

Report on field research

Ergin Opendin

Ph.D. candidate in Linguistics

Supervision: F. Jacquesson (LACITO) & G. Haig (University of Bamberg)

The Field Research

My fieldwork started from March the 14th, 2011 through April 23rd, 2011. From the March 14th till the March 23rd I was in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan, and its surrounding region. Then I went to the main context of my field research, the city of Mehabad in Western Iran and its surrounding region called Mukriyan in Kurdish. I spent four weeks in this region.



Map 1. The location of Mehabad in Iran and its neighbouring regions (North-east)

According to my field plan I was supposed to spend the first week of my field research in Suleimaniya, a Sorani-Kurdish speaking province in Iraqi Kurdistan, close to the Iraq-Iran border. However, because of a series of public demonstrations and a long-lasting civil unrest prevailing in the town since mid-February, I could not make it to there from Erbil. Seeing that it was risky to undertake my research in Suleimaniya, I took the chance of accompanying Prof. Haig, who was in the region for his researches, to conduct

another questionnaire-based survey on Kurmanji dialectology in Duhok and Sheikhan regions (Kurmanji Kurdish speaking parts of Iraqi Kurdistan).



Photo 1: The Yazidi Cultural Center, in Ba'edre (a Yazidi village in Iraqi Kurdistan), where we did the interviews

On 23rd of March, I set out to Mehabad. I did not have any contacts in the region, except for a friend's friend from a nearby town, although I had once been in the town several years ago. Upon arriving, I roamed around the town and nearby towns to get to know the region, holding a map of the Azerbaijani Gharbi (Western Azerbaijan) province of Iran, the official province that includes also the Mukriyan region. At the end of the first week I had already contacted a number of local scholars, some of them working in the field of oral literature. Moreover, thanks to informal interviews with these people, I was able to have some preliminary opinions about the nature of intra-regional variation. Finally, I was convinced that I should choose one single village as representative of the Mehabad variety, and that I should go to two other towns, Serdesht, Shino and Boka, which are the border towns of Mukriyan region, for comparison.

My research

I work on mobile pronominal clitics in Central Kurdish, also called Sorani and spoken in Northern part of Iranian Kurdistan and Northeastern part of Iraqi Kurdistan. In my research I concentrate on a certain variety called Mukriyan. My research will be composed of a basic grammatical sketch of Mukriyani Kurdish and then the lengthy treatment of several problems concerning the mobile pronominal clitics in Central Kurdish. Thus, on the first hand I was supposed to collect enough spoken data for my

grammatical description of the variety. The same annotated corpus would serve, later on, to the description of the clitic behavior in this variety. However, thinking that the oral literature texts and ordinary speech that I collect would not provide all of the clitic behavior, I had prepared an eclectic and flexible questionnaire to elicit data from the speakers. I had planned to administer the questionnaire with one person from this village, and in three other towns located on the border areas of Mukriyan region. These towns were decided to be Bokan, Shino and Serdesht.

Against these expectations from my field research, I visited several villages, talked to people from the villages. Usually they were reluctant to be recorded. In one of the villages, Qozluca (30 kms from Mehabad city center), thanks to a contact of mine, I was able to interview an old man of 90 years old. I have some four hours of recordings only from him. However, his way of speaking is quite hard to decipher, and again related to his age, the stories he narrated does not follow a consistent order. One further problem with these recordings is that the volume level of the recordings is not proper. Obviously, I was not well familiar with using the Zoom recorder. Though, my second recording machine, which records on Mp3 format, has recorded all these stories in a proper volume-level.



Photo 2: The Qozluca village

It was only after having visited and spent some days in several villages that I found the appropriate village for my research. Thus, thanks to a contact, I worked in depth in a village called Sarewanan, 12 kms far from Mehabad city center. I was able to record hours of (around 10-12 hours) folk tales, regional anecdotes, ordinary speech and dialogues in this village. In total I had 6 informants from this village, two old fellows, one old lady who could speak only 8-10 minutes, two speakers of 25-35 years old and finally

a child of 8 years old. The recordings are done in appropriate conditions using the Zoom recorder. The sound quality is excellent. Especially the oral literature examples (%90 of the recordings) are extremely interesting for their folkloric value beside their linguistic value. I visited the village for more than two weeks, taking some days to arrange the data from time to time. One of the informants from this village kindly accepted to respond to my questionnaire-interview questions, which took us more than six hours in total. This questionnaire principally included the questions like “Is X a correct/acceptable sentence for you?”. Most of the time I had to measure the degree of acceptability rather than correctness. As many times the speaker would respond “I understand the meaning of the expression/sentence, yet I would never say it in that way”.



