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## Abstract Translations

## EL LENGUAJE NO LOGRA CONSUMAR SU OBJETIVO DE COMUNICAR: UN ESTUDIO COMPARATIVO DE LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS Y EL IRAN.

El presente estudio es una comparación entre las culturas de los Estados Unidos y del Iran hecha sobre la base de datos obtenidos mediante un análisis colectivo de asociación. Los datos para este análisis fueron recolectados entre estudiantes iraníes de las universidades de Teheran.

Para demostrar la importancia de este estudio comparativo se hace uso de los conceptos de personalidad, revolución, realeza, política y país. El examen gravita en torno a las implicaciones que para las relaciones entre el Iran y los Estados Unidos contienen las diferencias en el significado e interpretación de estos conceptos.

Recherche sur une comparaison de culture Américaines et Iranienne par l'application de la méthode d'Analyse de Group Associative, fondée sur des données scientifiques qui ont été assemblés parmi les étudiants Iraniens de divers universités de Téhéran.

Les concepts de soi, de la révolution, de la royauté, de la politique et du pays ont été utilisés à démontrer l'aspect significatif de cette étude comparative. La discussion se concentre sur l'implication de sens différents du mot et sur l'interprétation de ces concepts pour les relations Irano-Américaines.

Are We Teaching Persian? or *farsi*? or *dari*? or *tojiki*?

BRIAN SPOONER  
University of Pennsylvania

It must be about twenty years since I first heard Persian called "*farsi*" in an English sentence. Over the past decade or so the usage has become relatively common—more so outside academia than within, but we cannot ignore it, or the issues it raises, because we depend more and more on nonacademic interest in Persian for the enrollments that justify its place in the curriculum.<sup>1</sup>

Many of us find the usage jarring. The Society for Iranian Studies has taken a formal position against it. Some colleagues have published protests. But not enough has yet been said in explanation. This volume is an appropriate place to offer some additional arguments, especially (given Dr. Jazayeri's own interest) arguments with practical implications, even though for some these may be controversial. If what is offered here still fails fully to justify our protests, I hope it may at least reinforce our professional indignation at the spread of "*farsi*!"

Why should the change have occurred at all? Why should it have occurred when it did? In what context should we ask these questions? "*Urdu*" is, after all, in English regularly called Urdu, and always has been. We do not question why "*hindi*" is called Hindi. On the other hand, I have not heard Greek called "*Ellenika*." And I cannot imagine that anyone would call German "*Deutsch*" or French "*français*."

Consistency does not appear to be a factor. We do not treat all languages the same. But should we? A new orthodoxy in language instruction implies that we should—at least in some important

<sup>1</sup>An earlier briefer version of this article, with a somewhat different emphasis, was published in *Penn Language News*, No. 4 (1992), pp. 5 & 22-24, under the title "Do You Speak Persian? or *farsi*? or *dari*? or *tojiki*?"

For Fran  
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respects. This new orthodoxy endows the expert in language instruction with competence not only to advise on instruction in any language but also to pronounce on methods and procedures for class management, design of materials, and testing in general, *whatever the language*. Over the past decade, following a slow start, it has found widespread acceptance. But it raises important questions which have not been adequately addressed, barely even acknowledged. The case of Persian, and what we call it in English, provides interesting material for the investigation of some of these questions.

The issue is not simple. The usage seems to have appeared during the period—late 1960s to mid-1970s—when the number of native English speakers visiting and working in Iran was increasing on a scale for which there may be no precedent in any other Middle Eastern or Muslim country. The perpetrators are diverse and not easy to classify. They include various types of professionals and nonprofessionals. Perhaps the movement derives from a sense that *farsi* suggests some degree of familiarity with an exotic culture, a cachet. It also connotes the equal value of another cultural community on its own terms. It is patently modern, perhaps even postmodern. "Persian," on the other hand, carries connotations of elitism, romanticism, even orientalism. It is by implication dated.

