

The Kurds' Attitudes towards the Arabs and Learning Arabic Language: A Sociolinguistics Case in Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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Abstract

Research on attitudes towards particular ethnic groups and learning their languages has mushroomed in the field of sociolinguistics for last few decades. This quantitative study contributes to the related literature through investigating the Kurds' attitudes towards the Arab minority in Kurdistan region of Iraq and learning Arabic language. To achieve this goal, thirty-seven (28 males and 9 females) Kurdish undergraduate and graduate students in two different settings are recruited and given an attitude questionnaire to collect the necessary data. The results obtained from the statistical data analyses reveal that the Kurds have neutral attitude towards the Arabs and favorable attitudes toward learning Arabic language. Moreover, weak positive correlation is found between their attitudes towards the Arabs and learning their language.

Key Words: Attitude, Ethnic group, The Arabs, The Kurds, Language Learning, Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Introduction

Nowadays, mostly due to globalization and immigration, many countries in the world host various ethnic minorities with different cultural and language backgrounds. This cohabitation, however, may not always have a favorable and positive consequence. For instance, it has been believed that attitudes of majority communities towards other populations are a potentially significant determinant factor of social exclusion and welfare of ethnic minorities (Dustmann & Preston, 2001). Moreover, Krueger and Pischke (1997) concluded in their study that high concentrations of minorities are likely to lead to severe violence and hostile actions against minorities. Dustmann and Preston (2001), further, claimed that attitude of intolerance can cause corrosive behavior in a society. Therefore, the majority group is likely to be in conflict with the minority groups mainly because of “the fear of separatism, secession, country breakdown”, although this attitude is covert and not shown explicitly (Protsyk, 2008, p. 2).

This phenomenon is likely to be true in the Kurdistan region, a Kurdish dominant region in Iraq. In the past few years, due to the ongoing violence between the ethnic and religious communities in Iraq, and current terrorist attacks by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), thousands of Arabs from the south and middle of Iraq have fled to Kurdistan region to find safe shelter. This mass migration has made the Arabs to start becoming the dominant minority in the region, among Turkmens, Christians and Assyrians who have been living peacefully with the Kurds in the region for decades. Moreover, many of these Arabs have bought houses and opened business centers in the major cities of the region, which is a clear indication of staying in the region permanently. One of the dark sides of this phenomenon, however, is that they are providing job opportunities mostly for Arabs, and knowing Arabic language is the major requirement for the Kurds to find a place in their business, which seems to be a potential threat for the Kurdish identity and language. Although this situation has created tensions among the Kurds, and they have recently reflected on the media and social websites, it is not verified by research in the region. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct research on what attitudes the Kurds have towards the Arabs living in Kurdistan region of Iraq, and learning their language so that the government takes necessary actions to prevent potential ethnic conflicts in the region and protect Kurdish language.

Attitudes and Ethnicity

The notion of “attitude”, considered as a key concept in social psychology (Schwarz & Bohner, 2001), has been defined from various perspectives throughout history. In the early years of the last century, for instance, Allport (1935) described attitude as “a mental and neural state of readiness” that is systematically arranged through experience and has a direct impact on the individual’s response to “all objects and situations” (p. 810). In addition, Krech and Crutchfield (1948) expanded Allport’s definition by adding that attitudes are not only organized by experiences, but also by an individual’s motivational and emotional processes related to his/her world. In the

past few decades, furthermore, the concept of “attitude” has gained more characteristics in a way that it is defined as “likes or dislikes” (Bem, 1970, p. 1) about an aspect and “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993, p. 1), and it is “highly context-dependent” (Schwarz & Bohner 2001, p. 2). Stemming from these definitions, it can be inferred that “attitude” is a response which is mainly shaped by an individual’s experience, motivation, emotion, and evaluation to a particular aspect in his/her world.

