Persian Language Policies: Nationalism and Islam

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In a German monograph entitled, *Persephonie*, Bert Fragner examines the evolution of the Persian language in a succinct, concise, and cogent manner. Fragner attributes the success of the spread of the Persian language to its expansion in multiple urban centers such as Herat, Tus, Shiraz, Lahore, Kabul, Samarkand, Bukhara, and Isfahan, calling Persian a “polycentric” language, where geographically distant cities generated highly esteemed literary and artistic work while maintaining an indigenous language and culture.

The “polycentric” nature of the Persian language, however, has posed a major challenge in studying Persian language policies, which have been state imposed in Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. By language policies, here I mean both state policies and non-state language planning, both publicly known changes as well as “covert”

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1Bert Fragner, *Die “Persophonie”: Regionalitaet, Identitaet und Sprachkontakt in der Geschichte Asiens* (Berlin: Anor; Das Arabische Buch, 1999), 36.

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implementations. In addition to the political agenda language policies may or may not have pursued, therefore, other non-written but existing proclivities have directed the course of language evolution. As such, language policies emerged as a product of complex, social, political, and economic changes which culminated in on-going, and mostly unexplainable, shifts of lexical, linguistic, and rhetorical nature. Any attempt for identifying, categorizing, and more importantly defining Persian language policies will therefore require analyzing related political, social, and historical contexts since Persian has functioned as a widely used lingua franca among the administrative elite, the merchants, and the literati in multiple centers over many centuries, persisting throughout a large geographical area from the Bosphorus straits to the eastern shores of India. In this article, first I discuss the linguistic specifications that distinguished Persian from other regional languages at its time of emergence, and then I examine some of the dominant ideologies that have impacted our understanding of the evolution of modern Persian, in particular its relationship with national identity and Islam. These narratives, I argue, have formed an underlying motive for many future language policies. In the last section of this paper, I examine contemporary language decrees and the ongoing transformations of the Persian language in Iran, questioning how in a globalizing world, with the accelerating easy access to the Internet, satellite dishes, and the information superhighway, lexical and linguistic transformation can be monitored, relegated, and orchestrated in a standardized way. Can state mandates alone dictate policies related to language use? In other words, to what extent are other elements and social factors, despite strict state regulations, responsible for directing the pace and course of change? At the end, I analyze how different responses to language policies are formed, and are constantly forming, in contemporary post-revolutionary Iran.

**Linguistic Specifications**

The Modern Persian that initially emerged in the greater Khorasan area, and then later spread to both East and West, is quite different from the known Middle Persian varieties, no longer comprehensible to modern Persian speakers. As such, modern Persian, which remained syntactically and morphologically the same in the expansion of a millenium, distinguished itself fundamentally from its predecessor, the Middle Persian varieties. Compared to Arabic, Soghdian, Pahlavi, Sanskrit, Oguz

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Turkish, and other pre-Islamic existing languages of the Iranian plateau, the modern Persian simplified syntax and morphology. In a study on the semantic development of Arabic loan words in Persian, Asya Asbaghi has studied how the Persian language adopted basic Arabic vocabulary but modified meaning to properly serve the new Persian language. Thus, the new language maintained a Persian syntax but incorporated Arabic loan words for its particular purposes throughout history.

What we call the Modern Persian language is at least one thousand years old. Over this time, the Persian language has not undergone any significant morphological or syntactic transformations. While other modern languages like German, English, and French have existed for much less time than that, Persian’s linguistic transformations have been minimal at best. Contributing factors to this phenomenon are mainly a result of Persian’s linguistic specifications, and the fact that Persian has been in constant interaction with multiple indigenous languages at any given time. This condition has increasingly given way to a pragmatic, viable, and conventional state of “diglossia” over large geographical territories.

When modern Persian emerged between the ninth and tenth centuries—almost two centuries after the Islamic conquests, it was a completely different language from Arabic and other indigenous languages such as Pahlavi, Oguz Turkish, and Soghdian, or other known Middle Persian variants. Modern Persian evolved with its own grammatical and syntactic features, with an advanced morphology and vocabulary. While Persian vocabulary has increased dramatically over the years, the user-friendly structure of modern Persian, which unlike many other Indo-European and Semitic languages had no grammatical gender distinction, possessed a simplified morphology and nominal inflections and employed a predictable verbal system, facilitated its use. Furthermore, this condition contributed to the Persian “diglossic” norm, “a relatively stable language situation” which allows the “highly codified” version of a language to exist alongside regional and standard dialects of the language. In explaining this diglossia, linguists have categorized the high standard version of a language as the “H- variety” and the spoken version as the “L- variety.” For Persian, we can call the language which was embellished in multiple centers as the “H- variety.”

