

Can ethnic and minority languages survive in the context of global development?

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Abstract

It is clear that the minority languages will not be able to survive in the process of economic, political and scientific globalization: nor can they resist international languages such as English. Consequently, fewer people will use them in their daily communications and ultimately all we will have left are relics in museums. New communication technologies and new ways of transportation are the major enemies to the traditional cultures and languages that, willingly or unwillingly, are fading away. It is similar to the extinction of some species of animals and plants.

As the advocates of ecology do their best to keep nature intact, we linguists should also do our best to keep our ethnic languages preserved. We must not yield and let them vanish in the process of globalization. However, we have to accept the reality of globalization together with an international language necessary for it. In my opinion, we can communicate with our own national languages as well as with an international one. So, we have to adapt ourselves with the coming global civilization; otherwise we cannot survive. But this does not mean that we ignore the positive aspects of our traditional cultures and languages, which are considered as the ingredients of living. Without them, life is boring and dull.

This paper discusses Iranian ancient languages spoken in the past but faded away, intermingled with other languages or transformed to new Persian (Farsi). I will also debate the possible ways that can keep our native languages alive.

Introduction

It is estimated that there are about 6000 spoken languages in the world. Of these, about 50% can be reasonably classified as "moribund", 40% classified as "endangered", and 10 % classified as "safe." Roughly 90% of the world's languages will face "death or doom "during the 21st century (in Malone, 2002).

According to linguistic theories, most European languages and some of those spoken in Asian countries developed primarily from an ancient tongue called Indo-European, no longer spoken and for which no written records exist. But at present we are aware that a large number of languages are fading away. In the following section I talk about the New Iranian languages and dialects, derived from Old Iranian language, which are now fading away.

Origins of Iranian languages

In the 4th century BC the Iranian people were the largest and the most widespread group within the great Indo-European family. Iranian languages derived from Indo-European languages which have been spoken in some areas of the world, such as Iran, India, Pakistan, Iraq, Turkey, Republic of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Georgia, since long ago. Iranian languages, like many other sets of languages, can be divided into three periods on a chronological basis: Old Iranian, Middle Iranian and New Iranian. Old Iranian languages were closely related to Sanskrit. The most widespread of these were Old Persian and Avesta (SOAS. 1998-2002).

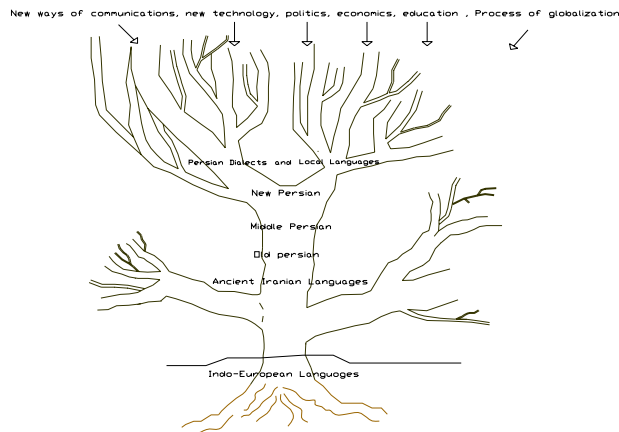


Figure 1-The tree of Iranian languages derived from Indo-European language

Old Iranian languages

Old Persian is the name applied to the Persian language used in the cuneiform inscriptions of the Achaemenian dynasty. It can be localized as the language of southwestern Persia, or Persis in the narrower sense, and was the vernacular speech of the Achaemenian rulers. Linguistically, OP belongs to the Iranian branch of Indo-Iranian or Aryan, which is one of the main divisions of Indo-European family of languages (Kent-1953).

Avesta language or the sacred writings of Mazdayasnian, known as Zoroastrians (the followers of Zoroaster, the ancient prophet of Persia) are also a branch of Old languages of Iran.

Middle Iranian languages

The Middle Iranian languages include the Iranian dialects as they appear from about 250 BC to about 900 AD. They are in general called Pahlavi, which is a derivative of the OP word Parthva or 'Parthian.' It was the official language of the Sasanian Dynasty, which ruled from 226 A.D until the Moslem conquest in 652 AD. It appears to have developed from Old Persian or from a very similar dialect (Kent-1953).

