

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PERSIAN, FARSI, DARI, TAJIKI: LANGUAGE NAMES AND LANGUAGE POLICIES

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#### 4.1. INTRODUCTION

Persian is an important language today in a number of countries of west, south and central Asia. But its status in each is different. In Iran its unique status as the only official or national language continues to be jealously guarded, even though half—probably more—of the population use a different language (mainly Azari/Azeri Turkish) at home, and on the streets, though not in formal public situations, and not in writing. Attempts to breach this exclusive status of Persian in Iran have increased in recent decades, but are still relatively minor. Persian (called *tajiki*) is also the official language of Tajikistan, but here it shares that status informally with Russian, while in the west of the country Uzbek is also widely used and in the more isolated eastern part of the country other local Iranian languages are now dominant. In Afghanistan, although Persian (officially renamed *dari* in 1964, but still commonly called *farsi*) is the official language, the national language is Pashto, and there is no official restriction on the use of other languages (see discussion by Nawid in this volume). Persian also continues to be spoken in some of the northern and western parts of Pakistan and the southern littoral of the Persian Gulf. Meanwhile, for most people in Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, for reasons that are explained later, Persian is informally recognized as a classical language. In the other countries of the region—Turkey, the Caucasus, the Persian Gulf and the other Central Asian republics—somewhat negative, discriminatory attitudes are found with regard to Persian. This situation is a consequence of the nationalisms that have emerged over the past fifty years or so. This unusual combination of vast geographical distribution and country-by-country variation can be explained only by detailed reference to the history of the language. Persian makes an interesting historical case study, because it includes in a somewhat exaggerated form a number of features that are found in other modern languages

that have long textual records—features which throw a shadow over the continuing development of language policies in all these countries, and may illuminate some of the less tangible factors behind language policy in general.

Persian is an unusual, perhaps unique, case in world history: unlike other languages which became media of written communication before the modern period, it moved seamlessly out of its mediaeval past into the status of official language in three modern countries without undergoing any significant modification. New Persian, the form of the language which emerged in the Arabic script in the 8th century AD (with a borrowed Arabic vocabulary component comparable to the Latin in English) is the direct successor to Middle Persian (written in a form of the Aramaic script since the third century BC) and Old Persian before that (written in cuneiform since the 6th century BC). Besides the longevity and relative stability of New Persian over a period exceeding a millennium (for more detail see Spooner and Hanaway in press) from earlier periods of very low literacy rates to present situations of near universal literacy, and from language of dynastic courts and administration to national language—texts from the 9th and 10th centuries are fully legible and still in use among educated Iranians today—this historical continuity was facilitated by a number of factors. The most important are:

- A. The geographical extent of its standard usage between the 9th and the 19th centuries, from as far east as the trade routes into central China under the Mongol (Yuan) dynasty in the 13th and 14th centuries, south over the Deccan Plateau into southern India under the Mughals, and as far west as the western reaches of the Ottoman Empire in Bosnia, as the public language for any function associated with writing—administration, trade, literature—regardless of local spoken languages, among non-Muslims (e.g. Hindus) as well as Muslims.
- B. Its association with the authority of governments and the culture (*adab*) of the secular elites of cities throughout this vast area.
- C. The social organization of literacy (over an area much larger than the group of modern countries considered in this volume), which effectively restricted entry to the literate class down to the middle of the 20th century, the consistent degree of interaction among members of the urban literate class throughout this area by travel and correspondence, and the high cultural and religious value ascribed