

# Persian Language Dominance and the Loss of Minority Languages in Iran

Hossein Ghanbari<sup>1</sup>, Mahdi Rahimian<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The University of Victoria, Victoria, Canada

<sup>2</sup>Mohawk College of Applied Arts and Technology, Ontario, Canada

Email: hosseinghanbari1980@gmail.com, Rahimian333@yahoo.com

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## Abstract

Iran is home to many different ethnic groups who speak different minority languages. Despite that, the Persian language, among others, has dominated other languages and connected Iranian diverse ethnic and linguistic groups with each other. Scholars have attributed its dominance to its linguistic features and the attempts of Iranian elites throughout history to safeguard the Iranian culture and the Persian language from those of non-Iranian ones. Iranian elites have endeavoured not only to maintain the Persian language but purge it from non-Persian words and concepts, namely Arabic and Turkish. However, as a result of that dominance, not only other minority languages in Iran have been lost but their speakers shifted toward the Persian language. This paper presents a historical account of that language dominance and loss to advocate that Iranian linguists and language revitalizers can learn from the language revitalization practices around the world to maintain and revitalize their minority languages.

## Keywords

Persian, Dominance, Minority Languages, Language Loss, Language Shift

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## 1. Introduction

The discussion of the loss and shift of the Iranian minority languages cannot be divorced from the discussion of the Persian language dominance in Iran. Despite the rich linguistic diversity in Iran, the Persian language became the dominant language and helped diverse Iranian ethnic groups communicate with each other. Its dominance is attributed, as described below, to its linguistic features and also to the efforts made by Iranian elites in that endeavour. Given that, in this paper, the writers will first present a discussion on the reasons that have

risen the Persian language over other minority languages in Iran. Then, they will investigate the effects of the Persian language dominance on the gradual loss and shift of the Iranian minority languages. However, before that, they will briefly explore language loss in the world and the reasons that have induced it.

## 2. Iran

Iran is located in western Asia and has a population of over 80 million people, and many of whom speak a minority language along with Persian, the official language of the country (Hamdhaidari et al., 2008). There are 75 minority languages spoken in Iran and out of which 61 percent is Persian-speaking, 16 percent Azeri, 10 percent Kurd, six percent Lur, two percent Baluch, two percent Arab, two percent Turkmen and Turkic tribes, and one percent speak other languages (Haddadian-Moghaddam & Meylaerts, 2015). In other words, multilingualism is not a new concept in Iran but rather has always existed there for a long time (Aghajanian, 1983; Riazi, 2005). After the introduction of Islam and the Arabic concepts and vocabularies had already entered the speech of the Iranian mass, Iranian elites attempted to safeguard their Persian language and culture from that of Muslim Arabs. However, not many of the them deemed that a necessary endeavour. While some strived for a pure Persian language void of Arabic words and concepts, others paid no heed to that. It is in light of this that we argue in favour of a relationship between Iranian elites' efforts in purifying the Persian language from the Arabic language and culture. As a result of those efforts, the Persian language rose to dominance over other minority languages in Iran, although we doubt if that was a conscious decision to push non-Persian languages to the margin. With that said, in the following section, the process through which the Persian language rose to dominance over other minority languages, especially after the Arab Muslims' invasion of Iran, will be presented. Later, we will open our discussion on the effects of that linguistic and cultural dominance on the loss and shift in non-Persian minority languages in Iran.

## 3. Arab Muslims' Invasion and Iranians' Reactions

This paper does not intend to discuss the reasons that led to the defeat of the Sassanid (224 - 651 CE) in Iran. However, it is believed that Arab Muslims struck at the Sassanid army at a right time. By the time Arab Muslims invaded Iran, the Sassanid army had already been defeated by the Byzantines, the Sassanid was involved in four years of dynastic disarray, and the Sassanid nobles were busy with some internal wars between themselves (Daryae, 2012). All of these reasons worked to the benefit of the Arab Muslims and the defeat of the Sassanid kingdom in the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. that led to the rise of Islam and Arabic as the new religion and language in Iran. This paved the way to the Arabic and Islamic concepts, ideologies and vocabularies to crawl into the Persian language that eventually aroused different reactions to it. As Iranian cities fell one after another to the Arab Muslims, and many people lost their property and posses-

