

The Standardization of the Modern Persian



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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the standardization process of the Persian language, which we now call Modern Farsi, Modern Persian, or more technically, the Persian Modern Literary Standard (PMLS), together with its spoken variants; for example, the standard Tehrani Farsi (STF). As a case for comparison, the standardization process of the Armenian language has been selected, so that the analysis of the differences in the two processes will reveal the basic features of the standardization process of Farsi.

Methodologically, the investigation is based on a sociolinguistic approach, I shall also use the models developed by the soviet linguist N. Y. Marr, (Aghayan (1962)) the American linguist J. Gumpers (1962) as well as my own theories on diglossia and multiglossia (Nercissians, (1988))

Main Hypothesis

The main hypothesis, which I shall attempt to substantiate in this paper, can be stated as follows: The Persian Literary Standard Language has been

formed mainly during the first few centuries following the Islamic conquest. Later developments and the changes introduced during the constitutional revolution and the transformation of the Iranian economic system resulting in the contemporary Modern Iranian society has been less extensive than the changes introduced into the language during the early Islamic era, and the existing literary standard is still capable of continuing its function. One must note that this hypothesis has also been formulated by the comparative and historical school of linguistics in a similar manner. In this paper, it is sought to put forward the sociolinguistic view in the substantiation of the hypothesis. So, we shall be analyzing mainly the sociological criteria and the main functions of a standard language in any given society rather than the internal criteria and the structural features of the codes.

The Process of Standardization

Let us begin by the following observations;

1. The literary works written in Persian during the Islamic period, which include the poems of Saadi, Hafiz, Ferdowsi, Khayam and Molavi is still read and understood both by the native speakers of Persian as well as by those who learn Persian as a second language. Not only the language, but in many cases the stylistic details too, have preserved their freshness and applicability to this date.
2. The Modern Persian language, or precisely, the standard and Literary Persian during the post-Islamic period has been formed mainly on the basis of "Dari" version. The other Middle and Ancient Persian varieties, including the Pahlavi, Zand, and Avestaii codes have only played secondary roles in the formation of the Modern Persian (Bahar (1970))
3. As for the Armenian language, the historical and comparative school has also distinguished three periods during which the language is called Ancient Armenian, Middle Armenian and Modern Armenian. But beyond this similarity there are many differences. The Modern Armenian has appeared as a standard and literary code only in the recent times and at the same times as the society was entering the modern period. Unlike the case

of the Persian, the contemporary Standard and Literary Armenian is very different from the Armenian language used in the literary works of the previous centuries. The old literary codes are so different that they are not even understood by native Armenian speakers who have not studied the Middle and Ancient Armenian Languages. (Ačaryan (1940))

Now we can formulate the main question of this paper. What is the source of this difference in the standardization process of Persian and Armenian, and how can that difference be explained? The explanation presented here can be stated as follows;

Through the Iran of the post Islamic period, even when the country was occupied by some foreign invaders and the Persian language had lost its dominant status as the state language or the religious language, the cultural dominance and the chief social functions was widely or at least partially with Persian. During the previous centuries we can for example, also see the consequences of this cultural dominance in the influences exerted by Persian to the Turkish language used in the Ottoman Empire (as well as the direct use of the Persian in the court). Thus the Standard and Literary Persian has always enjoyed some prestige and has often times been used as the formal language enjoying the recognition and support of the authorities.

At the same time, because of this cultural dominance, the Persian language has become a lingua franca, and has been used as a common language with which the different nationalities and ethnic groups living in the region could communicate. In the codification of the Persian language the writers and intellectuals belonging to the different nationalities and ethnicities who had learned Persian as a second language have played a most important role.

Needless to say, similar conditions did not exist for the case of Armenian. The investigation consists of two parts.

Firstly: the analysis of the Persian language in the period preceding the Islamic conquest, that is, the period called the Middle Persian period by the historical linguists.

Secondly: the analysis of the development of standard and literary Persian during the Islamic period.

The Persian Language in the Pre-Islamic Period

we observe that:

The Sassanid society has been a strictly stratified society approaching a caste system.

Although the different religious movements including the Manichean and Mazdaki and Christian sects in Iran have all tried to change the class-caste system of the Sassanid society, that system has not been defeated until the Islamic conquest.

The widespread illiteracy has hindered the access of the majority of the people to the written codes and during the Sassanid period, the power of the scribes increased, so much that they became a privileged estate in the society.

This can be seen to be in accord with the New-Linguistic theory of N.Y. Marr. The basic assumption of the Marrist theory is;

- i. Language reflects the social conditions and the different social classes and strata differ in their language use.
- ii. The non-dominant strata of the society have had very limited access to literacy and so the written language has been in the monopoly of the dominant classes.

In what Gumperz calls the intermediate societies distinguished by the different occupational groups and inheritable social stratification, the language structure has the following characteristics.

- i. The nationally dominant languages (argots), mainly
 - a. The state language
 - b. The religious language
- ii. The regionally dominant languages (argots)
- iii. The languages spoken by the lowest strata of the society (vernaculars)

Furthermore, the languages of the privileged strata are the markers of their speakers' belonging to the corresponding estates. They usually have elaborate grammars and difficult scripts that are learned by extended training.