The movement is not, however, without serious implications. In the case of most languages which are commonly learned by non-native speakers, the consequences of replacing the English name of the language with the native name would be no more than stylistic, and might even suggest increased international significance both for the language and for its speech community. Unfortunately, calling Persian *farsi* has the opposite effect. Since Afghanistan and Tajikistan now use different native terms for the language, the new usage may even be a symptom of its declining international status, for it reduces it to a local level, making national political connotations inescapable. In fact, by changing the English name of the language now we may appear to choose political sides and risk becoming complicit agents of larger changes. We are, of course, impotent to manage the naming

of anything beyond our own small professional community throughout the English-speaking world. However, by analyzing the processes at work we may learn more about one of our perennial concerns: the dynamic interplay between language and other dimensions of culture.

In what follows, I have limited objectives. I argue that careful attention to this phenomenon may help us think more clearly about how we should be teaching Persian in university programs. We must avoid doing anything that would contribute to the deracination of Persian from its larger cultural and historical context and legitimate its status as just another national language, albeit of a country with a population approaching sixty million. I am particularly concerned that the change invalidates much of the justification we have for insisting that the place of Persian in the curriculum should be more secure than, say, Hungarian or Bengali. The use of *farsi* as the English name of the language on campus fits with the view of language teaching implicit in current policies that would reject the accumulated experience of instruction in the language and replace it with new standardized methods proven in the teaching of languages with very different linguistic cultures.

In brief, as others have pointed out, if instead of Persian we offer "Farsi" and teach it according to straightforward proficiency-based methods, much of the significance of Persian among languages is lost to English speakers (and generally to non-Persian speakers). I shall therefore first attempt to place the phenomenon in its historical context, and then to explore some of the implications for our Persian language programs.

### I. *Dari, farsi, and tojiki*

Persian and *farsi* are, of course, in origin not different names. They both emerged from the same political situation some two thousand, five hundred years ago. Based on a summer capital in an area known as Pars in what is now southern Iran, the Achaemenians established an empire covering most of southwest Asia. As a result of

their success the toponym lives on in three related traditions: (i) Arabicized in the New Persian name of the province "Fars," and (ii) of the language, *farsi*, and (iii) Hellenized in the Greek *pers-* (the Greeks associated the Persians with their mythical hero Perseus), derivatives of which are still used to denote everything related to the high culture of Iran in Western languages. The root that gives us Persian became inseparable from the administrative language of the empire and the homeland of the Achaemenians in southern Iran. Persian (the language) and *farsi* are historically the same word. But apart from the fact that Anglicized Greek suits English better than Arabicized Persian, local connotations and usages of the latter have recently changed in some respects that are irrelevant to our academic concerns, as characterized in the former.

After the Achaemenians, the Persian language evolved under the succeeding empires and reemerged in its modern form after the Arab conquest. In the first ten centuries of the Islamic period it spread over an even larger area extending into Xinjiang in the east and the Deccan plateau in the south. Most of this vast area came to be dominated by Persian-speaking Muslim ruling classes of what may be called (after Hodgson) "Persianate" culture. Their language inevitably served as not only the language of government and bureaucracy but, of all the functions of court life, of which perhaps the most significant in the long term has been a monopoly on all genres of literary production. Once established in these roles, Persian continued to dominate them down to the present century, when finally, long after the decline of Persianate culture throughout most of the area, the geopolitical situation began to change irrevocably. This change, when it finally came, was not, as might at first be surmised, the result of the intrusion of foreign powers, but rather of their departure.

For a thousand years, therefore, Persian has enjoyed cultural preëminence over a large proportion of central, western, and southern Asia. This area is primarily that known (since LeStrange) as the "Eastern Caliphate." But the direct influence of Persian

extends beyond the Eastern Caliphate proper, most obviously into the lives of the Hindus of South Asia, whose modern languages are replete with Persian vocabulary and calques.

