

# **Bilingualism in Mazandaran: Peaceful Coexistence With Persian**

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## **Introduction**

Although Persian is the official language of Iran, there are many regional languages and dialects spoken across the country. Most regional languages are related to Persian and belong to a larger "Iranian" family, itself a branch of Indo-European. Turkish, the major non-Iranian language, spoken in the northwestern part of the country, is greatly influenced by Persian. In some parts of the country, this linguistic diversity coupled with religious differences has led to ethno-political conflicts (e.g. in the province of Kurdistan). On the other hand, the Caspian provinces of Mazandaran and Gilan enjoy a peaceful coexistence between their vernaculars and the lingua franca, Persian.

This paper investigates the present position of Mazandarani, the non-standard regional language of the Mazandaran province, and its peaceful relationship with Persian, the standard language of Iran. In examining this relationship, this paper will attempt to answer two questions:

- 1) Why has language division which has caused political conflicts in certain regions of Iran not done so in the province of Mazandaran?
- 2) What are the implications of this linguistic harmony? Does this peaceful coexistence mean that the two languages are equal in terms of socio-political and economic status?

The paper is organized into four sections. The first section provides a glimpse of the historical and modern position of Mazandarani. The second section provides four motivating factors behind linguistic-political conflict: the level of sociocultural and political integration, internal (intra-national) and external (transnational) factors, religious differences, and socioeconomic inequality. The main concern of the third section is to discuss the consequences of the peaceful co-existence and its impact on Mazandarani by focusing on language shift and decline. Finally, the last section highlights the attempts that have been made to revitalize or maintain the vernacular.

Choosing this language as the subject of my study is an extension of my personal attachment to Mazandarani. I was born and raised in Sari, the provincial capital of Mazandaran, and acquired the vernacular as a child. However, it was only in college that I began to speak the language fluently. I was first encouraged to speak it by my Mazandarani co-residents in the

dormitories at the University of Tehran during my graduate years when I was studying Linguistics. More recently, I started to collect folk poems. My interest in Mazandarani is largely connected to my familiarity with linguistics, sociolinguistics, and ethnography, without which I might have regarded the dialect worthless, as many of my friends from Sari do.

## **The Mazandarani Language**

Mazandarani is the local language of Mazandaran, a province stretched along the southern shores of the Caspian Sea, with a population of about three million. Among the living Iranian languages, Mazandarani boasts one of the longest written traditions (from the 10th to 15th centuries), roughly matching that of New Persian. This status was achieved during the long reign of the independent and semi-independent provincial rulers in the centuries after the Arab invasion. Several major works were written in Mazandarani, but all are lost, except some fragments preserved in the Persian works connected to the province (Borjian, 2001, 2004; Windfuhr, 1989).

The geographical domain of Mazandarani, roughly within the present administrative boundaries of the province, has remained almost unchanged over the past millennium. It is still spoken in the historical cities as well as in modern industrial centers. Most speakers, however, dwell in a series of loosely knit villages spread over the plains of Mazandaran. They also live in individual mountainous settlements in the central-eastern Alborz, as far south as the suburbs of Tehran (Borjian, 2004; Windfuhr, 1989).

The usage of Mazandarani, however, has been in decline. Its literary and administrative rank was lost to Persian perhaps long before the ultimate integration of Mazandaran into the national administration in the early 17th century. Considerable migration has occurred in modern times from the foothills into the littoral plains and towns of Mazandaran. This demographic change has combined with the widespread use of Persian in gradually limiting the use of Mazandarani. An overwhelming majority of the population of the province is now bilingual. Moreover, Persian is increasingly influencing Mazandarani, which belongs to the northwestern family of Iranian languages, and, therefore, is mutually unintelligible with respect to Persian, a southwestern language (Borjian, 2001, 2004).

Attempts have been made to promote the language in the later decades. There has been a growing number of literary publications, mostly verse, but also proverbs, idioms, and vocabulary of various localities and sub-dialects that are being collected and published. Radio and television programs, both entertaining and educational, are regularly broadcast in Mazandarani. Since there exists a high mutual intelligibility among various Mazandarani sub-dialects, the broadcasts attract many listeners and are considered to be successful.

