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***Guest Editor's Introduction***

**Endangered Iranian Languages: Language Contact  
and Language Islands in Iran**

The topic of “Endangered Languages” has come more into the focus of public and academic debate in recent years and is being discussed by numerous scholars. The Iranian languages are a branch of the Indo-Iranian languages, which are in turn a branch of the Indo-European language family. As of 2008, there were an estimated 150 to 200 million native speakers of Iranian languages.<sup>1</sup> The Ethnologue (2019)<sup>2</sup> estimates that there are eighty-six Iranian languages; the most prominent of these are Persian, Pashto, Balochi and the Kurdish group.

Many languages spoken in Iran today will become extinct in the near future. A large number of these languages and dialects have never been recorded or described. Many of them are in danger of being lost if their speakers die or if members of younger generations turn to the use of other languages instead. In many areas of Iran, political, religious and social tensions are creating situations in which speakers abandon their languages and traditional ways of life. These speakers generally turn to the primary use of Persian, which is the country’s dominant language and associated with social and economic power. The speed of this development has increased dramatically in the last century, especially in the case of minority languages. Language minorities in Iran are losing ground to dominant and more widely recognized Persian. The minority languages regularly lose their own characteristics, and their speakers are no longer able to communicate and fully understand the language. As a consequence, an endangered language gradually becomes dormant. The process of aging generations of speakers without language transmission to younger speakers ultimately leads to language shift and loss of language. Since language is closely related to culture, if a community loses its language, it also loses much of its cultural heritage and history, including the traditions of ceremonies, rituals, myths, poetry, songs, humor, habits, and rhetoric. These traditions and cultural habits are often replaced by the habits of the dominant community.

A language can slowly become extinct, known as a “gradual death” or, alternatively, a “sudden death,” when all or almost all of its speakers suddenly die or are killed, due to

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<sup>1</sup>Windfuhr, *Iranian Languages*, 1.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.ethnologue.com>

circumstances such as war or natural disasters. A third alternative is “radical language death.” This means a rapid loss of speech due to genocide or political repression. Stages of “gradual death” allow us to track the effects of change both externally and internally.

Much has already been written and commented on regarding language endangerment, but language contact has not been sufficiently taken into account in discussions about it. Although languages without contact phenomena can be compromised, language change through language contact is the most common process leading to language death. Language contact creates a continuum of structural borrowing that leads to the replacement of grammar and lexicon and, finally, to language shift.<sup>3</sup>

In many locations in Iran, language shift occurs because Persian is politically and economically dominant. Persian is then typically used by the speakers of the non-dominant language group as the administrative or business language, and eventually permeates everyday usage. For example, this dominance of Persian has led to the gradual abandonment of the languages of almost all ethnic and religious minorities in Iran.

For such language shift, Zoroastrian Dari (also known as Behdini, Gavri or Gavruni), the language of a religious minority in Iran, serves as an example. Persian structural borrowings in Zoroastrian Dari are massive. The two languages mainly share syntactic features and phonological characteristics. In a large number of grammatical categories, Zoroastrian Dari relies almost exclusively on borrowings from Persian. The borrowings include prepositions, negation markers, adverbial subordinators, adverbial sentence structure, coordinating conjunctions, indefiniteness, object markers, and much more. In fact, one can only identify a small number of grammatical relationships on which Persian has had little or no influence. The existence of these clearly proves massive structural borrowing.

The question now arises as to whether language contact with Persian is responsible for the loss of language and persistent language death in minority languages, or whether there are other causes of language loss outside the linguistic system. To answer this question, we must take into account the sociolinguistic conditions of endangerment shared by endangered languages. The endangerment of languages can be traced back to a number of internal as well as external factors.<sup>4</sup>

It is of particular importance to find cases in which language death has taken place by speakers gradual shifting to the use of another language rather than by the sudden disappearance of the speaker population. In addition, it is important to identify the causes of abandonment of a language and the factors that make a language more vulnerable to a shift in language use. To clarify this issue, we organized the International Symposium on Endangered Iranian Languages (ISEIL) 2018 conference on “Endangered Iranian Languages: Language Islands and Language Contact,” held from 19 to 20 October at the Leibniz-Zentrum Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft (ZAS) in Berlin, Germany, as part of cooperative work between the Institute for Empirical Linguistics at the Goethe University of Frankfurt, the Freie Universität Berlin and the ZAS. A total of twenty-four experts from the fields of linguistics, Iranian studies,

<sup>3</sup>Thomason and Kaufmann, *Language Contact*.

<sup>4</sup>For external factors see Matras, “Language Contact, Language Endangerment.”

Arabic studies, Turkic studies and Semitic studies participated in the conference. Scholars from Europe, the United States, Canada and the Middle East and other parts of Asia discussed both practical and theoretical dimensions of language contact and language islands in Iran. The conference was funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation in Germany.

The present volume is a collection of selected articles based on papers given at ISEIL 2018 in Berlin. All contributions that were submitted for this special issue were carefully evaluated by the editors in collaboration with external referees. The purpose of this collection is to elucidate the term “language islands” with examples in Iran, and to investigate language contact in Iran with a focus on language endangerment. The main question addressed by this collection is whether language contact with Persian or other dominant languages is responsible for the loss of language and the persistent language death of minority languages, or if there are other non-linguistic causes for the loss of language. Another aspect of this issue is the identification of causes of abandonment of a language and of vulnerability to social changes leading to a shift in the balance of domain-specific language use.

