

Purifying language as the mechanism for success in promoting Iranian nationalism

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Abstract

*The possessor of a highly powerful imperial pre-Islamic past, with an unique Islamic- Shiite identity, doubled by the Persian language(which belongs to the linguistic group of indo- European languages), the Iran of the 21st century tends to project a sentiment of superiority towards its fellow Arab neighbours, often being associated to the term *gāhiliyya* (in translation ignorance). Iran also tends to accentuate its belonging to the Arian race, hence the origin of the word "Iran", derived from the Proto-Persian "*aryānā*", which means land of the Arians.*

The linguistic domain is relevant in building a Persian nationalism, since imposing a pure language and cleaning it of borrowed words (which inevitably lead to the loss of the Persian language of its national identity) represent measures brought into attention by the post-revolutionary Iranian leadership in amplifying the Iranian nationalism.

Keywords: Iranity, nationalism, linguistic, purism, culture

Introduction

Iran disposes of an ancient identity and seems now more than anytime preoccupied with consolidating its "Iranianness", this privilege of the past, which is being doubled by the country's belonging to one of the first empires in history. The feeling of having belonged to a great civilization, of being a state rich in natural resources, with an educated population, placed in a strategic point on the global map animates the Iranian society and leads to words of praise regarding Iran's history, culture, civilization and language.

On the other side, over the past few years we witness the tendency of returning to the Persian tradition, to authenticity and cultural identity, often rebuilt depending on the needs and myths of the moment. Teheran opts for this tendency out of the wish to fix in the global conscience its contribution to the world's civilization.

Therefore, in a state characterized by an unique ethno-linguistic diversity and ancient cohabitation between the Persian-, Turkish-, and Arabic speaking population¹, with a history that lasts for over several millennia, the language played a key role in constructing a national identity. On the other side, as a result of the massive alphabetization from the 2nd half of the 21st century, the Persian language knew an extraordinary dynamic in contrast to the other languages spoken in Iran, hence contributing to a greater integration of the existent minorities on Iranian soil.

Built around the language, religion and culture, the Persian national unity completed itself as a result of this cultural diversity, which never became the source of any ethnic, civil wars; the reported sporadic incidents had a profound political character². Teheran encouraged the conservation of the Iranian national cohesion and consensus with the Arab, Indian of Turkish linguistic worlds, actions carefully thought, which in fact translate to the need for political and cultural equilibrium.

The Islamic revolution consolidated the nation state, but at the same time provoked a post-modern dynamic through a process of identity restoration, combining three constitutive forces of the current Iran: nationalism, Islam and culture.

If initially nationalism (in Persian "*melat parasti*") was assimilated to a symbol of the modern, anticlerical intellectuality, then it assimilated nuances associated to the promotion of a transnational Islamic identity, becoming one of the most modified in meaning terms, with the meaning of national independence and sacred earth of the mother land³.

Mostly composed of nationalism and intimately tied to the pre-Islamic heritage, the Islamic religious component is part of this identity and after the instauration of the Islamic republic, to the concept of iranity, understood as Iranian identity was added the concept of Islamity, the expression Islamic Iran⁴ being one of privilege and initially proposing the abandoning of ancient Persia's image. Afterwards, these symbols, traditions and myths, which were strongly anchored in the collective conscience were

¹ Iran is a multiethnic state, the Persian language is currently spoken and understood by quasi the entire population, yet it is the mother tongue for only half of Iran's population.

² The assassinations after 1979 of the Kurdish leaders from Vienna and Berlin had political background.

³ In Persian "*zamin-e moqadas _e vatan* „

⁴ In Persian "*irān-e eslāmī*„

reactivated and gained a new connotation; feasts such as *Nōrūz*⁵ (New Year) and *Čahāršanbe sūrī*⁶ (in translation, *the lighted Wednesday*) are celebrated with great with great feast and seen as symbols of the Persian identity; the visits of the prominent figures of the Iranian politics at the Persepolis ruins highlighted the new direction Teheran tends to adopt, namely to connect itself to the grandeur of the pre-Islamic Iran.

This Iranity forms a series, whose specificity and vocation can only be explained under the premises that the Iranian spiritual universe forms a whole, anterior and posterior to Islam, thesis which is being successfully promoted by the Iranian leadership, aware of the necessity of highlighting the non-Islamic Persian element, which brought added value to the Islam situated over the zoroastriasm background.

