

From Vernacular to Official Language: A Case Study of Language Shift in Iran

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Abstract

The multilingual context of the present Iran has recently witnessed a significant tendency among families in indigenous communities to undermine the mother tongue and speak the official language of Persian to young children. Accordingly, the present study aimed at examining the reasons for language shift from native to official among Dehlorani families in Ilam, Iran. A questionnaire consisting of 46 items to identify the main reasons for language shift was distributed among 206 participants to reflect their views on the basis of a five-point Likert scale. The results indicated that the majority of people attributed language shift to reasons such as the belief in better understanding of educational materials in school as well as achieving fluency in Persian, the role of Persian as the lingua franca for all Iranian ethnics, and the use of Persian in expanded domains. Moreover, the findings maintained that the language shift is not confined to a particular social class but is pervasive among all members of the society.

Keywords: language shift, Persian language, native language, indigenous and official languages

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Theoretical Background

Language shift is "the change from the habitual use of one language to that of another" (Weinreich, 1953, p. 63). Fishman (1991) considered it as characteristics of "speech communities whose native languages are threatened because their inter-generational continuity is proceeding negatively, with fewer and fewer users (speakers, readers, writers

and even understanders) or uses every generation" (p. 1). According to Fasold (1984), language shift occurs when a community gives up a language completely in favor of another. In the same vein, Hoffman (1991) stated that "when a community does not maintain its language, but gradually adopts another one, we talk about language shift" (p. 186). Typically, the speech community is a minority group language and the language people adopt is a dominant language majority. Paulston (1994) holds that "ethnic groups within a modern nation-state, given opportunity and incentive, typically shift to the language of the dominant group" (p. 9).

Cavallaro (2005) has identified several factors that accelerate language shift. These factors include societal bilingualism, migration, industrialization, the school's and government's use of the language, urbanization, and the prestige level of the languages in contact. Hyltenstam and Stroud's (1996: 572, cited in Myers-Scotton, 2002, p. 39) framework has distinguished between factors at three different levels: societal, group, and individual. At the societal level, main factors include political-legal conditions, the ideology of the majority society, implementation, economic conditions, sociocultural norms, and education. At the group level, major variables include demography, language characteristics, heterogeneity/homogeneity, niches of subsistence/religion, type of ethnicity, internal organization, institutions, media, and culture. And at the individual level, key factors include language choice and socialization.

In multilingual communities, families always hesitate between adopting the vernacular and the official language for their children in their childhood. These patterns of language choice are not selected collectively, but on an individual basis. Language shift, therefore, is the cumulative effect of a group of individuals increasingly making use of one language over another (Fasold, 1984). If parents agree on the official language then the mother tongue no longer is transmitted to the new generations, leading to more and more monolingual individuals. That is to say, when language transmission from parents to children does not occur, there is the possibility that the native language would vanish within two generations.

The presence of official languages, among other things, maintains national unity and identity among citizens of differing vernacular languages in a country. However, it can also lead to the extinction of vernacular languages spoken by minorities in long term. That is to say, this phenomenon can act like a two-edged sword.

Language shift is not restricted to a particular part of the world. As a global phenomenon, it is rapidly growing in Iran. Anecdotal evidence indicates that the number of

monolinguals in Iran has remarkably increased in recent decades. This implies that more people are abandoning their native languages and shift to Persian.

Though language shift has drawn the attention of many researchers, few, if any, studies have focused on the reasons behind language shift. Therefore, the present study seeks to shed some light on the reasons affecting language shift from vernacular languages to Persian among families in the city of Dehloran in Western Iran.

B. Statement of Problem

A significant tendency can be observed toward the official language among a large group of families of indigenous communities in Iran such that many parents have refrained from transmitting their indigenous language to their children. Instead, they have chosen to teach them speak Persian, the official language of the country. When children do not learn a language from their parents, that language is no longer passed to the next generation and the possibility of maintenance of that language would diminish with time. Nowadays, the number of monolingual children who exclusively speak the official language and accordingly have abandoned their indigenous languages is believed to have grown remarkably. Therefore, this study attempts to examine the reasons why parents prefer their children to exclusively speak Persian. More specifically, the study aims at responding the following questions:

1. Why do parents prefer their children to speak Persian rather than the indigenous language in the early years of childhood?
2. Is language shift more dominant among a particular group of families?

