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Documentary as Dictionary, Documentary as Classroom: Preserving Kurdish Languages and Reclaiming Kurdish Worlds through Film

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Abstract

This article examines how documentary film preserves, and reclaims Kurdish languages in Turkey within a sociopolitical context defined by linguistic suppression and subtractive educational practices. Drawing on Stanley Cavell's (1976) insight that language constitutes a world, the paper frames the repression of Kurdish as an attempt to regulate and fragment lived Kurdish worlds, exploring how documentary cinema exposes and intervenes in this process. Through a close analysis of Veli Kahraman's *Where Is My Mother Tongue?* (2012) and classroom-centred documentaries like Orhan Eskiköy and Özgür Doğan's *On the Way to School* (2008) and Emine Emel Balcı's *Ich Liebe Dich* (2012), the article develops two interconnected frameworks: documentary as dictionary and documentary as classroom. In the former, film operates as an audiovisual lexicon that reattaches Zazaki words to lived experience, "bringing the world to the dictionary" and reinstating a suppressed linguistic presence within the public sphere. In the latter, documentary renders visible the long-term effects of linguistic deterritorialization and subtractive education, tracing what Coşkun, Derince, and Uçarlar (2012) describe as the "scar of tongue." Engaging with Walter Mignolo's (2009) concept of epistemic disobedience, the article argues that Kurdish documentary practices in question enact a decolonial epistemic reconstitution. By reinserting marginalized linguistic worlds into audiovisual forms, these documentaries confront hegemonic invisibilisation and affirm Kurdish languages as dynamic sites of struggle, of love, and active world-making.

Keywords: Kurdish documentary; documentary as dictionary; documentary as classroom; linguistic deterritorialization; decolonial epistemic reconstitution; linguistic world-making

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Introduction

In *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Stanley Cavell indicates that “a natural language is what native speakers of that language speak” in as much as [f]or a native speaker (of any language) to say what, in ordinary circumstances, is said when, no such special information is needed or claimed (1976, p. 5). He further fleshes out the connectedness of the spoken word and the world, noting that: “We forget that we learn language and learn the world together, that they become elaborated and distorted together and in the same place (Cavell, 1976, p. 19). I take Cavell’s insight here as a foundation to explore how different languages give shape to different worlds; in other words, how linguistic structures are not only systems of communication, but also living frameworks for being, knowing the self and the world outside. In Turkey, Turkish functions as the language of the official and imposed world, whereas Kurdish exists in the private and common spaces of Kurds, forming a world of shared identity yet one constrained by state-imposed limitations. There is thus a force I want to focus on here: a force imposed through and as language, mediated and revealed through documentary form.

For those who live between or across multiple languages, this means simultaneously inhabiting multiple worlds. Yet when your mother tongue, the first world you knew, the language in which the self first formed, is banned, silenced, or institutionally repressed – how does this impact the simultaneity of language worlds? When your foundational language, your mother tongue is actively suppressed, it results in a forced reorientation of being, where the original world of meaning is rendered unspeakable, even though life continues unendingly. Thus, the world becomes a place that can no longer be spoken in the mother tongue; language, the act of speaking, and the world itself, become divided.

In this line of thought, here I examine how Kurdish languages – systematically marginalized in Turkey through decades of authoritarian and nationalist policy – have been documented, revealed, and reanimated through audiovisual media. Drawing from Cavell’s notion that “language constitutes a world,” I suggest that banned languages constitute and reveal worlds under erasure, and that these worlds continue to live and resist even under the dominance of an official linguistic regime. Audiovisual media – and documentary cinema specifically – moves beyond representing suppressed languages: it registers their silencing through its narrative form, its use of voiceover and ambient sound, and its attention to pauses, hesitations, and broken speech. In this way, documentary film can be a shield that can preserve a banned language, and moreover it can reveal the affective weight of its repression, as well as the longing and resilience embedded in the act of speaking, or by revealing an inability to speak, one’s mother tongue.

I further ask here: How can audiovisual culture mediate in between distinct linguistic worlds, especially when certain languages, like Kurdish, have been continuously suppressed in Turkey? Can the documentary form, in particular, create spaces where denied or silenced languages become not only audible and visible again, but also politically and affectively legible

and identifiable? And to what extent can audiovisual media dismantle the power hierarchies that privilege official languages over marginalized ones? To address these questions, I first provide a legal and sociolinguistic background on Kurdish in Turkey and the ideological tensions around the term “mother tongue.” I then trace the afterlives of this background in documentary films like Veli Kahraman’s *Where Is My Mother Tongue?* (2012), which follows an elderly man’s effort to recover and record his native language, Zazaki, through a documentary that I argue functions as an audiovisual dictionary. In the second half, I shift to classroom-based films and documentaries like *On the Way to School* (2008) by Orhan Eskiköy and Özgür Doğan, and *Ich Liebe Dich*¹ (2012) by Emine Emel Balci, exploring how Kurdish students, adults, and women are shaped by linguistic suppression in formal educational settings. Taken together, these films reveal that, even when experienced during childhood, language loss is an ongoing process, one that persists across generations, institutions, and even through new forms of language acquisition.

Linguistic Background: Kurdish Languages in Turkey

To understand how documentary cinema preserves and reanimates Kurdish languages in Turkey, I first turn to the sociohistorical and legal contexts in which these languages have been contested, and silenced. It is important to note that Kurdish is not a single, monolithic language, instead it is a rich constellation of dialects and linguistic forms. As Jaffer Sheyholislami notes, Kurdish is “divided across several dialects, scripts, and legal statuses” (2010, p. 290) shaped by the national boundaries of the four states in which Kurds live: Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. While Kurdish gained official recognition in Iraq in 2003, in Turkey it was entirely banned until 1991 and remains under significant legal and institutional constraints today (Sheyholislami, 2010, p. 290).

