

# The Significance of Education and Gender in Persian Word-selection

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## Abstract

This study strives to investigate the importance of ‘education’ and ‘gender’, as two major sociolinguistic variables, in accepting or rejecting the words coined by the Iranian Academy of Persian Language and Literature (APLL). A total of 500 students from state universities in Tehran were chosen as subjects and provided with a questionnaire consisting of 50 APLL equivalents. The respondents’ acceptance of the first 25 words correlated with the extent to which these words are used in newspapers and magazines; however, the second 25 equivalents were treated differently. Close to half of the Undergraduates and Masters and only a little more than half of the PhD students accepted the equivalents. The results showed no significant relationship between education and the acceptance and rejection of the APLL words; however, there was a significant relationship between respondents’ parents’ education and the acceptance and rejection of the APLL words. Although, males tended to be slightly more accepting than females who were split 50:50, there was no significant relationship between gender and the acceptance and rejection of the APLL words. The respondents preferred words which had only a single equivalent.

**Keywords:** Education, Gender, Word-Selection

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## **1. Introduction**

Whenever language contact occurs, linguistic borrowing can occur and once a foreign word is borrowed, there is a need to find an equivalent for it. Normally, words and phrases are made and/or selected and then introduced into a speech community by individuals in society and/or official experts in an Academy of Language. In either case, these items may be either be accepted and used extensively or rejected/ignored by a speech community.

Word-selection in writing and speaking is a linguistic activity but it is also a cognitive activity since it deals with such mental processes as thinking, problem-solving and remembering. That is why word-selection is regarded as a linguistic-cognitive activity. Cognitively, word-selection seems to be an example of problem-solving. According to Soslo (1988, p. 157), problem-solving is a type of thinking which aims at solving a given problem and provide answers from which a choice has to be made. If we accept such a definition and take word-selection as an instance of problem-solving, we may come to this definition: "Word-selection is a type of thinking aiming at finding an equivalent for a foreign word through providing several equivalents among which a choice has to be made." (Ne'matzade, 2000, p. 17).

### **1.1. Literature Review**

Many researchers have dealt with coining words and word-selection in Persian in Iran (see, for example, Ne'matzade, 2000; Modarresi, 2001; Sadeghi, 2001). However, to date no study seems to have critically discussed the criteria considered by the Iranian Persian speech community for accepting or rejecting the lexical items introduced by the Academy of Persian Language and Literature. Once this is determined, it should facilitate the work of

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academicians and officials involved in coining new words and this, in turn, is likely to contribute to the enrichment of the Persian language. Sadeghi (2001) explains:

“The APLL was founded in 1991 with 25 permanent members and seven departments, the most active of which is the department of word-selection... The main task of this department is to find Persian equivalents for foreign words used both in common language and scientific writings... For instance, one of the tasks carried out by this department has been the selection of Persian equivalents for some 200 [now over 280] western loan words used in official documents. This word list was drawn up by the Iranian government and submitted to the Academy...The Academy’s first principle for choosing and coining words is transparency and intelligibility. Opaque words and dialectal and ancient forms are rejected as unintelligible for the public. Another principle is to preserve international words, such as *râdio*, *post*, *televiziyon*, etc. Phonetic considerations and simplicity are also taken into account”.

Sadeghi (2001) claims that “language planning in Iran has predominantly aimed at the modernization of Persian through word coinage and although thousands of Persian equivalents have been coined for loan words during the past several decades, Persian needs many more native equivalents for new foreign terms”. Some examples of the words chosen and coined are: *payâm-gîr* ‘answering-machine’, *dur-negâr* ‘fax’, *čerâqak* ‘warmer’, *payâm-negâr* ‘email’ and *ramzîne* ‘bar code’ (Sadeghi, 2001).

The APLL publishes a newsletter every month to obtain the opinions of specialists outside the APLL of the lexical items newly coined and suggested. However, as Sadeghi (2001) observes, “from all the products of the Iranian

Academy of Language only a few words, such as *râyâne* ‘computer’, *hamâyeš* ‘congress’, *šomârgân* ‘printing, tirage (Fr.)’, etc., were more or less accepted in the common language.” In this connection, both Sadeghi (1986) and Yazdi and Bedayat (2003) believe that the reasons for not accepting certain words by the speech community should be discussed. The former is of the view that linguists should be included in discussions on the capability of the Persian language, while the latter explain that carelessness and extremes in word-selection [by both officials involved in the APLL and individual experts] are the reasons behind the non-acceptance of words by the general public.

