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Stop contrasts in Kurmanji Kurdish - Testing the ejectives hypothesis

Kurmanji Kurdish in Anatolia employs a 3-way stop system and shares this feature with most of its West Iranian sister languages (e.g. Talysh, Tati) as well as a number of its areal-linguistic neighbors (e.g. Armenian, Georgian, Laz).

Whereas a contrast of voiced vs. voiceless unaspirated vs. voiceless aspirated as in Thai would be functional and unsurprising, field workers have reported that Kurmanji Kurdish may also have ejectives.

Jastrow (1977) describes the voiceless unaspirated stops as ejectives, i.e. stops with simultaneous oral and glottal occlusion followed by an upward movement of the glottis. This would indicate that another stop mode is involved in this contrast, namely glottalic initiation. This would be congruent with the areal pattern, as ejectives are all in all not rare in the neighboring languages of the Caucasus.

However, Jastrow also prefers to characterize these stops as [-aspirated] instead of [+ejective]; furthermore, he describes the ejectives as having a synchronous glottal and oral release. Both of these characterizations point to a rather weak glottalic initiation (weak ejective realization). Only the uvular has no voiced or aspirated counterparts and was perceived as a clear ejective (Jastrow 1977, 91).

This paper provides the first phonetic evidence which will allow these reports and descriptions to be tested. We contribute data from two independent small scale studies. The first is an investigation of acoustic and electroglottographic data collected with 6 Kurmanji speakers originating from different areas of Turkish Northeastern Anatolia who were members of the Kurdish community in Germany at the time of recording. The other, purely acoustic, study consists of data from 4 Kurmanji speakers obtained partially during fieldwork in two small villages (Akarbaşı and Mazgirt) in the vicinity of Karakoçan, in the Elazığ province of Turkey. Both studies focus mainly on parameters that have been found useful for the description of such pulmonic and non-pulmonic stop contrasts (s. e.g. Grawunder et al. 2010).

In the first study, preliminary results of the analysis of VOT and post-burst noise suggest that the 3-way contrast is maintained in all speakers. However for some speakers the difference between aspirated and unaspirated stops in these parameters are sometimes neutralized, especially in initial position. Despite prosodic

influences on VOT, the contrast is retained and enhanced by means of voice quality in the following vowel. Uvular stops in particular turn out to share most of the features (post-burst energy lag, abrupt vowel onset) of glottalic stops as they occur in some Caucasian languages.

In the second study we found so far, that in initial position, labials, alveolars and velars maintain a reliable distinction between voiced unaspirated stops, voiceless aspirated stops and a third voiceless unaspirated variant for which the auditive impression suggests a fairly consistent glottalization, at least in clear pronunciation. The most reliable characteristics of these suspected ejectives are an absolute lack of voicing during the stop closure and a short VOT. Additionally, we frequently found creaky voicing in the post-burst lag.

These results need to be discussed with respect to possible contact scenarios (multilingualisms) and areal differences, but also with respect to speaker specificities due to the nonstandardized forms present in such a large speaker community. Finally, our findings will be compared with those for other languages of the area for which glottalic stop realizations have been suggested (e.g. Eastern Armenian).

References:

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