Geoffrey Haig conceptualizes Turkey’s language policy as *invisibilisation*. Haig argues that a remarkably consistent state strategy of making Kurdish invisible has been pursued, driven by the ideological goal of achieving Turkish cultural homogeneity (2004, p.122). In a similar vein, Welat Zeydanlıoğlu (2012) demonstrates that Turkey’s legal framework, shaped under a strict military regime, has systematically suppressed Kurdish by embedding Turkish ethnicity and linguistic dominance into the constitution and legal system. The Turkish constitution explicitly denies protection to any activity deemed contrary to Turkish national interests, the indivisibility of the state, or the historical and moral values of *Türklük*/Turkishness, reinforcing Kemalist nationalism. More specifically, as Zeydanlıoğlu notes, Article 2 in the constitution binds the Republic of Turkey to Atatürk’s nationalist ideology, while Article 3 asserts that Turkey, as an indivisible entity, has Turkish as its only official language. Article 4 goes even further, prohibiting any amendments or even proposals to alter these provisions, ensuring their permanence. Article 26, before its amendment in 2001, banned the use of prohibited languages in the expression and dissemination of thought, while Article 42, still in effect today, explicitly prohibits any language other than Turkish from being taught as a mother tongue in educational institutions (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2012, p. 110).

While limited reforms were introduced at the beginning of the 2000s during the early years of the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) rule in order to align with European Union accession criteria, these efforts remained mainly cautious, fragmented, and largely unreliable. Notably, none of the constitutional amendments have explicitly recognized Kurdish. The amendment of Article 26 allowed for more flexibility in the media, removing the label of "prohibited languages" for Kurdish and related dialects in broadcasting. Yet, the deeper structure of linguistic inequality remains largely intact. Article 42's enduring prohibition of mother-tongue education continues to institutionalize Turkish linguistic dominance and ensures the ongoing marginalization of Kurdish (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2012, pp. 110-112).

This legal and linguistic framework reinforces a broader ideological strategy: not only is Kurdish institutionally repressed, but even the very concept of "mother tongue" remains unstable in official discourse. Zeyneloğlu, Sirkeci, and Civelek (2016) underline that the term "*anadil*" in Turkish is inherently ambiguous, as it can signify both "mother tongue" and "main language." While it traditionally refers to the first language learned in childhood, Turkish census forms have consistently redefined it as "the language spoken at home and among family", emphasizing its functional rather than origin-based meaning. This redefinition became even more explicit in the 1985 census, when the term *anadil* was omitted entirely, and the question was instead phrased as "What language do you speak at home and among family?". This subtle but significant shift exposes the fluidity of the concept in Turkish, where *anadil* does not strictly denote the first language learned but rather the dominant language in a given social setting (Zeyneloğlu, Sirkeci, & Civelek, 2016, p. 31).

This analysis reveals that when Kurdish-speaking parents chose to speak Turkish at home, often believing it would secure better opportunities and safety for their children, Turkish gradually became the primary language of the household even though Kurdish remained their original mother tongue. This shift from an origin-based to a functional definition of language reflects and reproduces state-led policies of linguistic assimilation, reinforcing the hegemony of Turkish in both public and private life. At this point, it is essential to recognize that Turkey's linguistic diversity extends far beyond Turkish and Kurdish, reflecting the historical presence of multiple ethnic and linguistic communities. In addition to Kurdish, which remains the central focus of this article, Turkey is home to a rich and complex linguistic diversity shaped by centuries of coexistence, though much of this diversity has been rendered *invisible* in the public sphere by state policies that privilege Turkish as the sole legitimate language.²

Although Kurdish remains the most politically and socially contested language, Turkey's broader linguistic diversity points to an underlying logic that extends beyond policies of repression: the state's power to define what counts as a legitimate language. The ambiguity of *anadil* in Turkish, oscillating between "mother tongue" and "main language", demonstrates how official discourse can shape and reshape the relationship between language and identity. By translating lived linguistic realities into functional categories, the state transforms language from a site of shared world and belonging into a tool of regulation. This shift marks the deeper

structure of linguistic hegemony: where speech itself becomes subject to governance, and the act of speaking one's mother tongue turns into a negotiation with power.

My reference to Cavell earlier also invokes the idea of a natural language, an ordinary language that is spoken freely, without constraint. Yet, when an ordinary language – like Kurdish – is restricted or banned, it undergoes a transformation: what was once natural, effortless speech becomes a guarded, prohibited, and defiant act. The shift from an ordinary language to a banned language marks a form of condemnation, where the simple act of speaking is no longer a means of seamless participation in a shared world, but a potential crime. This means, the voice of non-official language is marked by the state as the voice of an 'other', who vocally marks their difference. So, the banned language is pushed into the margins of public life, and compelled to inhabit an imposed linguistic world. The dominant language not only silences the mother tongue via rendering it invisible and socially illegible, it also insists upon itself as the primary and legitimate vocality, and soundscape through which participation in public life is rendered possible. This imposition creates a dual reality: the world of the dominant ordinary language, which demands compliance and conformity, and the world of the suppressed ordinary language, which remains vibrant yet restricted to private, or unthreatened safe spaces.

Çoşkun, Derince, and Uçarlar (2011) refer to the condemnation of speaking the mother tongue as *the Scar of Tongue* (*Dil Yarası*), describing how Kurdish speakers who began schooling in a language they did not understand internalized feelings of shame and inadequacy, turning linguistic repression into a visible and enduring psychological and linguistic wound. Drawing on extensive interviews with Kurdish students, parents, and teachers, their study demonstrates that the transition from the home, where Kurdish was the language of affection and everyday life, to the school, where Turkish was the only permissible medium, constituted a form of linguistic deterritorialization (Çoşkun, Derince, & Uçarlar, 2011, pp. 40-44). The first day of school becomes, in many of these accounts, the moment when one's words no longer belong to the space in which they are spoken, when the world itself starts to feel shattered.

Over time, this experience produces *semilingualism* (*yarım-dillilik* - see Çoşkun, Derince, & Uçarlar, 2011, p. 89³), a condition in which speakers feel insufficient in both languages: unable to express themselves fully in Turkish, which remains an imposed instrument of power, and unable to sustain Kurdish, which has been rendered unspeakable by the institutional design. In *Scar of Tongue*, *semilingualism* is framed as the structural consequence of an educational system that erases rather than enriches. The violence of language policy, then, is heard in prohibitions and embodied in the accents, internalized hesitations to speak, and constant self-corrections that are the subtle gestures through which speakers embody the loss of linguistic ease. This process corresponds to what Cummins describes as *subtractive linguistic education* (2000, p. 45), where learning the dominant language occurs at the expense of the mother tongue, rather than alongside it. The "scar" or the wound thus manifests as both metaphor and residue: an affective and audible trace of deterritorialized speech that continues to shape how Kurdish speakers inhabit their linguistic worlds.