People’s attitudes towards a particular ethnic group can be understood from three major constituents, namely, their beliefs, behavior orientation, and affective factors (Jackman, 1977). Beliefs about an ethnic group can be both positive and negative. However, Jackman (1977) believed that beliefs about an ethnic group are usually attitudes denoting antipathy toward the ethnic group. He, moreover, claimed that an individual holds such negative beliefs about an ethnic group because he/she experienced undesirable and unattractive quality from the group, which created a stereotypical nature to everyone associating with the group. Concerning behavior orientation, Jackman (1977) stated that behavior orientation involves much more than beliefs about an ethnic group, which I think the behavior is perhaps to be seen in the individual’s overt ideological response and/or maybe physical response to the ethnic group due to holding unfavorable belief about the group. Finally, affective factors can be related to feelings and motivation that an individual has toward a particular ethnic group, and these factors lead the individual to have positive or negative attitudes towards the group. It is worth noting, moreover, that affective factors seem to be temporary and changed in response to fluctuations in an individual’s emotions and motivation. Beliefs, in contrast, tend to be permanent and difficult to change.

Attitudes and Language

Attitudes towards learning a second language have been a considerable topic of research in the domains of applied linguistics and social psychology for decades (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dornyei, 1994). Generally, attitudes towards a language are considered as the feelings that people have about their own language and the language of others (Crystal, 1997, p. 215). Although in the literature there are different viewpoints to the concept of attitude in relation to language learning, most of them have been provided based on two theoretical approaches, the behaviorist and the mentalist. Attitudes from the behaviorist perspective are basically investigated through observing individuals’ responses to certain languages; while the mentalist approach sees attitudes as an internal, mental state, which can trigger certain forms of behavior (Appel & Muysken, 1987).

In the related literature, there is a considerable amount of research on attitudes towards different languages. Starks & Paltridge (1996), for example, have confirmed that there is a close relationship between learning a language and the attitudes

towards the language. Moreover, Karahan (2007), after investigating 190 secondary students in Turkey through using a questionnaire, concluded that the participants do not take active steps to learning English mostly because they do not have positive attitudes towards the English language. In addition, Malalla (2000) conducted a study to investigate Kuwaiti students' attitudes and motivation towards learning English as a foreign language in Kuwait. She recruited 409 undergraduate students from different departments from one of the universities in Kuwait, and administered a questionnaire to collect the necessary data. One of the major results of the data analysis revealed that Kuwaiti undergraduate students have positive attitude towards learning English and native speakers of English. In another study, Aladdin (2011) examined the questionnaire given to 207 non-Muslim Malaysian undergraduates studying Arabic language in one of the national universities of Malaysia to explore their attitude and motivation to learning Arabic as a foreign language. The results of the data analysis reported positive relationship between the participants' attitudes towards Arabic native speakers and learning their language since they have moderate positive attitude to learning Arabic and Arabic native speakers despite having very limited contact with the Arabs.

It can be inferred from the aforementioned studies that the attitude people hold towards a particular ethnic group is positively connected to the desire of learning their language. In other words, the participants in the previous studies showed positive attitude towards learning a foreign language because they had desirable attitude to the ethnic community who use that language. These studies, moreover, have been conducted in different contexts and investigated various languages and ethnic groups. However, to the best of my knowledge, there is no study in the literature investigating the attitudes towards the minority Arabs and learning their language in Kurdistan region of Iraq. Since attitudes are context-dependent and based on people's experience, this study is most likely to be an invaluable contribution to the field by examining Kurdish people's attitudes towards the Arabs and learning Arabic language in a new context, Kurdistan region of Iraq.

The Present Study

This quantitative study probes into Kurdish people's attitudes towards Arab community and learning their language in Kurdistan region of Iraq. More specifically, it aims to address the following research questions:

1. What are the Kurds' attitudes towards Arab people living in Kurdistan region of Iraq?
2. What attitudes do the Kurds hold towards learning Arabic language?
3. What relationship does exist between the Kurds' attitudes towards Arab people and learning Arabic language?

