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## Persian NOT Farsi

### Iranian Identity Under Fire: An Argument Against the Use of the Word 'Farsi' for the Persian Language

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The term Persian has been used in the English language for over five hundred years: to describe both a nation with 7000 years of archaeological history, and also the language that nation has used since the rise of the first Persian Empire, the Achaemenids.

Unfortunately however, the word 'Farsi' is increasingly and incorrectly being used to describe the Persian language. This paper outlines the linguistic and cultural context of Persian, as well as exploring the potential motivations of those promoting the incorrect usage of the word 'Farsi'.

It explains clearly how the use of the word 'Farsi' instead of Persian voids important historical and cultural associations for the Iranian nation, with its long history of civilisation, and how it can therefore be seen as an insult to the heritage of Iran.

#### LINGUISTICS

Persian is described linguistically as an Indo-European language. It is a member of the Western Iranian branch of the Iranian languages, which are themselves a subgroup of the Indo-Iranian (or Indo-Aryan) family of languages. As such, Persian is distantly related to the vast majority of European languages, including English. Over the past three millennia, it has developed through three distinct stages: Old, Middle and New Persian.

#### Old Persian

Old Persian and Avestan are the two most prominent members of the Old Iranian languages.

Avestan is categorised as an Eastern Iranian language, and was spoken in northeastern and eastern Iran from the second half of the second millennium BCE (Old Avestan) down to about the beginning of the Achaemenid period (Younger Avestan)[6] [1]. It is also the language of the sacred texts of the Zoroastrian religion. The Gathas or metrical sermons of the prophet Zarathushtra were composed some time in the second millennium BCE in Older or Gathic Avestan. Later texts are recorded in Later or Younger Avestan, which constitutes a subsequent and distinct linguistic phase [7] [2], which is more similar to the language of the oldest Old Persian inscriptions than to Old Avestan [8] [3]. Old Avestan is very close to Old Indic Rigveda and as such is a very archaic Indo-European linguistic type [9] [4].

Old Persian was the vernacular tongue of the Achaemenid monarchs [10] [5], but had already been spoken for a few centuries prior to the rise of the Achaemenid dynasty [11] [6].

Old Persian script was called Aryan (OP. *ariy*) by the Achaemenids. It is largely known from an extensive body of cuneiform inscriptions – especially from the time of Darius the Great (r. 522-486 BCE) and his son Xerxes (r. 486-465 BCE) [12] [7]. However, some scholars believe that Aryan was invented by the first Iranian dynasty, the Medes (728-550 BCE), and then adopted by the Achaemenids as the imperial script [13] [8].

#### Middle Persian

Middle Persian is one of the Middle Iranian languages. The two major languages in this group are Arsacid Pahlavi (also called Parthian and Northwest Pahlavi [14] [10]) and Sasanid Pahlavi (or Southwest Pahlavi and, more commonly, Middle Persian). The term Pahlavi is a noun derived from the adjective *Pahlav* [15] [11], which is the equivalent of the Old Persian word *Parthava* meaning 'Parthian' [16] [12].

Arsacid Pahlavi (Parthian) was the official language of the Arsacid dynastic empire (248 BCE-224 CE) [17] [13]. It is also preserved in a large body of Manichean texts, which provide evidence for its continuation in Central Asia right up until the 10th century [18] [14].

While Arsacid Pahlavi is categorised as a dialect within the Northwestern subgroup of Iranian languages, it retains many archaic Eastern Iranian features – probably because the founders of the Arsacid dynasty, the Parni tribe, were originally speakers of a Northeastern Iranian language similar to Scythian [19] [15]. Parthian has no known direct linguistic ancestor [20] [16], but is closely related to the other major Middle Iranian language, Sasanid Pahlavi / Middle Persian.

Middle Persian was a successor to, and derived directly from, Old Persian. It has a multiplicity of Southwestern Iranian features. Gradually developing into a distinct idiom after the reign of Emperor Xerxes [21] [17], it became the official language of the Sasanid Empire (224-651 CE) and as such was utilised in a noteworthy literature of Zoroastrian and also Manichean texts. Following the Arab invasions of Iran in the seventh century it developed into New Persian.

#### New Persian

New Persian, or Persian for short, is categorised as one of the Modern Iranian languages, along with Kurdish, Baluchi, Pashto, Ossetic and number of other languages. It can be considered as having two phases: classical and modern – although both variants are mutually intelligible [22] [18].