Taken together, this legal and ideological backdrop reveals how language in Turkey is deeply entangled with state power that imposes national identity through language, and the institutional production of legitimacy. As Bourdieu argues, the “legitimate language” is the language backed, supported, and perpetuated by institutions – “codified by grammarians, inculcated by teachers, and policed by mechanisms of correction” (1991, p. 45). In the Turkish context, this has meant that Kurdish, while historically spoken by millions, is rendered illegitimate in both public and educational settings. This illegitimacy, however, does not and cannot eliminate the language, it only pushes it into the margins, into homes, songs, and oral stories. Yet with the advent of digital media, it exceeds private spaces, and reaches out to different digital media forms and platforms, and for our purpose, into documentary film.

I should also note that the documentary films analysed here, which were released between 2008 and 2012, emerged during a specific and exceptional historical window known as the “Kurdish Opening”. This period was characterized by a relative easing of state censorship and a series of democratic reforms by the AKP government, which at the time sought to align with European Union standards. It was this rare atmosphere of negotiation and peace processes that provided the material and political possibility for these documentaries to be produced and screened publicly. This specific political climate ensured that these films were produced and screened, unlike more explicitly political films such as *Bakur* (Çayan Demirel & Ertugrul Mavioglu, 2015) or *Zer* (2013, Kazim Oz) which faced direct censorship.

By 2026, as discussions of a new peace process and disarmament continue precariously due to the recent Turkish political context, these films represent the endurance of the Kurdish linguistic world in the absence of consistent state or international support. As formal political channels have faced significant volatility and systemic challenges, Kurdish cinema, Kurdish art, and their inherent language activism have become the primary means for cultural endurance and survival. These documentaries demonstrate how a “world in Kurdish” is sustained through the Kurdish subjects’ own efforts, asserting a decolonial presence that persists regardless of the shifting political tides of the state.

Documentary as dictionary: Kurdish documentaries and preservation of the mother tongue

Having outlined how Turkey’s language policies and educational practices have imposed linguistic deterritorialization through subtractive educational practices, I now turn to how documentary films explore the emotional, historical, and sensory layers of this suppression. In this sense, the documentary can be understood as a form of what Walter Mignolo calls *epistemic disobedience* (2009, p. 160), which is a delinking from dominant regimes of knowledge and a refusal to reproduce their hierarchies. In *Where Is My Mother Tongue?* (2012), this disobedience unfolds through the audiovisual recovery of Zazaki, a language that is rendered unspeakable. The film not only exposes the traces of institutional erasure but also performs a reconstruction of linguistic life from within through speaking back to the history that sought to silence it.

Filmmaker Veli Kahraman, who has worked extensively as an art director, production designer, and stage and costume designer, brings a visually attentive sensibility to his filmmaking practice. *Where Is My Mother Tongue?*, his first feature-length documentary, marks a notable shift toward personal and political inquiry, engaging directly with questions of language loss, and cultural suppression. This documentary, centred on Kahraman's mother and father and their effort to protect Zazaki⁴, their mother tongue, weaves together past and present, the spoken and the unspoken, and engages broader theoretical conversations on language, power, and linguistic subjectivity. Importantly, it reveals that language erasure experienced during childhood cannot be regarded as a loss confined to the past, but as an ongoing process that continues to surface and shape lives across time. To understand the complexity of this haunting persistence, I argue that it is essential to examine how the documentary attempts to become a dictionary, and thus an audiovisual log, that preserves a marginalized language and at the same time exposes the mechanisms of its institutional erasure. Thus, through focusing on various scenes, in this part I will exemplify how the documentary becomes a vessel and mode of preservation, how it exposes the mechanisms of linguistic erasure, and how it thematically reinforces the sociolinguistic positioning of the marginalised Zazaki language in Turkey.

Where Is My Mother Tongue? chronicles the daily lives of Mustafa and Hatice Kahraman, an elderly couple living in Ankara, Turkey. Mustafa is recovering from unstable blood pressure and diabetes. Before these physical ailments are introduced, the documentary opens with an off-screen voice speaking Zazaki (also known as Dimli or Kirmanski), recounting a recurring dream. Over a wide shot of Ankara, the narration unfolds:

"I hear a voice in my dream. I keep hearing the same voice. I look around, searching for someone—there is no one. I look again—everyone is there. I say something, but nobody understands. In an instant, everybody disappears. Time moves backward. The voice tells me to return to where I came from. Since the day I was born, my mother has been calling me. The voice never fades. I realize the voice is coming from inside me. I long to see someone, just to exchange a few words. How are you? What are you doing?" (*Where Is My Mother Tongue?*, Kahraman, 2012)

By beginning with the dreamlike voice-over, the film establishes a heavy atmosphere of solitude and a profound longing for linguistic connection. As the voiceover concludes, the film transitions to Mustafa arriving home on a winter evening. In the back of a car, and later with the help of two women, he carefully navigates the melting ice to enter his apartment. Due to his illness, Mustafa spends most of his time resting, appearing passive and withdrawn. In contrast, Hatice remains active and spirited; she manages the household, attends music classes, and paints, keeping herself constantly occupied.

A generational gap soon becomes visible through the visit of their granddaughter, who is preparing to leave for Italy and must pass an English proficiency test. Accompanying the presence of their granddaughter, a small video camera appears on screen. While she is recording her grandparents to the camera, Mustafa takes up the camera and records them

as well. This is a crucial point to unpack as the act of recording is not just confined to the filmmaker's gaze; it becomes an intergenerational impulse shared by Mustafa, whose own desire to document will emerge as an urgency (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: The first time that Mustafa takes the camera and starts recording

During their conversation with Mustafa's granddaughter, he appears confused over the necessity of the language test she has to sit for, he questions why she must learn English if she is moving to Italy. This point in the documentary reveals how English as an international language can bypass the dominant language of a country, and act as a possible spoken world. Following up on this, both Hatice and Mustafa question how, although their granddaughter can speak English and French, and will learn Italian, she cannot speak the mother tongue her grandparents speak. This marks that, although they are sharing a common family life, their linguistic worlds are distinct and different, which reveals a crack in their shared family history⁵. Eventually, she expresses a desire to learn Zazaki, asking her grandparents to teach her.

