

Past Tense in Kurmanji Kurdish — Dema Borî di Kurmancî de

Lesson 07 | English + Kurmanji | Final teaching edition

Learning outcomes — Armancên fêrbûnê

Distinguish simple past from past habitual, conjugate intransitive past verbs, recognize the oblique agent and direct patient in past transitive clauses, form common negative past sentences, and explain the limits of the textbook ergative pattern.

1. What is the past tense? — Dema borî çi ye?

The simple past describes completed events. Kurmanji also has a distinct past habitual/imperfective construction, often with *di-* plus a past stem. Compare *Ez çûm* (I went) with *Ez diçûm* (I used to go / was going). These are not interchangeable. This lesson concentrates on the simple past, with an introduction to the past habitual.

2. Two verb stems — Du rehên lêkerê

Many verbs have a present stem and a past stem. The simple past uses the past stem. Learn infinitive, present stem, and past stem together rather than guessing. Examples: *çûn* (go), *ç-/çû-*; *hatin* (come), *tê-/hat-*; *dîtin* (see), *bîn-/dît-*; *xwarin* (eat), *xw-/xwar-*; *kirin* (do/make), *k-/kir-*; *xwendin* (read), *xwîn-/xwend-*. Some verbs and regional varieties exhibit allomorphy.

Infinitive	Present stem	Past stem
çûn	ç-	çû-
dîtin	bîn-	dît-
xwarin	xw-	xwar-
xwendin	xwîn-	xwend-
kirin	k-	kir-

3. Intransitive past — Lêkerên negerguhêz di dema borî de

In an intransitive past clause, the subject typically stays in direct case and the verb agrees with it: *Ez çûm* (I went), *Tu çûyî* (you went), *Ew çû* (he/she went), *Em çûn* (we went), *Hûn çûn* (you plural went), *Ew çûn* (they went). Notice the glide in *çûyî*. The agreement paradigm for a given verb may involve stem-final phonological adjustments.

Pronoun	Verb	Meaning
ez	çûm	I went

Pronoun	Verb	Meaning
tu	çûyî	you went
ew	çû	he/she went
em	çûn	we went
hûn	çûn	you (pl.) went
ew	çûn	they went

4. Transitive past and ergativity — Ergatîvî di dema borî de

The core teaching rule is: PAST TRANSITIVE AGENT = OBLIQUE; PATIENT = DIRECT; VERB AGREES WITH THE PATIENT. Thus Ez te dibînim (I see you) contrasts with Min tu dîtî (I saw you). The past agent min is oblique, the patient tu direct, and dîtî agrees with second-person singular tu. Compare Wî ez dîtîm (He saw me) and Min ew dît (I saw him/her). This is not passive voice; it is a characteristic alignment pattern.

Agent	Patient	Verb	English
wî	ez	dîtîm	he saw me
wî	tu	dîtî	he saw you
wî	ew (sg.)	dît	he saw him/her
wî	em	dîtîn	he saw us
wî	hûn	dîtîn	he saw you (pl.)
wî	ew (pl.)	dîtîn	he saw them

5. The full pronoun contrast — Berawirdkirina cînavkan

Direct: ez, tu, ew, em, hûn, ew. Oblique: min, te, wî/wê, me, we, wan. For the simple past of a transitive verb, use oblique forms for the doer: Min kitêb xwend (I read a book); Te kitêb xwend (You read a book); Wan kitêb xwend (They read a book). The unchanged third-singular verb here follows the singular patient kitêb, not the number of the doer.

6. Agreement with the object — Lihevhatina lêkerê

Change the patient, not the doer, and the verb can change: To demonstrate agreement with different direct objects, consider: Wî ez dîtîm (He saw me); Wî tu dîtî (He saw you); Wî ew dît (He saw him/her); Wî em dîtîn (He saw us); Wî hûn dîtîn (He saw you plural); Wî ew dîtîn (He saw them). The direct third-person pronoun ew is number-ambiguous, so context determines whether dît or dîtîn is appropriate.

7. Negative simple past — Dema borî ya neyînî

A common negative prefix in the simple past is ne-: Ez çûm → Ez neçûm (I went → I did not go); Min ew dît → Min ew nedît (I saw him/her → I did not see him/her); Wî ez dîtîm → Wî ez nedîtîm (He saw me → He did not see me). Past habitual negation is different: Ez diçûm → Ez nediçûm (I used to go → I did not use to go).

