in Turkey are under-investigated. Most of these studies concentrate on the "standard Kurmanji" spoken in Bohtan, mainly in Şırnak (*Şirmex* in Kurdish) province. These studies also seem to ideologically align with the views of their authors, since Bohtan Kurmanji is positioned as the most "proper" and "clean" variety of Kurmanji but nobody seems to explain why this is so. Conversely, Maraş Kurmanji is rarely dealt with in scholarly work.

Although there is no consensus among linguists in relation to the term "standard Kurmanji", Matras and Reershemius (1991) state that it is based on the Kurmanji dialect spoken in Cizre and Hakkari along the Turkish-Syrian and Turkish-Iraqi borders. The variety is based on the Kurdish language periodical "Hawar" which was published in Damascus and Beirut between 1932–1943 by Bedir Xan who uses the Latin script adapted for Turkish by the Turkish language reform of 1928, with some additional characters (Matras and Reershemius 1991: 108). The reason why this variety became known as "standard" may be due to the literary works produced in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries by poets and writers from the Bohtan principality in the Ottoman Empire (Vanly 1992). The dominance of the Bohtan region's contributions to political activism in the contemporary Kurdish movement is another reason behind the variety's prestige.

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<sup>6</sup> Speaking Kurdish in Turkey: <http://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/turkey/speaking-kurdish-turkey> (accessed 8 May 2015).

Mehmet Bayrak, a writer who identifies himself as a Turkologist and Kurdologist, argues that Maraş Kurmanji receives negative criticism by “other” Kurds and that this leads to a fear of speaking Maraş Kurmanji.<sup>7</sup> Although the majority of Kurds are Sunnis, the Alevi faith<sup>8</sup> is particularly important to this study as most of the participants in this research identified themselves as Alevis or “Alevi but non-believer” (which means not participating in any faith based activities) and they identified Alevism as a distinctive part of their Kurdish identity (Yilmaz 2016). Alevism in its broader definition means heterodoxy. Alevis are the second largest religious community after the Sunnis who speak Turkish and/or Kurdish. They are not officially recognised in Turkey. However, they are recognised officially in Germany and the UK. As a heterodox religious minority they have experienced persecution, especially in the 1990s (the massacre of Kahramanmaraş in 1978 and the killing of 35 Alevis in Madımak hotel are two specific attacks on Alevis which had religious motivations) which prompted the migration of Alevis to the big cities in Turkey and Western Europe. Alevis and Sunnis see each other as the “other” and intermarriage is still discouraged to this day. Their numbers in Turkey are estimated between 15–20 million.<sup>9</sup> However, these numbers are not reliable as some Alevis hide their Alevi identity in order to avoid discrimination (Sökefeld (2008).

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7 Mehmet Bayrak who identifies himself as a Turkologist and Kurdologist argues that Maraş Kürtçesi receives negative criticism by “other” Kurds:

Demek istediğim, bizim bölgede farklı bir kelime dile girince hemen dikkatlerini çekiyor, hemen eleştiri konusu oluyor. Halbuki Kürdistan’ın diğer bölgelerinde konuşulan dillerin içerisine diğer dillerden bir sürü kelime giriyor. O, onun Kürtçe olduğunu sanıyor. Böyle bir yanlışlığa düşmemek ve kendi bölgemizin Kürtçesinden korkmamak, kendi bölgemizin Kürtçesini konuşmaktan korkmamak, kamlarını söylemekten korkmamak, müziğini icra etmekten korkmamak lâzım. Ancak böyle ayakta tutulur, geliştirilir ve yaşatılabilir bu kültür.

[What I mean is when a different word enters into our language it immediately takes their (other Kurds’) attention and gets criticism. However, in other parts of Kurdistan many different words enter into their language. But s/he thinks it’s Kurdish. We shouldn’t be mistaken by this and should not fear to use our region’s Kurdish, should not fear to sing the “klams” (songs), and should not fear to perform our music. This is how our culture will stay alive and improve.

(<http://www.binboga.org/maras-Kürtçesi-soyleminin-sakincalari-0/> [accessed 29 November 2015]).

8 Some Alevis consider Alevism a religion whereas the rest consider it to be a faith/philosophy of life/path which they practised secretly or hid their Alevi identity until the 1990s which could be considered as a period of Alevi identity revival.

9 Amanda Paul and Demir Murat Seyrek, European Policy Centre (24 January 2014) ([http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub\\_4093\\_freedom\\_of\\_religion\\_in\\_turkey.pdf](http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub_4093_freedom_of_religion_in_turkey.pdf) [accessed 5 May 2015]).

Kose (2013) argues that Kurdish Alevi identities neither fit into the “ideal citizen” (Kose 2013) category (Turkish, western, and Sunni) that the nation-state-building project has been striving for, nor do they fit into the Kurdish nationalists’ idea of ideal “imagined” Kurds, and hence their identities are often described as “ambivalent”.

This article hypothesizes that, having been subjected to such ideological apparatuses of the Turkish State such as compulsory military service, the national education system and “one nation, one language” policy in Turkey, the participants in the present study enact linguistic practices in London that mirror state-like ideologies such as monolingualism and purism (Karrebæk and Ghandchi 2015). The classroom context reproduces dominant language ideologies, as similarly seen in the heritage language classrooms observed by Lytra (2015). Lytra (2015: 194), in her study on Turkish speaking children in London found that: “the institutional recognition and authority of standard Turkish, however, erases the complexity and heterogeneity of the pupils’ colloquial speech and renders Turkish vernaculars invisible during Turkish language and literacy teaching and learning”. Similarly, in this study the recognition of Bohtan Kurmanji as standard among the Kurdish community in London led to negotiations of linguistic differentiation between the Bohtan and Maraş speakers. The perception of Maraş Kurmanji as “corrupt” or “contaminated” among the Kurds in London is pervasive (Heller 2004; Sallabank 2010). Ives (2004: 7) argues that “language is spread predominantly not by government or state coercion, military or police action, but by speakers accepting the prestige and utility of new languages, phrases or terms”. In the case of the Kurmanji language learners, the prestige of Bohtan Kurmanji was accepted although this acceptance led to tension and negotiations among the pupils and the teacher.

