



The Permanent Committee on Geographical Names

## Afghanistan: The Validity of *Dari* as a Language Label

### Introduction

1 Much discussion has taken place as to the name of the principal Western Iranian language of Afghanistan<sup>1</sup>. Within Afghanistan itself, this language is officially known as Dari, and it is listed as such in that country's constitution. The name itself is believed to derive from Persian words relating to "court" (*dar* = "door/gate" leading to *darbār* = "court"). This paper attempts to establish whether Dari is an appropriate label for this language of Afghanistan, and the degree to which this language might differ from its closely related partners, Persian and Tajik.

### Evolution of the language label *Dari*

2 Until recent decades, there seems to have been little recognition of this language as anything other than Persian. The classic Steingass dictionary of 1892<sup>2</sup> does contain an entry for Dari, but essentially as a dialect, the language entry instead being for "Farsi", the Persian-language word for "Persian":

Darī one of the three surviving dialects of the seven anciently spoken in Persia, said to prevail chiefly in Balkh, Bukhara and Badakhshan, and called the language of the court and of paradise.

Fārsī Persian (language).

Herbert Penzl, writing in the 1950s, is content to consider the language as being simply "Afghan Persian"<sup>3</sup>, and Miller's Soviet viewpoint in the 1960s was that the language was "Farsi"<sup>4</sup>.

3 Also writing in the 1960s was the librarian of the Fairchild Aerial Surveys company, engaged at the time in a comprehensive mapping exercise in Afghanistan. With a doctorate in linguistics, the librarian too was of the opinion that this language was basically Persian – his exact definition being "Persian (or rather a variety of it)"<sup>5</sup>. And interestingly, at the same historical juncture, the Afghan creator of the romanization system used in the Fairchild mapping exercise was also calling the language "Persian"<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The principal Eastern Iranian language of Afghanistan is Pashto.

<sup>2</sup> *Persian-English Dictionary*, F Steingass, London 1892 (2<sup>nd</sup> Impression 1930).

<sup>3</sup> *A Grammar of Pashto*, H Penzl, Washington DC 1955.

<sup>4</sup> *Persidsko-Russkiy Slovar'*, B V Miller, Moscow 1960.

<sup>5</sup> *A few remarks concerning the transliteration of Pashto*, S A Bence, Fairchild Aerial Surveys, 1964, p11.

<sup>6</sup> *Transliteration System for Geographical Names in Afghanistan*, M Din Yaqubi, Royal Afghan Ministry of Mines & Industries, Special Publication No 1, Kabul, 1962; resubmitted in *Activities of the Afghan Cartographic Institute for the past five years*, 6<sup>th</sup> UN Regional Cartographic Conference for Asia and the Far East, Tehran 1970.

4 So even within Afghanistan there may have been relatively little usage of the term Dari up to and including the 1960s. But labelling practices for this language were beginning to alter, with the “Dari” label achieving much greater prominence as representing a language in its own right. Ten years after Miller’s dictionary, the Soviet two-volume Persian-Russian dictionary of 1970<sup>7</sup> contained separate entries as follows:

Darī name of the second state language of Afghanistan (equally with Pashto), named also Farsi or Farsi-Kabuli

Fārsī Persian (language or literature).

And working papers presented by Afghanistan and the Asia South-West Division of the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names to the 3<sup>rd</sup> UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names at Athens in 1977 both unequivocally labelled the language as “Dari”<sup>8</sup>. Also at this time, Iran itself seems to have come to acknowledge that Dari was not wholly identical to Persian. A Persian-English dictionary compiled in 1976<sup>9</sup> has two separate entries as follows:

Darī ancient Persian dialect; [separately] the Persian spoken in Afghanistan

Fārsī Persian (language).

5 Current English-language literature relating to Afghanistan is by and large consistent in its use of Dari as the appropriate language label. Jason Elliot speaks of “Dari, the Afghan version of Farsi”<sup>10</sup>, while the Odyssey companion guide to Afghanistan<sup>11</sup> has the following entry in its glossary:

Dari: one of the main official languages of Afghanistan; an Indo-Iranian tongue closely related to Farsi (the language of Iran) and Tajik.

The author Nelofer Pazira, in recalling her formative years in Afghanistan, consistently refers to the language – her own language, as it happens – as Dari, even providing it with a retrospective application to the time of her early childhood in the 1950s, defining the Dari of that period as “the language of the people and the administration in Kabul”<sup>12</sup>.

