

“May the Bread Shred Me into Tiny Bits” – Oaths in Kurmanji Kurdish
from the Van Region

“Ekmek Beni Ufalsın” Van Çevres Kırmançi Kürtçesinden Yeminler

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss the content and performance of oaths among Kurds from the province of Van in eastern Turkey. Kurds in Van are Kurmanji Kurdish speakers, and particularly the older generation speak mostly or exclusively Kurdish among each other. In mixed-age settings, there is a lot of code-switching between Kurdish and Turkish, and many children who have grown up in Van speak Turkish to each other. This discussion focuses on oaths in Kurmanji, particularly because certain types of oaths are more common among the older people.

Keywords: Oaths, Kurmanji Kurdish, Van.

Özet

Bu makalede Türkiye'nin doğusunda Van yöresi Kürtlerinin yeminleri içerik ve kullanım açısından incelenmektedir. Van Kürtleri Kırmançi lehçeci konuşmaktadır. Yaşlılar aralarında konuşurken Kürtçeyi özellikle ve yaygın olarak kullanmaktadırlar. Van'da Türkçe konuşan çocuklarla büyüyen her yaştan Kürdün dilinde Türkçe ve Kürtçe alışverişleri görülmektedir. Bu çalışma, daha çok yaşlılar arasında yaygın olan yemin tipleri üzerinde odaklanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yemin, Kırmançi Kürtçesi, Van.

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In this article, I discuss the content and performance of oaths among Kurds from the province of Van in eastern Turkey. Kurds in Van are Kurmanji Kurdish speakers, and particularly the older generation speak mostly or exclusively Kurdish among each other. In mixed-age settings, there is a lot of code-switching between Kurdish and Turkish, and many children who have grown up in Van speak Turkish to each other. This discussion focuses on oaths in Kurmanji,¹ particularly because certain types of oaths are more common among the older people.

Who performs oaths and in which context?

An adaption of linguist and anthropologist Hymes' framework for discussing speech acts (1974: 55-60) can be used to place oaths in a socio-cultural context.² Hymes talks about "participants", i.e. interlocutors and possibly also an additional audience. Just as Vancı-Osam found that the rural Turkish population was more likely to use curses (1998: 829), Kurdish oaths, particularly the more elaborate ones, are found more in the village, especially among the elder generation. Many oaths are full of religious connotations, and it has been noted that it is more common among the older rural Kurdish population to use religiously influenced speech (Yalçın-Heckmann 1991: 110). Both men and women may perform oaths.

A quick glance at a Turkish-Kurdish dictionary reveals that both Turkish and Kurdish contain a multitude of expressions with religious content. The Turkish-Kurdish dictionary published by the Istanbul Kurdish Institute, for instance, has nearly three columns of utterances related to *Allah* (God in Arabic/Turkish) translated into Kurdish and nearly one column of utterances related to *Xwedê* (God in Kurdish) translated into Turkish. Some of these utterances are oaths, some curses, and some blessings. In informal conversations with bilingual Kurdish interlocutors, I have often noted the ease with which they have found the equivalent for examples of these three speech acts in the other language. There is obviously a great degree of shared culture based on religion and/or geographical coexistence. Although interlocutors from Van themselves may say that

1 Kurdish spelling follows the rules set out by Bedir Xan and Lescot (2000) and Bedir Xan (n.d.). A Turkish-Kurdish dictionary by Farqînî was used (2007).

² Hymes suggested the mnemonic SPEAKING to consider setting and scene, participants, ends, act sequence, key, instrumentalities, norms and genre of different discourse (1974).

Muslims should not swear oaths and that swearing a lot of oaths decreases the credibility of a person, plenty of oaths can be found in everyday speech, particularly among the older generation.

The settings in which oaths are performed range from joking conversation to the solemn swearing to the fact that a deed was not done or done. The audience understands intuitively whether to roll their eyes at yet another exaggerated outburst of oaths related to a humorous or unimportant matter, or whether tensions are running high and much is at stake. The drama of the performance, be it serious or joking, may be increased through ceremonial nonverbal actions (Austin 1962: 76, cf. Vancı-Osam 1998: 82), such as pointing at or touching certain objects, touching someone in the audience for extra emphasis (e.g. clutching someone's arm), looking someone in the eyes, or raising one's arm and hand for extra emphasis.

Types of Oaths

I would now like to present examples of oaths categorised according to their content. Different ways of swearing oaths can be identified. First, there are oaths that involve pointing at or touching quite concrete objects in the immediate surroundings; second, oaths might be short exclamations or phrases that evoke sacred things, events or persons held dear; third, oaths can be a recitation of bad things that should befall speakers if they have told a lie.

