An Ascending Minority Language, Kurdish: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT--- *This study examines Kurdish language and its related problems that belong to the largest community as one of the minority groups after the declaration of Republic until late at this century. This paper also studies and points out the so called "oppressive policy" of the previous governments towards its minority groups. And further it discussed issues related to language ethnicity and assimilation based on data collected from interviews with three Kurdish students studying in London. Turkish is used as the medium of communication on their preference. Names have been changed in the text to protect anonymity, they are given other than real names. The participants come from Eastern Turkey where majority of Kurdish population dwell. This article also will demonstrate a linguistic perspective on minority language rights, language change and language shift in Turkey. However, this paper raises an awareness of cultural and ethnical prospect towards language use. Empirically, this work is aimed to uncover what is hidden and kept away from the minds through primary and secondary sources.*

Keywords--- Minority, ethnicities, cultures and languages
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1. INTRODUCTION

This study examines Kurdish language and its related problems that belong to the largest community as one of the minority groups after the declaration of Republic until late at this century. This paper also studies and points out the so called "oppressive policy" of the previous governments towards its minority groups. And further it discussed issues related to language ethnicity and assimilation based on data collected from interviews with three Kurdish students studying in London. Turkish is used as the medium of communication on their preference. Names have been changed in the text to protect anonymity, they are given other than real names. The participants come from Eastern Turkey where majority of Kurdish population dwell. This article also will demonstrate a linguistic perspective on minority language rights, language change and language shift in Turkey. However, this paper raises an awareness of cultural and ethnical prospect towards language use. Empirically, this work is aimed to uncover what is hidden and kept away from the minds through primary and secondary sources.

In this study, one of the minority languages (Kurdish language) will be focused, relating to nation building policy of the Turkish governments. Since the demostration of republic in 1923 , Turkey has been extensively and strictly employed its language policy not only to Kurdish people but also to other minority ethnic groups and their sub-affiliations. As Yavuz and Özcan (2006) states that the aim of Kemalism (Mustafa Kemal Ataturk,The first founder of Republic of Turkey after Ottoman, the ideology of the state, known as Kemalism) was to uniform a secular society and a uniformed, nation-state. Nation state policies were so successfully carried out in 1920s as Kurdish issue appeared but it seems in the present that the consequences are reversed by the effecting of international anti-nationalist resurrection (Bruinessen,1998). In the section below, the concept of assimilation will be introduced, discussed and examined through data collected.

Nation-building regimes have compulsory general education, obligatory military service and state controlled media. In Turkey the only accessible language was Turkish into the modern world by prohibition of minority languages (Bruinessen,1998). In comparing with the interview findings, which support the above mentioned ideas; the three speakers were asked why Kurdish was forbidden in Turkish schools in Turkey? Their responses were obviously different from one to another. Batir replied as (See the original Turkish text in Appendix [1]): [Political reasons, lack of civilisation, lack of mutual understanding, lack of human rights, unfounded fears.] Faruk gave even quite different answer to the same question [2]. - [Now, I can speak comfortably because I have more democratic friends who respect me.] and Yahya's response was even more different[3].

[There are many ethnic elements in Turkey. After Republic of Turkey founded, the issue had profound format by exhanging of Turkic people from Balkans to newly founded country. The founders defined the meaning of "ethnicity" under the same roof (shelter) as 'Turk'. Ethnic identities were externalized (The government turned a blind eye on ethnicities). In fact, they were successful too. But Kurdish people are appeared to be different on this issue, comparing to other ethnic elements. They live east and south eastern part of Turkey as well as having a well established and different culture. By implication, they are not melted together in the same pool as others. Besides, herein is seen the influence of Kurdish people who live in the neighbouring countries (Iran, Iraq and Syria). Therein as people speak Kurdish freely, this emerged the Kurdish community to bring their language foreground in Turkey.]

Faruk took an individual point by contrasting his response with two others, relatively more unique. Can we say that it has been better if he could have answered the question same as the others? This can be analyzed on the linguistics perspectives. Elphinston (1946) supports the third speaker by indicating that Kurdish people who live in Turkey was never free from fear to speak their own language and follow the traditions of their ancestors but may oppose to Faruk.

