

Kurdish Language Class in New York: A Platform for Social, Political and (Inter)personal Engagement

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Abstract

Every country that encompasses Kurdistan faces extermination efforts, meaning that the Kurdish language has found refuge mainly in exile and has been associated increasingly with the Kurdish identity and with the political struggle of the Kurdish people. The present study looks at a very special case; a voluntarily-initiated Kurdish language class that takes place in the middle of Manhattan, New York, at a prestigious public university. We conducted interviews with 3 students and the teacher of the class to understand the dynamics within and beyond the Kurdish language class, the interplay of their political ideologies, as well as the intricate process of identity negotiation through language practices. Results indicate that through the language class, people are exercising the right to a language, the right to a culture and the right of a people. Participants are challenging and resisting established relations of power and transforming the educational space into a space of freedom.

Keywords: Kurdish, diaspora, agency, language class, identity

Resumo

O Curdo é uma língua que tem sofrido tentativas de extermínio e nos vários países que englobam a região do Curdistão. Por estar fortemente associada à identidade desse povo e à luta política por reconhecimento, a língua Curda tem luta por se manter viva e tem encontrado refúgio e expressão predominantemente em exílio. O presente estudo apresenta como estudo de caso um curso gratuito de Curdo para iniciantes, ministrado no coração de Manhattan, Nova Iorque, nas locações de uma universidade pública americana. Na pesquisa foram entrevistados três alunos e o professor do referido curso de Curdo para compreender a dinâmica em jogo dentro e fora da sala de aula, as interfaces com as ideologias políticas além do processo de construção identitária e de agência dos participantes em suas práticas de linguagem. Os resultados indicam que na sala de aula, os sujeitos estão exercendo o direito à língua, o direito à cultura e o direito de um povo de construir sua identidade pelo viés da língua. Nesta dinâmica, configuram-se estratégias de resistência a relações de poder arraigadas bem como estratégias de transformação do espaço educacional em um espaço de liberdade.

Palavras chave: Língua Curda; diáspora; ensino de línguas; identidade, agência.

Kurtayî

Zimanê Kurdî disa jî ji xwe re cîh û zimênanîn li xerfbiye dîtiye. Ev xebat li vir, li dozêkî gelek taybetî dinihêre; dersên zimanê Kurdî ji aliyê dilxwesta de pêk tê li

zaningehêkî gelî yê bi nav û deng li navbera Manhattan, NY'ê. Me bi çar xwendekaran re û bi mamoste re hevpeyvîn çêkirin ji bo fêmkirina dînamîkên di nav û derve dersa zimanê Kurdi, hev têkilkirina îdeolojiya wan a polîtîk hem jî xebitinek tevlihevî dewana nasnameyî bi reya pratîkên zimanî. Bi reya hin buna dersa ziman mirov pratîkê mafên zimanekî, mafên çandekî û mafên netewîkî pêk tînin. Beşdarvan sazûna têkildariyê hêz li hember hev dikin û li ber xwe didin û navbirî perwerdeyî bedilandin navbirî azadî.

Peyva kilîd: Kurdî, henderan, livbazî, dersa zimanê, aîdiyetî

Introduction

Kurdish is the 40th most spoken language in the world, among some 6000 to 7000 languages (Hassanpour, 2012). It has faced immense efforts of extermination and assimilation threats in every country in which Kurds reside (mainly Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria). Despite its large speaker population and territorial extension, the Kurdish language is highly dismissed in the international scholarship on language. Different dynamics play a role in this underrepresentation including, but not limited to, the oppressive policies of nation states in which Kurds live, the silencing of Kurdish activists, lack of a state or autonomous governance and the related lack of international recognition, de-legitimization efforts, linguistic heterogeneity of Kurdish varieties, the late transition of Kurdish into literature, and the division of Kurdish speakers into different geographic locations (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2012).

