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# Towards a dialectology of Southern Kurdish: Where to begin?

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**Abstract:** This contribution provides an overview of the current state of knowledge on the dialectology of Southern Kurdish (hereafter SK). The introductory paragraphs discuss the concept of SK, survey existing sources and briefly address core issues of terminology. The bulk of the study reviews Fattah's (2000: 9) proposed dialect classification, and complements it with the evaluation of language data from older sources, the author's own research in Kermānshāh Province and other documentation activities recently carried out in the SK-speaking area, sketching possible directions for future research.

## 1 What is Southern Kurdish?

Despite a growing scholarly interest in SK dialectology, SK vernaculars are still among the least documented contemporary Iranian languages and suffer from having too long been relegated to the fringes of linguistic research.<sup>1</sup>

SK can be defined as a bundle of closely related vernaculars, spoken as mother tongue by a minority of the Kurdish-speaking population,<sup>2</sup> mostly living at the southernmost periphery of the core Kurdish-speaking region of the Middle East.

The area where SK is predominantly spoken is rather wide and almost completely included within the borders of present-day Iran: As shown in Figure 1, it stretches (north to south) from the county of Qorve (Kordestān Province),

<sup>1</sup>I wish to thank the anonymous reviewer, later revealed as Erik Anonby, for contributing with punctual suggestions and criticism to the improvement of a previous version of this paper. Of course, I bear responsibility for all the remaining errors and shortcomings.

<sup>2</sup>Figures close to three million people have been proposed (Fattah 2000: 4), but as the reviewer pointed out these include Laki speakers and are likely to be overstated.

to the counties of Ābdānān and Dehlorān (Ilām Province), in the north-central part of the Zagros mountain range. The SK domain also includes a narrow stretch of land on the western side of the Iran-Iraq border and reaches, to the east, the Iranian county of Tuyserkān (Hamadān Province). The SK-speaking enclave of Bijār, located in a mainly Central Kurdish (hereafter CK) linguistic milieu,<sup>3</sup> represents the northernmost outpost of this dialect group.

The region concerning us here is characterized by intricate linguistic geography, prevalent multilingualism and extensive language contact, due to the historical presence, alongside the majority SK-speaking population, of communities speaking other Iranian (i.e. CK, Gorāni, Laki, NLori, Persian<sup>4</sup>) and non-Iranian (i.e. Neo-Aramaic, Turkic and Arabic<sup>5</sup>) languages and dialects. Language variation often parallels the rifts traced by religious and/or ethnic affiliations, which need to be carefully looked into when accounting for the complex distribution and multifaceted interaction between different vernaculars within the community of speakers.

SK has never been subjected to processes of language standardization and planning, nor does it boast a long written literary history.<sup>6</sup> These circumstances have hindered the emergence of a prestigious normative supralect, ensuring the permanence of a globally high level of dialectal heterogeneity. Even today, SK varieties are only rarely written<sup>7</sup> and their use has remained

<sup>3</sup>CK (i.e. Sine'i varieties, cf. De Morgan 1904; Christensen & Barr 1939: 198–234) is the majority language west of the SK enclave of Bijār, cf. the language map of Kordestān Province in Anonby & Taheri-Ardali, et al. (2015–2019).

<sup>4</sup>In addition to Sine'i (cf. Footnote 3), so-called 'Southern Jāfi' varieties of CK (Fattah 2000: 3) are spoken in south-west Kordestān Province, north-west Kermānshāh Province and in adjoining areas of Iraq. Gorāni/Hawrāmi dialects are mainly spoken in the Awrāmān region, on the north-western tip of Kermānshāh Province, and adjoining areas of Iraq. Related Gorāni vernaculars are also found in other localities of Kermānshāh Province (cf. Mahmoudveysi & Bailey 2013: 2). Laki and NLori varieties are spoken further south-east of the SK-speaking area, in Ilām Province, Kermānshāh Province and northern Lorestān (cf. Figure 1).

<sup>5</sup>Turkic varieties are spoken around Bijār and Qorve and in a few other spots within the SK-speaking area (cf. Fattah 2000: 2–3, 5, 17–19; Anonby et al. in this volume). After a mass migration outside Iran during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only a few families speaking Jewish NENA dialects are still found in the region (cf. Anonby et al. in this volume; Khan 2009: 5–11; 2011). SK is also in contact with the Arabic vernaculars of eastern Iraq and with a pocket of Arabic speakers in north-east Ilām Province, cf. the language maps of Ilām Province in Aliakbari et al. (2014) and Anonby & Taheri-Ardali, et al. (2015–2019).

<sup>6</sup>The main linguistic means for oral and written transmission of literary works in the SK-speaking region has historically been literary Gorāni (cf. Kreyenbroek & Chamanara 2013). Currently, the role of regional dominant languages has been taken on by Persian (in Iran) and Arabic and Sorani Kurdish (in Iraq), by virtue of their status as official languages of education and administration.

<sup>7</sup>The few attempts at writing SK either apply the Sorani writing norm or involve a modified

largely confined to everyday oral communication, especially in the domestic sphere.



**Figure 1:** Respective distribution of SK, Laki and Northern Lari (hereafter NLari) dialects, according to Fattah (2000: iv)

Despite their surface complexity, however, SK dialects form a rather compact dialect continuum, unified by a fair degree of mutual intelligibility based on shared phonological, morphosyntactic and lexical features. To my knowledge, no specific study on mutual intelligibility between any two SK varieties has ever been carried out, but personal observations and other hints from

Arabo-Persian orthography, which can vary considerably from writer to writer (personal observation).

the existing literature Aliakbari et al. (2014: 7-8) suggest that dialect variation rarely impedes face-to-face interactions.