C. Context of the Study

Iran is a multilingual country in Middle East. According to Ethnologue, there are 66 languages, dialects and varieties spoken in Iran. The major languages are Persian, Azerbaijani Turkish, and Kurdish. Persian is the official language of Iran which is spoken by less than 50 percent of the population. Kurdish consists of various dialects and varieties spoken mainly in Western Iran in the provinces of West Azarbijan, Kurdistan, Kermanshah, and Ilam.

Situated at the south of Ilam province, Dehloran, according to 2011 census, has a population over 30 thousands. This city is a multi-ethnic community. The majority of the population speak Southern Kurdish. This dialect is spoken only in two cities of Ilam

province, namely Dehloran and Abdanan. The overall population of these two cities is estimated to be less than 60,000. In addition to Kurdish, Lorish, Arabic, and Persian are spoken by the minorities in these cities.

Kurdish- and Lorish-speaking residents of Dehloran understand each other well. With some exceptions, each group of people speak their own language at home and do their affairs in society using their own mother tongue. Stated differently, Kurdish and Lorish speakers often do not shift when interacting with one another, yet they shift to Persian when they meet Persian or Arabic speakers.

Southern Kurdish along with Lorish is not used in written form. That is to say, they are merely spoken languages and little to no material is published in these minority languages. Instead, a huge volume of materials are published in the official language of Persian on a daily basis. Further, textbooks used by students are all written in Persian as the official language in educational contexts is Persian.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A plethora of studies have examined the place and use of Persian and vernacular languages in some regions in Iran. Some of these studies are Zolfaghari (1997), Hooshmand (2007), Esmaili *et al.* (2008), and Nasiri-Alamooti (2009).

To begin with, Zolfaghari (1997) used questionnaires to investigate the extent to which people use Persian and Bakhtiari dialect in different domains as in bazaar, local ceremonies, family sessions, etc. in Masjid Soleiman. She also took into account factors such as age, gender, jobs, education level, etc. in using a language. According to the findings, the younger-age groups used Persian more than the elder-age groups, and females used Persian more than males. The findings further indicated that Bakhtiari dialect is used more in informal situations like local ceremonies and family sessions. The study implicated that teaching children to speak Persian is growing and, consequently, the use of Bakhtiari dialect is declining.

Likewise, Hooshmand (2007), in his MA thesis entitled "examining the place and use of Persian and Lorish in Mamasani", given the context and factors such as age, gender, educational level, and the spouses' mother tongue, noticed that females use Persian more than males in formal situations, and persons with non-Lorish speaking wives use Persian more than others. The findings of the study also indicated that Persian is used more than Lorish in

formal situations, while the reverse holds true in informal situations. Moreover, the study specified that younger-age groups use Persian more than elder-age groups.

In another study, Esmaili *et al.* (2008) used questionnaires and interviews to investigate the acquisition and use of Mazandarani among three age groups in Amol. The findings indicated that in some informal situations like family domain, Mazandarani is the dominant language but in formal domains as in school and office domains Persian is more common. The findings further indicated that younger-age groups use Persian more than older-age groups. Moreover, as the study made it clear, attitudes towards Mazandarani are not so positive, especially among younger generations. It was concluded that a gradual erosion of Mazandarani is occurring in the region.

Similarly Nasiri-Alamooti (2009) in her MA thesis entitled "Examining the place and use of Persian and Gilaki in Tonekaban", noticed that the spouses' vernacular language impacts the extent to which Persian and Gilaki are used. It was found that women use Persian more than men and persons with Gilaki-speaking wives use Gilaki more. Moreover, the use of Persian among literate people was seen to be more than illiterate people. Further, the study indicated that the use of Persian among younger-age groups is more than elder-age groups. The study further indicated that the use of Persian was remarkable in more formal social domains.

