



## Article

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### The Morphosyntactic Behavior of the Preposition *la* in Sorani Kurdish Structures

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#### Abstract

This article aims to investigate the role of the preposition *la* in the structure of Sorani Kurdish verbs. As certain verbs are usually accompanied by *la* in different sentences, this paper explains in detail how this preposition is situated in the structure of those verbs by providing a syntactic as well as morphological treatment of their linguistic behavior. Verbs are classified into four main categories for the sake of studying them in detail. Deriving from a number of different sources, it is deemed necessary to make a distinction between two main classes of prepositions discussed in Kurdish grammar: simple and absolute, a distinction that also applies to *la*. Drawing upon this distinction, this article sets out the main framework of this discussion and explains thoroughly how this preposition can behave differently based on the host it is attached to or followed by in the sentence. The verbs will also be analyzed with respect to how many morphemes they are composed of and a morphemic analysis will be taken into account throughout. The preposition *la* also serves to provide an archaic type of *ezafe* (construct).

**Keywords:** Simple Prepositions, Absolute Prepositions, Noun Phrase, Prepositional Phrase, Pronominal Clitics, Sorani Kurdish, Central Kurdish, Gorani

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**Introduction**

The written standard of Central Kurdish developed in the 1920s was later adopted as the official orthography of Iraqi Kurdistan; this spoken Kurdish dialect became known as “Sorani” (after the historical Soran Emirate). Central Kurdish at some time in its history reflected interactions with the ancient Gorani language or dialect (and possibly with Arabic and even Hebrew) in a way that ultimately meant that some archaic structures would become “standardized” in Sorani Kurdish. To further clarify, Sorani either did not for example lose its enclitic personal pronouns, which in the course of time have disappeared in Kurmanci and Zazaki, or there is a strong possibility that Sorani Kurdish was deliberately archaized. In any case, Sorani Kurdish employs a great number of postpositions and circumpositions, which constitute a significant share of its grammar. The present study by focusing on one single preposition, *la*, deals with the very essence of what seem to be preserved archaic structures, especially prepositional phrases with a “sandwich-like” postposition or enclitic. With respect to this matter, Thackston observes:

“Certain prepositions, in particular the prepositions *ba*, *da*, and *la* occur as circumpositions that envelop the complement, that is, the preposition itself marks the beginning of the prepositional phrase, and the end of the complement is marked by a postpositional element like *-awa*, *-(d)a*, *-ra*.”  
Thackston (2006, p. 20)

Examples of this phenomenon are:

<b>la durawa</b>	from afar	
<b>la khoawa</b>	by itself, by oneself	
<b>la niwashawda</b>	in the middle of the night	
<b>I'am wakhtada</b>	at this time	Thackston (2006, p. 20)

In addition to this, the preposition *la* also serves to provide an archaic type of *ezafe* (construct). Michiel Leezenberg writes:

Substratal influence need not involve extensive lexical borrowing: it typically starts with phonology and syntax, and to a lesser extent the inflectional morphology . . . . My main argument . . . will be that these closer affinities between Central Kurdish and Gorani are best seen not as a substratum (presumably preceding the Mongol invasions), but rather as prestige borrowings of a much later date, probably not before the seventeenth century. This process need not have involved any serious language shift among the Gorani population, as an account in terms of substratal influence would imply (Leezenberg, 1993).

Various aspects of Kurdish prepositions have already been discussed, notably by Bamshadi et al (2017), Fossum (1919), Moradi et al. (2019), and Saeed (2017). However, the scope of their

investigations provides just a general understanding of the linguistic behavior of prepositions within the framework of specific linguistic theories, and there has been no attempt to treat any preposition individually. The present study focuses on one single preposition\_ *la*. The main thrust of this study is to explain the usage of *la* in the structure of certain verbs and explicate tendencies of its linguistic behavior based on the nature of the verb(s). Morphologically, *la* displays its peculiar behaviors when attached to different items and it also has a semantic range based on the position in which it occurs. There are some verbs that may usually combine with *la* when the presence or absence of *la* is not obligatory. Therefore, it is within the purview of this paper to reflect on the linguistic behavior of *la* in regard to the structure of various verbs, and then to classify them. A morphological and syntactic treatment of *la* will be provided and accounted for by setting out a sufficient number of examples to clarify its objective. Please note: the scope of examples provided are restricted to the present indicative tense.

### 1.0 Verbs in which *la* is not an internal part of the structure

Under this category, we need to distinguish two types of verbs with which *la* is likely to occur in the structure of sentences. There are certain verbs which might be called one-word verbs; they consist of a single meaningful unit, which is to say they are made of one free morpheme. The second category belongs to two-word verbs, those which include more than a single free morpheme and therefore display a rather more complex linguistic behavior.

