# A Corpus of the Sorani Kurdish Folkloric Lyrics

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## Abstract

Kurdish poetry and prose narratives were historically transmitted orally and less in a written form. Being an essential medium of oral narration and literature, Kurdish lyrics have had a unique attribute in becoming a vital resource for different types of studies, including Digital Humanities, Computational Folkloristics and Computational Linguistics. As an initial study of its kind for the Kurdish language, this paper presents our efforts in transcribing and collecting Kurdish folk lyrics as a corpus that covers various Kurdish musical genres, in particular *Beyt, Goranî, Bend*, and *Heyran*. We believe that this corpus contributes to Kurdish language processing in several ways, such as compensation for the lack of a long history of written text by incorporating oral literature, presenting an unexplored realm in Kurdish language processing, and assisting the initiation of Kurdish computational folkloristics. Our corpus contains 49,582 tokens in the Sorani dialect of Kurdish. The corpus is publicly available in the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) format for non-commercial use under the CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license at https://github.com/KurdishBLARK/KurdishLyricsCorpus.

Keywords: Computational Folkloristics, less-resourced languages, lyrics corpus, Kurdish

# 1. Introduction

Kurdish is considered a less-resourced language for which general-purpose grammars and raw internet-based corpora are the only existing resources (Hassani, 2018). While the lack of a long history of written text is considered as one of the reasons for this situation, the lack of research and activities on data collection are also counted as other reasons in this regard (Ahmadi et al., 2019).

Folkloric content play a significant role in Kurdish life as a crucial medium in communication between different Kurdish generations (Blum and Hassanpour, 1996). They are also a rich source of vocabulary, as they have mostly been traditionally transferred over generations orally and less in a written form (Kreyenbroek, 2005). A few but crucial efforts have been made to transcribe some products of the Kurdish oral literature in the beginning of the previous century by both western and eastern scholars (Rasul, 1999; Salimi, 2015; Mikailee, 2015). Because these transcripts are mainly available in hard copy and not electronic forms, they are not suitable for computational processes. On the other hand, the lack of optical character recognition systems for Kurdish prevents the automatic conversion of these resources into text formats.

Despite the limited number of resources for Kurdish, there have been various studies to create new corpora. Esmaili et al. (2013) present *Pewan*, a general-purpose corpus based on the news articles in Sorani and Kurmanji dialects of Kurdish. Similarly, Ataman (2018) presents a parallel corpus containing Kurmanji Kurdish news articles. With a particular focus on automatic identification of subdialects, Malmasi (2016) creates a corpus using articles from news sources. In the most recent attempt, Abdulrahman et al. (2019) present the Kurdish Textbooks Corpus (KTC), which is composed of 31 K-12 textbooks in Sorani dialect. Unlike previous resources which are based on news articles, the latter is more domain-specific. However, none of

these resources deals with oral material and Kurdish folkloric heritage.

In this paper, we present a corpus of folkloric lyrics and songs in Sorani Kurdish containing 12, 8, 141, and 1 item respectively for four musical genres, namely *Bend*, *Beyt*, *Goranî*, and *Heyran*. The development of the corpus is carried out by transcribing folkloric songs manually from audiovisual materials and transforming the transcription into a structured format in XML according to the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) (Ide and Véronis, 1995). Moreover, our project could be considered as an initiative to mobilize the Kurdish community to provide further documentations for the Kurdish oral literature.

This corpus can serve various aspects of natural language processing (NLP) for the Kurdish language. While it enriches the diversity of the available datasets and corpora, it also adds a set of folkloric vocabulary which could not be found in the prose and non-poetic Kurdish writing. Furthermore, the computational folkloristics (Abello et al., 2012), which has not been addressed in the context of Kurdish studies yet, can also benefit from the result of this research. As the collected songs are performed by different local singers, this can provide further insights into the subdialectal variations of Sorani Kurdish and therefore, will be beneficial to speech recognition tasks.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the Kurdish folklore and presents the major types of Kurdish lyrics emphasizing on those that are presented in our corpus. In Section 3, we summarize what has been done with respect to the Kurdish folklore. Section 4 presents the corpus and illustrates some statistics about it. The evaluation of the corpus is given in Section 5. Finally, Section 6 concludes the paper.