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which served as the main administrative language, as well as the language of trade and literature. At the same time, the “L” varieties of the Persian language operated as the accepted and demanded mode of communication among speech communities in the multiple urban centers. The standardized modern Persian versions in Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan are thus each initially an “L” variety that has thus turned into an “H” variety, each acceptable as an official state language.

**Persian and the Sixteenth Century**

Persian language, culture, literature, and art reached an unprecedented cultural and political zenith by the middle of the sixteenth century, mainly on account of a remarkable rivalry of three emerging empires whose rule encompassed a vast geographical expanse from the straits of Bosphorus to the Bay of Bengal. The Safavids, the Ottomans, and the Mughals solidified their political rule covering a geographical terrain that settled over one-fourth of the world’s population at the time. In the course of their sovereignty over this area, the Persian language evolved in various forms and in a multitude of ways, contributing further to its poly-centric nature. At this time, the modern Persian language with the Arabic script (now known as the Perso-Arabic script) had already become the linguistic medium of scholars and Sufis as well as tradesmen, merchants, and world travelers. This modern language that emerged in the aftermath of the conquests of the Arab Muslims of Persian lands in the seventh century replaced many of the already existing languages of the region, including middle Persian, Sogdian, Oguz Turkish, and so on. The language itself actually traversed beyond the initial expanse of Muslim conquerors of Persian territories. By the thirteenth century, we have numerous accounts, including Marco Polo’s, which affirm Persian served as a language of trade and commerce in the East, and there is strong evidence that the fourteenth-century Chinese Yuan dynasty used the Persian *siyaq* as their main language of accounting and trade — calling it *stefi* (istifa). From the eighth century onward, court poets, scholars, philosophers, scientists, historians, and literati composed major literary and scholarly works in the

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7 Ibid. See David Morgan. “Persian as a Lingua Franca in the Mongol Empire.” pp. 160-170. Steffi was the Chinese pronunciation of istifa, the Persian language of accounting at the time.
written Persian language. The employing of Persian as a lingua franca continued rapidly until the new emergent empires of the sixteenth century adopted Persian—to varying degrees—as their administrative language and formalized its use. And later in the eighteenth and nineteenth, the Qajars (themselves Turkic speakers) also led the way for formalizing and standardizing the Persian language.

When the young and intrepid Ismail, the founder of the Safavid Dynasty, initiated a series of conquests from Ardabil in 1501, he soon conquered Tabriz and Qazvin, his two earlier capitals, before settling in Isfahan—calling himself “Padeshah-i Iran.” Shah Ismail composed poetry in a Turkic Azeri variant of Ardabil under the pen name “Khatayi” (hence Divan-i Khatayi). Ismail’s native language was not Persian, but he and his successors in the Safavid Dynasty became major patrons of Persian literary culture, cultivating the creation of magnificent works of art and architecture.

The eastern neighbors, the Mughal Indians, looked up to the Safavids, and as one of the last Mughal Shahs once stated, “No other nation is better than the Persians for acting as clerks.” Muzaffar Alam maintains that, “the Mughal literary culture has been noted for its notable achievements in poetry and a wide range of prose writings in Persian. In terms of profusion and variety of themes, this literary output was also perhaps incomparable.” This achievement is especially noteworthy as the founder of the Mughal Empire in the East, Babur, a descendant of both Timur and Chengiz khan, and a playmate of Ismail, cultivated a Persian court culture in northern India. Although Babur was not a Persian speaker, his administrative language in the Mughal court remained Persian. His successor, Homayoon, is especially known to be one of the ardent patrons of Persian poetry and prose—partly because of his short refuge into Persian territories early on. Later, Akbar (1542–1605) formally declared Persian as the language of administration at all levels in the Mughal court.