What Sadeghi means by “specialists outside the Academy” is not clear. Are they really the appointed representatives of the Iranian Persian speech community and if they are, who appointed them and how? The results would be more significant if officials involved in the APLL had obtained feedback and views of a range of people, including government employees and teachers as the latter are more in contact with people in the speech community. Moreover, Sadeghi does not suggest any reason(s) for not accepting most of the APLL words and terms. Lastly, his claim about the apparent indifference to the APLL products is not supported through any statistical analyses.

Sultanzade (2003) proposes that the APLL’s site should be accessed by every interested individual to search the latest equivalents made and to present their suggestions and criticisms to the APLL. In addition, translators, writers and other interested individuals should be sent the latest approved words in order to express their views about them.

Zomorrodian (2003) holds that if people have a mental image of a given word, then the word is easier to accept. For instance, consider the Persian words *xodnevis* ‘fountain pen’, *xodkâr* ‘biro’, *padâfand* ‘defence’ and *pâtak* ‘counterattack’. The first two words have become widespread because the

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components of them are completely known to Persian natives and have been used in many words. However, the last two have failed to be used widely since people are not familiar with either of the words and their components. They are, however, used in the army.

Shokouhi and Hossein-Nia (1993) point out that for words to be selected, they should be euphonious...compatible with grammar. Similarly, Shari'at (1993) speaks of euphony [a pleasing or harmonious sequence of sounds] and persuasively argues that when a word lacks euphony, though made systematically, it will fail to be used widely. For example, if a word is similar to an unpleasant word existing in language, there is very little chance of acceptance. For example, before 1990s, the two words *bolandgu* and *durgu* were suggested for the foreign words 'loudspeaker' and 'telephone', respectively. The former was accepted but the latter was not used due to the fact that it was similar to the pejorative Persian word *zurgu* 'bully' (Shari'at, 1993).

Word-selection is believed to be of two kinds (Ne'matzade, 2000). In other words, there are two approaches in word-selection. One is 'individual' and the other being 'collective'. In the former approach, certain translators [and writers] try to present new words and expressions, whereas in the latter, the issue is pursued by a group of experts, mainly from an authorised department or public body, for instance, an Academy of Language. In collective word-selection, hidden mental argumentations become manifest and meet with opposition, but in individual word-selection argumentation and reasoning remain in mind (Ne'matzade, 2000).

In this connection, Haddad Adel (2003) suggests that scholars in the field of word-selection should pay attention to individual word-selection as well...In

Persian, there are many beautiful words coined by individuals revealing aesthetic taste [which have not yet been considered by the APLL].

A final point needs to be made here. It may appear that the variables involved in Persian word-formation and word-selection have been comprehensively described above but this is not the case. We need to introduce another phenomenon: 'blocking'. This is defined as the non-occurrence of one form due to the simple existence of another." (Aronoff, 1976, p. 43). For blocking to occur, firstly, there needs to be a corpus in another language similar to that of English so as to block further equivalents. Secondly, experts or individuals fail to study and consider the equivalents already suggested and used by other scholars. Lastly, scholars may be aware of the existence of such equivalents.

Kafi (1996) holds that [Persian] word-selection has lapsed into chaos due to the fact that the experts and individuals involved have failed to reach consensus on the issue. For example, for the foreign word '*maximum*' one can find three or more equivalents such as *bišine*, *mâkzimom*, *mehin* and *hadd-e aksar*. Another example is provided by the word 'reaction' with its seven equivalents. They are: *vâ-koneš*, *aksol-amal*, *barâžireš*, *fe?lon-fe?âl*, *radd-e amal*, *enfe?âl* and *reâkson* (Kafi, 1996).

When we look at such ideas and suggestions, it is clear that these researchers may have considered the role of speech community but their statements are essentially anecdotal and not based on official statistics (see Sadeghi, 2001). Further, the mere consideration of ideas on the part of linguists (see Zomorrodian, 2003), men of literature (see Shari'at, 1986) and other experts (see Haddad Adel, 2003) involved in word-formation and word-selection seems to be insufficient and, sometimes, leads to paradoxical and opposing views (Yarmohammadi, 2006 vs. Kafi, 1996). In essence, the best

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judges of linguistic choices are the members of the speech community. It follows that we should be studying their judgments and, accordingly, the present study has used a questionnaire as an attempt to obtain helpful feedback from the Iranian speech community as to what words are accepted or rejected and the reasons for this. Words may be accepted by an official body for different reasons but what are the factors that make coined lexical items acceptable by the man in the street?

## **1.2. Objective of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the importance of '*education*' and '*gender*', as two key sociolinguistic variables, in Persian word-selection. This study strives to answer the following specific research questions:

1. To what extent is 'different levels of education' significant in accepting or rejecting the APLL general words?
2. To what extent is 'gender' important in accepting or rejecting the APLL general words?