Language contact is seen as a condition in which “two or more languages are alternately used by the same individual.”<sup>5</sup> In the study of language contact sequences, this volume focuses on two phenomena: (1) the influence of one language on another, and (2) results of the influence in the receiving language. Of particular importance is the degree of borrowing in vocabulary (foreign words, loanwords, loan translations, etc.).

The overall structure of this special issue is made up of six parts. The first part is devoted to language contact and linguistics of Iranian languages. Mohammad Dabir-Moghaddam discusses the implications for language isolation, language change and contact linguistics in Khorasan. He examines the existence of these language islands in Khorasan and the reasons for change and shift in the former dialect of Birjand. His article gives an overview of the linguistic positioning of the dialects of Ferdows and Khanik.

On the subject of “Jewish Languages,” Habib Borjian’s article focuses on Judeo-Shirazi. He notes that historical-comparative phonology classifies Judeo-Shirazi directly within the group of Southwestern Iranian. In Borjian’s view, Judeo-Shirazi shows a close relationship to the indigenous rural languages spoken around Shiraz and Kāzerun. These vernaculars seem to form their own southwestern Iranian subgroup, separated from the Lārestāni group in the southeast (Lecoq 1989) and the Garmsiri languages in Kermān (Borjian 2017) by significant lexical and grammatical isoglosses.

The last contribution of this part, which was not a part of the ISEIL conference and was submitted later to the journal by Jam, Razmdideh and Naseri, treats “Final n-Deletion in Ghayeni Persian.” This research presents new empirical data about characteristics of phonological processes in different domains and environments are affected by several opaque counterbleeding and counterfeeding interactions as well as bleeding.

In Iran, there are relatively small closed language and settlement communities located in a larger foreign language area (mostly a Persian-speaking area). Many

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<sup>5</sup>Weinreich, *Languages in Contact*.

language islands in Iran today are endangered or have already vanished. Political, cultural, religious and/or linguistic situations are the decisive factors for the preservation of the linguistic island. Several lectures have already addressed these factors. Many more questions have arisen in this debate:

What are the most important methodological approaches in the study of language islands? How suitable are traditional methods of language documentation for exploring the language islands? Why is a change of perspective required?

Specific examples of the use of the research methods mentioned in this volume show that linguistic islands create a special cultural environment that determines both the particular methodological environment and the results of the research.

The second part of the volume raises key issues on the Aramaic and Arabic linguistic islands. In his contribution, Geoffrey Khan gives an overview of the neo-Aramaic dialects that are spoken in Iran in modern times. The language situation has changed dramatically in recent decades due to mass migration.

He emphasizes above all the new character of the neo-Aramaic dialects that came into being through contact with other languages spoken in Iran, especially Iranian and Turkish.

Dina El Zakra and Sandra Ziagos' article deals with the language of the Arab minority in the provinces of Bushehr and Hormozgan. This preliminary study explores the hypothesis that Arabic dialects spoken on the Iranian side of the Persian Gulf exhibit the beginnings of contact-induced shift in word order from VO to OV.

The third part of this volume includes various aspects of the Georgian language island in Fereydanshahr in Isfahan. Beridze, Bakuradze and Pourtskhvanidze treat a dialectal variant of the Georgian language in Iran, Fereydani Georgian, which has survived in Iran since the seventeenth century. This article covers various relevant aspects of the history of Fereydani Georgian, and it presents the internal heterogeneity and multi-layered linguistic character of this language island, based on findings from language materials that have been collected through fieldwork in Fereydanshahr in recent years.

Tea Shurgaia discusses proverbial borrowings in Fereyan from Persian. She presents three groups of proverbs: (1) Persian proverbs, translated into the Fereydani dialect; (2) common Georgian and Persian proverbs; and (3) Georgian proverbs that are not present in the paremiological corpus of Persian. She points out that, remarkably, most of these three types of proverbs reflect characteristics of the Fereydani dialect on the phonetic, lexical and grammatical levels.

On the subject of "Turkish Languages," the topic of the fourth part, Elisabetta Ragagnin's research deals with the major and minor Turkish languages in Iran and focuses on contact phenomena in these languages.

The article by Anonby, Taheri-Ardali and Schreiber focuses on the effects of language contact in the city of Juneqan in Chahar Mahal va Bakhtiari Province, where the position of two minority languages—Bakhtiari and Qashqai Turkic—appears to be evenly balanced. The authors argue that the equivalent influence of each language on the first- and second-language speech of members of the other language community is achieved not by simple equal status, but through the counter-

balancing of regional Bakhtiari dominance with majority mother-tongue Turkic population in this city.

The fifth part of this special issue is devoted to primary sources and archival reports, and includes an introduction to the Iran Linguistic Atlas Project (ILA) at the Research Institute for Cultural Heritage and Tourism, by Faryar Akhlaghi.

The final part of the volume includes three book reviews. Mohammad Rasekhmahand looks at *The Languages and Linguistics of Western Asia: An Areal Perspective* [The World of Linguistics Series; volume 6], edited by Geoffrey Haig and Geoffrey Khan. This book was launched on 19 October 2018 during the ISEIL 2018.

Zaniar Naghshbandi reviews *The Oxford Handbook of Persian Linguistics*, edited by Pounch Shabani-Jadidi and Anousha Sedighi.

Mahrokh Shojaei looks at *Endangered Iranian Languages*, edited by me.

I am grateful to *Iranian Studies* and its Editor-in-Chief, Ali Gheissari, for their support in the publication of this special issue and those colleagues who invested a considerable amount of time and effort in acting as referees.

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