Despite unfavorable circumstances, Kurdish is striving to survive, and speakers are putting immense efforts into making it survive. The Kurdish language issue is important to analyze not only because it demonstrates a notable resistance against extermination efforts and monolingual nation state discourses, but also it is intertwined with the Kurdish liberation movement and has been a site of sociopolitical battle.

An informal and voluntarily-initiated Kurdish language class that takes place every Friday in the middle of Manhattan, New York City (NYC), at a prestigious public university, the Graduate Center of CUNY, offers rich material to analyze the role of Kurdish in its transnational context, and more specifically, the divergent meanings of Kurdish for different users. The language class includes learners from different social, linguistic, ethnic, political and ideological backgrounds. With our research, we aim to offer insights on the following research questions:

What makes a language such as Kurdish so essential to learners in diasporic contexts? What is its symbolic importance and relation with the Kurdish political movement from a distant reality? What different positionalities do speakers and learners from different backgrounds have in this class in relation to the language? What dynamics play within and beyond this classroom in addition to the stated purpose of learning the language itself?

By trying to answer these questions, this research is ultimately concerned with exploring two main issues. First, it aims to understand the capacity of languages such as Kurdish in areas that expand beyond language classrooms to invigorate various social and political platforms for their users. Second, this study attempts to understand how learners from different social, linguistic, ethnic, political and ideological backgrounds position themselves as pertaining to this minority language classroom. This paper also devotes special attention to the agency of language speakers and learners in language revitalization efforts in diaspora. Based on interviews with students and the teacher of the Graduate Centre of CUNY's voluntarily-initiated Kurdish language class, the study aims to discuss the complex interrelated issues around language, people's positionalities and identities, the interplay of their political ideologies and their sense of belonging. The diverse population of the Kurdish language class offers opportunities to understand the entangled relations of language, culture, politics, and the interconnectedness of these to identities and positionalities of learners.

Brief History of Kurdish Language Policy in Kurdistan¹ and Diaspora

Hassanpour (2012, p. 50) states that Kurdish is made up of at least four "geographic dialect" groups, namely: Kurmanji, Hawrami (Gorani), Sorani, and Zaza. As the author articulates, "this linguistic diversity was not perceived as a problem – in fact the coexistence of language varieties was a normal way of life – until the rise of Kurdish nationalism in the twentieth century. The dialects were not politically or socially hierarchized into, for instance, literary and spoken, standard and vernacular, official and non-official, urban and rural, or superior and inferior" (Hassanpour, 2012, p. 50). After the division of the land that was predominantly populated by Kurdish people into five different nation states in the early 1900s – Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Armenia – this linguistic diversity became increasingly complicated and the linguistic culture of Kurdish people went through a distinct transformative process in each of the countries, generally

by force and coercive measures, in addition to historical influences, naturalization into new national groups and modernization. Kurds in different countries used different alphabets ranging from Cyrillic to Arabic. Only the Sorani dialect received partial official recognition by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. Some standardization efforts took place for some varieties, but not for all of them. Thus, Kurdish in Turkey became influenced by the Turkish language and Kurdish in Syria and Iraq was affected more by the Arabic language. Kurdish took on a literary form in some areas and remained oral in others. All these situations have contributed to the further diversification of the Kurdish language. Unity or agreement regarding the choice of one variety among others to become the standard Kurdish language is a very difficult task, and has strong political connotations, rather than simply linguistic ones (Hassanpour, 2012).

The issues relating to this diverse Kurdish linguistic landscape is also reflected in the narratives of our interviewees and is experienced as a real difficulty for teaching and learning the language in many aspects. Linguistic variety and the lack of a standard Kurdish and a common alphabet make it hard to reach all Kurdish people or to decide which variety to use, since they all have limited utility on a large geographical scale. This diversity also restricts the amount of resources available to learn each dialect, since time and energy in developing materials is divided between several main varieties. The heterogeneity of Kurdish leads to more problems than mere practical and instrumental ones. The definition of different varieties also poses a challenge for Kurds because, for the most part, language is the cornerstone of the Kurdish identity. Some linguists have claimed that some varieties of Kurdish are not Kurdish at all, but rather languages on their own, a claim very much raised and supported in State discourses in those countries where the different varieties of Kurdish are spoken. This situation has put issues of identity at the fore for some Kurdish speakers. Hassanpour, Sheyholislami and Skutnabb-Kangas (2012) have argued that some linguists have been taking a pure linguistic approach to Kurdish by claiming that each regional variety is a separate language, which disregards the social realities of Kurdish people who traditionally lived a nomadic life and developed numerous local varieties of Kurdish, while continuing to identify with speakers of other varieties.

