

Globalization, Standardization, and Dialect Leveling in Iran

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to shed light on the effects of modernization, urbanization, monolingual educational system, and mass media as well as the process of globalization on dialect leveling among Persian dialects. In so doing, the first part of the paper elaborates on the relationship between globalization and sociolinguistics, and on the concept of standardization.

Also, it discusses some factors accelerating dialect leveling among Persian dialects. The second part of the paper presents some empirical evidence for the change, based on the data collected from 3 Persian dialects, namely: Birjandi, Neyshaboori, and Yazdi. Three spoken language sample corpora from two age cohort groups in each speech community were collected.

Having transcribed the data, the researchers juxtaposed the phonological, morphological, and syntactic conventions of the two groups of each speech community for further in-depth analysis. Comparing the speech samples of the two age cohorts in each corpus revealed significant movements towards standard dialect. However, the quality and quantity of the observed movements did not appear to be the same across the dialects in question.

Keywords: Globalization, Standardization, Dialect Leveling, Sociolinguistics, Persian Dialects

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Introduction

When we open our mouth for speaking we must choose a particular language, dialect, style, register, or variety (Wardhaugh, 1989), and by speaking a particular dialect or language, “we reveal who we are, where we grow up, our gender, our station in life, our age, and the group we want to belong to” (Coulmas, 2005, p. 173). In other words, according to Coulmas (2005, p.171) “language displays its speaker’s identity”. However, linguistics identity, “is not an inseparable fate imposed upon us but, to some extent at least, a social construct, a matter of choice” (ibid., 173). In fact, “identity is a multilayered and dynamic process rather than an inborn trait that cannot be helped” (ibid., 178), and there are many factors that make the speakers change their linguistic identity.

In fact, in the process of globalization that causes the “intensification on the level of interaction, interconnectedness or interdependence” (McGraw, 1992 cited in Meyerhoff and Niedzielski, 2003, p. 539), the transformation of language and identity is happening in many different ways. According to Heller (2003, p. 743), these transformations “include emerging tension between state-based and national and supra-national identities and language practice and between hybridity and uniformity”. In fact, “Globalization is detraditionalising”.

It tends to strip away the value of traditional ritual and symbols, and that of course includes way of speaking” (Coupland, 2003, p. 470).

The obvious fact is that all languages change, however, the causes and incentives for this change may be different. Torgersen and Kerswill (2004) refer to “internal (system-driven)” and “external (contact driven)”, as well as “extra linguistic,” viz. “socio-political and economic motivations” in linguistic change (p. 23). Moreover, according to Milroy (2001) quoted in Torgersen and

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Kerswill (2004) “language attitudes and language ideologies must also be taken into account in a sociolinguistic account of variation, as well as cognitive constraints on acquiring a second dialect” (p. 25). Watt (2000) cited in *Torgerson* and Kerswill (2004) “favors an extra-linguistic (i.e. not necessarily contact-based) account and argues that, in dialect leveling, social and attitudinal factors take priority over systemic factors” (p. 25). Furthermore, Eckert and Wanger (2005, p. 582) believe that “we need to understand the role of power generally in linguistic practice, and specifically in variation and the spread of change”. In fact, according to Wardhaugh (1989) standardization is sometimes deliberately undertaken by the governments for political reasons.

Such attempts have been done about Finnish and Turkish languages and there are “similar attempts at rapid standardization in countries such as India, Israel, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, and Tansania” (p. 32). In spite of the preceding causes of language change, some of these changes, especially those that originate from the age factor are usual. Coulmas (2005) mentions two reasons for these intergenerational changes: “(1) in the course of time communication needs change, forcing each new generation to adjust the language to suit the changing world of their experience. (2) At a set time the communication abilities and needs of contemporaneous generations differ” (p. 52).

In the light of the above discussion, it is reasonable to claim that as the process of modernization, and urbanization, as one of its feature, in a country increases, the move towards mixing different dialects in the process of dialect contact, and dialect leveling will also be increased.

Sociolinguistics and Globalization

There are different definitions for globalization. According to Levitt (1983) quoted in Meyerhoff and Niedzielski (2003, p. 538), “a phenomena was global if it was invariant wherever it is found”. This is an outcome–orientation definition of globalization. However, McGraw (1992) characterizes globalization principally as a process. He believes that “globalization... describes the process by which events, decisions, and activities in one part of the world came to have significant consequences for individuals and communities in quite distant parts of the globe” (cited in Meyerhoff and Niedzielski, 2003, p. 539). According to Blommaert (2003, p. 612), “globalization implies that developments at the top or the core of the world system have a wide variety of effects at the bottom or the periphery of that system”.

This “process-oriented notion of globalization resonates better with the explain sociolinguistics currently places on the emergence of the meaning of variables through conversational negotiation than with Levitt’s outcome-oriented one” (Meyerhoff and Niedzielski, 2004, p. 59).