Turkey has acted upon a “one nation, one language” official state ideology since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. The republic continues to have an official monolingual language policy, and issues around language ideologies are under-researched or often ignored. Furthermore, boarding schools in Kurdish provinces are particularly important in this respect (Beşikçi 1970: 552–53), since it is argued that these schools “cut Kurdish children from their families and community and as in other educational and military institutions, they were strongly encouraged and more often forced to forget their mother tongue and exposed to propaganda that Kurds were ‘bad’, ‘dirty’ and ‘primitive’” (Zeydanlıoğlu 2012: 107–108). Skutnabb-Kangas (2010: 15) argues that “In Turkey, the existence of the Kurds and their language are not only stigmatised but have often been outright denigrated” and adds that Turkish language ideology is “culturally and linguistically genocidal and assimilationist”.

Turkey’s constitution still does not recognise Kurds as a distinct ethnic group, and Kurdish language demands have been interpreted as “separatism”

and even “terrorism”. There have been substantial changes in the AKP (*Ak Parti* [Justice and Development Party]) government’s attitudes towards the Kurdish issue and education in the Kurdish mother tongue since the beginning of 2000s. This has been mainly due to Turkey’s EU accession process and a turbulent “peace process” between the pro-Kurdish party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi* [People’s Democratic Party]) and the state. The armed conflict between the PKK<sup>10</sup> (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan* in Kurmanji [Kurdistan Workers’ Party]) and the Turkish Republic, ongoing since the 1980s, has now ended with a tenuous ceasefire and a peace process (implemented since March 2013), which has brought issues of language and identity to the forefront of politics in Turkey in recent times. The process involves greater linguistic rights such as mother tongue education in Kurdish for Kurds living in Turkey. Furthermore the Council of Europe has reported the following on the “Cultural Situation of Kurds” (2006)<sup>11</sup> which is the most recent report at the time of writing:

13. The improvement of the cultural situation of Kurds is directly related to political stability in the region. Peace and stability are necessary for the improvement of the cultural situation of ethnic groups.

14. The Assembly encourages Turkey, as a Council of Europe member state, to address the “Kurdish issue” in a comprehensive manner and to take necessary measures with a view to further improving the cultural situation of Kurds in Turkey.

15. In the field of culture, the Assembly recommends that the competent Turkish authorities take the following measures:

15.1. ensure the protection of the main Kurdish languages by signing, ratifying and implementing the European Charter for Regional or Minority languages (ETS No. 148) with reference to the Kurdish languages spoken in Turkey;

15.2. consider the possibility of mother tongue education, in addition to education in the official language;

15.3. inform Kurdish parents of the different linguistic possibilities and

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**10** “The PKK was formed in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan. [...] In February 1999 the PKK’s founder and leader Abdullah Öcalan was captured by Turkish security forces in Kenya. During his subsequent trial in Turkey, in June 1999, Öcalan announced a PKK ceasefire and also that the group intended to seek a peaceful resolution to its aspirations” (Lipscombe 2014: 23).

**11** *The cultural situation of the Kurds*, 2006. *Assembly debate* on 4 October 2006 (28th Sitting) (see Doc. 11 006, report of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education, rapporteur: Lord Russell-Johnston). *Text adopted by the Assembly* on 4 October 2006 (28th Sitting) <http://assembly.coe.int/Mainf.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta06/ERES1519.htm#1> (accessed 8 May 2015).

- issue instructions on how to apply for what is available;  
 15.4. encourage university courses on Kurdish language and literature.

However, Article 3 of Turkey's constitution still affirms that "The language of the country is Turkish and there can be no changes made to this article". This law brings certain contradictions to Turkey's politics on Kurdish language and other minority languages. Therefore, constitutional and political constraints have a great impact not only on Kurdish language use in Turkey, but also leads to limited descriptive research on the sociolinguistic situation of the language and variation. It is important to note that standard language ideologies (Milroy and Lesley 1985) are a salient part of national and regional identity constructions. This process often involves macro power structures and institutionalisation of particular behaviour by dominant groups through "coercion" and "consent" (Fairclough 1989: 33). This often becomes salient when speakers believe Maraş variety is "not proper" and that Bohtan Kurmanji is "proper" hence dominant.

## 2.1 Language

Kurdish is classified under the "Western Iranian group of the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European family" (Thackston 2006: vii) and the two major varieties are Kurmanji and Sorani. Kurmanji is spoken mainly in Turkey, Syria, Armenia and Azerbaijan and in some small parts of Iraq and Iran. Thackston (2006: viii) argues that this variety is far from being "unified, normalised, or standardised", whereas Sorani, which is spoken by the Kurds of Iraq and Iran, he argues, is more advanced in this sense, as it has been the second official language of Iraq since WW1.

As the concern of this article is two varieties of Kurmanji namely Maraş and Bohtan varieties it is important to give a brief overview of the distinctive lexical and phonological features between the two varieties.

Based on Öpengin and Geoffrey (2014) some of the lexical and phonological differences between Maraş and Bohtan Kurmanji are shown in Table 1 and Table 2.

Although Özsoy and Yektan (2006) study is inconclusive in terms of a comprehensive description of Kurmanji varieties in Turkey, they argue that:

While it is conceivable that further research on the dialects of Kurmanji will reveal other factors such as religious affinity, i.e. whether the dialect community is of the Alevi or Sunni sect, to be also crucial in defining variation across dialects, our findings nevertheless provide evidence to the act that geographical factors indeed do play a significant role in determining the properties of the individual dialects.