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Subjects**

A total of 500 Iranian undergraduate and postgraduate students (275 Men and 225 women) majoring in different fields of study from different state universities in Tehran for the academic year of 2009-2010 participated in this study. Their ages ranged from 18 to 61 years, with an average of 23.4 years. The rationale for choosing state universities as the research site was due to the free education and high prestige they offer. As Tehran is a metropolitan city, the subjects of the questionnaire represent the different cultures and social

background in Iran. Of the 500 respondents, 60% were BA, 30% MA and 10% Ph.D.

The Cochran's (1977) sample size formula  $n = z^2 p(1-p)/d^2$  was used to determine the sample size (384 students). However, to secure this number, the final sample size of this study was considered to be as large as 500.

In order to achieve the objective of this survey, the researchers utilized multi stage sampling. Personnel in the Iranian Students' Polling Agency (ISPA) were asked to call at every faculty of the universities in question in order to select the students randomly from different programmes. The 'gender' proportion was also realized in the sampling.

## **2.2. Procedure**

Before the selection of the APLL words for the questionnaire, 282 APLL equivalents were studied in 7 newspapers and over 80 magazines to determine their frequency via the website [www.magiran.com](http://www.magiran.com). Based on the results obtained, 54% (154 equivalents) of the APLL general words seem to have been used in the above-mentioned media, yet 46% (130 equivalents) showed zero frequency. Analyses revealed that as for the first 25 APLL words (frequent equivalents), the respondents' acceptance of them correlates with the extent to which these words are used in the newspapers and magazines. In other words, the frequent words in the media in question have been accepted by 62% by the respondents; however, the second 25 equivalents, which were of zero frequency in the media, were treated differently. That is, they were accepted by 38% of the N.

### 2.3. Instrument

The data for this study were collected by means of a questionnaire. In order to investigate the views of the subjects in terms of acceptance and/or rejection of the APLL general words, the researchers provided a questionnaire composed of 50 words (25 with the highest frequency and 25 others with zero frequency). It should be noted that the 25 frequent words were chosen from a total of 49 equivalents in descending order and for the second 25, systematic random sampling with an interval of 5 was used to choose from a total of 135 equivalents. Meanwhile, five criteria for accepting or rejecting the APLL general words were included in the questionnaire in terms of *brevity*, *euphony*, *eusemy*, *productivity* and *semantic transparency*.

### 2.4. Operational Definitions

It should be pointed out here that in the context of this study, **brevity** is defined as “the quality of expressing something in very few words” (Longman, 2009). More precisely, it is the condition of making words using the shortest possible syllables in a language as in Persian words *payâmgir* for ‘answering machine’, *majles* for ‘parliament’ and *goruh* for ‘department’. As for **euphony**, it is “a pleasing or harmonious sequence of sounds” (Crystal, 1992) as in *virâyeš* ‘editing’, *afšâne* ‘spray’, and *xošâb* ‘compote’. **Eusemy**<sup>1</sup> is a newly-coined term rhyming with ‘euphony’ for the phrase ‘beautiful meaning’ (Barzegar & Menon, 2010). As far as **productivity** is concerned, it is “a general term used in linguistics to refer to the creative capacity of language users to produce and understand an indefinitely large number of patterns or instances” (Crystal,

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<sup>1</sup> This term was first coined by the first author (2010) at the 2nd Postgraduate Conference at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya.

2003). In other words, it is the ability to create more words from the basic form as in *virâstan* 'to edit', *virâyeš* 'editing', *virâst* 'edition', *virâstar* 'editor' and *virâstari* 'editing'. Finally, **semantic transparency** is "a condition in which the meaning of lexical unit is easily understood on the base of the meanings of the parts of they are composed" (Malmkjær, 2010). The English word 'incorrect' (meaning 'not correct') and Persian words *kâlâbarg* 'voucher', *čâpgar* 'printer', and *sardkon* 'chiller' are instances of transparent words.

## **2.5. Validity and Reliability**

In order to ensure the validity of the questionnaire, one of the writers distributed hard copies to five experienced professors and lecturers in the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya as well as five academic experts in Iran. The purpose was to prevent ambiguity, irrelevance and excess verbiage in the items in the questionnaire. The experts reviewed the questions by evaluating the content validity in order to ensure that each item was relevant to the research questions. Based on the feedback certain items were revised, and others deleted in order to ensure the content validity of the questionnaire.

