

Linguistic Data as An Indicator of Cultural Change: The Case of Iran-Turkic

Filiz Kızıl

Can language data be an indicator of cultural identity? In the case of minority languages such as the Turkic varieties spoken in Iran, which are more or less heavily influenced by Modern Persian, the question of the correlation between the degree of language contact and cultural identity could play an important role. Questions such as „What extralinguistic factors are significant for processes of language retention/maintenance, of language change, or even of cultural identity” are relevant to language contact studies as well as to sociolinguistic and ethnological studies. Linguistic change can be viewed in this context as an internal process variable of a given language system, while language contact is an external process variable which reacts to the coexistence of different systems and the circumstances of their contact.

Linguistic patterns, elements of language structure, varieties, and languages evolve in a process that is significantly shaped by social interaction, social structure, and social, economic and political factors. Within the formation and development of Iran-Turkic cultural identification, the following factors play an important role: the settlement history and cultural tradition, the interplay of historical and linguistic factors, socio-cultural similarities and differences, language contact and multilingualism, the delimitations of linguistic and cultural varieties, as well as the roles of normative centers. Developments within the languages sometimes give us insight into the relationships between the language communities. In other words, it has to be examined how recent language data from minority groups can serve as an indicator of cultural identity.

In the course of researching Iran-Turkic languages and dialects for many years, especially Iranian-Turkic language contact phenomena, I have undertaken numerous field studies in Iran, especially among the Azerbaijanians in the Northwest, the Khalaj in Central Iran, and the Qashqay in the South. It is from this linguistic perspective that I have gradually approached the topic of cultural identity and cultural change. Linguistic developments can provide clues to the relationships among language communities. The sociolinguistic interview introduced by Labov elicits two types of important data. The first kind provides extralinguistic information relevant to language contact, such as age, provenance, and occupation. The second type of data is raw data from which information concerning the quality of contact to date can be extracted. The Azerbaijanians of Iran, the Khalaj Turks, and the Qashqay Turks, who partially continue to lead a nomadic way of life, provide us with good examples of differing cultural developments.

The Turkic varieties of Iran

Linguistic investigations of Turkic minority languages spoken in Iran began relatively late, only in the early 20th century. One of the pioneers who studied the dialect of Tebriz was Karl Foy (1903/1904), who researched the linguistic characteristics of the Azerbaijanian variety spoken in Tebriz and neighbouring Urmia. In addition, Foy discovered that the Anatolian dialects, especially the dialect of Erzurum, constitute a dialect continuum with Azerbaijanian.

More intensive study of the Turkic languages and dialects spoken in Iran began with the so-called Göttinger expeditions and the extensive materials that were collected and analyzed under the direction of Gerhard Doerfer. The expeditions, which were conducted from 1968 to 1976, made a significant contribution to the previously neglected field of Iran Turkic studies. The linguistic data gathered in these field studies ultimately led to an expansion of the Oghuzic branch of the Turkic languages, thus impacting the linguistic history and the classification of the Turkic languages as a whole.

Numbering approximately 15 million, the Azerbaijanians, whose main area of settlement is located in the Northwest of Iran in the province of Azerbaijan constitute the largest group of Turkic speakers in Iran.¹ Their language, in particular the urban dialect of Tebriz, enjoys a high level of prestige within their own language community as well as among the speakers of the other Turkic languages and varieties of Iran. In addition, it is the *lingua franca* of Iran Turks and the dominant language of commerce in Teheran's Grand Bazaar. The Göttinger expeditions also collected transcription texts and word lists outside the province of Azerbaijan in the Azerbaijanian enclave of Galūgāh, which were analyzed and published in a volume titled *Oghusica aus Iran* (Doerfer, Heschke & Ravanyar 1990).

The Azerbaijanian of Galūgāh forms a bridge to the second largest group of Turkic minorities in Iran, the Khorasan Turks in the Northeast, whose dialects were once classified as Azerbaijanian. Closer examination, however, revealed that these dialects diverge significantly from Azerbaijanian. Khorasan Turkic, spoken by about 2 million people, is made up of six dialect groups² and is descended from the so-called *obya bolya* language, which used to be mistakenly compared with certain Anatolian texts of the 13th and 14th century (Doerfer 1993: 7 f.).

¹ Population figures for Iran tend to vary from one source to another. Demographic data are also vague as the population density differs from region to region, rising rapidly in some areas, and because minorities are not identified in official census reports. The population figures that I use are based on those found in the publications of Gerhard Doerfer and his collaborators as well as those published by Hendrik Boeschoten in the most recent volume of *The Turkic Languages* (1998: 13).