By choosing Persian as their court language, the Mughals associated themselves closely with their Safavid neighbors, but the Safavids distinguished themselves from their western neighbors, the Ottomans. In order to solidify this distinction, the Safavids also forcefully converted the Sunni Iranians into their brand of Imami Shi’ism. Thus, in terms of both language and religion, the Ottomans and the Safavids separated themselves by mid-sixteenth century.

Regardless of this seeming difference, the Ottoman court kept on sponsoring and cultivating Persian art and language to a great extent. Although linguistically speaking the Ottoman language belongs to a Turkic family, the Ottomans infused their language with countless Persian and Arabic words. Nonetheless, many kept on writing in Persian and the most striking example is that of Sultan Selim, who wrote poetry in eloquent Persian- and not Ottoman.

Later on, the elite language of the few, however, came under attack during the Kemalist era, and a widespread purge of Persian and Arabic vocabulary began as early as the 1920s in the new Republic of Turkey. The Ottomans certainly cultivated Persian literary culture and art for centuries, as is evident in their art, literature, and especially the large range of Persian vocabulary in their language up until the twentieth century. The political exigency of the sixteenth century had politicized language to such an extent that by the twentieth century, various narratives of Persian’s evolution emerged. These narratives are important in that they form the underlying cultural exigencies of future language planning and language policies, particularly policies adopted by nation-states in the twentieth century.

**Evolution Narratives**

**A. The Language of Islam**

One widely accepted narrative about the evolution of the Persian language considers Persian to be the language of Islam, and the main language which embraced the new religion after the Islamic conquests, becoming their vehicle for the expansion of the religion of Islam. In *Persephonie*, Bert Fragner explains this phenomenon as such:

>The Persian language was not the language of cultural resistance to Islamization, it was more the language of the process of Islamization. By adopting the Arabic script, but a Perso-Arabic vocabulary, the early Muslims created a language that they could take from land to land as a court and administrative language. Thus, the language that early Muslims adopted and expanded was not really Arabic, but the modern Persian language.  

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10Fragner, “Die Persophonie,” 36.
Here, Fragner is responding to those who claim that Persian language actually developed in resistance to Islam, and not as a result of subduing to it. His analysis attempts to contextualize the evolution of the Persian language within the Islamization process of the early Arab Muslims, and views the development of this new administrative language as the efforts of Muslims to spread their religion. Fragner’s argument situates Persian as the primary vehicle for the transportation of Islam. Likewise, several historical accounts and hadiths contribute to such statements about Persian as the main language of Islam. Many of these accounts go back to the early years of Islam, and the conquests of Persian territories, and in response to language policies set in the early Islamic era, when all correspondence and administrative affairs were ordered to be conducted in Arabic throughout the Islamic conquest territories. For the new converts (or pseudo-converts), however, the Arabic language proved difficult to learn and inaccessible at the time. Recognizing this issue early on, an early decree by Abu Hanifa (699–767 A.H.), one of the founders of a main Sunni theological school, acknowledged the legitimacy of Persian alongside Arabic in both religious and administrative affairs. In a religious decree, he named both Persian and Arabic to be the languages of residents of heaven, and the recitation of prayers and “salat” in Persian language as legitimate as the Arabic language. Likewise, in another hadith attributed to the prophet (deemed as forgery), which became quite popular in Transoxiana, cited the prophet Mohammad saying, “in the East, in Khorasan, there are three cities—one of them Bukhara—which will rise on resurrection day, ornamented with precious stones and corals. In each of these cities, seventy thousand flags will wave and bring salvation to all those who believe in Allah, and speak Persian.”

In the early Islamic era, the main intention of such decrees and accounts was to consolidate power, convert non-Arabs, and alleviate political tensions between Persians and Arabs who had fought fiercely against each other. Such statements, however, created an early rift among some Arab conquerors who saw their conquests futile if they could not export their language and culture.

with them to the new lands. Eventually, this group succeeded in enforcing the use of only Arabic as the language of prayer in all Islamic lands, especially in Persian territories.