According to Bryman and Crammer (1990, p.70), instrument reliability 'refers to its consistency' of measurement. Initially, the reliability coefficient for the questionnaire was below 0.70. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 and above is considered to be desirable (Nunnally, 1978) and, a few items where the coefficient indicated was less than 0.70 were removed so that the reliability coefficient for the questionnaire was above 0.88.

In order to strengthen the research instrument (the questionnaire) two pilot studies were administered to achieve adequate reliability. The first piloting was conducted in November 2009 in Malaysia with 30 Iranian students

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(BA, MA and Ph.D) in the University of Malaya. The questionnaires were distributed randomly to students from different faculties. They were requested to participate in a test within an hour to determine the instrument reliability. For the present questionnaire, the Cronbach's Alpha was ( $r=0.75$ ), indicating that the items in the questionnaire are reliable enough to retain.

The second piloting on 30 students was carried out in Iran. The Cronbach's Alpha was above 0.88 on this occasion. The feedback from respondents was very useful and modifications were duly made based on these comments. Some questions were rephrased for the sake of better understanding and efficiency, and some other questions were moved to more relevant sections. A modified final version was produced in late May 2010.

### **3. Results**

The preliminary analysis of the data showed that in terms of gender, the males outnumber the females (55% and 45%, respectively), with 60% being BA, 30% MA and 10% Ph.D from different fields of study including Humanities, Engineering, Science and Language (see Table 1 & 2 below). Their ages ranged from 18 to 61 years, with an average age of 23.41. The data obtained revealed that of the respondents, 49.6% (BA/BSc), 50.39% (MA/MSc) and 53.97% (Ph.D) have accepted the APLL suggested equivalents. In this regard, the one-way ANOVA was performed ( $F_{(2, 490)} = 1.753$ ;  $P=0.146$ ), indicating that there was no relationship between respondents' *level of education* and their acceptance or rejection of the APLL general words. Respondents with more educated parents treated the issue a bit differently in that the more educated the parents, particularly mothers, there was less acceptance of the APLL words. In this connection, the ANOVA was performed and the results being ( $F_{(4, 478)} = 7.777$ ;  $P<0.001$  and  $F_{(4, 482)} = 3.682$ ;  $P=0.006$ ) for mothers and fathers,

respectively showed that there was a significant relationship between the respondent's parents' education and their acceptance of the APLL words.

Furthermore, in order to determine the relationship between the respondents' gender and their acceptance of the APLL words, the t-test was performed. The results being ( $t_{491}=1.685$ ;  $P=0.093$ ) showed that there was no significant relationship in this connection.

The respondents preferred words which had only a single equivalent. An interesting observation here was that male respondents tend to be slightly more accepting of the words as compared to the females. In other words, 52.3% of the male respondents accepted the words and 47.7% rejected whereas the females were split 50:50.

**Table 1. Preliminary Data Analysis of the Respondents**

Programmes	Undergraduate	MA	Ph.D	Total
Gender	Number	Number	Number	Number
Female	153 (31%)	57 (12%)	13 (3%)	223 (45%)
Male	143 (29%)	90 (18%)	37 (8%)	270 (55%)
Total	296 (60%)	147(30%)	50 (10%)	493 (100%)

**Table 2. Sample Size from Different Programmes**

No	Names of Universities	Samples	BA	MA	Ph.D
1	Tehran Univ. (18 faculties)	135	81	40	14
2	Iran Science & Technology Univ. (13 faculties)	115	69	35	11
3	Allameh Tabatabaee Univ. (7 faculties)	100	60	30	10
4	Sharif Technical Univ. (7 faculties)	100	60	30	10
5	Art Univ. (5 faculties)	50	30	15	5
Total		500	300	150	50

The most and the least frequent equivalents were (*sâzemân* organisation 'organisation', *hamâyeš* for *congrès* 'congress', *nemâd* for *symbole* 'symbol')

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each with 81% and (*âlemâne* for *académique* ‘academic’ and *darsadâne* for *pourcentage* ‘percentage’) with 19%, respectively.

It should be noted that the APLL has suggested two or more equivalents for some of the foreign loan words. Studying equivalents of this kind proved that some of these words have not been accepted at all and in some other cases they have been treated differently.

For example, for the word *académique* ‘academic’, three equivalents (*dânešgâhi*, *elmi* and *âlemâne*) have been suggested with an acceptance score of 78%, a 57% and a 19%, respectively. In contrast, the word *musée* ‘museum’ with two equivalents (*muze* and *ganjine*) has 69% of the respondents accepting the former which is the Persianised version of the foreign word itself and 43% the latter.