In Turkey minority languages and ethnicity is usually tied up with status planning, it brought forward corpus planning and language planning which was seen in M. Kemal's situation in 1932, he adopted Romanized writing system. This helped Ataturk planned the corpus. And it brought social change, therefore, status change into being (Fishman, 2006).According to Fishman (2006:22) 'language planning is sub divisible into two large components: status planning and corpus planning'. Why are language planning and corpus planning important in general? It might help status planning and strengthening the political statue in controlling written and printed language which is more likely controllable and rewardable by official units. According to Fearon and Laitin (2000) and Fishman (2006) there is not always a dominant group who keeps the state power and have right to access economic welfare and advancement is not like what we generally think. The power of hegemony over other social groups or minorities should carefully be considered by status planners. What Batir told that[4]:

[I think there is no ethnic difference between people in Turkey but there are people called elites who have occupied top positions in the government for years. The elites' unfair desires to safeguard their positions caused such problems.]

This is a multi-folded assessment about ethnicity and it has possible reasons, which this paper will also try to analyze. In Turkey minority language rights were banned, therefore the speakers of those languages have no opportunity to use their mother tongue at official domains, such as local banks, schools, local offices and social services and in the media (Crystal, 2003).

Turkey is a home to many ethnicities, cultures and languages. However, the use of separate languages and ethnical diversities has not been welcomed, encouraged and promoted in Turkey until recently. Turkey has a larger Kurdish population than any other state in the region. Yavuz and Özcan (2006:106) believe that 'there are three competing, sometimes overlapping, secular and Islamic trends in the structure of Kurdish ethno-nationalism. The first group is the secessionist PKK and its political outlets.
The second group known as "occasional Kurds" are well integrated with the state and its policies. They have no problems with the state. Their main goal is to define their status in the national society. The third group can be identified as Muslim-Kurds. They believe and stress Islamic values'. When they face with the choice of Turkish identity, they feel Kurdish and identify with religious rather than ethnicity. Hutchinson and Smith (1996:6) define ethnie as 'a named population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members'. In the interview the mınorıty language ethnicity in Turkey was explained as follows; Yahya described the term explicitly[5] - [Turkish is lingua franca. There is no minority language education in hand. It is what everyone learns from their parents. Namely, Turkish is systematicaly only available medium at schools.]

The law settled in 1934 aimed to assimilate the bearers of other cultures, primarily the Kurds, to Turkish culture (Bruinessen, 2000). What faruk stated considering the minority language ethnicity is [6]; - [It had been very tough until a decade ago. Thankfully democracy has started to apply in my country, too. I am not mistaken if I say that I no longer suffer any difficulties.] On this occasion, Crystal (2003) claims that it is possible for the world's languages that an important growth may one day emerge as a progressive consequence of the contemporary trend to recognize ethnic identities that supports the above statement. He also shows the new varieties of English as a consequence of language emerging status as world lingua franca. Batir made a different statement[7]; - [I think, it is exposed to injustice. It is not taught, printed, published and developed.] The policy of govermets towards its inhabitants should carefully be articulated. 'It is simultaneously the stigmatised language of an oppressed minority and a state-legitimated symbol of former national glory (Fishman 1972:44)calls the link with the glorious past' as cited in (Marr,2002:214).

Kurdish language divided into two main dialects. One and the most important one is Kurmanci. It is estimated that more than half of the population of Kurds who live in Turkey speak it. Second is Zaza. It is spoken 25th percent of the Kurdish community. The rest of the community speak the other dialects. In Europe, language courses were organized to develop the standartized Kurdish "Kurmanci" among its speakers (Bruinessen,1998) hence there was no place for the Kurdish language in Turkey. Bianco (2005:112) argues that writers, translators, poets and dictionary makers can impact on language directions more profoundly than governments, even for political and economic purposes. Both people and languages are various, their goals and desires are asserted too.

2. THE KURDS AND THEIR OWN LANGUAGE PROBLEMS WITHIN TURKEY.

'What is lost by the country when the country loses its languages?' (Fishman, 1994:71). If the question is modified for the minority languages, the result possibly will be the same as in Fishman (1994) has revealed to remind us; 'if you take it away from the culture, you take away its greetings, , its curses, its praises, its laws, its literature, its songs, its riddles, its proverbs, its cures, its wisdom, its prayers. The culture could not be expressed and handed on in any other

way' (Fishman, 1994:72). Language is a strong element to use for the purpose of ethnic nationalism. The bearers of those minorities may suffer for the compulsory language use as in the Kurdish issue in Turkey.

