

Language Change and Language Maintenance in Persian

Persian is an ancient Indo-European language dating back to the 6th century BCE. Throughout its rich history, the language has traveled through several stages, each marking significant changes in its linguistic features. Descending from Old Persian (6-3 BCE) with a very rich case system, Middle Persian (3 BCE - 9 AD) marks a number of important changes in the language resulting in a less complex affixal system and the formation of compound verbs. New Persian emerged in the 11th AD with a large vocabulary borrowed from Arabic. Persian is evolving still today, giving rise to changes at all levels – vocabulary, phonology, word formation rules and syntactic patterns. This panel of prominent scholars in the field of modern Persian linguistics will investigate a number of the important changes currently taking place in Persian, the factors that give rise to them, and the diverse reactions of the speakers to these modifications.

The Iranian diaspora that has arisen following the Revolution of 1979 has created a strong bilingual community facing significant challenges in language maintenance. The first talk in the panel will address the issues of bilingualism in minority communities in general and in the Iranian diaspora in particular. The change in Persian can be seen especially among the children of immigrants who are attempting to forge an identity in the new society while finding a balance with their families' traditions. The second talk in the panel will explore the language characteristics of these "heritage speakers" delineating their strengths as well as areas that require further emphasis.

Language change is not limited to the diaspora community. Persian has also been changing at a strong pace in Iran as witnessed in the creation of new words (e.g., *rahkar*, *balgærd*), usage of old terms within new contexts (e.g., *lotfæn shæfaf begin*), and new structural constructions such as the positioning of the *ra* object marker in relative clauses. The third talk of the panel studies the distinct characteristics encountered in the language of the Persian Blogosphere where the literary and conversational variants interweave and what they signify for language change. The final talk of the panel will explore the distinct perspectives and reactions to language change, ranging from criticism and proposals for countering or containing change to accepting and defending the new language features, and what these diverse approaches reflect about the interest of the community towards its language.

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Academic Bio: Dr. Vida Samiian is professor of linguistics at California State University, Fresno. She received her Ph.D. from UCLA, specializing in syntax and Iranian languages. Her research has been focused on the structure of non-verbal phrasal categories in Persian. She has served on numerous academic committees and advisory boards. Dr. Samiian currently serves as Dean of the College of Arts and Humanities at California State University, Fresno.

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Academic Bio: Dr. Simin Karimi is a professor of linguistics at the University of Arizona. Her research focuses on syntax, and the interface between syntax, semantics, morphology and discourse functions, with a special interest in Iranian linguistics. Her recent projects include complex predicates, scrambling, control, nominal constructions, and modality. She has published three books and several papers in major international journals.

First Presenter Name: Dr. Shahrzad Mahootian

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Academic Bio: Dr. Shahrzad Mahootian is professor of linguistics at Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago. Her research focus is on the structure and function of codeswitching, and aspects of Iranian linguistics. Her publications include a grammar of Persian (Routledge), and articles in *Linguistic Inquiry*, Elsevier's *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, and the *International Journal of Bilingualism*, among others.

Choosing Languages, Changing Languages

Bilingualism has been simply described as the use of two or more languages effectively (e.g. Weinreich 1953, Mahootian 1996). A closer look reveals that effective bilingualism is a complex behavior that involves multiple levels of cognitive and social negotiations. Which language you use with whom is determined by a number of variables including topic of conversation, the interlocutors, formality of the context and status of the two languages vis-à-vis one another, among other factors. Over time a pattern of dual language use emerges and, depending on the bilingual speech community, becomes a more or less acceptable speech variety. In this paper I examine the patterns of dual language use among Iranian-American bilinguals with an eye towards understanding the impact of bilingualism on language change and language maintenance.

Second Presenter Name: Dr. Anousha Sedighi

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Academic Bio: Anousha Sedighi is the first full-time Persian faculty member at PSU in twenty years. She holds a Ph.D. in Persian Linguistics from the University of Ottawa. She is the recipient of the award for the Best Student Paper Contest at the Canadian Linguistic Association Conference (CLA) in 2004. She has delivered papers on Persian linguistics at several International conferences and has written articles on Persian Syntax. At PSU, she is developing a two year proficiency oriented Persian Program and is the coordinator for the Heritage Persian Initiative at PSU.

Heritage Speakers of Persian

This work is a continuation of Sedighi (2008), which discussed the issue of teaching Persian as a heritage language. Persian language has always been praised for being the sweet language of literature and poetry and associated with the glories of the ancient Persian culture. However, with more than three million Iranians living abroad how much Persian do the second generation Persians actually acquire and speak?

