

Grammar
of the
Kurmanji or Kurdish Language

By

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INTRODUCTORY NOTICE

IT is not so long ago that Kurdish was described by travellers as a harsh jargon, a very corrupt dialect of Persian, unintelligible to any but the folk who spoke it naturally; or again by others as an artificial language composed of Persian, Armenian, and Turkish words. It is neither of these. A little research proves it to be as worthy of the name of a separate and developed language as Turkish or Persian themselves. The early Medes and Persians spoke two different languages, Medic or Avestic and Old Persian (that of the inscriptions), but the two tongues have grown further apart than was originally the case; and while Persian has adopted almost as great a proportion of Arabic words as our own Anglo-Saxon did of Latin and Greek words to form modern English, Kurdish, eschewing importations, has kept parallel, but on different lines of grammar; and while frequently adopting a phrase or turn of expression from its sister language, has retained an independence of form and style that marks it as a tongue as different from the artificial Persian as the rough Kurd himself is from the polished Persian.

The seclusion and exclusiveness which have been its preservation have also been the means of allowing a certain development into dialects in the almost inaccessible mountains which are the home of the Kurdish nation. As little literature arose to exercise its fixing influence upon the language, there has been no impediment to the growth—each along its own lines—of the dialects, which are now very numerous.

Some years of study and residence among the Kurds of various parts of Kurdistan have enabled the author to ascertain that there is a main Kurdish tongue, purest in the most central districts of Kurdistan and giving the foundation for all the various dialects.

From the changes which have taken place in the last two thousand years in the lands where Kurds are either a large proportion or the whole of the population, it appears probable that the Kurds inhabited the regions between Urūmia and Vān Lakes and the mountains of the headwaters of the two great rivers of Mesopotamia, and also the Zagros mountain system to the south of that line, as far as the Northern Lurish tribes or the ancient tribes of the Gūrān and Ardalān, now termed Kurds. Within these bounds was spoken the language of the *Kurdmāh* or *Kurdmānj*; but when the power of the surrounding States waned, these warlike people pushed north and west till now they have established themselves as far as Bāyazid (long in the hands of Kurdish Beys, and a purely Kurdish city), Erzerūm, Erzinjān, and to the mountains north of Aleppo.¹

In these northern bounds they live to some extent as strangers and nomads, though there has been a tendency to settlement within the last two centuries; but while in the nomadic and semi-settled state they are ever the

¹ 'Leurs émigrations vers la Perse et la Susiane sont plus anciennes, les écrivains orientaux du moyen-âge les y connaissent déjà. Mais c'est vers l'Occident que ses colonies se sont dirigées de préférence. Là ils habitent la plaine de Nisibe, Mardin, et Urfa jusqu'à Alep, et en Arménie jusqu'à Erzeroum, Ani, et Alagoz, on trouve même des Kurdes jusque dans la province géorgienne de Somchethi. Dans l'Asie-Mineure on les rencontre dans l'Albistan sur le Dscheihan supérieur, et ils s'étendent de là jusqu'à Césarée et plus loin encore' (Eugene Wilhelm, pamphlet entitled *La Langue des Kurdes*, Paris, 1883).

terror of the surrounding peoples, and are ready for guerrilla warfare at any time.

In stating the fact that these tribes all speak the Kurmānji language, which is the Kurdish language, mention must be made of the tribes which, living among the Kurds, have received the name Kurd, and whose language—among Europeans and Turks—has been called a Kurdish dialect. Chief of these is the Zāzā, a tribe with many ramifications in Middle and Western Kurdistan.¹ The language of the Zāzā, while a pure Iranian tongue, has little in common with Kurdish in grammatical construction and choice of words, and shows a few common features with the Gūrān and Lurish. Theorists have surmised that Zāzā may be an offshoot of the later Zoroastrian population of Persia.

In the Darsīm Province of Asiatic Turkey, among Kurd and Zāzā, is found the Bālakī tribe, which uses as a vehicle of thought a mixture of Arabic, Armenian, and Kurdish.

The purest Kurdish races are probably the Hakkārī and Mukrī.

That the Kurds had in and about what we now know as Central Kurdistan been settled, and gained power and security, finds a proof in the fact that a number of quite brilliant poets existed in the Hakkārī domains in the Middle Ages, beginning with 'Alī Ḥāriri, whose works are still known, and who wrote in the eleventh century of our era in the Shamisdīnān district of the Hakkārī (on the Persian frontier, one of the wildest and most inaccessible parts of the country).