Instructional Setting and Participants

Participants of this study are chosen from two different settings, Eastern Mediterranean University (EMU) in North Cyprus and two public universities in Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Thirty-eight undergraduate and graduate students, twenty-seven from various departments in EMU and eleven from different majors in KRI universities, are recruited to participate in the study. Among them, twenty-eight students are males and nine students are females who have enrolled in BA (n=9), MA (n=25), or PhD (n=3) studies in departments like English Language Teaching, Civil Engineering, Pharmacy, Computer Engineering and Political Science. Moreover, the age range of the undergraduate and graduate participants is (19-21) and (22-35), respectively. It is also worth noting that the selected participants have come from various provinces of KRI, including Erbil (n=12), Slemani (n=23), Duhok (n=1), and Kirkuk (n=1). The reason for choosing these participants is mostly that there are many Arabs living in their provinces and they have had contact with these Arabs for many years.

Research Instrument

The main instrument for collecting the research data is a questionnaire (see Appendix 2), which is adapted for the purpose of this study from Gardner's (1985) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery. The questionnaire consists of two major sections; the first section comprises of 11 items aimed to investigate the participants' attitudes towards the Arabs living in KRI. The second section, on the other hand, includes 10 items designed to explore the participants' attitudes towards learning Arabic language. Furthermore, the items in both sections are designed based on 5-point Likert-scale ranging from (1 = Strongly Agree) to (5 = Strongly Disagree). In addition, the questionnaire is tested for reliability and has the Cronbach Alpha of (0.74), which proved to be reliable for data collection since Hudson (1991 cited in Krysik and Finn, 2013) claims that the Cronbach Alpha of any research scale in order to be reliable must be at least (0.60).

Data Collection Procedure

The process of data collection starts with gaining the participants' consent through giving them the consent letter (see Appendix 1) for participation. After getting consent from those who had the tendency of participation, the questionnaire is distributed in two different ways. First, those participants who study at EMU are contacted personally and met in their convenient time. Moreover, they are provided with the hard copy of the questionnaire and asked to fill-in the questionnaire in at most one hour. Second, concerning those participants studying in KRI, the questionnaire is sent to their Facebook® account and asked to complete it in their convenient time. It is worth mentioning that instant and virtual help, if needed, are provided for both groups of the participants regarding the way of completing the questionnaire and having difficulty in understanding the items. Finally, the returned questionnaires are checked for completeness – the incomplete ones are disregarded – and the process is finalized.

Data Analysis and Findings

The main goal of the study is to explore Kurdish people's attitudes towards Arab community and learning their language in Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI). To address this issue, 21 variables representing the items of the questionnaire are created in the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) program. To answer the first research question, which deals with the Kurds' attitudes towards the Arabs living in KRI, descriptive statistics, a component of SPSS program, is run and it yields the following results:

Table 1: Attitudes of the Kurds towards the Arabs in KRI

Attitude Items	No.	Percentages			Mean	SD
		SA & A	N	SD & D		
1. The Arabs are very sociable, warm-hearted and hospitable.	37	41	3 8	21	2.67	1.0 5
2. I would like to know more Arabs.	37	62	2 4	14	2.40	0.9 4
3. The Arabs add a distinctive flavor to the Kurdish culture.	37	19	3 2	49	3.32	1.0 0
4. Most Arabs are so friendly and easy to get along with that Kurdistan region is fortunate to have them.	37	57	2 9	14	3.27	1.0 4
5. The Arabs are considerate of the feelings of others.	37	22	4 3	35	3.16	1.1 4
6. I have a favorable attitude towards the Arabs.	37	19	5 4	27	3.13	0.7 8
7. The more I learn about the Arabs, the more I like them.	37	30	2 4	46	3.10	1.0 4
8. The Arabs are trustworthy and dependable.	37	16	4 3	41	3.37	1.0 0
9. I feel comfortable living in the Arab neighborhood.	37	8	5 4	38	3.35	0.9 1
10. The Arabs are an important minority in Kurdistan region, and the government should protect them.	37	49	3 2	19	2.70	0.9 6
11. I think that the Arabs are a potential threat for Kurdistan region.	37	46	3 2	22	2.64	1.0 3
					Average	Mean

Score 3.01

Mean: 1=Strongly Agree (SA), 2=Agree (A), 3=Neutral (N), 4=Disagree (D), 5=Strongly Disagree (SD)

