

Mohammad Rasekh-Mahand

7 The Laki of the Ahl-e Haqq community in Češin: Some morphosyntactic features

Abstract: This paper introduces one Laki vernacular, spoken in a small village near Hamedān named Češin, surrounded by Persian- and Turkish-speaking communities. This community has two outstanding features: first, they are followers of the Ahl-e Haqq creed in a Shi'a-dominated region, and they have kept their native language, Laki. Laki and its varieties are among the lesser-studied languages spoken in western Iran. Moreover, their relationship to the Kurdish language group is controversial: some consider it a language of its own, others classify it within the Kurdish language group, and others consider it a transitional variety between Kurdish and Luri. This study is based on natural data gathered through fieldwork. I have described some of the morphological features of nominals in this variety: definiteness, plurality, Ezafe construction, demonstrative =a, and personal clitics. These forms are compared with two other Laki dialects, Laki Kakavandi and Laki Harsini, and Southern Kurdish dialects. Lastly, it is shown that the alignment pattern of this variety is accusative, similar to Southern Kurdish dialects. However, some of the examples suggest the presence of remnants of a tense-sensitive alignment system, particularly in the third person.

Keywords: Laki, Southern Kurdish, Clitics, Alignment, Nominal morphology

1 Introduction

This paper focuses on an understudied minority community and their language in Češin, a village near Hamedān, in the west of Iran. This community has two outstanding features, which make it an interesting case study. First, the inhabitants of Češin, also called Kišin by locals, are followers of the Ahl-e Haqq creed. Orthodox branches of Islam, both Shi'a and Sunni, regard Ahl-e Haqq beliefs as heresies (*ghuluww*). Therefore, the followers of this faith are advised to keep their beliefs and ideas as secret as possible, which, to a certain degree, hinders open encounters and inquiries to these people about religious themes. It is agreed that this sect originated as a variant of Sufism in Kurdistan and remained a popular religion among nomadic tribespeople and peasants (Mir-Hosseini 1996: 112). Then, it spread

Mohammad Rasekh-Mahand, Bu-Ali Sina University, Hamedan

from Kurdistan to other parts of Iran and Iraq. Second, the Ahl-e Haqq community in Češin is unique in having kept its native tongue, while most Ahl-e Haqq believers living in other parts of Hamedān Province are now speaking Turkish or Luri. Having kept their original religion and native language, the Ahl-e Haqq community of Češin provides a chance to study their conservative religious and linguistic habits. Ethnolinguistic vitality is defined as “a group’s ability to maintain and protect its existence in time as a collective entity with a distinctive identity and language” (Ehala 2015: 1). Normally, a group transmits its language and cultural practices to new generations. When a group successfully keeps its heritage, it can be considered a high-vitality group; on the other hand, low-vitality groups lack agency and are prone to assimilation. In this sense, the inhabitants of Češin can be classified as a high-vitality group.

The populace of Češin asserts that they speak Laki. Laki’s status among Iranian languages is not well-defined. It is an Iranian language spoken mainly in the Zagros region of western Iran, though its area of diffusion extends to the east of Iraq. It is traditionally considered a member of the Northwestern branch of Iranian languages, along with its neighbor to the north, Kurdish. However, to the south, it neighbors Luri, a south-eastern Iranian language. The contact effects caused controversies over the status of Laki. It is considered to be a dialect of Kurdish (Lazard 1992, Fattah 2000), sometimes a transitional dialect between Kurdish and Luri (Asatrian 2009), and sometimes an independent language (Izadpanah 2012). Difficulty establishing the position of the Laki dialect continuum is partially caused by its location surrounded by Kurdish and Luri (Shahsavari 2010). Despite Lazard (1992) introducing the Laki language at the end of the 20th century, there is still no agreed-upon position on its status, and comprehensive research on the language is yet to be conducted. The existing classifications of Laki among Iranian languages are generally based on intuitions and native speakers’ perceptions of their language (Anonby 2004–5: 11, Aliyari Babolghani 2019). Anonby (2004–5) argues that Laks are ethnically associated with the Luri population of Luristan, but their language, Laki, is a Northwestern Iranian language, genetically very close to Kurdish. Dabir-Moghaddam (2013: 862) also asserts that Laki is a Northwestern Iranian language. The case of Češin, as a small village surrounded by Persian and Turkish languages and preserving their vernacular (Laki), is an exceptional case that can help better understand this language and clarify its status among Iranian languages.