The everyday language of local communities throughout this area was (a) a variety of dialects of Persian, (b) a variety of other Iranian languages, most of which still have no standard form (not only the relatively well-known Baluchi, Kurdish, Ossetic, Pashto, Yaghnabi, for example, but also a large number of others, many of which remain undescribed), and (c) a variety of Turkic vernaculars. For about the same length of time, since the beginning of the movement of Turkic peoples into southwest Asia, Turkic has spread at the expense of both Persian and other Iranian languages for purposes of everyday communication between nonliterate speakers of different languages—that is, as a local or regional lingua franca. Over large areas it eventually eclipsed many minor, localized Iranian languages. But Persian continued to function as the overall koine. As much as half of the population of modern Iran now speaks a form of Western Turkic for domestic or other nonliterate purposes, but all literacy (with minor exceptions) and (secular) education continue to be in Persian. Even after the growth in this century of literacy and official use of languages other than Persian, mostly in the parts of the region that came under colonial domination, where Russia in the North and Great Britain in India saw fit to encourage Turkic and Urdu respectively, Persian continued to be important as a second language throughout the area for the intelligentsia and in the educational system. It is not entirely coincidental that Persian ceased to be required in schools in India and Pakistan at about the same time (1960s?) as Latin ceased to be a requirement for entry to Oxford and Cambridge.

Despite enormous diversity and periodic upheaval at the level of community life, the history of this vast area throughout the two and a half millennia from Cyrus to Khomeini displays an unusual degree of continuity and homogeneity in literate or high culture. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that *farsi* continued as the Persian

name of the language throughout the area to the present day. The continuing use by Americans of "English" comes to mind as an analogous continuity.

The future, however, appears less assured. Political, social, and economic changes over an area much larger than the modern state of Iran, and extending into the diaspora that has developed since the 1979 revolution in Iran, are reflected in a changing awareness of the language that has for so long been a symbol of identity. Here and there particular speakers or groups make various efforts to conserve or to change the language and attitudes toward it. In the Islamic period this identity was until recently largely an attribute of class. The current rise of a new self-consciousness among all Persian speakers perhaps can be explained only in the context of similar intensification of linguistic and ethnic community identities throughout the world.

Such changes in the way speakers relate to unity and diversity in their language are, of course, not uncommon in recent history. Common speech is often seen as a reflection or even a condition of common heritage or of common interests, and lack of it (however broadly or narrowly defined) as a clincher of cultural difference, though it may perhaps just as often be ignored. Much has been published in recent decades about language policies of colonial powers and about linguistic nationalism. This work is not irrelevant to the continuing uncertainties in the politics of Iran and its neighbors. But the effective context of the continuing history of Persian includes a number of other factors.

Despite the continuing use of the name *farsi* even now throughout the area, some regional variation has been officially recognized. Although this recognition has been at the government level, it is not entirely without popular support. Persian was renamed "*tojiki*" in the Soviet Republic of Tajikistan (and, by extension, in the Persian-speaking communities of the neighboring Soviet republics and throughout the Soviet Union) in 1928. The Soviet authorities changed not only the name of the language but also the alphabet.

They first changed it to Latin. By discontinuing education in the Perso-Arabic alphabet they effectively restricted access to materials printed in Persian outside Soviet territory. This change also broke the most basic connection with the Islamic world by separating general literacy from the text of the Koran. Later, in 1940, the alphabet was changed to a modified Cyrillic, thus reinforcing the political relationship with Russia and the other Soviet republics (which underwent the same change at about the same time).

The change of alphabet was an interesting experiment. It had long been advocated by Westernizers as a means to increase literacy. For this reason it was attempted first in Azerbaijan in 1922, and effected with success and to some foreign acclaim outside the Soviet Union in Turkey in 1928. There is, however, still no reliable evidence to recommend it as a method of increasing literacy. Literacy has risen significantly since the 1960s not only in Turkey and in the Soviet republics, which changed their alphabets, but also in Iran, which retained the Perso-Arabic alphabet. Perhaps no two languages are exactly comparable in the functionality of their alphabets. But the countries with the highest literacy rates in the world include Thailand and South Korea, whose alphabets would not be likely to rank very high on an international scale of functionality or simplicity. Although Persian in the Perso-Arabic alphabet is written phonetically, spelling is complicated by a number of factors: there are several phonetically redundant letters, short vowels are normally not represented, and diphthongs are normally not distinguished. Moreover, in the Perso-Arabic alphabet, at least until very recently, only the standard literary language was written, never any vernacular. Diglossia is an important feature of the whole area, as it is in most premodern literary traditions. When Cyrillic was adapted for use in writing Persian, it was designed not only to be completely phonetic but also to represent the language as spoken by the Central Asian intelligentsia. Differences that marked the speaker as coming from a particular area immediately became differences of spelling and of standard vocabulary and syntax. Even the name of the