It is at this moment that Mustafa reflects on why Zazaki was never spoken at his childhood home. His admission of this fact is strong, he notes: "We destroyed ourselves". He recalls how, at school, they were forbidden from speaking Kurdish and forced to speak Turkish, which was a rule strictly enforced by their teachers. Ironically, Mustafa himself led the Turkish Language Club in his classroom, as he was rather fluent in Turkish. The consequences of breaking the rule were financial, those caught speaking Kurdish had to pay a fine of twenty-five piasters. To avoid the fine, Mustafa remembers warning his friends, who were less proficient in Turkish, not to speak at all, as their weekly pocket money was also twenty-five piasters, the cost of a single penalty. Hatice, listening to the conversation, shares her own recollection: at her school, the fine was only five piasters, which is significantly cheaper. This contrast sparks

laughter between them, and they momentarily turn the trauma of linguistic suppression into a light-hearted exchange over whose penalty was “cheaper”.

Their teacher insisted that they speak Turkish at home as well, and because they were taught that teachers always knew best, they complied, gradually shifting to Turkish even in their private spaces. Reflecting on this, Mustafa admits, “We denied ourselves”. Beyond the authority of the school, social pressures reinforced this linguistic erasure, as speaking Zazaki meant being looked down upon in the neighbourhood, being excluded from the games played on the street with other kids, and being treated as outsiders by other children. Yet, these moments of linguistic reservation and suppression are not narrated as heavy traumas revealed through direct interviews in the documentary; rather, they unfold organically alongside mundane daily interactions. As Mustafa recalls these memories, his words blend into the rhythm of the present, for instance Hatice casually asks if he is hungry, their granddaughter absentmindedly browses her laptop, and the past lingers in the air, as though Mustafa is speaking both to his family and to himself, reliving these moments in quiet reflection.

In his article on language oppression, Gerald Roche frames language loss as a form of coercion, arguing that “language oppression is arguably the most violent type of linguicism in that it not only subjects speakers of certain languages to regimes of ascription and discrimination, but also aims to transform them forcefully through coerced language loss” (2019, p. 488). In the documentary, this coercion is visible in Mustafa’s recollection of being told to speak Turkish at home, a directive that led to the gradual abandonment of Zazaki within his private space as well. The imposed shift from one language to another cannot be regarded as a practical adaptation but it is a form of forced transformation through language loss, where linguistic assimilation becomes both an act of survival in the classroom yet also an erasure of self.

Roche further emphasizes that language erasure is a deliberate political strategy. He states that it occurs through “the eradication of languages that are not salient to a particular political order, through the refusal to include them in public discourse and institutions, leading to their elimination” (2019, p. 490). This framework sheds light on the way Zazaki, like other suppressed languages, was systematically excluded from public life. Mustafa’s story reflects this double erasure: first, through formal policies that banned Kurdish and related dialects in schools, and second, through the internalization of these restrictions in private spaces, which led families to suppress their own language at their home. By layering interwoven histories of language suppression and forced adaptation, the documentary embodies how audiovisual culture can expose the mechanisms of coercion and silenced mother tongue, actively countering the erasure of linguistic memory by restoring it to audiovisuality, to documentary form.

As the couple spend their time reading newspapers and solving crossword puzzles in Turkish, the documentary reveals how Turkish has become their primary language, reinforcing its dominance in their daily lives, as previously discussed. Later, Mustafa reads aloud from a newspaper clip, while his voice lingering on a passage that states there are 2400 languages spoken worldwide, and that eighteen languages in Turkey, including Laz, Syriac, and

Zazaki are under threat of extinction. A pause follows as he absorbs this reality. With quiet determination he carefully cuts out the article and places it among his growing collection of newspaper clippings, as if keeping the traces of a disappearing world. From that moment on a shift occurs in his mood, his passivity gives way to a new sense of urgency. He becomes more alert, even sneaking a forbidden piece of candy as a small act of defiance. Soon after he begins searching for an old cassette with recordings in Zazaki, as if trying to recover something long buried, a piece of his language that had been slipping away with time.

It is significant to note that because Kurdish was long banned and relegated to private spaces, communication often occurred orally through the circulation of audio cassettes, which functioned as “oral letters” across long distances. This medium became a crucial mode of communication, but at the same time a way of preserving and sharing the language outside of formal institutions. Consequently, references to cassettes or audio tapes stored within domestic archives recur not only in *Where Is My Mother Tongue?*, but as symbols of self-archivisation and correspondence across Kurdish cinema at large.⁶ Because of this history and when Mustafa searches through old cassettes he is also attempting to reconnect with the suppressed fragments of his linguistic world. In this sense, his home becomes a time capsule, an intimate archive of personal collections that keep his mother tongue documented. The documentary brings these hidden resources to the surface, revealing how private audiovisual collections act as reservoirs of linguistic heritage and memory. By doing so, it makes the silenced language audible again, transforming personal preservation into public testimony.

When Mustafa finally finds these cassettes, he listens in solitude, retreating into the memories embedded within the recorded voices. However, Hatice disapproves of these practices of remembrance, fearing that dwelling on the past will only bring him sorrow. Instead, she turns on the television to a Yeşilçam film on TRT (Turkish Radio and Television), a cinematic universe defined by melodramatic tales of impossible love. This friction between Mustafa’s intimate engagement with his past and Hatice’s attempt to redirect his attention toward mainstream Turkish media reflects the film’s central tension: the struggle between preserving personal memory and mother tongue against the state’s imposed audiovisual and linguistic world.

This dynamic extends beyond the domestic sphere. Although Hatice had been through a similar history of mother tongue erasure, she appears more engaged in participating in the dominant cultural life. As the documentary continues to trace the daily lives of Mustafa and Hatice, it highlights Hatice’s weekly routine of attending a choir where she joins others in singing old Turkish songs. While framed as a hobby, this activity operates in the film as more than mere leisure: it becomes a metaphor for the assimilationist force of culture, wherein language, song, and audiovisual performance work together to construct a normative world that only partially resonates with her own. The film thus draws a contrast between Mustafa’s intimate efforts to reconnect with his suppressed linguistic heritage, and Hatice’s outward participation in communal activities shaped by the dominant language. Yet, moments of resistance emerge: Hatice is visibly frustrated during the singing classes, especially by the

teacher's demand for rapid progress, a pressure that reflects the broader societal expectation of seamless and quick integration into the Turkish cultural sphere.