Having explored the theoretical background and literature on language shift, we now turn to describe the methodology used for this study. The following section includes the participants, the instrument, and the procedure to gather and analyze the data.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

206 respondents from the city of Dehloran in the Ilam province participated in this study. Of this sample, 112 were female, 93 male, and one person of unspecified gender. Only respondents with the age of 18 and above could participate in the study. They were selected randomly from different districts of the city. All the participants were residents of the city of Dehloran with Southern Kurdish, Lorish, and Arabic as their indigenous languages. Participants were of various occupations and of differing level of literacy, ranging from under diploma to higher education. The frequency, age range, and level of literacy of all the participants are given in Table 1.

Table 1: The frequency, age range, and level of literacy of participants in percentages.*

Age range	Under diploma		Diploma		Undergraduate		Graduate		Higher education	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
18- 20	-	-	1.48	5.44	-	.49	-	-	-	-
21-30	-	1.48	4.95	5.44	4.45	5.44	6.93	17.83	.99	1.48
31-40	-	-	2.97	2.47	2.47	.49	6.43	7.92	1.98	.99
41-50	-	.49	2.97	2.47	2.47	.49	4.95	1.98	1.48	-
Over 50	0.49	-	-	-	-	-	.99	-	-	-

* Three respondents did not specify their age.

B. Instrument

A questionnaire was employed to collect data from the participants. It consisted of 46 items formatted in a five-point Likert scale, ranging from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*. The questionnaire was centered on two series of questions. The first series of questions dealt with reasons for contributing to language shift. The second series of questions had to do with families who tend to shift from vernacular to the official language.

C. Procedure

The study began with an initial questionnaire involving two major open-ended questions. It was distributed among a sample of people from the city of Dehloran as pilot and data was then collected. Next, based on the responses given, along with other data from the authors, the final questionnaire consisting of 46 items was formulated. This final version of the questionnaire using five-point Likert scale was distributed among the sample with the age range of 18 and above in the city of Dehloran in August 2012. Participants were asked to express their agreement towards the items on a Likert scale. Some experts on social sciences were asked to do the valuing of the items. The questionnaire began by providing the participants with instruction on how to respond to the items. The whole process of distributing and collecting questionnaires lasted for two weeks. After collecting the questionnaires, data processing began and the required statistical operations were computed.

IV. RESULTS

The first series of the research questions dealt with the main reasons for language shift. Respondents were asked to express their agreement with 31 items posed as possible reasons why parents prefer to speak Persian rather than the indigenous language to their children in the early childhood. The responses are shown in Table 2 below. This table contains 31 items arranged in a descending order. However, for the ease of discussion, the *agree* and *strongly agree* choices were grouped into one slot. The same process was adopted for the *disagree* and *strongly disagree* choices.

Table 2: Reasons for language shift.

No.	Reasons	Agree	No opinion	Disagree
1	Children will speak comfortably and understand the material better when entering schools.	90.73	2.43	6.82
2	Persian is the lingua franca of all Iranian ethnics.	89.8	5.33	4.85
3	Persian as the official language of country is used in most contexts.	89.7	2.94	7.35
4	Children will gain the necessary preparation to enter school through attending preschool classes.	87.86	4.85	7.28
5	Persian as the official language is used in most programs being broadcasted on mass media.	86.89	3.88	9.22
6	Speaking Persian is of great help for children to learn courses and communicate.	85.78	4.9	9.31
7	The atmosphere around and the context in which the families live make them to do so.	84.15	8.91	6.93
8	Early childhood is the best time to acquire a new language.	84.07	5.97	9.95
9	Children will gain the courage to communicate with Persian-speaking people and keep up with them.	80.97	9.26	9.75
10	Parents and family members feel that Persian is superior to the mother tongue in totality.	80.69	6.43	12.87
11	Persian is a lovely language.	72.63	14.91	12.43
12	Children will be highly competent in Persian and won't be ridiculed for their nonnative accent.	71.92	8.37	19.7