(Özsoy and Yektan 2006: 300)



**Table 1:** Lexical correspondences.

Gloss	Bohtan Kurmanji	Maraş Kurmanji
‘good’	<i>baf</i>	<i>rind</i>
‘leg’	<i>ling</i>	<i>zuni</i>
‘wing’	<i>per</i>	<i>pil</i>

**Table 2:** Phonological correspondences.

Bohtan Kurmanji			Maraş Kurmanji	
a [a:]	agir	‘fire’	[ɔ:]	ɔ:gir
e [ɛ]/[æ]	dev	‘mouth’	[a:]	da:v/(æv/æw)
ū [u:]	gūz	‘walnut’	[u:]	gu:z
o [o:]	īro	‘today’	[o:]	huro:
vbV [-b-]	hebū	‘there was’	[-w-]	hawu
v	av	‘water’	[v]	o:v
xw	xwē	‘salt’	[xw/xw]	xwe

There are no studies on the issue of religious affiliation, language use or variation concerning Kurmanji. To date there are two descriptive studies – Öpengin and Geoffrey (2014) and Özsoy and Yektan (2006) – which do not deal with sociolinguistic factors of variation in detail. However, Özsoy and Yektan (2006) indicate that religious and regional factors need to be taken into account in relation to Kurmanji variation. In the case of Bohtan and Maraş Kurmanji while certain forms of speech are perceived as appropriate and legitimate (Bourdieu 1991), phonological and morphosyntactic structures produced by Maraş Kurmanji speakers are found to be outside of the “norm” that is a product of classroom interactions that are reproduced by the language ideologies and policies of language institutes, grammarians and language instructors who claim that Bohtan Kurmanji is “pure”, “uncontaminated” and “clean” reproduce such beliefs. Maraş Kurmanji, meanwhile, is considered “contaminated” by its own speakers and the so called Bohtan speakers. Looking closely at language ideologies enables us to see how language ideologies and the social are shaped in institutional settings such as language classes. While there is no linguistic reason why one variety is standard (i.e. undergoes a process of standardisation) whereas another is not, these dispositions become “reality” or “common sense”

(Gramsci 1971) in language learning contexts where learners are exposed to “correct” language use. In the context of this study, the classroom context reinforced the “correct” use of Kurmanji language where phonological features of Maraş Kurmanji which were perceived as incorrect, were corrected by the teacher. This often led to negotiations of linguistic features such as phonological and lexical choices made by the interlocutors. Therefore, language ideologies and identities were an integral part of the classroom interactions that were constructed, negotiated and resisted by the Kurmanji learners through three semiotic processes, iconization, fractal recursivity and erasure, outlined by Irvine and Gal (2000).

### 3 Language ideologies and identities

This article follows Bakhtin’s view on language in that language is not,

[...] a system of abstract grammatical categories, but rather language [is] conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view, even as a concrete opinion, ensuring a maximum of mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life.

(Bakhtin 1981: 271)

Having established how this article conceptualizes language, language ideologies are understood as “sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (Silverstein 1979: 193). As stated by Piller (2015):

Language ideologies undergird language use, which in turn shapes language ideologies; and, together, they serve social ends, in other words the purpose of language ideologies is not really linguistic but social. Like anything social, language ideologies are interested, multiple, and contested.

(Piller 2015: 4)

In order to analyse how language ideologies are constructed, negotiated and resisted I the model that Irvine and Gal (2000) developed using the concept of semiotic processes which they set out as follows:

*Iconization*: involves a transformation of the sign relationship between linguistic features (or varieties) and the social images with which they are linked. *Fractal recursivity*: involves the projection of an opposition, salient at some level of relationship, onto some other level. *Erasure*: is the process in which ideology, in simplifying the sociolinguistic field, renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible.

(Irvine and Gal (2000: 87–89)

This model could be summarised in statements such as “Maraş Kürtçesi is rough” or “Maraş Kürtçesi is broken” (Yilmaz 2016) which potentially iconises Maraş speakers or Alevi Kurds as “rough” or “broken”. These depictions could be interpreted as iconic representations of the Maraş people. Fractal recursivity could be related to the concepts of “sameness” and “difference” where groups or individuals articulate statements from oppositional positions e.g. “Our Kurdish is mixed with Turkish” which could be interpreted as “our” language in comparison to “their” language is mixed or not proper, and so on. Or lexical dichotomies between two varieties recur on the phonological level, thereby creating another subcategory in linguistic differentiation. The last process, namely erasure, suggests that some individuals’ linguistic activities become invisible where internal variation gets dismissed. I found many examples in classroom interactions where students’ vernaculars were simply disregarded by the teacher. However, students often resisted these top-down imperatives by negotiating their identities.

Identities are then the products of discourses that are also the products of hegemonic practices (Gramsci 1971), such as schooling and military service, which make subjects internalize (Althusser 1971) or reproduce these dominant ideologies as well as contest them. In this account, identities are discursively produced (Foucault 1972); in other words, “identities (or ‘subjects’) are regarded as the product of dominant discourses that are tied to social arrangements and practices” (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 30). As Lippi Green (1994) argues:

Much of linguistic variation is structured around social identity. Linguists know this, but nonlinguists know it too, and act on it: accent becomes both manner and means for exclusion. The fact is, however, that when people reject an accent, they also reject the identity of the person speaking: his or her race, ethnic heritage, national origin, regional affiliation, or economic class.

(Lippi Green 1994:165)

Therefore, linguistic variation is closely linked to social identity where “speakers may use phonological variation to signal the social groups to which they feel they belong”, (Hudson 1996: 45). Ideological differences associated with linguistic variation have cultural meaning in terms of our identifications:

In semiotic terms, dialect styles are a subset of a community’s culturally imbued ways of speaking and need to be analysed in relation to other (non-dialectal) dimensions of cultural meaning.

(Coupland 2002: 191)

Having established the close theoretical link between linguistic variation, language ideologies and social identities in the next section I discuss the

methodology and methods used for the analysis of ethnographic data collected from two community-based classrooms in London.