# 2. Kurdish Folklore

The Kurdish folklore has been addressed as the major pillar of the Kurdish literature by eastern and western scholars (Salimi, 2015; Allison, 2001; Abubakir, 2016). Traditionally, this folklore is transmitted orally. They have been influencer of and influenced by other surrounding cultures and folklores (Leezenberg and others, 2011; Rasul, 1999).

Given the diversity of dialects of the Kurdish language, there are many types and genres which are specific to each dialect. Similarly, the content of the transmitted songs might not be identical among these dialects. Furthermore, such a diversity brings a different terminology with itself which might not be similar in all dialects. For instance, the individuals who perform songs are called by different terms, such as Dengbêj (bard), Stranbêj (minstrel), and Çirokbêj (storyteller) in Kurmanji (Broughton et al., 2006) and, Goranîbêj, Heyranbêj, and Beytbêj (and xoşxwan) in Sorani. While *Cirokbêj* and *Dengbêj* are used interchangeably in some contexts, they refer to different types of performing (Bocheńska, 2014). In Kurmanji speaking areas, Dengbêj is used in a broader context as a person who sings different types of music and also plays certain instruments while singing the song (Reigle, 2014).

According to Mikailee (2015), there has not been significant academic research on the Kurdish lyrics. A survey over the existing literature indicates that there is not a common categorization for the Kurdish lyrics and further discussions about the origin of the lyrics have been ongoing among scholars (Rasul, 1999; Hassanpour, 2005). Hassanpour (2005) discusses the multi-root nature of Kurdish songs. Moreover, a common opinion states that the Kurdish lyrics have been influenced by Turkish, Arabic, Azeri, Persian, and Armenian music during a long interconnection among these ethnics (Rasul, 1999; Leezenberg and others, 2011; Hassanpour, 2005).

Given the diversity of the Kurdish lyrics in form and genres, we only focus on four types of Sorani Kurdish folkloric songs, namely, *Beyt, Bend, Goranî* and *Heyran.* A few examples of these types are illustrated in Figure 1 for comparison.

# 2.1. Bend

Bend is a genre of Kurdish secular narrative recital song which is performed by bendbêj or şayîyer, commonly at rural gatherings and weddings. There is no evidence to indicate when Bend dates back in the history, but a strong element of praise and adoration as one of its most important components, and also a rich structure full of love, village lifestyle, farming work, nature description, local mystics, local lords, rebellions, and warfare stories guide us to assume that it may return to where the first Kurdish local social and political power was formed (Hamelink, 2016; Brenneman, 2016). Another important feature of Bends is the improvisation element which has been evolved over time, dealing with important political and especially social issues of the day. Recently an element of nationalism has been added to Bend, making it much powerful and widespread all over the Sorani-speaking regions and sometimes even in the regions which speak other dialects such as Southern Kurdish and Kurmanji (Christensen, 2007).