Thus, Arabic continued to remain the main administrative and court language in Persian territories for at least another two centuries, but not without its own contestations. *Tarikh-i Sistan* (The history of Sistan) narrates an episode when Ya’qub-i Layth (840–879 A.H.), of the Saffarid Dynasty, lambasts the recitation of Arabic poetical verse in his court, “Why should something be composed that I cannot understand?” he rants. Mohammad ibn-i Wassif, his administrative secretary, then began composing court poetry and reciting it for him in Persian. This watershed moment, in most historical sources, marks the beginning of literary modern Persian in the 9th century A.D. It was then that this language spread throughout the Islamic world and beyond and served as a model for a generation of other Islamic languages and literatures, such as Urdu.

Fragner’s argument about Persian being the first language of Islam thus theorizes the expansion and evolution of Persian based on the above mentioned accounts, and it does not give as much weight to the role of Arabic in the expansion of Islam, or the reasons for the expansion of Persian in non-Islamic areas of the subcontinent, where the export of religion did not take place at the same pace of the language.

Ironically, the idea of Persian as the first and main language of Islam has not gained much support, even in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Rather, in a state that bases its legitimacy on its Islamic past, the state-funded institutions explicitly state Persian to be the second language of the Islamic world, after Arabic. This designation has been proudly stated on the public website of the Academy of Persian Language and Literature. In fact, the view that Persian is the language of Islam after Arabic has gained more attention by the Islamic state. Nonetheless, both perspectives deem Persian as a language closely associated with the coming of Islam to the region, and attribute its evolution to the religion of Islam. For centuries, this narrative associating Persian with Islam has become prevalent in studying the evolution of the Persian language,

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15Fragner, “*Die Persophonie*,” 36.
16http://www.persianacademy.ir/.
especially gaining more ground after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. This religious view has found its own opponents—some very radical—especially after the Iranian Revolution.

B. The Nationalist Approach

Perhaps it was against this prevalent view that nationalist arguments about the evolution of Persian was formed, for the most part in contradiction to the Islamic and religious analysis that strongly asserts a close association between the evolution of Persian and the expansion of Islam. The nationalist theories idealize the Persian language, and deem it a distinguishing factor between Arabs and Iranians, one which solidifies a distinct identity apart from the Islamic conquerors. In his book on Iranian national identity and the Persian language, Shahrokh Meskoob, whose book has been translated by Michael Hillman and edited by John Perry, highlights this nationalist tendency and spells out how he views Iranians to be distinct from Arabs:

Only with respect to two things were we Iranians separate from other Muslims: history and language, the two factors on which we proceeded to build our own identity as a people or nation. History was our currency, the provisions for the way, and our refuge. Language was the foundation, floor, and refuge for the soul, a stronghold within which we stood.\(^{17}\)

In contrast to the earlier narrative that associates the evolution of the Persian language with the emergence of Islam, this narrative emphasizes that Persian evolved despite Islam— and not the other way around. Meskoob’s account of the evolution of Persian in resistance to Islam highlights the nationalist view that sees Iranians in the garb of combatants against the invading Arabs. These Arabs believed that “the language which Allah hated the most was the Persian, the language of the devils of Khuzestan, and the hell-dwellers of Bokhara.”\(^{18}\) This belief, Meskoob states, clearly showed a bifurcation between the Persians and Arabs, confirming that Arabs operated in opposition to the Persian language, and were it not for the heroism, gallantry, and the strength of the Iranian culture, this strong, rich, and fascinating language would not have survived. He reiterates the belief of many secular nationalists and idealizes the Persian resistance to Islam and politicizes the function of the language against not only the Arabs, but all Muslims:

\(^{18}\)Meskoob attributes this saying to Abu Horayra, and Fueck in *Arabiya* to Maqdisi.
In the tenth century we Iranians, a people who had undergone the test of defeat, shouldered the knapsack of our history and stood on the territory of our language. An ancient people sprang up anew, like all other Muslims yet different from the rest on account of a distinctive identity and awareness of this distinction, on account of an Iranian awareness of being Iranian. The tree of Irananness grew on the earth of the Persian language and in the climate of Islam.\(^\text{19}\)

Marking Ferdowsi’s composition of the *Shahnameh* (completed in the tenth century) as the date for the reification of Persian identity, such nationalist arguments appeal to those who glorify Iran over Islam. Some such nationalists have even converted back to Zoroastrianism in protest to what they deem a forced conversion over centuries. Some more radical have formed strong anti-Islamic sentiments, expressing a loyalty to Iran as their primary cause. In all cases, the *Shahnameh* stands as the symbol of Iran’s greatness and Iranian identity.