language changed: *tajiki* in Perso-Arabic became *tojiki* in the modified Cyrillic. Persian in Tajikistan was thus cut adrift from the standard form of the language, and the scene was set for local divergence from the international "classical" standard through convergence not only with rural dialects of the area (under the influence of Soviet populism) but also with other Iranian languages, and most significantly with Eastern Turkic, especially Uzbek. The process accelerated in the following generation, which now constitutes the senior cohort of Tajik intelligentsia, who were socialized in an environment of Soviet rather than Islamic literacy. Nevertheless, six decades of isolation behind the Soviet border appear not to have been sufficient to break the ties of language and culture inherent in the common use of Persian, and the status difference between *farsi*, the international standard, and *tojiki* (despite its recent standardization), though not as abrupt as before, has not disappeared.

Now as the Tajiks become aware of the significance of their unexpected independence and renew relations with their Persophone neighbors, they are faced with a new dilemma. Should they keep the Cyrillic alphabet, in which they were educated (either in *tojiki* or, in the case of many of the intelligentsia, in Russian), or switch back to the Perso-Arabic alphabet? To stay with Cyrillic would defeat their purpose of rejoining their historical community, the only community fully open to them. But if they switch and the neighboring republics do not, they will have cut themselves off from the *tojiki* speakers of Samarqand, Bokhara, and the rest of Central Asia. There are no reliable census figures for these other Central Asian Persian speakers, but they could easily equal the Persian speakers of Tajikistan in number! Tajikistan did, in fact, legislate an official change back to Perso-Arabic in 1989, but the change will take time to implement and may not be pursued as a priority.

Thirty years after the Soviets changed the alphabet in Tajikistan, Afghanistan confronted a similar problem due to the rise of Iranian cultural and political influence in the region. Despite the

low literacy rate in Afghanistan the government was not strong enough to de-Islamicize the alphabet by switching to Latin, as Turkey had done. But in 1964 it did change the name of the language as used in Afghanistan to *dari*. This relatively minor change was sufficient to give rein to nationalists who wished to introduce elements of vernacular usage into the written language, making it divergent from the politically dominant form of Persian emanating from Iran. *Dari*, which signifies "the language of the court," had been available as an alternative to *farsi* as the name of the language since the earliest times. New Persian had emerged from Middle Persian as the language of the local courts that began in the ninth century to take back power from the Caliphs in Baghdad, less than two hundred years after the Arab-Islamic conquest. Just as everyday educated Persian speech in Tajikistan had been influenced by Uzbek and by other rural languages and dialects, and later by Russian, in Afghanistan it was influenced by Pashto (the "national" language, though not the language of the national bureaucracy) and by Urdu. Although literacy in Pashto was still negligible at the time and still lags far behind Persian within Afghanistan, a number of institutions were given Pashto names to be used irrespective of language, such as "*pohantun*" for university, making official *dari* immediately divergent from *farsi*.

The standard Persian of Iran has, of course, similarly been influenced by local linguistic factors. Historical convergence on the local level has produced divergence from the standard literary New Persian of the mediaeval period. It would, in fact, not be easy to determine objectively which modern form of Persian has diverged least. The main differences lie in certain verb forms (most of which are periphrastic), in choice of loan words, and in the adoption of a number of neologisms generated by an academy. However, partly because Afghans, Iranians, and Tajiks all rightly claim Persian literature as their heritage, and partly because their separation into separate linguistic communities is recent and incomplete, for educated speakers there is no problem of mutual intelligibility.

Persian continues to be the main language for all public purposes not only in Iran but also in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, which have a combined population of not less than eighty million, as well as being the domestic or community language of millions more in the other Central Asian republics, Pakistan, and the Persian Gulf. Moreover, beyond these primary communities and although largely forgotten, it continues (like Latin in the West) to play an important role in vocabulary and word-building in the other languages of the area. Throughout it continues to be known mostly as *farsi*.