# 2.2. Beyt

*Beyt* is a term in Sorani dialect for a type of lyric which is usually a long piece of work based on different subjects, such as historical, mythical, legendary, and love figures and events (Merati, 2015; Salimi, 2015). Beyts have different contexts, such as epics, historical battles, mythical tales, fables, and tragic love stories (Rasul, 1999; Sharifi, 2005; Barzegar Khaleghi, 2009; Mikailee, 2015). In some Sorani speaking areas, the term Bend is used interchangeably along with Beyt. However, Bend is usually used with a more popular content . Beytbêj, literally meaning Beyt sayer, recites beyt in gatherings (Barzegar Khaleghi, 2009). Although Beyts are poetic, they do not follow any particular standard for their form or size (Barzegar Khaleghi, 2009). The transcription of Beyts in Sorani dates back to the 1900s (Rasul, 1999; Sharifi, 2005). 17 Beyts were transcribed around 1905, which were translated into Sorani Kurdish in 1975 (Rasul, 1999; Sharifi, 2005; Mikailee, 2015). From 1950s onward, other transcriptions started to appear (Mikailee, 2015). According to Sharifi (2005) and Mikailee (2015) during 1960s major transcripts were presented in Sorani Kurdish. In some cases, these transcripts were provided along with the translation into other languages, for instance, Persian (Sharifi, 2005). The transcripts by Qader Fattahi Qazi (also spelled as Ghader Fattahi Ghazi) (Sharifi, 2005; Mikailee, 2015) are examples of the efforts in this area which are also one of the major sources of the Beyts section in our corpus.

## 2.3. Goranî

In addition to a specific genre, the term *Goranî* is also one of the words for "song" in Sorani Kurdish. It should not be confused with the Goranî dialect<sup>1</sup>. There is a fine line between what is referred to with the term Goranî and with other terms such as *Stran*, *Beste*, and *Meqam* (Salimi, 2015) in different dialects and regions. The terms are observed to be used interchangeably across the Kurdish speaking areas regardless of the dominant dialect.

The themes of *Goranî* come from diverse contexts. This diversity creates different types of *Goranî* for various occasions such as wedding, birth, feasts and funeral, and various feelings, such as love, happiness and hope (Broughton et al., 2006).

A special form of *Goranî* is *Meqam* which has different characteristics among the speakers of different Kurdish dialects. For example, it is essentially used in religious practices in some Kurdish groups (Merati, 2015), while it is a special lyric whose main motif is a love story among other groups. It is usually performed without musical accompaniment.

### 2.4. Heyran

It is a form of lyric which mostly tells love stories, but it could also be about tragic stories and actions of heroes in the battles (Merati, 2015). The *Heyranbêj*, literally meaning the sayer of Heyran, is the one who performs Heyran. According to Merati (2015), it is a lyric form which is performed in Sorani and mostly in the Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, this type of lyric is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>also written as Guranî.

Bend		Goranî	
مەحالە پەھاييم بىٰ ھەتاكاتى مردنم داويْك لە زولْفى خاوت	 Dîmen is very mischief Çîmen smiles beautifully (may) Kak Xalîd be successful until the land of London I scream with full voice just like mountain partridge your frizzy soft hairs put (them) over my neck (it) is impossible to get free until my death a strand of your hair put (it) into my shroud	ئەرى خاللۇ رېيوار، ئەى وەى رېگام كويستانە دەچم بۇ لاى يار، ئەى وەى خاوەن بېستانە ئامان ئامان ئۆرىكاكى جووتيار، ئەى وەى جووتت شاگول بى تووەكەت پازيانە، كاكم خەرمانت گول بى ئەرى كاكى رېيوار، ئەى وەى پېم توولانىيە	My caring companion is from Mokriyan O, dear traveller, mountain is on my way I am going to my companion, (she) owns a garden Aman, Aman O, the ploughman, (may) your plough (brings) big clusters (may) your seeds (be) fennel, your harvest (be) flower
- v - ·		کوتی نهگد بزانم نایهوه ئەمن ئیستا جەللادان دینم له سەرت دەن ئەويش تېنى لى پەيدا بوو وەيزانى پاس دەكا كوتى بەلى شەرت بىن بە شەرتى پياوان	Heyran  then, (he) said henceforth (you) should come here every day (she) said, but I cannot come here without my lord's permission even today (I) have come without permission Finally, (he) got mad (he) said if I know that you do not come back (I) will call upon the hangmen then (she) got mad believing him (she) said alright, I promise solemnly, If you allow me, I will come back 

Figure 1: A comparison of the four genres included in our corpus. The translations are literal and additional words are provided in parentheses. Proper names are italicized.

also called by the same name. However, a similar type is called *Lawik* in the Kurmanji-speaking areas of Iraq which is usually longer than Heyran (Merati, 2015). According to Merati (2015), the stanza of Heyran is constructed on three verses with three rhymes in each verse.