The tricky question of the linguistic affiliation of Laki – an associated variety spoken further south-east of the SK-speaking area<sup>8</sup> – is still a debated issue and will be briefly touched upon at the end of this paper. For our purposes, the narrowest possible definition of SK is adopted and Laki varieties will be considered as forming a separate cluster of Northwest Iranian varieties. The controversial question whether or not Laki is part of the Kurdish language continuum will also be left unanswered for the time being.

## 1.1 Sources

The scarcity of detailed information on most SK varieties and the variable quality and types of the existing data make a complete and reliable account of the dialect situation a long-awaited desideratum. Indeed, these varieties pose a genuine challenge to dialectologists, being both extremely diverse and severely under-documented.

In spite of the relevance of this group of vernaculars for Kurdish and Iranian linguistics, the number of scholarly works dealing with SK is inexplicably low. At present, the natural starting point is the monograph published by Fattah (2000) almost two decades ago, which in spite of all shortcomings still represents the most comprehensive collection of information on individual SK vernaculars, as well as an initial attempt at sketching a group-internal classification (cf. Section 2). The language data contained therein, however, remains for the most part unverified.<sup>9</sup>

A few works predating Fattah's monograph (e.g. Blau 1989; Christensen & Barr 1939; De Morgan 1904; Querry 1896) also provide interesting data for comparison on individual varieties (i.e. the SK of Bijār, a not better specified 'Kermānshāhi' dialect and the Badre'i of Baghdad).

A significant amount of descriptive work on other SK vernaculars has appeared in Iran (e.g. Karimi-Doostan 1380/2001 on the SK of Badre; Morādi 1394/2015 on several varieties of Kermānshāh Province; Aliyāri Bābolqāni

<sup>8</sup>Figures close to a million speakers have been reported for Laki (Fattah 2000: 4; Izady 1992: 175), but I consider that these are exaggerated, perhaps including Laki-Kermānshāhi (cf. Section 2) and Khezeli speakers (cf. Aliakbari et al. 2014: 7-8) in the count (Erik Anonby, p.c.).

<sup>9</sup>In this respect, my own research (Belelli 2016) has confirmed the overall accuracy of the information reported in Fattah (2000) for the vernacular of Harsin. With due caution, this can reassure those using that source on the reasonable correctness of data from other SK varieties contained therein.

1396/2017 on the varieties of Gilān-e Gharb and Gahvāre). As for dictionaries, Darvishyān (1375/1996), Jaliliyān (1385/2006) and Karimpour (1382/2003) can be quoted among the best-known references.

Documentation of SK is recently being revived by newly founded research groups, which have already achieved important results and augur well for the progress of research in this field.<sup>10</sup>

## 1.2 Issues of terminology

Due to a great deal of confusion surrounding many labels applied to SK vernaculars, a clarification of terminology is an appropriate point of departure for any study dealing with the subject.

Looking at endonyms, we observe that native speakers usually refer to individual SK varieties simply as ‘Kurdish’ (SK *kordī*, *kwirdī*, etc.). If they need to stress the distinctness of their own or other vernaculars *vis-à-vis* neighboring groups, they apply a reflexive pronoun (e.g. *kordī xomān*, *kwirdī wižmān*, etc. ‘our own Kurdish’) or a tribal-geographic specifier (e.g. *kordī kalhorī* ‘Kurdish spoken by Kalhors’, *kordī kirmāšānī* ‘Kurdish spoken in Kermānshāh city/area’) to the generic language label. I could observe that at least a section of Laki-Kermānshāhi speakers (cf. Section 2) refer to their dialects also as *lakī*, although they seem quite categorical in stressing their distinctness from the communities of Kermānshāh Province that speak varieties akin to the Laki of northern Lorestān and eastern Ilām (Belelli 2016: §1.4).

In the literature, SK dialects have been collectively referred to in various ways. Terms originally having a more restricted semantics, usually connected to (historical and/or contemporary) place names and ethnic groups (e.g. Kalhori,<sup>11</sup> Kermānshāhi,<sup>12</sup> Feyli,<sup>13</sup> Pa(h)lawāni) have been used by popular schol-

<sup>10</sup>The project *Documentation of Gorani, an endangered language of West Iran* (cf. Mahmoudveysi et al. 2012; Mahmoudveysi & Bailey 2013) has restituted, as a side result, two samples (i.e. *laki\_conv\_1* and *laki\_conv\_2* <https://hdl.handle.net/1839/00-0000-0000-0018-03DC-B0view>, retrieved June 2018) of varieties pertaining to the Laki-Kermānshāhi subgroup (cf. Section 2). SK language samples and other kind of linguistic and bibliographic information is also being collected by the teams of Anonby & Taheri-Ardali, et al. (2015–2019) and Matras et al. (2016).

<sup>11</sup>This choice might be motivated by the wide diffusion of Kalhori dialects (cf. Section 2) and/or by their higher prestige in comparison to other SK varieties.

<sup>12</sup>Labels such as *Kermānshāhi*, *Ilāmi*, etc. might be confusing in that the geographic/administrative categories on which they are based can refer to entities of variable size (city, county, province, etc.) at the same time.