To summarize, apart from the colonial language policies of the past and local nationalistic sentiments today, the idea of a separate identity in *dari* and *tojiki* continues to have limited significance for native speakers. Those who emphasize them have more concern for national cultural equality than for linguistic form (if only because as separate standards they are inadequately described and the amount of scholarship relating to them is of little significance). Whatever the future may hold for Persian in Central and Southwest Asia, Persian speakers today still identify with a single linguistic community. Beyond this cultural core the importance of Persian continues to lie very largely in the number of people who speak, read, and write it as a second or third language.

## II. Persian I and Persian II

Outside Iran, "Persia" remained the Western name for the Iranian polity from the time of Herodotus until the Iranian government requested the use of "Iran" for official purposes a little over fifty years ago. Shortly before the 1979 revolution official usage was once again made optional (in view perhaps of the public relations value not only of the connotations of "Persia" in European languages but also of a more categorical differentiation from Iraq). But the separation of the name of the country (Iran) from the name of the language (Persian) for a full generation had already had its effect in the popular mind and made the introduction of *farsi* easier. Persian is now generally known only as the national language of Iran

and might therefore just as well (it may be argued) be called by a distinctive name. Meanwhile, *dari* and *tojiki* have easily acquired in the West the separate identity the Soviet and Afghan governments had sought.

Much else has changed that was beyond the control of governments, as part of the general shift in relations between the countries in the area and between these countries and the Western world. Since the severance of diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States in 1979, academic enrollments in Persian in American universities have decreased significantly. There is also a significant change in the objectives of students who enroll. The establishment in America of a major branch of the Iranian postrevolutionary diaspora—one of the most highly educated of its type—has generated a new type of student, pursuing cultural heritage within the American liberal-arts framework—an option not available to immigrants from, for example, Vietnam or the Philippines! University programs that were designed to train students for doctoral research in history and literature have more and more been called on to serve the purposes of students with essentially nonacademic objectives. Since university curricula are now largely enrollment-driven, these needs must be accommodated.

This accommodation cannot but influence the way we teach. We are obliged to reevaluate our programs and their relationship to the rest of the curriculum. We find, for example, that for most purposes, a Persian language course is now measured in simple functional terms against courses in other "less commonly taught" languages (LCTs), not (as was the case until ten or so years ago) in terms of its success as an introduction to one of the world's great literatures, which represented a major episode of world civilization as well as the living heritage of several Asian countries and the basis of educated speech and literacy for close to a hundred million people. Lack of awareness of what might be called the changing academic ecology of Persian has led us to react defensively against the type of demands that are made of instructors of less-commonly-

taught languages in general, that Persian should be taught primarily as a spoken language of everyday life according to the informal pronunciation of the capital, Tehran.

Penn has been teaching Persian intermittently since the early part of the century and continuously since 1949. But until the 1970s it was taught as a classical language only—the language of one of the world's richest literary traditions, dating from the tenth century and still vital today. It was in this form, after all, that it continued to be important also as a professional language among native speakers of other languages in the region. Persian had entered the Western curriculum in the first place not because it was the national language of Iran, but because it had been an international language of educated speech and writing throughout a large part of the civilized world, comparable to Hellenistic Greek, which predominated in similar functions over a similar area a millennium or so earlier.

Persian has now for some time been taught in all the major Middle East programs in the United States, but no longer exclusively as a classical language. Academic attitudes toward it have changed as a result not only of the emergence of Iran as a major regional power in the 1960s but also because of changes in academic priorities and in the criteria (never entirely explicit) for the inclusion of particular languages in the curriculum. Few now are aware that the earliest Western students of Persian had studied it in the eighteenth century as the bureaucratic and classical language of Mughal India. Official interest in the language grew because of its importance beyond the "North West Frontier" (though within India its importance was declining, and it was replaced with Urdu for official purposes in 1837). This interest faded following the independence and partition of India in 1947. Now most prospective students associate Persian almost exclusively with modern life in Iran and study it because of Iran's role in the Middle East.

Since the early 1970s at Penn and elsewhere, the teaching of Persian as it is used for everyday public purposes in modern Tehran has gradually diverged from the teaching of the classical form of the

language. In most cases students now are introduced to Persian first as the standard language of modern Iran, only secondarily in its classical form, and rarely at all in its other standard national forms—of Afghanistan and Tajikistan—let alone the nonstandard forms still in use in considerable populations scattered (somewhat unevenly) throughout the region. This divergent and narrowing specialization of Persian instruction has resulted partly from the pressures of funding agencies, which have sought to promote social science at the expense of literature in area-studies programs, and partly also from a diversification of academic, professional, and other interests among students. But the divergence has confused rather than clarified the situation, because it is usually not explicit, it is by no means complete, and it is more evident in some institutions than others.