New Iranian languages

New Iranian languages include Iranian middle language, from about 900 AD onward. Its greatest monument is the national epic of Persia, the *Shah Namah* or Book of Kings, composed by Ferdowsi about the year 1000 A.D. This language branched into several other local languages spoken in different parts of Iran, the most famous of which was Parthian (Pahlavi), which transferred into new Persian (Farsi Dari) from 650 AD onwards. At present we have many dialects and local languages derived from new Persian. The most famous are as follows; Pashto (Afghanistan), Tajik (Tajikistan), Kurdish (Iran, Turkey and Iraq), Asi (Ghafghaz), Yaghnabi (Tajikistan), Monjani (Afghanistan), Ormouri (Afghanistan, Pakistan), Koumzari (South of Iran), Pamiri (Tajikistan-Afghanistan), Balouchi (South of Iran and Pakistan), Tati (Azerbaijan), Taleshi (north-west of Iran), Gilaki (north Iran), Tabari (north Iran), Lori & Bakhtiari (Near southwest part of Iran). However, at present, Farsi Dari is the most popular language in Iran (Bagheri-2000).

Let's have a glance at the word “cow” in some dialects of Iran; Old Persian (Gav), Farsi Dari (Gav), Baloochi (Gok), Bakhtiari (Go), Sangsari (Gou), Tati (Gou), Pashtou -Afghani (Yew), Tajiki (Gov), Yazdi (Gu), Moonjani; (yowa), Taleshi (Go), Yaghnabi (Yow), Asi, (Gou). (Abolghasemi-1994).

Invasions and interactions of languages

Interactions and invasions of languages have occurred in various ways in the lives of human beings through history. Runners carried spoken messages over long distances; people changed their native languages because of wars and invasions; traveling, trading, immigration and many other factors which caused languages change or vanish.

It is clear that language is very important in the building up of national identity, but all languages have interacted with each other in all periods of history. The interactions happen so gradually that speakers are not even aware of them until a century or more passed. Changes may occur in all aspects of a language: pronunciation, syntax, lexicon and culture. Of course, lexical and cultural changes are the most noticeable.

After all, styles of dress, architecture, art, and music change over time in all societies. Why should language be an exception? Language, clothing, housing, and media for aesthetic expression are necessities, but they are also social institutions and, therefore, subject to change. A basic tendency to change is not unique to language. One way of interaction is borrowing. When a language borrows a word, the new word is pronounced according to the sound system of the language to which it is being added. To trace the history of linguistic borrowing of words means to trace the history of people – where they settled, whom they conquered, who conquered them, their patterns of commerce, their religions and their intellectual history (Falk – 1978).

Interaction and invasion of Arabic into Farsi

The greatest interaction and invasion of alien language into Farsi was the Arabic language in 651 A.D., when new religion (Islam) was introduced to Iran. As a result of that, the old and middle Persian spoken for a thousand years, were greatly affected by Arabic language, particularly in vocabulary. However it was not able to break the backbone of Persian language.

Dari language, a branch of middle Persian, has been spoken for more than 1000 years and is still used as an official Persian Language. However, there have been some changes in its way of talking in different parts of Iran. But, in spite of so many invasions of other languages such as Arabic, Turkish, Mongols, and European languages, Farsi Dari has not yet lost its original skeleton. In the past, Arab tribes and caliphs tried hard to use Arabic as the national language of Iran. They had serious punishments for those who spoke in Persian in Iran. Hajaj-Ibn-Yousef, the Omavian Islamic Caliph (600-650 AD) was one of those Arab Caliphs who ordered that all Persian official correspondence should be changed to Arabic; nobody was allowed to speak and write in Persian (Perier-1934).

Interaction and invasion of European languages into Farsi

Since the 19th century, hundreds of French, Russian, Germany and English words were introduced into Persian. Some Iranian students were sent to Europe, particularly France, to follow their academic studies in the last century. When they came back to Iran to teach at universities and high schools, they played a great role in using the Latin vocabularies among the educated people. Since then, many Latin words have been incorporated into daily speech. French was a universal language for a considerable period of time and it was taught as a second language at Iranian high schools and universities until fifty years ago, when it was replaced by English.

The measures taken in Iran to keep Persian dialects and folklore alive

Over the last fifty years, there have been great efforts to keep the Persian and local languages, as well as Iranian folklore, alive. Many people have written dictionaries and many local poets have composed poetry in their own native tongues. Local newsletters and newspapers have been published in many local languages. Local radio and TV programs have been broadcasted in local languages of each region or province. There were also some academic centers for regional culture and folklore in provinces such as Khorassan, Kerman, Gilan, Mazandaran, Balouchestan and so on. Having published some books and essays in their short time of activity, these cultural institutes have had an important role in preserving and recording the local languages and folklore. Unfortunately they were not supported financially so most of them were to stop their academic activities for various reasons. Such as Khorasanology Department in Mashad (northeastern Iran), was closed some years ago. However, there are many publications related to local dialects and folklore written in Persian, for example, in Baloochi dialect, Lar dialect, Gha-eni dialect and so on.