sions, Iranian elites and noblemen reacted differently to these Arab victors. Some picked up their weapons and fought back, albeit unsuccessfully, and some like the wealthy peasants cooperated with Arab rulers (Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010). According to Khosravi and Bayat (2008), this cooperation with the new rulers for one thing, saved thousands from massacre and also allowed the Iranian peasants to administer their business in the Persian language and without being harmed by Arab Muslim rulers (Gholizadeh, 2016). This was perhaps one of the most critical decisions ever made in the Iranian history as Iran and its minority languages could have had the same faith as other non-Arab countries whose national languages were uprooted and replaced with Arabic.

#### 4. The Rise of the Persian Language to Dominance in Iran

The dominance of the Persian language has been attributed to a number of reasons. For one thing, it is attributed to the linguistic characteristics of the Persian language that distinguish it from the languages of foreign rulers in Iran. According to Talattof (2015), Arabic words in contrast with Middle or Old Persian words are simpler in structure, and could only influence the Persian language at the vocabulary domain and not at syntax. Therefore, although Arabic and Islamic concepts were taken up by the Iranians, the Persian language grammar has not been impacted by that of the Arabic language. As a consequence, the colloquial and simpler form of Persian, called *Dari* Persian, was adopted and spoken by the Iranian mass (Talattof, 2015). To illustrate the role that the linguistic features of a language play in its dominance, the Greek language changed the Persian language grammar from synthetic to analytic which is demonstrated through the Model of *Competition and Survival* (Singh, 2018). According to this model, when two related languages, for example, Greek and Persian are both Indo-European languages, encounter each other, the grammar of the domestic language will be affected by that of the outside language and becomes simpler (Singh, 2018).

The Persian language dominance over other minority languages in Iran is attributed to the high status of the Persian language in the Sassanid dynasty. Although multilingualism was commonly accepted in Iran (Aghajanian, 1983; Rizazi, 2005), the Sassanid kings opted for the Persian as the language of communication in Iran (Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010). It was used in as far places as Balkh, the center of commerce in ancient Iran, and was spoken by the Manavis, the followers of an Iranian religion, and by the Zoroastrians, who were later pushed to the eastern part of Iran to be safe from the Arab Muslims. In other words, not much changed after Islam was introduced to Iran as people kept on communicating with each other in Persian (Anooshe, 2006; Sadeghi, 2001) which played a significant role in its dominance over other over time.

However, after the introduction of Islam to Iran, Arabic script took over and infused the Persian language with Arabic words and Islamic concepts (Talattof, 2015). Thus, as Iranian semi-independent dynasties rose to power in Iran, some

pursued a national approach to highlight their Persian culture and disdain that of the Arab Muslims. They did so to magnify the pre-Islamic Persian civilization and present it as a golden age so that it marked contrast with the Islamic domination of Iran and the Arabization of the Persian culture and values (Kia, 1998). Others did not regard the idea of purifying the Persian culture and identity as *important*. For instance, although the Tahirid dynasty (821 - 873 AD), strived to break themselves free of the Arab rulers, they found the idea of purging the Persian language or culture from that of Arabic out of question. However, many elites and thinkers intentionally followed a scheme of purifying the Persian language from the non-Persian/Iranian words and concepts which in turn has increased the scope of the Persian language dominance in Iran. With this preamble, in the following section, we will present a discussion of those who have attempted to purify the Persian language from foreign words and concepts.