Turkish and neighbouring governments determined to assimilate (separately) non-Turkish, ethnic minorities. Because of fearing from large numbers of the Kurds in each country to apart or and stand against those of governments (Romano, 2002). Turkey and the neighbouring countries have been 'repressing almost any expressions of dissent towards the state, placed severe restrictions on the use of Kurdish' says Romano (2002:133). The only available language at schools in Turkey is Turkish, therefore Kurdish students have to learn and study all subjects in Turkish. Further studies on the current issue can be interpreted by exploring interviewees' discourses.

The all interviewees were asked "what were their first language problem that they remembered and how did they react against it? Here what Yahya stated that [8];

 [I think you are asking about problems that related to speaking Turkish. I did not speak Turkish untill I started primary school. That is why I did not understand what was happening around school in early days of the school. It is funny and also dramatic but I remember that I answered all my teachers' questions by adding my name first.]

Faruk, who often uses Kurdish among his words, said [9]; - [Of course, we had problems. For instance, Speaking Kurdish was forbidden when we were at primary school, therefore we could not tell our problems to anybody] He continued on talking about a memory he could not forget. ....?

Batir [10]; - [I remember being bullied and beaten at school because I was not able to speak Turkish fluently.] It can be concluded that the third interviewee faced discrimination either at individual or societal level. It may be the best answer to Fishman's question is as a conclusion from Crystal (2003) that how languages die or at the step of extinction by the loss of each domain, there is a loss of vocabulary, discourse patterns, and stylistic range. And people hardly find any-subject matter to talk about. That is to say, banning a language can cause its disappearance and attitudes towards language-loss depend on your perspective.

Kurdish people have always faced challenges trough out the last 70 years. And Kurdish people are the largest community without state on earth after Ukraine got its independence. Turkish authorities took part between Turcoman and Kurdish refugees. Authorities think that the Turk refugees from Balkans and the Kurd refuges from Iraq were treated differently and Turkey did not give them same opportunities (Bruinessen,1998).

Fearon and Laitin (2000) stated a hypothesis that ethnic or religious minority groups are more likely to fight with the state. This could be result of any but possibly the restrictions, especially on the use of a minority language, broadcasting and print media. Benjamins (2008) added the freedom of restrictions, particularly minority languages and religious ethnical identities in the eyes of the public. Turkey has begun to recognize cultural rights, cultural autonomy, and linguistic rights of Kurds. More importantly, Turkey started to recognize Kurds as separate people (Fuller, 2004). Before Turkey recognize its Kurds They were described as Elphinston (1946); Fearon and Laitin (2000); Fuller (2004); Bruinessen (2000); Yavuz and Özcan (2006); Scalbert et al (2006); Romano(2006) Kurds in Turkey were referred officially as Mountain Turks. The idea was that Kurds were Turks and that their language was Turkish was unacceptable for the human rights. Journalists and engineers began to promote such works, started of the Republican era and were carried on until the 1990s (Scalbert et al,2006).

3. ASSIMILATION

The only acceptable identity was Turkishness in Turkey until Erdogan (primer minister of Turkey) introduced nationalism by defining 'citizenship rather than "Turkish identity" as a supra-identity for both the Kurds and Turks in a speech in Ankara in August 2005' (Yavuz and Özcan,2006:111). In Turkey, state policies were successful assimilating those of Kurds who moved western part of Turkey. Some of the Kurds now consider themselves as Turks and speak Turkish as their mother tongue (Romano,2002). The authorities believed that massive migration will easily solve the Kurdish issue. In fact, The government were successful on occasions. Article 89 of Turkish Constitution states that 'no political party may concern itself with the defence, development, or diffusion of any non-Turkish language or culture; nor may they seek to create minorities within our frontiers or to destroy our national unity' (Entessar, 1989:133). According to Romano (2006) the state took control over education and media of cultural framing in the early stages of this process. However, language-planning decisions may suppress a language along with its community say Gibbons and Ramirez (2004). Romaine (2002) argues that minority language rights have not guaranteed its maintenance, which depends on native language speakers. Assimilation can take place at any level. Yahya was asked "What do you think about assimilation policies of the governments in Turkey? On what circumstances are you against it?" and here what he said [11]: - [Generally, assimilation takes place for political reasons. In my opinion, technically, if assimilation aims to exterminate a society by demolishing its language, therefore it has happened in some degree in Turkey. On the other hand, to say this we need to search whether Turkey pastures this policy. However, Kurdish was an endangered language in Turkey, until recently. The government took a different step. Now it can not be said that there is assimilation. At least you can not say that there is such a policy.] In my view of point, he thought optimistically with regarding to the present government's positive policy on ethnic minority languages, ethnic groups giving them their rights back, accepting their availability rather than previous governments. The following statement was made by Batir[12]: - [Yes, it is exposed to assimilation. I hope these inaccuracies will be rectified.] Batir clarifies the situation [13]:

[Yes. I think it is a natural response if someone is against the assimilation of his language. That's the case for everyone regardless of their ethnicity.]

