THE FIRST NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON THE KURDISH LANGUAGE

The Event
The First North American Conference was an immense success. We achieved record level attendance and established a precedence as a truly international conference. It took place at James Collins conference room on November 5, 2010. The conference was organized by the Kurdish American Education Society (KAES) and co-sponsored by the Center for Near Eastern Studies at UCLA and several other academic institutions.

Participation Statistics
More than 20 speakers from around the world convened at the UCLA James Collins. By rough estimates 180-200 people attended the conference throughout the day. The speakers came from different parts of the world including the U.S, England, Canada, France, and Turkey. Partakers exchanged views and insights as they established contact, forged new ties and expressed their commitment to similar projects in the future.

Conference Program
The conference was a synthesis of individual presentations and panels ranging from the opening involving the organizing body, KAES, the Center for Near Eastern Studies and the Center for World Languages to engaging keynote speakers to interactive panels. The program was richly eclectic with an emphasis on thematically based panels. The opening ceremony included Dr. Amir Sharifi and Mr. Ardishir Rashidi, the president and founder of KAES respectively who welcomed the guests and paid tribute to Dr.Vera Saeedpour and Dr. Hassan Ahmadi as pioneers in Kurdish studies.

Then Dr. Yonar Sabar, on behalf of the UCLA Center for Near Eastern Studies, welcomed the guests.

Dr. Olga Kagan, the UCLA director of the Center for World and Community Languages welcomed the conference, stressing the need for the preservation of heritage languages.

Overview of Kurdish Studies
Dr. Hashem Ahmadzadeh, the director of Kurdish Studies at the University of Exeter, spoke about the young and growing field of Kurdish studies, calling for efforts to help Kurdish studies find their rightful place.

Overview of Linguistics Studies
The renowned Kurdish linguist, Dr. Amir Hassanpour, from the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations, University of Toronto, in addressing the conference through SKYPE, questioned research ethics in the past and the reticence of linguists in the face of a threatened language; he stated that purism...
is limiting the vitality and functionality of the language. He argued that new developments herald the emergence of a new generation of linguists. He called for a democratic, multidialectal approach to include the linguistic and educational rights of Kurmanji speakers and those of other dialects and languages under Kurdish Regional Government (KRG).

Keynote speakers participating were Dr. Jaffer Sheyholislami, the School of Linguistics and Language Studies, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, Dr. Alexandra Jaffe, the editor of Linguistics Anthropology, California State University, Long Beach, Dr. Yonar Sabar, UCLA Center for Near Eastern Studies.

The panels were organized around the following themes:

- language policy and planning
- language and literature
- language, music, and identity
- language standardization and its dilemmas
- language, assessment, education

The panels linked with the above themes; the program also included three special sessions: The Influence of Kurdish on Neo-Aramaic by Dr. Yonar Sabar and the application of a “polynomic” ideology related to language and variation in the context of Corsican by Dr. Alexandra Jaffe and a presentation by Dr. Sheyholislami on language policy and planning in Iran.

The panelists articulated different views and insights and exchanged their research with their colleagues. They established new ties and strengthened the existing ones as they honed their perspectives. The audience enthusiastically participated in the question and answer periods.

**Language and Literature**

Dr. Ahmadzadeh problematized the one dimensional role of language in Kurdish novels and stressed the need for the multilayeredness and dialogic nature of language. Ms. Shayee Khanaka from UC Berkley discussed how the newly acquired political power has made Kurds the object of political jokes in Iraq; Mr. Ali Ashuri author and poet, delineated the characteristics of Literature of Fantastic and its historical embeddeness in ancient Kurdish literature and the ways in which contemporary literature of horror draws on this unique tradition.

**Language Policy and Planning**

The Panel on language planning described various approaches to the study of language planning and the need for more studies on Iran and Turkey; the presenters cast light on the socio-linguistic position of Kurdish in language policy and planning and the social use of the language. Dr. Sheyholislami, one of the keynote speakers, reviewed language policy in Iran and laid the foundation for a probing and engaging panel on language policy and planning by panelists Mr. Christian Sinclair, the assistant director of the Near Eastern Studies, Arizona University, and Mr. OPENGIN Ergin, L’Université de Paris III-Sorbonne Nouvelle, who spoke about the status of Kurdish in Turkey. Language shift and language loss were found to be endemic to the political institutions that restrict the use of Kurdish in social, educational and public domains.