Beyond direct linguistic themes, the film introduces visual metaphors as well – for instance Mustafa's broken *saz*.⁷ Though others tell him it is beyond repair and that he should discard it, he refuses to do so. The instrument carries the memory of his uncle, who once played it and sang along. Mustafa's desire to mend the *saz* is not just about restoring its musical function, but about reaffirming its existence as an object of memory, a link to a world that he refuses to let vanish. He actually does not plan to play it himself, but he only wants it to be functional again, perhaps to pass it on to someone who will play it. The act of refusing to let the *saz* stay broken reflects his larger resistance to the idea that suppressed languages, oral cultures, and memories can simply be discarded. They should be repaired, restored, and carried forward rather than left to disappear.

Continuing these efforts, Mustafa begins compiling a dictionary, documenting the Zazaki words he remembers as if reclaiming fragments of a language that had been slipping away. His linguistic efforts, however, exceed the pages of his notes. The documentary itself mirrors the process of linguistic retrieval, gradually evolving into an audiovisual dictionary of Zazaki. No longer limited to naming objects, Mustafa's recordings expand from isolated words into contextualized speech, mapping his language onto the world around him. As he looks through old photo albums, he narrates the images in Zazaki, pairing names with faces, and uses the small camera left by his granddaughter to record his surroundings. In doing so, he creates a filmed lexicon of his mother tongue. What begins as an individual effort to recall forgotten words transforms into a comprehensive record of Zazaki in use, reinforcing its status as a spoken, living language.

When Mustafa begins to record Zazaki words with the small camera, his act extends beyond linguistic preservation; it performs what Stanley Cavell describes as "bringing the world to the dictionary." Cavell writes, "What seemed like finding the world in a dictionary was really a case of *bringing the world to the dictionary*. We had the world with us all the time... but we felt the weight of it only when we felt a lack in it. *Sometimes we will need to bring the dictionary to the world*" (1976, p. 20). In this sense, Mustafa's effort to compile an audiovisual record of Zazaki is about recovering words that have been forgotten, but at the same time about reattaching them to the life and world that once contained and sustained them. His recordings move beyond translating experience into Zazaki vocabulary, but they let experience return to the language, his mother tongue. Each word, each utterance, reclaims a fragment of a world in Zazaki that was suppressed, transforming the dictionary from a static archive of meanings into a living medium of reanimation and the reclamation of a Zazaki world.

Through this act, the film enacts Cavell's insight: that the world and language continually remake one another, and that by "bringing the dictionary to the world", one restores the capacity of speech to bear life. As Mustafa makes recordings in the streets of Ankara, the camera becomes a vessel through which Zazaki exceeds private memory and re-enters the public sphere. This choice of location is deeply symbolic: Ankara, as

the administrative and ideological capital from which Turkey's monolingual policies were historically declared, embodies the very structures that sought to erase languages like Zazaki. By inserting Zazaki into this specific soundscape, the film performs a subversive act – reclaiming audiovisual space at the heart of linguistic power. Each utterance becomes an act of counter-inscription, allowing a marginalized language to reverberate within the capital that once legislated its silence.

In this sense, the documentary practices what Walter Mignolo calls “epistemic disobedience” (2009, p. 162), a refusal to think and speak within the limits imposed by the colonial and national matrix of power. Yet, the film moves beyond mere refusal. By constructing an independent audiovisual dictionary, it performs an act of “epistemic delinking” (Mignolo, 2009, p. 160), deliberately separating itself from the authority of the Turkish state and its monolingual order. Ultimately, *Where Is My Mother Tongue?* achieves a form of epistemic reconstitution. Rather than appealing for recognition within dominant frameworks, it rebuilds a world of knowing and sensing on its own linguistic terms.

These all mean that the documentary moves beyond capturing linguistic fragments; it actively constructs a linguistic log, where words and images work together to resist the erasure of Zazaki. Furthermore, Mustafa's audiovisual dictionary becomes a deliberate articulation of language itself, ensuring that his mother tongue remains both spoken and seen, extending from the intimacy of home into the shared spaces of public life. As he continues recording in the streets and squares of Ankara, the camera becomes a medium through which Zazaki is used rather than remembered, and it transforms language from an act of recollection into an act of existence. While the documentary ends with Mustafa reciting another dream, thus in a cyclical narrative, the documentary exposes how suppressed languages keep existing in different realms of consciousness.

As a concluding statement to this film and its linguistic and visual analysis, I want to underline that in *Where Is My Mother Tongue?*, language operates on three interwoven levels: *personal* (via mediating memories), *metaphorical*, and *active*. By forming a layered cinematic texture that speaks out, mourns, and revives Zazaki, and by making memories of the past outspoken, the film centres on the lasting effects of linguistic suppression, depicting how the silencing of Kurdish languages by state institutions continues to shape everyday life, as well as personal and ideological relationships. The story of Mustafa, struggling to reclaim his mother tongue he was once forced to abandon, is framed as an ongoing reckoning in the form of active Zazaki speech. Metaphorically, props used as personal objects in the film (such as the broken *saz*, old cassette tapes, and newspaper clippings) act as silent compilations and continuations of the suppressed language, storing fragments of Zazaki in the ordinary textures of domestic life. These objects suggest that, even though the mother tongue had been suppressed, it undeniably persists in memory and in and through material traces, waiting to be reawakened. Most significantly and through the end, the film becomes an active audiovisual dictionary: as Mustafa begins recording Zazaki words, naming everyday items, and narrating photo albums, the camera documents and participates in the reconstruction of a Zazaki (personal) life.