4. EDUCATION

Education in Kurdish language was forbidden for many years. It is still a matter of fact that Kurdish people can not educate their children in their mother tongue at schools in Turkey. It is neither compulsory nor optional. Today, it is a dream of almost any Kurdish person to receive education in their mother tongue. After Turkey forbade Kurds to access education and media, Kurds looked somewhere else to reach their goals. A few European countries gave opportunity to the Kurdish immigrants to evaluate their language "Kurmanci", publish and broadcast. 'The Kurdish writers found much more stimulating environment in Sweden for developing Kurdish into a modern literary language' says Bruinessen (1998:45). Kurdish literacy courses were organised in various European countries to mobilize Kurdish national awareness. Further more they learnt to read and write in their mother tongue says Bruinessen (2000). Yavuz and Özcan (2006) stated the demands of current parties as is bilingual public education. Alternatively, the interviewees were asked to purify what is known-unknown to us: "Can you speak and write in Kurdish, if so, on what conditions you learnt Kurdish?" Yahya [14]:

[I can both speak and understand Kurdish. Because the only language spoken among my family members is Kurdish. But I can not say same thing for writing and reading because it should be taught at school. (sadly)] He has the same demands as Kurdish parties do. So it is a natural phenomena of every human being. Faruk [15]:

[I can speak but I can not write in Kurdish. I learnt Kurdish from my parents. My mother did not receive education so she does not speak any Turkish; therefore we always speak Kurdish in our home.] Batir[16]: [Yes. Kurdish is my mother tongue.]

Turkey started to permit broadcasting in Kurdish and language courses at . On the other hand, In Turkey many of the Kurdish people grow up at bilingual settings. 'Where two or more languages or varieties coexist in a hierarchical relationship' (Garrett,2005:327), code-switching may occur and as defined by Trask (1995:39) as follows; 'changing back and forth between two language varieties, especially in a single conversation. Sociolinguists use the term code to denote any identifiable speech variety, including both a particular language and a particular variety of a language'. Garrett (2005:337) argues that 'certain words and phrases, such as greetings and exclamations, may continue to be used as salient markers of ethnic identity and group membership' by having language shift observed. In fact, as Garrett (2005:354) remarks 'Language shift is never a simple or straightforward process, and is notoriously unpredictable.' Ethnic minority members at some points in their history, may prefer to give up their languages, and try to move closer to other dominant domains by adopting a common lingua franca (Crystal, 2003).

5. LEARNING & SPEAKING OF KURDISH

In Turkey, many Kurdish peasants do not speak Turkish, they speak Kurdish as their primary language. And there are some others who only speak Turkish as their mother tongue as one of the person I interviewed. Fishman (1994:71) asks that 'What is lost when a language is lost?' Code switching may occur if some one loses his language from passive, inactive used one to a new code where relationship between language and culture, education and status planning strongly take place with some other domains. Fishman (1994:73) indicates that people may tell you deeply meaningful things when they are positively ethnolinguistically conscious and he says that 'this is what they would lose if they lost their language'. Romaine (2002) supports the argument that the basic right of someone's education in his/her mother tongue is very important. In the case of Kurds, in Turkey where their language is not officially exist, a child may not understand the instruction of the official language. However, this may cause casualties, as seen in the first interviewee's utterances.

6. LANGUAGE PLANNING & LANGUAGE CHANGE AND LANGUAGE SHIFT

In Turkey language planning is always associated with formal, high-status use. Turkey has locked his doors until recently to minority languages and vaccinated Turkishness to any of ethnies, which was against the nature of human. Crystal (2003) describes language shift as is the formal term for the slow or sudden move from the use of one language to another. As in the Kurdish case many children either voluntarily or obligatorily need to change their language from Kurdish to Turkish especially at official environments which is the Lingua Franca to ethnic minorities. This may also cause language loss. On the case that language transmissions break down, there should be a serious loss of inherited knowledge says Crystal (2003). Akira Yamamoto distinguishes nine factors as cited in Crystal, 2003:143) 'that help maintain and promote the small languages

• the existence of a dominant culture in favour of linguistic diversity; a strong sense of ethnic identity within the endangered community;
  • the promotion of educational programmes about the endangered language and culture;
  • the creation of bilingual/bicultural school programmes;
  • the training of native speakers as teachers;
  • the involvement of the speech community as a whole;
  • the creation of language materials that are easy to use;
  • the development of written literature, both traditional and new;

• the creation and strengthening of the environments in which the language must be used.'