Assimilation practices in each country where Kurds live followed similar logic and resembled each other in many ways, yet differed in their intensity, timing, and means. None of the countries where different varieties of Kurdish are spoken gave any official recognition to the Kurdish language until very late in recent history, with the exception of Iraq, albeit this

recognition had few practical implications (see below). In Syria, Kurdish people had no political recognition, whatsoever, under the Baath Party rule until 2011, when the Syrian civil war erupted. Soon after, the Kurds mobilized themselves in their enclaves, defended themselves and claimed political autonomy in northern Syria (informally called Rojava, meaning West Kurdistan). They soon launched education in Kurdish language amidst war and desperate conditions, thereby fulfilling a long held desire (Massoud, December 4, 2015). In Iran, After the Islamic Revolution, Kurdish and other spoken languages were allowed to be the medium of instruction according to the new Constitution, but were never really allowed in practice. Kurdish was allowed to be broadcast under state control and religious texts could be translated into Kurdish for the promotion of Shiite Islam (Kurds are mainly Sunni Muslims), thereby serving a pragmatic purpose of subtle assimilation rather than being a legitimate attempt to recognize Kurdish language rights and sustain Kurdish speakers' linguistic culture (Hassanpour, 1991). Since 2014, Kurdish is allowed to be used in Iran in educational institutions, though not as the medium of instruction as the Constitution originally suggested, but as a second language elective class starting from high school and college.

Iraq, as we have mentioned, represents a distinct case in its Kurdish language policy in that it afforded the language official recognition relatively early on. However, it still parallels other countries where Kurdish is spoken in terms of the assimilationist nature of its policies. Kurdish was designated as a local language in Iraq and as an official language in the Kurdistan region under the British mandate in 1931 (Hassanpour, Sheyholislami & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2012). After the formation of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq in 1992, Kurds were allowed to have mother tongue education in their region. Kurds were granted more rights over their language after the 2003 Iraq war, during which the Kurdistan region expanded, more rights were granted generally, and life conditions improved (Hassanpour, Sheyholislami & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2012).

Turkey perhaps can be described as the most oppressive among the other states in terms of the scope and severity of its assimilation policies. Turkey, similar to other states, has historically not given any official recognition to Kurdish, but is different from others in that it has forbidden any forms of expression, including publishing, broadcasting, educating, and speaking in Kurdish. The most recent constitution created in 1982, after a military coup, clearly established the abolition of prohibited languages and threatened users with legal action. Historical Kurdish

city names and landmark places were changed into Turkish names by the force of state policies (Skutnabb-Kangas & Bucak, 1995). People could not name their children in Kurdish or use Kurdish letters until very late in 2012 (Hassanpour, Sheyholislami & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2012).

The conditions in 2016 with regard to the Kurdish language across the various countries where it is spoken are minimally different from those in earlier decades; there is little to no change in the policies of States to assimilate Kurds into dominant languages and cultures. Small policy changes or slight flexibility within strict law enforcements do not go beyond the intention of balancing geopolitical sentiments and do not embrace the idea of the linguistic self-determination of Kurds. Thus, we can conclude that any current small changes are a continuation of assimilation policies with a more liberal-looking face, and they do not address Kurds' desires and their plight for representation, recognition, and self-determination.