## **Language Divisions and Political Conflicts**

### *The level of sociocultural and political integration*

Fishman (1968) examines language problems in terms of the degree of political and sociocultural integration. He divides countries into three categories: the new developing nations, such as sub-Saharan and East Africa, the old developing nations, such as the Near East and Southeast Asia, and the intermediate types, such as India and Pakistan. While in newly developing nations the problem is in achieving and maintaining sociocultural and political integration, in old developing nations integration is already attained on the basis of their history and past greatness. However, the main concern of these societies is modernization. Their classical standard language is significantly different from the vernacular of the masses and should be mobilized through the process of modernization. Unlike the first two categories, the intermediate nations are those societies which need to maintain the political and sociocultural integration on the one hand, and deal with the process of modernization on the other.

Iran falls into the category of old developing countries, as it originated nearly 25 centuries ago, and over its entire history, Persian (Old, Middle, New) has functioned as the standard language. This lingua franca has always coexisted with other varieties and regional languages, including Mazandarani (Schmitt, 1989). This co-existence is the result of the political and sociocultural integration of an old developing country whose various ethnic groups want to be connected with and unified under their "Great Tradition." "Their ancient literatures, legal codes, heroes and leaders of the past command admiration and obedience; the old developing nations can withstand much greater linguistic diversity and unrest as a result of integration" (Fishman, 1968). Thus, based on Fishman's theory, in Iran, the stable and widespread coexistence of separate dialects or languages (including Mazandarani) with the standard language is indeed natural and expected. Therefore, linguistic division alone is not a vital factor to inflame political conflicts within an old nation; rather, other factors must be involved.

### *The role of internal and external factors*

In discussing minority languages, Price (1979) analyzes language problems in terms of internal and external factors. The author distinguishes between those languages which belong to a minority in one country, but are a majority language elsewhere, and those languages which are not the dominant language in any country. Price includes in the first category such languages as French in Switzerland and Dutch in a small area in northern France. In the second category there are languages like Welsh, Catalan, and Basque. In the latter, only internal factors (e.g. inequality) are involved in language problems, while in the former, both internal and external factors magnify the language conflicts.

In Iran, the impact of external factors, which have promoted linguistic conflicts, can easily be detected amongst the Turkish-speaking and the Baluchi minorities. Turkish, spoken in northwestern Iran, is the official language of

neighboring Turkey and the Azerbaijan Republic, who regularly broadcast radio programs for Turkish speaking minorities abroad. The programs aim at encouraging the speakers to see themselves as part of a transnational Turkish speaking nation. This phenomenon also encourages separatist tendencies, as "ambitious members of minority groups see the opportunity to make careers for themselves by fanning a large potential group into consciousness of its separate identity" (Inglehart & Woodward, 1972). In 1945, the influence of external propaganda combined with the ambitions of local leaders led to the emergence in northwestern Iran of a small "republic" which declared Turkish its official language. The incident took place under the Soviet occupation of northern Iran during World War II, and the Republic was soon abolished after the Red Army was forced to leave the country under international pressure.

Baluchi, however, belongs to the larger Iranian language family spoken in the southeast of Iran. Although Baluchi is not a dominant language anywhere, most of its speakers live in Pakistan, where it is recognized as an official language to discourage the Baluchi separatist movement, which became a serious threat to the territorial integrity of Pakistan in the 1970s. In Iran the Baluchi problem has never become serious, partly because Iranian speaking Baluchis do not consider themselves alien in Iran as they do in Pakistan, and partly because of the preventative measures taken by the central government, particularly by spending large development funds in the poverty-stricken, tribally-structured province (Boyajian, 2000).

Mazandarani, in contrast, is at the other end of the spectrum. It is neither the dominant language of any nations, nor do its speakers live across the border (Borjian, 2004). Therefore, in the absence of the external factors, linguistic division itself is not a strong factor to lead to political conflicts among this minority group.

### *The role of religion*

Religious division is another important factor tending to reinforce the line of linguistic cleavages. The Hindi-Urdu situation is an ideal example. Hindi and Urdu are by and large identical, but each represents a religion, and the religious division has led to linguistic cleavages (including in the script) and eventually to political conflicts within an old nation (Inglehart and Woodward, 1972; Wardhaugh, 1987).