<sup>13</sup>According to Fattah (2000: 70–74), only some SK speakers of Baghdad used the term ‘Feyli’ as self-denomination. Historically, the term denoted the principality of Lor-e Kuchek (‘Lorestān-e Feyli’, i.e. current Ilām and Lorestān Provinces) and was only later extended to qualify the

ars and academics alike as cover terms for SK. I maintain, however, that the use of ‘Southern Kurdish’ as collective language label should be favored, being already common in scholarly works and less ethnically and geohistorically connotated than most available options.

As neutral as it may be, however, this label is not entirely exempt from ambiguity: since Iraqi Kurdistan is often referred to as ‘Southern Kurdistan’ (CK *kurdistānī bāšūr*), ‘Southern Kurdish’ sometimes denotes the varieties of CK (Sorani) spoken there. For this reason, we could consider the labels ‘Southeastern Kurdish’ (Schmitt 2000: 76–77, from the common designation of Iranian Kurdistan as ‘Eastern Kurdistan’, CK *kurdistānī rōzhalāt/xōrhalāt*) or ‘Southern Iranian Kurdish’, common in Iraqi Kurdistan, two viable alternatives for further disambiguation.

## 2 Dialect distribution and Fattah’s (2000) preliminary sub-grouping

Fattah (2000) was probably the first to sketch a classification of SK vernaculars, identifying seven dialect subgroups (listed below from north to south, cf. Figure 2):<sup>14</sup>

1. **Bijāri:** also known as Garrusi,<sup>15</sup> is spoken in the county of Bijār (former Garrus, Kordestān Province).
2. **Kolyā’i:** includes the varieties spoken in the district of Chahārduliye Gharbi (Qorve County, Kordestān Province), in northern and eastern Kermānshāh Province (from the Poshtdarband rural district up to Kāmyārān, in Dinavar district and Khodābandelu rural district). The SK dialects spread in Asadābād, Hamadān, Tuyserkān and Malāyer Counties (Hamadān Province) are also classified in this subgroup.
3. **Laki-Kermānshāhi:** includes the so-called ‘Pāyравand’ vernaculars (Fattah 2000: 23), spoken in the rural Districts of Dorudfarāmān and Miyāndarband (Kermānshāh County), and most varieties spoken in the Sahne

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people inhabiting this region and the vernaculars they speak (i.e. SK and N Lori dialects). Its inherent ambiguity, however, makes it a rather infelicitous choice as a language label.

<sup>14</sup>It is worth pointing out that this study appeared quite late in comparison to MacKenzie’s (1961a, 1962) major work on regional variation in Kurdish, which did not treat the SK situation in any detail.

<sup>15</sup>cf. Christensen & Barr (1939: 291–331); De Morgan (1904) and Querry (1896)

and Harsin Counties of Kermānshāh Province (except for the rural District of Chamchamāl, where dialects akin to the Kalhori-Sanjābi-Zangane subgroup are mainly spoken).

4. **Kalhori-Sanjābi-Zangane:** includes the varieties spoken by a section of ethnic Sanjābi (roughly located west of Kermānshāh city and east of Qasr-e Shirin, in Kermānshāh Province), the varieties spread in the territories of the Kalhor people (between Eslāmābād-e Gharb in the north and Eyvān in the south, in Kermānshāh and Ilām Provinces) and the vernaculars of the Zangane people of the Harasam rural district (Kermānshāh Province). Varieties akin to Kalhori are also spoken immediately across the border in Iraq, between Khānaqin and the town of Zurbātiya (northeast of Badra). Fattah (2000: 27–28) also seems to ascribe the dialects spoken by the Arkavāz people (between the cities of Eyvān and Ilām, in Ilām Province), and those spoken in the counties of Sirvān and Chardāvol (Ilām Province) to this group.
5. **Malekshāhi:**<sup>16</sup> includes the dialects spoken in the region to the north and west of Badre District (Ilām Province), inhabited by ethnic Malekshāhi and Mishkhās. Varieties pertaining to this group are also spoken in the Sālehābād district (Mehran County, Ilām Province), around Zurbātiya (in Iraq) and by a section of the SK-speaking population of Baghdad.
6. **Badre’i:** spoken in Badre District (Darre Shahr County, Ilām Province), as well as by a section of the SK-speaking population of Baghdad.<sup>17</sup>
7. **Kordali:** or Ābdānāni (Aliakbari et al. 2014) spoken at the southern periphery of the SK-speaking area, in the counties of Dehlorān and Ābdānān (Ilām Province) occupied by ethnic Kordali, and adjacent areas of Iraq.

<sup>16</sup>This cluster roughly combines the ‘Ilāmi’ and ‘Malekshāhi’ subgroups in Aliakbari et al. (2014: 7). The reviewer correctly pointed out that Fattah’s label looks rather odd, considering that ethnic Malekshāhi are neither the larger, nor the most representative community speaking varieties related to this subgroup.

<sup>17</sup>cf. Blau (1989)



**Figure 2:** Approximate distribution of SK dialect subgroups, based on the evaluation of the sources outlined in Section 1.1 (BIJ: Bijāri; KOL: Kolyā'i; L-KER: Laki-Kermānshāhi; KSZ: Kalhori-Sanjābi-Zangane; MAL: Malekshāhi; BAD: Badre'i; KOR: Kordali).