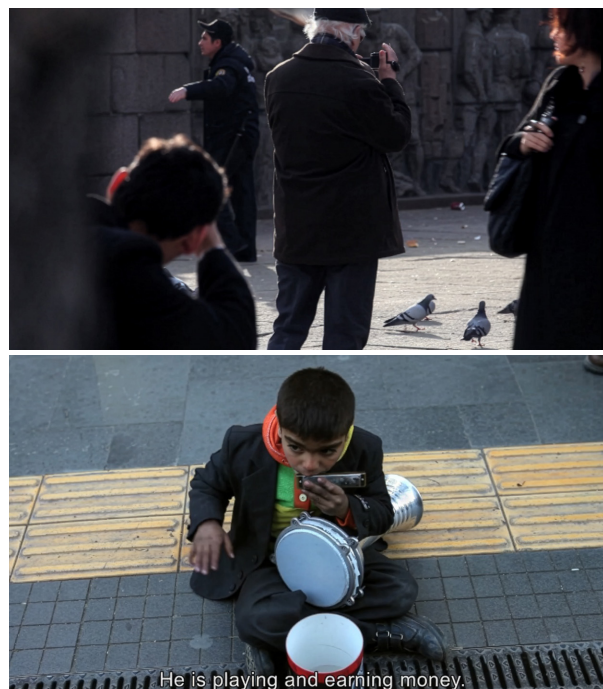


Figure 2: Mustafa goes on to the streets of Ankara and starts creating an audiovisual dictionary of Zazaki

Where is my Mother Tongue? – and the search it calls for – exposes the educational institutions' aim of erasing linguistic worlds if they are not Turkish; yet, the mother tongue later recovers from this suppression through documentary form (Cicek, 2025). Picking up on this point in the second part of this article, I will unpack how classroom documentaries expose the eradication of mother tongue as well as the effects of this language loss afterwards.

Documentary as Classroom: Revealing Language Erasure and Its Resonances

Having explored the role of documentary as a dictionary, a visual form through which audiovisual media revives and preserves marginalized languages, I now turn to another critical function: the documentary as classroom. While the previous section focused on individual and decolonial acts of linguistic recovery, this part interrogates how audiovisual narratives expose the institutional and pedagogical dimensions of language erasure. The classroom in this context moves beyond being a site of instruction and becomes a microcosm of national ideologies, state policies, and structural asymmetries that regulate which languages are taught or allowed to exist and institutionalized. In shifting from the domestic spaces of memory to the institutional frameworks of schooling, we begin to see how the suppression of mother tongues like Kurdish is a continually reproduced process. Through documentaries such as *On the Way to School* and *Ich Liebe Dich*, the school becomes a contested space where linguistic loss and linguistic resistance are simultaneously staged.

Yet, I should initially note that broader theories on classroom narratives create enclosed, often idealized universes where students from diverse backgrounds cohabit under

the guidance of a teacher or institutional force which has various forms of narrative tendencies. As Melanie Shoffner (2016) explains in *Exploring Teachers in Fiction Films*, American classroom films frequently follow a class-based narrative: poor students require teacher-heroes to guide them to academic achievement, while middle-class students pursue identity through individual growth, often independent of the teacher's role. Shoffner notes that, "while some national cinemas subvert these patterns, the narrative hierarchy –teacher-centered for the working class, student-centered for the middle class – remains dominant across many representations" (Shoffner, 2016, pp. x-xi). From a different angle (a UK and Scotland-based perspective), Jeremy Howard critiques the idea that documentary representations of schools can offer an authentic recovery of institutional life. He argues that these films function more as curated visions, mediated by filmmakers, producers, and institutional patrons than as transparent records. Rarely do school documentaries serve as critical reflections of systemic failures; instead, they often reassert institutional aspirations, projecting images of virtue and ambition over structural critique (Howard, 2011, pp. 560-562).

Yet, in the context of linguistic oppression, particularly of minority and marginalized languages, classroom documentaries can break away or merge these patterns. Two documentaries I bring together highlight the sociolinguistic pressures exerted by state and transnational institutions. While *On the Way to School* centres on the teacher's position within state language policy, *Ich Liebe Dich* foregrounds the students' internal struggles within classroom spaces shaped by both past and present linguistic exclusions.

On the Way to School serves as a critical intervention into how the Turkish classroom operates as a site of linguistic hierarchy and forced assimilation. The film follows Emre Aydın, a newly appointed Turkish-speaking teacher from Denizli, who begins his mandatory teaching post in a Kurdish-speaking village in Şanlıurfa. He has one big challenge: the children in the classroom do not understand any Turkish, and Emre does not speak Kurdish. Thus, what is framed as a primary education experience quickly transforms into a form of foreign language instruction, yet not in the sense of multilingual enrichment, but as a state-enforced linguistic demand. The students are expected to absorb Turkish as their "official" language, not just for their school life but beyond in order to participate in Turkish life in general. The teacher is young and inexperienced, still he becomes a proxy for institutional power, representing the educational system's role in eradicating non-Turkish linguistic worlds through everyday disciplinary practices. The film resists portraying Emre as a saviour or bringer of education; rather, it documents his growing realization that the Turkish curriculum and his own linguistic incapacity reinforce a colonial structure that renders Kurdish children voiceless within their own classrooms (see Figure 3) (Cicek, 2012).



Figure 3: Emre Aydın is the teacher who brings Turkish to a Kurdish world

With this background, the documentary filmmakers follow the first year Emre Aydın spends in his new position in the Kurdish town. Similar to *Where is my Mother Tongue?*, the filmmakers do not have any on-screen presence, and they take up more of an observational mode, as Bill Nichols identifies (Nichols 1991, pp. 38-43). Thus, while the documentary captures the awkwardness and unintended violence of primary school teacher, it slowly reveals how state education functions as a vector of assimilation. Emre Aydın's effort and commitment to connect with his students is challenged by his own linguistic unfamiliarity with Kurdish, making visible the tensions between language and authority.

Through a quiet and observational lens, the documentary captures Aydın's daily frustrations, pedagogical improvisations, and growing self-awareness as he becomes more conscious of the cultural and linguistic divide that separates him from his students. The classroom becomes a stage for linguistic asymmetry: while Aydın brings Turkish as the language of the state, the students embody – yet are not allowed to speak – Kurdish. The documentary implicitly reveals the effects of what Bourdieu calls linguistic capital: the value assigned to languages by institutions of power. Turkish becomes the legitimate, “correct” language, that is backed up by teachers, exams, and state curricula, while Kurdish is relegated to the realm of the familial and the informal, lacking institutional legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 50–52).