## 4 Methodology and methods

I began to learn “standard” Kurmanji in South London in 2011 as a heritage language learner. Initially, I began to attend these classes at what I will call the South London Classroom (SLC) as a learner and only later on as a researcher, which is how my “insider” status was secured as I had already established rapport with the research participants. However, this status was often negotiated due to my position as a linguist and researcher. Sometimes I was positioned as an expert and asked to comment on the language practices of the participants. Sometimes I was an outsider because I was the researcher, and this meant that I had to negotiate my position in the research process. I observed and socialised with learners before and after the classes three times a week in order to form a preliminary understanding of their language use in their daily lives. In December 2012 I began to attend another centre, which I call East London Classroom (ELC), where I carried out participant observations and audio recorded classroom interactions. Compared to SLC, ELC had different ideological orientations: while SLC was a place where political activism dominated the classroom interactions, ELC claimed to be a more politically neutral place, though many participants were activists. Resistance to the change of phonological features such as using /e/ as in /ez=I/ in Bohtan Kurmanji instead of /a/ as in /az=I/ in Maraş Kurmanji was similar in both classrooms. As the teacher was the same in both settings, the teaching material was the same but the levels of literacy in SLC and ELC were different. The SLC learners had intermediate level of Kurmanji, while the ELC ones were in the beginners’ classroom.

My main method for data collection was Linguistic Ethnography (LE), including participant observations, semi-structured interviews and audio recordings in two language classes on a weekly basis over three semesters. I used participant observations, audio recordings, semi-structured interviews and extensive fieldnotes and vignettes with participants as my main tools for data collection. These methods helped me to determine the recurring patterns emerging in participants’ language use in their language learning settings. In total I had approximately 26 hours of classroom interactions and 74 hours of interview recordings from 39 participants, which meant a total of 100 hours of audio recordings. While transcribing the recordings, I paid particular attention to the moments where language and identity became salient.

The methodological processes that this article draws on are informed by linguistic ethnography. Linguistic Ethnography in the context of this study is used as a methodological and analytical approach since LE focuses on local literacies, language, ethnicity, identity and inequality in classroom; ideology and cultural dynamics; classroom as a site of interaction; and language teaching (Creese 2008). As the context of this study is classroom settings and the intersections of language ideologies, language learning and teaching, LE was a practical methodological approach as it has been used in similar settings and has been found useful (see Charalambous 2009). The second role of LE in this research is in the choice data collection: semi structured interviews, fieldnotes, participant observations, audio recordings (Copland and Creese 2015) were used in order to provide a fine-grained, in-depth understanding of Kurmanji language learning in community based classrooms in London. Vignettes (based on fieldnotes) – descriptions of events that were typical and emblematic (Miles and Huberman 1994) – were used in order to contextualise the ethnographic data. A vignette is:

[...] a focused description of a series of events taken to be representative, typical, or emblematic in the case you are doing. It has a narrative story-like structure that preserves chronological flow and that normally is limited to a brief time span, to one or a few key actors, to a bounded space, or to all three.  
(Miles and Huberman 1994: 81)

The third role of linguistic ethnography in this paper is that my analysis draws on situated language use (Copland and Creese 2015: 29) where I employ “a bottom up approach in which local action and interaction [is] embedded in a wider social world” (Creese 2008: 233) and I analyse themes that emerged from the participants’ interactions and discourses rather than top down categories.

Linguistic ethnography is a hands-on practical methodology, which is suitable for institutional settings such as classroom interactions where meaning making processes are created by the participants within the constraints of the context and hence ways in which ideologies shape and are shaped in classroom interactions. Since linguistic ethnography focuses on local practices from the practitioners’ point of view and takes participants’ subjective evaluations into account, it suits the research questions that this paper seeks to answer. It is a post-structuralist approach as it critiques essentialist accounts of social life (Creese 2008).

The sets of data in this article draw on two levels of analysis. The first is the fine-grained analysis of linguistic features, particularly phonological ones such as [ɑ]~[æ], and lexical items that emerged as markers of group

identities. The second level of analysis draws on the model of three semiotic processes developed by Irvine and Gal (2000), namely *iconization*, *fractal recursivity* and *erasure* and ways in which these link to the constructions of identities.

In both classrooms, the learners often described Kurmanji as *their* language and prided themselves on making the effort to gain literacy skills in a language that they did not have a chance to learn in Turkey. However, for many, language use was limited to the classrooms, and usually Kurmanji was not used in their day-to-day interactions apart from with older members of the family or the community. The material the teacher used was *Hînger* (level 1–3), a coursebook written by Kurdish teachers who work in mainstream education in Turkey. The book mimics English language coursebooks in Turkey and raises fundamental questions about social class. For example, most characters in the book are middle class Kurds. Previous books, such as Rizgar's (1996) grammar book *Learn Kurdish: a multi level course in Kurmanji*, which was published in the UK, had peasant characters and often depicted Kurds as villagers, while two other textbooks prepared by the Turkish ministry of education have the Turkish national anthem and a picture of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic. The first textbook prepared by Gülmez et al. (2015) included religious characters for example women with headscarves. The second textbook included children characters and portrays secular characters, Yıldırım et al. (2015). This material was not used in the classroom. However, different ideological orientations of the textbooks show distinct political and ideological predispositions that reflect the authors' political inclinations.

Such material also impacts on the interactions produced in classrooms, and in this case the *Hînger* textbook reproduced the dichotomies between Bohtan and Maraş speakers as well as contradictions between working and middle-class learners. Mikail, the teacher, taught in both the SLC and ELC classrooms. He was from the Bohtan region and had no educational background in teaching Kurmanji as a heritage language; however, he had practical experience in teaching Kurmanji in Turkey. He was a volunteer and prepared his own material for the lessons.

The examination of two classroom interactions, followed by in-depth, semi-structured interviews and audio recordings of classroom interactions, shows that the classroom is an institutional site that reproduces hierarchies and resistance (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Collins 2009; Martin Rojo 2010). Although the two classroom contexts of South and East London had different dynamics in terms of language use – learners in the first were mainly Kurds from Turkey while those of the second were Kurds from Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey – the discourses that

were (re)produced were similar in terms of their constructions, negotiations and resistance as I will demonstrate in my data analysis.