¹ For some specimens of Zāzā the reader is referred to *Forschungen über die Kurden und die iranischen Nordchaldäer*, Lerch, St. Petersburg, 1858.

After him we know of Shaikh Aḥmad Jezrī of the Hakkārī, who wrote in the twelfth century, and whose entire *Dīwān* has been discovered and reproduced by the photolithograph process in Germany recently.¹

No other poet of note is known till Muḥammad Feqi Tairān of Mikis of the Hakkārī, whose works are known and who wrote in the fourteenth century. Following him is Mulla Aḥmad of Bāta of the Hakkārī, whose *Mewlūd*, a work on the birth of the Prophet, is still renowned. Between this poet and the next the Hakkārī had spread to Bāyazid, where they became firmly established, and here one of the most famous of all the Kurdish poets and authors lived in the sixteenth century, Aḥmadī Khānī of the Hakkārī, whose many works, both educational and otherwise, are perhaps the best known of all. He established in Bāyazid a school, and built also a mosque. A manuscript of his *No bahār*, a metrical Arabic-Kurdish dictionary for children, is preserved in the British Museum.

A pupil of his, but of little fame, one Ismail, followed him in the next century at Bāyazid.

The end of the same century saw the birth of probably the most famous of all the writers of the Kurds, Sharif Khān of the Hakkārī, who wrote in Persian the history of the Kurds, the *Sharaf Nāma*, which is still the only authoritative record that exists of the history of the nation. Besides this he wrote innumerable Kurdish books and poems.

Murād Khān of Bāyazid of the Hakkārī is the next poet of whom there is definite record, but he was of no

¹ *Der Kurdische Dīwān des Shēch Ahmed von Gezret ibn 'Omar genannt Mālā'i Gizri*, with a notice by Martin Hartmann (S. Calvary and Co., Berlin, 1904).

great account and died in the year 1784. In the south there were a large number of poets at the court of the Gūrān Khāns of Ardalān at Sina, but these wrote for the greater part in the idiom of the Gūrān, and no great poets arose in Southern Kurdistan until the end of the eighteenth century at Sulaimānia, since when that place and Kirkūk have been the home of many poets and writers, both great and small, too numerous to mention here.

The main tribal groups of the Kurdish nation are to-day the Milli Kurds of Western Kurdistan, the Hasanānlū of the Armenian Plateau, the Hakkārī of the lands including Van, Bitlis, and east to the Persian frontier, the Upper Zāb Valley, Jazīra ibn 'Umar, and as far south as near Erbil; the Rawāndüz tribes south of these, as well as the tribes west and north of Sulaimānia, are of the Kurmānj and Hakkārī stock, and further south yet, their lands extending to Qizil Rubāt and the Baghdād-Kermānshāh road, are the Jāf, a Kurdish nomad tribe of great strength, speaking an original Kurdish language much corrupted and mingled with Lurish forms.

On the Persian side south of Urūmia are the Mukrī race, whose language is probably the purest Kurdish to-day existing,¹ though each of these tribes has a large number of subsections, that of the Hasanānlū including such famous robber tribes as the Sibkī, Haidarānlū, and Adamānlū, while the Shekāk, the noted fighting frontier tribe, are an offshoot of the Hakkārī. The Bilbās are probably a branch of the Hakkārī, and were once a famous and powerful race, like that of Rawāndüz, whose Pāshā in

¹ Though differing considerably from the great bulk of the Kurdish tongues, and classed here as of the Southern Group, which is vastly inferior, numerically, to the Northern Group.

the early part of last century was independent and ruled with an iron hand over wide lands.

It must be confessed that very little attention has been paid to the Kurdish language by English students; in fact, I think it may not be a misstatement when I say that so far none in this country have directed their attention to this extremely interesting branch of Oriental study.

Among Continental linguists between the years 1850 and 1890 some interest was evinced, for the greater part by Russians, but since then there are but two works, one of which was published by the French Government, and which attempted somewhat feebly to treat of various Persian and Kurdish dialects. The other is nothing but a photolithograph of a large manuscript in Kurdish (the *Dīwān* of Shaikh Aḥmad above mentioned) without any attempt at translation or notation.