This religious minority group preserved its historical roots in a city whose primary religion is Shi’a Islam. Both religion and language play a pivotal role in defining their identity: Laki speakers of Češin typically define themselves as an Ahl-e Haqq community who is ethnically Lak, which shows the importance of both features in their self-identification. The main goal of this study is to describe some of the main morphosyntactic features of the Laki of Češin and compare them with

other varieties of Laki, especially the Laki of Harsin (Belelli, 2022) and Southern Kurdish. This comparison shows how this vernacular differs from other Laki variants spoken in western Iran and neighboring languages and sheds light on some contact-induced changes in this specific variety. In section 2, we introduce the Češin community, its geography, population and history. Section 3 is devoted to a discussion of the linguistic placement of Laki, its general features, and its relation to other Iranian languages, especially Southern Kurdish. A selection of morphosyntactic features of the Laki of Češin are further described in section 4 and compared with equivalents in the Laki of Harsin and Southern Kurdish, whenever possible.

2 Geography and population of Češin

The village of Češin (also called Kišin by local people) (34° 44' 32" N, 48° 33' 9" E) is located to the south-east of Hamedān, the capital city of the homonymous Province of western Iran (Figure 1). Češin has an overall extension of 130 km² and is surrounded by the locations of Pol-šekaste, Abaru, Enjelās, Simin, Xāku, Tafrijān, and Hamedān (Figure 2). While the primary language of Hamedān Province is Persian, the population of the villages surrounding Češin speak Turkish and Luri, besides Persian. Like other non-Persian-speaking regions of Iran, many people in this area are bi- or multilingual.

The population of Češin is about 1400 people based on the 2015 census of the Statistical Centre of Iran. It includes about 800 men and 600 women, only 70% literate. Historically, the inhabitants of Češin migrated from Kurdestān, Kermānšāh, Noorābād and Tuyserkān. They either define themselves as Laki-speaking Kurds or as Laks altogether. They also distinguish themselves from the inhabitants of the nearby village of Xāku based on the linguistic affiliation of the latter to Northern Luri. One can observe an increasing tendency among native speakers in Češin to neglect to teach Laki to younger generations.

The inhabitants try to hide their religious affiliation to preserve their cultural and religious heritage from external assimilatory pressure so that they do not talk about the fundamental differences between their creed and the official religion of Iran in the public sphere. For this reason, many ordinary people consider the Ahl-e Haqq religion as a branch of Islam. This study is based on field research since 2021, which led to 89 minutes of video recordings and audio files. Whenever needed, we addressed specific questions to our native-speaking consultants.



Figure 1: Iran's administrative provinces (ostān).

3 Linguistic situation

Notwithstanding recent attempts at a comprehensive study of the different Iranian languages spoken in the core Kurdish-speaking region (see Gündoğdu et al. 2019 for a general discussion), many varieties at this region's frontiers are still severely under-documented. There are some completely undocumented vernaculars in the western and southern borders of the Kurdish-speaking region. One of these is the Laki of Češin. Understanding the linguistic status of Laki is impossible without some background knowledge of different varieties of Kurdish, especially Southern Kurdish, spoken mainly in Kermānšāh and Ilām Provinces. Southern Kurdish varieties are not as well-studied as Northern and Central Kurdish (Haig 2008: 202, though see Fattah 2000 for dialectology of Southern Kurdish). Therefore, there is