To summarize, leaving the enclave of Bijār aside, the dialects pertaining to the second, third and fourth groups are mainly spoken in Kermānshāh Province and adjoining areas of Kordestān, Hamadān, Ilām and Iraq, while the dialects pertaining to the last three dialect groups are uniformly spoken in Ilām Province and adjoining areas of Iraq (i.e. historical Posht-e Kuh). The latter correspond to the 'Ilāmi (Feyli) dialect group' in Aliakbari et al. (2014: 7–8), although these authors suggest a different internal classification.

Unfortunately, Fattah's material is unevenly arranged and the author fails to specify the features setting out each subgroup from the others. From the



chosen denominations it seems clear that his dialect subgroups, despite the terminology used, should not be considered simply as *geolects*,<sup>18</sup> but are first and foremost *ethnolects*.<sup>19</sup> One can suppose that their distribution has become more sharply defined in space only in the aftermath of the mass sedentarization of pastoral-nomadic tribes of West Iran, particularly after the first two decades of the 20th century (cf. Potts 2016: 428–429).

Another necessary proviso is that any assertion of dialectal uniformity, at any level of linguistic or spatial analysis (e.g. within a single dialect subgroup or even within a single village), is an inevitable oversimplification and an ultimate artifact in a region characterized by ongoing, widespread human mobility and frequent displacement of population groups.<sup>20</sup> At this stage of what is known, any representation of SK dialects in physical space cannot account for the complex intersections and frequent overlapping of dialect areas, or the existence of transitional idioms and ‘mixed’ urban dialects (e.g. the Persian/SK creole of Kermānshāh city, cf. Guizzo 2007).

### 3 Dialect features

The following paragraphs contain a selection of dialect features which may be relevant in identifying clusters of SK vernaculars, as assembled from the sources outlined in Section 1.1. They are divided into phonetics and phonology (Section 3.1), morphosyntax (Section 3.2) and lexicon (Section 3.3). No quantitative evaluation of the data has been carried out and no figures concerning relative distance between different SK dialects or subgroups are currently available.

#### 3.1 Phonetics and phonology

In order to identify regional patterns of variation, the consonant and vowel inventories of SK dialects have been tentatively represented in a unified table (cf. Table 1).

<sup>18</sup> A more or less uniform group of varieties spread over an identifiable geographic area.

<sup>19</sup> A variety associated to a specific ethno-cultural group, generally a tribe or a section of it.

<sup>20</sup> Notwithstanding the decline of pastoral nomadism in west Iran, population movements have continued until the present in the form of migratory flows from rural areas towards major urban centers.

**Table 1:** Consonant and vowel inventories of SK dialects (including peripheral sounds)<sup>21</sup>

	Labial	Dental-Alveolar	(pre)-palatal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyngeal	Glottal
Voiceless Stops/Affricates	p	t	č	k	q		
Voiced Stops/Affricates	b	d	j (gʲ)*	g			(ʔ)
Voiceless Fricatives	f	s (ʃ)*	š	x		(ħ)*	
Voiced Fricatives	(v)*	z (z̥)*	ž	(ǵ)*		(ʕ)*	h
Nasals	m	n		(ŋ)*			
Laterals		l ɭ*	(ʎ)*				
Vibrants		r ɾ					
Semivowel	w (w̥)*		y				

	Front	Central	Back
Close	ī ü*		u
Mid	(e) (ø)*	i	(o)
Open	a		ā

*Consonants:* The consonant inventory of SK dialects is rather uniform, with only a few sounds (mostly peripheral in the system) being confined to specific dialect subgroups or single varieties:

Phonemic /v/ [v] is more or less restricted to L-KER and some KOR vernacu-

lars, a feature perhaps attributable to proximity to Laki and NLori (cf. Lazard 1992: 216; MacKinnon 2002: 106). In L-KER and some KOR dialects, /v/ [v] parallels cSK /w/ [w], especially in word-initial and intervocalic positions and as common outcome of lenition of an original intervocalic [b]: e.g. *vark* vs. cSK *wark* 'lamb'; *vitin* vs. cSK *watin*, *witin* 'say'; *mīwa* (≠ L-KER of Sahne *mīwa*) vs. cSK *mīwa*; *xavar* vs. cSK *xawar* (≠ SK of Kermānshāh *xabar*). This sound is virtually unknown to other SK varieties, with isolated exceptions (in word-final position or as allophone of /b/ [b] and /f/ [f] before /d/ [d]), e.g. SK of Qasr-e Shirin *dīv* 'demon' (Fattah 2000: 94); BAD *avdāt* 'monk' (Blau 1989: 44 ff.).

Dark /ɬ/ [ɬ] appears to be phonemic in virtually all SK varieties, except for the varieties of Kermānshāh city and Mandali, where it is regularly replaced by clear /l/ [l]: e.g. *bāl* vs. cSK *bāt* 'arm'; *pyāla* vs. cSK *pyāla* 'cup' (Fattah 2000: 98–99). A similar distribution applies to the velar nasal [ŋ],<sup>22</sup> e.g. Ker., Man. *tang* vs. cSK *taŋ* 'narrow, tight', equally rare in the SK of Qasr-e Shirin and Xānaqin (Fattah 2000: 104). Another interesting trait concerning laterals is the frequent palatalization of /l/ to [ʎ] in some L-KER dialects, e.g. L-KER of Harsin *lā* [ʎa:] '(be)side'; *kwil* [kwəʎ] 'all' (Belelli 2016: §2.1.3), a feature also observed in Laki and NLori dialects (Anonby 2004–2005: 16; MacKinnon 2002: 107).