#### 1.1 *La* in the structure of one-word verbs

Specific verbs in Sorani Kurdish are usually accompanied by *la* in different sentences. The one-word verbs discussed in this section are not by any means monomorphemic. In such cases, the preposition precedes the verb and is followed by a noun phrase (NP) or a pronoun. The following table shows a number of verbs of this type:

Table (1) (one-word verbs)

Verb	Morphemes	Meaning
<b>tirsân</b>	tirs+ân	to fear
<b>torân</b>	tor+ân	to upset
<b>pirsîn</b>	pirs+în	to ask
<b>řanjân</b>	řanj+ân	to offend

Before providing a syntactic analysis of *la* with respect to the above verbs when co-occurring in a sentence, the role of pronouns once attached to this preposition needs to be considered.

Samvelian (2006, 2007) cites that Mackenzie classifies two types of prepositions in Kurdish: simple and absolute, a distinction which is made based on the host by which they are followed.<sup>2</sup> If they are followed by syntactic items (noun phrases in this case), they occur in their simple form, which yields a non-clitic realization of their arguments. On the other hand, if they are followed by clitics/affixes (in which process they attach to them), they occur in their absolute form, which entails a clitical/affixal realization of their arguments. The following table presents these two major types.

Table (2) (simple &amp; absolute prepositions)

Simple	Absolute	Meaning
<b>ba</b>	pe	'to', 'with', 'at'
<b>be</b>	-	'without'
<b>ba</b>	(bo)	'for'
<b>-a</b>	-e	'to'
<b>la</b>	le	'of', 'in'
<b>tâ</b>	-	'until'
<b>da</b>	te	'to', 'with', 'at'

As is clear, *la* goes through a phonological change in its absolute form, a process which takes place once it is attached to pronominal clitics/affixes to form a prepositional phrase (PP). Overall, the preposition *la* can occur with two types of pronouns: 1. Free pronouns, 2. Bound pronouns (pronominal clitics/affixes).<sup>3</sup> In the first scenario the preposition occurs in its simple form, while in the second one the absolute form is utilized, which is central to the scope of this study. Semantically, free pronouns are used to indicate emphasis, which is much less used in Kurdish, since it is a null-subject language. Bound pronouns are preferred in most cases. That is the only major difference between these two classes of pronouns with respect to their accompaniment by *la*. In the following tables, I have listed these pronouns as well as their occurrence with this preposition.

<sup>2</sup> Thackston (2006) and Fossum also make the same observation as Mackenzie regarding these two types of prepositions. But since Mackenzie is the one who attributes the terms "simple" and "absolute" to these categories, he is acknowledged as the scholar who makes this original distinction.

<sup>3</sup> It is imperative to point out that pronominal clitics/affixes cover a much wider range than bound pronouns, which are just a small category that belong to these linguistic items. Throughout this paper, however, pronominal clitics/affixes are freely used to indicate bound pronouns and other linguistic items that might occur in the examples since they all have the same forms and can be used to represent each of those linguistic entities.

Table (3) (free pronouns)

Free pronouns	
Singular	Plural
Min	Ema
To	Ewa
Aw	Awan

Table (4) (bound pronouns)

Bound pronouns (pronominal clitics/affixes)	
Singular	Plural
-(i)m	-man
-(i)t	-tan
-y	-yan

Table (5) (prepositional phrases formed by *la/le+* pronouns)

Simple form	Absolute form	Simple form	Absolute form
<b>la+ min</b>	lem	la+ ema	leman
<b>la+ to</b>	let	la+ ewa	letan
<b>la+ aw</b>	ley	la+ awân	leyan

As Thackston (2006) rightly points out, “When pronouns are complements of prepositions, they occur as enclitics,” in the process of which they convert to their absolute form, a fact that can be easily observed in Table (3). Above is an overview of the two main distinctions in the case of this preposition. Let us now supply further examples but in context of a sentence:

- (1) Hawrin **la** bâb-y da-tirs-e.  
 Hawrin of father-3.SG.POSS IMPF-fear.PRES-3.SG  
 “Hawrin is afraid of her father.”
- (2) Hawrin **le-y** da-tirs-e.  
 Hawrin of-3.SG IMPF-fear.PRES-3.SG  
 “Hawrin is afraid of him/her.”