### 2.5. Other Forms of Kurdish Lyrics

As it was mentioned earlier, Kurdish lyrics are not restricted to the forms presented here. They are diverse in their form, colorful in their themes, and varied in their subjects and contexts. Some of these forms are particular to certain dialects, while some are common among the dialects.

One example of these forms is *Hore*. It is particular to Hawramî (Goranî) and the Southern Kurdish dialects, spoken in the Kurdish speaking regions of Iran and Iraq. *Hore* is assumed to be a type of singing with more than several thousand years of history (Merati, 2015). Another example is *Çamary*, which is a song in mourning circumstances, particularly, for the death of socially important individuals (Merati, 2015).

## 3. Related Work

In this section, we address the related work regarding the collection of folkloric content and lyrics as resources in other Kurdish dialects and also other languages.

Regarding Kurdish, Hamelink and Barış (2014) created a corpus from Kurmanji lyrics. This corpus includes 84 *Kilams* (or *Kelams*) (Merati, 2015) which is a title for a type of music mostly in Kurmanji speaking areas, though

with different attributes, depending on the geographical position of the community in which the music is performed (Hamelink and Barış, 2014).

Regarding other languages, a famous work on the English song lyrics is The Million Song dataset (Mahieux et al., 2011) which is a freely-available collection of audio features and metadata for a million contemporary popular music tracks. Moreover, Taft (1977) collected over two thousand texts which were performed by about 350 blues (an African-American music genre) singers. Mahedero et al. (2005) presents experiments on lyrics using NLP methods to identify lyrics' language, thematic categorization, structure extraction and to perform similarity searches. This research suggested that information which acoustic and cultural metadata would have been providing could be further improved when they are accompanied by lyrics. McNeil (2018) reports the collection of folklore poetry and popular song lyrics alongside other forms to develop a Tunisian Arabic corpus.

The application of lyric processing in music analysis have been investigated from a variety of perspectives. For example, Hu et al. (2009) conducted research to examine the role that lyric texts could play in the mood classification in audio music. They found the lyric features can outperform audio features in the classification of mood categories in certain cases. They also found that combining lyrics and audio features improve performances on a majority of mood classification categories.

Also, Rodrigues et al. (2019) developed a corpus of English lyrics which they expected that would assist in testing and

evaluation of tools pertinent to the language generation in the poetry and lyrics context.

In the same vein, the International Workshop on Folk Music Analysis (FMA)<sup>2</sup> is an annual workshop dedicated to folk music analysis since 2011. The computational folklorisitics has been a repetitive theme in this workshop series wherein many scholars have reported on variety of corpora which have been developed based on various ethnic and national folklore (for example, see (Holzapfel, 2014), (Beauguitte et al., 2016), and (Ali-MacLachlan and Hockman, 2019)). Although the dominant area of these workshops is about musicology, some attempts concerning language processing are observed. For instance, (Strle and Marolt, 2014) reported on the collection of 1,965 variants of Slovenian folk narrative poems to evaluate the effectiveness of two different methods of semantic analysis in NLP.

# 4. Lyrics Corpus

We transcribed a set of 162 songs in various genres in the four types of Kurdish folkloric materials: *Bend, Beyt, Goranî*, and *Heyran*. Given the wide range of Kurdish dialects and sub-dialects, we only focused on the Sorani dialect of Kurdish which is mostly spoken in the Kurdish regions in Iran and Iraq. As a song may have been performed by many singers, we considered the recording quality and authenticity of the lyrics as the criteria to select one.