The afternoon session began with Dr. Sabar’s informative and engaging analysis of the influence of Kurdish and Persian on the new-Aramaic through morphological, phonological, and syntactic examples.
Language Standardization and its dilemmas

Dr. Alexandra Jaffe as a keynote speaker cogently argued that any language planning is ideological in marking identities and in terms of its far reaching consequences. Based on her ethnographic work she recommended the adoption of a poynomic system to reflect the every day practices and uses of language in a system of differentiation based on not linguistic but social and multiple standards to ensure unity through uniformity and a pluralistic language policy.

Dr. Karadaghi suggested a Latin based writing system as a neutral and viable alternative to the multiplicity of writing systems used in writing Kurdish, arguing that such a system is more accessible and Kurds do not have any particular emotional attachment to any of these scripts.

Dr. Roshani, through a Powerpoint presentation that he had sent to the conference offered an overview of various approaches to the language issue in Kurdistan while providing a new solution for creation of a standard Kurdish writing system to suit any electronic medium bridging the Kurdish dialectal varieties.

Language, Music, and Identity

Dr. Robert Reigle, Centre for Advanced Studies in Music, Istanbul Technical University retraced the history of Kurdish music production in Turkey from an ethnomusicological perspective, playing examples of earlier and later music recordings, engaging the audience’s attention; Dr. Amir Sharifi’s paper was about Dengbeji folk genre of verbal art, arguing that this ancient practice is now being recontextualized as a vehicle to preserve, revive and reclaim different aspects of Kurdish life. Dr. Hisyar Ozsoy, from Department of Anthropology, The University of Texas , Austin through insightful and informative examples, showed how the Kurdish use of the letters W, X and Q in writing --letters that do not exist in the Turkish alphabet and are legally prosecuted as “criminal letters”- have gained a quite rebellious character, scandalizing the Turkish state.,

Educational Linguistics Panel

The panel discussed the educational challenges that teaching and learning Kurdish involves. Dr. Chyet, the prominent scholar through his prerecorded talk, explained his vision of a Kurdish educational system in which Kurmanji and Sorani are both taught to all Kurdish schoolchildren on the basis of mutual respect between the two dialects, as well as other dialects and languages of Kurdistan. Dr. Chyet’s talk was well-received by the audience.

Mr. Norman Leonard, Director of Outreach, Language Acquisition Resource Center San Diego State University, spoke about the largely untapped resources that heritage language speakers have. He offered a model of community-based language schools that have been successful in San Diego County for languages that have never before had a sustainable program.

Mrs. Zuzan Barwari, in a thorough overview of the drawbacks of the existing sources on curriculum and assessment in the U.S, addressed the pressing need for developing authentic and authoritative teaching and learning materials, curriculum, and assessment instruments. Ms. Laura Shepherd, Senior Linguist AECOM, Federal Services Group, National Security Programs Language Research Center offered compelling arguments for the use of authentic and discourse based materials as a vital resource for language teaching and learning.
Creativity Contest
Murat Gundig was announced as the winner of the creativity contest for his original and penetrating style of writing in Kurnmanji.

The conference also displayed works by famous Kurdish artist, Sardar Zuhdi, who had dedicated 30% of any proceeds from the sale of his artwork to the conference.

Conference Summary
The conference covered a wide variety of topics; it is clear from the participants’ comments that they were highly satisfied with the conference. All participants appreciated the interactive and dynamic nature of the discussions from the panelists and presenters. They had found the topics relevant and rich; similarly, the presenters appreciated the audience as being very cordial and responsive. Based on the number of participants, it was clear the conference was well received in its entirety. Most of the talks shed light on current trends in Kurdish linguistics studies as most speakers stressed the need for novel approaches in conducting research. They also offered suggestions on how to broaden and diversity the scope of Kurdish studies, in general, and linguistic studies, in particular. The reception held after the conference, gave the participants the opportunity to mingle and get to know each other better.
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Friday, November 5, 2010
9:00 AM to 6:00 PM
UCLA Collins Conference Room
James West Alumni Center

Sponsors

UCLA G.E. von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies
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UCLA Center for World Languages
The Center for Language, Interaction, and Culture
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Department of Anthropology, California State University, Long Beach
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In Living Memory of Dr. Vera Saeedpour