As is clear, in Example (1) *la* is followed by an NP and experiences no phonological change. In this NP, “-y” acts as a “pronominal clitic/affix” and expresses a possessive construction which is of a unilateral agreement type. In example (2), however, the NP is replaced by a personal affix and therefore an attachment takes place in which case *la* changes to *le* and joins the third person singular marker, as shown in table (5). These two examples illustrate very clearly the syntactic behavior of *la* with respect to a verb (*tirsan*) it is likely to occur with. If an NP is used, the preposition precedes it by occurring in its simple form; however, if a bound pronoun appears in the sentence the preposition takes its absolute form and attaches to it, which yields the PPs we touched upon in table (5). A third possibility would include the co-occurrence of *la* and free pronouns, which is not central to the

purpose of this paper, apart from the fact that it does not yield any interesting points for discussion. Drawing on Samvelian (2007), absolute prepositions take a clitic complement and in this case “-y” fulfils this role. Edmonds (1955) illustrates an interesting aspect of pronominal clitics/affixes, stating that they are “always under an impulsion, alike in all their functions, to find as early as possible in the sentence an eligible word or phrase to which they can attach themselves.” He touches upon two significant functions of pronominal clitics/affixes: (b) “As a pronoun standing in the genitive relation to a noun or to another pronoun” (c-iv); “As a pronoun governed by and attached to a preposition” (Edmonds, 1955, p. 491).

On the basis of such evidence, one can claim that “-y” is a pronominal clitic/affix both in (1) and (2), in the first example fulfilling the function expressed in (b), and in the second example fulfilling the function expressed in (c-iv). All the verbs mentioned in table (1) show the same syntactic behavior as examples (1) and (2) if they are accompanied by *la* in the context of different sentences; therefore, no further examples are required to elaborate on this, since the same linguistic behavior applies to them all.

## 1.2 *La* in the structure of two-word verbs

Having reflected upon the role of *la* in the structure of one-word verbs, we turn our attention to verbs consisting of two words and as to be expected more morphemes. We need to see how *la* is situated in their structure. This category of verbs in the main has two free morphemes; the first conveys meaning, and the second as well as having meaning usually has a grammatical function. As Edmonds (1955) indicates, a noun is used with an auxiliary to form this category of verbs, which can also be referred to as compound verbs. It must be noted, however, that compound verbs cover a wider range than the verbs discussed in this category and are best defined by Amin (1979, p. 59). Different kinds of phrases can be inserted between the two parts of these compound verbs, and such split is likely to occur in the majority of cases. The following table presents two-word verbs which are likely to occur with *la* in the context of different sentences:

Table (6) (two-word verbs)

Verb	Morphemes	Meaning
<b>mořa kirdin</b>	mořa+kird+in	to frown upon
<b>hâřâ kirdin</b>	hâřâ+kird+in	to disavow
<b>pirsyâr kirdin</b>	pirs+yâr+kird+in	to ask question
<b>dast halgirtin</b>	dast+halgirt+in	to give up
<b>wena girtin</b>	wena+girt+in	to take photo
<b>qalsa geřân</b>	qalsa+geř+ân	to make angry

Each of the above verbs is made up of two components, the second of which is mostly “kirdin” and bears a grammatical function. In conjugating them, the grammatical part comes into play and the first component stays the same in all six persons, except for verbs such as “mořa kirdin” and “hâřâ kirdin”, in which the first element ends in a vowel. In such cases, “-y” is usually attached to the first element, which itself is a noun in terms of grammatical categories. The present simple indicative conjugation of “mořa kirdin” is provided below.

Table (7) (conjugation of “mořa kirdin”)

Singular	Plural
<b>Mořay dakam</b>	Mořay dakayn
<b>Mořay dakay</b>	Mořay dakan
<b>Mořay dakâ</b>	Mořay dakan

As with the verbs discussed in 1.1, *la* usually accompanies this class of verbs in different sentences. Using the following examples, I will comment on their linguistic behavior.

- (3) Daik-im                      mořa **la** bâb-**im**                      da-kâ.  
 Mother-1.SG.POSS frown of father-1.SG.POSS IMPF-do.PRS.3.SG  
 “My mother frowns upon my father.”
- (4) Daik-im                      mořa-**y**                      **le** da-kâ.  
 Mother-1.SG.POSS frown-3.SG of IMPF-do.PRES.3.SG  
 “My mother frowns upon him/her.”

