Linking Social Networks and Attainment in an L2 Accent: Kurds Acquiring Turkish

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1. Introduction

Researchers have held many factors accountable for their effects on the learning and production of a language. Several early sociolinguistic studies attempted to answer significant questions about the interaction of social factors and language. Some studies, like the ones conducted by Labov (1972) on variation in speakers' accent, and Scovel (1988) and Guiora et al. (1972) in language acquisition studies focused on pronunciation as a strong linguistic marker of a speaker's cultural identification. In addition, Bourdieu's (1991) theory about the symbolic power of language and Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory have also been influential in theorizing about the connection between social factors and language, which in turn has affected the field of language teaching.

In order to study socialization patterns and the degree of attainment of a language group, we need to understand the community's life regarding social, cultural, historical, and economical realities. The situation of the Kurdish language in Turkey has a long history of clashes and controversies dating back to the Ottoman Empire. While the Ottomans, under the Millet System, did not directly outlaw the use of minority languages in general, like other minorities, Kurds were able to use their native language (Hassanpour et al, 1996). From the inception of the modern Turkish republic in 1923, government policy sought to create a national identity under one nation and one official language; Turkish. To varying degrees over the past 80 years, it has been illegal to speak, write, publish, broadcast, or essentially communicate in minority languages in government offices (Hassanpour, 1992; May, 2001). Although, recently there have many improvements in the Kurdish language rights as a result of the attempts made by Turkey regarding the European Union membership, Kurdish children still have to attain high level competency in Turkish in order to receive education and survive in the community.

Based on previous research on similar linguistic and cultural environments, we can make assumptions about Kurds in Turkey. We can expect that in order to perform well in school and attain access to higher education, Kurds have had to acquire complete fluency in the Turkish language. Moreover, in order to impress educators and future employers, they have had to appear to be as Turkish as possible. For those who have chosen to integrate into the system within Turkish-dominated network zones for the sake of the afore-mentioned instrumental values, motivation for acquiring absolute fluency in Turkish may have been great. These groups of Kurds may have had weaker ties to the Kurdish communities of the country, have had less of an incentive to maintain the use of the Kurdish language, and may generally not have been able to resist the shift to Turkish that

the formal educational setting encourages. Such structural configurations help us see how nation-states directly and indirectly foster language shift and loss.

As for those who do not seek higher education, life has not been easy. Following the same research and theoretical explanations, their language proficiency may not have exceeded a simplified form of Turkish. These groups of Kurds may subsequently have stronger ties with Kurdish-speaking networks, and therefore more incentive to maintain their use of Kurdish and resist the State's goal of their attaining Turkish to a native-like level. They may have restricted their interactions to Kurdish-only or Kurdish-dominated communities with remarkably little motivation to learn Turkish, resulting in a lack of identification and integration into the Turkish-speaking community, and they are socially and economically marginalized.

2. Previous studies on social networks

In order to understand fully the relationships between language and social categories with respect to native speakers' patterned use of language, Milroy (1987) drew on the concept of social network theory, a method of modeling behaviors that arose in sociology. The concepts of social network theory grew out of the need for a set of procedures "to examine the specifics of local practice and local conditions, which are sensitive to the local social categories and locally contracted ties with which speakers operate in their everyday lives" (Milroy & Gordon, 2003). Social networks are a way of "capturing the dynamics underlying speakers' variable language behaviors" rather than as social categories parallel to class, gender, or ethnicity (Milroy & Gordon, 2003). Milroy's goal, with a focus on variability within language practices of native speakers, was to integrate research on linguistic and social variation at individual and community levels with research that relates language variation to social class; that is to integrate micro and macro levels and show that they embody complementary rather than conflicting perspectives.

Network theory turns to exchange theory to define types of network structures in order to understand to what degree these networks have influence on individuals' linguistic behaviors. *Exchange networks,* including family and close friends, and *interactive networks,* including acquaintances. *Passive networks* are the most distant networks (Milroy, 1992). Social networks act as mechanisms for exchanging goods and services (Milroy, 1987). "A fundamental postulate of network analysis is that individuals create personal communities to provide a meaningful framework for solving the problems of daily life (p. 115)" Individuals rely on exchange networks for emotional and material support, and though individuals may frequently interact with interactive networks, they do not rely on these ties. Passive ties enable a person to access a range of valuable information, goods, and services that might not be available in interactive networks (Lybeck, 2002).

