

Shift Happens: Language Shift and Maintenance in the Persian Diaspora

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Abstract.

Maintenance of immigrant languages has always been a fundamental challenge among Diaspora communities. The Iranian Diaspora in the United States is facing a similar dilemma with the second generation already showing signs of language loss. This paper presents detailed results of linguistic research on Heritage Persian, the language spoken by the younger generation of Iranians, delineating its strengths and shortcomings. The paper then uses these results to propose a language instruction methodology informed by the characteristics of Heritage Persian speakers that can build upon their language intuitions and cater to their specific needs, within the larger context of diglossia and bilingualism found in the Persian community.

Although Persian instruction for the heritage community is fundamental in preventing language loss in the Iranian Diaspora, it will not be sufficient if applied in isolation. A number of factors play a role in language loss including the lack of teaching material for all levels, ideological issues affecting attitudes towards Persian, isolation from the home country, lack of firmly established Persian language communities outside of a few major cities, and parents' behavior and attitudes. In order for true maintenance to occur, language instruction must be implemented within a strong community of bilingual speakers. The paper discusses the factors contributing to language loss in the Iranian Diaspora and introduces important measures that, along with heritage language instruction, can contribute to Persian language maintenance in the United States.

Even though the main focus of this paper is on the Iranian community, the general linguistic characteristics of Heritage language as well as the language maintenance strategies discussed in this paper can also apply to other immigrant communities in the United States.

Shift Happens: Language Shift and Maintenance in the Persian Diaspora

Maintenance of immigrant languages has always been a fundamental challenge among Diaspora communities. Since language is crucial in preserving culture and defining identity, the loss of the minority language directly affects the preservation of the community itself. The Iranian Diaspora in the United States is now facing a similar dilemma with the younger generation displaying signs of language loss. Iranian immigration to the U.S. is a rather recent phenomenon, with most of the population arriving following the 1979 revolution. The largest increase took place between 1980 and 1990, where the number of Iranian immigrants increased by 74 percent (Hakimzadeh Iran, Hakimzadeh spotlight). The official number of Iranian-Americans is estimated to be around 419,490 (US Census Bureau), whereas the Iranian Interest Section in Washington, DC claims to hold passport information for approximately 900,000 Iranians in the US (Fata and Rafii)¹. Given the current population and with a new wave of younger Iranians arriving into the United States, it is important to develop methods and establish policies to stop language loss in the Iranian Diaspora and to strengthen the cultural identity of the group².

In this paper, I study the linguistic characteristics of *Heritage Persian*³, the language spoken by the younger generation of Iranian immigrants, and outline an approach to language teaching that would be appropriate for the linguistic portrait of these speakers. Persian in the US Diaspora has undergone a shift and Heritage Persian now differs from the Persian spoken by a monolingual native speaker. At the same time, Heritage Persian has properties that set it apart from the Persian spoken by a second language learner (e.g., an American learning Persian as their second language). Heritage language speakers are typically able to carry out conversations on everyday topics in Persian, can understand rapidly spoken language, and are familiar with the sociocultural behavior of the Persian community. But in most cases, they are unable to read and write Persian. And given the strong divergence between the conversational and literary language variants in Persian-speaking societies, heritage speakers cannot comfortably function in contexts requiring formal speech or high-level language proficiency⁴. In addition, Heritage Persian in the United States has developed new linguistic features as a result of contact with English. It is imperative for the Iranian community to begin a systematic language education for heritage speakers in order to prevent language loss but the instruction should be informed by the specific needs of this group of speakers in order to be successful.

Language instruction alone, however, is not sufficient for language maintenance. Studies have shown that immigrant languages in the United States typically assimilate to the dominant language and culture within three generations. In his book “Language loyalty in the United States”, Joshua Fishman summarizes the “three-generation model” for language shift: in the first state, the immigrant generation continues to speak the native language; the second generation becomes bilingual by virtue of learning their foreign-born parents’ mother tongue within the home while using English outside of the home; and the third generation typically learns only English. The Iranian Diaspora, however, seems to have experienced language loss at a much faster rate with members of the second generation often unable to speak Persian fluently (Ansari, Modarresi). In addition to language instruction, several factors contribute to language maintenance among immigrant groups: language ideology, parents’ behavior and attitudes, the existence of a strong literate community, language policy, and availability of linguistic material and educational institutions. Based on the results of linguistic research on Persian heritage language, the paper provides guidance towards the development of appropriate language teaching material, set within the bigger context of establishing important measures for Persian language maintenance in the United States. Despite a focus on the Iranian community in the US, the general description of the linguistic characteristics of Heritage language in Section 1, the overall proposal for a language instruction methodology that would be appropriate for Heritage speakers in Section 2, as well as the language maintenance strategies discussed in Section 3 can directly apply to other immigrant communities in the United States and Canada.

1. Heritage Persian

Characteristics of Heritage Persian. A heritage language speaker in the United States has been defined as someone who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken and who at least understands the language and is to some degree bilingual in that language and in English” (Valdés 38). Based on this proficiency-based definition, Heritage Persian refers to the language spoken by the children of immigrants who grew up in a home where Persian was spoken. These children have developed some level of bilingualism but the acquisition of the language was interrupted at some point and English became the primary language (Polinsky). The acquisition of English continues beyond childhood and it often becomes the dominant language in interactions with peers and siblings, as well as being the language used in school. Meanwhile, the acquisition of the heritage language is significantly curtailed or even stopped. In some cases, if the individual is not using Persian when he or she grows older, there may also be some loss in the language, also known as *language attrition*. Heritage Persian speakers in the US typically receive no instruction in their first language and, as a result, are able to read and write only in English.

Since the acquisition of Persian is incomplete among heritage speakers, the language shows clear differences with the Persian language spoken by a native speaker. However, the speakers of Heritage Persian are not beginning from scratch and even if they are not able to communicate fluently, they typically can understand basic Persian conversation. In general, they possess skills that a non-heritage student of Persian may never achieve such as native-like pronunciation, fluency in colloquial register, and sociocultural understanding (Brecht and Ingold, Montrul). But in most cases, the heritage students tend to lag behind their non-heritage classmates in terms of reading and writing skills, and the use of formal registers or styles (Lynch).