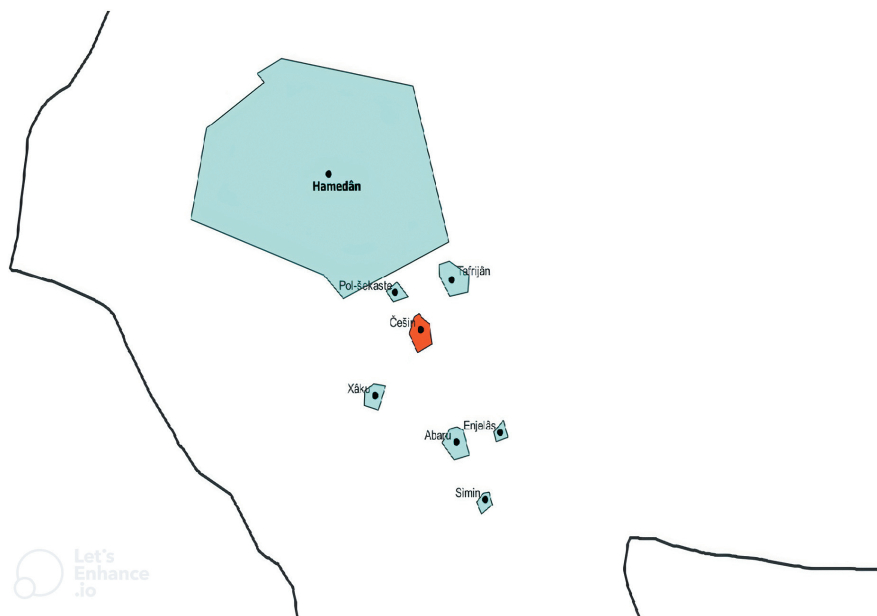


Figure 2: Geography of Češin.

no complete consensus on the different branches of Southern Kurdish. Laki's status with respect to them is also an open question.

Generally, Laki refers to the dialects spoken by Laks, an ethnic group living in the northwestern areas of historical Lorestân. Nowadays, Laki dialects are spoken in an area wedged between the Southern Kurdish and the Luri-speaking regions of western Iran. Small exclaves of Laki speakers are also found in other parts of Iran and beyond the Iraqi border (Belelli 2021: 21). Fattah (2000:4) estimates that the population of Laki speakers is around one million people, but Belelli (2021: 22) considers this figure probably overstated. Laki's genetic affiliation within the Iranian languages is disputed: as already pointed out, the language is commonly considered as a Northwestern Iranian variety constituting the southernmost cluster of the Kurdish language group (Minorsky 1943: 75; Windfuhr 1989a: 248, 1989b: 294; Blau 1989: 328, 1993: 93; Lazard 1992: 215; Schmitt 2000: 77; Fattah 2000: 55–62; Asatrian 2009: 12). Some admit that Laki is a Kurdish dialect which developed several commonalities with Northern Luri due to contact, so that it could be called a mixed language (Anonby (2004–2005). Other marginal views, such as Izady's (1992: 174–175), assert a closer affinity of Laki to Gorani/Hawrami.

Typologically, Laki has OV word order but is a tendentially head-initial language. Belelli (2021: 22–23), studying Laki of Harsin, refers to some commonalities between Laki and Kurdish varieties. For example, some shared phonological features include phonemic opposition between /l/ and /ɬ/ and /r/ and /ʕ/; common realization of the group *ng* as [ŋ], some shared morphological features; such as the presence of a definite marker *-a/-ka* and of an ‘open compound construction,’ and some lexical traits. However, Laki differs from Southern Kurdish and Luri in its alignment patterns, showing forms of ergativity in past transitive verbs. Belelli (2021: 23) emphasizes that “mutual intelligibility between Laki and most SK varieties is possible, although it may require a certain degree of effort and acclimatization, especially on the part of SK speakers.” Laki also has different dialects, although little is known about its internal variation. Belelli’s (2021) study of the Laki of Harsin provided a reliable base to study other Laki varieties and to compare them. In this paper, we compare some of the morphosyntactic traits of the Laki of Češin with those of the Laki of Harsin to highlight aspects of internal variation found in the Laki dialect group.