1. Oaths with Concrete Objects

In order to make an oath more emphatic, whether in jest or deadly seriousness, the person performing the oath can point at or touch certain objects, such as water from the Zamzam well from Mecca (*ava zemzemê*) or a prayer rug (*sicade*). Very conventional are oaths with reference to the Qur'an. The performer may exclaim:

Quran, kitêb! ("On the Qur'an, on the book!")

or, touching a Qur'an, say:

Welehî! (literally, "In the name of Allah", meaning "I swear")

or swear, in a longer, more dramatic version:

Welehî, bilehî û tilehî!

In the village homes I visited in Van province, the Qur'an was often kept in hand sewn cloth bags with a long shoulder strap and hung high on a nail in the wall to avoid people touching the Qur'an without having undergone their ritual ablutions (*destnimêj*) and to make sure that the Qur'an was always kept above the level of people's waistline. The bag itself could also be used as an object to swear on:

Kirasê Quranê! ("On the bag of the Qur'an!")

Books with some religious writing in Arabic or the ubiquitous tear-off calendars (which contain information about religious feast days, personages and prayers) may also be used to strengthen the effect of an oath. In addition, pictures of the fourth caliph Ali, the cousin of the Prophet Muhammed, are very popular in the Kurdish village I visited, despite the inhabitants being Sunni and not Alevi Muslims.³ These pictures could also be evoked in oaths. The village mosque, literally "the house of Allah" (*mala Xwedê*) was also a point of reference, as in:

Mala Xwedê min nekir! ("On the mosque, I didn't do it!")

Bread is also an object that is considered sacred. Children are taught not to drop or step on bread, not to waste it and not to throw it away. I have often seen children in Van picking up a piece of bread, kissing it, and then touching it to their forehead to make up for it having been dropped. It is thus not surprising that bread can be evoked, too, often being touched or pointed at as well.

Vê nanê helal! ("On this helal bread!")

2. Objects, Events or Dead Persons

A lot of the exclamations in this category make reference to texts in the Qur'an:

Ayet! ("On the verse in the Qur'an!")

Sî û sê cizûyê Quranê ("On the 33 sections of the Qur'an!")

Yasîn! ("On the Yasin verse of the Qur'an!")

Other exclamations refer to holy times or religious practices:

Meha remezanê! ("On the month of Ramazan!")

³ Because the depiction of the Prophet Muhammed is not allowed, perhaps the depiction of his relative and contemporary offers people a focal point for their religious affections (Grabolle-Çeliker 2012).

Sê mehên bimbarek! (“On the three holy months!”, referring to Şaban, Recep and Ramazan)

Nîmêj! (“On the daily prayer!”)

Rojî! (“On the ritual fast!”, referring to the daylight fast during the month of Ramazan)

Oaths can also be sworn on Allah, the Prophet Muhammed, or his cousin Ali:

Sê qesem navê Xwedê! (“I swear thrice on Allah’s name”)

Xwedê ser min ra! (“On Allah above me!”)

Serê Hezretî Elî! (“On Ali!”)

Qebra pêxember! (“On the grave of the Prophet!”)

Also invoked can be Fatma, the daughter of the Prophet and the wife of Ali:

Qebra Hezretî Fatê! (“On Fatma’s grave!”)

In a variation on these, Allah or other revered persons can be called upon as witnesses:

Xwedê/Pêxember/Hezretî Elî şihadê min e! (“With Allah/the Prophet/Ali as my witness!”)

Other oaths that interlocutors listed for me or that I heard were related to deceased persons in their life, predominantly the father. Death (in the form of graves), blood and suffering seem to increase the sacredness and intensity of the oath. Although they are quite dramatic, I have also witnessed them being used in joking contexts:

Qebra bavê min/ Gora bavê min! (“On my father’s grave!”)

Serê bavê min! (“On my father’s head!”)

Bi xwîna bavê min! (“On my father’s blood!”)

Bi kefenê bavê min! (“On my father’s shroud!”)

Bi birîna bavê min! (“On my father’s wound!”)

Bi serê azîze min! (“On someone I love very much!”)

Another group of oaths referred to marriage:

Nîkaha min! (“On my betrothal!”)

Namûs û nîkaha min! (“On my sexual honour and betrothal!”)

Nîkaha bavê min! (“On my father’s betrothal!”)

3. Invocation of Disaster

For this type of oath, I would like to make the point that oaths as a speech act genre can stand in a relationship with curses. Nearly 100 years ago, Westermarck pointed this out:

An oath is a curse in the wide sense of the term; it is a conditional self-imprecation, a curse by which a person calls down upon himself some evil in the event of what he says not being true.

(1926: 492)

The type of oath discussed below invokes disaster upon the speaker should he or she have been telling lies. Oaths can thus be analysed as curses where the addressor and the addressee are the same person (Vancı-Osam 1998: 78). Blessings are another speech act genre that is related to oaths and curses; indeed, they can be seen as an inversion of both of these (Kratz 1989: 63). Thus, people may curse others by wishing them misfortune, swear an oath by threatening themselves with such misfortune if they tell lies or do wrong, and bless someone by wishing them protection from such misfortune.