In the rest of this section, I will discuss the linguistic characteristics of Heritage Persian in the US. Only through an understanding of the properties of the heritage language and consideration of its strengths and shortcomings can we develop an instructional curriculum that will most benefit the subsequent generations of Iranians and provide a successful approach to language maintenance in the US.

Diglossia. The characteristics of Heritage Persian cannot be fully understood outside of the diglossic context of Persian in Iran. Diglossia refers to situations where the language spoken by the people in a society differs considerably from the traditional written variant. The term was used by Charles Ferguson to describe the distinction between Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), the written, literary variant of Arabic, and the dialects spoken in various Arabic countries (Ferguson). Since then, diglossic situations have been noted in many languages where two distinct variants of a language coexist in society. In the case of Persian, a diglossic situation has developed in the three countries where the language is spoken – Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan – with the conversational variant undergoing linguistic modifications throughout the years resulting in a situation where the conversational and literary variants have become quite distinct. The sentences in (1) and (2) represent the same utterance in the two varieties of literary and conversational forms of Iranian Persian, respectively⁵. As the examples show, there are distinctions in the form of affixes, lexical choice, the way the future tense is expressed, and there are also word order differences.

(1) ما فردا با دوستانمان برای تعطیلات به اصفهان خواهیم رفت و در هتل خواهیم ماند.
ma færdɑ bɑ dʊstɑnɛmɑn bæɾɑyɛ tæ'tilɑt bɛ ʔsfæhɑn xɑhɪm ræft vɑ dær hɔtɛl xɑhɪm mɑnd.
We tomorrow with friends-our for vacations to Isfahan will.1pl go and in hotel will.1pl stay
'We are going to Isfahan for vacation tomorrow and we will stay in a hotel.'

(2) ما فردا با دوستانمون برا تعطیلات میریم اصفهون و تو هتل میمونیم.
ma færdɑ bɑ dʊstɑmʊn bɾɑ tætilɑt mirim ʔsfɔhʊn vɑ tu hɔtɛl mimʊnim
We tomorrow with friends-our for vacations go-Pres.1pl Isfahan and in hotel stay-Pres.1pl
'We're going to Isfahan for vacation tomorrow and we'll be staying in a hotel.'

In societies where diglossia exists, the written form which is associated with the literary tradition is considered of higher prestige, whereas the spoken form or vernacular variety of the language is treated as a lower variant (Ferguson, Hudson). This is also the case of Persian diglossia where the literary variant, the language of literature and poetry, maintains a more valuable position in society and those who have mastered this variant are often highly respected as intellectuals or literate folk. As is the case in most societies with strong diglossia, the members of the Iranian society and the immigrant community in the US often have very strong intellectual and emotional responses to these two language varieties and there are often discussions as to the “correct” way of speaking and writing. It is an important aspect of speech communities that “different languages and language varieties [...] are often associated with deep-rooted emotional responses in which thoughts, feelings, stereotypes, and prejudices about people, social, ethnic and religious groupings, and political entities are strongly associated with different languages or varieties of a language” (Stern 237). In the case of Persian, the conversational language or what Ferguson named the Low variety of the language is often looked upon as the incorrect and bastardized form of the literary or High variant of the language. Feelings about languages can run high and sometimes obscure the real facts behind the usage and properties of the two varieties.

What is important to realize is that diglossia is a very natural development and has historically been present in most societies. In situations of diglossia, both variants of the language are equally valid but there is typically a very clear distinction in the functions of the two varieties of the language, so much so that the usage of one variety in the wrong context will give rise to awkward reactions and perhaps even ridicule. For instance, conversational Persian is used in everyday conversations ranging from chats with family and friends to serious political discussions. It is the variant used when getting a taxi, purchasing groceries or clothes, and when ordering food in a restaurant. Conversational Persian is also used in official, professional, or business situations such as meetings, bank transactions, renewing a passport, and even when talking to one’s manager. In fact, using the literary variant in these situations would be considered unnatural, very marked, and may sometimes be taken as a sign of arrogance or pedantic behavior. Such situations do occur with non-Iranian tourists who attempt to ask for directions using the literary variant that they have been taught at school, resulting in people either laughing or finding it cute. The literary variant, on the other hand, is used almost exclusively in writing and in newscasts. It is interesting to note that even in university and political lectures and in interviews on radio and television, the presenters often use the conversational word forms in their speech but may incorporate many literary variants such as more high-level vocabulary. This is exemplified in the transcription below from a BBC interview on the editing of Encyclopedia Iranica with the erudite Iranian scholar and linguist Dr. Yarshater, who has full command of literary Persian, yet delivers the interview in the conversational variant (Yarshater interview). The conversational word forms are underlined in the text to show the extent of the usage of conversational forms by Dr. Yarshater.

Iranica tasævor nemikonæm kæmtær æz chehel-o-pænj jeld beshe. Monteha hala ye tærtibi pish amæde, yæni ye ræveshe tazei ma pish gereftim ke modæti ro ke bæraye tækmile Iranica lazeme kheyli kæm mikone. Yæni tæghribæn be yek sols tæghlil mide; væ un in æst ke ma sabeghæn fæghæt be tærtibe horufe ælefbyai pish miræftim æma hala un tærtibo dombal mikonim, væli zemnæn æz tæmame iranshenasaye mo ’tæbæri ke dær donya hæstæn dær reshteye tækhæsoreshun dævæt mikonim ke mæghalati ke ma lazem daræn [darim] benevisæn. Sæbr nemikonim ta beresim be hærfi ke tækhæsose una... mæscælæn færz konin yeki motekhæsese dowlæte sasanist. Ma lazem nist sæbr konim ta be hærfæ “es” beresim ke æz u dæ’væt bekonim. [Translation: “Iranica, I don’t believe it’s going to be less than forty-five volumes. However, now a new order has come about, that is we have adopted a new method that largely reduces the time needed for completing Iranica. That is, it reduces it by a third. And it’s that previously, we only advanced according to the alphabet but now we still follow this order but at the same time we invite all the authoritative Iranologists in the world to write the articles that we need in their specialization field. We don’t wait until we get to the letter that their specialization... for

example, imagine someone is a specialist of the Sassanian government. We don't have to wait until we get to the letter 's' in order to invite him/her.”]

