

Abstract

A noteworthy feature of a small number of Western Iranian languages, including Kurmanji Kurdish, is the presence of contrastive pharyngeal sounds in inherited vocabulary. These pharyngeals are considered by most linguists to be the result of contact with Arabic, coming into the language through Arabic loan vocabulary (Haig and Matras 2002). However, as I demonstrate here, the distribution of the majority of contrastive pharyngeals in inherited Iranian vocabulary in Kurmanji Kurdish strongly suggests a phonetic explanation for their distribution modulated by familiarity with the phonetics of Arabic pharyngeals. A newly-discovered sound pattern is the association of what are arguably pharyngealized vowels in Kurmanji with pre-existing labial consonants and constraints determined by Kurmanji Kurdish phonotactics. Following Blevins (to appear), this effect is modeled in terms of Arabic pharyngeals as external “perceptual magnets” for native speakers of Kurdish who have had extensive exposure to Arabic sound patterns.

Keywords: Pharyngeals, pharyngealized vowels, Kurmanji Kurdish, Western Iranian languages, Iranian historical phonology, areal sound patterns, contact-induced change, loan phonology, perceptual magnet effect, phonetic explanation of sound change.