13	It is the result of rivalry and imitation among families in society	70.38	9.22	20.38
14	Children can acquire mother language later if they wish.	65.85	7.8	26.34
15	Speaking Persian is considered as a matter of prestige and civilization.	63.9	4.39	32.19
16	Cultural awareness and attention to ethnics has not been institutionalized among the educated and the community system as well.	57.28	22.61	20.1
17	The vernacular language does not have a written form and exists only in a spoken form.	54.72	12.93	32.33
18	Marriage between people speaking non-Persian languages leads to choosing Persian for children.	51.5	23	25.5
19	The deprivation of the area and the desire to attain the possible opportunities in Persian-speaking areas drive them to shift to Persian.	47.02	17.32	35.64
20	Marriage with a Persian speaker leads to choosing Persian for children.	46.6	26.21	27.18
21	Parents use this as a pretext to speak Persian themselves.	45.63	13.1	41.26
22	Parents take this as an opportunity to achieve what they failed to obtain in the past.	45.36	11.21	43.41
23	Parents draw more attention from others.	45.36	10.24	44.39
24	Parents lack self-confidence and feel inferior to Persian speakers.	43.41	9.75	46.82
25	There is the possibility of migrating to a Persian-speaking city in future.	39.5	20.5	40
26	The mother tongue does not have practical uses.	37.25	4.9	57.84
27	The indigenous-speaking population is extremely small.	34.67	10.5	55.27
28	Parents have cultural deprivation.	33.33	11.61	55.05
29	The intellectuals in the region are mindless to the old traditions as well as to the native language.	32.68	9.75	57.56
30	Parents, in a sense, are coerced into language shift.	26.36	20.89	52.73
31	Parents have forgotten their descents and their past.	23.9	12.68	63.41

The second series of questions dealt with the degree of dominance of language shift among various groups of families. They consist of 15 items. All the results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Dominance of language shift among families in a descending order.

No.	groups of families	Agree	No opinion	Disagree
1	Families who wish their children not to have any problem with using Persian in future and use it fluently and appropriately.	89.1	4.45	6.43
2	It encompasses everybody in the community from the lower middle class to higher middle class.	68.5	12.5	19
3	Families who have more social contact with people from other cities.	58.91	16.33	24.75
4	Families who belong to the rich middle-class portion of the society for whom language shift is a matter of rivalry.	53.6	12.88	33.5
5	Families who live in cities.	51.51	8.08	40.40
6	Families who are the result of the marriage with persons of different ethnics.	46.73	24.62	28.64
7	Families who are multilingual.	46.42	13.86	35.20
8	Families who are highly competent in Persian.	45.58	11.76	52.97
9	Families who hold higher education levels.	45.27	16.41	38.3
10	Families who are literate enough.	45.22	11.05	43.71
11	Families who have office jobs.	44.27	14.92	40.79
12	Families who live in a Persian-speaking environment.	43.34	9.35	47.29
13	Families who try to imitate others blindly.	42.42	14.64	42.92
14	The newly rich families	35.71	15.3	48.97
15	Families who are civilized and progressive.	25.74	21.28	52.97

V. DISCUSSION

When asked why parents prefer their children to speak Persian rather than mother tongue in the early childhood, 90.73 per cent of the participants asserted "because children