4 Some morphosyntactic features

This paragraph describes some of the morphosyntactic features of the Laki of Češin in the nominal domain (4.1) and its alignment patterns in (4.2).

4.1 Nominal morphology

The morphosyntactic features typically marked on Laki nouns are number (singular/plural) and definiteness. Some other markers may occur on nouns, e.g., the Ezafe marker. In this section, we discuss (in)definiteness, plural marking, the Ezafe construction, the demonstrative particle *=a*, and personal clitics.

Definite and indefinite markers. In the Laki of Češin, the definite marker is the stressed suffix *-a*, which attaches to nouns and noun phrases. It marks the nominals whose referents are recoverable in discourse or identifiable by the hearer (1). When the NP refers to a generic noun, the definite marker is absent (2):

- (1) *gerdu-a* *hard=i*
 walnut-DEF eat.PST=3SG
 ‘He ate the walnut.’

- (2) *gerdu hard=i*
 walnut eat.PST=3SG
 ‘He ate walnuts.’

This Laki suffix is one of the variants of K-suffixes existing in Iranian languages (Nourzaei 2021, 2022; Haig and Mohammadirad 2019; Haig 2019; see Taghipour 2021 for a different analysis), which were initially used as an evaluative, traditionally called diminutive, marker. Its variants, among which *-(a)ka*, *-ok*, *-ek*, *-e*, are used in Kurdish, Luri, Persian, and some Iranian languages to mark definiteness. The equivalent form used in colloquial Persian is *-e* (Rasekh-Mahand 2010; Nourzaei 2022); however, in some parts of Hamedān, the *-a* variant is also used (Karim 2021: 95; Rasekh-Mahand & Saburi 2022).

In the Laki of Češin, the *-(a)ka* variant appears in nouns ending in /ā/, such as *dā-ka* ‘mother-DEF.’ However, in our data, the *-(a)ka* variant is also used as a kind of demarcative suffix. Fattah (2000: 259) observes that its presence is particularly frequent when certain kinds of kinship relations are implied. However, in this usage, they are very similar to vocative markers since they appear after the noun being used as a term of address:

- (3) *berā-ka=m*
 brother-voc=1SG
 ‘My brother!’
- (4) *koř-aka=m*
 son-voc=1SG
 ‘My son!’

Belelli (2019: 86) asserts that *-aka/-aga* and *-a* are the two allomorphs marking definiteness in Southern Kurdish varieties. Fattah (2000: 246) argues that towards the north, the varieties use exclusively *-aka*, *-aga*, and the varieties in the southern part favor *-a*. Other Southern Kurdish vernaculars allow variation between these two forms. Based on this analysis, the Laki of Češin is similar to southern vernaculars of Southern Kurdish.

The indefinite noun phrases in New Western Iranian languages could have specific and indefinite interpretations (Karim 2021: 91). These languages have an indefinite marker. The Laki of Češin is among Iranian languages that have two types of indefinite markers: *yak* (< **aika*) and *ew* (< **aiwa*). In this respect, it is similar to New Persian and Hawrami, which have a hybrid system consisting of both *yak* and *ew*. In (5), both of these markers are used:

- (5) *ye det-ī der-em o ye koř-ī*
 one daughter-INDF have-1SG and one son-INDF
 ‘I have a daughter and a son.’

The unstressed indefinite suffix *-ī* alone also marks indefiniteness, as in (6):

- (6) *e māl det-ī hāt*
 from house girl-INDF came.3SG
 ‘A girl came out of a house.’

If a modifier follows an indefinite noun, the indefinite suffix attaches after the modifier as in (7):

- (7) *māl xās-ī*
 house good-INDF
 ‘a good house.’