As this interview clearly shows, the purely literary or High variety of the language is seldom used in speech. In formal registers, however, people may select to speak in the vernacular, especially when it comes to morphology and word forms, yet oftentimes elements of the High variety such as higher level vocabulary, Arabic plural forms, and complex sentences may be integrated within the speech as Dr. Yarshater does in this interview. It is therefore clear that both varieties of Persian, the literary and the conversational forms, are both valid and “correct” forms of modern Persian but that they each have specified usages based on the particular context and domain of the speech act. Accordingly, if one realizes that each variant of Persian fulfills a different and important function in the society, it becomes obvious that it is linguistically inaccurate to claim that one form of the language is better or that another form is incorrect. It is however important, in order for someone to be considered a functioning speaker of Persian, that he or she be able to speak both varieties well and to have an understanding of which variety to use given the context.

It should be noted that the main restriction on conversational Persian has traditionally been in the written domain where one can rarely find a written piece or document that does not use the literary variant of the language. Hence, even advertisements and metro or bus tickets are written in the High variety in Iran. Nevertheless, conversational Persian has been used, especially in modern times, to produce written documents: letters to family and friends are generally written in the conversational form, and so are plays that need to portray dialogues and the spoken form of the language. Modern authors of the 20th century such as Sadegh Chubak began writing novels in the vernacular. More recently, with the advent of blogs and their use for expressing personal thoughts and feelings, a vast amount of online documents have been written in the vernacular variety, thus breaking the taboo of the written conversational language in Persian (Doostdar). The blogs are in direct contrast to traditional online resources, such as news sites and official websites, which make use only of the literary Persian variant.

Understanding Persian diglossia in Iran is crucial in teaching heritage speakers of Persian. These speakers are typically fluent or at least comfortable with the Low variety of the language since they have learned Persian within the domain of the household where the conversational language is mainly used. In order to become fluent speakers of Persian, much emphasis needs to be placed on High variety instruction in the classroom. At the same time, it is important for the teacher and the community not to belittle the language variant spoken by the heritage speakers by calling it an “incorrect” or “substandard” form of the language since, as discussed above, it represents a valid, standard variant whose function is limited to certain specific domains within the society.

In the remainder of this section, I present an overview of specific linguistic characteristics of heritage speakers based on the results of previous studies on Heritage Persian. The linguistic portrait of Heritage Persian presented in this section is based on the results of two studies on Persian heritage speakers: The first investigation is an experimental design consisting of an extensive battery of 56 tests carried out at the University of Maryland on about 43 participants (Cagri et al). The test battery includes empirical language acquisition and assessment tasks with controlled variables and targets distinct language features. The tests were administered to heritage speakers of Persian, non-heritage learners of Persian, and native speakers of Persian who were used as a baseline for the evaluation of the results. The test results were verified for statistical significance. The second study is based on a linguistic analysis of a collection of exercises and essays by 20 students in the heritage language classrooms at the University of California, San Diego in 2004 (Megerdumian).

Competence in Conversational Language. Studies have shown that heritage speakers of Persian have a number of advantages over non-heritage learners who are learning Persian as a second language. They are very familiar with common vocabulary items, word forms, and sentential constructions that occur frequently in conversational language. This places them ahead of a non-heritage learner of the language who has to learn everything. Even heritage speakers with very low

proficiency are able to follow a basic conversation, while heritage speakers with medium proficiency are able to carry on conversations about everyday or household topics, using the correct forms on verbs and nouns, and generally in the correct word order (Lynch).

The heritage speakers' competence is not limited to knowledge of vocabulary and word forms, but they also have internalized a number of syntactic constructions that occur often in conversational language such as the use of the Persian subjunctive verb form as shown in examples (3) and (4). Learning the correct usage of the subjunctive, which in Persian occurs after verbs and modals such as *bayæd* 'must', *shayæd* 'may' and *xastæn* 'to want', or following a hypothetical clause with *ægær* 'if', is usually difficult for American students since it is not used in modern American English (Stokes). Yet analysis of the subjunctive usage in classroom essays shows that heritage speakers of Persian do not show any difficulties in forming these sentences with the correct tense and mood (Megerdooonian).

- (3) ما فردا باید بریم دانشگاه
ma færda bayæd berim daneshga
 we tomorrow must go.Subj.1pl university
 'Tomorrow we have to go to the University.'
- (4) آگه جوابشو بهت بگم معلم ناراحت میشه
æge jævabesho behet begæm moællem narahæt mishe
 if answer-its-Obj to-you say.Subj.1sg teacher unhappy become.Pres.3sg
 'If I tell you the answer, the teacher will be unhappy.'

Persian is a *pro-drop* language that allows the subject of the sentence not to be expressed overtly. Heritage speakers naturally utter sentences without the pronominal subject (5) whereas English speakers need to learn this property of Persian. In English, the bare plural is used to express an unspecified quantity in object position as in "I read books every day". In Persian, however, a bare singular noun should be used as in (6). While English learners of Persian tend to add a plural affix in these contexts (i.e., کتابها *ketabha* 'books'), most heritage speakers of Persian have no difficulty using the bare noun. Heritage speakers are also typically comfortable with certain complex constructions such as the basic relative clause which occurs frequently in conversational language (7) (Cagri et al). Furthermore, heritage speakers have a clear intuition about the use of the object marker *ra* in Persian and almost always use it correctly in speech in sentences that require a specific object. However, since they have only heard this marker in the conversational language, they are familiar with its colloquial forms *ro* or *o* as exemplified in (7) and (8), respectively, and make mistakes when they are trying to write the same sentence with the literary form of the marker *ra* (Megerdooonian).

- (5) هر هفته کلاس فارسی داریم.
hær hæfte kelas-e farsi darim
 every week class-of Persian have.1pl
 'We have Persian class every week'
- (6) من هر روز کتاب میخونم.
mæn hær ruz ketab mixunæm
 I every day book read.Pres.1sg
 'I read books every day'
- (7) کتابی رو که بهم دادی گم کردم.
ketabi ro ke behem dadi gom kærdaem
 book Obj that to-me gave.2sg lost made.1sg
 'I lost the book that you gave me.'
- (8) مشقمو تمام کردم.
mæshq-a-m-o tæmum kærdaem
 homework-pl-my-Obj end did.1sg
 'I finished my homework.'