There are many relatively formulaic oaths, curses, and blessings, as testified by the list in the Kurdish-Turkish dictionary mentioned above. However, among my interlocutors there was agreement that some middle-aged and elderly village women had a particular talent for creating their own oaths in the form of curses addressed to themselves (cf. Vancı-Osam 1998: 74). The dramatic content of some of the oaths below allows the reader to imagine the same formula used to utter curses that are meant to be devastating.

In this type of oath, some of the objects mentioned in the first category of oaths reappear, as can be seen in the following examples. Unsurprisingly, there are references to the Qur'an and other religious objects:

Quran per per xenîmî min be! ("May the Qur'an strike me page by page!")

Perê teqwîma xenîmî min be! ("May the page of the calendar strike me!")

Ziyaret li min bixe! ("May the holy grave strike me!")

Bread, and its main ingredient, wheat, are also considered to have divine and devastating force:

Nan min pirtî pirtî ke! ("May the bread shred me into tiny bits!")

Genim xenîmî min be! (“May the wheat strike me!”)

The sacredness of bread is clearly related to its role as basic foodstuff in a society that has been predominantly rural, and it is therefore not surprising that fruitfulness and possessions in general are threatened in emphatic oaths (and of course also in very emphatic curses):

Bereketa mala min bireve! (“May the abundance of my home disappear!”)

Xwedê malê min bi min nede xwarin! (“May Allah not let me eat my possessions!”)

Xwedê malê min e şîrîn belav bike! (“May God destroy my most precious belongings!”)

Some of the most dramatic examples of oaths that I was given call for the death of the father, brother or son or disaster to strike them. In a rural society where women marry into patrilocal patrilineages, where most women have not been financially independent of their husbands and can expect little support from the welfare state in old age, widowhood, or separation, fathers, brothers, and sons represent the only security that middle-aged and elderly women have had. The importance of male relatives is exemplified in a blessing I often heard older women utter:

Xwedê kure tê bihêle! (“May Allah spare your son!”)

Thus, inversely, oaths are uttered that threaten the existence of these male relatives or the continuance of their support:

Kurê min bimire! (“May my son die!”)

Bav birayê min bimire! (“May my father and brother die!”)

Ez xêrê birayê xwe nebinim! (“May I not benefit from my brother!”)

Finally, some oaths called Allah’s general wrath or even death down upon the speaker, should he or she be caught in a lie:

Xwedê min dêran ke! (“May God devastate me!”)

Xwedê min poşman ke! (“May God make me regret it!”)

Xwelî li serê min be! (“May the soil be on my head!”, i.e. “May I die and be buried!”)

Performance

Hymes draws our attention to the manner in which speech acts are performed through his reference to “norms”. The oaths that I heard and/or collected from interlocutors show a spectrum from the relatively formulaic to the more inventive. Indeed, when recalling certain more unusual oaths, interlocutors would also remember certain individuals who used them and were able to describe the manner in which they were performed.

As touched upon earlier, oaths can be in different “keys” (Hymes 1974), too. Whether in jest or in seriousness, oaths are performed with animation, gestures, and a raised voice. The person performing them may be the focus of attention already because she or he is entertaining a room full of people, and the oaths are one additional item in their repertoire to intensify the story or the joke. Particularly before the advent of television in the 1980s, story-telling was highly valued and some older or deceased women and men are remembered fondly as talented entertainers. The oath was and is an integral part of such story-telling. In joking contexts, it seems from my observations and conversations that some individuals are accorded more liberties to make fun of others. They may use oaths to swear, for instance, that they saw so-and-so doing such-and-such, and there can be a fine line between general amusement and someone taking offence (*xeyîdîn*). In both stories and entertaining conversation, then, oaths do not really serve the purpose of confirming the truth value of claims; rather, they add drama for an audience that is willing to listen to the speaker and suspend disbelief anyway. When an oath is uttered in great seriousness, however, the aim is not to draw more attention to the speaker; rather, the truth value of the speaker’s assertions is sought to be increased.

The New Generation

Many Kurdish children in Van province grow up around elders who use a lot of oaths, and so it is not surprising that their speech can also be littered with them. I have often witnessed children who may well have done something wrong afterwards swearing on the Qur’an, its cloth bag, or on bread, that they were innocent. These material objects are still very much part of children’s daily life. Bread is still one of the main foodstuffs, and many children learn to read and respect the Qur’an in yearly summer courses.

Depending on whom children talk to and their own fluency in Kurdish, these oaths can be performed in Kurdish or Turkish. Typical Turkish versions are:

Ekmek çarpsın! (“May bread strike me!”)

Vallahi! (“I swear!”)

Kuran çarpsın! (“May the Qur’an strike me!”)

However, it seems that the use of the more dramatic oaths of the third category is in decline.

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