In this matter, Teheran accentuated more than ever the need to reorganize the Persian language through a completion of the language's purity, its regenerative power being at present highly visible through a gradual liberation of the Arab grammatical and stylistic influence. Most vivid is the bold replacement of the term God from the very well known "Allāh" with the Persian "Khodā" exactly for the reason to highlight the principle of Persian specificity and intention to reactivate the language as a symbol of the sacred values of the Persian culture, but also to place the Shiite Islam in the national linguistic context subordinated to ethnicity.

Diachronic perspectives over the Iranian nationalism manifested in the linguistic context

Manifesting its superiority over the Occident, Iran had and has much at stake, now more than ever in the notion of nationalism. Ofering it a unique identity, offered by the fecundity of the marriage between the cultural hegemony of the Shiite Islam and the Iranian assets, nationalism was built on the pre-Islamic history and civilization, Persian culture and language, all transformed afterwards in instruments needed to contour the homogenous national identity.

⁵ Takes place on the 20/21 of March according to the spring equinox.

⁶ Zoroastriasm feast, which celebrates the fire on the Wednesday prior to the New Year through passing over the fire, tradition which is also present in Oltenia and takes place the night before Easter Fasting.

At a first glance, the theocratic apparatus in Teheran seems to have ignored the Iranian reality based on multi-ethnicity, multi-linguism, multi-culturality, where each ethnic group is the possessor of its own history, language, religion, tradition, but a more thorough study of this problem brings to light the fact that, over its history, this nation managed to implement a form of cohabitation, which is unique all over the Middle East⁷.

On the other side, the Iranian nationalism brought into light the pre-Islamic period or the so called golden age of the Iranian civilization, which was marked by the glory of an empire with an administration, culture, language and writing system, unique to the eastern area, which gathered alongside the Islamic tradition during the Arab conquest and demise of the Sasanid dynasty. The legitimate question that rises even at present in the Iranian society is regarding the added value element that the Arab conquerors brought to the Iranian society, aware of the fact that the Arabs lead a nomadic life, which lacked the depth of the Persian one.

If, during the first stage, as a result of the superiority background, "the culture of the losers outranked the one of the conquerors"⁸, there was still the very complicated process of the meeting point of different cultures, which meant the assimilation of the Islamic traditions, with consequences including at the political independence layer.

The contamination with the Arab element and implicitly with the Arab language, lead to a new type of culture, as the Arab Isaac Filshtinsky pointed out the fact that "the connection between the nomad conquerors' culture and the one of the conquered populations also has one other essential aspect, without which one cannot fully correctly understand the dynamic of the historic-literary process, because not only the Arab conquerors, but also the Arabic population of the caliphate actively participated to the creation of a common Arabic - Islamic culture"⁹.

Without losing touch with their own national culture in this process of assimilation, the Iranian elite continued to stay in contact with the pre-Islamic legacy, as well as the Islamic traditions and Arabic as the language of the conquerors and language of the new religion.

⁷ KIA Mehrdad, "Persian nationalism and the campaign for language purification", in *Middle Eastern Studies* (vol. 34, 1998).

⁸ According to the Ukrainian orientalist Ahatanhel Krymsky, beginning of the 20th century.

⁹ FILSHTINSKY Isaac. *Arabic Literature*, in Viorel Bageacu *Note de curs*, University of Bucharest, 1995 – 1996.

With a rich cultural past and aware of the risk of losing the national identity through the imposition of the Islamic religion, the Iranian populations tried to revive the ancient traditions through the resistance movement against the Arab domination, called "aš-šu'ūbīyya", which brought into discussion the national Iranian triumph, which surfaced through the Arab language layer. Therefore, for a while the colossal Islamic world recognized the pre-Islamic art of the word as an own collective antiquity, the Iranian cultural invasion going up the point that it managed to be rooted in the popular conscience, on behalf of the universal ethical and aesthetic ideal, the supremacy of the Persian culture¹⁰.

Offering an unspeakable position of the Arab influence on the Persian language, it needs to be mentioned that this conquest hindered the development of the Persian culture; one first argument in favor of this thesis is the new imposed writing, since the Arab alphabet did not correspond in structure to the Persian language and hence the need to add four graphemes to express the Persian morphemes- "p", "j", "č", "g".

In other words, the two poles of the Iranian culture represented on the one hand by the non-Muslim culture which stretches over several millennia and on the other by the more recent, yet profoundly rooted in the Iranian mind, Shiite Islam (16th century), seem to be undistinguishable.