Heritage speakers also have advantages in their knowledge of the sound system in Persian. Persian stress, besides a handful of words, is typically marked on the last syllable of the word, which is distinct from stress marking in English, but phonetic experiments have shown that heritage speakers tend to produce the stress patterns correctly in Persian⁶ (Cagri et al).

These examples show that the heritage speakers have knowledge of basic conversational vocabulary, word forms, stress patterns, and syntactic structures, which places them ahead of the second language learner in the classroom.

High-Level Language. However, since heritage speakers of Persian have not been intimately exposed to the language spoken in newscasts or the literary writing in books and publications, they lag behind in their knowledge of linguistic features generally found only in the high-level language. These include the various Arabic forms used in Persian language such as *اقتشار* *aqshar* ‘layers’, *محبوسین* *mahbusin* ‘the arrested ones’, or *شعرا* *sho’æra* ‘poets’ (Cagri et al).

One of the language features that distinguishes conversational Persian and its literary variant is the verb form. Hence, in spoken language the speaker would say *mærdom migæn* ‘people say’ but one would write *mærdom miguyænd*, where both the endings of the verb (-æn vs. -ænd), and the basic root form (g- vs. guy-) are different. Heritage speakers familiar with the conversational language often cannot understand the high-level verbal forms and are unable to relate them to the conversational forms of the verbs that they already know. Compound verbs also raise difficulties for heritage speakers who sometimes overuse the light verb *kærdæn*, creating forms such as *nejat kærdæn* (rescue do) instead of the standard form *nejat dadæn* (rescue give) ‘to rescue’ (Megerdooimian).

In addition, heritage speakers of Persian have difficulty producing complex sentences that involve subordinate sentences, coordination between sentences using terms like *bælke* ‘but, but also’ or *hær chænd ke* ‘even though’, or hypothesis constructions such as *اگه وقت داشته باشم* (*æge vaxt dashte bashæm*) ‘if I have time’ using the past subjunctive (Cagri et al, Megerdooimian). They are also not familiar with the usage of many adverbs, especially the more literary ones used in forming complex structures. This is particularly important in the Persian writing style where long and complex sentences are generally the norm, especially in comparison with the writing style prevalent in American English.

Cultural understanding. Since heritage speakers have only been exposed to the familial context, they are unable to change registers and may use the language in socially inappropriate ways according to a native speaker. For instance, heritage speakers oftentimes refer to everyone in the familial form of address *to* ‘you’ and generally have to be taught to use the polite form when appropriate, i.e., *shoma* used for an interlocutor and *ishan* ‘they’ used when speaking of a third person. Heritage speakers are also unfamiliar with the honorific language used in what is known as “taarof” constructions in Persian such as *tæshrif biyarin* (lit. bring your honorable presence) instead of *biayin* ‘come’, or *in xedmætetun bashe* (lit. may it be in your servitude) instead of *ino negæh darin* ‘hold this’. The choice of the inappropriate forms in contexts where the honorific language is appropriate can have very negative social consequences if the interlocutors are unaware of the heritage speaker’s limitations.

Interference Effects. As a result of contact with English, Heritage Persian shows signs of language shift since it includes features borrowed from the dominant language. One of the most common elements is the high usage of borrowed words from English that are apparent not only in Heritage Persian but also in the Persian spoken by the first generation of immigrants in the US and even among some Iranians living in Iran. In general, lexical borrowings and *code-switching* – whereby the speaker switches from one language to another in the middle of a sentence – are extremely frequent in communities that come in contact with another language. Code-switching is not a simple combination of two sets of grammars; rather, one language (in this case Persian) sets the main grammatical framework and the other (i.e., English) provides certain items to fit into the framework.

Some examples of code-switching in Heritage Persian as well as in the language of the first generation of Iranian immigrants are provided by Modarresi (Modarresi 104):

- (9) *egzito mis kærdaem*
exit-Obj miss did.1sg
 ‘I missed the exit.’
- (10) *kalera ba hæm kambayn mishæn*
color-Pl with each-other combine become.3pl
 ‘The colors are combined with each other’
- (11) *ye adæti develop kærde*
a habit develop has-done.3sg
 ‘She/he has developed a habit’

As these examples illustrate, when an English word is used within the Persian sentence, it may carry Persian affixes such as the object marker in *egzito* (exit-Obj) or the plural affix in *kalera* (color-Pl). One of the most common ways of borrowing an English word appears in compound verbs where the main noun or adjective element is English and the light verb is in Persian: *mis kærdaem* (miss do) ‘to miss’, *kambayn shodæn* (combine become) ‘to get combined’, *develop kærdaem* (develop do) ‘to develop’. This usage is also very common in Iran as well, as can be seen in the frequent usage of *kansel kærdaem* (cancel do) ‘to cancel’⁷. In these instances, the English word replaces the Persian equivalent of the noun or adjective. However, in some instances the noun used may itself be the result of English interference as in the sentence in **Error! Reference source not found.** uttered by a heritage speaker on her blog, where she used the incorrect verb *baz kærdaem* ‘to open’ instead of *eftetah kærdaem*; in Persian, only the latter is used in the context of ‘opening a show’ (Missy).

- (12) یو-کیس برنامه رو باز کرد و اولین گروهی بودن که اجرا داشتن!!
yu-kis bærnamae ro baz kærd væ ævvælin goruhi budæn ke ejra dashtæn
 U-Kiss program Obj open made.3sg and first group were that performance had
 ‘U-Kiss opened the show and they were the first group to be performing.’

Another common interference effect from English is in the choice of prepositions that follow a verb. In heritage Persian, some of the prepositions used follow the English choice rather than the one a native speaker of Persian would make. For instance, heritage speakers often say or write *dær englisi benevisid* = **in** English write.2pl) which is a direct translation of the English construction ‘write it in English’; the Persian sentence should use the preposition به ‘to’ in this case. Heritage speakers often say *mæn ruye telefonæm* = **I on** phone-am) or *ruye saæt residim* = **on** time arrived.1pl) instead of using the correct prepositions *mæn pa telefonæm* = **I foot** phone-am) and *sære saæt residim* = **head-of** time arrived.1pl), respectively (Megerdoomian).