In Iran, too, religion has played a significant role in language identity. Some 85% of Iranians are Shiite, the Persianized branch of Islam influenced by Zoroastrianism, the ancient religion of Iran (Borjian, 2001). In some parts of the country, the linguistic diversity coupled with religious differences has promoted political conflicts in the above-mentioned province of Kurdistan, the land of the Kurdish tribes, whose territory extends across national frontiers to Turkey, Iraq, and beyond. Sometimes religious divisions promote faith-motivated literary activity and the development of writing systems among linguistic minorities (Windfuhr, 1989). In Mazandaran, however, the dominant religion is Shiism, the majority faith. This is another reason why in Mazandaran linguistic division has not led to political conflicts (Borjian 2004).

### *The role of inequality*

Ronald Inglehart and Margaret Woodward (1972) analyze language conflicts as a function of group inequality. They state that in almost all bilingual and multilingual societies, there is an upper language (i.e. the dominant) and one or more lower languages (i.e. subordinate). While the upper language represents prestige, power, and a higher status of the speaker, the lower languages signify the opposite. This linguistic inequality, however, does not always lead to political conflicts. Linguistic divisions will lead to political conflicts when a dominant language group obtains the social, political and economic power within the society and blocks the social mobility of the minority language groups. Therefore, based on Inglehart and Woodward's point of view, language conflict has its roots in the unequal economic, political, and social status of a language group.

Mazandaran's rural economy ranks high among the provinces of Iran, because of its rich soil and abundance of precipitation, in contrast to the arid plateau covering the bulk of Iran. Based on a quantitative survey conducted in 1962, Keddie (1968) contrasted regional variations as follows: "there were villages in the south-east [of Iran] where the poorest peasants made 8, 10 or 14 dollars a year, and even the richer cultivators made only five or six times that much per family; at the other extreme, in one atypical village in Mazandaran, a prosperous province below the Caspian Sea, the peasant families average 1037 dollars per year." This data reveals the economic status of Mazandarani, who are economically above average on the national scale.

It has so far been discussed that in Mazandaran a high level of sociocultural and political integration between the standard language, Persian, and the vernacular, Mazandarani, exists. Moreover, Mazandarani is neither the dominant language of any nation, nor do its speakers live across the border. Additionally, the lack of external factors, religious division, and economic inequality has allowed the peaceful co-existence of this linguistic division.

### **The Implications of This Peaceful Coexistence**

Iran's linguistic diversity has led both to political conflicts (e.g. among Kurds and Turkish-speakers) and to peaceful coexistences (e.g. among Mazandarani and many other ethno-linguistic groups). The latter situation, peaceful coexistence, does not merely mean that there is no language inequality, shift, or decline at all. As Fishman (1991) points out, "some languages die and disappear without struggle" while others fight to reveal their anger and frustration.

The peaceful coexistence of two languages in old developing nations functions much like the phenomenon of globalization in the modern world; it can be both constructive and destructive. The positive implication is that it unifies a nation and connects its people to their common past and empowers nationalism instead of *nationism* (i.e. separation). On the other hand, it is destructive because one of the consequences of unification is the destruction of indigenous cultures and languages (Fishman, 2001). If this theory is legitimate, then the

question that emerges is why Mazandarani has not disappeared prior to the era of modernization.

When two languages are in contact, their relationship tends to change as a result of shifting economic, linguistic, social, demographic and political factors (Wardhaugh, 1987). Before the process of modernization and urbanization in Iran, the power status of Persian and Mazandarani was not profoundly unequal. The masses were illiterate and unaware of national events. The majority were peasants who were connected to their own lands and had low expectations of social and economic mobility. Moreover, lack of contact with other language communities (i.e. geographical isolation) and the absence of the mass media were vital safeguards to the maintenance of the local language (Keddie, 1968). Thus, functionally, Mazandarani was the dominant language within its geographical domain, both in urban and rural areas.

The balance of power between Persian and regional languages (including Mazandarani) has significantly been changed since modernization began in Iran in the late 19th century. Modernization has brought many changes in the social networks, relationships between people, and patterns of languages. Persian remained the language of education, bureaucracy, government and economy. The masses, at one time illiterate, were required to attend schools to learn the standard language. Newspapers, magazines, and mass media have broken the geographical isolations of the language groups. Thus, Persian has been replacing Mazandarani gradually--not fully, but partly--in its functions (Windfuhr, 1989).