Along with the ongoing battle of Kurds to obtain linguistic self-determination in Iran, Syria and Turkey, Kurds in the diaspora also carry out efforts supporting this endeavor. In fact, Kurds in exile have contributed much more to the literature on Kurdish than Kurds in Kurdistan; most of the Kurdish literature has been published outside of Kurdistan (Galip, 2014). This is the result of varied intersecting factors such as greater freedom of expression in exile, governmental support, a great number of Kurdish intellectuals who have been deported from their countries of origin, as well as the exposure of Kurdish intellectuals to new ideas in exile (Bruisnessen, 2000). Kurdish organizations in exile play a central role in bolstering efforts in Kurdistan and in the nation states that divide Kurdistan.

Kurdish in New York

The migration of Kurds to America is quite a recent phenomenon and both because of its small number and wide territorial dispersion around the United States, there have not been many studies conducted on this phenomenon. The number of Kurds in the U.S. is only an estimate, and no official census has ever been conducted, particularly because Kurds are classified in the national category of the nation states they are coming from (Kurds from Turkey, for instance, are registered as Turks). While the total population of Kurds is documented to be 15,361 according to the 2006-2010 American Community Survey (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), different sources give very different numbers. Larger Kurdish communities can be found in Nashville, Tennessee

(more than 11,000 people) (Arnold, 2015), and mainly came from Iraq in the 1970s because of Saddam's war on Kurds. There are also Kurds in San Diego (more than 10,000 people) and smaller numbers of Kurds in Georgia, Washington (DC), Minnesota, and the New England area (Abdulrahman, September, 2009).

New York City, where our research takes place, presents a distinct case both because of the small number of Kurds and because of the absence of available work on Kurdish literature and language. Be that as it may, it is surprising to find a flourishing Kurdish language class in NYC. This Kurdish language class in NYC is also special because the group is extremely diverse in terms of age, gender, faith, nationality, immigration status of participants (some are short-term exchange students, some came to learn English, some are established, and some are undocumented) and their positionality with regard to the Kurdish movement. The class takes place at a prestigious public university in the city, yet it is not part of university's official curriculum. It is quite symbolic that the class is allowed to be conducted as a voluntary activity at a university in NYC, while the right to Kurdish language education is denied in most of the Kurdish homeland and in the majority of its educational systems.

Methodology

The Kurdish Class

Kurdish people in New York and New Jersey usually know each other and meet each other at events, concerts, protests (which happen quite frequently, especially to condemn Turkey's treatment of Kurds or to demand that the U.S. help Kurds in Syria). It was during these gatherings that Kurdish people encouraged Thomas (pseudonym), an American PhD student in linguistics, who is married to a Kurdish woman and knows some Kurdish, to initiate a Kurdish language class. Thomas states that even though he is still in the process of learning Kurdish and is not as good as other Kurdish speakers in the class, he was asked to teach because of his linguistic knowledge and his knowledge of written Kurdish. With the encouragement of his students, Thomas went ahead and asked the director of Middle Eastern Studies at The Graduate Center of CUNY, where he is a student himself, to reserve a room for two hours a week.

The class started in October, 2014. Only three Kurdish people came to the first class and thanks to the help of social media and other social networks, by the time the research took place

(November, 2015), the class was hosting about 36 to 40 people. About half of the class were of Kurdish origin and the other half were from various different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, including two Turkish, one Arab, two Persian, ten American, and one Brazilian student (the number and the composition of the group is constantly changing because of its voluntary nature and temporary status in NYC of many of the participants). The class benefits from the use of social media to promote its activities. A very active Whatsapp© group offers a platform to discuss linguistic as well as political issues related to the Kurdish issue. The class holds Kurdish film screenings a few times a semester, which generally have political content. Many people, especially Kurds and Turks, have close ties beyond the class and meet each other in protests and other events. Classes are usually mixed with language activities and cultural/artistic presentations like videos, songs, and even dances. Because of the inherent diversity of Kurdish language, which not only gives form to different varieties but also borrows from other languages, like Arabic or Persian, and because people attending the class come from those different language backgrounds, the class takes the form of a babel of languages. Although adopting a standard variety, Kurmanji, as the main guiding language for the class, the teacher frequently informs and values contributions and clarifications from the students in other languages and Kurdish varieties they might know.