Interference effects may also affect bigger phrases or syntactic constructions. One common mistake by heritage Persian speakers is in the choice of the conjunction in embedded questions as shown in (13)(13). Heritage Persian speakers almost always use *æge* ‘if’, which is a direct translation of the English construction, whereas standard Persian either leaves it blank or uses *ke* ‘that’ (Megerdoomian).

- (13) میخوام بدونم اگه میتونی بیای
mixam bedunæm æge mituni biyay
 want.1sg know.1sg **if** can.2sg come.2sg
 ‘I want to know if you can come.’

Another common interference effect observed among heritage speakers is the pronunciation of certain characters such as *re* (or ‘r’) in Persian which often takes on the qualities of the English sound, especially in the middle of the word (Sedighi). Low proficient heritage speakers often cannot distinguish

sounds that are not common in English such as خ /x/ or ق /q/. Heritage speakers also tend to allow consonant clusters in the beginning of the word, pronouncing for example برای 'for' as *braye* rather than *bæraye* (Cagri et al).

Literacy Skills. Heritage speakers learn Persian within the family but are typically not taught reading and writing skills. Those who have been taught the alphabet may be able to read and write at a low level of proficiency. When heritage speakers are given instruction in Persian literacy, however, they begin to read full texts quickly and advance at a very fast pace. This is because they are already familiar with the vocabulary and language, and do not face the same issues in reading that a second language learner experiences with the lack of vowels and in determining phrase boundaries in a sentence.

When heritage speakers of Persian do read and write, they are only familiar with the Naskh typeset usually found in publications and with the writing style taught to elementary students; they are not at all familiar with the cursive handwriting style. A literate native speaker of Persian, however, should be able to read and write in the handwriting style and should also be familiar with the “broken” (or *shekaste*) cursive style. This is a topic that is often ignored in Persian language classes but should be incorporated within a heritage language class as it allows the students to feel more integrated within the Persian community once they are able to read signs in the grocery store or letters from grandparents and other family members.

Since heritage speakers have not received literacy instruction, they tend to write as they speak with word forms found in the conversational language such as *migæm* ‘I am saying’ (vs. *miguyæm*), *umædæn* ‘they arrived’ (vs. *amæde ænd*), and *qæshænge* ‘it’s pretty’ (vs. *qæshæng æst*). In addition, a number of words have undergone phonological alternations in modern Persian. One common instance of such an alternation is the pronunciation of /n/ before /b/ where /n/ assimilates to the formation of /m/ (which is pronounced by pressing the two lips together) and is always pronounced as /m/ in this context. Hence, the word written in Persian as شنبه [literally: *shænbe*] is actually pronounced as *shæmbe*. There are many examples of this phonological alternation in Persian where the originally written /n/ is now pronounced as /m/ before /b/: *jombesh* ‘movement’, *pæmbe* ‘cotton’, *dombal* ‘after, following’, *zæmbur* ‘bee’, among others⁸. Heritage students typically write these words with the letter ‘m’ as they hear them, as in شمبه, جمبش, دمبال, پمبه, and زمبور (Megerdoomian).

2. Heritage Language Instruction

Overview of Heritage Persian. To summarize, heritage speakers of Persian are bilinguals that have experienced incomplete acquisition of the language when English surpassed Persian as the dominant language. This places heritage speakers in a category distinct from both native speakers and those learning Persian as a second language, and these differences should be taken into account when devising a curriculum for heritage Persian instruction.⁹ Although it may not be realistically possible to separate heritage Persian speakers from second language learners in university classrooms, it should not raise an issue in schools and courses targeted specifically for the Iranian community.

In the previous sections, it was shown that children of Iranian immigrants have typically acquired basic conversational skills in Persian, especially if the linguistic structure is frequent in the spoken register. They often have native-like pronunciation (with minor phonetic interferences from English), have internalized a number of grammatical rules for Persian – in particular if they are frequent in conversational language – and are familiar with the socio-cultural values of the Iranian community. On the other hand, heritage speakers are unfamiliar with language features that do not appear in the conversational language that they have been exposed to, such as complex sentence structures, idiomatic expressions, Arabic morphological constructions, and higher level vocabulary in general. Although heritage speakers do not have advanced reading and writing skills, they can begin reading longish texts much faster than a second language learner since they have knowledge of the language and the vocabulary. They also need instruction in extra-linguistic elements such as orthography. Heritage Persian speakers may show interference effects from English by transferring language features of English into

Persian, especially in the context of preposition choice after a verb and by inserting English language words within Persian sentences. They also tend to be unaware of honorific and politeness forms used in higher registers of the language and are therefore unable to move from one register or variety of the language to another in order to use contextually appropriate language.

Textbooks. Once we have a better understanding of the language competence of heritage speakers, we are in a position to develop an instructional curriculum that can better address their specific needs by building on their strengths. Most current textbooks for Persian are designed for second language learners and are therefore not really adequate for teaching heritage speakers. The textbooks that were developed for native children in Iran may be relevant for teaching young children within the community, but they cannot be used in high school or university courses since their subject matter is too infantile for adult heritage speakers. The books published in Iran that address adult topics, on the other hand, are too high-level and difficult. In addition, the topics in Iranian textbooks, though valuable for familiarizing students with the culture in Iran, are often not relevant to the heritage speakers who are living in the American society and do not address issues that are of direct interest to them. There is therefore a strong need for age and culture appropriate textbooks specifically targeted to heritage Persian speakers.

Instructional Approach. Heritage speakers, like many children of immigrants, are sometimes faced with identity issues since they feel different from their American peers but also do not completely fit in within the Iranian community especially if they do not have full command of Persian language (Val and Vinogradova 5). Therefore, one of the most important elements that the instructor needs to be aware of is the position of heritage Persian within the diglossic situation of Persian language in Iran. It is important for the teacher to explain to heritage speakers the language variant that they are speaking is as valid and as standard as the literary language but has very clear and distinct functions within the society. The language features of heritage speakers are in no way “incorrect”, but are rather natural consequences of being familiar with only the conversational variant of Persian. In order to be proficient in a language one needs to be able to function fluently in both conversational and literary variants of the language and that is one of the main goals of the heritage Persian classroom.