## 5 Constructing, negotiating and resisting language ideologies and identities

Language use, learning and teaching in the context of this study varied due to the different institutional imperatives of the settings. As SLC was dominated by political activism and ELC claimed to be a more politically neutral place, classroom interactions should be considered in the realm of wider politics outlined in the introduction. Three findings emerged from the data analysis: (i) the construction of linguistic differentiation and dominant discourses, (ii) the negotiation of linguistic differentiation and dominant discourses, and (iii) resistance to change. As the following vignette from my fieldnotes demonstrates, the classroom context in SLC is highly affected by political activism. The vignette in (1) provides an overview of how a typical lesson unfolded and which languages were used in the centre.

(1)

In the classroom [...] I hear Turkish and a little English... Most conversations are about politics in Turkey. It feels like everybody knows each other very well in here. Most students are young educated women in their 30s and single. [...] The lesson begins with the revision of grammar, reading a text or from the course book *Hinker* and watching a political programme on teacher's laptop. After an hour or so, students take a smoking and tea break. After the break students gather and continue learning Kurdish grammar and vocabulary. The lesson ends with a word game where learners compete with each other. I hear some students whispering 'biz böyle söylemiyoruz' (we don't say this like this). And here my journey begins: to explore what 'biz' / 'we' means...

(22 March 2012, Researcher vignette, SLC)

In contrast to the shared dialects in SLC, in ELC participants spoke many different varieties of Kurdish (Sorani mainly), Arabic, Farsi, English and Turkish. East London School (ELS) where mainly Kurds of Turkey learning Kurmanji attended. There were a few students from other parts of Kurdish territories such as Syria, Iran and Iraq who spoke Sorani and Arabic as well as English. The South London School (SLS) instead had learners who predominantly spoke Turkish and English.

(2)

It feels so different from the other centre because there are Kurds from Iran, Iraq and Syria in this class and the teacher tends to speak more in English than Turkish here. Students are mainly the parents of the children who are attending the Sunday school.

(2 December 2012, Researcher vignette, ELC)

The learners who attended the lessons in ELC were mainly parents of the children who were attending the Sunday school. It is important to mention that there was a diglossic situation between parents and children led to the establishment of ELC. That is to say, children were learning standard Kurmanji, whereas some parents spoke regional varieties. Furthermore, some parents were Sorani speakers and some did not speak Kurmanji at all. The funding for this school came from a local council and initially ELC was established for children. However, in due course parents had lessons at parallel hours with their children but in different classes. As the funding was limited these classes lasted only one year and did not continue in the following years. As the languages and political alignments in the two centres varied, language use and the context in which interactions took place also varied. However, participants in both contexts constructed similar language ideologies through their interactions: Maraş Kurmanji was delegitimised in both contexts. The following sections will thus address the question of how these themes were constructed in language use.

## 5.1 Constructing discourses of linguistic differentiation and dominance

The target language was “good” or “academic” Kurmanji, which participants associated with the Bohtan variety (as the *de facto* variety to be acquired). This ideology is manifested in (3), where Elif (female), a well-educated Alevi woman from Malatya who spoke Maraş Kurmanji (Malatya is a city close to Maraş and speakers from this city were also classified as Maraş speakers), reports that a woman from the southeast region (a region corresponding to Bohtan) advised her not to speak in Kurmanji since she found her dialect vulgar and difficult to understand. Example (3) illustrates not only assumptions about Maraş speakers – that they do not speak Kurmanji or that it is better they do not – but also the discursive construction of linguistic differentiation and the dominance of non-Maraş Kurmanji speakers. (See Appendix for a list of transcription conventions used.)



(3)

- 1 I was at this friend's place and this girl from Kars came and like ...  
 2 I didn't know her ... And she goes like [uhm] something in Kurdish.  
 3 ... looking at me thinking probably **it was obvious I was from Malatya**  
 4 definitely. And then friends go "of course she can speak Kurdish" ...  
 5 ... and then she goes "haha" ... "where is she from?" Malatya [surprised]  
 6 Oh Meleti, Maraş you guys ... **it's better you don't talk in Kurdish.**  
 7 ... what an attitude? And it is not only her ... because of that **so many**  
 8 **people actually don't talk Kurdish. People from the area** (Maraş and Malatya)  
**because**  
 9 **they make jokes... It is so important to learn academic Kurdish ...**  
 10 If So I really hate that! It really puts me down  
 11 ... And then she asked me "what do you do?" I said *parezer*<lawyer>  
 12 obviously she doesn't understand *parezer*. She goes what's that? **I was like it was**  
**you who**  
 13 **was saying that your Kurdish was better than mine because you were from this**  
**area ...** She  
 14 goes I don't really understand anything ... **the way they speak** is really "**kaba**"  
 15 <vulgar/impolite> ((referring to Malatya and Maraş))  
 (Interview with Elif)

Elif's narrative evidences the linguistic insecurity of Kurds from Malatya and Maraş, which could be the result of encountering such judgmental comments on their variety. The comments she receives suggest that she should be "silent" or speak Turkish rather than speak her regional variety. Elif reports that when she said she was from Malatya, and she stated that this affiliation made her and Alevi as well (lines 3–4). Elif shows her awareness of this by using the adverb "definitely". This means she has no doubt that people think that one is Alevi if one is from Malatya, Maraş and surrounding areas. Maraş Kurmanji speakers in this case are regarded as illegitimate producers of language who should be silenced. When I asked Elif what she meant by "good" Kurdish, she justified this by referring to the phonetic differences between Maraş and Bohtan Kurmanji.

The label "good" Kurdish was used by the participants and referred to people from Diyarbakır, Bingöl or Muş (areas linked to the Bohtan variety). In our discussion, Elif expressed that these regions' Kurdish was "good", and therefore I asked her what she meant by this. The notion of "good Kurdish" emerged from Elif's narrative (as well as in many other interactions I had with the participants). Elif describes the Kurdish of Maraş and surrounding areas as grammatically incorrect and lacking in vocabulary. In the course of Elif's narrative we see the process of iconization through which linguistic features are

linked to social images. She associates the sound /a/ with Maraş people and the sound /æ/ with others (referring to Bohtan people).