A palatalized realization of /g/ [g] in word-medial (mainly intervocalic) and final position is typical of the dialects spoken in Iraq and border areas (especially MAL, but also some Kalhori and Sanjābi dialects). In MAL varieties, g<sup>j</sup> [j] generally parallels cSK word-final /g/ or /k/, e.g. *kilig<sup>j</sup>* vs. cSK *kilik*, *kilig* 'finger'. In BIJ and northernmost KOL dialects (e.g. Qorve) [j] results from lenition of an original intervocalic/postvocalic d,<sup>23</sup> yielding [y] in other SK dialects, e.g. *ziyāg<sup>j</sup>* vs. cSK *ziyā(y)*, *ziād* 'much, many'; *āg<sup>j</sup>am*, *āg<sup>j</sup>im* vs. cSK *āyam*, *āyim* 'person' (Fattah 2000: 100–101, 135 ff.).

SK vernaculars close to the border with Iraq (i.e. MAL, some KOR and Kalhori vernaculars spoken along the border) see the presence of emphatic [sˤ] [zˤ]

<sup>21</sup>Peripheral sounds (i.e. non-integrated, used in borrowed items only, having low frequency and/or uncertain phonemic status) are marked by parentheses, while sounds restricted to certain varieties or groups of varieties (Fattah's 'non-generalized' sounds) are marked by \*. In examples, the abbreviation 'cSK' precedes the forms common to most SK dialects.

<sup>22</sup>Minimal pairs contrasting /ɬ/ (never found word-initially) point to its phonemic status with incomplete distribution, e.g. *kol* 'rounded, smoothed' / *koɬ* 'short' (Fattah 2000: 98), *bār* 'bring!' / *bāt* 'wing'. [ŋ] (never found word-initially) can be seen as predictable allophone of /n/ before homorganic consonants (/k/ and /g/), but contrasting pairs do exist, e.g. *taŋ* 'narrow, tight' / *tan* 'body'; *saŋ* 'stone' / *sag* 'dog'. We mention here also the incomplete distribution of the flap /r/, regularly replaced by trilled /ʀ/ word-initially.

<sup>23</sup>This phenomenon is generally referred to as 'Zagros-d' (McCarus 2009: 591).

and pharyngeal [h] as common counterparts of corresponding non-emphatic sounds in both inherited and borrowed words, pointing to a stronger influence, whether direct or indirect, of Arabic, e.g. *şuzānin*, *şożānin* vs. cSK *suzānin* ‘burn’, *gonāh* vs. cSK *gonā(h)*, *gwinā(h)* ‘sin’ (Fattah 2000: 96–97, 107). The retention of Arabic ‘*ayn* in loans is also common in these dialects, e.g. *şāqit* vs. cSK *āqit* ‘wise’ and the insertion of a word initial pharyngeal often extends to non-Arabic items as well, e.g. KOR *ʕas(i)p* vs. cSK *asp* ‘horse’ (Fattah 2000: 106–107).

Many varieties of İlām and adjacent areas of Iraq tend to preserve [ɣ] in Arabo-Persian and Turkic loans vs. cSK [q] or [χ], e.g. *āḡā* vs. cSK *āqā*, *āxā*. The overall tendency in the varieties not retaining [ɣ] is to favor a realization as /q/ [q] towards the north (e.g. L-KER; KOL; but ≠ BIJ, aligning with southern dialects) and as /x/ [χ] towards the south of the SK-speaking area (e.g. some Kalhori, Zangane and MAL dialects, BAD, cf. Fattah 2000: 215–216).

**Vowels:** Fattah (2000: 75) states that SK vowel system manifests more regional variation than it is attested for consonants.

The vowel /a/ [a] is very unstable and a certain degree of free variation with the central vowel /i/ [ə] in unstressed syllables is ubiquitous across SK.

Front-rounded vowels /ü/ [y, y:] and /ö/ [ø] are not common to all SK dialects: The first is absent in most MAL and KOR varieties, having /i/ [i, i:] in comparable contexts, e.g. *dīr* vs. cSK *dūr* ‘far’, *šī* vs. cSK *šū* ‘husband’. In the dialects lacking /ü/, the labiopalatal approximant [ɥ] (represented as *w* in Fattah 2000: 110) is also missing.<sup>24</sup> The sound [ø] has very low frequency and uncertain phonemic status. It is virtually restricted to L-KER, KOL and KOR dialects, where it most often results from the fronting and rounding of /a/ before /w/, e.g. *šōw* vs. cSK *šaw* ‘night’ or from the dropping of an original *h*, e.g. *nō* vs. cSK *no(h)*, *nu* ‘nine’.

Mid vowels /o/ [o, o:] and /e/ [e, e:] pattern as peripheral: the first seems to be found in all dialects, although it is often diphthongized to [wə], e.g. *kwiř* *koř* ‘boy’, or replaced by /i/, e.g. *jift* ~ *joft* ‘pair’, particularly (but not exclusively) in Kalhori dialects (Fattah 2000: 117 ff.). In KOR vernaculars, possibly under NLori influence (cf. MacKinnon 2002: 109), cSK /ā/ [a, a:] is raised to [o, o:] before nasals (with concomitant consonant dropping in the case of /n/) or in the group /āy/, e.g. *gyo(n)* vs. cSK *gyān* ‘life, soul’, *čoy* vs. cSK *čāy* ‘tea’. /e/ [e, e:] and its slightly diphthongized allophone [ej] occur in loan-

<sup>24</sup>I provisionally take this sound as an allophonic variant of /w/, produced by a series of coarticulatory processes involving an original group /wī/ following /a/ (in turn fronted and rounded to [ø]), e.g. *\*tawila* > *tōwila* [təu‘la] ‘stable, cattle shed’. However, as the reviewer pointed out, it might be phonemic in some SK dialects.

words or result from the contraction of /ay/, e.g. *me(h)mān* ‘guest’, *kaywānu* vs. *kewānu* ‘old woman’. Their status and the patterns of alternation with /ī/ are still largely unclear.