Almost all Iranian universities offer courses up to the B.A, M.A., and Ph.D. levels in Persian language and literature for thousands of students all over the country. In addition, annual national and international seminars and conferences that focus on Persian language and literature as well as on Persian dialects are held in different cities of Iran. The last one was "The Fourth International Assembly of Professors and Researcher in Persian Language and Literature," which was held in Tehran, 20 October 2003. According to the *Iran Daily* newspaper, a Farsi website was launched, which includes two sections: the first is *Ferdowsi Magazine* that contains the latest cultural news and information and the second is a resource filled databank. There is also a program for teaching Persian language on the Internet. The websites are: www.persian-language.com and www.persian-language.org (*Iran Daily*-2003).

Essays about Persian dialects (some in English) were presented at "The First National Congress on Iranian Studies" held in Tehran on 17-20 June 2002 (Iranology Foundation, 2002). To name just few publications about Iranian dialects, in brief, we can say as follows:

- 1- Political studies on Gilanian verse, a local language of the north of Iran
- 2- *Gheni dialect, which is a Persian dialect from the southeastern part of Iran.*
- 3- *Mazandarani vocabularies.*
- 4- *Azari dialect, a local language of the north west of Iran (Azarbaijan).*
- 5- *The effect of local dialects on vocabulary area, referring to Shahnameh.*
- 6- *A short review on poems in Semnani dialect.*
- 7- *Dictionary of Bakhtiari dialect.*
- 8- *Kermanshah vocabularies, a dialect in the west of Iran.*
- 9- *Raji vocabularies, a dialect from Delijan, center of Iran (near Isfahan).*
- 10- *Balkhian dialect.*
- 11- *Hamadani dialect.*
- 12- *Kordish literature and poems, a dialect of Kordestan – west part of Iran*
- 13- *Baloochi and Uzbek poems.*
- 14- *Shirazian poem is a dialect of shiraz- south center of Iran.*
- 15- *A short study on Kermanian dialect. Gebri dialect is in south part of Iran.*
- 16- *Lari poems, composed in a dialect of Lorestan- south west of Iran.*
- 17- *Tati dialect, spoken in North West of Iran. (Torabi-1996, Reg. No. 76-3438)*
- 18- *Hezaragi dialect, some poems of north part of Afghanistan.*
- 19- *Phonetic differences between Malayeri dialect and standard Persian.*
- 20- *Kordish poems & literature.*
- 21- *Suffixes and prefixes in Mazandarani dialect.*
- 22- *A short study on Lori literature, which is a dialect of Lorestan.*
- 27- *Kashani dialect, spoken in the center of Iran.*

There is also a journal of Dialectology of Persian languages and Literature, which is rated as a scientific and research journal by the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology of Iran which includes very helpful articles for the Persian dialects and literature (Dialectology - 2003).

One of the academic cultural centers which tries to keep the Persian language free of alien words is the Academic Center of Persian language and literature or the department of Farhangestan-e- Zaban Va Adab Farsi. This organization has the duty to coin or adapt new words for the non-Persian ones. It consists of 25 Persian language experts and professors who are the final decision-makers. There are several specialized sub-departments such as Engineering, Medicine, Agriculture, Transportation, Military, Economic, and so on, that cooperate with the Center.

Farhangestan-e-Zaban VA Adab Farsi is responsible for coining the new Persian words against New Latin ones using by people or may be used in future. This organization follows the below procedures to coin or adapt appropriate words for the Latin ones. Its main policy is as follows (Farhangestan-e-Zaban - 2001):

1. In coining and choosing a new word, Persian phonetic rules and learned speakers' way of talking and Islamic points of views should be regarded as criterion.
2. Phonetic rules should be obeyed according the Persian way of talking.
3. New words that are found or created should follow the Persian grammatical rules for coining nouns, adjectives, verbs and so on.
4. New words should be chosen or coined out of the most common or frequent words that have been used since 250 AD.
5. New words can be chosen from among the most frequent and common Arabic words, as they are used in Persian.
6. New words can be chosen out of the middle and Old Persian languages
7. There should be only one equivalent in Persian for any of the Latin ones, particularly for technical words.
8. It is not so much necessary to adapt or create new Persian words for those Latin words which have been used internationally and globally.