Individuals within exchange networks are likely to use the same linguistic variants as their network members whereas interactive networks are unlikely to enforce norms and are open to variation and change (Lybeck, 2002). Similarly, networks that are made up of strong (dense and multiplex) ties support localized linguistic norms and resist pressures from competing external norms. In terms of a bilingual system with dominant and minority languages, strong ties and exchange networks support the existence of minority languages. However, when networks are weak or weaken, conditions arise for language shift to occur (Milroy & Gordon, 2003). Hence, a network analysis can help to account for why a particular community successfully supports a linguistic system that stands in opposition to a legitimized, mainstream set of norms, and why another system might be less focused or more sensitive to external influences (Milroy & Gordon, 2003).

Many studies have found that second language learners who are able to engage in

exchange networks with native speakers will experience less distance than learners who do not have native speakers in their exchange networks, thereby improving the formers' L2. Gullestad (1991) made clear that in cultures like Norway in which networks are very cohesive and close-knit, it is highly likely that the L2 learner will not engage in exchange networks, thereby naturally increasing the social distance. These issues also have direct implications for potential social factors such as cultural patterns, cohesiveness, enclosure, and attitudinal and motivational orientations.

Lybeck (2002) proposed the use of Milroy's (1987) Social Network Theory to operationalize the degree of social distance experienced by the learner. Lybeck used Milroy's claims that linguistic norms are influenced by a person's relationships with others via strong or weak exchange and interactive and passive ties to study the second language pronunciation of Americans living in Norway and learning Norwegian based on Schumann's acculturation theory. However, Lybeck eliminated the distinction between the social network theory and Schumann's acculturation theory, asserting that many psychological variables can be understood as social constructs and that many social variables differ among members of the same group. She combined acculturation theory and social networks labeling them "cultural distance."

Milroy considered the most significant relationships to be those of *kin*, *work*, *neighborhood*, and *friendship* in her Belfast study of language variation within English (Milroy & Gordon, 2003). Depending on the factors, these four types of relationships likely have an effect on the density and multiplexity of the networks of Kurds in Turkey. For instance, Kurds historically have been organized according to a tribal structure, where kin is the most important tie influencing life decisions. In modern times, the tribal structures have loosened but not disappeared. In rural areas, family is still considered to be very important, with a network of relatives living in the same village or neighboring villages. In these rural areas, most of the work is agricultural, where one's neighbors are also the people with whom one works and whom one considers as friends (multiplexity), and every person in the village knows one another in some capacity (density). In spite of the fact that there is institutional pressure from the government imposing the Turkish language, in rural areas people speak Kurdish in their homes, in the street, on their farms, and so forth.

3. This Study

In this study, I aim to explore how socially constructed socialization patterns of second language learners were related to the degree of existing social solidarity or the distance between the native and target language communities. I am particularly interested in how their exchange, interactive, and passive networks relate to the degree that they attain a native-like regional Turkish accent.

Pronunciation in standard Turkish is rather simple because it follows certain phonetic patterns with all letters having the same value in most situations. Granted that Turkish is a vowel-harmony language, there are rules regarding the order in which vowels may follow each other. The Turkish alphabet contains all the letters of the English alphabet except for q, x, and w, and has some additional letters. Generally most letters are pronounced similar to English letters with a few exceptions.

4. Methods

The major question for this paper is whether there is a relationship between socio-psychological factors and the phonological aspects of second language acquisition in the specific case studied. I hypothesized, with socio-constructivism acting as background

learning theory, that social network theory could account for the acquisition of a regional Turkish accent (RTA) to varying degrees. My overall quantitative research design, as far as social networks were concerned, was a descriptive cross-sectional design based on five levels of accent native-likeness. Some qualitative analysis was also used for richer descriptions and triangulation purposes.

4.1. Setting

My setting, the city of Erzurum, has a population of around 650,000 with a medium socio-economic level, which would correspond to the working class in the US, (according to the socio-economic rankings of cities in Turkey) and a university of 42,000 students; it is a fairly traditional and historical city in the eastern part of Turkey. The Kurdish population is reported to be approximately 16% of the city (TUIK, 2006).