**National Identity and Language**

Lutz Rzehak, the German scholar of the Tajik language, explores the evolution of the Persian language in Central Asia in a phenomenal German monograph, *Vom Persischen zum Tadschikischen: Sprachliches Handeln und Sprachplanung in Transoxanien zwischen Tradition, Moderne und Sowjetmacht (1900–1956)*, where he argues that the evolution of modern Persian occurred mainly as a result of frequent trade between Khorasani merchants who brought the language from the Khorasan area into northern Khwarazm and Transoxiana—merchants who happened to be Muslims. Rzehak examines the transformation of the Persian language from a language of a multilingual society for centuries, the leading language of religion, science, literature, administration, correspondence, and trade, to a language whose function has been reduced to the primary language, defined according to national criteria of a speaker community—in the twentieth century. In the course of this transformation, he claims, the Persian language emerged as a decisive element for national identity.

From a global perspective, following the French Revolution, the idealization of a national language as an essential factor for nationalism became a widespread attitude in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nation-states traditionally played a central role in promoting and preserving their national languages by safeguarding

the spheres of domestic politics, national culture, education, and law. Thus, standardization processes typically have a reciprocal impact on nationalistic approaches, and national identities. In the Iranian case, efforts to standardize Persian continue to be of state concern. The presidential decree issued in July 2006 (by then president Ahmadinejad) banned the usage of foreign vocabulary in Persian media, educational materials, and daily correspondences. By foreign vocabulary, the decree meant words from Western languages such as English and French, but not Arabic. In this official act, the president endorsed the equivalents coined by the state-funded Academy of the Persian Language and Literature. These words were coined for almost fifteen years, but had neither found their way in administrative correspondence, nor been accepted on a mass level. The state, once again, aimed at supervising cultural policies to solidify a national identity, aligned with the post-revolutionary slogans of combatting the Western “cultural invasion” (tahajum-i farhangi) in Iran. It is also important to note that post-revolutionary language policies closely adhered to other Western-combatting cultural policies such as the earlier ban of any Western music on public television and radio.

While such decrees for deliberate cultural engineering of language cannot be considered anything new, or effective for that matter, this particular decree highlights how Persian as a national language has attained a certain socio-political status, suggesting the intricate, nuanced, and complex ways and means by which language and politics are inextricably linked. This top–to-bottom approach, however, should be seen within the existing cultural narratives that I have discussed here earlier. While the presidential decree calls for a nationalist cause, purging foreign words and influence from the language, at the same time it does so within the context of an “academy” that regards Persian as the second language of Islam. In a way, and paradoxically, the Iranian president’s decree attempts to reconcile the two opposing views regarding Iran and Islam. In fact, the controversial idea of an “Iranian Islam” was raised during Ahmadinejad’s presidency, which at the time outraged several religious clergy. The idea of an Iranian Islam more than anything else attempted to find a third way to maintain the glorifying and valorizing of being an Iranian, but not seeing this Iranian-ness as distinct and in opposition to Islam. As such, the presidential decree advocated a standardization policy, aligned with the idea of reveling

in the glories of Islam and at the same time asserting a pride for the Iranian past by preserving the *esalat* of the Persian language. Unfortunately, public discussion about such views is not tolerated in Iran today, which makes it difficult to gauge its actual number of supporters.

According to the Iranian national census, no more than 50 percent of the Iranian population of the estimated 80 million are Persian speakers at home. This multi-ethnic and multi-lingual reality contributes to regarding the Persian language as a national unifying factor, for both political and cultural purposes. The ideology of one nation, one language, which solidified in the 1930s with the rise of Reza Pahlavi to power, attempted to integrate the national identities of different ethnic groups under one umbrella. “Language has been regarded as an indisputable unifying factor in the otherwise linguistically and ethnically heterogeneous country of Iran,” writes Helena Bani-Shoraka, whose socio-linguistic study of the Iranian Azerbaijani community in Tehran examines the impact of language policy in Azeri and Persian in Tehran. Her analysis underscores the political motives behind recognizing Persian as the only language of the country:

> Since there is historically strong fear that a movement in support of cultural autonomy would soon develop into a political movement with features of separatism, there is no real interest on the part of the state to stimulate the development of a vigorous Azerbaijani language used for public purposes.