Our research started as part of a larger project (see other contributions to this monograph) carried out within the Futures Initiative at the Graduate Center of CUNY. Our project consisted in different qualitative studies aimed at learning more about different linguistic communities within CUNY by going beyond the statistical data provided on speakers of different languages within the CUNY system. One of the authors of this article, who is herself Kurdish and has some command of spoken Kurdish, had previously attended a semester of the Kurdish class and therefore had some additional insight. We benefited from two methods to collect the data: a classroom visit to get to know the participants and observe the classroom atmosphere, and open-ended interviews. Besides the teacher, three other informants were approached and agreed to take part in the study: a Kurdish woman, an American woman and a Turkish man, all between the ages of 25 and 30. The criteria for choosing participants were based on representing a diversity of personal backgrounds and aspirations within the class. The interviewees were selected from different backgrounds believing they would provide a wide range of experiences and ways of relating to the subject matter. We announced the project in the class and made direct contacts to

seek voluntary participation. All interviewees were asked to sign a consent form to take part in the study and their interviews were recorded upon their agreement. The protocol for the interviews with the students addressed five main points: their personal background; their relationship with the Kurdish language; their reasons for attending the class; their expectations about their attendance; and their impressions about Kurdish language policies. The protocol for the interview with the teacher covered the same themes, albeit from his perspective as the teacher. The interviews were conducted with each participant individually and each one took about an hour and a half, with both of the researchers being present. All the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed by the researchers. Pseudonyms are given for each participant. The analyses followed a qualitative approach and the categories emerged from coding process by both researchers. As a discursive analysis, the interpretation of the participants' discourse is a dialogic confrontation between their points of view and the researchers', illuminated by the theoretical background of the study regarding the concepts of identity (Hall, 1996a, 1996b), agency (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004) and language and educational rights (May, 2012).

Introducing the Participants

Kurdish student Dilan is a 25 year-old female who suspended her university education in Turkey and came to the U.S. about two years ago for the purpose of learning English in the summer. Dilan is a speaker of Zaza, a variety of Kurdish, and she is also Alevi, a minority religious group in Turkey. She does not plan to go back to Turkey; she stated the reason to be the feeling of being a second-class citizen both in Turkey and the U.S., and since the living conditions in the U.S. are better than in Turkey, she stayed. Participating in Kurdish class, she stated, is the only moment during the week that is not open to any negotiation.

Ashley is a 29 year-old American female who works at New York University at the Center of Human Rights and Global Justice. She has always been interested in humanitarian causes and because of her interest in the Middle East, she has visited Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Turkey, spending the summer of 2015 in the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, where she learned some Sorani, one of the Kurdish language varieties.

Deniz is a 27 year-old Turkish male student from Istanbul, Turkey. His political opinion of being leftist drew his interest in the "Kurdish liberation movement," as he describes it. He left Turkey at the age of 19 to study an undergraduate degree in Economics and Social History in

Vienna. Currently, he is undertaking his PhD in Economics at the New School, in New York. He is also interested in Kurdish music and has a deep desire to be able to communicate with his Kurdish friends in their home language.

Thomas, the teacher, is a 29 year-old male, born and raised in San Francisco, California in a monolingual family. He knows a total of 10 languages including Farsi and German. While in China, he met his future Kurdish wife, who was also studying Chinese there. His interest in learning Kurdish came only afterwards due to his desire to communicate with his wife's family. He is doing his PhD in linguistics at The Graduate Center, CUNY.

While we call non-Kurdish interviewees 'outsiders', we do not mean to suggest that they are aliens, who have no interaction with the Kurdish movement other than the language itself. In contrast, some strongly embrace or identify with the Kurdish culture, people, and the movement. We use this title simply to clarify that they do not identify themselves as Kurdish or were not raised in a Kurdish community.