The modern methodology accepted in language teaching focuses on a communicative approach in the classroom that cuts back on the traditional drilling and teacher-centered instruction. I suggest, however, that in the case of heritage speakers a level of instruction needs to be integrated into the classroom in order to correct some fossilized forms – non-standard language or errors that may have become fixed, mostly due to interference effects from English or lack of exposure to literary language. Without direct instruction in these elements, the heritage speaker may not be able to become aware of these issues, since these constructions have become a natural part of their Persian language. For instance, the use of *آگه* (*age*) ‘if’ in embedded questions exemplified in (13) is so engrained in Heritage Persian that often the students are surprised to hear that it is a non-standard usage. In these cases, it is difficult to teach the standard form by input alone and direct instruction is required to modify the fossilized linguistic structure. Furthermore, extra-linguistic elements such as writing and reading skills and orthography are best taught by direct instruction.

Direct instruction does not need to take the form of the traditional teacher-centered approach however. Heritage speakers of Persian often have a number of linguistic intuitions that can be explored and built upon in the classroom. Since heritage speakers are proficient in a number of common features of conversational language, such as the usage of the *ezafe*¹⁰ or the object marker, the students could be guided via an inductive approach to discover the grammatical rules that they have already internalized. Through this approach, the instructor can raise questions about a specific language construction that guides the students towards finding a pattern in Persian language that they are already using naturally. For example, heritage speakers at medium proficiency typically know the difference in meaning between the sentence in (14) and its causative variant in (15). By developing similar examples and relevant questions, the instructor can guide the students to discover the relation between the two sentences –e.g., in (15), the

doctor causes or makes the patient lie down, which is achieved by adding *-an* to the basic verb to obtain خواباندن (*xabandæn*) ‘make sleep/lay’ from خوابیدن (*xabidæn*) ‘sleep/lay’.

- (14) مریض روی تخت خوابید
mæriz ruye tæxt xabid
patient on bed slept/laid.3sg
‘The patient lay down on the bed.’
- (15) دکتر مریض را روی تخت خواباند
doktor mæriz ra ruye tæxt xaband
doctor patient Obj on bed laid-Caus.3sg
‘The doctor made the patient lay down on the bed.’

Although this methodology requires careful planning by the instructor, it is an innovative way of teaching grammar without direct instruction. It also allows the students to use Persian language communicatively for the task of discovering a pattern in their own speech.

Another instructional paradigm that can be successfully implemented is to teach elements of the literary language within a comparative framework by guiding heritage speakers to study the mapping between the literary and conversational forms of the language. For instance, introducing the pattern of assimilation of /n/ to /m/ before /b/ discussed earlier in the classroom by comparing the written form to the spoken form can allow heritage speakers to better understand the pattern in their pronunciation. Another example is the distinction between the simple past tense form (e.g., خوردم *xordæm*) and the pluperfect tense form (e.g., خورده‌ام *xordeæm*). In the literary language, the two tenses are written differently but in the conversational language, both forms are written as خوردم (*xordæm*). This often confuses the heritage speakers since they cannot distinguish between the two tense forms (Megerdooonian). However, conversational language does make a clear distinction between these two tenses by modifying the stress position: the simple past tense is pronounced *xórdæm* while the pluperfect form is pronounced as *xordæm* with a clear difference in the stress pattern. Heritage speakers have already internalized this stress pattern and do make the distinction between the two tenses in their speech.¹¹ An understanding of this fact can help guide them to choose the correct form of the simple past or pluperfect in writing.

By understanding the linguistic characteristics of Heritage Persian, we can develop instructional methods and design material that will be specifically targeted to heritage speakers. I have proposed that comparative instruction and inductive guidance are appropriate methods for heritage speakers who already have some intuition about Persian language. Allowing them to explore their own language in this way also has the added benefit of raising interest in Persian language among some students. Nevertheless, although language instruction is fundamental for language maintenance, it cannot achieve that goal without a number of other elements implemented within the immigrant community. These are addressed in the next section.

3. Language Maintenance

Motivations for Language Maintenance. Language is often used for social identification and together with culture, religion and history becomes a major component of national identity. It is also the means for an immigrant group to pass on the traditions, literature, and historical narratives to the subsequent generations. Given the fact that minority languages are typically replaced by the dominant language of the country within three generations, it is crucial to determine a stable environment for the maintenance of the language of the immigrant community.

In order for an immigrant language to be maintained, it needs to be passed on to the next generation, creating a *bilingual* generation of speakers that have command of both the native and the dominant language. Instruction based on an understanding of Heritage Persian characteristics (and the consideration of the language shift that has taken place) is imperative to language maintenance but it is insufficient if used alone. American sociolinguist and leading expert on language maintenance, Joshua Fishman,

believes that it is only through “socially recognized and protected functional differentiation of languages” that a minority language can be successfully maintained (Fishman bilingualism 79). The more successful immigrant communities are those that manage to create two distinct domains for the use of each language: the minority language is used within the home and the immigrant community, while the dominant language (in this case English) is used in the professional domain, educational institutions, and the general society at large. Under the best of circumstances, from the point of view of language maintenance, cultural and religious organizations and schools also operate in the minority language exclusively. If the community is able to establish and maintain a functional separation between the two languages, the immigrant language can survive within this bilingual context¹². This kind of clear differentiation of functions for each language creates a strong motivation for the children of immigrants to learn the minority language in order to communicate with their family and friends, and to be able to function within the immigrant community. A strongly compartmentalized family and community milieu also allows the development of an ethnolinguistic identity among the subsequent generations and creates a stable form of bilingualism in the community rather than leading to the replacement of the minority language by the dominant one.

If the native language is not established firmly within the family and the immigrant community, however, it is very difficult for the subsequent generations to acquire it. This leads to *language loss*. The typical scenario consists of the children of the first generation immigrants understanding the language but feeling more comfortable with the dominant language; the children of this generation rarely acquire the language at all, leading to language loss. By the third generation, the dominant language fully replaces the immigrant language in all aspects of social and familial functions (Fishman language loyalty). In the rest of the section, I will present the various factors that contribute to the establishment of a stable bilingual community.