(4)

- 1 Your question was what do I mean by “good Kurdish”. What I mean by good Kurdish is
- 2 especially when I talk about people from Mardin, people from Diyarbakır, Bingöl, Muş
- 3 they are able to have full conversation in Kurdish. **They speak fluently** and they
- 4 understand. They make full sentences; **they make long sentences**, short sentences – full
- 5 conversation only in Kurdish. Right! **Compared to people from my area** Meletî or
- 6 Kahramanmaraş or Pazarcix or Kayseri. So... [...] I mean **we do use many Turkish**
- 7 **words while talking in Kurdish**. Basically **their vocabulary is quite poor** [meaning
- 8 people from her region] I think, that’s what we can say. And grammatically it’s not right.
- 9 That’s ... I found out after learning obviously after attending Kurdish classes, yeah. [...]
- 10 actually we say /a/ /a/ /a/ you know what I mean by good Kurdish areas because they
- 11 say /æ/ it’s like it’s softer. You know we say “az hatim” for example. It’s not grammar it’s
- 12 pronunciation. Az hatime wana diben ez hatim **{KR}** (They say I came) which is softer (Interview with Elif SLC)

Elif’s narrative is a good example of the *iconization* process and how linguistic features were linked to social images in the language classes. Elif linked the sound /æ/ with Bohtan speakers and evaluated it as softer than the sound /a/ which she associated with her region. The social images that Elif portrays are Bohtan speakers as “fluent” speakers and Maraş speakers lacking in vocabulary and using many Turkish words (lines 6–7). Elif’s self-stigmatisation. She asserts that the vocabulary of people in her region is poor and that the sounds they use such as [a] are “harsh”.

Elif not only engages in the reproduction of dominant ideologies by positioning Bohtan Kurmanji as “good” and implying Maraş Kurmanji is not “correct” and therefore “bad”, but also foregrounds her metalinguistic awareness regarding grammar and pronunciation. The second level of linguistic differentiation that occurs in Elif’s narrative is *fractal recursivity* – that is, the construction of further dichotomies pertaining to the grammar and pronunciation of the two varieties and effectively maintaining another opposition. In her comparisons such as between soft /æ/ and harsh /a/, she repeats /a/ three times to persuade

me that she is aware of grammar rules and knows as a fact that her Kurmanji is not “proper”. By using the pronoun “they” to position the others, namely the Bohtan speakers who are able to construct long and full sentences, as fluent and competent, she positions herself and her regional variety as incompetent and corrupt. Elif further argues that she knows this because she attends the language classes. This is an important point since it illustrates how the distinction of who is a legitimate speaker and who is not emerges from the institutional context. The institutional setting of the classroom contributes to the legitimacy of Bohtan Kurmanji, which leads to the dichotomization process that is constructed in Elif’s narrative.

## 5.2 Negotiating linguistic differentiation and dominance

Another theme that emerged from classroom interactions and the interviews was the positioning of Maraş Kurmanji speakers as “mixing” Turkish and Kurdish languages. We also see this in Elif’s narrative in (3) when she reports that speakers from Mardin and surrounding areas (Bohtan region) speak in full sentences and that speakers of her region had “poor vocabulary” (line 7) along with the use of Turkish words (line 6–7) when speaking in Kurdish. The notion of mixing Turkish and Kurdish languages also generated mixed feelings towards dominant discourses. In (5) from East London Classroom, the teacher Mikail (male) gives students a “filling in the blanks” task, where he fills in the missing verbs in Turkish. For example, in the first line the first five words are in Kurdish and the sixth word where the verb should be is in Turkish. The following excerpt focuses on the interaction between Mikail and Yeter (female), one of the students. Yeter could be described as a prototypical speaker of Maraş Kurmanji, retaining the phonological features of Maraş Kurmanji. She was one of the less well-educated participants in the class, and this could be one of the reasons why she was laughed at and picked on by other pupils more than the well-educated participants.

(5a)

- 1 Mikail Ez her sibeh saet heştande {KR} uyanıyorum {TR}. Ser çavên xwe yixiyorum
- 2 û diranen xwe firçe {KR} yapıyorum {TR}.
- 3 <I wake up at eight o’clock every morning. I wash my face and
- 4 brush my teeth>
- 5 Yeter Bu ne hepsi Türkçe? {TR}
- 6 <what is this it’s all Turkish?>
- 7 Mikail ((continues)) taşte ya ku dayîka min amade kirî bi hevra {KR}

- 8 yiyiyorum {TR}.
- 9 Piştî taşte cilên xwe li xwe {KR} giyiyorum {TR}.
- 10 Û ji mal {KR} çiqiyorum {TR} Ez jî
- 11 Finsbury parq trene {KR} biniyorum {TR} û {KR} gidiyorum {TR}
- 12 dibistane {KR}.
- 13 Dibistana min (di) navenda bajêr e seet deh û nîvande waneyên me {KR}
- 14 başlıyor {TR}.
- 15 Li dibastana me ji her netewî mirov hene {KR}
- 16 Seet dozdana em navbera nîvro {KR}
- 17 veriyoruz. {TR} Ez xwaringehe dibistane xwarine {KR} yiyiyorum {TR}.
- 18 <I eat breakfast that my mum prepared, together. After having breakfast
- 19 I put my clothes on. And leave home. I take the train from Finsbury
- 20 park and I go. My school is in the centre of the city, and at ten thirty my
- 21 class starts. In our school we have people from all nations. At twelve
- 22 o'clock we have a lunch break. I eat my meals in the refectory of the school.>
- 23 Yeter amo aynı {TR}/{KR} mîno kurmoncîye ma **yozmişkiriye** {KR}
- 24 <but this is written like our Kurdish>
- 25 Miakîl Kurmancîya we **yazmişkiriye** êre [laughs] {KR}
- 26 <yes it is written in your Kurdish [laughs]>
- 27 Yeter ((continues)) **nivî tirkî nivî kurmoncî** ay î tavhav dakim
- 28 ka a wayn biwem {KR}.
- 29 <half Turkish and half Turkish, I mix them,
- 30 let me put it this way>
- 31 [EVERYBODY LAUGHS]
- (Classroom recording, East London Classroom)