Identities and positionalities reconstituted through Kurdish language class

The Kurdish language classroom serves as a ground for a wide interplay of identities, both individual and social. Following Hall (1996a, p. 4) we understand that "identities are never unified and in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation". Moreover, identities are also subject to negotiation (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Negotiation can be performed in various ways and language practices are one way to define, modify, support and challenge recurrent identities. Languages "might not only be markers of identity but also sites of resistance, empowerment, solidarity or discrimination" (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004, p.4).

The diversity of the interviewees, and of their personal, social, political and historical trajectories, projects onto the process of negotiation of their identities on the basis of language. For the Kurdish student Dilan, the Kurdish language class was a place for *reclaiming* the identity that she felt was being dispossessed by the Turkish government. She expresses her feeling of

vulnerability because of language policies in Turkey and her sense of empowerment through this language class;

You can listen to a song in that language...You have all these feelings about this language but you cannot write and read things about this language. I really feel like some part of me is missing. After I attending Kurdish class, I can defend my identity in a more professional way (2016, November 22).

Dilan also stated that if Turkey did not forbid her language and if things were not the way they are now, she might not even insist on learning literary Kurdish while she is still trying to learn English and working long hours to support herself in NYC. Despite her exhausting schedule, she feels a sense of completeness by attending Kurdish class. The more she is prevented from maintaining her mother tongue, the stronger her Kurdish identity becomes. One can see the attempt by Dilan to restore her agency through learning Kurdish better.

Deniz, our Turkish participant, recognizes the importance and interrelatedness of language and identity of a person, a group or a nation. Considering the way that his own country is using the prohibition of the language as a means to submit all Kurds to the homogenizing forces of the state, he is very well aware of the function of the Kurdish class in helping Kurdish people sustain their identity. As an outsider, his attendance in the class is an expression of his *acknowledgement* of the Kurds as an “ethnic identity” as someone from the oppressor group. Deniz expresses his attendance as a way to show his solidarity. He acknowledges Kurds’ long denied identity, and speaking as an outsider – not any outsider but as a Turk – he also expresses very clearly where he stands, “I don’t want to speak of Kurds as a Turk, like they have to do this, they have to do that” (2015, November 25). He redefines his position as a Turk in this historical and political context in relation to the political condition in his country and in relation to the *othered* group, Kurds. For Ashley, the American student, the Kurdish class is also a platform to reaffirm her identity as it pertains to the ideals of her home culture. She states:

I am so American in my understanding of freedom of expression..., you know, this is such a deep part of me... like when I think of the idea of prohibit ... like making a language... (2016, November 24).

Her “Americanness” together with her belief in the freedom of expression is reaffirmed as she attends a class to support her ideals.

Thus far, the data suggest that language-learning choices are very much tied to the process of construction and negotiation of identities, not understood as an essentialist cultural identity shared by a people through a common history or language, in a stable and continuous way (Hall, 1996a), but rather, in the sense of identities that are negotiated in a performative, transitional and contextual way (Pennycook, 2010) and that are linked to social actions, such as the decision to study Kurdish.

Interrelatedness of Kurdish Politics and Kurdish Language

The Kurdish language has historically been a battleground for different nationalist agendas of the countries that split Kurdistan up, and therefore the Kurdish language has been inseparable from politics. As has been discussed already, the underlying goals in many states' policies, with regard to Kurds, has been to exterminate the language and culture, and to assimilate Kurds into the mainstream language and culture. States' changes to their language policies have been decided after detailed calculation of their possible nationalist repercussions, and every reaction from the Kurdish side has also been embedded in freedom and liberation politics. Therefore, any cultural and linguistic move, on both sides – the state and Kurdish groups – has a political component to it. In addition, cultural and linguistic rights have been the principal demands of Kurdish political movements in all countries.