It must be admitted that the acquisition of any one of the many dialects is attended with great difficulties, and it is not within the powers of all of us to spend long periods in Kurdistan, nor do I think many, even linguists, would look upon such an uncomfortable sojourn with any feeling of pleasurable anticipation.

We thus find that most of the literature on the subject is the work of persons whose occupation led them to reside in Kurdistan, and among the best of these are the Russian students who had been employed in the Consular Service, as was Jaba, who in 1860 published his *Recueil de Notices et Récits Kourdes* at St. Petersburg, a collection of stories and poems in the Northern Kurmānjī dialect, translated into French but without notes or commentary, the introduction being written by Lerch, who himself had published through the same medium the *Forschungen über die Kurden*

und die iranischen Nordchaldäer in 1857, a comprehensive work treating of the Kurmānjī and Zāzā languages with a long review of works on Persian and Kurdish dialects, and comparative notes and a glossary of Kurmānjī and Zāzā, the main portion of the work being devoted to a number of stories with translations.

In 1887 Prym and Socin published a collection of poems in the dialects of Tūr Abidīn and Bohtān (Hakkārī), with translations, entitled *Kurdische Sammlungen* (St. Petersburg, 1887). Many of these had been collected during a voyage in the Tiyāri and Hakkārī country. These were unsupported by any grammatical section, though a glossary was appended, a book full of interest to one who already knows the language, but of little to him who has no means of learning it for lack of grammars on the subject.

This deficiency had been filled to a degree by Justi in his *Kurdische Grammatik* (St. Petersburg, 1880), but as 105 pages out of a total of 250 are devoted to lengthy dissertations on the vocalization and dissection of the vowel and consonant sounds, which for practical purposes might have been confined to twenty pages, the student is liable to be somewhat dismayed by the apparent complications of sound. The grammar, too, is somewhat obscurely arranged, though very complete.

A year previous to this Jaba had published his *Dictionnaire Kurde-Française*, a small volume containing about 14,000 words, mostly culled from northern dialects, as presented in the works above mentioned.

These are the principal works on the language, supplemented by de Morgan in his *Études Linguistiques*, already mentioned, and by Martin Hoffmann, also noticed above, in the same year.

The following is a list of the published studies and works on the language :—

- CHODZKO, 'Études philologiques sur la langue Kurde (Soleimanie)': *Journal Asiatique*, série v, tome ix, p. 297, 1853.
- BRUGSCH, *Gesandtschaft in Persien*. Leipzig, 1862.
- FRIEDRICH MÜLLER, *Kurmangi-dialect der Kurdensprache*. Vienna, 1864.
- *Kurdisches und syrisches Wörterverzeichnis*. Vienna, 1863.
- RHEA, 'Brief Grammar and Vocabulary of the Kurdish Language of the Hakari Dialect': *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. x, No. 1, 1872.
- LERCH, *Forschungen über die Kurden und iranischen Nordchaldäer*. St. Petersburg, 1857.
- *Obratitsi shritov tipografie i slovolitni Imperatorski Akademii Nauk*. St. Petersburg, 1870.
- PRYM & SOCIN, *Kurdische Sammlungen*. 4 vols. St. Petersburg, 1887.
- JABA, *Recueil de Notices et Récits Kourdes*. St. Petersburg, 1860.
- *Dictionnaire Kurde-Française*. St. Petersburg, 1879.
- JUSTI, *Kurdische Grammatik*. St. Petersburg, 1880.
- WILHELM, *La Langue des Kurdes*. Paris, 1883.
- GARZONI, *Grammatica e Vocabolario della lingua kurda*. 1787.
- HOUTUM-SCHINDLER, *Beiträge zum Kurdischen Wortschatze*. German Oriental Society, 1884, 1888.
- ZIA UD DIN PASHA, *Al Hadia al Ḥamīdiya fi'l lughat ul Akrād*. Constantinople, 1892.
- SOCIN, 'Die Sprache der Kurden,' in the *Grundriss der Iranischen Philologie*, Geiger & Kuhn, tome i, pt. ii, p. 249.
- DE MORGAN, *Mission Scientifique en Perse*, tome v. Paris, 1904.
- KLAPROTH, *Various Studies on Kurdish*. Vienna, 1808.
- HAMMER, *Ueber der Kurdische Sprache und ihre Mundarten*. Vienna, 1814.
- RODIGER & POTT, *Kurdische Studien*. 1840.
- BERESINE, *Recherches sur les dialectes Musulmans*. Casan, 1853.