It is exactly for this purpose that official interest grows in regulating and controlling the national language as the unifying language of a country which has diverse ethnicities and regional dialectic varieties. Nonetheless, the post-revolutionary Academy of Persian focused more on the Western threat than the domestic ethnic diversity. Founded by the decree of the “Cultural Revolution’s High Council” (Showra-ye ‘Aliye Enqelab-eFarhangi) in 1989, the first meeting of the current post-revolutionary Farhangestan-e zaban va adab-e Farsi (The Academy of Persian Language and Literature) was convened with seventeen members of the academy at the Iranian president’s office. In its initial charter, the academy emphasizes the conservation of the

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“authenticity” (*esalat*) of the Persian language as one of the main tenets for Iranian national identity, with the objective of monitoring and regulating the evolution of the new Persian language. This objective reveals a significant political urgency and asserts the expansion of the Persian language to be a necessity for creating a link with its historical, cultural, and literary heritage as well as with that of future generations. The academy’s main responsibility, furthermore, lies in the attempt to devise equivalents for foreign words in order to ensure that scientific and technical language is translated into Persian terms, rather than the commonly used Western terms. This essential objective had also been pursued with the first Iranian Farhangestan, the precursor to the current one, with more attention given to eliminating the overwhelming number of obsolete Arabic terms. This objective, however, is less pronounced in the post-revolutionary Farhangestan, where Arabic terms are not an issue and there are less efforts to translate such terms. In fact, Arabic loan words such as *Ertehal*, *tahlif*, and *tanfiz* have entered the vocabulary in the revolutionary era as accepted terminology, whereas the Farhangestan has created Persian equivalents for technical terms such as “computer,” (*rayaneh*) “fax” (*namabar*) and “text messaging” (*payamak*).

In the first Farhangestan, founded in 1934, the predominant basis for finding equivalents was to get away from some of the Arabic compounds, such as replacing “*tasdiq-e madreseh*” (“diploma”) to the compound word “*govahi-nameh,*” and if the degree was issued by an institution of higher education, it would be called a “*danish-nameh,*” or instead of “*dastur-e tahsilat*” (program/schedule) the simpler word “*barnameh*” was substituted. Now, many years later, we see that these lexical changes have been integrated into the language but have not caused the complete obliteration of the original terms in all cases. As a result, sometimes both terms are interchangeably used in Persian texts.

While the state-funded existing Farhangestan attempts to create a unified and acceptable usage of orthography, morphology, and most significantly vocabulary, there are many outside factors, such as the Internet, multimedia, satellite programs from North America and Europe, sit-coms, soap operas, university education, which transform the language in unprecedented ways, preventing state-issued language policy decrees to be fully implemented.

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In the words of Mir Jalal al-Din Kazazi, a professor of Persian literature at Allameh Tabataba’i University, and a radical pioneer in the “Persianizing movement,” “the assault against the Persian language has spawned farther and mightier than before, and a cultural institution alone is not capable of challenging this assault.” Kazazi makes an unprecedented effort to write and speak in pure Persian—eliminating almost all foreign vocabulary in his speech and writing, being especially conscious of avoiding Arabic words. While his case may be the most radical, there certainly exist common movements of purifying and purging Persian of foreign elements in reaction to the rapid and steady bombardment of new terms from the outside. The general population, however, seems to be more reflexive, and this reflexivity takes its own path.

**Sit-coms, Satellites, and Slangs**

One of the crucial design features of languages is their reflexive ness, where speakers constantly reflect on their speech and consciously change the way they speak. Hence, it is no wonder that language from television, film, and other media has a lasting effect on the language of speech communities. Furthermore, the demographic increase of over 70 percent of the Iranian population under thirty accounted partly for a rise in a new slang, which is rapidly being formalized. Mehdi Sama’ii has compiled this swiftly evolving language and has brought it to the attention of the formal learners of the language in a work called *Farhang-i Lughat-i Zaban-i Makhfi* (The dictionary of underground language). In his socio-linguistic introduction, the author of this rather popular but thin compilation, re-published in six editions within three months, contextualizes his work within the international dictionaries of slang. Despite its deficiencies, such as not paying complete attention to the nuances of this new language, including defining Jamshid, Javad, Abolhassan, Hassan all to have a similar meaning as a simple-minded, unsophisticated dupe, the book offers a valuable collection of popularly used vocabulary that opens up a window to the vernacular culture of Persian speakers.