There is also inconsistent classification of the language in terms of difficulty for English speakers. It is important to note that Persian (when taught as the modern language of Iran) is relatively easy to begin with because some of the basic vocabulary is cognate with English and the syntax is relatively similar. Beyond the initial hurdle of a strange alphabet, the student finds relatively simple sentences with familiar structures. Partly for this reason, introductory Persian classes are often relatively large. However, few students progress far into the intermediate level because of the increasing need to deal with vocabulary, syntax, and usage that are culturally alien to English speakers as a result of the high degree of convergence with the major non-Indo-European languages in the region, Arabic and Turkish, as well as the importance of imported Arabic vocabulary. Enrollments in Persian (when taken for these essentially nonacademic, but now common, purposes) tend to fall off sharply after the first year, further endangering its future in the curriculum.

We are left with a dilemma. Persian has at best an uncertain future in Western universities. If it is seen as the national language of Iran, with little to distinguish it from other less-commonly-taught

languages in the eyes of the average administration, its best chance for survival is probably along the lines of Armenian, supported by an expatriate community with ties to a home country. In the long term it is unlikely to attract more than the occasional student of non-Iranian background. But there is little evidence so far to suggest that the Iranian expatriate community, despite its size and its resources, would support Iranian studies as strongly as the Armenian community supports Armenian.

To break out of this mold that seems to be forming around us, it will be necessary not simply to make the negative case: that Persian should not be categorized as a less-commonly-taught language to be taught according to standard proficiency methods. Rather, we must be ready to make a major investment of energy in constructing the positive case: that it should be categorized as a type of international language—a language whose exclusive native speakers are outnumbered by those who use it to varying degrees for a range of purposes, including professional and research purposes, as a second or third language. This category would include English, French, and Spanish in the Western world, and Chinese in Asia, as well as other less well-known international languages elsewhere. Categorized in this way it is not difficult to justify a continuing place for Persian in the American curriculum despite the current paucity of students with strictly academic objectives, especially if instruction in it can be integrated into a larger program of courses on the history and cultural products for which it is the key, rather than being ghettoized with other LCTs. The logic of this general approach should facilitate the development of a number of alternative specific approaches (in addition to the standard proficiency methods, which may still be preferred by some) to satisfy a range of academic objectives that would demonstrate the significance of the Persian cultural tradition for a liberal-arts curriculum.

Until such time as we may be able to achieve such a transformation, we should choose our terms carefully. If we leave no doubt that what we are teaching is Persian, in the larger or inclusive

sense, we can continue to claim that we are teaching not only the major language of Afghanistan, Iran, and Tajikistan but also a historically important international language. If some of us say we teach *farsi*, we risk being overtaken for good by the “national language” image with the implication that what we teach is not more or less important than the modern nation-state of Iran. The “Farsi” image (I suspect that beyond a certain stage the battle against it could never be won) would sweep us along in the direction mapped out by Soviet colonial ideology and the linguistic nationalisms it has left behind, besides implicating us in the more dubious crime of unnecessarily inventing English words. Those of us who are native speakers to boot could also be accused of linguistic imperialism. More significantly, by disguising the international and historical significance of the language, we would be damaging our case for attracting academic students, keeping it in the liberal-arts curriculum.

In either case, if we continue to emphasize oral proficiency as a methodological principle in modern language teaching, we have a serious problem. We have to organize our teaching around the standard usage of a particular community of native speakers. Which “standard” Persian pronunciation and usage are we to teach in this multicultural age? *Dari?* *farsi?* or *tojiki?* If we take the position that we are teaching Persian, the historical international language, in full consciousness of all the implications, we have an excellent case for defining our own role in the changing modern curriculum and reclaiming the status in it that Persian used to hold, making us immune to the pressures that have put us on the defensive over the past decade. However, maintaining this position will require strong leadership, because it puts us at odds with the larger community of teachers of foreign languages.