Erzurum does not have a history of extremism in terms of the long-lasting ethnic clashes between the Kurdish separatists and the Turkish government despite the significant Kurdish population in the city. Given the study objectives, this project could not possibly have been conducted in settings in which inter-cultural interactions were either socio-psychologically denied to people or where one culture had entirely assimilated into the other.

4.2. Participants

The participants in this study included 121 students at three public middle and high schools in Erzurum, Turkey. Participants' ages ranged from 13 to 18. Sixty (49.5%) participants were from middle schools and fell between the age range of 13-14 while the ages of participants from high schools (n= 61, 50.5%) ranged from 16 to 18. There were more male (n= 65, 53.7%) than female (n= 56, 46.3%) participants in the study. All participants were ethnically Kurdish and had been born and lived in Erzurum all of their lives. They had received all their education in Turkish. Only seven participants had spent some time in another city other than Erzurum, and the amount of time ranged from one week to two months. The descriptive statistics are presented in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. Distribution of Participants across Gender, Age and Accent Ratings

R. Levels	Girls	Boys	M. School	H. School	Total
1	2	19	13	8	21
2	6	27	17	16	33
3	15	11	14	12	26
4	19	5	11	13	24
5	14	3	5	12	17
Total	**56**	**65**	**60**	**61**	**121**

Considering the overall poor economic situation of the city, participants were mostly from low socio-economic backgrounds. Participants were selected on the basis of random sampling, and qualitative descriptions came from the population that was representative of the young Kurdish speaking people in the city. Participants were from three schools that

were ethnically diverse in order to make sure that all kinds of social networks were available to them.

4.3. Research questions

This study answers the following research questions:

1. How native-like is the participants' accent when speaking Turkish as rated on a global scale from 1 to 5? In order to understand participants' proficiency in their L2 accent, it was of utmost importance that the degree of their accent in terms of native-likeness was determined and categorized accordingly before other data collection.

2. What are the social networks of the Kurdish-speaking community, and how do these network zones relate to speakers' level of regional Turkish accent? As another aspect of the interaction analysis of the Kurds in the region, I asked this question to help determine the density and multiplexity of my participants' social networks, providing more data on the background of Kurds' integration patterns and social interactions.

3. Do age and gender also relate to level of regional Turkish accent? Considering the studies on gender as well as age effects with regard to social-psychological factors in second language acquisition, I was interested in seeing how these effects came into play in interaction with various socialization patterns involved in this study.

4.4. Data collection

Both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were used in this study. I collected data over the course of one year using judge ratings, questionnaires, observations, audio-recordings, and interviews. Five judges, ethnically Turkish and native speakers of the regional Turkish accent, rated participants' recorded speech samples. For training, in cooperation with a regional Turkish accent expert, I created sample recordings for each native-like level of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and had each judge listen to these recordings. In the training session, we explained what made each level different from the other levels. As a participant observer, I collected my data overtly (Merriam, 1998). For rigorous and conclusive implications and data triangulation purposes of both qualitative and quantitative methods, I also used my field notes as well as anecdotal records as secondary data collection sources.

4.5. Data analysis

The first part of my data, the Background Information Questionnaire, was analyzed in order to determine if a student was eligible to be a participant in the study as far as the participant selection criteria were concerned. The rest of the data was analyzed after all data had been collected. Then, I analyzed the judges' scores on "native-likeness" based on the scale from 1-5, with 1 meaning "definitely non-native speaker" and 5 meaning "definitely native speaker" of a regional Turkish accent.

As for the social network variable, first the density and multiplexity of the participants' non-family exchanges, the interactive and passive network scores, were analyzed based on the social network questionnaire using descriptive percentages. In order to make analyses more consistent both across participants and rating levels, each participant's non-family networks were restricted to seven and family networks included five contacts. Participants were asked to indicate the structure and content of their

networks in terms of with whom, when, and how often they interacted with people who were outside their family circle. They were to note the nature of this relationship and which language typically was used in their relationship. This part of my data enabled me to calculate density and multiplexity of each of my participant's exchange, interactive, and passive networks and to report together my findings by groupings of individuals in each accent rating level.