The indefinite markers in the Laki of Češin are identical to those in the Laki of Harsin (Belelli 2021: 77).

Plurality. The definite plural marker in the Laki of Češin is the suffix *-ela*, bearing stress on the definite component *-a*. This is a definite plural marker combining PL *-al* and the definite marker *-a*, with a regular reduction of the unstressed /a/ of the plural suffix bordering a stressed syllable. It marks countable nouns but does not appear on mass nouns.

- (8) *koř-ela har siyān žen san-en=a*
 boy-DEF.PL all three wife take-3PL=COP.PRS.3SG
 ‘All of the three boys got married. (Lit.: took a wife.)’

- (9) *dār / dār-ela*
 tree / tree-DEF.PL
 tree(s) / the trees

- (10) *ku / ku-ela*
 mountain / mountain-DEF.PL
 mountain(s) / the mountains

When the plural marker appears after /a/ and /ā/, it is further reduced to *-la* (11, 12):

- (11) *ča* / *ča-la*
 well / well-DEF.PL
 well(s) / the wells
- (12) *nana* / *nana-la*
 mother / mother-DEF. PL
 ‘mother(s)’ / ‘the mothers’

The plural suffix in Laki of Češin is very similar to Southern Kurdish dialects, while in Northern and Central Kurdish dialects, it is normally *-ān* (Belelli 2021: 80).

Ezafe construction. In Ezafe construction in many Iranian languages, various modifiers can be linked with the head noun, most often with an Ezafe particle, /e/ or /i/. However, Fattah (2000: 261–5) observes inconsistent use of the Ezafe particle in Southern Kurdish dialects. Belelli (2021: 83) argues that while in the Laki of Harsin, the two elements in the Ezafe construction can be simply juxtaposed, some traces of using the Ezafe particle are observed. She nonetheless observes that juxtaposition is the dominant tendency in this dialect.

Our data from the Laki of Češin shows that the speakers do not use the Ezafe particle, and they simply juxtapose the head and dependent element:

- (13) *māšin barā-k=am berd-en*
 car brother-DEF-1SG steal.PST-3SG
 ‘They stole my brother’s car.’
- (14) *kor gujer=am*
 boy last=1SG
 ‘My last son.’
- (15) *nāma Ali xān-em*
 letter Ali read-1SG
 ‘I read Ali’s letter.’
- (16) *dam dar-a hāt*
 Beside door-DEF sleep.PST.3SG
 ‘He slept beside the door.’
- (17) *nana Ahmad merd*
 Mother Ahmad die.PST.3SG
 ‘Ahmad’s mother died.’

Demonstrative particle =a. In the Laki of Češin, like in other Kurdish varieties, an unstressed particle =a attaches to the end of a noun or noun phrase determined by a demonstrative adjective (Belelli 2021: 87):

- (18) *a boy=a*
that bride=DP
'That bride'
- (19) *i daftar=a*
this notebook=DP
'This notebook'
- (20) *i žen=a hat*
This woman=DP come.PST.3SG
'This woman came.'

The demonstrative particle follows a plural marker:

- (21) *a gol-el=a*
That flower-PL=DP
'Those flowers.'

When following a complex noun phrase, the demonstrative particle appears in the final position after the dependent word/modifier:

- (22) *i kor lar=a*
this boy slim=DP
'This slim boy.'

Clitics/ bound personal pronouns. The free and bound personal pronouns of Laki of Češin are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Free and bound personal pronouns.