Urbanization is another consequence of modernization, which has had a direct impact on the decline of Mazandarani. Wardhaugh (1987) considers cities and towns as important factors in achieving language dominance; they become governmental, social, cultural, and economic centers. While the countryside loses its attraction, cities get more attention, particularly from the young and mobile. Consequently, it is in the cities that languages come together and it is there where language inequality emerges. Before modernization, a large majority of Mazandarani dwelled in villages, and used different sub-dialects of the same language. However, after modernization, the mastery of Persian has increased especially among growing urban inhabitants (Windfuhr, 1989).

As Wardhaugh (1987) indicates, "languages exist to meet the needs of its speakers." The emergence of new needs has caused the linguistic assimilation of the younger, literate, mobile, and progressive urban generation who cannot rely on the vernacular to assess social progress. On the other hand, rural inhabitants, the farmers who are still connected to their lands and have their own economy and, therefore, are not entirely dependent on the bureaucracy, have kept the vernacular much better than the city dwellers. Mazandarani still meets farmers' needs and that is why rural areas remain the stronghold of Mazandarani (Borjian, 2004).

One of the factors indicating the decline of a language is "when it is no longer transmitted naturally to children at home by parents or other caretakers" (Nettle & Romaine, 2000). As mentioned previously, I was raised in a bilingual family whose mother tongue, Mazandarani, had not been fully passed down to

the younger generation, including my siblings and me. To provide an example, I would like to use one of my own experiences. Once my grandmother, my mother and I went to the forest to pick some edible vegetation. While my grandmother knew the indigenous names of many plants and tried to pass them on to us, my mother was only familiar with some of them; I, myself, was so much of a stranger to the subject that I did not even try to learn them. Obviously, this aboriginal knowledge, which has been passed down orally over time, is being forgotten and will soon disappear. This dilemma is not limited to my family; it is applicable to the entire urban generation, of which I am a part. We not only acquired the standard language but also express a negative attitude toward Mazandarani (Borjian & Borjian, 2006, forthcoming).

Negative attitudes toward the speakers of a language community may have psychological impacts on the individuals of the community and the use of their language (Grosjean, 1982). In addition, it reveals the impact of modernization on this language community. The community, which used to be economically self-sufficient from the cities, is gradually losing its independence, and this loss has paved the road for *Persianisation*. The following example, which is based on my fieldwork in rural parts of Mazandaran, shows the negative attitudes of the urban dwellers toward the rural people.

My 60-year-old informant, whose mother tongue is Mazandarani and whose Persian is pidgin-like, while talking about how she used to make cookies for the New Year, added: "These cookies used to be our gifts for the New Year's Eve. Now, well, we go to the town to buy all types of pastry. We don't bake them because the tradition survives no more. If you bake 'goat-ear bread' or a 'cookie,' the people would say, 'O peasant, you are still doing the things belonging to the olden days.' Now, we cannot do these any more, and if we do, no one would appreciate" (Borjian & Borjian, 2006, forthcoming).

## **Language Revitalization**

Attempts have been made to promote the Mazandarani language. For instance, local radio and television programs regularly broadcast in the language. As I already mentioned, the broadcasts attract many listeners and provide primary and secondary employment for the minority language speakers. The question, however, is how local broadcasting alone can save a language which is losing its functions within the family domain.

To salvage languages at risk, Fishman (2001) presents an eight-stage solution, the most important of which is trying to keep a language alive within the domain of family. He proposes that if a language is used only by the older generation, it is likely to die as the older generations pass. His solution for this stage is to encourage parents to speak in the local language with their children. This effort, though, cannot be made on a wide scale without the support of the government. The urban youth within the province of Mazandaran do not generally speak its mother tongue. Although radio and television alleviate the pressure, they are only short-term remedies for the dying language. Media cannot uproot the source of the problem. When the older generation vanishes, the media will hardly attract the younger generation in any significant scale.

## Conclusion

Over the last millennium, Persian and Mazandarani, one as the standard language and the other as a regional language of the Caspian province of Iran, have lived side by side. The sociocultural, economic and political fabric of the country has not led to the eradication of regional languages and dialects. That is the major reason why Mazandarani is still in use. However, the balance of power between the two languages has been dramatically altered since the emergence of modernization, which brought many changes to social networks, relationships between people, and patterns of languages. The power imbalance has led to language shift and the current decline of Mazandarani. This process has not caused political conflicts owing to the specific political, economic, and religious characteristics of the province and its people. It is not easy though to predict the future of the language given the promising attempts on the part of the speakers, as well as the central government, to save the language.

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