Then, the analysis of the nature and content of their family networks were provided. Finally, some qualitative analysis of interview data and observations were conducted. First, I looked for possible gender and age relations that might correlate with native-like accent. Interview data were transcribed and analyzed separately for each independent variable. Due to the nature of the private information gathered through the follow-up questions, only edited parts of data were included in this report.

5. Findings and Discussion

Research Question 1: Variation in Accent.

Bongaerts (1999) and Birdsong (2004) used global accent ratings to determine the native-likeness of the foreign accents of L2 French learners who were over 20 years of age. Their findings suggested that variation in accents of the speakers of different L1s (e.g., English and Dutch in learning French) was not uncommon. They found that there was a high level of uniformity among raters in determining variation in terms of the assessment of accent native-likeness using a global rating scale.

Similarly, my findings suggested that the Turkish accent of the Kurdish young individuals in this study also varied. The inter-rater reliability coefficients indicated that there was a very significant level of agreement among the judges in determining different levels of accent native-likeness. Considering the fact that my participants were from a younger age group, based on previous research on the Critical Period Hypothesis (Birdsong, 1999), finding more variation in their Turkish accent was also not surprising.

Research Question 2: Social Networks and Accent Native-Likeness.

Several previous studies revealed that second language learners who were able to engage in exchange networks (close friends with mutually exclusive emotional and material support) with the target language community experienced less distance than learners who did not have native speakers in their exchange networks, which improved their attainment of an L2 (Lybeck, 2002; Schumann, 1978). However, some researchers suggested more culture-specific results. For example, Gullestad (1991) pointed out that in cultures like Norway in which networks are very cohesive and close-knit, it is highly likely that the L2 learner will not engage in exchange networks with the L2 community, thereby naturally increasing the social distance.

In studying the possible relationship between success in acquiring pronunciation in Norwegian and these Americans' exchange, interactive, and passive networks, Lybeck (2002) found similar results to my findings. Note that she studied only nine participants during the course of less than a year. Therefore, her findings suggest more about how the participants felt during their interactions with the native Norwegian speakers, and their experience in creating and maintaining networks with the target language community, rather than ultimate attainment in the L2.

My study does not suggest that the participants who integrated into the Turkish-speaking community through mutually exclusive social networks attained a more native-

like Turkish accent simply because they had more comprehensible input opportunities. However, consistent with the findings of Lybeck (2002) and Gullestad (1991), results did show that participants who attained a more native-like accent also had more Turkish-speaking networks, suggesting that Turkish-speaking networks were one of the integral contributors of their L2 accent.

Findings indicated that Kurdish young learners with less native-like Turkish accent interacted more with their exchange networks (close friends with mutually exclusive emotional and material support) than participants with more native-like accent. This was mainly because many of the interactive (less frequent acquaintances without reciprocal emotional and material exchange, e.g., a teacher) and most of the passive networks (least frequent distant acquaintances, e.g., friends of friends in interactive networks) were Turkish, and these participants had fewer Turkish-speaking networks in general. Results for Level 1 and Level 5 participants supported Bortoni-Ricardo's (1985) and Lippi-Green's (1989) findings that exchange networks are better predictors of language behavior than other kinds of networks. Furthermore, results indicated that participants with more native-like accent were likely to have more Turkish contacts with whom they interacted regularly outside their ethnic community allegiances.

My findings are consistent with Lybeck's (2002) conclusions that there is a positive relationship between maintaining more integration and exchange networks (close friends with mutually exclusive emotional and material support) with the target language community and success in the attainment in an L2. Nevertheless, many of my participants had multiplex Turkish networks, but none of Lybeck's (2002) participants had such networks with the target language community. Also, passive networks (least frequent distant acquaintances, e.g., friends of friends in interactive networks) as they relate to native-like accent have not been studied before.

It is also interesting to find that Kurdish young learners who had more Turkish-speaking networks (Levels 4 and 5) also received higher native-like accent ratings. However, it is not clear whether they engaged in more Turkish-speaking networks because they were motivated to learn Turkish or whether maintaining such Turkish-speaking networks contributed to their motivation in learning Turkish.

Research Question 3: Social Networks, Gender and Accent Native-Likeness.