The extract demonstrates an exaggeration of Maraş Kurmanji as a mixture of Turkish and Kurdish. Yeter, asserts that this is the same as “her” Kurdish. However, there is also a hint of ambivalence towards Maraş Kurmanji (line 6) when Yeter realises Mikail is using a lot of Turkish words. On the one hand, Yeter realises that this “mixing” of Turkish and Kurdish languages is familiar to her, but on the other hand she is surprised that “it’s all Turkish” (line 6). Yeter is surprised because the classroom context is a setting where she learned “correct” Kurmanji and the “mixing” of the Turkish and Kurdish languages by the teacher were unexpected. Although Yeter resists in line 23, where she implies that this is the way she talks, she also accepts the dominant ideology that Maraş Kurmanji could be identified as “naturally” a mixture. Yeter’s interaction with Mikail shows the *iconization* of Maraş Kurmanji as “mixed”. Yeter not only accepts that her variety is mixed but also resists by continuing to mix her varieties in this way and maintains her regional identity.

Maraş Kurmanji is characterised by morpheme mixing (lines 23 and 25) such as:

(5b)

yap+mış+kir+î+ye

do (TR)+3PST/PTC (TR)+did (KR)+3PST

The first two morphemes are Turkish and the rest is in Kurdish, which is often discouraged in language learning settings. This type of “morpheme mixing” is typical among many Kurdish speakers but it is often accepted as an iconic representation of Maraş Kurmanji speakers. However, it came to my attention that this stereotyping of Maraş speakers was inaccurate, as speakers from other regions used similar morphological structures. In line 23, Yeter uses *yozmişkirîye* ‘s/he wrote’ and states that it is written in “her” Kurdish, indexing that this structure belongs to her Kurdish. The teacher repeats the same word in line 25 and agrees that it is written in Yeter’s Kurdish. The identity alignments Yeter and the teacher make are on grounds of linguistic differentiation. The constructions of this type of difference were often made in tandem with identity alignments the participants made.

### 5.3 Resistance

The classroom context also provided opportunities for students to negotiate and challenge the language ideologies imposed on them by the teacher and the context of learning standard Kurmanji. While dominant discourses such as Bohtan Kurmanji’s legitimacy was established, Maraş Kurmanji speakers challenged such beliefs by indexing their identities and the authenticity of their varieties. Although the teacher tried to correct Maraş Kurmanji speakers’ pronunciations of certain sounds, students resisted this so-called phonological “plastic surgery” (Silverstein 2003) and retained their linguistic differences.

Example (6) is from East London Classroom and concerns an interaction between Yeter (female), Gülbahar (female), Mikail (male teacher) and Kamuran (male) in which Yeter is often laughed at. The regional differences she displayed such as *‘dîlîzim* ‘I play’ (Bohtan Kurmanji), *~dalîzim* ‘I play’ (Maraş Kurmanji), or Turkish and Kurdish morpheme mixing such as *yozmişke* were often laughed at by the other participants, especially those who were more educated and from outside of her region.

(6)

- 1 Yeter Te [eh] te kurre xa ro yozmişka? Ez da kurre xa ro  
 2 yozmişkim {KR} & {TR}  
 3 <You [eh] you will write to your son>  
 4 Gülbahar ‘yozmişke’ [laughs] ((then the others laugh at Yeter for  
 5 ‘yozmişke’=to write))  
 6 Yeter kurre xa ro kur kur amo am şanokim yozmişbikin/m {KR}  
 7 <to my son, son son but we cannot write>  
 8 Kamuran binîvisim {KR} ((corrects Yeter who is from Maraş too))  
 9 <will write>  
 10 Mikail ez binîvisim? Ha beje binîvisim {KR}  
 11 <I will write? Hah say ‘binîvisim’ <I will write>  
 [...]
 12 Mikail lawîke xwe, kur xwe. Farq nake ez bi kurre xwe ra dilîzim ez bi  
 13 lawike xwe ra dilîzim {KR}  
 14 <lawike xwe=my son, kure xwe <my son>. There is no difference. I  
 15 play with my son. I play with my son>  
 16 Yeter dalîzim {KR}  
 17 <I play>  
 18 Mikail dilîzim [exaggerates] DALîzim ere dalîzim [everybody laughs]  
 19 ((including Yeter)) ere, dalîzim jî dibejin ev jî dibe ev jî dibe {KR}  
 20 <(dilîzim <to play> in standard Kurmanji. dalîzim =(Maraş  
 21 Kurmanji) I play yes I play yes they say dalîzim that’s OK that’s OK>  
 22 Mikail law jî kur jî her du jî aynîne {KR}  
 23 <law and kur (son) both are same same meaning>  
 24 Gülbahar yöresel farklılık, ikisini de kullanabilirsiniz {TR}  
 25 <regional differences, you can use both>  
 26 Mikail eş anlamlı yani ikisinde eş anlamlı ikisinide kullanabilirsiniz {TR}  
 27 <they are synonyms both are synonyms you can use both>  
 28 Yeter Az bi kaçike xa ro dalîzim {KR}  
 29 <I play with my daughter>  
 30 Mikail ((name)) ew çi dikî? {KR}  
 31 <what is s/he doing?>  
 32 Yeter ew aw awno ew [e ben in Turkish] jî tarrina {KR}  
 33 <s/he s/he they =but me= are going>  
 34 Gülbahar [laughs] ((then everybody laughs)) aw je tarrina {KR}  
 35 <they are going>  
 36 Mikail [laughs] ku de tarrin ku de? Just say they are walking {KR}  
 37 <where are they walking to?>  
 38 Yeter işte {TR} tarrina {KR}

