

# Persian Diglossia and its Impact in the Classroom

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## 1. Introduction

In the three countries where Persian is an official language – Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan – a diglossic situation has developed where the language spoken by the people differs considerably from the traditional written variant. In his seminal article, Charles Ferguson used the term *diglossia* to describe such situations in speech communities where two or more varieties of a language are used by speakers under different conditions (Ferguson 1959: 435):

DIGLOSSIA is a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any section of the community for ordinary conversation.

Since then, diglossic situations have been noted in many languages where two distinct variants of a language coexist in society. In societies where diglossia exists, the written form, which is associated with the literary tradition, is considered of higher prestige (Ferguson's H-language) whereas the spoken form of the language is treated as a "lower" variant (L-language). 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. The literary variant of Persian, however, is rarely used in conversations and its use in formal situations is often mixed with elements of the conversational language. In addition, the literary variant contains vocabulary and linguistic structures that are no longer found in the modern conversational variant of Persian. Yet textbooks for teaching Persian as a second language focus primarily on the literary variant, despite its obsolete formulations, rarely offering an instruction that could provide the language students with true communicative skills and abilities.

This paper investigates the diglossic situation of Persian in Iran and argues for an instructional curriculum focusing first and foremost on the conversational language, with future enhancements of higher language skills with the literary variant of the language. The approach advocated in this paper represents a teaching methodology that will produce better communicative skills for the language student and which would allow a better understanding of the linguistic patterns of Persian.

## 2. Diglossia in Persian

Definition of diglossia: Diglossia in Iran has been investigated mainly in terms of "societal bilingualism" (Hudson 2002) where two distinct languages, which may be related to each other or be unrelated, are used side by side throughout a speech community (see Nercissians for studies on the use of Armenian and Azeri alongside Persian, and Amouzadeh for an investigation of the patterns of use of Mazandarani bilingual speakers). However, the diglossia cases discussed in this

paper refer to the original formulation in Ferguson 1959 which discusses the use of two variants of the same language in very distinct contexts in societal functions.

Usage depends on context and function: H form is used in religious sermons, political speeches, university lectures, news broadcasts, newspaper writing/editorial/report. But conversations with family, friends and colleagues, instructions to servants, waiters, employees are in L language. Also in L are soap operas on TV and radio, caption on political cartoon, folk literature. Even if someone has high knowledge of H-language, he/she will not use it in all contexts. But speaking to your maid in H or bargaining in the bazaar in H would be considered awkward or bizarre. “even Classical Arabic literature and grammar professors \_ go home and speak their colloquial dialects with their children, families, and friends” (Kaye 1994: 60).

For example, if a student of Persian goes to Iran and asks for directions in H language:  
*bebakhshid, shoma mitavanid be man beguyid ke khyabane ValiAsr koja ast?*

Give examples of Persian:

*Miguyand ke dar japon zelzele khahad shod*

*Migan ke japon zelzele mishe.*

It affects morphology, phonology, lexicon, and syntax. Give examples of each from blog paper. The bulk of the lexicon is shared but... with variations in form and the use and meaning. (Ameliorate vs. improve, purchase vs. buy)

Technical terms are mainly used in H. However, new technical terms seem to be coming out in L more with blogs.

Examples from English:

*To whom do you wish to speak?* vs. *Who do you want to talk to?*

*Talkin'* vs. *talking*

But Persian H-L dichotomy is much more poignant, pervasive, stronger. In English mainly formal vs. informal stylistic variation, although possibly less so than in Arabic.

Continuum in the sense that oftentimes conversations contain mixed elements. For instance, even at H-language functions such as university lectures or political discussions on TV, the professor or interlocutors would most probably tend to use the conversational morphology on verbs, *ra*, etc. The main distinction then remains in the choice of lexical items, such as the use of Arabic plurals or simple verbs such as *kushidan* instead of *say kardan*. Even syntactic elements such as free word order and post-verbal elements would be used.

*Ma inha-ro etela dadim be dowlat.*

### ***Characteristics of diglossia***

Native language: Interestingly, there are no native speakers of the literary variant of Persian since it represents an older form of the language: children first learn to speak the conversational variant of Persian and are only taught the literary form once they enter school or the educational system. Hence linguistically, the true Persian language with living native speakers is the conversational variant which represents the modern or contemporary form of the language. In fact, the literary variant contains vocabulary and linguistic structures that are no longer found in the modern variant of Persian. However, using modern conversational Persian in writing, education or in news reporting and analysis is strongly frowned upon.

This is why heritage speakers of Persian are also unable to converse or even understand H-language since they were never educated in it. HL speakers have difficulty, for instance, following news reports in Persian.

- The grammatical structure of L is learned without explicit discussion of grammatical concepts; the grammar of H is learned in terms of rules and norms

Literary heritage: sizable body of written lit. in H which is held in high esteem by the speech community.

Result of Linguistic change: H represents in large part an earlier stage of L in some cases. As in the case of Persian, the literary or written variant often represents an older version of the language, while the spoken form is the modern conversational variant that has undergone certain linguistic modifications throughout the years until reaching its present state. Most often, the conversational form is still undergoing change while the more conservative written variant remains generally intact, resulting in a situation where the conversational and literary variants become quite dissimilar.