In some cases, some Iranians do not use the Persian equivalents coined by Farhangestan-e-Zaban , they prefer to use the Latin ones. There are several reasons for this:

- 1- People have been using the Latin words for some years and now they are accustomed to the Latin ones while the new created Persian equivalents are not familiar to them.
- 2- A few Iranians use Latin words to pretend that they are more educated or to show that they are of a higher social group!
- 3- Most university students and graduates need to know scientific vocabulary for which there are no appropriate Persian equivalents. Willingly or unwillingly, the result of reading the Latin books is that the terms used in these books gradually will be a part of the readers' daily talks.

- 4- Those who know English are more successful in some areas such as education, business, science, medicine, and so on.
- 5- Some Iranian like to see and listen to foreign news broadcasts in English. Some of them watch the programs broadcasted by international TV through satellite or internet; some prefer to watch foreign movies in original language rather than the Persian translation.
- 6- Most educated Iranian families send their children to private English institutes to learn English from childhood. Nowadays, many families are equipped with computers at their homes which make them to communicate with other parts of the world in English. They arrange their children to learn English as soon as possible. Many Iranians have immigrated to Europe, Canada or America, so it is a great stimulus for some of their relatives to learn English to join them in future. There are also other social, industrial and educational reasons. What happens? It is clear that little by little, people lose their own local languages and cultures. To some young people, to talk in their native languages is not helpful for them to be successful in Tehran, the Capital of Iran. Some of them are ashamed of talking in their native accent even if they can be understood by others. This is an important reason that new generation is losing its strong desire to keep their local languages and cultures alive, they pretend to be born in Tehran or other big cities of Iran.

However, there are so many other factors such as the luxurious way of living, social amusing facilities in western societies such as various clubs shown on TV or other media is an important factor which attract the young and cause them gradually lose their local languages and culture.

- 8- Finally, the fanatical thoughts and prejudiced beliefs of some parents together with their illogical behaviors to their children are the other reasons that have made the young escape their own local culture, beliefs and languages.

Is English language an enemy to ethnic languages and cultures?

English is the most widely used language in the history of the planet. More than half of the world's books and three quarters of international mail are in English. Among all languages, English has the largest vocabulary- perhaps as many as two million words. The use of the English language, as the essential means of access to the Internet and also the language of other multi-media is the most important factor leading to the loss of minority languages all over the world.

English language is the key to global communication, success and development. English was an important tool for Great Britain's development which has been using by them to gain cultural, political and economical benefits since a long time ago and also it will serve as a vital mean for future global culture. Those who do not know English have fewer chances to take advantages in their jobs and studies. To believe that English is or is not an enemy does not solve any problems! We should think professionally rather than emotionally on this field.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that a common language used throughout the world would do much to bring countries closer to each other. More than 900 million people in about three countries speak Chinese; 500 million people in about 50 countries speak English and about 100 million people in about 25 countries speak French (Mallerbe.1930). Everything is changing and everyday more conferences, correspondences and business communications are held by English language, however, the people of the world need to have a language they can all use in their communications. Fortunately or unfortunately, English is going to be that language.

Is a unique and universal language a natural process in human life?

According to some religious beliefs, at the end times there will be only one unique language all over the world: "Resurrection will be preceded by the end of the world, by "annihilation". On that day "the sound shall ring out and second shall follow it" (Halabi-1990). Considering that, "The second sound is the sound for Resurrection", the sound that will be understood by all people all over the world. In traditional religious beliefs, we can conclude that people always desire to have a single language at the end of the world. The desire of Resurrection is found in all religions through history. There are other tales and sayings all over the world which show the same idea, such as the tale of Babel in Old Testament.

Are the changes in Languages necessary?

Change in any languages is the main characteristic of it. Languages have changed throughout history: new words introduced; old ones dropped out of use, meanings shifted, and pronunciation has been altered. Some people believe that no matter how a language changes, it always remains essentially the same—a productive system of communication, completely adequate for the needs of its speakers. So why are we afraid of introducing new words into our native languages? When our native languages are weak in scientific lexicons and when new technologies are introduced into our societies, why are their terms not added to our lexicons? If enough people use a new word, willingly or unwillingly, it will be a part of the language whether it originated through borrowing, coining compounding, inflection, derivation, extension, narrowing, shortening or etc. Some believe that language change is a necessity. However, the question is Why, How and Where should it change? What do we get and what do we lose? Do the changes happen in a regular and clear way? Do all people use the changes in their daily talks? Do the changes affect their local culture? And so on.