Bourdieu's theory of legitimate language further explains the classroom dynamic depicted in *On the Way to School*. He argues that institutions such as schools and their grammarians not only promote one standard language, but also create an entire apparatus of correction – normalizing “proper” usage while stigmatizing other forms of expression. This “legitimate language”, Bourdieu writes, is a semi-artificial construct that requires constant pedagogical labour to sustain itself. It is protected from “relaxation” by a system of corrections,

and through punishments and evaluations that uphold its dominance (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 50–51). In the film, we see this play out through subtle and overt mechanisms: for instance Emre Aydın’s insistence on Turkish, the students’ lack of comprehension, and the growing awareness of the linguistic distance and difference that no pedagogy can bridge overnight. This reflects an imposition by force of Turkish world-building, where every weekday children are forced to inhabit a language that is foreign to their own lived reality.

As Pierre Bourdieu argues, legitimate language, the language sanctioned by educational and state institutions, is a socially-constructed standard that must be taught, corrected, and inculcated (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 55). The classroom plays a central role in this process. It produces speakers who internalize the “correct” form of speech while simultaneously marking other linguistic forms as inferior or improper. The imposition of legitimate language thus becomes “the principle of the production and evaluation of speech” (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 61), shaping who gets to speak, how they are heard, and whether they are recognized as full and legitimate participants in public life.

When read alongside Stanley Cavell’s assertion that language constitutes a world, the condition of *semilingualism* takes on a deeper, ontological resonance. In this light, the classroom exceeds its role as a space of instruction and becomes a mechanism for shaping and delimiting the “ordinary world” itself, as well as the subjects’ linguistic position within it. By elevating Turkish and marginalizing languages like Kurdish or Zazaki, educational institutions regulate access to the shared reality that language creates. Those denied the legitimacy of their mother tongue are, in Cavell’s terms, denied full participation in the world that language makes possible. The classroom thus functions as an arena of linguistic power, where embodied language worlds are fractured, and where belonging is conditioned by the state-sanctioned authority of the language the subject is permitted to speak.

This dynamic resonates with what Çoşkun, Derince, and Uçarlar (2011) describe as the *scar of tongue*, which is the enduring wound created when children are introduced to schooling in a language they do not understand. As in the testimonies gathered in *Scar of Tongue*, the children’s hesitations and visible discomfort are also signs and symptoms of an imposed linguistic order that renders their own voices illegible within the institutional frame. In *On the Way to School*, the camera captures this scar through the daily rhythm of repetition, such as the students’ pauses before answering, their blank stares, and the teacher’s frustrated corrections. The film thus uncovers how linguistic repression is reproduced through everyday educational practice, where silence becomes a learned behaviour and speech itself becomes a site of discipline, exposing how education continues to serve as a colonial tool of linguistic domestication rather than a space of learning.

From this perspective, the classroom is not only a site of language learning or new language acquisition, but also one of ideological and linguistic displacement and enforcement. Language instruction becomes a tool of constant control, disguised as primary education and pedagogical care. The very forced process of teaching Turkish in a Kurdish-speaking region reaffirms the state’s refusal to accommodate linguistic plurality within its education

system. Aydın's main struggle revolves around cultural and linguistic imposition. Although the documentary presents him with empathy, it does not obscure the power dynamics his position embodies.



Figure 4: The German language classroom in *Ich Liebe Dich* where German is taught through the enforced language, Turkish

In contrast, Emine Emel Balcı's *Ich Liebe Dich* focuses on the students themselves who must navigate a different linguistic terrain. The documentary follows Saime, a Kurdish woman living in the Hacilar district of Şanlıurfa, as she tries to pass the German A2 language exam to be able to get the documentation and approval that will allow reunification with her husband in Berlin, Germany. Her efforts to learn German are framed within and through the domestic rhythms of Kurdish village life: milking animals, cooking – and studying German. The film opens with her routine: waking up, completing household chores, and walking to a classroom where other Kurdish women gather to study German, often by translating phrases from Turkish.

It should be noted here that their German teacher does not reflect any foreign language pedagogy, yet aims at teaching through direct translation of unending phrases from Turkish to German. Thus, he does not appear to be an accomplished teacher with a lot of foreign language teaching skills, which adds a sense of hopelessness to the women's desire to learn German. In the end, all the students have to sit the A2 level exam, and only two of the women in the classroom will manage to pass it (see Figure 4).

Given this background, I should emphasize that the women in this German classroom are learning a third language (German) through a second language (Turkish); their first language (Kurdish) is never part of the instructional process. This is not just a technical detail, yet it reveals the grounds for foreign language anxiety. Students who were once forced to learn

Turkish in elementary school are now going through another language barrier to be able to enter Europe. In effect, the linguistic violence imposed during their early education continues to echo, now manifesting as an obstacle to integration into the German language. Thus, the layered history of forced linguistic assimilation resurfaces in this adult classroom. Their earlier encounter with Turkish, marked by alienation, punishment, and suppression of mother tongue as I revealed earlier, reflects itself as an internalized barrier to new language acquisition. In this way, the film exposes how multilingualism, when born of coercion, is a traumatic process of forced language acquisition. Thus, while *On the Way to School* frames the classroom as a space of initial foreign language imposition, *Ich Liebe Dich* reveals the extended aftermath – how early experiences of linguistic erasure linger and shape future foreign language learning and linguistic openness.

The students in this adult classroom are trying their best to pass the language test, yet additionally they also deal with the complexities of having their significant others in Germany and seeing them only once a year, when they return for summer holidays. For instance, a poignant scene in *Ich Liebe Dich* centres on a woman from the same classroom, who explains that her six-year-old son refuses to speak with his father, who has been constantly absent working in Germany. Thus, this reluctance to silence or not to speak is not due to a language barrier per se, but rather to a deeply emotional response to absence and separation. This “not speaking” resonates with the broader theme of obstructed speech throughout the documentary. The boy’s refusal to speak becomes an embodied expression of longing, estrangement, and perhaps even resentment. In this way, language, or its withholding, emerges as a powerful and embodied response where familial emotions, especially those shaped by displacement and migration, are made legible. Moreover, scenes of longing and jealousy further entangle language with emotional landscapes. The women fear that their husbands might form new attachments abroad, and their inability to speak German heightens these anxieties. So language becomes a symbol of access to a shared world for these fragmented family lives, and its unfulfillment becomes a marker of disconnection.