### 5. Purging the Persian Language from Non-Persian Words: Figures

One of the first people who ventured to purify the Persian language, albeit unsuccessful, from the Arabic words is the Iranian polymath Avicenna (died in 1037 AD) (Sadeghi, 2001). Avicenna coined new Persian vocabularies to replace the Arabic philosophical terms used in the Persian to facilitate learning philosophy for Iranian learners. However, the most prominent figure in Iranian history who set off to safeguard the Persian language, culture, and mythology was the great poet of Tus, Ferdowsi (died 1020 in Khorasan province). Ferdowsi spent over thirty years to write his *Shahnameh—Book of Kings*—in the late tenth and early eleventh century C.E. to rescue and re-define the Iranian identity and history and purge it from those of non-Persian (Davis, 2007).

During the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries and under the Saffarids (867 - 1003 CE) and the Samanids (864 - 1005 CE), Iranian elites endeavoured to void their language of Arabic words. As a result, the Persian language and culture regained its vigour and made Iranian peoples proud of their ancient culture who tried to cast off Islamic religious domination and build a homogenized Persian national identity that honoured the Persian language and culture over that of Arabic (Omar, 1998). By then and as a result of the direct influence of the two-hundred-year cultural dominance of the Arabic language, the Persian language had already been simplified and different from the *Dari* Persian spoken by the Sassanid (Talatof, 2015). The dominance of the Persian language over Arabic reminded Iranians of their pre-Islamic glories and identity (Kia, 1998) because according to Joseph (2007) a language leads to identity by configuring its speakers' experiences into words and inducing humans "to form a conception of self rather than being ourselves" (p. 24). Also, when a language dies, its identity or sense of brotherhood disappears and induces complex, varied feelings, and reactions among its speakers or those associated with it (Hinton, Huss, & Roche, 2018).

Contemporary Iranian elites and thinkers took diverse views towards dissoci-

ating the Persian language from foreign words. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *Shahnameh* was used and modelled after by the Iranian elites to dissociate the Iranian culture and the Persian language from foreign languages and cultures. That was done by adopting an increasing number of the Persian names who mimicked *Shahnameh* to denigrate the non-Persian words in Iran and instead to highlight the Persian language and culture (Tavakoli-Targhi, 1990). Additionally, while progressive thinkers such as Jalal od-Din Mirza (1832-71) and Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzade (1812-78) advocated purging the Persian language from Arabic and foreign words (Tavakoli-Targhi, 1990), others such as Talebof (1838-1909) and Kermani (1851-1896) argued that the Arabic and Persian languages were profoundly intertwined and cannot be separated from each other (Kia, 1998). Yet, there was another group of Iranian elites who manipulated history and forged fake Persian origins for non-Persian vocabularies used in Iran. According to Tavakoli-Targhi (1990), Mirza Abd al-Latif Shushtari (died in 1805) made up a Persian origin for the European custom of “dining at a table”, and Jamal al-Din Afghani (1838-1897) claimed that Persian scientists had already discovered origins for the camera and telephone.

Qajar kings were also worried about multiethnicity and multilingualism in Iran, and they considered it as a threat to the Iranian national security and devised preventive measures to reduce the threats coming from non-Persian groups (Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010). Additionally, the role of the Pahlavi dynasty and their emphasis on modernization and nationalism and purging the Persian language from non-Persian vocabularies and concepts cannot be undermined. It was during the Reza Shah, *the King*, (1878-1944), that although there was no such a law stipulated in the Iranian Constitutions of 1906, the Persian language became the official language of Iran (Kalan, 2016). One of the implications of such a policy was that Iranian minority people were banned from observing their cultural practices and their speakers were never permitted to call for gathering to preserve their cultures and customs (Hassanpour, 1992). As the Persian language maintains Persian identity amongst its speakers, its dominance over other languages in Iran aimed to assimilate diverse minority and linguistic groups into the mainstream Persian culture and language (Haddadian-Moghaddam & Meylaerts, 2015). After seizing power in 1921, Reza Shah took a tough purist viewpoint towards the Persian language (Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010) and attempted to glorify the pre-Islamic Iranian culture through his Persianization and secularization plans. This is manifested in the establishment of the *Farhangestan-e Iran*—to provide opportunities for the Iranian intellectuals and literary figures to coin new Persian words and void the Persian language from non-Persian words and concepts (Kia, 1998). The Pahlavi’s modernization also led to the migration of non-Persian communities to industrial cities in Iran that changed the pattern of economic growth which engulfed a socio-economic inequality among Iranian minority communities (Aghajanian, 1983).

The Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran brought along an abundance of politi-

cal and economic changes. Although the Iranian ethnic groups have been allowed to teach their literature in schools and use their languages in mass media (Haddadian-Moghaddam & Meylaerts, 2015), Article 15 of the Constitution of the Islamic Revolution mandates Persian as the official language and script of Iran. As a result, such minority languages as Azeri and Kurdish were not considered literary languages and their books were destroyed by Iranian officials (Hassanpour, 1992). Yet, the Islamic government of Iran regards the ethnic groups and their languages as an essential part of Iranian history (Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010) but at the same time mandates that they convert into Islam (Safran, 1999). This has led to biased cultural changes and political activities with regard to non-Persian minority speakers in Iran (Aghajanian, 1983) in the way that non-Persian speakers regard speaking their own language a sign of illiteracy and will give it up in favour of the Persian language. One of the writers in this paper, Hossein Ghanbari, has seen many Bakhtiari people among his kin, who have refrained from speaking Bakhtiari language. There are also anecdotes of minority speakers who would go to great extents to conceal their ethnic background and minority language because they feel embarrassed to speak or acknowledge their ethnicity (Kalan, 2016).

## 6. Minority Language Loss in the World and in Iran

There are 5000 - 7000 languages spoken in the world (Anderson & Carter, 2016), and a great majority of all these languages are spoken by 4% of the world people (McIvor & Anisman, 2018). However, the loss of one-third of all these languages has induced language loss in the world (Lewis & Simon, 2016). While this paper does not overgeneralize the causes that have led to language loss and shift among minority languages in the world, it, yet, seems difficult not to notice the similarities. It is with that regard that in the following section, we will first present the reasons that lead to language loss in the world and then explore the effect of Persian language dominance on the loss of Iranian minority languages.

There are internal and external reasons for language loss. According to Maki-hara (2005) internal language loss happens when two or more languages are spoken in an area, and the speakers of the dominated language and culture incline towards the dominant language and culture (Shaul, 2014). That is because minority language speakers internally regard their language as less important than the language they are inclined to, and refrain from speaking their own language in public (Huss, 2017). The role of the education system in inducing language loss and shift in multilingual and multiethnic countries cannot be overlooked. According to Nutti (2018), the Swedish education system, teachers, and parents are responsible for language loss among Sami people because Sami teachers did not receive any cultural training in their language, and Sami parents were not confident if their children would benefit from learning the Sami language as they have to compete in the national examination in the Swedish language. The major external reasons for language loss are colonization and death,

disease and forced relocation (McIvor & Anisman, 2018); world economic growth (Amano et al., 2014), and globalization (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006). Language loss happens when a strong language linguistically dominates over a weaker one and decreases its number of speakers and contexts (Shaul, 2014). Also, it happens when a language loses its use within a community because it is under pressure from one or more competitor languages or its speech community migrates to somewhere else and stops using their language (Hinton, 2010; Swiggers, 2007).

There are many minority languages spoken in Iran (Kalan, 2016), and Iranian scholars have noticed and been concerned about the gradual shift and loss of their minority languages and cultural elements. As explained above, the loss of minority languages in Iran is related to the Persian language (Shojaei, 2020), which has been considered the more prestigious language in Iran, and the attempts of Iranian elites to emphasize the Persian culture and disdain non-Persian words and concepts. The Pahlavi kings did not regard multiethnicity and multilingualism in Iran favourably (Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010). That along with the idea of purifying the Persian language from non-Persian words and concepts led Reza Shah to establish *Farhangestane-Iran* to provide the Iranian linguists and literates with enough authority to coin new Persian words and replace non-Persian ones (Kia, 1998). That emphasis on the Persian language and culture arose a disdain towards those non-Persian languages and concepts in Iran (Aghajanian, 1983), which we believe has contributed to the minority language loss and shift in Iran.