All our interviewees expressed some political and ideological reasons when asked about their reasons for attending Kurdish class, in addition to their interest in the language itself. While they saw their roles differently in this political endeavor, they were, nonetheless, articulate in stating that their presence in the class decidedly conveys a political stance, mainly in the form of opposition to the oppressive policies of the states that aim to exterminate Kurdish. Deniz, the Turkish student, is very explicit in his perception of this intricate relationship between language and politics:

I want to learn Kurdish, I want to be a part of Kurdish speaking community because this is not a neutral ground. Kurdish has been prohibited. I am standing up against this oppression and if language is one of the means of this oppression, then I am standing against that specific mean of oppression (2015, November 25).

Thomas, the American teacher, defines himself as a pragmatic person and states that partially he approaches knowing the Kurdish language for its instrumentality to form relations

with family members from his wife's side. However, he added that through time, his relationship with Kurdish has become more and more political, as his leftist ideas have also taken firmer form. Thomas pointed to the possibility of language being appropriated by State apparatus for political advantages. Therefore, he believes that every Kurd should stand by their language and try to learn it because in the Kurdish case, it is precisely the language that is being used as a means of social control. He is very knowledgeable about Turkey's policies with regard to Kurds and he states the following:

There is also a danger because the more abstract Kurdish identity becomes, then it becomes about blood and feelings, as AKP (Justice and Development Party in Turkey) has shown how that can be appropriated as a means to shut down the actual Kurdish national movement (2015, November 26)

Thomas refers to the AKP party's getting a majority of Kurdish votes in the 2002 elections when it appealed to Kurdish people and expressed acknowledgement of Kurdish identity, but yet, restricted any radical undertaking when it came to the Kurdish language.

Within Kurdish politics, interviewees paid extra attention to freedom and emancipation from oppressive regimes, both of which have been main motives of the Kurdish political movement. All interviewees perceived language as a crucial right and believed that any abuse of this right should be protested against, and their attendance in this class also served this purpose. Interviewees linked language right to the freedom of Kurdish people and pointed to both its symbolic as well as its instrumental importance. Deniz reasoned that language rights and emancipation were closely intertwined and if language was used as a means of oppression by the states, then people should treat it as a tool to fight against that oppression and stick to learning it. He stated, "...wherever you are helping Kurdish language survive is helping Kurdish people emancipate in some sense..." (2015, November 25). Interviewees were very well aware of the emancipatory power of language and their attendance was also a means to contribute to the efforts of freedom; freedom to practice linguistic and cultural rights.

Positionalities of Outsiders: From Support to Solidarity

Our four interviewees provided us with rich diversified material especially because they came from very different ethnolinguistic groups and they all have different, though in some ways convergent, positionalities in Kurdish language class. This special case enables us to see things

from different perspectives. While by no means do we want to claim that a person from a certain background is representative of his or her entire social group, we do want to draw attention to the different stances that people may take in relation to a language depending on their history with that language as well as their own political and social identity' and positionalities. As Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004, p. 20) point out, "agency and choice are critical in positioning". The American student, Ashley, adopted a supportive stance with regard to the issues related to Kurdish language and policies:

I wanted to work supporting people who were doing good during the crisis... I always wanted to be a conflict resolver and to support people who are solving conflict and to try in some way to diminish the violence in the world and so in particular with this region (2015, November 24).

Her support arises as a feature of what she has previously defined as her American identity, which holds freedom as paramount. Furthermore, identities are constructed within discourse and discourse is a product of historical, political, ideological and social constructions (Hall, 1996b). Nationalist discourses in the United States portray the ideal that Americans have a role to play in worldwide conflicts and that they can be influential in helping other countries to solve their problems. Ideologies are intertwined with those discursive practices. Deniz portrays a different stance about the Kurdish movement from Ashley. When asked if he thought his learning Kurdish would help Kurdish people, Deniz stated;

No I do not think so. Kurdish struggle is strong enough. Kurdish people do not need my help, let's not define it in terms of help but solidarity but it is not help and Kurdish people do not need my help in that sense (2012, November 25).