- 39 <well they are going>  
 40 Mikail çima tu 'jî' kar tine? 'jî'çi ye? {KR}  
 41 <Why do you use 'ji'? What is ji?>  
 42 Yeter Aw jî  
 43 <They too>  
 44 Mikail Çima'jî' ?{KR}  
 45 <why 'ji'?>  
 46 Yeter diye kullanırız, diye kullanılır bizde, öyle deriz {TR}  
 47 <This is how we use it, we say like this>  
 48 Gülbahar [laughs]  
 49 Mikail ka minakeke bide ka beje beje {KR} biz beraber ders ogreniy...,  
 50 yapıyoruz {TR} <give an example say say {KR} we are learn (ing)  
 51 studying together>  
 52 Yeter Am a am jî darse dakina ((Maraş KR)) öyle deriz {TR} am jî {KR}  
 53 <we we are studying we say it like 'am ji'>  
 (Classroom recording, East London Classroom)

The teacher often corrected Yeter's Kurmanji and insisted she change sounds such as *da* to *di*, as in line 16, but at times had to give up on changing Yeter's dialect markers (lines 19–21). Often these kinds of tensions were resolved through the teacher's advice that these were only regional differences and that students could use any variety they wished. Although Mikail's aim was to teach standard Kurmanji, at times there was so much resistance from the students that he had to accept and "tolerate" Maraş Kurmanji. The semiotic process that takes place in this particular interaction is the process of *erasure* where the "awkward element" (Irvine and Gal 2000: 38) gets "transformed". Irvine and Gal (2000: 38) argue that the "problematic" element is seen as fitting some alternative". Although Mikail showed flexibility with vocabulary, he provided alternatives in Yeter's phonological features. In other words, Mikail had to negotiate the "problematic" elements of Yeter's variety with phonological transformation.

Yeter's resistance towards this phonological transformation is linked to the process of identity formation. In line 27, Mikail accepts the lexical differences as "synonyms". Differences between *kur* and *law* 'son' (line 14) are homogenized, and internal variation is disregarded. Yeter's resistance signals her social group identity as a Maraş Kurmanji speaker.

This extract shows how "authentic" or "standard" Kurdish is de-authenticised, (Wei and Zhu 2013) and challenged by Yeter, who does not accept it as dominant or as a source of legitimization as a Maraş speaker. Yeter uses her diverse linguistic repertoire to construct her regional identity and resist changing her dialect markers

by foregrounding her regional affiliation through her metalinguistic awareness, such as “we say it like that” (line 53).

## 6 Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to examine the discourses that emerge in two Kurdish-Kurmanji heritage language classrooms in London. I illustrated how language ideologies and identities are constructed, resisted and negotiated in classroom interactions and semi-structured interviews. I also showed that although Kurds lack a nation-state, and the definition of “standard” is unclear in literature (Matras and Reershemius 1991), the participants construct an idea of the standard Kurmanji – referring to Bohtan Kurmanji. The institutional imperatives of two language learning settings seem to impose the imagination of a “standard” language.

The semiotic processes of *iconization*, *fractal recursivity* and *erasure* enabled us to examine the beliefs of the HL learners and the ways in which these processes inform us about HL learners’ ideological positionings and identities. Furthermore, a fine-grained analysis of language use contributed to our understanding of how discourses are constructed, negotiated and resisted in the classrooms and how these discourses also link to participants’ identity positionings.

I demonstrated how Maraş Kurmanji is delegitimised by its own speakers and others. Through Elif’s narrative, I sought to examine how the dominance of Bohtan Kurmanji is constructed and the ways in which “us” and “them” are discursively constructed, and how participants’ religious and regional trajectories are implicated in their interactions and metalinguistic interpretations. Secondly, I showed how dominant discourses are contested, especially in teacher-pupil talk. The interaction between Yeter and Mikail in (5) shows how Yeter negotiates the institutional imperatives of language learning and resists changes to the phonological and morphosyntactic features of her variety.

The poststructuralist approach towards language and identity gears our gaze towards moment-to-moment practices of postmodern subjects, especially in urban settings. In many encounters I had during the course of this research, Maraş Kurmanji speakers expressed their fear of talking in the presence of what they imagined as “proper” Kurmanji speakers, namely Bohtan speakers. Their fear seems to be deeply rooted in their Alevi identities that are camouflaged with their regional identity. Since Labov’s (1966) seminal research, factors such as social class, gender (Trudgill 1972), region (Trudgill 1983) and age (Eckert 1998) have been widely researched in the discipline of sociolinguistics. However, religion has not captured the attention of variationist or poststructuralist sociolinguists until very recently.



The fact that Kurmanji, which is spoken in Maraş, Sivas, Malatya and Adıyaman – namely, the areas populated by Alevi – barely receives any attention from linguists who work on Kurds and their languages further contributes to its stigmatisation and marginalisation by its speakers and others. Although there are very few sociolinguists among Kurdish linguists, the lack of research on linguistic diversity shows which varieties are considered worth researching in the Kurdish linguistic market of research.

Although many participants in this study were activists who affiliated themselves with the Kurdish movement and saw Kurdish language as part of their Kurdish identity (Yilmaz 2016) and hence promoted Kurdish language learning.

As Schieffelin et al. (1998) argue:

movements to save minority languages are often structured, willy-nilly, around the same received notions of language that have led to their oppression [...] language activists find themselves imposing standards, elevating literate forms and uses, and negatively sanctioning variability in order to demonstrate the reality, validity, and integrity of their languages.

(Schieffelin et al. 1998: 17)

The resistance in the classroom interactions show how identities are discursively constructed and negotiated and thus not homogeneous and static. The classroom context shows how the notion of “standard” is negotiated in the context of Kurmanji language learning and how the dominance of the “standard” is reproduced.

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## Appendix: Transcription conventions

Based on Gumperz and Berenz 1993: 121)

..	pauses of less than 0.5 second
...	pauses greater than 0.5 second (unless precisely timed)
()	unclear word
(did)	guess at unclear word
[laugh]	nonlexical phenomena, both vocal and nonvocal, that interrupt the lexical stretch
< translate >	translated segments
{TR}	Turkish
{KR}	Kurdish
<u>underline</u>	extra emphasis
[...]	omitted text
<b>bold</b>	words and utterance of particular interest for the analysis (Rampton 2006)
((word))	Researcher’s comments