Nonetheless, the cultural rebirth of Persia took place under extremely complicated circumstances, since over the centuries of foreign domination and in spite of the Shiite Islamic religion, the Iranians have preserved their culture and national conscience through the speaking of the Persian language, even though, through time, it was altered by Arab, Turkish or European elements.

Convinced of the necessity of preserving of their national identity, the Iranian intellectuality, lobbying for an exacerbated nationalism, started cleaning the Persian language of the foreign terminology and words/expressions, which entered the language in a fraudulent manner, without following their own linguistic norms.

Triggered by the need to preserve the purity and distinction of the Persian language, this movement wished to guarantee the integrity and independence of the language through replacing/eliminating of the foreign

¹⁰ ANGHELESCU Nadia. *Identitatea arabă. Istorie, limbă, cultură* (Polirom:Iași, 2009): p.53-57.

words or of non-Persian origin, since it was firmly convinced of the force of the borrowed words to influence the specificity of the national language.

The purism movement before the Islamic Revolution

Of all the compartments of the language, the vocabulary is the most mobile one and if the norms dictate, also to some extent the morphology, syntax, even pronunciation, still these cannot prevent the loss/entry of some new words. The changes in vocabulary are strictly parallel to the development of the society, since new words often appear alongside the object they represent, which was absent before or in circumstances that did not exist before. The bond between the language and especially the vocabulary and the society is so tight, that the lexical data allow to a certain extent the piecing together of the nation's history. The vocabulary is more complex than it is thought to be, because it reflects the history of the nation, along with chapters of the history of all the other languages to which it came into contact¹¹.

Over time, the Persian language suffered significant changes as a result of the influence of other languages; this longstanding history is proven by the linguistic contacts of the words derived from Arabic, Greek, Latin, Armenian, Hindi and the related Iranian languages from the pre-Islamic century.

During this period, Arabic words start to enter the language. The volume of entry starts growing during the dissemination of Islam and Persia's conquest by the Arabs by the 7th century BC. This is the time when the Persian language is invaded by a large volume of Arabic words, associated mostly to the religious and scientific language and are integrated in an organic manner into the language. Therefore, the Persian language fosters words which appeared or entered in different historical periods and resulted from different ways of forming or appeared through different techniques of language enrichment.

The process of entering of foreign words into the language accentuated during the prospering age of the Persian literature (11th to 16th centuries), when the Arab element massively enters, whilst during the modern decade (end of the 19th century - beginning of the 20th century) the processes of transformation of the language and semantic transformations become preponderant.

¹¹ VRACIU Angela, *Lingvistica* (EDP: București, 1980), p.78.

As a result, the 20th century marked the beginning of the stabilization of the official Persian language, full of contradictions due to the tough fight between the Iranian and Arabic influences, which left deep marks on the Persian language, as a result of its longstanding presence on Iranian territory.

Under this context, as a result of the need to create a linguistic terminology, the purist movement arises. This translates itself into the intense fight against the foreign element in the language and into the forming a new terminology starting from the pure Persian words.

The Iranian Purist movement was no isolated phenomenon, in Iran it started only during the last period of the ruling of *Rezā -šāh* (1935 - 1941). During this period, the governmental apparatus imposes the Persian language as the general spoken language all over the Iranian territories, the city and family names are changed and the Persian languages is being cleaned of the Arabic elements and of the foreign influences, especially the Turkish ones.

The new city names had nominal roots from the word "*šāh*" or reminded the glorious historic past of Iran (for example *Anzālī* became *Pahlavī* and *Tūs* became *Ferdōsī*).

Separated into more opinion movements, the Purist movement is dominated, at the beginning by the extremist Purists, who were the adepts of a pure Persian language and who proposed the full cleaning of the language of foreign elements by resurrection of the old Persian language and the Medio - Persian language. Yet, afterwards, this extremist current was to be replaced by a more moderate one regarding its views and attitude towards adopting the language of the classical literature. In their opinion, there was no need to give up all the Arabic heritage, since a lot of them gained rightful access into the language and even for some there were no Persian equivalents.

Without being singular, the Iranian Purist movement was to some extent influenced by the Purist campaigns in the Middle East. In Turkey, during the same time, slogans against foreign word borrowings were released with the purpose of the future development of the Turkish language on its own terms. Also Egypt organized during the same time a language academy with the purpose of building a new scientific terminology.