### **Differences and similarities between *Dari* and its close relations**

6 The principal question is whether Dari is a dialect of Persian, as it seems to have been perceived until the 1970s, or whether the present balance of opinion that Dari can stand as a language in its own right is justified. As the example of Moldovan shows<sup>13</sup>, simple vocabulary differences are not sufficient to constitute a separate language, and for Dari we scarcely know for certain what vocabulary differences from Persian there may be. There is a distinct lack of dictionaries, though BGN have acquired at least one recently<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> *Persidsko-Russkiy Slovar'*, Yu A Rubinchik, 2 volumes, Moscow 1970.

<sup>8</sup> *Report on Afghanistan*, 3<sup>rd</sup> UNCSGN, Athens, 1977, WP E/CONF.69/L.111; and *Report by the Government of Iran on progress made in the standardization of geographical names*, 3<sup>rd</sup> UNCSGN, Athens 1977, WP E/CONF.69/L.86.

<sup>9</sup> *The Concise Persian-English Dictionary*, A & M Aryanpur-Kashani, Tehran, compiled 1976, published 1997.

<sup>10</sup> *An Unexpected Light: Travels in Afghanistan*, J Elliot, Picador, 1999: 0330371622, p52.

<sup>11</sup> *Afghanistan: A Companion and Guide*, B Omrani & M Leeming, Odyssey 2005: 9622177468, p737.

<sup>12</sup> *A Bed of Red Flowers: in search of my Afghanistan*, Nelofer Pazira, Free Press, 2005: 0743281331, p30.

As we have seen, the term Dari was rarely used contemporaneously in the 1950s.

<sup>13</sup> See *Moldovan: An Identity but not a Language*, PCGN 2005: available at <http://www.pcgng.org.uk>.

<sup>14</sup> *Dari-English Dictionary*, M N Neghat, Kabul/University of Nebraska 1993.

7 Emphasising the linguistic similarities, the Bookrags website notes that “the languages are so similar in their structure, syntax, and lexicon that Iranians and Afghans can communicate with each other with little difficulty”<sup>15</sup> Yet there does nonetheless seem to be scientific justification for the separation of Dari from Persian. The UCLA website speaks of “clear phonological and morphological contrasts”<sup>16</sup>, and Bookrags acknowledges that “there are some distinctive differences between the two. The accent in Dari is not quite so stressed as in Farsi; the vowel systems of the two languages differ; and Dari employs more consonants than Farsi. Finally, when a designation is specified, Dari adds a suffix, *ra*”. Supporters of Dari claim that the language also has its own separate literary tradition, both past and present.

8 In her autobiography, the author Nelofer Pazira recounts the moment when her relatives returned to Afghanistan after having spent some time living across the border in Iran: “My cousins all speak Dari with an Iranian accent”<sup>17</sup>. Pazira could easily have written that her cousins had returned speaking Persian/Farsi, if that is what she had intended to convey. Instead the inference is that Dari, even with a Persian accent, remains a different medium from Persian. Indeed, as we have seen in paragraph 5, Pazira is a consistent advocate of the notion of Dari as a separate language, and regards it as the language she and several million others in Afghanistan speak.

9 The Ethnologue organisation prefers the label “Eastern Farsi” to Dari<sup>18</sup>, but to the present writer this term seems inappropriate for three reasons:

(a) The usefulness of compass points in linguistic labels is debatable, particularly at this low level of the taxonomic hierarchy. The “Farsi” category is itself already classified as a Western Iranian, or sometimes a South-Western Iranian, language. Thus Dari would be an eastern sub-type of a western or south-western language. It is a complicated and tortuous terminology.

(b) As an extension of this, and as Comrie hints<sup>19</sup>, compass points used in the linguistic sense may not correspond precisely to compass points used in the geographical sense. We could cite the tongue known as Dimili or Zaza as an example; linguistically this belongs to the southern Kurdish branch of languages yet geographically it is located exclusively in pockets of east-central Turkey, at the north-western edge of the Kurdish-speaking area. Similarly, Ossetian is a language of the north-eastern Iranian branch, yet it is a language spoken in the northern Caucasus, at the very north-western periphery of the Iranian language sphere.

(c) Ethnologue suggests that, in Pakistan at least, Tajik and Dari are both alternative names for Eastern Farsi. Using “Eastern Farsi” as a label therefore has the potential to cause misunderstanding as to whether Dari or Tajik is intended. And, as will be demonstrated<sup>20</sup>, a linkage of Dari and Tajik in this manner is highly improbable anyway.

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<sup>15</sup> “Bookrags” quotations in this paper are at <http://www.bookrags.com/history/worldhistory/dari-ema-02/>.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.lmp.ucla.edu/Profile.aspx?LangID=63>.