The slang culture is growing very rapidly in Iran today and is transforming the standardized Persian in dramatic ways. This vernacular culture creates a discernible

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rift between the standardized culture advocated by the Farhangestan and the actual culture used by the people on the streets in everyday life.

In addition to Iranian-produced sit-coms and street slang, the proliferation of satellite programs broadcasting mainly from North America and Europe has also influenced the Persian language in unforeseen ways.

The vernacular is also finding its way on the Internet, as blogging gains popularity among young Persian writers. In 2005, there were over 700,000 Persian bloggers on the web, but this number decreased slightly after the events of the Green movement. Although the Iranian government has developed highly advanced filtering systems to control the content of these blogs, served by Persianblog, Blogfa, Blogsky, Parsiblog, and Mihanblog, among others, Iranian bloggers continue to organize public blogging festivals and express themselves freely on social media, especially Facebook, Twitter, and FriendFeed. Writing on blogs also influences the Persian language in unprecedented ways, as more and more bloggers write in the colloquial, with all its diglossic characteristics. This colloquialization of the written language now dominates social media:

Writing colloquial Persian on weblogs has become a linguistic trend, meaning verbs are conjugated in a way common among people in cabs and busses. This act does not add to its beauty and lucidity, nor does it assist one in comprehending the matter better. If this kind of writing establishes itself in the country, tomorrow the younger generation will encounter major problems in understanding Persian texts, especially poetry.

There is a clear cultural contention about writing in colloquial Persian, or the diglossic “L variety,” as in response to the criticism on the deformation of the Persian language through blogs, Dadfar responds:

I am against all these opinions and believe that it is the Persian standard language that actually contributes to the language’s deformation. Those who...
have formed and formulated Persian vocabulary and sentences in such a way that only the few “elite” would comprehend them, and only the speakers and composers with knowledge of the language, who would be placed above the laymen in distinction, it is they who have corrupted the language, not these young people who wish, just like Ya’qub-i Layth-i Saffari, to say something that they understand and not that which they don’t know.29

The changes in the political economy of language will certainly weaken the state’s ability to control the dynamics of language change, the patterns of language use, and linguistic standardization.

Standardization policies in Iran intended to create proper speakers of language, with a proper accent and proper syntax and spelling, associated with a particular social status.

The reflexive ness of the language, with its various external factors that cause the transformation of the language, has now undermined the social status associated with standardizations and is certainly changing over time. The deliberate attempt to engineer lexical equivalents and issue political regulations through state decrees, only underscores the dilemma of any language policy, as well as the importance of the negotiating cultural narratives and ideologies. However, knowing its own limitations, the state may also be cognizant of the fact that several outside factors, as the ones mentioned above, restrict the capacity of the language community to abide by those set norms. Especially rapid transformations in the information superhighway, the accessibility of multimedia communication methods, and many other global elements impact the way people write and speak Persian in the twenty-first century. At the same time, domestic and local politics, such as satisfying a constituency, may be a major determining factor for cultural policies and impact decisions related to language.

Final Remarks

The narratives discussed in this paper delineate prevailing trends and cultural ideologies in local language politics—and how such ideas have been socially, politically, and culturally negotiated in various spheres of language use. The polycentric nature of Persian in its historical evolution underscores the complexity and the diversity of language planning and language policy approaches. In outlining such policies,

29Hosseini, “Haftad-o- yek salegi-ye Farhangestan-e Iran: In pir degar tavan nadarad?.’’
Persian’s relationship toward Islam has remained central to impacting the path and method of cultural planning. By illustrating the major narratives underlying such policies, in this article, I showed how they guided national debates, as well as scholarly arguments, in describing the evolution of Persian. As John Perry, the Persian studies scholar argues, “no language is inherently religious,” and Persian was “devoid of religious connections and connotations.”

The polycentric nature of Persian, especially, deems it difficult to cast generalizing statements about its relationship with one particular religion, or to dismiss its relationship with one or more ideologies. What we know is how political exigencies, and cultural policies, superimpose perspectives and ideas in pursuit of a particular public agenda that continue to affect the evolution of Persian—for now and the future.

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