The Purist tendencies never ceased to appear, hence by its founding (in 1935) the Persian Language and Literature Academy (in Persian

Farhangestān-e zabān va adab-e fārsī) assumed responsibility for cleaning the language and putting a halt to the mess in the Persian language. Having as a starting point the saying that the language is the root of a nation's history, the Persian Language and Literature Academy was founded with the purpose of purifying the Persian language and of grounding its cultural identity, in the attempt to distinguish it from the European and especially Arab one.

Hence, alongside the instauration of the *Pahlavī* dynasty, the Persian language was subject to a process of reorganization, manifested through a tighter bond to the spoken forms and perfecting of the official norms in the fight for language purity, fight to eliminate the pro-Arabic tendency and democratization of the official language in the press and publishing domain.

The Purist movement, which was initiated during the 3rd and 4th decades of the 20th century is bound to the modernization politics of Iran, *Rezā Pahlavī* encouraging therefore nationalism, which finds strength in the pure Persian linguistic sector. With more or less chauvinistic connotations, yet still loaded with pregnant nationalism, in the sense of imposing of a unique official language, this movement of purification of the Persian language represented a normal stage of a process of emancipation from the feudal Islamic culture dominated by Arabic as the language of Islam.

Hence, the spoken language, the so called country language (in Persian "*estelāhāt*"), gained access into the press and becomes this way seen in a different light out of the wish to eliminate the precious imposed Arabic words. This tendency gets accentuated after the 1930s, a time when writers agree on using the national language as the language of mostly Persian literature. The Iranian linguist claims that "*the language is necessary to develop and one of the most important means for this development is to claim help from the freshly used words and expressions, that the people use every day to satisfy its needs for communication*".¹²

By creating a lot of "Persanized" words, by adopting new terms in various domains of activity and by eliminating from the language the foreign words and expressions, the Persian Language and Literature Academy took responsibility of reforming the language and the system of forming new terminology, the military one being exclusively built under the supervision of the Shach and Minister of War. In March 1925, by means of

¹² KHĀNLARĪ Parvīz Nātel. *Zabānšenāsī va zabān-e fārsī (Linguistics and the Persian language)*, (Tehrān: Tus, 1343 Hs): p.123.

a special law, the calendar was reformed and instead of the Arabic months (the lunar calendar) the Iranian months were adopted (the solar calendar), with a laic use at first. The old "laqab"s (nicknames) were replaced with family names composed of old Persian roots. Still, adopting the terminology was no random act, some models being analyzed beforehand. Yet again, the need for terms was not solved, at present still being a pressing issue taking into account the new notions that impose urgent correspondences in the linguistic field.

The majority of the words adopted by the first academy entered the language indefinitely, for example the Arabic "tayāra" (airplane) was replaced by the Persian „havāpeymā", the Arabic "tabīb" (doctor) was replaced by the Persian word "pezešk", and the Arabic "nahr" was replaced by the Persian "rūdkhāne".

The second Academy (reinstated in 1968) brought back to light the problem of the language purification and processing of a united terminology. The magazine "Khabarnāme-ye farhangestān zabān va adab-e fārsī"¹³ consecrated an edition to criticizing the manner in which it had been forced by film translators through brutal use of French and English words alongside with slang elements.

Hence, the creation of new word was realized at the initiative of the Academy, which launched a serious call to people in the literature field to stop as well as possible the entering of foreign elements into the Persian language, which inevitably lead to the loss of its national specificity.

The contribution of the Iranian elite to rejuvenating the Persian language and to imprint a Persian identity is obvious, since it demonstrated to the people that the Persian language is still viable in producing new compounds.

Post-revolutionary linguistic developments

Starting from the idea that even if the Persian territory had been conquered along history and the Persian language survived by having the capacity of rejuvenating and reinventing itself¹⁴, the political class, doubled

¹³ ****Khabarnāme-ye farhangestān zabān va adab-e fārsī* (The Journal of the Persian Language and Literature Academy) (Tehrān, no. 2, 1374 H): 7-11.

¹⁴ EMAMI Karim. "La contribution de Farhangestan", in *Journal de Teheran* (nr. 9054, 1965): 6.

by the academic environment accentuated the necessity to preserve the threatened by the ongoing flux of borrowed words (which came from French, English or Arabic) Persian language. This can illustrate the manifestation of a tendency in the contemporary Persian language to open to international influences certain parts of the language, especially that of the terminology.