“The foundational insight in globalization theory was that private sector companies were outgrowing their national territories and, as new multinational or transnational or global forces, reshaping community life” (Coupland, 2003, p. 4). For instance, Machin and Leeuwen quoted in Coupland (2003) refer to 44 globally distributed versions of cosmopolitan magazine. In their words “cosmopolitan is a thoroughly commodifying and commodified product. It markets distinctive, idealized images of women, female appearance and female sexuality... seeks to universalize women’s lifestyles” (p. 468).

Moreover, Blommaert (2003) refers to rap artists and the music industry, international English training programs, airlines, tourism and service industries

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and printed press as particular mediating institution in the new economics that appear to characterize globalized flows.

In the light of the above discussion, it is reasonable to claim that the speaker's attitude towards their language may be changed in the process of globalization. In fact, as Coupland (2003, p. 470) puts it, "the continuing spread of consumerism and commodification into more and more domains of life-including..., the commodification of language itself- can disenfranchise people and undermine their sense of authentic membership in longstanding communities". For instance, in Heller's (2003) Canadian cases, language shifts from a marker of ethnolinguistic identity to an economically interesting skill or a commodity.

Since the process of globalization affects language change and variation, and these effects have been voiced more than before, Coupland (2003, p. 465) believes that "sociolinguistics is already late getting to the party".

Also, Meyerhoff and Niedzielski (2003, p. 536) believe that it is imperative for sociolinguists studying variation and change to be motivated to look more closely at globalization theory on both empirical and theoretical grounds:

Empirically, it is clear that, at least superficially, the linguistic variable we are concerned with do seem to involve diffusion from a major economic and/or cultural centre to a smaller, less influential centre. Theoretically, we believe that variationist sociolinguists may gain from exploring globalization theory more fully because the alternative between linguistic variation within a speech community has been framed as analogous to competition between different form of social capital... perhaps a stronger... motivation... is the fact that... the constraints on the spread of linguistic innovations are essentially the same as those that constrain the spread of other innovations.

However, when sociolinguists want to address globalization they should reconsider some of their assumptions. Because, some of the sociolinguistics concepts are not in line with the process of globalization, as Blommaert (2003, p. 615) sums it up:

Globalization results in intensified forms of flow-movements of object, people and image-causing form of contact and difference perhaps not new in substance but new in scale and perception. Consequently, key sociolinguistic concepts such as speech community... become more and more difficult to handle empirically.... Even more disconcerting is the fact that the presupposability of function for linguistic resources becomes ever more problematic, because the linguistic resources travel across time, space and different regimes of indexicalities and organizations of repertoires.

Consequently, some sociolinguists such as Coupland (2003) believe that, when sociolinguists attempt to address globalization, it will need new theory.

Blommaert (2003, p. 612) also believes that “sociolinguistics of globalization will need a holistic and world-systemic view in which local events are read locally as well as translocally”.

What is Standardization?

The primary definition of standardization is taken to be the imposition of uniformity upon a class of objects (Milory, 2001, p. 530). Language standardization is “a process which involves the readjustment of speakers’ choice over time” (Coulmas, 2005, p. 79). This process according to Wardhaugh (1989, p. 33) “attempts either to reduce or to eliminate diversity and variety”.

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Furthermore, it “unifies individuals and groups within a larger community while at the same time separating the community that results from other communities. Therefore, it can be employed to reflect and symbolize some kind of identity: regional, social, ethnic, or religious” (Wardhaugh, 1989, p. 310).

Hence, “governments sometimes very deliberately involve themselves in the standardization process by establishing official bodies of one kind or another to regulate language matters or to encourage changes which are felt to be desirable” (Wardhaugh, 1989, p. 32). For instance, according to Heffernan (2006), “the obsolescence of Okinawan is a direct consequence of the Japanese government’s policy of dialect eradication.... This policy was a part of the effort to convert Japan from a feudal state system into a unified, modern nation” (p. 43). Moreover, we can see similar attempts at rapid standardization in countries such as India, Israel, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, and Tanzania” (Wardhaugh, 1989, p. 32). So, we must be aware of the role of power in dialect change and language standardization, since there is a strong relationship between language and power (Fairclough, 1989).

Here, by standard Farsi we mean that variety which is used in print, and which is normally taught in schools. It is also the variety which is normally spoken by educated people and used in news broadcasts and other similar situation. Apart from the preceding internal and external factors that increase standardization, speaking the standard variety is associated with a kind of prestige, so the speakers of other dialects try to adopt it, and modify their dialect according to the standard one.

However, who are in the vanguard of this change is a difficult question to answer. According to Wardhaugh (1989, p. 198) “there seem to be a consensus among investigators that linguistic change often seems to originate in the lower middle class, with women in the vanguard of such change”.