[from Hudson]

The second scenario alluded to above, the extinction of the population of speakers upon whose vernacular the contemporary written standard is historically based, in its most familiar guise, is the process whereby change in written language proceeds at a significantly slower pace than change in spoken language. The process in its most general form has been described as follows: “The two varieties of language involved become increasingly dissimilar, the variety of the original body of texts remaining largely unchanged (although likely codified) while the spoken variety, which does not undergo processes of linguistic standardization, continues to change in ‘natural’ ways” (Walters 1996: 161). Finally, whereas in the cases just discussed the vernacular might be said to have been changed over time via replacement by its own linguistic descendant

H vs. L has previously been called formal/informal → define how we use the term and that it is not the same as politeness. Also the terms *goftari* and *ketabi*. It's also not a distinction between slang (although slang and popular expressions may be present in L but not in H but there's more encompassed in L).

Prestige: There is often a strong feeling that H is the superior language. Not knowing H is considered being illiterate. Also, “there is usually a belief that H is somehow more beautiful, more logical, better able to express important thoughts” (Ferguson). Many speakers of the language would prefer to hear a political speech or an expository lecture or a recitation of poetry in H even though it may be less intelligible to them than it would be in L. Also, there's a tendency to argue that L has no grammar.

In the previous section, I argued that Persian in Iran is diglossic and while the literary variant is traditionally used in education and writing, it represents an older version of the language. Modern Iranian Persian is actually the conversational variant used by the people and acquired at home by Iranian children, In this section, I ...

The difference between the literary and conversational variants of Persian has sometimes been described as a difference in formality. The literary language is considered to be more formal or polite, while the conversational form is sometimes called *slang* or *vulgar*. The evidence, however,

clearly shows that this distinction cannot be maintained and that each variant of Persian represents the full array of register and politeness formulations.

*Formality* definition:

The forms of address (deferential vs. familiar *you*) is distinct and orthogonal to diglossia.

Modern Persian or 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 food or clothes, and when ordering food in a restaurant. Conversational Persian is also used in official, professional, or business situations (meetings, bank transactions, renewing a passport, at University lectures and even when talking to one's manager [as shown in examples]). In fact, using the literary variant in these situations would be considered unnatural and very marked (explain). [This is not to say that a speaker cannot use forms of the literary variant but ...]

This clearly demonstrates that the usage of literary vs. conversational variant is not dependent on the politeness level. As the following examples show, one can be extremely polite yet use the conversational variant when speaking [examples] .... And literary, scientific and political talks, debates or lectures can be delivered in the conversational variant [Examples]<sup>1</sup>. The literary variant, on the other hand, is found/used in .... ? News, speeches?

The main restriction on conversational Persian is 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, metro or bus tickets, or ? are written in the literary language (in fact at a much higher register than one might find e.g., in English) [examples]. 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 hence the spoken form of the language. Modern authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as Sadegh Chubak began writing in conversational Persian. More recently, with the advent of blogs and their use for expressing personal thoughts and feelings have created a vast amount of online documents written in the conversational variant of Persian. This is in clear contrast to traditional online resources, such as news sites and official websites, that made use only of the literary Persian variant.

- This has not been without controversy: strong movement against allowing the conversational form (the true modern Persian) to be written down as text. Discuss the Vulgarity Debate online.<sup>2</sup>

To conclude, it's not a difference between formal and informal, high vs. low register, *goftari* (spoken) vs. *neveshtari* (written) or correct vs. colloquial/slang. But we basically have two distinct variants of Persian language, with the literary form representing an older version which people insist on teaching with. And the impact for teaching is crucial. We're currently in the strange position, where unlike English or Spanish, we have to teach a modern Persian and an older Persian that is not spoken anymore (except in artificial situations such as the news) yet is important for any high level knowledge of the language.

### 3. Impact for teaching

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<sup>1</sup> Broken plurals (e.g. foqaraa) and terms like *shenavandegan* could be considered high register of conversational variant but not the verb morphology endings such as in *didid, didand*. Is that true?

<sup>2</sup> Can mention that this is nothing new historically and this has happened before in the past: e.g., Armenian, Latin, etc.

Review references from the teaching / communicative field and summarize their arguments for providing a curriculum that gives the students authentic situations and communicative skills rather than literary knowledge. Has to do with the fundamental question of what are the goals of L2 teaching!

Problems with teaching literary as the main language variant:

(a) Lack of communicative skills, forms that are almost never used or are infrequent:

- future: *xaaham*
- no definite marker in literary
- *karde-am* forms
- *ast*

Students are never taught their equivalent in Modern Persian, the spoken language. For instance, how many textbooks actually teach the definite article of Persian??!

(b) Ridicule or not fitting because don't know when to use which form.

(c) So first and foremost, students should be taught to speak and understand Conversational Persian or Modern Persian (henceforth MP), so that they can communicate in all situations in society or community.

(d) "but conversational Persian cannot be written!!"