The APLL words with zero frequency were also investigated. The results revealed that 61% of the respondents rejected the suggested equivalents and only 38% of them accepted them. The most accepted equivalent involves *šomâr* for the French loan word *tirage* ‘circulation’ (59%), and the least accepted one was *činižâ* for *buffet* ‘sideboard’ (19%).

## **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

This study was conducted to investigate the importance of education and gender in word-selection. With regard to the first research question (the importance of education), the ANOVA yielded no significant relationship between respondents’ *level of education* and their acceptance and rejection of the APLL general words. In other words, Undergraduates, Masters and Ph.D students treated the issues almost similarly. This finding does not support Modarresi’s (2012, p. 200) claim that people’s level of education and even their fields of study play an important part in a speech community.

What appears to be really significant is that respondents with more educated parents treated the issue rather differently in that the more educated the parents, particularly mothers, there was less acceptance of the APLL words on the part of the respondents. In this regard, the ANOVA indicated that there was a significant relationship between the respondent's parents' education and their acceptance of the APLL words. A possible explanation of this may be the fact that educated parents tend to spend more time with their children at home discussing different issues in relation with society, politics, language and the like. More importantly, with fathers being away at work, mothers are in more contact with their children; therefore, they have a more intimate relationship with their mothers and learn more from them. This finding supports Trudgill's (1983) view, in that women are more conservative than men (who are thought to be more innovating) in dealing with language issues. Additionally, such a result, as asserted by Labov (1972), confirmed the key role of mothers in training children notably when language is concerned.

Concerning the second research question (i.e., the importance of gender and the acceptance and rejection of the APLL words), the data obtained in this regard revealed that more male respondents seem to have agreed on the APLL suggested equivalents; i.e., 52.3% of the male respondents accepted the words and 47.7% rejected them, whereas the female respondents were split 50; 50 on the acceptance and rejection of the equivalents. In order to determine the relationship between the respondents' gender and their acceptance of the APLL words, the t-test was performed and the result indicated no significant relationship between them. It should be pointed out that in terms of acceptance and rejection of the new APLL equivalents there seems to be no difference between the perceptions of the gender; however, some sociolinguists (Coates,

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1986; Gal, 1994; Lakoff, 2004) claim that men and women differ significantly in their communicative style.

In conclusion, the findings of the present study indicated that more respondents (62%) are positive about the first 25 APLL general equivalents (with 54% frequency in the media); however, the second 25 equivalents, with zero frequency, were treated differently. That is, despite the fact that these words were of zero frequency in the media, they were accepted by 38% of the respondents. In addition, the respondents preferred words which had only a single equivalent.

It was assumed from the start that the results of this study would confirm earlier research which indicated that education and gender would be determining factors in the acceptance or rejection of APLL general words. This has not been borne out by the present study. On the contrary, the significant factor appears to be the education of the parents, especially the mothers, on the behaviour of their children. Mothers appear to be very influential in predisposing their children in the direction of rejecting rather than accepting the APLL recommendations

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## Appendix

(APLL 50 words)

No	Foreign word	APLL word	No	Foreign word	APLL word
1	théâtre	namâyeš	26	nân-e tost	nân-e berešti
2	académique	âlemâne/ elmi	27	ef-ef	darbâzkon
3	technologie	fanâvari	28	aquarium	âbzidân
4	organisation	sâzemân	29	balcon	eyvângâh
5	technique	fan	30	boulevard	čârbâq
6	congrès	hamâyeš	31	buffet	čini-jâ
7	pourcentage	darsadâne/ darsad	32	catalogue	kârnemâ
8	échantillon	nemune	33	conférence/ lecture	farâhamâyi
9	classe	tabaqe/ radif	34	décor	ârâye
10	institut	mo'assese	35	échelle	pâye
11	session	nešast	36	estampe	johargin
12	subside	yârâne	37	flash/ flashlight	deraxš
13	télécommunication	moxâberât	38	forum	nazarâzmâyi
14	parlement	majles	39	Handbook/ manuel	dastine
15	sujet	mozu	40	isolation	bâmpuš
16	syndicat	ettehâdiye	41	microfiche	rizbarga
17	code	ramz	42	moquette	faršine
18	commission	goruh/ hey'at/ komisyon	43	page (kardan)	peyjuyi (kardan)
19	département	baxš, goruh	44	parcomètre	tavaqqofhâg
20	conférence/ lecture	soxanrâni	45	patio	nurxân
21	mobilephone	telefon-e hamrâh	46	portable	dasti
22	musée	muzeganjine	47	retouche	pardâxt
23	symbole	nemâd/ ramz	48	seminar	dars-e goruhi
24	académique	dânešgâhi	49	stereophonic	čandâvâyi
25	harmonique	hamâhang	50	tirage	šomâr