	Singular		Plural	
	Free	bound	free	Bound
1	<i>me(n)</i>	<i>=m</i>	<i>Ima</i>	<i>=mān</i>
2	<i>to(n)</i>	<i>=it</i>	<i>homa</i>	<i>=tān</i>
3	<i>ow</i>	<i>=ē / =ey</i>	<i>awāna</i>	<i>=yān</i>

These bound personal pronouns correspond to the pronominal clitics attested in the Laki of Harsin (Belelli 2021: 96). Mohammadirad (2020: 379) lists the personal clitics in Kakavandi Laki, in which the 3SG clitic is only =*ē*. The clitics in the Laki of Češin have different functions and occur in different distributions: they function as adnominal possessor, object marker, adpositional complement, and indirect participant in very few clauses. However, they are not used as A-past markers as in related languages showing forms of Tense-based Split Alignment (Haig 2008, Gholami 2018, Mohammadirad 2020). Notably, they are used as A-past markers in Kakavandi Laki of Kakavandi, which show tense-sensitive alignment (Mohammadirad 2020: 377) but do not play this function in Laki of Harsini (Belelli 2021).

They are used as possessors in possessive construction:

- (23) *nana=m* ‘my mother’
 bow=at ‘your father’
 māl=ey ‘your room’
 dīt=mān ‘our daughter’
 māl=tān ‘your (PL) room’
 qāliya=tān ‘their carpet’

In the following examples, the clitics are used as adpositional complements:

- (24) *ča an=tān bar-am*
 what for=3PL bring-1SG
 ‘What should I bring for you?’
- (25) *ajen=ē be-pors*
 from=3SG IMP-ask
 ‘Ask from him.’
- (26) *vagar=et šuxi kerd-em*
 with=2SG fun do.PST-1SG
 ‘I made fun of you.’

Clitics may mark an indirect participant (Haig 2008) or subject-like argument (Mohammadirad 2020: 379) in some sentences involving verbs of necessity and wanting, liking (as in 27 below), and non-controlled internal physical and emotional states:

- (27) *e māl-a=tān xoš=em hat*
 from house-DEF=3PL like=1PL come.PST.3SG
 ‘I liked your house.’

In this sentence, the 1SG clitic *=em* marks the experiencer of the sentence, while the verb is in the 3SG form. Belelli (2021: 100) reports that clitics can also mark an indirect participant, such as a benefactive or experiencer, in more or less fixed expressions that describe physical or mental states in the Laki of Harsin.

In the periphrastic verb construction in (28), the clitic referring to the experiencer is introduced by a preposition:

- (28) *hers ben=et gert=i*
 anger to=2SG take.PST=3SG
 ‘He became angry.’ (Lit: Anger took over me.)

The last function of pronominal clitics is to indicate direct objects. This feature is common in various Iranian languages (Rasekh-Mahand 2014, Haig 2018, Mohammadirad 2020). In Laki, spoken in Češin, pronominal clitics mark direct objects, regardless of whether they are explicitly expressed as noun phrases. It is noteworthy, however, that these clitics do not represent fully developed object agreement markers, primarily because their usage is not mandatory.

- (29) *xerř-m=ē*
 buy.PST-1SG=3SG
 ‘I bought it.’

A notable characteristic of object-marking clitics in the Laki language of Češin is that the clitic attaches to a dummy preposition in most cases where object indexing occurs. As reported by Mohammadirad (2020: 558), this type of dummy preposition, lacking any inherent meaning, has also emerged as a host for clitics in the Bandari language. This phenomenon highlights the influence of language contact and the potential for similar linguistic features to arise in unrelated languages through contact-induced change. In the following examples, the Laki preposition *ben* (glossed as PREP) is a dummy preposition acting as a host for object clitics:

- (30) *ben=et di-m*
 PREP=2SG see.PST-1SG
 ‘I saw you.’

- (31) *dî-m ben=etān*
 see.PST-1SG PREP=3SG
 ‘I saw you (PL).’
- (32) *ona ben=em xeri-n*
 they prep=1SG buy.PST-3PL
 ‘They bought me (something).’

This is an example of an independent development, apparently not observed in the Laki of Harsin or other Laki dialects in the region.