As already seen, (historical-phonemic and allophonic) lenition of intervocalic and postvocalic voiced stops /b, d, g/ and word-initial and word-final /b/ is characteristic of SK, although slightly less prevalent in urban centers (perhaps under the pressure of standard Persian pronunciations). Morpho-phonemic lenition also occurs when present and past verbal stems beginning with /b, d/ are preceded by indicative, subjunctive or negative prefixes, a complex phenomenon<sup>25</sup> that seems to manifest different regional outcomes (i.e. from full maintenance of the consonantal sounds, e.g. BAD *adan* ‘they give’, to their complete dropping, e.g. L-KER of Harsin *men* ‘they give’, with various intermediate stages, e.g. KOL *ayan*, BIJ *digʻan* ‘they give’, cf. Fattah 2000: 408 ff.). At a very first glance, it seems less prevalent in urban dialects (likely influenced by Persian, which does not exhibit this lenition) and in most varieties of Ilām and adjacent areas of Iraq, but more research is needed before a clearer judgement can be made.

SK varieties show more variation than one may expect also in the outcome of historical sound changes considered relevant for locating Kurdish in the context of West Iranian (cf. Fattah 2000: 152–164; MacKenzie 1961b), with frequent shifts towards typical Southwest Iranian developments instead of expected Kurdish ones, e.g. ‘eye’: most L-KER, MAL *čam*, *čyam* vs. BIJ, KOL, KSZ, BAD *čaw*, *čāw*, KOR *čow*; ‘groom’: BIJ, L-KER, MAL, KOR *zāmā*, KOR *zomā*, *domā* vs. KOL, KSZ, BAD *zāwā*; ‘deer’: cSK *āhu*, *āhū*, *āhī* vs. KOL, Kalhori *ās(i)k*, *ās(i)g*, *āsu*; ‘life’: cSK *zin(d)agī*, *zinay* alongside *žiyān*, *gyān*. This question cannot be further pursued here, but deserves to be carefully addressed.

## 3.2 Morphosyntax

Variation is observed in virtually all aspects of SK morphosyntax and is often too slight and pervasive to allow the identification of regional patterns.

*Morphology*: Looking at nominal morphology, differences are mainly found in the form, rather than the type and function of SK morphemes. The cSK indefinite marker is *-ī(k)*, *-ī(g)* (and variants: Fattah 2000: 241), with the final consonant regularly dropped word-finally. The only appreciable difference

<sup>25</sup>The phenomenon is not restricted to SK. Similar developments are attested, for instance, in the Gorani of Gawraju (see Mahmoudveysi et al. 2012: 20–22), as well as in some varieties of CK (see MacKenzie 1961a: 3–4, 19–20) and NK, particularly with stem-initial b- (see Öpengin & Haig 2014: 157–158).

concerns the vernacular of Kermānshāh city and some KOL, MAL and BAD dialects, allowing the realization of the final consonant also in absence of further suffixation (= CK).

Two forms of the definite marker can express definiteness in SK: *-aka*, *-aga* (and variants) and *-a* (taking the form *-(a)ka*, *-(a)ga* only after /ā/). According to Fattah (2000: 246), their distribution allows for identification of a northern group (i.e. KOL) using exclusively *-aka*, *-aga*, and a southern group (i.e. most MAL, but also L-KER ≠ Sahne) favoring *-a*. Other SK vernaculars allow variation between the two, with an apparent preference for the first type towards the north and for the second towards the south of the SK-speaking area.

The plural/collective suffix *-ayl*, *-(y)al*, *-el*, *-gal* (and variants, Fattah 2000: 248) is the common SK plural marker. Only a section of BIJ speakers use the suffix *-ān* as default plural morpheme, probably under the influence of neighboring CK dialects. In other SK vernaculars the type *-ān* is restricted to a few fixed forms and borrowed invariable plural/collective terms (e.g. L-KER of Harsin *atrāfiān* ‘entourage, courtiers’, ← Pers.) or used with specialized functions (adverbial locative/temporal, e.g. Kalhori *xātuān* ‘at maternal uncles’ (house)’ (Fattah 2000: 250 ff.).

On the other hand, the suffix *-ān* is widely involved in the formation of definite plurals, a feature that Fattah (2000: 253) identifies as one of the defining elements of geolinguistic classification in this region. Indeed, the type ‘*-agān*’ is used in most BIJ, KOL and KSZ vernaculars, while the type ‘*-ala(ga)*’ is found in L-KER (≠ Sahne) and in most BAD, MAL and KOR dialects.

The use of the cSK *ezāfe* morpheme =*i* manifests considerable variation (Fattah 2000: 264–265). Despite its presence in virtually all SK dialects, only the northernmost varieties seem to realize it regularly, while L-KER and most varieties of Posht-e Kuh (i.e. BAD, MAL, KOR) favor simple juxtaposition.