As a result, the years after the Islamic revolution marked a meandering track of the Persian language; the positioning of the Iranian linguistic environments towards the acceptance or not of the borrowings from different languages was exclusively realized on the basis of political considerations, even though the Persian language had its superiority and importance in the completion of the Shiite Iranian state confirmed.

During the *Pahlavī* dynasty, the Arabic language was seen as an obstacle in the way of modernization of the Iranian nation and a target to the Purist activists. Along with the Islamic revolution, this language had an unsecure path in the evolution of the Islamic Iran, because in its beginning, Arabic was officially recognized as an indispensable part of the Iranian nation, being placed alongside of the Persian language. Afterwards, in the 1980^s, the foremost objective of the third Persian Language and Literature Academy was to “consolidate the force and originality of the language as one of the pillars of the Persian national identity” through “identification and usage of Persian equivalents for foreign terms” and Arabic became exclusively an instrument for supplying words that could not be created by the Persian language.

Under thorough analysis, the Islamic Revolution consolidated the Iranian nationalism, manifested at the language level through highlighting the fact that the revolution identifies itself with the Persian language. The politicization of this field consisted of the political leaders’ speeches, focused on language as an instrument to add potency to the Iranian identity. An example that speaks volumes is *seyyed ‘Alī Khāmeneī*, who as well as in his quality as the president of Iran, as well as the supreme leader (in Persian *valī-ye faqīh-e īrān*), assumed the role of defender of the Persian language as the language of revolution and Shi’ite Islam, being careful about also embracing Arabic words with the purpose of not irritating the Iranian theocracy. This message willingly reactivated the moderate Purist currents of the 40^s, deploring the eccentricities of the language. The linguist *Mohammad Forūqī* declares himself in favor of

total elimination of Arabic words and their replacement with a pure Persian lexicon of an archaic nature.

Having as objective the preservation of the Persian language's authenticity, the Academy concentrated its interest on adopting of proper words to represent new concepts in Persian. Arabic is still being associated to some extent to religion, even though Shi'ism, by the way it is understood and assimilated at present by the Iranian nation seems more than ever to be tied to the Persian language.

This purification action gained a totally different intention with the presidency of Ahmadinejad, who as a response to the American policies in the Middle East, immediately eliminated all foreign words, that entered the Persian language and replaced them in all governmental releases with Persian words agreed by the Academy.

The Arabic words and expressions were also targeted in the context of Arabic being the only language of the Qur'an. It was still argued that the use of Arabic words brings prejudice to the Persian language, since the strict grammar rules of Arabic are not being assimilated by the native Persian speakers. Under these circumstances, the clerical circles adopted a clear position in supporting the mandatory study of Arabic in schools and universities, claiming that the Persian language should remain unchanged in status and Arabic to keep its role to cosmeticize the Persian language.

Under the same umbrella of eliminating the Arab influence comes the practice of giving up the use of numerous synonyms to describe one object or express one notion, since the result often translates into a disturbing, prolix style. "Mot juste" became popular thanks to the literature world and the word invested with figurative meanings can come either from the old dusty lexicon, or be invented. At present we are witnessing a regeneration of the Persian language¹⁵, most likely derived from the wish to deepen the fertility of the Persian language and bring potency to the Iranian culture, including its religious one, encouraged to be written in a language that got rid of the prolix Arab expressions and even some borrowed words that came into use by force.

The last 15 years brought to attention the Iranian cultural element through promoting the Persian art, medicine, science, philosophy, claiming at its rightfully legitimacy *Al-Bīrūnī*, *Ibn Sīnā*, *Al-Ghazālī*, *Al-Fārābī*,

¹⁵ ****"Javānsāzī-ye zabān-e fārsī" (Rejuvenation of the Persian Language), in *Khabarnāme-ye farhangestān zabān va adab-e fārsī* (Tehrān, no. 8, 1375 H): 3.

Sībawayh sau *Az-Zamakhṣarī* and highlighting their belonging to the Persian cultural pantheon.

Literature and especially Persian poetry continues to play a leading role in animating the Persian national feeling, the political and religious speeches of the elites from public squares often end with lyrics from the "*Šāhnāme*" by *Ferdōsī* or refer more and more to the rebirth of the Iranian nation during the umayyade and abbaside dynasties.

Conclusions

In spite of the ethno-linguistic diversity, in the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century, the Persian language managed to be assimilated to the national identity and the awareness of the Persian culture and history. Alongside linguistic nationalism, it served as a force to coagulate the Iranian nation, capable to overcome the different sporadic movements with the potential for separation.

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