Job Visibility as a Variable for Assessing the Frequency of Kurdish Language Use among Kurdish Migrant Workers in Istanbul Workplaces (Anne Schluter)

Kurdish language rights are intrinsic to Kurdish migrants’ human rights; therefore, measuring Kurdish migrants’ freedom to speak in their native tongue is an important endeavor. Many within the Turkish mainstream believe that Kurds have already achieved full freedom of expression in Turkey; this study will address this belief. The social and political factors that contribute to this group’s language choices change frequently, and apparent trends in the two realms even contradict each other at times. For this reason, focus on macro inter-group variables such as policy, interpretations of policy, political rhetoric, and social discourse can lead to misleading conclusions. Instead, the following study will look at individuals’ own perceptions of their language freedoms: it will analyze Kurdish migrants’ language practices in the Istanbul workplace and the reasons for these practices.

Observations that came out of a pilot study will inform the research question. The pilot study addressed Kurdish migrants’ attitudes towards their language in both general contexts and the specific domain of work; results pointed to a widespread belief in Turkish as the business-appropriate language; the widespread use of Turkish in Kurdish-Kurdish workplace interactions reflected this belief. In analyzing these results, an additional theme emerged: job visibility. Kurdish workers appeared to use Kurdish to interact with their Kurdish colleagues more frequently when the possibility of being overheard by customers did not exist. The following study will address this theme of job visibility directly. It will employ a mixed-methods approach to analyze the question: do Istanbul-resident Kurdish workers from the Southeast of Turkey who work in high visibility jobs use significantly less Kurdish when addressing their Kurdish colleagues than their counterparts in low visibility jobs with similar pay?

Thirty-four Kurdish migrants from the Southeast of Turkey will take part in a two-part data collection process at their predominantly Kurdish workplaces in Istanbul. First, participants will be split into two groups of seventeen according to the visibility of their job (Group A: high job visibility; Group B: low job visibility,) and will take part in a causal-comparative study. Job visibility will serve as the independent variable; frequency of Kurdish language use will serve as the dependent variable. T-tests will assess differences between groups, and multiple regression analysis will look at inter-group relationships between individual participants. The second portion of the study will use structured interviews to focus on the reasons behind the participants’ language practices. Analysis of these interviews will be based on emergent themes across participant data. Special attention will be payed to the categories of ‘force’ (the use of Turkish due to external pressures) vs. ‘choice’ (the use of Turkish due to identification with the Turkish mainstream.) Results will contribute to the discussion of Kurdish migrants’ perception of their linguistic freedoms. If the higher visibility group demonstrates a significantly lower frequency of Kurdish language use than the less visible group, and their interview data suggest that these choices come out of force, then the results would suggest limitations on Kurdish migrants’ freedom to speak their native language.