Indexing Language and Identity: Kurds of Turkey in London

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This paper examines the intersection of language, identity and language ideologies in relation to national, regional, religious and gender identities among Kurdish-, Turkish- and English-speaking multilingual Kurds of Turkey in the UK who are learning Kurmanji-Kurdish as their heritage language in community-based language classes in London.

The central concern of this paper is to explore the ways in which language is constructed as a salient marker of Kurdish national identity in the UK diaspora. The process of Turkey's accession to the EU, along with greater cultural and linguistic demands of Kurds, has foregrounded the significance of language as a means of democratization and conflict resolution. The armed conflict between the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and the Turkish state which has been a problem since the 1980s is currently undergoing peace negotiations via a turbulent ‘resolution process’ (since 2009), tantamount to the ‘peace process’ initiated in 2012, where language and identity became an important part of the political negotiations between the PKK and the Turkish state. These macro-political developments have had a great impact on the emerging Kurdish language classes in the UK.

In this paper I seek to examine how historical and current political processes in Turkey are negotiated in Kurdish language classrooms in London. More specifically I demonstrate how national identities (Anderson, 2006; Hobsbawm, 1996; Joseph, 2004) as well as regional, religious and gender identities are indexed (Silverstein, 2003) and hierarchized (Omoniyi, 2006) in classroom interactions and semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, I demonstrate how institutional aspects (i.e. community-based language learning) of identity are indexed through a systematic analysis of ethnographic data, which predominantly focuses on languages and identities using Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS) (Gumperz, 2001) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2010; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997).