It can be inferred from (Table 1) that the average mean score is 3.01, which denotes that the Kurds have neutral attitudes towards the Arabs living in KRI. Although most of the Kurds believe that the Arabs are sociable and warm-hearted (%=41, $M=2.67$),

and want to know more Arabs (%=62, $M=2.40$), they think that the Arabs do not add a distinctive flavor to the Kurdish culture (%=49, $M=3.32$). Moreover, another considerable result is that although most of the Kurds agree that the Arabs are important minority in KRI and the government should protect them (%=49, $M=2.70$), they still believe that these Arabs are a potential threat for KRI (%=46, $M=2.64$).

Concerning the second research question, which is about the attitudes the Kurds have towards learning Arabic language, the results of the descriptive statistics report the following results:

Table 2: Attitudes of the Kurds towards Learning Arabic Language

Attitude Items	No.	Percentages			Mean	SD
		SA & A	N	SD & D		
1. Arabic language is worth learning.	37	76	5	19	2.21	1.22
2. Arabic language should be a compulsory subject in school programs in Kurdistan region.	37	51	30	19	2.54	1.04
3. Learning Arabic is an exciting experience.	37	76	21	3	2.05	0.74
4. Everyone in Kurdistan region, regardless of their ethnicity and faith, should learn Arabic language.	37	51	32	17	2.51	0.93
5. I plan to learn as much Arabic as possible.	37	70	16	14	2.16	1.06
6. I think that Arabic is one of the important languages in the world.	37	78	14	8	2.02	0.95
7. If Arabic is an optional subject in school, I will definitely take it.	37	48	38	16	2.64	0.91
8. I like learning Arabic because I like Arab culture.	37	21	27	52	3.37	1.00
9. In Kurdistan region, knowing Arabic language is necessary for finding a job.	37	51	32	17	2.62	0.89
10. Arabic language is easy to learn.	37	43	32	25	2.72	1.09

Average Mean Score 2.48

Mean: 1= Strongly Agree (SA), 2 = Agree (A), 3 = Neutral (N), 4 = Disagree (D), 5 = Strongly Disagree (SD)

The results of data analysis show that the Kurds have positive attitude towards learning Arabic language, since the average mean score of all items is 2.48. Furthermore, the majority of the participants believe that Arabic language is worth learning (% = 76, $M = 2.21$) and is one of the most important languages in the world

(% = 78, $M = 2.02$). Moreover, most of the Kurds participated in this study have the intention to learn Arabic language in the future (% = 70, $M = 2.16$). In addition, they also agree that Arabic language should be a compulsory language in the school programs in KRI (% = 51, $M = 2.54$) and everyone in the region should learn the language regardless of what ideology he/she has and to what ethnic group he/she belongs (% = 51, $M = 2.51$). One of the considerable finding, however, is that the majority of the Kurdish participants disagree with the belief that they want to learn Arabic language because they like the Arab culture (% = 51, $M = 3.37$).

Regarding the last research question aimed at exploring the relationship between the Kurds' attitudes towards the Arabs in KRI and learning the Arabic language, the collected data is analyzed through using Pearson's correlation, which is a constituent of SPSS program. Before running Pearson's correlation, the variables representing the items in each section are statistically computed to get the average mean scores for the variables of each participant. From this computation, in addition to the already existing 21 variables, two other separate variables are created that represent the participants' attitudes towards the Arabs and learning Arabic language. Finally, these two variables are analyzed to explore the correlation between them; the analysis reveals the following results:

Table 3: Correlations between Attitudes towards the Arabs and Learning Arabic Language

		The Kurd's Attitudes towards Learning Arabic Language
The Kurds' Attitudes towards the Arabs Living in KRI	No. Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	37 0.3* .03

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

The results in (Table 3) show that there is a significant positive relationship between the Kurds' attitudes towards the Arabs living in KRI and learning their language, which Arabic ($r = 0.3$, $p = 0.03 < 0.05$). However, this correlation is relatively weak because the Pearson correlation value is 0.3, which is close to zero. This entails that changes in the Kurds' attitudes towards the Arabs may not guarantee the changes in their attitudes toward learning Arabic language.