<sup>17</sup> *A Bed of Red Flowers: in search of my Afghanistan*, Nelofer Pazira, Free Press, 2005: 0743281331, p252.

<sup>18</sup> As opposed to Western Farsi, its preferred label for Persian. See

[http://www.ethnologue.com/show\\_language.asp?code=prs](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=prs).

<sup>19</sup> *The Languages of the Soviet Union*, B Comrie, Cambridge University Press 1981: 0521232309, p159.

<sup>20</sup> See paragraphs 10-11.

## Brief note about *Tajik* in relation to Afghanistan

10 The “Tajik” language label<sup>21</sup> tells an interesting story in relation to Afghanistan. Neither the nineteenth century Steingass dictionary<sup>22</sup> nor the present-day dictionary of Aryanpur-Kashani<sup>23</sup> mentions this word in a language context at all. For Steingass, “Tājīkī” means no more than a tiller of the soil and/or a term of abuse, while for Aryanpur-Kashani there is simply no entry at all. Yet both Persian-Russian dictionaries<sup>24</sup> do include the word “Tājīkī” as a language label. The reason for this difference in approach is explained by the establishment of the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Before that time, the principal Persian language of present-day Tajikistan was not significantly different from that of Afghanistan, and the term “Persian” was generally used to cover both – as we have seen, neither “Dari” nor “Tajik” generally featured as a dictionary term at that time. The Soviets crafted and codified the Persian within their area of control, an area which developed into the Tadzhik SSR, and in effect created in that unit a language which came to be called Tajik. Meanwhile, the Persian language of Afghanistan carried on much as before and, as we have seen, came to have the label “Dari” attached to it.

11 The growing linguistic discrepancy between the principal Persian languages of Tajikistan and Afghanistan was not immediately apparent to the outside. Matthews, in his study of Soviet languages<sup>25</sup> and writing before the days when the label “Dari” had become frequently employed in Afghanistan, simply termed the Persian on both sides of the Amu Darya as “Tajiki”. This was not unreasonable, since in both areas it was indeed the language of ethnic Tajiks – as well as acting as a *lingua franca* in Afghanistan. But in reality the divergences between the ongoing Persian of Afghanistan (=Dari) and the newly moulded Persian in the hermetically sealed Tadzhik SSR (=Tajik) were increasing. The significance of this within Afghanistan is that **the Tajiks of Afghanistan speak Dari, not Tajik**. Modern writers are conscious of this phenomenon. Elliot writes of Afghanistan’s Tajiks that “their language [is] Dari”<sup>26</sup>, and the Odyssey companion guide to Afghanistan notes that “Dari is generally spoken by the Afghan Tajik population”<sup>27</sup>.

## Conclusion

12 The term “Persian” can collectively cover the three closely related languages known in their native countries as Farsi (Iran), Dari (Afghanistan) and Tajik (Tajikistan) – but given that the Farsi of Iran is the *primus inter pares* of these three it has become the custom to use the term “Persian” instead to mean this language alone, leaving Dari and Tajik as labels for the others. This seems sensible practice. There is greater scientific substance to the distinctions than there is between (for instance) Moldovan and Romanian. Importantly, too, Iran appears content to allow the label “Dari” to flourish, as we have seen in paragraph 4; again, this contrasts with the Romanian denial of any credibility in “Moldovan” as a language. As regards national boundaries, these three languages fit fairly neatly within their respective countries, with the exception that the language of the Khorāsān region of eastern Iran perhaps shows more affinity to Dari than to the Persian of Iran.

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<sup>21</sup> Sometimes “Tajiki”.

<sup>22</sup> *Persian-English Dictionary*, F Steingass, London 1892 (2<sup>nd</sup> Impression 1930).

<sup>23</sup> *The Concise Persian-English Dictionary*, A & M Aryanpur-Kashani, Tehran, compiled 1976, published 1997.

<sup>24</sup> *Persidsko-Russkiy Slovar’*, B V Miller, Moscow 1960; and *Persidsko-Russkiy Slovar’*, Yu A Rubinchik, 2 volumes, Moscow 1970.

<sup>25</sup> *Languages of the U.S.S.R.*, W K Matthews, Cambridge University Press 1951, pp104-05.

<sup>26</sup> *An Unexpected Light: Travels in Afghanistan*, J Elliot, Picador, 1999: 0330371622, p52.

<sup>27</sup> *Afghanistan: A Companion and Guide*, B Omrani & M Leeming, Odyssey 2005: 9622177468, p737.