The period after the Islamic conquest is described by Iranian scholars as the 'Two Centuries of Silence'. There is no inscriptional or textual evidence for New Persian and only very scanty indications for the continuing use of Middle Persian. However scholars consider it unlikely that Iranians deserted their mother tongue and only cultivated Arabic [23] [19]. The lack of any literary evidence from this period will certainly have been compounded by the destruction of Iranian libraries by the Mongols under Genghis Khan and his successors – and there may also be other reasons unknown to us [24] [20].

The subsequent 'Persian renaissance' was marked by the advent of Classical Persian. This emerged in Khorasan in eastern Iran [25] [21] and so was strongly influenced by Eastern-Iranian linguistic elements [26] [22]. Arabic also had a major impact: with large numbers of loanwords, increasing palatalisation and also the inclusion of some grammatical elements. A modified version of Arabic script was adopted and some letter changes were made. For the purposes of this paper, the most important of these was the use of /F/ for /P/. As Arabic has no /p/ phoneme, the area of Prs, the Iranian people who originated there and their language came to be described by natives as 'Frs' and 'Frsi'. After these linguistic changes, Persian then remained essentially unchanged until the nineteenth century. At that time, what is now called Modern or Standard Persian developed from the Tehrani vernacular – following the adoption of Tehran as the capital city of Iran by the Qajar s in 1787.

#### NOMENCLATURE

The name Persian derives from the province of Prs (modern Frs) in southwestern Iran. This was itself named after the Persian tribes of Indo-European nomads who migrated, along with some other Iranian peoples, from territories east of the Caspian Sea onto the Iranian plateau in the middle [27] [23] or later part of the second millennium BCE [28] [24].

The Persians settled in the mountain country rising over the northeast side of the Persian Gulf and enclosing the high basin in the west in which Persepolis and Shiraz are situated [29] [25], some time between the seventh and ninth centuries BCE [30] [26]. The name survived as Frs [31] [27].

This region then became the birthplace of two Persian dynastic empires – the Achaemenids (550-530 BCE) and the Sasanids (224-651 CE) – as well as the cradle of the Persian language.

Achaemenid Persians called their language (Old Persian) *Prsa* and the Greeks followed this in naming it *Persis*. From then on, other nations have predominantly named Persia and Persian using words based on the root *Prs-* [32] [28].

For example, the English use of the word 'Persian' has a five hundred year history [33] [29] and is derived from the Latin *Persianus*, itself drawing on the Greek *Persis*. Similarly, the French word is *Persane*, the Germans use *Persisch*, the Italians *Persiano* and the Russians *Persiska*.

As outlined above, Persian only came to be described as 'Frsi' by natives of Iran following the P/F letter substitution associated with the Arab conquests.

#### SAME LANGUAGE, DIFFERENT NAMES

Persian is the language of at least 110 million people worldwide – sixty to seventy million of whom are mother-tongue speakers. The most substantial populations are in Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan, but there are also significant numbers in neighbouring countries [34] [30], [35] [31] – including Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Turkey and the Caucasus [36] [32] – and also in the Persian Gulf states [37] [33]. In addition, since the 1979 revolution, emigration from Iran has led to the creation of Persian-speaking diaspora communities in many countries worldwide, especially in the United States, Europe, Canada, Australia and Israel. The largest urban community of Iranians outside Iran is now in the Los Angeles area [38] [34].

All these populations use regional versions of Persian with different proportions of non-Persian loanwords [39] [35] and slightly different pronunciations [40] [36] compared to the Persian spoken in Iran [41] [37]. Some of the alternatives have different local names: Tajiks call their Persian *Tojiki*, while Afghans often use the word *Dari* [42] [38].

However, unlike Arabic, all the alternatives are mutually comprehensible. Contrary to the views of some academics and institutions, they are the same language.

The Cultural Heritage News Agency of Iran explains why the versions of Persian have at least a strong claim as those of Arabic to be considered as one language [43] [39]:

"Some mistakenly believe that, in English, the official language of Iran should be called Farsi, while the language spoken in Tajikistan and Afghanistan should be called Dari, and Persian should be utilised to refer to all of them. However, the difference between the Persian spoken in Iran, Afghanistan, or Tajikistan is not significant or substantial enough to warrant such a distinction and classification. Consider the following case: an Egyptian and a Qatari engage in conversation in Arabic. They will encounter a great deal of difficulty in comprehending each other. Despite this fact, the language used in their conversation is referred to as Arabic. . . On the other hand, Iranians, Tajiks and Afghans can converse in Persian and easily understand each other. Why, then, should their dialects be classified separately and referred to by different names?"