The family. Ultimately, the most significant institution for minority language maintenance is the family. If the family manages to create an environment where the children hear and speak Persian, and there is a clear functional distinction between the language used at home and the language used in the outside society, the chances for language maintenance are much higher. In order for the child to acquire Persian successfully, it is generally agreed that the parents should speak exclusively in Persian within the home¹³. After that point, the child should be given continuous exposure to the language and encouraged to speak it at home. Of course this becomes more difficult with the next child, as children tend to speak English with their siblings, which they learn at school and from television. The presence of grandparents and family visiting from Iran (who do not feel comfortable speaking in English) are very significant in providing the children with the motivation and the context for speaking Persian at home.

Modarresi points out that an important factor in the acquisition and maintenance of the minority language is the role played by women as mothers since they generally spend more time with their children and contribute strongly to language acquisition (also see Fishman language loyalty). Various surveys, however, indicate that many Iranian parents (especially mothers) either speak English to their children or if they speak in Persian, the children tend to respond solely in English (Carreira and Kagan). Research carried out on the Persian-American Baha’i community in New York City also notes that oftentimes parents may show a strong desire for their children to learn Persian but they do not implement any real method for achieving language acquisition or to ensure continuity (Rohani et al).

There are several factors that may have contributed to this situation, such as the anti-Iranian feelings during the hostage crisis in America and the post-9/11 sentiments that placed Iranian immigrants in a very difficult situation. Without these issues of ideology, the Iranian community might have been more open to introducing Persian to the second generation. These sentiments also had an effect on the children who were trying to forge an identity in the US: “[...] the second generation of Iranians seems to be in a frustrating position of being American by birth on the one hand, and bearing the stigma of being a foreigner on the other hand” (Modarresi). As a consequence, a number of second generation children began to distance themselves from Persian and Iranian culture in order to better fit within the American

society. Finally, some parents feel that teaching children Persian language may interfere with their fluency in English. This attitude results mainly from a misunderstanding of bilingualism and will be further discussed in the section on bilingualism.

Community strengthening. Within the past twenty years, diaspora Iranians have established and expanded a number of cultural institutions that, according to Modarresi, have played a significant role in maintaining Iranian culture by organizing literary, musical, and traditional events. These associations have been able to bring Iranians together on various cultural occasions and have introduced Persian language and Iranian identity and culture to the second and third generations. In addition, various religious centers, radio and television programs, and Persian language publications have been launched in the United States – all important elements in language maintenance in immigrant communities. Nevertheless, these efforts have not been very fruitful in maintaining fluency in Persian among the younger generation.

Ironically, the pluralistic attitude in the United States and the typically higher level of education among Iranians have allowed the Iranian immigrants to be readily accepted within American society, giving the members of the Iranian community opportunities to use English for professional and economic advancement and eliminating the need to be confined to their community for work. This ensures easier assimilation within the dominant culture and may lead to language loss. There should therefore be a strong focus on creating other opportunities for children to experience the diverse aspects of Iranian culture that can provide positive motivation to learn Persian. Besides events organized by cultural associations or religious centers, the availability of other resources such as Persian language publications for maintenance of literary culture, radio and television programs targeted towards the youth and which provide a “cool” image of Iranians and of Iranian popular culture are essential.

Unlike many other immigrants in the United States, Iranian immigrants are often unable (or unwilling) to travel back home. The unavailability of regular visits to Iran and with the family back home hinders language maintenance in the Iranian community. Sabha Rohani’s survey of second generation immigrants in the Baha’i community in New York City indicates that traveling to Iran if possible allows the second generation to experience Iran firsthand and often has a positive effect on their perceptions of Iran and Iranian culture. In addition, with the events that took place after the 2009 elections in Iran and the support of the Western world for the Iranian youth movement, many American perceptions towards Iran have changed. This has in turn influenced members of the second generation to identify more closely with Iranian culture and has provided more motivation to learn the language. Sabha Rohani’s survey finds that “[...] as acceptance of friends, peers and greater community increased, so did their own comfort with the language and identifying with the culture” (Rohani et al).

Language teaching. There has recently been a lot of interest in the US in studying Persian, and the government has created and funded several programs for teaching Persian language at universities and governmental teaching centers¹⁴. These courses have played a significant role in developing language skills among heritage speakers. But since language acquisition succeeds best if it begins when the children are young, courses at the high school or university level may already be too late to prevent language loss in the community. Until recently, there have been no significant efforts in Persian language instruction within the elementary educational system, even in places with a high concentration of Iranians such as Los Angeles. In the US, Persian language instruction has mostly been carried out by Iranian cultural associations, which offer courses mainly on weekends or sometimes as intensive summer courses. Within the last couple of years, however, there have been important efforts to establish regular Persian language classes at the elementary level, within selected schools in the American educational system¹⁵.

Another issue in Persian instruction is the lack of adequate teaching materials. Instructors tend to use Persian textbooks published for native speakers in Iran or they select and prepare their own material from various sources. The existing Persian language textbooks published in the United States often follow traditional teaching methods rather than the new communicative approach used in most language-teaching courses (Nunan, Brown, VanPatten). As previously discussed, there is a need to develop Persian

language textbooks that integrate the latest pedagogical methodologies and integrate speaking as well as literacy, teach grammar using communicative exercises or task-based inductive approaches, enhance cultural understanding, and include subjects and authentic reading material that are relevant to the age and interests of the heritage speakers in the US.

Ethnic mother tongue schools. One of the most efficient ways for maintaining the minority language is for the community to establish ethnic mother tongue schools that provide bilingual education in the K-12 system where several courses are taught in Persian, such as language, literature, and history. Fishman states that “in the absence of bilingual education the unmarked [dominant] language reigns supreme in the public school and, accordingly, no positive contribution to minority language maintenance can be expected from it” (Fishman minority). Ethnic mother tongue schools, if adequately supported by the community, can provide a high school degree according to the requirements of the US educational system, but in addition they will be able to provide instruction in Persian language and in Iranian culture and history. In addition, these schools will provide a stable environment for the students to make new friends from their own background, and can develop in them a sense of belonging to their own ethnolinguistic community.