² The Khorasan Turkic dialects are: Bojnūrd in the Northwest, Qūcān in the North, Gūjgī in the Northeast, Soltānābād in the South, and Kharw-e Olyā and Langar in the Southeast. For details see Doerfer 1993: 24 f.

In the Northeast we also find another small Turkic minority language, Turkmen, spoken by a much smaller group of about 500,000 speakers. Continuing to the South of Iran, in the province of Fars, we encounter other Turkic language varieties, dialects of the formerly nomadic Qashqay tribes. The Qashqay Turks became settled in the Iranian province of Fars about 25 years ago and currently comprise an estimated 570,000 people. In recent times, most of the formerly nomadic Qashqay tribes have become settled. According to estimates, there are currently about 500,000 Qashqay speakers, of whom roughly 25% are nomadic or semi-nomadic. While they had been the object of ethnological studies (see Lois Beck 1986 and Oberling 1974), their language remained relatively unknown. Using data collected from an informant living in exile, David Soper was able to include the Qashqay dialect in his 1987 dissertation on *Loan Syntax in Turkic and Iranian*, which also featured the Tajik and Uzbek languages. The Qashqay Turks live in Southern Iran, in the province of Fars, with their center in Firuzābād. The first texts in transcription came out of the Göttinger expeditions in Firuzābād. Currently I am in the process of evaluating data that I collected in the 1990s among the Qashqay Turks of the Kešqulī tribe, who are settled in Nūrābād, a town east of Shiraz.

By far the smallest Turkic minority are the Khalaj of Central Iran, whose existence was “rediscovered” by the Göttinger expeditions as far as Turcology is concerned. Khalaj is spoken about 200 kilometers to the Southwest of Teheran, in the region of Khalajestān, of which the capital is Dastjerd, near the city of Qom. It is spoken by some 28,000 people only. To the question in Persian *torki barf mizani* ‘Do you speak Turkish?’ male Khalaj speakers, who speak Azerbaijanian fluently, tended to answer in Azerbaijanian, a circumstance which understandably misled the respective linguists to identify these speakers as Azerbaijanians. Thus was, for example, the experience of Minorski, who conducted field studies in Iran at the beginning of the twentieth century to study Iranian dialects. However, Minorski, a scholar of Iranian languages by training, made important notations concerning forms he recognized as atypical for Azerbaijanian. For socio-cultural reasons, the Göttinger expeditions were only able to collect linguistic data from male informants. Their research resulted in the publication of numerous articles, a Khalaj dictionary (Doerfer & Tezcan 1980), a Khalaj grammar (Doerfer 1988) and folklore texts of the Khalaj people (Doerfer & Tezcan 1994). The materials that I have collected in my field studies contain various text types, dialogue texts, and also linguistic data of Khalaj women. The language of the women differs from that of the men in that the women usually do not speak Azerbaijanian and their language shows less influence from Modern Persian. This can be explained by the distribution of traditional gender roles in Khalaj society. While men have better contacts to the world outside the community, women are mainly active in the inner-Khalaj community and their families. In this way Khalaj women are not simply fulfilling typical women’s roles such as child-bearing and rearing, but also

function as the main protectors of Khalaj culture and language. It should be added that the linguistic data I obtained from the Khalaj women represent an enlargement of Doerfer's materials and not a refutation.³

Among the Iran Turkic dialects, there are, of course, numerous transitional dialects such as Sonqori in Western Iran or Aynallu in the South. The neighboring areas also feature dialects that form a kind of continuum with the West Iranian Turkic dialects, such as the Anatolian dialects or the Turkic dialects of Northern Iraq, which, although they are called Iraq Turkmen, linguistically rather belong to the Southern branch of the Oghuzic languages.

As a result of spreading Iranian nationalism and the strong dominance of Persian, smaller Turkic varieties today face extinction. This is especially true of the Khalaj minority. According to Doerfer's estimates (1998: 276), the Khalaj language will have become extinct by the middle of the 21st century. Like Turkish and the Turkish dialects, the Iran Turkic languages and dialects belong to the Oghuzic subgroup of the Turkic languages.⁴ Khalaj, however, is an exception as it constitutes a discrete group within the family of Turkic languages. Moreover, Khalaj displays both features which are strongly influenced by Persian and archaic traits of Turkic patterns that mostly reflect an Old Turkic stage and have disappeared in the other Turkic languages. Beside its significance for language contact studies, Khalaj is extremely important for the linguistic history and classification of the Turkic languages.

Frequently linguistic processes provide essential clues to the history and cultural evolution of speakers. Thus, it is primarily through linguistic criteria that one can assess the historical and cultural relationships of minorities whose past has gone unrecorded by history books. For example, the Khalaj, whose language does not belong to the Oghuzic group of Turkic, must have a history separate from the Oghuz Turks. The archaic features of the Khalaj language are evidence of this language community's long isolation from other Turkic-speaking groups.