Discussion of the Findings

The study aims to examine the Kurds' attitudes towards the Arabs living in KRI and learning Arabic language, and to explore what relationship exists between these two variables. The results of the data analyses report that most of the Kurds in the study have neutral attitudes towards the Arabs in the region. Although the Kurds hold some positive attitudes towards the Arabs, such as protecting and sheltering them, they still believe that these Arabs do not add a distinctive color to the Kurdish culture and are considered as a threat for the future of KRI. This belief may have mostly resulted from the historical conflicts between the Kurds and Arabs in the region. For instance,

the feelings of animosity toward Saddam Husain's oppressive regime in Iraq may have had a key role in leading to disinterest and neglect to the Arab community and forming fossilized social ideology toward the Arabs. Another factor that fuels this negative attitude is likely to refer to the current terrorist group, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) tensions in the region, who are mostly Arabs and have recently killed and executed many Kurds, Yezidies, and Kurdish fighters known as Peshmarga. Therefore, the Kurds in the region have started to form a stereotypical belief towards the Arabs and seemed to generalize such belief over all Arabs in KRI and Iraq. These possible factors have been also supported in the previous literature. For instance, Allport (1935), Krech and Crutchfield (1948), and Jackman (1977) believe that people's attitudes are mostly formed as a result of their experience and people hold negative beliefs about or attitudes towards an ethnic group because they experienced undesirable and unattractive quality from the group, which created a stereotypical nature to everyone associating with the group.

To conclude, the Kurds have neutral attitudes towards the Arabs in KRI mostly because they are overwhelmed by the historical dominant ideologies and stereotypical beliefs about the Arabs. Moreover, they also have strong willingness to establish cultural unity and peaceful cohabitation, and maintain their conventional hospitality with the minorities in KRI. Therefore, they are standing between these two different emotions and are undecided.

On the other hand, the results of the other part's data analyses reveal that most of the Kurds have a positive attitude towards learning Arabic language. This, indeed, shows that although the Kurds hold neutral attitude towards the Arabs, they still believe that learning Arabic language is useful and worth learning. I believe this positive attitude is mostly attributable to two major reasons. First, Arabic language along with Kurdish language are the two official languages in Iraq, and since KRI is still part of Iraq, learning Arabic is thought to be necessary in the region. Second, nowadays in KRI many companies and business centers require knowing Arabic language from those who apply for a job in these places. Consequently, it can be inferred from this reason that despite not having a strong attitude towards a community, someone may learn the language of that community for materialistic purposes or he/she may have instrumental motivation to the target language. This claim is also supported by one of the findings in this study that the majority of the Kurdish participants report that their preference for learning Arabic language is not related to their favorable attitude towards the Arab culture.

This argument leads to the last finding of the study, which aimed to explore the relationship between the participants' attitudes towards the Arabs and learning Arabic language. The results of the data analysis show that there is a weak positive correlation between these two variables. This entails that changes in attitudes towards one of the variables may not guarantee the change in the attitudes towards the other. This finding, indeed, is in conflict with that of some related studies in the literature. For example, the studies of Malalla (2000) and Aladdin (2011) conclude

that there is a strong positive relationship between attitudes towards a particular community and learning their language in a way that the more positive attitudes someone has toward an ethnic group, the more preference he/she shows to learning the group's language, and vice versa. Thus, attitudes are verified to be context-dependent.

Limitations of the Study

The present study seems to have two major limitations. First, a small number of Kurdish people participated in the study; this shows that generalizing the results of the study to all Kurds in KRI may not be reasonable. If more Kurdish people from all parts of the region participated, the results would be more reliable for generalization. Second, this study employed only one sort of data collection, which is quantitative, through using a questionnaire. If other method of data collection such as interview was used, more reliable results would have been obtained. Therefore, replicating such study in the future, considering these possible limitations, will contribute more significantly to the related existing literature.