Bilingualism. As stated in the previous sections, in order for a minority language to be maintained, it is crucial to develop a bilingual system in the community with compartmentalized functional domains for each language. Although the two languages are kept apart in most cases, over time the language of work and school comes to be used at home and begins to influence the native language phonetically, lexically, semantically and sometimes even syntactically. Shift or change in the immigrant language due to contact with the dominant language is a natural occurrence when two languages come into contact with each other for a long time¹⁶. But language shift is often slowed by the existence of a strong immigrant community that uses the minority language in various functions, provides publications and radio and television programs, and offers strong education in the minority language to the bilingual speakers.

It is important, however, to debunk some of the myths of what a bilingual person’s abilities are. A bilingual can be defined as a person who has some functional ability in a second language. Thus, if Persian language is successfully maintained within the Iranian community in the US, the next generations will grow up as bilinguals able to communicate and function in both Persian and English. However, it is unreasonable to expect bilingual speakers to possess the same ability in both languages. Typically, bilinguals learn their two languages under different conditions and for different purposes, and each language is used in distinct domains and for distinct functions in the society. Hence, the type of vocabulary, writing ability, and structural knowledge may vary from domain to domain and from language to language. The functional ability of a bilingual may therefore “vary from a limited ability in one or more domains, to very strong command of both languages” (Spolsky). If children receive a formal education only in English, their knowledge of Persian would most likely be limited to the conversational level, enabling them to communicate fluently in informal settings but lacking in vocabulary and writing skills at the formal level. Bilinguals with very strong command of both languages are referred to as *balanced bilinguals*, and this may be achieved when the children follow continuous education and literacy learning in both languages. Thus in most instances, and without a strong bilingual education at the school, bilinguals will show different levels of command in each language based on the domain of usage and study.

4. Conclusion

A number of factors play a role in language loss in the Iranian Diaspora. These include the lack of systematic language instruction and teaching material for all levels, ideological issues affecting attitudes towards Persian, isolation from the home country, lack of firmly established Persian language communities outside of a few major cities, and parents’ behavior and attitudes. Language loss in the immigrant community has been associated with not only the loss of the ancestral language for the subsequent generations, but weaker connections with their community and culture (Fishman language

loyalty). The children of immigrants who are not fluent in the language are typically even unable to relate with the immediate family, which may give rise to feelings of alienation, loss of self-esteem, and uneasiness with their identity (Val).

In this paper, I presented the main linguistic characteristics of Heritage Persian and proposed an instructional approach that emphasizes the strengths of heritage speakers and caters to their specific needs. Although Persian instruction for the heritage community is fundamental in preventing language loss, it will not be sufficient if applied in isolation. In order for true maintenance to occur, the language must be incorporated into the home and communal life. Without separate though complementary norms and values to establish and maintain functional separation of the speech varieties, the existence of a strong community, and access to informed bilingual education, the dominant language tends to displace the minority language. As Sabha Rohani puts it in her study of Persian in the US diaspora:

With that loss of language there are a number of other consequences that ultimately change the course of existence for a very specific population. Without proper attention given to the matter, without awareness brought to its study and without concrete action taken to ensure its continuity, the pattern that has already been created amongst the second generation of immigrants will continue uninfluenced. The question is, however, if there is enough passion behind the deterioration to instigate a change. (Rohani et al 24)

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¹ The reason for this discrepancy in the numbers lies in the fact that most Iranians do not write-in their ethnicity in the Census forms. Informal census from the Iranian community in the United States sets the Iranian-American population numbers at no less than 1 million nationwide (Fata and Rafii).

² It should be noted that many Iranians speak other languages at home such as Kurdish, Armenian, Azeri, Baluchi, etc. These populations may decide to use their first native language as the home language and not maintain Persian as their main familial language in the US.

³ The term *heritage languages* was originally used in Canada when the Ontario Heritage Languages Programs were launched in 1977. Kagan and Dillon state that the term entered the US vernacular in the late 1990s.

⁴ The difference between conversational language and the higher-level variant in Persian is much more poignant than it is in English, and will be discussed in more detail in the section on Heritage Persian.

⁵ The examples include the Persian text, the transcription, a word for word gloss, and a translation.

⁶ Persian stress is not on the last syllable of the word if it contains inflectional affixes (e.g., affixes that mark concepts like tense or agreement on verbs or indefinite and possession on nouns). For more information on stress assignment in Persian, the reader is referred to Kahnemuyipour.

⁷ This is not a new phenomenon. As noted by Natel-Khanlari, new verbs were being created in New Persian (starting in the 7th century) by incorporating Arabic nouns and adjectives with the light verb as in *fekr kærdaen* (thought do) 'to think' or *monhæl kærdaen* (cancelled make/do) 'to cancel'. In the modern period, the lexical borrowing in these compound verbs comes from English rather than Arabic, which is now the main language of contact.

⁸ Note that this is not a characteristic of low (conversational) vs. high (literary) language, since a newscaster will not pronounce the word for ‘movement’ as *jonbesh* but will pronounce it as *jombesh*, even though the written form is with the letter /n/. Thus, this is an established property of modern Persian regardless of register or prestige.

⁹ See for example Montrul, for a similar take on Spanish heritage instruction.

¹⁰ The *ezafe* is used to link the noun to other elements in the noun phrase, such as the modifying adjectives or the possessive nouns: *ketab-e qermez-e pedær-am* (book-EZ red-EZ father-my) ‘my father’s red book’.

¹¹ Note that this observation goes against the claim made in Sedighi who states that heritage speakers do not distinguish these two forms in speech.

¹² There will inevitably be some degree of language borrowings or influences from the dominant language but the main communication will take place within the framework of the minority language.

¹³ For families of mixed couples, the Persian-speaking parent should do so while the other parent may choose to speak in his or her native language. The children will then be considered *simultaneous bilinguals* where they learn to speak two languages before the age of three.

¹⁴ Examples are the growth of Persian language courses in universities, the Persian Flagship Program, Persian courses offered at DLI and USDA, and the STARTALK program for Persian.

¹⁵ As of date, there are no such programs that we are aware of but summer Persian language programs have recently been launched in California. Examples are the courses for high school students in the UCLA summer session program and the STARTALK summer programs for elementary and middle school students in San Diego.

¹⁶ In certain instances, language shift may also occur in the opposite direction with the minority language influencing the dominant language.