Language Planning in Medieval Iran

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According to his contemporaries, Yaqub ibn Layth al-Saffari did not come from a noble lineage (Bosworth 2002). Known as the “Coppersmith” (al-Saffar), he worked as an apprentice craftsman in Sistan, a historical region now split between the modern day countries of Iran and Afghanistan until he and his brother, Amr, became warriors and bandits. Citing the grievances of the local population against the Caliphs in Baghdad, they led a rebellion that established a short-lived empire that controlled a large swath of Eastern Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

As he celebrated his capture of the city of Herat, a poet came forth to praise the self-proclaimed emperor with verses composed in Arabic. Al-Saffari's face, disfigured by battle wounds, must have made an intimidating sneer as he rebuked the poet, saying: “Why would you say something I don't understand?” (Mahmoodi-Bakhtiari 2003). His personal secretary, perhaps sensing an opportunity, spontaneously composed a sycophantic verse in Yaqub's native Persian dialect:

O, you, king that the world's kings are all,  
His slaves, servants and dogs and obedient!  
(ibid).

In the folklore of Iran this moment has become symbolic of the changing fortunes of Arabic and Persian as the language of elites in this corner of the Islamic world. This shift in prestige is reflected today in the linguistic composition of Southwest and Central Asia.

Yaqub al-Saffari was born at the low ebb of Persian's fortunes in Greater Iran. Two hundred years earlier, the Sassanid Empire, rivals to Rome in the Fertile Crescent for centuries, had fallen to Arab armies from the West in a matter of only half a decade. In the centuries between the fall of the Sassanids and al-Saffar's conquests, Persian had lost its status as a language of prestige and administration. It was replaced by Arabic, which carried with it not only the cache of a conquering army, but also a sacred character as the language of Islam.

In 876 C.E., al-Saffari's rebellion reached the Caliph, the supreme leader of the Muslim world. At the Battle of Dayr al-'Aqul. Yaqub's rebellious army, outnumbered and fighting an army in unfamiliar territory, were finally pushed back. Yaqub died three years later, never again pushing his armies towards Iraq, and the reins of power were seized by his younger brother, Amr ibn al-Layth, a former mule herder and mason.
Wishing to check the power of the Saffarids, the Caliph al-Mu'tadid sent a letter requesting aid to another local Persian prince, Ismail Samanid. In it, he exhorted the prince, who controlled Bukhara (in modern day Uzbekistan), to attack the rebellious Amr in Afghanistan. At the Battle of Balkh in the year 900, Ismail defeated the Saffarid armies despite overwhelming numerical inferiority.

Content to remain subordinate princes, the Samanid rulers who followed Ismail continued to recognize the authority of Baghdad (Soucek 2000:73) and grew rich on agriculture and the arteries of trade crisscrossing Inner Asia (Yarshater 2004:2). But their loyalty to Baghdad did not extend to matters of language.

In Language Planning: From Practice to Theory, Kaplan and Baldauf compare the linguistic forces at work in a society to an “eco-system” (1997:296) which interrelate speech communities with each other. Language planning theory differs from traditional linguistics in that its principal approach to language is from a historical-political perspective. In this view language not as an intrinsic value, but as a variable which is influenced by choices made on both the individual and community levels. It claims that languages possess both a purely linguistic element (vocabulary, grammar, etc) as well as a social dimension (prestige, officialness, etc). These two elements are called, respectively, corpus and status, and language planning may involve changes to either or both.

If someone is multilingual, for example, what other languages does he or she choose to speak and when? With what alphabet or in what language are children educated? Language choices are influenced by preferences and prohibitions within society. Important among these is the concept of a language’s prestige, the social status that is conferred upon a speaker of a particular language in a particular context. This is distinct from a language’s status as “official” or “unofficial.”

Language planning is most often treated as a modern phenomenon, as the centralized authority of a nation-state both expedites corpus change and provides the coercive power to enforce changes in a language’s status. A fresh perspective on the relationship between Arabic and Persian in medieval Iran has come from scholarship using modern sociolinguistic theories of language planning. Mahmoodi-Bakhtiar (2003) suggests that the actions of per-modern, feudal elites can be placed in a similar, if not identical, framework.

The first step in language planning is the selection of a language or dialect that is to become the standard or official version. The story of Yaqub al-Saffari’s rebuke demonstrates that selection was the prerogative of elites. It was, however, the Samanid princes who decreed that all correspondences with the court be conducted in Persian rather than Arabic (Mahmoodi-Bakhtiar 2003:260). Furthermore, the variety of Persian selected by the Samanids had:

...roots [which] went back to the official language of the last per-Islamic dynasty, the Sassanids, who were in turn heirs to... the earliest historical dynasty (Soucek 2000:72).

In time, this dialect of Persian replaced the Central Asian versions previously spoken in the homeland of the Samanid rulers.

Elites and royals directly affected the status of Persian in more ways than making it the official language of their courts. Their patronage also informally influenced the status of the language through their patronage of Persian literature. During their reign, philosophic and astronomical works were produced (Yarshater 2004:2), and the oral tradition of Persian
poetry was recorded and codified (Mahmoodi-Bakhtiar 2003:255).

The physician Avicenna and mathematician al-Biruni coined neologisms and used translations of Arabic technical terms during the Samanid era, and many of their new words are still used in Modern Persian (Mahmoodi-Bakhtiar 2003:258-259). Two of the most important poets in Persian history, Rudaki and Ferdowsi, also composed their master works during the Samanid era, further bolstering the status of their chosen language. Ferdowsi’s Shahname is not only a masterpiece of New Persian literature, but also an encyclopedia of Persian culture and legend that connects his contemporary, Islamic Persia to the pre-Islamic kings of antiquity.

Although the claim has been made that the historical period instigated by al-Saffari and Ismail Samanid represented “a scientific and systematic approach to saving the Persian language from a gradual death (Mahmoodi-Bakhtiar 2003 251).” Other scholars, however, warn against reading too much into this early stage of Persian revolt:

Ya’qub, as a man of the people who gloried in his lowly origins and denounced the ’Abbasids as usurpers and exploiters, expressed local Sistāni discontent with outside masters, and for this reason may be regarded as a mouthpiece of local protest in Persia, though not as a proto-Persian nationalist. Nor can we assume that the scraps of New Persian poetry which his inevitable court eulogists addressed to him, and which are preserved in the sources, show Sistān as a focus of the New Persian literary revival (Bosworth 2002).

Certainly, the influence of local elites in medieval Middle East differs greatly from the state-centered language planning attempts of, say, the Soviet Union (Bennigsen 1989, Fierman 1991, Landau 2001). However, the Samanid rulers’ patronage of Persian as a language of culture and scholarship equal to that of Arabic led to a fusion that Soucek (2000:73) compares to the hybrid of Anglo-Saxon and French that resulted from the Norman Invasion of England.

Under the patronage and influence of elites such as the Šamanids, a new Persian idiom challenged Arabic's regional dominance in Iran during the ninth and tenth centuries. The dialect selected and developed by these local rulers eventually replaced other regional dialects spoken in Central Asia, paving the way for a regional Persian identity that connects ancient kings, medieval amirs and modern mullahs, presidents and ayatollahs.

REFERENCES

http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/yaqub-b-layt-b-moaddal