Studies show that typically the third generations of immigrants have lost almost all of their parental language (Fillmore 1991, Kouritzin 1999). The term heritage language has not yet gained a rigid definition and has been defined and described differently by different studies. Among many other definitions, heritage language is “the language, which is frequently the means of establishing and reaffirming consolidation with one’s origins, though linguistics proficiency is not a pre-requisite (Foley & Thompson 2003: 99)”. Heritage language may or may not be the mother tongue of a speaker, which is the first language the speaker learned as a child. Considering the fact that heritage language is not the prominent language of a speaker, it is evident that heritage speakers exhibit different attributes than both native speakers of a language and foreign language learners. This work is an attempt to capture the different characteristics and linguistic profiles of heritage Persian learners. It aims to draw more attention to promotion of a stronger educational system and research on developing and sustaining Persian language skills amongst the future Persian diaspora generations.

Third Presenter Name: Dr. Karine Megerdooian

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Academic Bio: Karine Megerdooian is a theoretical and computational linguist specializing in less commonly taught languages with emphasis on Persian and Armenian, complex verbal predicates, and Persian heritage speakers. She has received a Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of Southern California and has over 10 years of experience in research and development with focus in the areas of machine translation and lexical semantics. She is currently a Lead Artificial Intelligence Engineer in the Human Language Technology group at MITRE.

Language in Weblogistan

Since its beginnings in 2001, the Persian blogosphere has undergone a dramatic growth making Persian one of the top ten languages of the global blog community. Iranian weblogs have opened the door to journalists, intellectuals, and University students who use blogs to evade government censorship or social and political restrictions. More recently, a large number of fundamentalist, religious and pro-establishment blogs have been launched. This new medium has also provided a forum for bloggers to express their opinions and thoughts in their everyday speech rather than the traditional literary language. Although many recent publications have focused on the socio-political aspects of Iranian blogs, almost no work has been done on the linguistic features. With the advent of blogs, the diglossic situation in Iran - where two distinct variants of the language co-exist – has been directly represented in this medium and colloquial speech has propagated in written form. The linguistic features of conversational text differ considerably from the literary counterpart. For instance, conversational language makes more frequent use of attached pronoun forms, has shortened verbal stems and inflectional endings, and includes affixes that do not exist in the literary language such as the definite article. The spelling in these texts often reflects the pronunciation in colloquial speech. In addition, there are more instances of free word order, idiomatic expressions, loan words, technical jargon and other non-dictionary words, as well as cultural inferences. Bloggers often create new words based on existing morphological rules in Persian. Moreover, blogs written in conversational text often do not follow a standard set of orthographic rules and may write affixes attached or unattached as the author sees fit. In this talk I will present a description of the Persian language in “Weblogistan” and explore the debate on the use of conversational language online within the context of language change and maintenance.

Fourth Presenter Name: Dr. Jila Ghomeshi

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Academic Bio: Jila Ghomeshi is an Associate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Manitoba. She is interested in syntax, the interface between syntax and morphology, pragmatics, and the nature of lexical representations. Recent projects have involved work on reduplication, number, determiners, and proper names. She works primarily on Persian and has published a number of articles in international journals.

Prescriptivism in the Iranian context

Prescriptivism is a term that refers to the judgments people make about language. Crucial to prescriptivism is the idea that there are correct and incorrect forms and uses of language. Under a prescriptivist approach it is a given that there are better and worse forms of language. These value judgments are made along every dimension: writing systems, spelling, pronunciation, words, sentences, dialects, and in some cases choice of competing languages. Prescriptivism is largely ignored within the field of linguistics as linguists take a descriptive view towards documenting and analyzing languages. A descriptive approach treats any form of language that is actually used as a valid object of study. Thus, prescriptivism is seen as being at odds with a scientific approach towards understanding the nature of language. Prescriptive ideas nevertheless hold sway within much of the broader population as a glance at the 'letters to the editor' page of any major newspaper will show. In this paper I situate some of the issues and debates around Persian within the context of prescriptivism as it is found cross-linguistically. In doing so, I will show that much of what may be viewed as culturally specific within these debates is in fact found elsewhere. Rather than exposing something about Iranian culture, these attitudes echo those found in practically every other literate society. People feel deeply invested in questions of tradition vs. innovation, formality vs. individuality, a respect for a heritage vs. relative ease of communication. Ultimately the attitudes held about these questions, while expressed as value judgments, reflect a deep interest and engagement with language itself.

Audio-Visual Equipment Request: Projector (for presenting PowerPoint slides)

Status: Approved

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