### 4.1. Text Transcription

The transcription process was carried out by native Kurdish speakers by listening to the audiovisual materials. In order to find such content easily and also receive feedback from others regarding our transcription quality, we created a channel on the Telegram Messenger<sup>3</sup> where we regularly published the lyrics along with the audiovisual material over four months. Table 1 provides the statistics of the corpus.

Two main challenges in transcribing the lyrics were the quality of the recording, which was low in some cases, and the way that the singer articulated the words. In many cases, we observed that some words were not pronounced clearly and some parts of the lyrics are left incomplete due to the rhythm. In such cases, we tried to write the lyrics based on various performances of the same song.

Genre	Number of songs	Number of tokens (characters)
Bend	12	6455 (56,723)
Beyt	8	17994 (200,981)
Goranî	141	22588 (212,408)
Heyran	1	2545 (2273)
Total	162	49,582 (472,385)

Table 1: Statistics of the lyrics corpus

### 4.2. Conversion to TEI

We converted the transcribed songs into TEI format, which is based on XML. The XML format provides a structured form to represent segments in the lyrics and metadata of

<text id="131"></text>		
<div type="song"></div>		
<head>ھەرزالىخ<head></head></head>		
<singer>ناسر رەزازى<singer></singer></singer>		
<audio>Audio/Gorani/131.mp3</audio>		
<li>lg type="Gorani"&gt;</li>		
<l>&gt;<li></li></l>		
<l>&gt;</l>		
<l>&gt;&gt;ئەو چۆپيكىشە چۆپى ئەكىشى<l></l></l>		
<l>&gt;l&gt; لى خوام گەرەكە، ھيچكوٽنەي نەيشى<l></l></l>		
<l>&gt;</l>		
<l>&gt;</l>		
<li><li><li><li><li></li></li></li></li></li>		
<li>&gt;l&gt;&gt;یان به نازی خۆت بمکه پهروەردە<l></l></li>		
<l>&gt;<li>هەرزاڵێ، براكەم ھەرزاڵێ&lt;<l></l></li></l>		
<l>&gt;</l>		
<l>&gt;<li></li></l>		
<l>&gt;<li>هەر وەک پێشمەرگە روو بکە لە سەنگەر<l></l></li></l>		

Figure 2: A transcribed song converted in TEI

each song, including song name, singer's name, URL to the audio file, song ID, and the type of the song. Regarding the name of the songs, we used a title that is most frequently known to the public. We used the refrains to give the title to the songs for which we could not find any title. However, some of the Bends left without a title due to lack of a refrain or a popular title. Figure 2 presents the XML structure of a song of Goranî genre. It should be noted that the attributes are customized and are not defined elsewhere in TEI. Some of the lyrics are composed of classical Kurdish poems. We use type="poem" attribute to distinguish these parts from the folkloric lyrics. In addition, Beyt and Heyran performers usually provide comments in plain language to facilitate the comprehension of the story and guarantee the

### 5. Evaluation

story flow. We use type="comment" to highlight per-

former's comments.

In addition to the statistics of the corpus in Table 1, we evaluate the content by comparing it with two other Sorani Kurdish corpora, Pewan (Esmaili and Salavati, 2013) and KTC (Abdulrahman et al., 2019) which are respectively generalpurpose and domain-specific.

Calculating the frequency of words is a measure to understand how they semantically form the resources. Table 2 presents the ten most frequent tokens in our corpus and the two other Sorani Kurdish corpora. Although all these words are function words, i.e., a word whose purpose is to contribute to the syntax rather than the meaning of a sentence, they are not similarly distributed in the lyrics against the two other resources. The frequency of pronouns is observed in the lyrics text, which indicates the narrative nature of the folkloric songs. In addition, punctuation signs, which are commonly used in formal writing in the two other resources, are not frequently used in the lyrics.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>http://www.folkmusicanalysis.org/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>Available at https://t.me/Folklorelyrics

In the same vein, Table 3 provides the ten most frequent words excluding the function words. The Pewan corpus has words associated with politics, as it was created based on the news articles. On the other hand, KTC has a more diverse range of words since it contains many domain-specific topics, from geography to linguistics and theology. Regarding the lyrics corpus, the most frequent non-function words are oriented around poetic and literary themes. Moreover, lyrics vocabulary can be used to analyze the semantic change thanks to archaism.