Conclusion

The relationship between language and ethnicity has been a major topic of discussion in the field of sociolinguistics. The present quantitative study investigates the attitudes of the Kurds towards the Arabs living in Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and learning Arabic language, and explores the correlation between these two different attitudes. The necessary data is collected through administering a questionnaire to 37 undergraduate and graduate students studying at either Eastern Mediterranean University in North Cyprus or two public universities in KRI. The results of the data analyses report that the participants hold neutral attitudes towards the Arabs, and have favorable preference to learning Arabic language. Additionally, weak positive correlation is found between the participants' attitudes towards the Arabs and learning their language. It is, thus, recommended that a major possible way to fade the unfavorable attitudes towards ethnic minorities is to increase collaboration between the ethnicities and create chances for providing living experience through bringing social contact.

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Appendix 1

Participant Consent Letter



Eastern Mediterranean University
For Your International Career

Faculty of Education
Department of ELT
PhD Program, ELTE

Consent for Participation in Research

Research Title: The Kurds' Attitudes towards the Arabs and Learning Arabic Language: A Sociolinguistic Case in Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Dear participant,

You have been asked to voluntarily participate in this research study about the attitudes towards Arabs living in Kurdistan Region of Iraq and learning their language. If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to fill-in a questionnaire specially designed to collect data for this study. When participating in this study, you will not receive any type of payment, credit, or grade. Your responses to the questionnaire will be kept confidential, and used only for this study. Once the results are ready, you can have a copy of them if you want so.

In case of having any questions about the study prior, during or after your participation, you can contact the researcher [Hawraz Qader Hama] at hawraz.hama@gmail.com or on (+90 533 880 0807).

You have been informed about the purpose and procedure of this study, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to read this form and ask questions before you sign, and told that you can ask questions at any time. By signing this form, you voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Thank you very much for your participation.

Your name and signature

..... Date:

Appendix 2
The Questionnaire

Gender: Male Female Age:

Department.....

Which governorate do you live in? Hawler Slemani Duhok Halabja Kirkuk

Current Degree Enrollment: Baccalaureate Master Doctorate

1. Attitudes towards the Arabs living in Kurdistan region of Iraq:

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	The Arabs are very sociable, warm-hearted and hospitable.	1	2	3	4	5
2	I would like to know more Arabs.	1	2	3	4	5
3	The Arabs add a distinctive flavor to the Kurdish culture.	1	2	3	4	5
4	Most Arabs are so friendly and easy to get along with that Kurdistan region is fortunate to have them.	1	2	3	4	5
5	The Arabs are considerate of the feelings of others.	1	2	3	4	5
6	I have a favorable attitude towards the Arabs.	1	2	3	4	5
7	The more I learn about the Arabs, the more I like them.	1	2	3	4	5
8	The Arabs are trustworthy and dependable.	1	2	3	4	5
9	I feel comfortable living in the Arab neighborhood.	1	2	3	4	5
10	The Arabs are an important minority in Kurdistan region, and the government should protect them.	1	2	3	4	5
11	I think that the Arabs are a potential threat for Kurdistan region.	1	2	3	4	5

2. Attitudes towards learning Arabic language:

1	Arabic language is worth learning.	1	2	3	4	5
2	Arabic language should be a compulsory subject in school programs in Kurdistan region.	1	2	3	4	5
3	Learning Arabic is an exciting experience.	1	2	3	4	5
4	Everyone in Kurdistan region, regardless of their ethnicity and faith, should learn Arabic language.	1	2	3	4	5

5	I plan to learn as much Arabic as possible.	1	2	3	4	5
6	I think that Arabic is one of the important languages in the world.	1	2	3	4	5
7	If Arabic is an optional subject in school, I will definitely take it.	1	2	3	4	5
8	I like learning Arabic because I like Arab culture.	1	2	3	4	5
9	In Kurdistan region, knowing Arabic language is necessary for finding a job.	1	2	3	4	5
10	Arabic language is easy to learn.	1	2	3	4	5

Adapted for this research from Gardner (1985)

Thank you very much for your participation!

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CYPRUS.