Turkey has started to 'reform its legal system to provide minority rights for the Kurds regarding on the basis of the Copenhagen criteria' (Yavuz and Özcan,2006:103). On the other hand, the nature of Kurdish issue has been changed and still changing by the help of Kurdish diaspora and revolution in communication.

(Bruinessen,2000). 'In a more democratic milieu where one can express one's identity freely and enjoys basic minority rights of freedom and cultural practice, People often learn by the example of others' (Romano,2002:149). The Kurds has been using modern equipments such as television, internet and radios to continue on demanding ethnic and cultural rights. In order to show power of media Cerulo (1997) attributes that television has encouraged the rise of hundreds of "minorities" in understanding of unfairly isolation. If broadcasting by television was permitted to the Kurds under the control and supervision of Turkey. It may have developed under the state's control. In contrast to this, it was banned and the Kurds had looked some other countries to find a way to tell the world that there were Kurds.

In most analyses Meyer et al (1997) find the nation-states as the results of their own histories and domestic forces as communal players. It may not be true alone itself domestic forces. There should be some external forces that attained or attain shaping the nation-states, which can be discussed at a large area. For instance; 'A state may fear of a film such as Braveheart, which was not allowed to be shown in the eastern part of Turkey for the idea of being an example to those of minorities whose rights were suppressed by considering parallel between their own situation and that of Scottish people's oppression at the hands of English' (Romano,2002:143).

The aim of the current study is not only to illustrate ethnic minority rights, demands but also their appealing at individual and societal level. Another primary aspect of this essay is to show that minority languages have been threatened to disappear starting at individual level. At this point of view Crystal (2003) supports my idea by indicating within a generation sometimes within a decade a healthy bilingualism can slip into a self-conscious semilingualism and then into a monolingualism which places that language close to extinction. In this essay oppression over ethnic minority languages and discriminated people are again examined at individual perspectives.

The findings of current study are various. One of the most important findings of this study is expressed by Bianco(2005:109) as cited in (Fishman 1972) 'Language often counts in nationalism'. The second finding of this study is that suppression of nation-state made the Kurdish people thirsty for information and it changed the current Kurdish issue in Turkey. The third finding of this study shows the natural and instinctive motion of these people who want to remain Kurd and speak freely their language. The fourth finding of this essay is nation building and secularization project and its implements. The following finding is another fact that language expresses its speakers identity and their history. Crystal (2003) points out the supra fact that it is not possible to be a member of a community if one does not speak its language. According to Crystal (2003) the cultural continuity can be possible despite language shift is another stunning fact. At the perspective of language shift, from a cultural point of view, what is lost and retained?

7. CONCLUSIONS

In Turkey, ethnicity is based on religion not on ethnic identities. For instance, Orthodox Christians are accepted as ethnic minorities as opposed to other parts of the world. For this reason, fundamental rights of ethnic minorities have been denied and ignored. At present, the minority rights are gradually recognized. The more people know each other, the more they understand each other. The more we respect each other, the less we will fight and the more happily we live. At Crystal's (2003:52) picture of power of language faculty and the value of knowing other languages; "It is every language that we are talking about. It is every dialect of every language that we are talking about. It is every emerging form of every language that we are talking about. As a source of knowledge, insight, and wisdom, the traditional nomenclature – language, dialect, creole, pidgin, patois, vernacular, koiné, lingo, etc. – ceases to be relevant; for any speech system, whether viewed by a society as prestigious or humble, educated or ignorant, pleasant or ugly, is capable of telling us something we did not know before."

Education, in your own language including universities, shoud be recognized. It is not important whether it is optional or compulsory. Sure it should be preceded at cultural background and the important thing is that it should not be politicized. In my view, the language of education should be optional. How minority language problems can be solved is summarized below.

• By letting people to have freedom of using their mother tongue without fear.
• Having liberty of choosing the language by which their children will be educated.

Everyone should have freedom of getting their children educated in their own language. A Kurdish child should have the right of being educated in his own language and so does a Turkish child. Because, I believe diversities are the values which make this world more meaningful and beautiful and hence they should be promoted. Consequently, Wee (2005:49) summed up that 'If the rights of minorities are respected, there is less likelihood of conflict.'

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