Influence from Modern Persian

The following are some very general remarks on the influence that Modern Persian has exerted on the Turkic varieties spoken in Iran. The intensive language

³ Doerfer traces the language of the Khalaj back to the dialect of the Arɣu as described by al-Kāšyarī in the sense that the Khalaj of today corresponds to the language of a portion of that people which Mahmūd collectively called „Arɣu“ (which merely means 'valley'). It is assumed that this Arɣu tribe was pushed westward by the Mongol incursions of the 13th century and came to settle in Central Iran. In addition to my descriptive work on the Khalaj language, I am examining this historical question. After my viewing of the relevant information in al-Kāšyarī (I will not go into the particular linguistic data here, see Kiral in press), I find that many questions remain unanswered.

⁴ For the classification and the history of the Oghuzic branch of the Turkic languages see Doerfer 1990 and Schönig 2002.

contact with Persian, Iran's sole official language, has taken place for generations and has led to language contact phenomena on all linguistic levels. Due to this intensive influence we find phonological changes such as lowering and delabialization of [ü] and [ö], e.g. in Khalaj and Qashqay. Iran-Turkic varieties show an abundance of lexical units which are intensively copied⁵ and which are sometimes used beside their Turkic expressions, e.g. in Azerbaijanian *ātaš* and *ot* 'fire'. In higher language registers copied lexical units which do not have Turkic correspondences are frequent, e.g. *vezārat* 'embassy', *dānešgāh* 'university', etc. In addition we can observe that complex units containing grammatical elements are also extensively copied, e.g. *bozortār* 'bigger' [*bozorg* plus comparative suffix *-tār*]. The high frequency of these complex copies from Persian would seem to have forced the copying of certain Persian grammatical elements in isolation, e.g. in Azerbaijanian *böyüxtār* and in Khalaj *bidiktār* 'bigger' [Turkic *böyüx/bidik* plus Persian comparative *-tār*].

It should be noted that the copying of Persian elements or structures can differ according to which Turkic system is doing the copying. In Khalaj or in Qashqay, for example, certain copied grammatical units are productive, whereas in Azerbaijanian they are restricted to complex copies, e.g. Khalaj *kin-i* and Qashqay *gün-i* 'a day' [Turkic *kin/gün* plus Persian indefinite *-i*], but Azerbaijanian *bir gün* 'a day'. Copies of the Persian type of complex sentence construction constitute an areal-typologically distinctive feature in the Turkic languages and varieties of Iran. In all Iran-Turkic varieties we find complex sentences introduced by conjunctions copied from Persian such as copies of *vaqti ke* 'when', *çon ke* 'because', *qabl az inke* 'before', *ba'd az inke* 'after', etc. Analogously, genuine Turkic strategies of left-branching complex sentences using subordinative nonfinite verbal morphology have been extremely reduced.⁶

As an alternative to the copying of Persian grammatical material, Turkic elements can be influenced by Persian with the result that they enter into combinations and acquire or discard functions often in accordance with their corresponding Persian structures. Those copies display combinational and semantic structural features of their equivalents. Modal constructions formed after their Persian counterparts are an example of this. They use modal auxiliary verbs to express modality in combination with a verb in the optative/imperative mood, where Persian employs the subjunctive, e.g. Khalaj *šäyim yäkälgäm* [want:prs:1sg *yä:come_opt:1sg*] 'I want to come', Qashqay *sän bašayiräy gäläy* [you succeed:prs:2sg *go:opt:2sg*] 'you can come'.⁷ In some cases even the valence of a verb can be changed such as in Iran-Turkic the verb for 'to eat', which can take a dative object in the meaning 'to fit', similar to Persian *xordan* 'to eat' which, in this meaning, is

⁵ This description of language contact phenomena employs the terminology of the Code-Copying Model (Johanson 1992).

⁶ See Kiral 2001 for copied complex sentence constructions from Persian.

⁷ For more details concerning modal constructions see Kiral 2005.

used mainly in spoken Persian varieties. These examples give us important information about the language system or register from which they are copied.