Several studies found that women outperformed men in learning a second language because they had different motivations and attitudes about the target language (Spolsky, 1989).Whereas some researchers found that women had restricted access to the target language and therefore attained a limited proficiency, others found the opposite. For example, Zentella (1987) found that Puerto Rican women in New York not only code-switched between English and Spanish more than men but they were also better speakers of both languages. She found that although women were the cultural mediators between the two language communities, they showed greater loyalty to their native language than men. Finally, unlike these studies that showed that women showed greater loyalty to their L1, Gal (1978) reported that women in Oberwart chose to speak German more than men by distancing themselves from the symbolic value of peasant status attached to Hungarian.

Gender differences in social networks was also interesting in showing the overall socialization patterns of the Kurdish community, with its prescription of separating contacts of men and women. Results indicated that 64% of the networks of female participants were Turkish while the number of Turkish-speaking networks was only 36% for boys, which demonstrated that girls maintained more regular interactions with the target language community. Moreover, female participants reported that 89% of their networks were with girls or women whereas male participants reported that 30% of their

networks were girls or women. This indicated the male dominance and relative freedom granted to boys both by their families and local social norms in choosing their networks. This also suggests that gender is a stronger indicator of social interaction than ethnic identity in the Kurdish society. Also note that, even though boys might have had more networks in general than girls based on the typical gender roles in these Kurdish areas, the number of networks used in the analyses were equally restricted to five for family and seven for non-family networks.

Findings also pointed to the fact that female participants were increasingly represented in the more native-like accent levels such as Levels 4 and 5. These findings also indicated that most of the participants with the most native-like Turkish accent (Level 5) were high school female participants. As exhibited in Table 4.6.1, most participants with the least native-like accent were middle school male participants. Also, both female and male participants reported that most of their regular networks were from the same gender.

Regarding the family networks, results suggested that compared to the male participants, female Kurdish students spoke more Turkish than Kurdish both outside and within their families. In addition, they had more non-family than family Turkish-speaking networks. Male participants reported slightly more family Turkish-speaking networks. Findings also revealed that for girls, code-switching and/or mixing reportedly occurred more within family networks than in non-family networks. Male participants, on the other hand, reported code-switching and/or mixing more outside than they did within their family networks.

6. Implications and Future Directions

From learners' perspectives, knowing that the target language community may affect the content and nature of their relationships with them based on their competency in L2 pronunciation may become a facilitating or debilitating source. Hence, utilizing learners' outside socialization patterns teachers can regulate their roles in the classroom, and thereby increase students' participation. They can enhance cultural integration by means of the so-called buddy-system where, depending on L1 learners' proficiency levels, L2 learners are seated with native speakers, and occasionally receive linguistic support accommodations in class.

Future studies could, for example, replicate this study on bilingual communities in the US to explore socio-political effects involved in the construction of socialization patterns, integration into the American community, and different aspects of L2 attainment.

7. Conclusion

Findings suggested that the Turkish accent of the Kurdish young individuals in this study varied drastically. Findings revealed that the overall structure of all non-family networks for participants in Levels 1 and 2 consisted predominantly of Kurdish- speaking networks; their classmates, neighbors, and friends were more likely to be Kurds exchanging certain services, and material and emotional support, which reinforced the use of Kurdish. Levels 4 and 5 young Kurdish learners still formed networks in which Kurdish was the main language used in the neighborhood, but outside that area, Turkish was the main language used throughout their interactive and passive networks.

Findings also showed that participants with more native-like accents such as those in Levels 4 and 5 had a higher number of family Turkish-speaking networks, whereas participants with the least native-like accent such as those in Levels 1 and 2 had greater numbers of Kurdish-speaking family networks. Results also indicated that participants

with more native-like accents had more Turkish-speaking family networks than non-family Turkish-speaking networks. In contrast, participants with the least native-like Turkish accent had more Kurdish-speaking family networks than Kurdish-speaking non-family networks.

As for gender and age, results revealed that female participants were increasingly represented in the more native-like accent levels such as Levels 4 and 5. These findings also indicated that most of the participants with the most native-like Turkish accent (Level 5) were high school girls whereas most participants with the least native-like accent were middle school male participants. Although the distribution of female and male participants in levels of accent native-likeness seemed to be consistently different, as far as age was concerned this distribution was consistently different only for female participants, showing that female participants clustered in Level 5 while male participants were in Level 1.

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