While Ashley defines her role as a supporter, Deniz underlines that he is just in solidarity with Kurdish people and the liberation movement.

A very striking difference between Ashley and Deniz was the ways they tried to influence the Kurdish movement. Ashley envisioned that she could help the movement by going to the Kurdistan Regional Government and helping Kurdish people themselves. She had also previously worked in an NGO in the KRG in the summer. Differently, Deniz tried to help by working in his own community. He tried to work with Turkish people, his own community, to explain to them the Kurdish movement and the historical and social realities of Kurdish resistance. Deniz states:

When I say I have a responsibility, I do not mean this is a historical responsibility on my shoulders, so on, but like I try to do my best in order to convince Turkish people. All my friends live in western Turkey and relatives mostly bought the official Turkish ideology with whom I have been discussing for years (2015, November 25).

Thomas provides a very distinct case in his positionality because while being an American, he is married to a Kurdish woman and has been immersed in Kurdish culture and language and holds strong ties with Turkey and envisions a life there. Even though we classified him as an outsider, he usually diverged from this category by using an insider language. When asked about Kurdish people, he often used the word “we” including himself to refer to Kurdish people. To explain the importance of his language class, Thomas expressed:

...the classes are limited politically, ideologically, intellectually, and linguistically by its location, but we need this, it is better than nothing. If this was not happening, all of us would be worse off (2015, November 26).

His patriotic identification with the Kurdish movement is seen in the following statement:

On the language side that's sort of my play is that I'm trying to bring people, who for various reasons, are distant and bringing them a little bit closer, push them back to where they need to be (2015, November 26).

He also illustrates this position by using a deterministic language:

Increasingly being Kurd outside of Kurdistan makes you part of the left and this is dangerous, I am leftist of course, but the thing is the Kurdish national question is politically important by itself and engagement with that has to be on the terms of Kurdistan (2015, November 26).

Despite their possible claim to American national identity, Thomas differs from Ashley because he doesn't view himself as a supporter, yet he is also different from Deniz, who despite having his own political and ideological perspective, refrains from suggesting anything explicit for Kurdish people or using deterministic language.

As mentioned previously, these differences in positionalities are not simply differences in personalities, but more so are differences in conditions, relationships, contexts, and interactions, social and political identities, realities and histories that these people bring with themselves to the Kurdish language class.

Concluding Remarks

Bonny Norton (2000) defined the term *investment* to characterize the reasons and temptations that learners might have to dedicate themselves to acquiring a language, any language other than their mother tongue. “If learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital” (Norton, 2000, p.10). For all of the interviewees, the instrumental acquisition of the linguistic code is relevant as it will be the means to literacy and to a communicative social life with friends and/or within family. However, learning Kurdish is also an investment that feeds into cultural capital, which also creates a sense of collective identity.

In our aim to investigate the dynamics within and beyond the Kurdish language class, we shed light on the intricate process of identity negotiation through language-learning choices and practices. Agency and positionality are evoked by the participants’ adherence to the language class. Through Kurdish language, people are exercising linguistic rights, cultural rights and the right of a people. By coming along, people from different backgrounds, different political affiliations, and different ideological foundations, are challenging and resisting established relations of power.

Relying on Thomas’s (the Kurdish teacher’s) words:

to learn Kurdish as a non-Kurd, there is no pragmatic benefit, it is not gonna get you or you may even lose your job, you know what I mean.... (2015, November 26).

It may be true that knowledge of Kurdish is not going to get you a job. In fact, in some contexts, such as in Turkey, it might actually mean you lose a lot more than a job! But then, how can we respond to the question that Thomas himself leaves open: what reasons would someone have to learn Kurdish in NYC? As it concerns the group of students who participated in this study, the Kurdish language class is a platform for social, political and (inter)personal engagement. It has become an arena where identities are being negotiated through language learning choices and practices. It has become a space for freedom.

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