We observe that, these conditions are reported by Hamza of Esfahan and other historians to have existed during the Sassanid period (Oransky (1979)). Each dominant estate spoke a different language and used a different script.

There was Pahlavi, which was the state language. The religious code was called Parsi or Din Dabira. Then, there were other codes. For example, Armenian was a regionally dominant language. Dari is pointed out as the language spoken in the capital and the northeastern regions of the country etc.

Here, let me quote only the relevant passage from Alfehrest where Ebne Nadim has quoted Ebne Moghafa and which corresponds to the very similar, though somewhat more elaborate passage in Moajem olbaladen of Yaghout quoting Hamza and Shiroya: the quot distinguishes Pahlavi, Dari, Farsi, Khuzi, and Soriani (Syrac) as the variants of the Persian language and explains.

"... but Pahlavi is related to Fahlav which designates five cities: Esfahan, Ray, Hamadan, Mah of Nahavand, and Azerbaijan. And Dari is the lexica of the Madaien cities and was spoken in the King's court, and is related to the court people and the lexica of the people of Khorasan and the East and the lexica of the people of Balkh is dominant there. But Farsi is the word spoken by the Mobads and the clerics and the like, and that is the language of the people residing in Fars. But Khuzi is the language spoken by the Kings and the aristocracy in their private, and during recreation time when they talk to their intimate companies, and Syrac is the language spoken by the people of Sevad".

(Oransky, 1979)

It is interesting to note that the reform of language and the writing system was tried by almost every social and religious movement of that period.

The Persian Language in the Post-Islamic period.

Before continuing the analysis let me point out that according to my model of multiglossia, (Nercissians, 1988) if prestige is the most important factor in the standardization of the dominant language, solidarity is also a factor of the same importance in the standardization of the non-dominant varieties. Let us also note the following:

After the Islamic conquest, the dominance of Sassanid dynasty and the Zoroastrian religion, vanished together with the caste order that prevailed during the Sassanid times. However, the Persian language, because of its rich

cultural heritage had preserved its viability. Not only the problem of regaining the Iranian national statehood and emancipation from the Arabic rule, but also the problem of conversion of the Iranian population to Islam, necessitated the use of the Persian language. Therefore, some period of using Arabic, the revival of the Persian language was attempted by the writers and intellectuals. The question was: which one of the different varieties could better serve the purpose of those intellectuals?

It can be noted that the former state language, the Sassanid Pahlavi, did not have applicability as a spoken code even in the Sassanid court, where a different language was used according to Hamze of Esfahan. So with the fall of the Sassanid dynasty, it lost its social base completely. The religious codes of the Zoroastrians was not suitable either. For it no longer enjoyed the support of a ruling religious order, and did not have basis among the masses either. It was necessary to develop a new language with the following characteristics:

1. social basis among the people.
2. social prestige.
3. non dependence to the former governing dynasty and religion.

The Dari variety had the reequired qualifications because:

1. its defferent variants were spoken as mother tongues by the people in the northeastern part of the country, where the national movement was the strongest.
2. among the regionally dominant varietiees, it enjoyed a high level of prestige because it was used in the Sassanid capital, which was in the vicinity of the centers of the Islamic Kafafate.
3. similar use of this variety by the Manichean and Mazdaki movements, which is probably responsible for its use in the northeastern Iran, has also given the Dari variety further strength and freed it from any dependence to the ruling dynasty and religion.

Finally, it can be pointed out that in the later centuries too, this standard and literary language has maintained not only its prestige, but also its simplicity and was understood by the people despite widespread illiteracy because:

1. Persian was used as a lingua franca and the common language for the out-group communication of the different nationalities in Iran. Because of this function, the standard code could not become too complex notwithstanding the attempts of the court writers in the late Islamic period. All lingua francas undergo a process called pidginization and creolization, which designates the acceptance of influences from the native vernaculars and through which the simplicity and viability of the language is maintained.
2. The Persian language has not been too dependent on the ruling religions and governments. Sometimes, Turkish and Arabic have functioned as the state and religious languages. The prestige of the Persian language has mainly stemmed from the Persian cultural dominance. It is because of this cultural dominance that successive invading dynasties have been Iranized and the non-Persian residents have learned Persian for their out-group communication.

Conclusion

The Modern Standard Persian which has been formed during the Islamic period has kept its simplicity and understandability because of the following reasons

- i. having the Dari variety which enjoyed immense viability and wide usage as its basis.
- ii. functioning as the common language for the different nationalities and ethnicities in Iran.
- iii. not being too dependent to the ruling system. From this viewpoint, it has been very different from other medieval literary languages. For example, the Middle and Ancient Armenians were not even understood by the Armenians who used vernacular varieties for their day-to-day communication. The literary language was called *graber*, which meant the book language or the language of letters.

Also because of the cultural richness even when the national statehood was lost or when the ruling religious sect was opposed by the majority of the

people, there was little need for Persian to acquire institutional support from those sources.

Finally, unlike many other languages, the main function of Persian has never been national marking and boundary making between Persian and non-Persians. On the contrary, many other nationalities learned and used it for social communications and enjoyed the culture associated with the Persian language.

In other words, Persian was not mainly a national language and has remained rich and viable through mutual influences to and from other languages.



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