That's a myth and it's an artificial decision. Authentic text is plentiful on web, blogs, modern literature and plays. So, we don't need textbooks as in Stilo's approach where the MP is written in Latin script and the LP (literary Persian) is written in the Persian script. Also, see Khorrami's use of the MP in his textbook.

Finally, there is a dearth of resources for L language since grammars, dictionaries, treatises on pronunciation, style and so on are produced in the H variant. Established norms are taught and there is a standard orthography (well, kind of – discuss variation even in H). Descriptive and normative studies of the L form are either non-existent or relatively recent and slight in quantity.

As the findings of the present study indicate, the choice of linguistic forms is determined by the formality of the context and the relationship between interlocutors in a speech event. Therefore, such features should be taken into consideration in the preparation and presentation of teaching materials in foreign-language situations. Simply presenting the learner with linguistic input would not guarantee that he would be able to express himself appropriately in different situations; he should be taught when to say what to whom and how. In other words, he should be made aware of the varying nature of language according to the formality of the context, the relationship between the interlocutors, and other sociolinguistic parameters involved in a speech event.

The role of social context, intimacy, and distance in the choice of forms of address<sub>1</sub>

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#### ▪ Teaching the literary variant

When should we start teaching the LP? Should it be done in parallel or only at more advanced levels (i.e., 3<sup>rd</sup> semester)? This is still an open question that needs to be studied more carefully and experimentally. However, I suggest minimal parallels of forms can be taught from the beginning with understanding that language change has occurred. For instance, *ast* can be taught

as the equivalent literary form for *-e* in *xube*. Same for the verbal endings and the fact that there is no definite in LP.

What is important to note is that the L language grammar can often be shown as a result of linguistic change and grammatical patterns can be derived from the H base form. E.g., assimilations. But also see Henderson's stuff on Kabul dialect.

However, since LP in speech is used mainly in news and high-level (e.g., political) speeches and other high-level/professional letters, it obviously needs to be taught only to the more advanced students along with when such topics are generally taught in a communicative curriculum. Hence, full instruction of LP should occur at the advanced levels with the higher level vocabulary. Nevertheless, as already mentioned, the tools should be provided and parallel forms should be taught from the beginning in order to provide the (beginning) students with a passive competence of the LP and the awareness of its existence and the distinctions. [examples]

#### 4. Curriculum development

This allows for a simpler curriculum development for classes that mix L2 and Heritage Learners. Since L2 speakers begin with the MP (as do the HLs) and only learn the higher-level vocabulary, writing and literary variant as they are more advanced, it would be easier to merge the HLs with the L2 learners [is that true? Still would need to be tested]. Also note that this approach would follow the natural development of the native speakers as well since they begin with the MP spoken at home and only learn the literary form at school. Heritage speakers also have issued with writing, spelling, register variation, and higher level vocabulary – all things that the L2 speakers would also learn at the higher level.

[Note: would MP teaching help solve some of the spelling issues actually in contrast to what has been claimed? Current claims are that teaching MP first would make the students “illiterate” and they won't be able to spell – but we learned! – however I think that a solid teaching with understanding of phonological changes might be beneficial. Again, to be tested. But see next section for ideas on this]

Finally, students who wish to study literature will continue to more advanced levels which is beyond what our L2 classes cover anyway and then specialize...

#### 4.1 Language change in the classroom

This would then be a new way of analyzing and teaching language as language change. Examples:

- Phonological changes can be taught to make the students understand the sound changes, as in *zambur* and *vaxti*. Contrast always with English is a good idea (e.g., knight). For these cases, both MP and LP should be taught in parallel but with a discussion of the sound change vs. more conservative orthography.
- Present perfect: *kardeam* vs. *kardám* are both the same form but in MP the morphology has been simplified yet the distinction with the basic past has been maintained by different use of stress.
- Loss of simple verbs as a historical phenomenon can make students understand why there are so many simple verbs that are no longer used in the MP. Also, the new lexicon with the new e.g., technology-related terms.
- Syntactic changes: such as the position of *ra* in relative clauses (near the relative head or at the end of the relative clause). Also things like *ketab-e kohne-i* (MP, LP) vs. *ketab-i kohne* (LP only). Prepositions taking object clitics in MP but not in LP. Etc.

All of these could be given bigger context sometimes if relevant historical changes can also be included in the class discussion. Clear evidence of language change happening in our time. To keep teaching the LP version is like insisting on “give an ear” type constructions in English!

## 5. Conclusion

Summarize the conclusions...

- Language change: MP vs. LP (more conservative in writing always)
- First teach MP: authentic speech of community and it can also be written down so we can create specific instructional material in written for the appropriate levels.
- More advanced levels, teach LP: so they can understand news, high-level vocabulary, professional letters, higher level writing and reading skills
- Results in good communicative skills and literary knowledge → dual proficiency with understanding of linguistic processes

The main focus of this paper is to delineate the distinctions in the literary and conversational variants of Iranian Persian and to argue for a new methodology of language teaching based on (solid) linguistic understanding and analysis.

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## Bilingualism and diglossia: patterns of language use by ethnic minorities in Tehran

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