In these anxiety-driven efforts of learning a new language, Kurdish – Saide’s mother tongue – quietly emerges as the language of love, longing, and solidarity. On the phone with her husband, they speak in Kurdish, showing care and jealousy through Kurdish, while in the voiceover she mainly speaks in Turkish. This layering of languages, I argue, cannot be coincidental. Kurdish appears as the language of affection, of desire and emotional grounding, and shared struggle, especially among the women in the classroom and their wider social circles. Turkish, on the other hand, returns as the language of instruction, the language used to teach, to explain, and to narrate. Even as a voiceover, it carries the weight of institutional order. Without stating it directly, the film draws a line between Kurdish as the language of closeness, of love and desire, and Turkish as the language of formal address, of making things legible to an outside world.

At the conclusion of *Ich Liebe Dich*, when Saide fails to pass the A2 German language test, the camera lingers on hope. This moment of disillusionment, rather than signalling

defeat, becomes a turning point. After speaking with her husband, they reaffirm their shared goal – “we will never give up” – and Saide commits to trying again. This decision resonates with the film’s broader exploration of how language learning is tied to both institutional barriers and intimate longings. The test itself is a symbol of state-enforced thresholds: the foreign language here functions as a gatekeeper of love, of unification and a shared future. Yet Saide’s persistence reclaims language as a site of resistance and hope. It also reflects how emotional resilience emerges within and despite linguistic trauma. Her determination disrupts the idea that language trauma, which creates new language acquisition difficulty, results in passivity. Instead, it becomes a mode of insistence, an act of speaking toward a future still shaped by absence, but no longer controlled by it. In contrast to earlier depictions of linguistic suppression, first through the imposition of Turkish in childhood, then through the alienation from German in adulthood, Saide’s ending signals a shift. Here, language becomes a site of reclamation: an affective horizon through which failure weighs less, and hope and desire intertwine.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has indicated that the documentaries discussed here resist linguistic loss and forced language acquisition. Through their layered audiovisual narratives and aesthetics, they expose the institutional forces that have worked to erase Kurdish, while simultaneously uncovering intimate spaces of reclamation and preservation. These documentaries function both as acts of language preservation, in the form of creating a documentary that functions as a dictionary, and for exposing erasure and its aftermath through documenting forced language processes and classroom oppression. In both ways, they offer means to preserve linguistic diversity and to confront and dismantle linguistic erasure. In doing so, documentary film becomes a means for uncovering, or altering the hegemonic invisibilisation of Kurdishness, transforming visibility itself into a form of decolonial reclamation. By analysing these documentary practices through the lens of Mignolo’s epistemic disobedience, this article also reveals how audiovisual culture moves beyond documenting the results of erasure to provide a site for the active reversal of state mandated invisibility.

Whether through Mustafa’s quiet determination to reconstruct a world in Zazaki or Saide’s persistent efforts to navigate bureaucratic barriers, these documentaries demonstrate that suppressed languages are resistive: they are dynamic, and they are also living sites of struggle, of linguistic memory, and unending desire. Together, they narrativize the *scar of tongue*, which reveals itself by the lingering wound of linguistic deterritorialization that state-enforced education has historically produced. Yet, by making this scar visible in multiple layers, the documentary form transforms it into a site of linguistic reclamation and a medium of insistence, insisting that Kurdish languages are spoken, heard, felt, and lived.

The increasing number of Kurdish film festivals in Turkey, Kurdistan, the United States, and across Europe substantiates this insistence, revealing how Kurdish is lived and heard

beyond confined spaces. These festivals extend the restorative energy of the documentaries discussed here, demonstrating that Kurdish languages can exceed the confines of the domestic domain and circulate transnationally. Kurdish becomes actively spoken, subtitled, and thus sustained across cinematic and solidary worlds. In Cavellian terms, this is not just *finding the world in a dictionary*, but *bringing the dictionary to the world*, reattaching language to lived experience and returning speech to the world it names. Each Kurdish film becomes part of a larger epistemic reconstitution, asserting the endurance of a language and the persistent vitality of a world in Kurdish.

Endnotes

- 1 The production years of these documentaries reflect a brief political moment during the AKP regime when the prospect of European Union accession created limited openings for the visibility of non-Turkish identities, cultures, and languages.
- 2 While Turkish holds the status of the official language, several other languages continue to be spoken across different regions of the country, including Arabic, Zazaki, Laz, Circassian, Greek, Armenian, and Assyrian. These languages, often associated with distinct ethnic and religious communities, have historically coexisted within Turkey's borders, yet they have also faced similar and varying degrees of marginalization.
- 3 Semilingualism is also referred to by Jim Cummins (2000) in *Language, Power, and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*.
- 4 Zazaki (also known as Dimlî, Dimilkî, Kirmanckî, or Kirdkî) is a Northwestern Iranian language spoken primarily in eastern Turkey by the Zazas, who are often considered a part of the Kurdish ethnic group and, in many cases, identify as such. It belongs to the Zaza-Gorani subgroup of the Northwestern Iranian branch. While Ethnologue estimates 1.48 million speakers, with the language classified as threatened due to widespread shift to Turkish, the number of speakers is likely between two or three million.
- 5 It is also crucial to note that this language plurality exists beyond the Kurds in Turkey. In my family, for instance, my father and his extended family spoke Pontic Greek, or Pontika, a Greek dialect peculiar to Pontus region on the southern shores of Black Sea and northeastern Anatolia, which is an endangered Greek language. Yet I cannot speak this language, as it was not transmitted to the new generation.
- 6 See, for example, *The Voice of My Father* (2012) by Zeynel Dogan and Orhan Eskikoy, or *I Flew you Stayed* (2012) by Mizgin Mujde Arslan, or *Silent* (2012) by Rezzan Yesilbas.
- 7 The *saz* (also known as *bağlama*) is a long-necked stringed instrument widely used in Kurdish, Alevi, and Anatolian musical traditions. It serves not only as a musical instrument but also as a cultural and emotional vessel, often accompanying oral poetry (*dengbêj* in Kurdish tradition) and functioning as a means of collective memory and storytelling.

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