Photo 3: A view from Sarewanan village

For the rest of questionnaire data I went to Bikan city, some 80 km south of Mehabad. After some days of research and non-recorded conversation with people I was able to arrange an interview with a young university student of 25 years old. I did the questionnaire of mobile clitic behavior with him. The different formulations of clitic placement and presenting ‘weird’ sentences were extremely tiresome for the informant. The third context of the questionnaire was Shino. Here, I was able to fix an appointment with a middle-aged scholar. Although the informant was specialized in philosophy, he was closely related to language issues concerning Kurdish. It was not difficult to make him understand that what I was looking was not “correct” or “standard” forms in Kurdish but the way the pronominal clitics (*zemiri likaw* ‘bound pronouns’ in Kurdish) were used in Shino variety. Apart from the very detailed and to-the-point responses he

provided, the informant also commented a lot on some salient aspects of Shino variety, which are all recorded.



Photo 4: A view from center of Shino, a town on Iran-Iraq-Turkey borders' intersection area

As for the fourth context, Serdesht, I was not able to go there to administer my questionnaire. The principal reason was the lack of time. Also, from my interviews with local scholars I understood that the variety does not show much variation when it comes to clitic behavior. Thus, I am planning to visit this fourth context next time when I go back on the field.

Apart from the recordings I did by myself, some of my contacts in the regions kindly accepted to give me some 4-5 hours of oral literature recordings done in different villages. Although some of these texts are transcribed and published, I made sure that I have the recordings of them because, most of the time, Kurdish authors somehow "correct" the mistakes in the oral literature texts, thus the result is not a reliable representation of the certain variety in which the story was narrated. However, the problem with these recordings is that they are done in Mp3 format and in some of them the quality of the sound is very bad.

Difficulties

Not having contacts or organizations that could possibly be related to this kind of research was a big obstacle to start with the actual research. In return, this difficulty left me with more time for observing and discovering the region, which was doubtlessly necessary. Furthermore, making the informants talk about ordinary things, daily life etc.

was extremely difficult. Most of the time they did not see any point in elaborating on a daily issue. For instance, an informant of 35 years old, working in agriculture, summarized in several sentences the whole process of plow (ploughing) and sowing. On another occasion, a woman rejected to talk elaborate on her illness finding it completely useless for me. In short, obtaining folk tales etc. was relatively easy once the right informant was found, however, trying to obtain ordinary speech texts was rarely productive. Also, conducting the questionnaire in two of the cases turned out to be a very complicated issue. The nature of the topic (mobile clitics) is liable to confuse any speaker, yet sometimes it was practically impossible to advance.

Another difficulty with conducting the interviews was the certain time period of the year. It was just the beginning of spring, hence the time when the farmers were quite busy with plow, sowing, pruning etc. That's why sometimes I had to bother them during the evenings, when they were supposed to be resting.

Still a further complication was the reluctance of the women to be recorded. Although they were usually ready to sit down in the same room and take part in the conversations, when it came to recording either they were reluctant or they did not continue talking after some time. The data from women speech is by no means comparable to men's speech. This is a serious drawback in my corpus.

Finally, but may be the one that I felt the most was the over-hospitality of the people. Once in their home, they did their best to please me and it was impossible to convince them not do anything extra for me. Some would leave their work and come to help me either by telling stories or by simply accompanying me. And it was very difficult to find a way to compensate for their efforts.

Conclusion

This first field experience was critically important for my research. First of all, I had the chance to know about my field through my personal observations and endeavor. I have much more detailed information about the social and linguistic composition of the region on one hand and the extent and type of the variation within the region on the other hand. Furthermore, I had the chance to meet and be in contact with a number of important local scholars besides many friends who will be ready to help me in my personal communications as well as in my future fieldwork. This field also enabled me improve my proficiency in Sorani, spoken and written. I was equally able to collect a substantial body of linguistic material that will surely make up the biggest part of the corpus of my thesis research. The material I collected can serve to many other areas such as archiving, oral literature documentation, etc. However, the lack of women's speech and relative scarcity of ordinary speech and daily dialogues are important drawbacks. These aspects will be of preliminary concerns of my next fieldwork. Once I have treated the required parts of the material I have collected, I will have a better understanding on what kind of a ground I should resume my researches in the next field. However, it is highly probable that there will be many gaps in my grammatical description for which I will need to consult elicitation while at the same time I will surely have another questionnaire on mobile pronominal clitics for my next field research.