Examples (3) and (4) show peculiar aspects of two-word verbs and how they can be distinguished from the ones discussed in 1.1. The first point to notice is that the verb itself (which is made of two free morphemes) is split up and the PP comes in between. As can be observed, “la bâbim” divides these two components and fits in the middle of this construction. The second point is related to example (4), in which two significant changes take place. Unlike what we witnessed in (2), the pronominal clitic/affix “-y” is attached to the first part of the verb rather than the preposition, as is also supported by Thackston (2006), although he does not explain specific instances. If we were to predict the same construction as that of (2), we would have the following:

- (5) Daik-im                      mořa **le-y**                      da-kâ.  
 Mother-1.SG.POSS frown of-3.SG IMPF-do.PRES.3.SG

The above sentence is not allowed in Sorani Kurdish grammar. The final point of significance is with regard to the change of *la* to *le* in (4); here, a simple preposition changes to an absolute one without necessarily being followed by an affixal form. As a matter of fact, this syntactic behavior is taken into account by Edmonds (1955) when he elaborates on the characteristics of pronominal clitics/affixes, but he does not provide examples. Pronominal clitics/affixes may be used “as a pronoun governed by a preposition, but attached to a word earlier in the sentence” (Edmonds, 1955, p. 491). What Edmonds observes is in line with the example provided in (4), in which the pronominal clitic “-y” is attached to the word preceding the preposition but is nevertheless its argument.

(6) Pirsyâr-ek-y                    le da-kâ.

Question-INDEF-3.SG of IMPF-do.PRES.3.SG

“He/She asks a question of him/her.” (Thackston, 2007, p. 22)

## 2.0 Verbs in which *la* is an internal part of their structure

So far, we have discussed the role of *la* as an accompanying preposition in the structure of certain verbs. However, in none of these cases was this preposition an internal part of the structure of the verb and it played no part in the conjugation. However, in the forthcoming section, I argue that there are certain verbs in Sorani Kurdish in which *la* is an inherent part of the verb and can be considered a morpheme.

### 2.1 *La* in the structure of one-word verbs

In this type *la* is considered a particle which forms an inherent part of the verb. In other words, with regard to morphemic analysis, this particle is considered a morpheme and will come to play a vital role in different sentences. The verbs mentioned in this section are different from those in section 1 in that they contain *la* as an obligatory component in their internal structure. The particle discussed in this case is a preposition which is a bound morpheme rather than a free one. The following table presents examples of one-word verbs in which *la* is rooted as an obligatory component to exist as a bound morpheme:



Table (8) (one-word verbs)

Verb	Morphemes	Meaning
<i>ledân</i>	<i>le+dân</i>	to beat
<i>legařân</i>	<i>le+gař+ân</i>	to search for
<i>leburdin</i>	<i>le+burd+in</i>	to forgive
<i>lewargirtin</i>	<i>le+wargirt+in</i>	to take away
<i>leřwânîn</i>	<i>le+řwân+în</i>	to observe
<i>lehâtin</i>	<i>le+hât+in</i>	to fit
<i>leqawmân</i>	<i>le+qawm+ân</i>	To be in a difficult situation

In each of the above verbs, *le* performs the obligatory function otherwise attributable to *la*. That is, *le* is the same as *la* in its absolute form. As this claim could be challenged, I will defend this case by setting up a number of examples and providing a coherent analysis of each.

- (7) Zânyâr **la** hawře-kay da-dâ.  
 Zanyar of friend-3.SG.POSS IMPF-hit.PRES.3.SG  
 “Zanyar is beating his friend.”

The above sentence is an example of standard Sorani Kurdish, an ordinary sentence that could be uttered by any native speaker of this language. The obvious fact to witness is that the NP “his friend” is preceded by the preposition *la*. The second noteworthy point is the conjugation of “dân” in its third person singular form after the NP. Since the preposition is followed by an NP, it occurs in its simple form – in this case *la*. Based on this body of evidence, we can claim that the verb “ledân” is split up between two necessary elements, *la* occurring as a simple preposition and “dân” being conjugated in the third personal singular form. Therefore, the preposition observed in the sentence is the same as *le* in the verb itself, changing its form since it is followed by an NP. Taking account of this example and others to follow, we can conclude that there are certain Kurdish verbs in which *la* is rooted in their internal structure as a bound morpheme; this is noticed in the construction of sentences and is a fact of grammar that is also somehow implied by Saeed (2017). Let us rephrase the above sentence by using the absolute form of this preposition:

- (8) Zânyâr **le-y** da-dâ.  
 Zanyar of-3.SG IMPF-hit.PRES.3.SG  
 “Zanyar is beating him.”

In complete alignment with example (2), *le* is used as the absolute form of *la* to be followed by a pronominal clitic/affixes. A few more example will suffice to prove my argument.

