
Exploring the Interplay between Language Policies, Revitalization Activities, and Socio-Environmental Transformations in the City of Erbil

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Résumé

The geographical focus of our study is the city of Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Erbil has a millennia-old history and is inhabited by a diverse and multilingual population, including Turkmen, Kurds, northeastern Neo-Aramaic-speaking Christians and Jews. While the Jews were forced to leave in 1950/51, the ethno-linguistic composition of the population today is characterized by a growing number of Arabs and immigrants/expats from all over the world. Migration has thus always had a lasting impact on the social structure and the linguistic ecology of the city, which is now facing severe disruptions caused by geopolitical changes and environmental crises. These social and environmental transitions are interrelated, since linguistic diversity corresponds to a high degree of cultural and biological diversity. According to Dodman (2014) the correspondence is a causal relationship, as the knowledge (Traditional Environmental Knowledge (TEK)) necessary for biodiversity conservation is encoded in local languages. In our contribution, we see the shift in linguistic diversity as a key indicator of social, political and environmental change.

Erbil, like the entire Middle East, is severely affected by climate change, which means an increase in drought and heat in this region (Adamo et al. 2018; Forti et al. 2023). Global warming is thus becoming a major factor in demographic change: Thousands of middle-class Arab families from southern Iraq are seeking refuge from the extreme summer heat in the south in the cooler but predominantly Kurdish north. Access to and distribution of water resources, a long-standing political issue in the region, has become more explosive in light of current developments. Water is now an instrument of power, driving gentrification and highlighting the relationship between resource dynamics, urban development and linguistic ecology. The environmental crisis intersects with increasing migratory movements, which in turn affect local ethnolinguistic diversity and put pressure on small minority languages, but also lead to multifaceted negotiation processes and revitalization activities at all levels of society, from official language policies to family language use strategies (Blommaert 2018).

In the context of the city of Erbil, we examine (a) the geopolitical and political economy: the neoliberal restructuring of the region, (b) the restructuring of society due to internal and international migration, war and displacement and the associated changes in resource and environmental management, (c) the impact of social and political-economic changes on the linguistic ecology of the region and the associated social and linguistic inequalities.

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Methodologically, we draw on the analysis of census data, which highlights the impact of migration movements on local linguistic minorities. This approach is triangulated by a linguistic landscape study that shows how communities are represented in the public sphere, how visibility is negotiated between local and new communities, and how linguistic communities are disappearing (Woldemariam & Lanza 2015). At the same time, the localization of languages and varieties in the city allows us to draw conclusions about their speakers' access to resources such as medical treatment and education. We will give examples of historical and recent linguistic hybridization and language loss leading to shifts in resource and environmental management, and explore the complex interplay between these phenomena. At the same time, the linguistic landscape shows creative forms of language reclamation, which we will analyze in the context of official language policy.

Mots-Clés: geopolitical economy, minorities, changing linguistic ecologies, language policies, reclamation activities