4.2 Alignment

Haig (2017) argues that one of the typological features of some Iranian languages is that they show a tense-based alignment split affecting the conjugation of transitive verbs in the past. However, differently from other Kurdish varieties, Southern Kurdish dialects are characterized by a straightforward accusative alignment throughout their verbal system. The core arguments (Subject, Agent, and Object) are morphologically unmarked. The Agent/Subject of any verb, irrespective of transitivity and tense, is normally cross-referenced via an agreement suffix on the verb, ultimately deriving from the set of bound pronouns reanalyzed as agreement markers (Belelli 2021: 17). However, Fattah (2000: 61–2) argues that Laki differs from both its neighbors, i.e., Southern Kurdish and Luri, in its alignment patterns. Laki shows forms of ergativity in the conjugation of past transitive verbs. The past-tense Agent is cross-referenced via personal clitics, much like Central Kurdish. Mohammadirad (2020: 377) also reports that Kakvandi Laki shows tense-sensitive alignment. He also observes that the agreement pattern in the dialects, which he terms ‘proper Laki,’ based on data from Kakavandi and Aleshtari Laki, is nominative-accusative in the present tense, but ergative-like in past-based tenses. He further notes that these Laki varieties differ from transitional, mixed Laki dialects in the northern periphery (like the Laki of Harsin), which have lost tense-sensitive alignment due to contact with different dialects of Southern Kurdish. Fattah (2000) reports that all Laki-Kermānshāhi dialects differ from ‘proper Laki’ in using certain verbal endings and in showing accusative alignment. “This feature has been taken by Fattah (2000) as the primary isogloss distinguishing Southern Kurdish varieties from Laki, as well as the main reason for including Harsini and related Laki-Kermānshāhi vernaculars within the SK dialect group” (Belelli 2021: 31). This quote means that Southern Kurdish varieties do not show tense-sensitive alignment and a variety like Harsini, in this feature, groups with these dialects.

Our data from Laki of Češin show that this dialect does not show tense-sensitive alignment consistently. Even in past transitive constructions, it uses a nominative-accusative pattern with personal affixes on the verb. The affixes which appear after consonant-final stems are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Personal endings.

	Singular	Plural
1	-em	-imin
2	-in	-inān
3	-ē (present) -e (present of 'go') -∅ (past)	-en

The following examples show the use of the personal endings in accusative alignment patterns with a Present intransitive verb (33), a Past intransitive verb (34), a Present transitive verb (35), and a Past transitive verb (36):

(33) *me ma-č-em*

I IND-go-1SG

'I go.'

(34) *me čī-m*

I go.PST-1SG

'I went.'

(35) *me Ali=a m-in-em*

I Ali=IND IND-see.PRS-1SG

'I see Ali.'

(36) *me Ali di-m*

I Ali see.PST-1SG

'I saw Ali.'

Using an accusative pattern throughout the verbal system bundles the Laki of Češin with the Southern Kurdish group. However, some of the examples provided earlier (such as 1, 2, and 8) suggest the presence of remnants of tense-sensitive alignment in the third person. This means that the choice of verb form in these examples is influenced by the tense of the sentence, which is a characteristic of tense-sensitive alignment. While it appears that tense-sensitive alignment is not a fully developed

feature of the Laki language, the examples suggest that it may have had some influence on the language's grammar in the past.

This manuscript serves as a concise introduction to the Laki of Češin, a language variety spoken by a small community outside the core region commonly referred to as Lakestān. This work aims to describe distinctive morphosyntactic features of nominals and alignment patterns in this specific Laki variety while highlighting any similarities or differences with other varieties of Laki and Southern Kurdish. Through this analysis, a more comprehensive understanding of language diversity in the region may be achieved, particularly regarding Laki varieties that have been insufficiently studied and comprise an understudied language cluster.

Abbreviations

1	first person
2	second person
3	third person
COP	copula
DEF	definite
DP	demonstrative postposition
IND	indicative
INDF	indefinite
PREP	preposition
PRS	present tense
PST	past tense
SG	singular
VOC	vocative

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