Although there has been a passion among Iranian nationalists to *Persianize* non-Persian concepts, it is rational to ask what happens when the speakers of minority languages lose their mother tongue. For one thing, there is well-established evidence that speaking one's language positively impacts its speakers' academic performance. For instance, Navajo-speaking children who receive bilingual education in Navajo and English outperform academically those Navajo children who receive education in English only (Jacob et al., 2015). There is also ample evidence in favour of the positive relationship between speaking one's minority language and having good health (Capone, Spence, & White, 2011) and the general wellbeing of the speakers of minority languages (Biddle & Swee, 2012; McIvor, Napoleon, & Dickie, 2009). For instance, it is well established that the First Nations of Canada who speak their minority language are less prone to diabetes (Oster, Grier, Lightning, Mayan, & Toth, 2014) and suicide (Hallett et al., 2007) compared to those who do not.

Although there is no relationship between the learning style and the students' educational advancement among monolingual and bilingual students (Shams-Esfandabad & Emamipour, 2008), the 2008 report of the Iranian Minorities' Human Rights Organization shows a high drop-out and a low literacy rate among Iranian ethnic groups who speak a language other than Persian. This is similar to what is happening among the First Nations of Canada where a significant per-



centage of their youth drop out of school (Coronel-Molina & McCarty, 2016). In other words, the high drop-out rate and the poor academic performance of students of minority languages suggest the failure of the education systems designed and implemented for all students regardless of their ethnic and linguistic differences (Jacob, 2017). In Iran, where educational attainment to high levels is not predominant, the differences in literacy level signify the existence of inequality because those living in urban areas have greater access to educational institutions, are exposed to more diverse employment opportunities, and receive higher incomes than rural residents.

## 7. Final Words

Iran is the home to many different people who not only speak different languages but have developed different perspectives with regard to the world. Thus, it is wise to recommend that these peoples' linguistic and ontological differences should be considered because although *Farhangestan-e Iran* regards the use of minority languages in education as an act of behind times (Zeighami, 2016), scientific achievements purport that speaking one's minority language and their academic performance and general health are positively related (Jacob, 2017). On top of that, one's language is a way to their worldviews, and it is advisable to maintain those worldviews via preserving the linguistic diversity of the people. As a consequence, to maintain minority languages in Iran, educational decision-makers should design appropriate strategies and methodologies to document and promote the minority languages before they are seriously endangered. One of those ways is through changing the medium of instruction of schools and academic institutions into the Persian language and the minority language of that specific area where the majority of all the population speak another language as their mother tongue. Additionally, appropriate and locally developed curricula can be designed and implemented along with the national curriculum that encompasses the cultural and linguistic elements of Iranian peoples. However, one should appreciate the launch of provincial TV and radio channels in Iran that broadcast locally developed programs, often in the minority language of that province.

Also, when the minority languages are ignored and the required education in that country is provided in its dominant language, the Persian language in Iran for instance, along with its encoded knowledge and cultural specifications minority languages of that country will be endangered or lost (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). With the same token, we recommend that the Iranian minority languages be promoted because the speakers of minority people in Iran can and will learn from each other. In turn, speakers of minority languages in Iran should not shy away from their languages and instead promote them to their prospective generations. It is in that light that although the use of the Persian language is more rewarding for bilingual Azeris in Tehran, there is a growing sense of revitalization of minority languages and cultures with regard to the Per-



sian language as the national language of Iran (Bani-Shoraka, 2002). Moreover, Bakhtiari cultural associations in and outside of Iran have been developing “audio and video recordings of Bakhtiari poetry, often accompanied by music and dance, folktales, comedy sketches, Bakhtiari-language radio and films dubbed into the language” (Anonby & Asadi, 2014: p. 15). However, there are many minority groups in Iran who should reach out to each other and to linguists and language revitalizers around the world to expand their knowledge on language documentation, language revitalization so that they embrace their minority languages along with their embedded worldviews and ideologies.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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