One other evaluation measure is linguistic representativeness (Gray et al., 2017). As the lyrics corpus contains various Sorani sub-dialects, various dialectal differences in the lexical choice and morphology are observed. Among the non-function words, we counted 7,316 tokens in the lyrics which do not exist among the 946,569 unique tokens of a basic Sorani Kurdish dictionary (Ahmadi et al., 2019) and the two other corpora. Having said that, considering lemmatization, which was not possible due to lack of tools for Kurdish, we expect that this number of words decreases to some extent, but still leaving a considerable number of words that could be added to the dictionaries.

Our corpus	KTC (Abdulrahman et al., 2019)	Pewan (Esmaili et al., 2013)
له (from) له	و	لە
(to) به (to	له	و
(and) <b>9</b>	به	به
بۆ (for)	که (that)	بۆ
بێ (without)	بۆ	/
ئەو (she/he/it/that)	ئەو	که (that)
من (I/me)	ئەم (this/it)	ئەو
تۆ (you)		-
ئەي/وەي/ئاي (O, oh)	:	:
(only, each) هەر	·	]

Table 2: The 10 most frequent tokens in our corpus versus two other Sorani Kurdish corpora. The common tokens are highlighted in bold.

Our corpus	KTC (Abdulrahman et al., 2019)	Pewan (Esmaili et al., 2013)
گیان ((soul, dear (adjective)	مرۆڤ (human)	كوردستان (Kurdistan)
دەڵێم ((I) say)	گەورە (big)	عيّراق (Iraq)
ده کهم (I) do))	کورد (Kurd, Kurdish)	ھەرێمى (region of)
دەبىّ ((it) should))	خوداي (god, god of)	سەرۆكى (president of)
وەرە ((come (imperative)) وەرە	كوردستان (Kurdistan)	هەولێر (Erbil)
کرد (she/he/it) did))	واته ((it) means)	حکومەتى (government of)
دڵ (heart)	زمانی (language of)	شاری (city of)
گوڵ (flower)	پيريسته (it) is needed))	ئيران (Iran)
شەو (night)	مافی (right of)	ئەنجومەنى (parliament of)
خۆم (myself)	وزەي (energy of)	ئەمەريكا (USA)

Table 3: The 10 most frequent tokens, excluding function words, in our corpus versus two other Sorani Kurdish corpora

### 6. Conclusion

We presented a corpus of folkloric lyrics in the Sorani dialect of Kurdish. The corpus contains lyrics of 162 songs (49,582 tokens) in four Kurdish musical genres: 12, 141, 8 and 1 songs in Bend, Goranî, Beyt and Heyran, respectively. We demonstrated that the current resource provides additional linguistic information, which is not represented in other Sorani Kurdish corpora.

This work is initial in using Sorani lyrics as a source for Kurdish language processing. Therefore, numerous areas could be counted for further developments, such as namedentity recognition, relation extraction, computational musicology and co-reference resolution. Another future work could be the enrichment of this corpus by adding content in other Kurdish dialects and by translating them into other languages, particularly English. We believe that development of such resources will pave the way for further developments in Kurdish language processing, therefore helping it to become a resourceful language. Since the Arabic script of Kurdish has proved to pose challenges in Kurdish text processing (Ahmadi, 2019), we would suggest the transliteration of the corpus into the Latin script, as it is also mostly used in the Kurmanji dialect.

The corpus is publicly available for non-commercial use under the CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license at https://github.com/KurdishBLARK/KurdishLyricsCorpus<sup>4</sup>.

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### 9. Language Resource References

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