Despite this, however, some academics and academic institutions are treating the Persian spoken in Iran and elsewhere as separate entities.

Professor Michael Hillman from the University of Texas, for example, whilst lecturing at the 'Fifth Biennial Conference on Iranian Studies', assumed that 'Farsi' and Tajiki are dialects of Persian [44] [40]. [45] [41]. While undergraduates at Emory College in US are taught 'Farsi' as one variety of Persian [46] [42]. Even the Faculty of Oriental Studies at Oxford University, who have been teaching Persian since the seventeenth century – and who therefore really should know better, now describe Tajik as one of the 'branches' of Persian [47] [43].

#### THE PERSIAN LANGUAGE AND IRANIAN IDENTITY

The rich legacy of the Iranian nation – that is, Iranian identity at its most fundamental – is defined by, and intertwined with, the Persian language.

Professor Ehsan Yarshater, editor of Encyclopaedia Iranica, affirms this eloquently [48] [44]:

"Persia has cherished and preserved against all odds . . . the shared experience of a rich and rewarding past. It finds expression primarily through the Persian language, not simply as a medium of comprehension but also as the chief carrier of the Persian world view and Persian culture. The Persian language . . . is a reservoir of Iranian thought, sentiment and values, and a repository of its literary arts. It is only by loving, learning, teaching and above all enriching the language that the Persian identity may continue to survive".

A key element in the history of Persian language and culture, within the discourse of Iranian history, is the struggle between Arab-Islamic and Iranian-nativist identities [49] [45]. This is not to say that Persian has not contributed to Islam: on the contrary, Persian played a major role in the propagation and spread of the religion in the Indian Sub-Continent, Central Asia and even as far as China and the Far East [50] [46].

#### Regional and European perspectives on Persian

The above concentrates on Iranian and Middle Eastern perceptions of Persian. Looking further afield, there is a long tradition of valuing Persian language and culture: "At its height, [the Persian language] stretched from the Aegean in the West to Sinkiang and the Bay of Bengal in the East and from the Russian steppes in the North to the Indian Ocean in the South" [51] [47].

Persian, in what Arnold Toynbee has called the 'Iranic Society' [52] [48], was the administrative and literary language of the Ottomans and of Mughal India [53] [49], [54] [50]. All medieval histories of India are written in Persian [55] [51] and under British rule, for the English who aspired "to high office in India, knowledge of Persian was desirable" [56] [52]. Indeed, until 1834, it was the medium of all official correspondence in India [57] [53].

Taking a more purely European view, the Persian epic stories were first brought back to France by the Crusaders [58] [54]. Wolfram von Eschenbach then translated versions into German by around 1180 [59] [55]. Presenting what became known as the Parsifal Legend, Eschenbach "utilized several Persian legends dating from about 600. By transmuting the sacred personages of the original legends into romantic knights, he modernized the tales for his own time. For this modernization he took as model a grand epic from the end of the eleventh century, the *Barzu-Nama*, the story of a knight named Barzu" [60] [56].

However, it was not until the reign of the Safavid dynasty (1507-1702) with their increasingly international commercial and political links, that any Europeans began to learn about Persian literature in any depth [61] [57]. The earliest extant reference to Persian literature in English seems to be from the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. In *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), George Puttenham gives four Persian poems in translation [62] [58].

The 17th century German Orientalist Adam Olearius then played a significant role in popularising knowledge about Iran, following his visit there in 1633 as secretary to the ambassador of Frederick III of Schleswig-Holstein [63] [59].

#### PERSIAN NOT FARSI

As well as being a linguistic nonsense, it has culturally undermining effects to use the word 'Farsi' rather than 'Persian'.

Linguistically, it is widely accepted that native speakers and foreigners use different words to describe the same language. Alex Bellem from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, observes [64] [60]:

"If we insist on 'Farsi' then shouldn't we insist also on 'Türke' or 'Español' or 'Elinici', and so on? Since it is accepted in linguistics as natural that non-native words are adapted to conform to the phonology of the borrowing language (perhaps via

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