SANDRECZKI, *Reise nach Mossul und durch Kurdistan nach Urmia, unternommen im Auftrage der Church Missionary Society*. Stuttgart, 1857.

POTT, some articles on Kurdish in *Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*. Detmold.

CHANYKOW, *Vermittelung in Sau'd Bulak*. St. Petersburg, 1856.

The languages of Kurdistan are principally dialects of a main tongue termed by the Kurds *Kurmānjī* or *Kurdmānjī* or *Kurmāngī*, a word probably originally *Kurdmāhī*;¹ and as the syllable *māh* has been thought by some authorities to mean 'Mede'² and produced, where it occurs in the names of places in Kurdistan, in support of the theory that the Kurds are the sons of the Medes, that theory here receives strong and unexpected confirmation, for this peculiarity of the name of the race itself had up to the present remained undetected.

This *Kurmānjī* language is spoken by the Aryan population of a very large area, in numbers calculated at about four to five millions, which has gradually spread wherever there are mountain-sides for the grazing of their flocks and herds, and retreats for their brigands, as has already been indicated.

The bulk of these tribes speak the *Kurmānjī* tongue, and there is through all the various dialects the same construction and radical unity, and wherever the *Kurmānjī* is spoken it is so termed by the Kurds. In the extreme south of Kurdistan the language is spoken which the natives term 'Kurdī' (*Kermānshāhi*, *Kalhur*, *Gūrān*, *Sina*), and which does not show the same affinity to *Kurmānjī* as even the remoter dialects of that language, which at first

¹ Many words ending in *ā* or *āh* in Old Persian appear in Kurdish as *āñg* or *āñj*.

² See Professor Browne's *Literary History of Persia*, vol. i, p. 19.

sight often appear to be further from it than the Kurdi. These Kurdi tongues are to a great extent Perso-Lurish dialects, in which a large number of Kurmānjī words appear and occasionally some verb forms.

Owing to the number of dialects of Kurmānjī, it is impossible always to quote but one word or form for an English equivalent, and the necessity arises of noting the differences between the main branches, which may roughly be stated as Southern Hakkārī and Mukrī (Sauj Bulaq), Bābān, Sulaimānīa for the Southern Group, and Northern Hakkārī and Erzerūm and Bāyazid dialects for the Northern Group, which will be indicated in the text by NG and SG. Unmarked passages and words are those common to both.

Sulaimānīa has some forms peculiar to itself which will be adequately distinguished, and reference will be made to the dialect of Kermānshāh, which, however, cannot properly be termed Kurmānjī. Of the Zāzā and Old Gūrān tongues it is not proposed to treat, as the latter is not Kurdish and the former, though probably a form of Kurdish, is so different as to demand separate notice. Moreover, Zāzā forms but a small portion of the whole, and cannot claim place among Kurmānjī tongues.

No attempt has been made here to describe the various vowel-sounds to which Justi among others devoted so much space, for the differences in sound are so subtle and so slight, and above all so inconstant, that full description can give no rule for pronunciation nor serve any other purpose than display the various distortions of any one vowel-sound possible. I have therefore confined myself to what may be termed the working sounds; the others can only be learned by the student while in actual contact with the Kurds, and then as often as not, having learned

the peculiarities of the vowel-sounds in one dialect, he will find himself quite at sea with another which reverses these and uses others. The working sounds are, however, universally understood, and are really the constant factors. This view finds confirmation in the following: 'M. Justi a traité longuement la phonétique kurde, les voyelles ont une prononciation peu fixe, ce que l'on doit attribuer, au fait, que le Kurde n'a jamais été écrit. Au reste, le même phénomène se présente dans d'autres dialectes.'¹

For the many inaccuracies which must exist in such a first exposition of a hitherto almost untouched tongue all my apologies are tendered, and I can but trust that the student will look leniently upon errors and apparent inconsistencies which are inevitable in a language which boasts so few of its own people who have ever given a thought to the subject themselves. The acquisition of Kurdish in Kurdistan is no easy task, and there have been times when it has been uncertain whether the seeker would not be left with his trove to stiffen upon the cold hills of Kurdistan.

¹ Eugene Wilhelm, *La langue des Kurdes*, p. 5.