will speak comfortably and understand the material better when entering schools." Since Persian is the only official language for education, it seems that families think that vernacular languages will interfere with learning. Put another way, shifting to the official language is seen as the gateway to more success in educational settings. 89.8 percent of the participants stated that they do so "because Persian is the common language of all Iranian ethnics." 89.7 per cent of the participants responded they do so "because Persian as the official language of the country is used in most interactions and settings." 87.86 per cent of the participants expressed they do so "because children obtain necessary preparation to enter school by attending preschool classes." 86.89 per cent of the participants maintained that they do so "because Persian as the official language is used as the dominant language in most mass media." 85.78 percent of the participants responded "because doing so will greatly help children learn courses and perform well in their communication." 84.15 per cent of the participants stated they do so "because the surrounding atmosphere encourages them to do so." 84.07 per cent of the participants responded they do so "because the early childhood is the best time for learning a new language." 80.97 per cent of the participants expressed they do so "because children will gain the courage to communicate with Persian-speaking people and keep up with them." 80.69 per cent of the participants responded they do so "because they feel that Persian is superior to the mother tongues in totality." 72.63 per cent of the participants stated that they do so "because Persian is a lovely language." 71.92 per cent of the participants expressed "because children will be highly competent in Persian language and won't be ridiculed for having an accent." 70.38 per cent of the participants expressed they do so "because there is rivalry and imitation among families." 65.85 per cent of the participants responded they do so "because children can acquire mother tongue later if they wish." 63.9 per cent of the participants expressed they do so "because they consider speaking Persian as a matter of prestige and civilization." 63.41 per cent of the participants stated "preference for speaking Persian does not mean forgetting the past." 57.84 per cent of the participants disagreed with "the mother tongue has no practical uses." The other results signifying less than 50 percent agreement can be found in the Table 2.

When respondents were asked to maintain among which group of families language shift is more dominant, 89.1 per cent of the participants indicated those who would like their children not to have any problem with using Persian in future and use it fluently and appropriately. 68.5 per cent of the participants also believed that language shift encompasses all community classes from the lower middle class to higher middle class. Moreover, 58.91 per cent of the participants stated that language shift is more dominant among those who have

more social contact with people from other cities. In addition, 53.6 per cent of the people shared the view that families who belong to the rich or middle-class portion of the society for whom language shift is a matter of rivalry tend to switch from vernacular to the official language. A little more than half of the participants, precisely 51.51 per cent maintained that language shift is more dominant among families who live in urban areas. However, the next eight groups of families were found to be, more or less, of equal significance to the participants as indicated by scores ranging from 46.73 to 42.42 per cent. The other results can be found in Table 3.

VI. CONCLUSION

As the results indicated, a high majority of the participants considered educational issues as the main driving force behind the parents' deliberate decision to speak Persian instead of the indigenous language to their children. In other words, the need for language shift was prompted by the belief that speaking Persian would result in better performance in educational contexts as it is the official language of education. This finding was in line with earlier similar works (e.g., see Garzon, 1992). In addition, the participants stressed the critical role that Persian plays as the lingua franca of the multi-ethnic community of Iran. Further, they had in common the view that the use of Persian in expanded domains motivates parents to discard their indigenous language in favor of the official language. The data also indicated that language shift is not confined to a particular group of families.

Such a fast growing language-shift among families in the recent decades suggests that the government has failed to fulfill the goals set in order to promote indigenous languages. Although a few hours of the visual and audio broadcasts are aired in local languages, officially teaching indigenous languages has not been considered diligently. Moreover, any attempt or initiation to strengthen local languages or substitute Persian words with local ones seems not to be embraced by the state media. In the absence of mass media to promote native tongues, mainly due to the press policies, the use of the indigenous tongues is expected to decline in time.

However, policy makers cannot be solely blamed for what has led to the undermining of the indigenous languages since the ultimate decision about language shift is up to parents and they themselves can choose whether to continue to transmit the indigenous language to the new generation or to abandon it. The parents' belief that monolingual children will attain a higher academic proficiency is a controversial issue. That is to say, the use of indigenous

language was equated with underachievement in school, as the results implied. Such a view contrasts sharply with literature on bilingualism which often indicates that bilinguals or multilinguals are in some aspects, say cognitive skills, advantageous over monolinguals.

Finally, the scope of this study on language shift was confined to the city of Dehloran in Ilam province. The results presented in this paper, no doubt, cannot be overgeneralized. Therefore, more studies need to be done on this subject in other cities of the province to gain a more accurate picture of how severe language shift is in Ilam and all over the country.

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