Affirmative	Negative
Ez çûm.	Ez neçûm.
Min ew dît.	Min ew nedît.
Ez diçûm.	Ez nediçûm.

8. Past habitual / imperfective — Dema borî ya dubare

Past habitual or ongoing background action often uses di- plus the past stem and agreement: Ez diçûm (I was going / used to go), Tu diçûyî, Ew diçû, Em diçûn. This form can indicate habitual past, ongoing past or background action according to context. A separate advanced lesson will address aspect, narrative sequences and compound past constructions.

9. Time expressions — Peyvên demê

Useful expressions include duh (yesterday), par (last year), berê (formerly / earlier), wê demê (at that time), and her roj (every day). Ez duh çûm (I went yesterday); Ez berê her roj diçûm (I used to go every day). These words help distinguish single completed events from repeated past activities.

10. Intransitive versus transitive — Cûdahiya gerguhêz û negerguhêz

Compare Ez çûm (I went) and Min ew dît (I saw him/her). The first is intransitive: the subject ez is direct and the verb agrees with it. The second is transitive: the agent min is oblique, the object ew direct, and the verb agrees with the object. This difference is crucial; simply adding past endings to every verb is not enough.

11. Regional variation and scholarly caution — Cûdahiyên zaravayan

The canonical ergative rule is a valuable teaching model, but real Kurmanji varieties differ. Linguistic studies document cases of unexpected plural agreement, including agreement associated with plural agents in some contexts. Therefore do not label every deviation from the simple textbook rule as incorrect. This guide teaches a standard-oriented baseline, not a claim that all communities speak identically.

12. Conversation — Axaftin

A: Tu duh çûyî? — Did you go yesterday? B: Erê, ez çûm. — Yes, I went. A: Te kitêb xwend? — Did you read a book? B: Erê, min kitêb xwend. — Yes, I read a book. A: Tu berê her roj diçûyî? — Did you use to go every day? B: Na, ez her roj nediçûm. — No, I did not go every day.

13. Exercises — Rahênan

A. Conjugate çûn for ez, tu, ew singular, em, hûn, ew plural. B. Supply oblique past-transitive agents: ez→__, tu→__, ew masculine→__, em→__, hûn→__, ew plural→__. C. Translate: Ez çûm; Min ew dît; Wî ez dîtîm; Min tu dîtî; Ez diçûm. D. Negate: Ez çûm; Min ew dît; Ez diçûm. E. Identify agent and patient: Wî em dîtî. F. Explain why the verb in Wan kitêb xwend is singular even though wan is plural. G. Change Wî ez dîtîm to mean “He saw you (singular).” H. State one reason dialect differences matter.

14. Answer key — Bersiv

A. Ez çûm; Tu çûyî; Ew çû; Em çûn; Hûn çûn; Ew çûn. B. min; te; wî; me; we; wan. C. I went; I saw him/her; he saw me; I saw you; I used to go / was going. D. Ez neçûm; Min ew nedît; Ez nedîçûm. E. Wî = oblique masculine agent; em = direct first-plural patient; dîtî agrees with em. F. In the canonical past transitive pattern the verb agrees with the singular direct object kitêb, not the plural agent wan. G. Wî tu dîtî. H. Some varieties have different agreement patterns; the standard teaching rule is not exhaustive.

15. References — Çavkanî

W. M. Thackston, Kurmanji Kurdish: A Reference Grammar (2006), especially the simple past and ergative discussion; University of Arizona Iranian Languages, Kurmanji Kurdish language overview; Geoffrey Haig and Ergin Öpengin, Kurmanji Kurdish in Turkey (2018), including variation in past-transitive agreement; Songül Gündoğdu, research on ergative alignment in Kurmanji. Sources: <https://www.kurdipedia.org/files/books/2013/92279.PDF> ; <https://iranian-languages.arizona.edu/node/7> ; https://www.uni-bamberg.de/fileadmin/aspra/06_Team/Publications_and_CV/HaigOepengin2018_Kurmanji_Kurdish_.pdf . Examples are pedagogical rather than direct quotations.

16. Next lesson — Dersa pêş

Lesson 08: Future Tense (Dema Dahatû). Subsequent lessons address perfect constructions, modal verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions and conjunctions.