- (9) Êwar řoja **la** dâik u bâb-**im**. da-gař-em.  
 Four days of mother and father-1.SG.POSS IMPFV-search.PRES-1.SG  
 “I have been searching for my parents for four days.”
- (10) Êwar řoja **le-yan** da-gař-em.  
 Four days of-3.PL IMPF-search.PRES-1.SG  
 I have been searching for them for four days.

The above sentences are expressed in simple present tense but their correct translation in English requires present perfect continuous. Once again, in (9) an NP is placed in the middle of the particle and the complementary part of the verb. Therefore, it can be concluded that in the case of this category of verbs, either an NP or an affixal complement can come between the particle and the complementary part of the verb.

- (11) **Le-t** nâ-bur-im.  
 Of-2.SG NEG-forgive.PRES-1.SG  
 “I will not forgive you.”

## 2.2 *La* in the structure of two-word verbs

The last category to be investigated is related to two-word verbs, in the structure of which *le* is placed as an obligatory component. In the case of these verbs, *le* is attached to the auxiliary part of the verb by preceding it. No further explanation is needed since their construction is like those discussed in 1.2, except for the fact that they are accompanied by a preposition morphologically rather than syntactically. The following table gives a number of such verbs along with their meanings:

Table (9) (two-word verbs)

Verb	Morphemes	Meaning
<b>êaw lekirdîn</b>	êaw+le+kird+în	to look at
<b>dast ledân</b>	dast+le+dân	to touch
<b>wâz lehenân</b>	wâz+le+hen+ân	to let go
<b>řaq lebun</b>	řaq+le+bun	to hate
<b>sar leshewân</b>	sar+le+shew+ân	to confuse, to baffle

In comparison with table (6), one can easily witness the difference. In table (6) there is no such element as *le*, however, in table (9) *le* is attached to the left edge of the auxiliary verb and will come to play an important role in the structure of the following examples:

- (12) Brâ-kam                    êaw **la** mindâl-akay da-kâ.  
 Brother-1.SG.POSS eye at child-3.SG IMPF-do.PRES.3.SG  
 “My brother is looking at his child.”
- (13) Brâ-kam                    êaw-y   **le** da-kâ.  
 Brother-1.SG.POSS eye-3.SG at IMPF-do.PRES.3.SG  
 “My brother is looking at him/her.”

Examples (12) and (13) are similar to (3) and (4); the only difference being that in this case *la* is rooted in the verb morphologically rather than inserted in the sentence to perform a syntactic function. In (12), an NP is placed between the first component of the verb and its second part which displays an auxiliary function. In (13), a pronominal clitic/affix is attached to “êaw” and the preposition has appeared in its absolute form, as was the case in (4). With reference to these examples, one can state the fact that NPs are likely to occur between the preposition and the auxiliary part of two-word verbs. If a pronominal clitic/affix is used instead, it is attached to the right edge of the first constituent to perform a postnominal function as was the case in example (4). Semantically, it must be noted that the meaning of Kurdish two-word verbs can be guessed at by referring to their first morpheme. In many cases, it is somewhat problematic to attribute a specific meaning to the auxiliary part, since it bears a grammatical function and not a lexical one.

- (14) Kâmyâr dast-y        **le** da-dâ.  
 Kmyar hand-3.SG of IMPF-hit.PRES.3.SG  
 “Kamyar is touching it.”

## Conclusion

This article has argued for a new understanding of the preposition *la* by taking account of the role it plays in the structure of different verbs in Sorani Kurdish. The aim of this study was to locate and present verbs which are usually but not necessarily accompanied by *la* (except for those in 2.1 and 2.2), in which *la* was part of the internal structure of the verb and was considered a morpheme. These verbs were gathered in tables (1), (6), (8), and (9), categorized under specific headings, and distinctions were made based on their morphosyntactic behavior. In so doing, this paper proffered four types of verb, which occur as predicates in the context of sentences – accompanied by two arguments. The first argument concerns the subject and the second concerns the object of the preposition that can

appear in two different forms: either as an NP or as a pronominal clitic/affix. Based on these two possibilities, the Sorani Kurdish *la* can appear in two forms: simple and absolute. The object of the preposition comes either directly after the preposition or attached to a word earlier on in the sentence, but is nevertheless an argument of *la*. By providing an in-depth analysis of the examples, this paper showed how an NP or a pronominal clitic split the preposition from the verb, and different cases of this phenomenon were discussed based on the nature of the verb with respect to *la* and whether the verb was made of one word or two.

### **Abbreviations**

INDEF: indefinite article

IMPF: imperfective aspect

NEG: negation

PL: plural number

POSS: possessor; possessive

PRES: present tense

SG: singular number

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