Sociolinguistic factors

With the exception of a very few publications, the majority of the Turkic dialects of Iran neither are written nor have any literary tradition. As a rule, the speakers of Iran-Turkic languages are bilingual in Turkic and Persian. In addition to their local variety, the male speakers usually are fluent in Azerbaijanian, which functions as the *lingua franca* of the Iran Turks and is also the main language of the Teheran bazaar. The Azerbaijanian language of Iran enjoys considerable prestige among the Iran Turks.⁸

Khalaj, like all of the other Iran-Turkic languages, is a spoken language only and is the object of heavy influence from Persian. For generations, the Khalaj have been multilingual in Khalaj, Persian and Azerbaijanian. During my extended stays among the Khalaj, I observed that Khalaj children no longer actively speak the language. Among the middle-aged, Persian tends to be the dominant language. Parents have told me that they prefer to speak Persian at home so that their children will not face difficulties at school or be disadvantaged compared to their Persian classmates. Doerfer predicted that the Khalaj language will have completely disappeared by the middle of the twenty-first century.

The researchers who participated in the Göttinger Expeditions had not been able to work with female informants, although Doerfer (1987: 13) did note that the researchers had casually observed that the women spoke Khalaj better than the men. The material obtained from female Khalaj speakers is also interesting because it shows that the Oghuzic influence that is present in the Khalaj spoken by the men does not occur in the women's speech. In fact, all other Turkic languages and dialects of Iran show influence especially from the Tebriz variety. This Oghuz-Turkic influence does not appear in the Khalaj spoken by the females, who as a rule do not speak Azerbaijanian. Therefore, when Khalaj women wish to communicate with other Iran-Turks, they speak Persian.

In my research, the sociolinguistic discourse analysis based on conversation analysis emphasizes face-to-face communication in which rules, interpretations, and assessments are determined. The discourse became the locus of language contact, where individuals with differing language competence and attitudes came together. The methods of conversation and discourse analysis can also be applied to examining attitudes toward language and stereotypes. Among other things, I have paid special attention to the individual speakers' attitudes toward language. The

⁸ Javāt Hayatī, an Iranian Turcologist of Azerbaijanian descent, has told me that in the near future Azerbaijanian will be taught in the public schools in the province of Azerbaijan.

comparison of different cultures reveals different "cultural scripts" within the language contact situation. I examined issues such as "Who speaks which language when to whom?" and discovered, for example, that parents had decided from a particular point in time, say the birth of a child, to speak Persian to this and all of their future children. In such a family, then, the parents speak Persian to each other; they speak Khalaj with the grandparents. Further, the parents speak Persian with those children who were born after the decision to speak Persian; and the children that were raised before this decision speak Khalaj with the grandparents but Persian with the parents, while all of the children speak Persian to one another. When strangers come together in open social situations (on the bus, in the bazaar), the age of the respective speaker plays an important role in determining which language is spoken. Younger generations choose Persian exclusively in such situations. One can observe that the language contact phenomena are more frequent and far-reaching than those found in the speech of elderly people. Khalaj spoken by older females shows significantly less influence from Persian than Khalaj spoken by middle-aged women or by the men of any age. In fact, women who are monolingual speakers of minority languages in general often speak these languages in a form containing fewer influences from contact languages.

The loss of social domains and the adoption of the dominant Persian language are two of the main reasons for contact-induced phenomena. These pressures can eventually lead to gradual language shift. In this context language attitude plays an important role. Azerbaijanian, which is used as a *lingua franca* among the Iran-Turks, has a relatively high degree of prestige. By contrast Khalaj has very little prestige among the Turkic language communities in Iran, one of the main reasons why Khalaj is in danger of linguistic extinction. Its speakers have become culturally assimilated, referring to themselves as Iranians who speak a strange mother tongue. Unlike the Azerbaijanians, the Khalaj speak Persian without a Turkic accent.

Like the minority Khalaj, the Qashqay Turks also speak Persian without a foreign accent. Unlike the Khalaj, however, they have not culturally assimilated. The Qashqay consciously practice their folklore and customs.

In some areas, the Turkic and Persian cultures undergo a kind of synthesis in which genuine and adopted customs merge. For example, marriages between female family members and Persian men are much less condoned among the Qashqay than among the Khalaj. The Qashqay are anxious to keep foreign influence to a minimum. An interesting linguistic phenomenon that serves as an indicator of tribal identity among the Qashqay occurs for example in the use of present tense forms. Thus, some Qashqay tribes consciously use the aorist only to denote the present tense.

Because of the increased usage of the official language and the pervasiveness of the media, influence from Persian is on the rise and is causing a generational conflict. I believe that as television increasingly becomes a part of family life,

cultural distinctions between the Persian majority and the smaller Turkic minorities whose native languages enjoy little prestige within their own speech communities will ultimately erode.

As mentioned at the outset, this article has been an attempt to approach the topic of cultural change from the perspective of language contact studies. The Turkic languages and dialects discussed here show varying degrees of influence from the Persian language. It would appear that the language attitude of speakers is one criterion involved in the process of cultural change. This is particularly evident in the case of the Khalaj, who have culturally assimilated and whose native tongue today is in danger of becoming extinct.

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