North/south variation seems to be attested also in other aspects of SK grammar, e.g. the morphosyntactic behavior of numerals (Fattah 2000: 300): in northern subgroups (i.e. some BIJ, KOL, KSZ dialects) a definite noun phrase determined by a numeral can occur in the plural, while the singular is preferred in the rest of SK. A north/south split is also adpositions (Fattah 2000: 583 ff.), with the L-KER dialects standing out from cSK for their use of typical Laki items (cf. Belelli 2016: §2.17; Fattah 2000: 608).

*Personal pronouns and demonstratives:* Pronominal forms (Fattah 2000: 275 ff.) are nearly identical in all subgroups, but vary in some ways in their phonological form. For full pronouns, the most evident differences concern the 2PL (*(h)oma* of L-KER (= Laki vs. cSK *īwa(n)*, *(h)ua*, *ūa*, *eva*) and the 3PL forms *ownī*, *öwnī* of some KOR vernaculars (vs. cSK *(a)wān(a)*, *avāna* and variants). Singu-

lar pronominal clitics are rather uniform (cSK =*im*, =*id*/=*it*, =*ī*/=*e*). The most appreciable difference concerns plural forms, with L-KER and few other dialects having =*mān*, =*dān*/=*tān*, =*yān* vs. cSK =*imān*, =*idān*/=*itān*, =*iyān*<sup>26</sup> (Fattah 2000: 280 ff.). The L-KER subgroup also diverges in respect to reflexive pronouns, having a form *wiž* (= Laki) vs. cSK *xwa-*, *xo-* (and variants, Fattah 2000: 291).

Demonstrative adjectives are rather uniform, with slight differences in phonological form (*ī*/ *e*/ *ay*/ (*h*)*āy* ‘this, these’; *a*/ *aw*/ (*h*)*āw* ‘that, those’, Fattah 2000: 314 ff.). More outstanding is the presence, in the majority of SK ≠ most L-KER and KOL vernaculars, of an animacy distinction affecting the form of demonstrative pronouns (Fattah 2000: 317 ff.). The L-KER subgroup is also unique in allowing the use of the plural suffix *-al* to form plural demonstrative pronouns (i.e. *yānala* ‘these’, *awānala* ‘those’).

*Verbal morphology*: Beyond the unifying feature of a generalized nominative-accusative alignment in SK, there seems to be considerable variation in verbal morphology and TAM systems of different subgroups and single SK varieties. Particularly illustrative are the forms of the prefixes intervening in the formation of the indicative present and imperfect tenses (Fattah 2000: 371 ff.): BIJ *dī-*, *a-*; KOL *a-*; L-KER (=a) *ma-* (= Laki, but ≠ Sahne *a-*); BAD *a-*; KOR *dī-*. Most Kalhori and MAL vernaculars build the present without an overt marker and contextually lack a morphologically formed Imperfect tense or build it by placing a morpheme *-yā-* between the past stem and personal endings (Fattah 2000: 375 ff.).

Other differences, all deserving closer scrutiny, concern the conjugation of the Perfect (BIJ adding a conjugated present copula to the past participle vs. cSK combining the past stem/past participle with a verbal agreement suffix and a 3SG invariant copula, Fattah 2000: 382); the choice of Preterite vs. Perfect as preferential past tense (Fattah 2000: 374–375); the choice of auxiliaries for the progressive periphrasis (some MAL, BAD and most dialects of Iraq using *nīštin* vs. cSK *dāštin*, Fattah 2000: 504–505; the suffix used for Past Participles (KOL, L-KER, most KSZ *-ī/-e*; BIJ, MAL, BAD *-īg/-īgʲ*, KOR *-a*); the forms of verbal endings and the Present clitic Copula (Fattah 2000: 465 ff., 514 ff.); the form and placement of preverbs and postverbs (Fattah 2000: 433).

<sup>26</sup>These forms refer to all contexts except following /a/ and /ā/, when SK dialects having the forms with /i/ also drop the vocalic element.

### 3.3 Lexicon

A great deal of lexical variation is observable throughout SK, even though the impact of such diversity on mutual intelligibility is somehow mitigated by a widespread knowledge among speakers of equivalents pertaining to SK vernaculars different from their own.<sup>27</sup> Overall, the most divergent dialects seem to be those of the L-KER and KOR subgroups, on one side, and of the KOL and BIJ subgroups, on the other.

L-KER dialects share additional lexical items with Laki (e.g. *lam* vs. cSK *zik* ‘belly’; *pit* vs. cSK *lüt* ‘nose’; *āyl* vs. cSK *zāru*, *mināl* ‘child’; *gwijar* vs. cSK *büčik* and variants ‘small’; *katiñ* vs. cSK *gawrā* ‘big’; *āyştin* vs. cSK *xistin* ‘throw’). KOR varieties are heavily influenced by neighboring NLori vernaculars, with shared forms such as *işkam* ‘belly’; *bača* ‘child’, *mas*, *gap* ‘big’; (İ)*aftow* ‘sun’; *hama* ‘all’. To the north of the SK dialect area, BIJ and KOL have additional items in common with neighboring CK dialects, e.g. *hilka* vs. cSK *xā*, *xāya* ‘egg’; *bayāni* vs. cSK *so(b)*, *şöso* and variants ‘morning, tomorrow’; *kotān* vs. cSK *dān* ‘beat’.

The dialects spoken across the Iraqi border show a bunch of additional Arabic borrowings, mostly attested outside the core vocabulary: e.g. *tallāja/sal-lāja* vs. cSK *yaxčāl* (= Pers.) ‘fridge’; *şat(t)* vs. cSK *ju* ‘river’ (= Pers. *ju* ‘channel’); *îşat* vs. cSK *zin(d)agî*, *žiyān* and variants.