It is obvious that language is a part of any nation's culture and identity. We can be informed of our ancestors' experiences and knowledge through our native languages. When we lose our native language and culture, we lose our identity and feel lost. On other hand, local and ethnic languages are changing very quickly and are greatly affected by alien words. So little by little, these languages lose their originality and turn to some dialects with strange accents and spellings, which are nor helpful for themselves or for other parts of a country. They are a bit like nonsense and seem absurd, without any clear background.

To be Pessimist or Optimist to the survival of languages!

Nowadays, I sometimes hear strange pronunciations of technological English words spoken by my students who come from distant towns. The words do not have any similarities to English or to Persian or any other languages. What happens? Every one or every community tries to pronounce and spell words in their own unique way; there is no regular way of spelling them in all parts of the country. It is clear that these words will corrupt the local languages. But this is not the whole story. When people incorporate meaningless vocabulary into their everyday speech, they begin to lose their local language, their culture, their beliefs and their identity. They speak in a newly strange language, which does not help them to improve their education, industry, agriculture and even the ethical issues or any other areas in their communities. Nowadays, many people from villages and towns have changed their ways of dressings, cooking, using agricultural tools, social behaviors to some ways which are not helpful to them in their lives. For example, Iranians used Qanat, Subterranean or underground man made river as long as several thousand kilometers' used to irrigate the dried lands in deserts for more than one thousand years and then suddenly in last decade they were dried out because of nearby unstable mechanical deep wells. However, the wells were very soon dried out too. What have left behind is; uninhabited villages, jobless, poorness and There were more than hundred words related to Qanat that are not used today.

Sometimes some sayings and proverbs used in a society carry a lot of information and experiences which can develop it ethically, educationally and economically. We have rich sayings in Persian that have come from the years of experiences in the past, but a few people know and use them. To name just a few; “Enemies with high knowledge will lift you up but ignorant friends will knock you down” “To have more knowledge is to be more powerful”, “Knowledge is much better than gold” “Knowledge is a wealth that nobody can steal it” “The pen of knowledge is sharper than the blade of a sword” and etc. When I narrate them in my classes, the students are often surprised to hear them!

The Solution!

In general I am not too optimistic to the survival of all ethnic and local languages for the next decades. The death of some of these languages is a reality. We have to consider this phenomenon logically than emotionally. The explosion of multi-media is an important factor that is fading away the minority and ethnic languages. May be, it is out of our hands to keep them alive in our society. We can only keep them alive in museums for the next generations! However, as linguists, like physicians who try to keep a person with a dreadful illness such as cancer alive, we should do our best to preserve and record our languages for future generations. But, we cannot perform miracles to survive them forever.

To me, the only way we can keep some languages alive is to strengthen the national language from which ethnic and local languages have derived. It is like the root and the stem of a tree with many branches. While the branches are drying because of some plant diseases, it is better to cut them to prevent the root and the stem to die for ever. We must follow a clear strategy in our education, that is, all Persian dialects gradually transfer into one National language. It is clear that local folklore and literature will be preserved if a stronger language supports them. Otherwise, we are faced with terrible confusion of various new coined dialects full of strange vocabularies with amorphous accents and structures which have no similarities to their original ones. They are unstable because they do not have any pure origin.

Conclusion

Generally speaking, we need to know English well; it is a necessity that cannot be ignored in any society. We also need to communicate in a national language, which can cover our national cultures, literatures, customs, etc. So each society must focus on its national language which can be understood and used by most of its people. As an instance, In Iran, the National Linguistic strategy should be based on the followings:

1-National Persian should be spoken in daily conversation in public and is to be strengthened through national media such as T.V., Radio, Newspapers and the educational textbooks. It is clear that the minority Persian dialects will be gradually vanished or intermingled with the national language. It is O.K., there is no other alternative. The linguists and educators should do their best to coin new words based on National Persian specifications and spread them through educational centers and through other parts of media all over the country. Local radio and TV programs, newsletters and magazines should try to use the national coined Persian words rather than the local ones

2-English as a second language should be used as the scientific language at our universities. English textbooks should be used instead of Persian ones, particularly in science courses. The professors should try to teach in English and the students should pass the exams in English as well. This certainly will affect the national language but I think if changes done gradually, people will not be overwhelmed by such changes. In this way we may be able to protect our local Folklore, literature and cultures against the process of globalization.

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