## 4 Summing up

Without any intention to reach immediate conclusions or provide final solutions to classificational problems, I believe the following picture can provide a useful starting point for future work dealing with SK dialectology.

Firstly, it seems obvious that the seven subgroups identified by Fattah (2000) cannot be treated as clear-cut, sharply-defined bundles of dialects. They show considerable internal variation and in some cases seem to include dialects manifesting highly diverging features. Some varieties cannot be easily ascribed to any specific subgroup, but are transitional between subgroups<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> An example of such adaptability is found in the recording titled *laki\_conv\_1* [2:08-2:14] from the DoBeS Archive (cf. Footnote 10).

<sup>28</sup> According to my assessment of Fattah’s 2000 data, the Laki-Kermānshāhi variety of *Sahne* often aligns with neighboring *Kolyā’i* dialects. *Zebiri/Zoheyri* (SK *zürî*, also Southern *Sirvāni*) is transitional between the *Kalhorî-Sanjābi-Zangane* and *Badre’i* subgroups. The dialects of *Zurbatiya* and *Wärmizyār*, on one side, and of *Xānaqin*, on the other, also seem to diverge quite a lot from most dialects pertaining to their respective dialect subgroups (i.e. *Malekshāhi* and *Kalhorî-Sanjābi-Zangane*).



or between these and neighboring languages/dialect clusters.<sup>29</sup>

Variation in SK is often related to non-linguistic factors, e.g. religious and ethnic affiliations, historically sedentary vs. mobile lifestyles, or urban vs. rural contexts. Dialect blending is particularly common in major urban centers (e.g. Kermānshāh, Qasr-e Shirin, Ilām), where the constant interaction of inhabitants of different origins and linguistic backgrounds facilitates contact and convergence over time.

Language data, as Fattah (2000) constantly underlines, hint at the existence of a north/south split, in some way distinguishing the subgroups centered in Kermānshāh Province (i.e. KOL, KSZ) from those spoken in Ilām and adjacent areas of Iraq (i.e. MAL, BAD). Interestingly enough, Bijāri and some of the northernmost Kolyā'i dialects (e.g. Qorve) often align with the latter. The closeness of Bijāri to the vernaculars of Posht-e Kuh is indeed mentioned by Fattah (2000: 18), who states that at least a section of Bijāri speakers was resettled in its present location from Ilām sometime during the last three centuries. The whole question, I believe, merits a more detailed assessment.

A second, lesser split appears to distinguish the varieties spoken across the border with Iraq and those spoken further into Iranian territory. This distinction is identifiable in minor phonological and lexical peculiarities, consequential to the respective influence of (local and/or standard varieties of) Arabic and Persian as dominant regional languages.

The KSZ and MAL<sup>30</sup> dialects are the broadest subgroups but seemingly not the most internally differentiated. Their cohesion, wide diffusion and apparent high prestige might favor (or have already favored) their emergence as inter-dialectal media of spoken communication in different regions of the SK domain.<sup>31</sup> Observing local TV and radio broadcasts of Kermānshāh and Ilām Provinces might prove interesting in this respect.

A third distinction concerns L-KER and KOR vernaculars, standing aside from the rest of SK for their remarkable closeness to the Laki varieties of Lorestān and, especially in the case of KOR, to neighboring NLori dialects. The L-KER subgroup seems to show the highest number of divergent lexical

<sup>29</sup>The dialects spoken at the northern and southern peripheries diverge the most, due to contact and convergence phenomena with neighboring CK (to the north) and Laki and/or NLori dialects (to the south).

<sup>30</sup>Corresponding to the 'Ilāmi' and 'Malekshāhi' subgroups in Aliakbari et al. (2014: 7).

<sup>31</sup>Aliakbari et al. (2014: 8) mention that "the dialect of Ilam city has the greatest prestige; in encounters with speakers of Ilami, speakers of other dialects in the province tend to approximate their own speech to that of the Ilami speakers. In addition, this dialect has influenced other Kurdish dialects".

and morphosyntactic features, often aligning with Laki ‘proper’, as my own research has confirmed for the L-KER variety of Harsin (cf. Belelli 2016).

From this observation, a question naturally arises: are the features L-KER dialects share with other SK vernaculars sufficient to include them in the SK group, despite important similarities to Laki ‘proper’? Indeed, it seems that mutual intelligibility between most L-KER dialects and neighboring Laki varieties is higher than between L-KER and other SK dialects (e.g. Kalhori of Gilān-e Gharb, personal observation). No easy answer to this classificatory challenge is currently at hand, considered the gaps in our knowledge of most SK and Laki varieties, as well as of their historical relationship.

The certain overall pattern is that, at least synchronically, the SK continuum extends south towards Laki-speaking regions of Lorestān and east Ilām, with L-KER and KOR varieties functioning as transitional links. In historical terms, we cannot tell how long this has been the case and a more in-depth study is needed before any assertion on genetic affiliations and the direction of contact induced variation in border areas can be made.

In summary, the central aim of this paper was to pose core questions that need to be addressed by future research. For a better understanding of SK dialectology, a thorough documentary activity is impelling and I agree with Rossi (1979: 162) that “more descriptive work must precede any historical one”. An investigation on the extent to which native speakers perceive the classification outlined in Fattah (2000) as being grounded in reality could also prove important for making an advance in SK dialectology possible.

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