However, in our perspective, having a one-size-fits-all perspective towards the findings of sociolinguists is problematic. In fact, whether the role of men is more prominent in language change or women depends on the role that they have in the society. In some countries women are not allowed to vote or drive, and many of them are illiterate, so they can not be in the forefront of language change.

In the following section we explain three important factors accelerating dialect leveling and language standardization among Persian dialects.

Factors Accelerating Dialect Leveling and Language Standardization among Persian Dialects

One of the important factors of dialect leveling and language standardization in Iran is the fact that, Iranian society is moving towards modernization. One of the important features of modernization is urbanization. As urbanization increases, those who immigrate from remote villages to urban areas should modify their own dialect in order to communicate with others. In other words, dialect contact causes dialect leveling, because in the process of communication, speakers try to accommodate their speech with their interlocutors. This fact is in line with what Coulmas (2005, p. 32) refers to as “accommodation theory”. That is, “in the course of conversation people converge.... They adjust to their interlocutors.... Adjustment can be upward and downward”. The rate of urbanization in Iran has been increased.

According to official statistics, in 1355 (1977), only 47/1 percent of Iranian population lived in the cities, and 52/9 lived in the villages. However, in 1375 (1996), 61/5 percent of Iranian population lived in the cities, and only 38/5 percent of them in the villages. This increase has been continued more rapidly

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during the last decade as well, and it has accelerated dialect contact, and as a result, dialect leveling.

Another factor is that Iranian Educational system is monolingual and monodialectal. All of the books have been written according to standard Farsi, and it is also the medium of communication in the classroom. One of the reasons for adopting a monolingual and monodialectal educational system in spite of the existence of other languages such as Turkish, Kurdish, Baluchi, and Arabic may be the fact that the policy makers try to make the Iranian nation unified. Whether this policy is right or wrong is beyond the space and purpose of this article, however, this is a fact that the main tool for implementation of language standardization is education. Talking about language standardization in Japan, Sibata (1991) quoted in Heffernan (2006) believes that “for standard language education, dialect was a bad thing, so dialect came to be labeled as bad language, and along with other bad language like baka ‘fool’, yatsu ‘guy’, and Kuso ‘shit’, something that had to be corrected” (p. 643). According to the statistics presented by the Literacy Movement Organization of Iran the rate of literacy has been increased from 47/5 percent in 1355 (1977) to 79/5 percent in 1375 (1996). The following figure shows this increase.

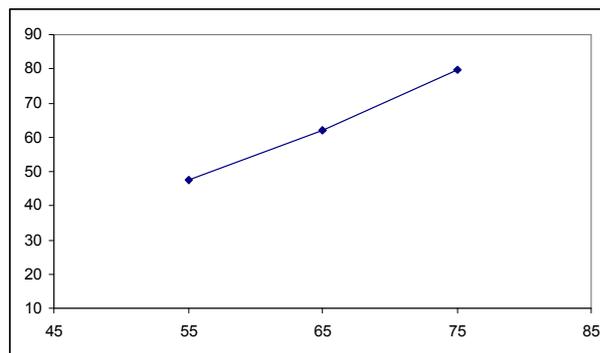


Figure 1: Increase in the rate of literacy in Iran from 1977 (1355) to 1996 (1375)

Taking into account that this increase has also been continued more rapidly since 1996 until now, one can recognize the role of the monolingual educational system in dialect leveling in Iran.

The role of mass media in dialect leveling in Iran is also prominent. The medium of communication in almost all of the TV channels and radio stations, broadcasting in Iran from IRIB, is standard language. Since almost all of the people have access to these channels and stations, and they watch films and news which are broadcasted from them, they are very influential on their speech patterns.

Empirical Evidence for Change

This section presents some empirical evidence based on the data collected from 3 Persian dialects, namely: Birjandi, Neyshaboori, and Yazdi.

Assuming that the age difference between the old and young people of a given speech community can be equated as a period of time during which variation in the speech of members of different generations are taken as evidence of language change (Labov, 1981; Coulmas, 2005), the researchers collected three spoken language sample corpora from two age cohort groups in each speech community, with the first age cohort including participants of both genders between 13 to 28 years old, and the second group between 55 to 70.

The data collection procedure was conducted with the help of some assistants who were members of the relative communities.

The assistants were asked to initiate conversations with the participants and record the vernacular spoken language samples of the members of each

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community¹. A total of 7 hours of language sample was recorded for each dialect. Having transcribed the data, we juxtaposed the phonological, morphological, and syntactic conventions of the two groups of each speech community for further in-depth analysis. Comparing the speech samples of the two age cohorts in each corpus revealed significant movements towards standard dialect. However, the quality and quantity of the observed movements did not appear to be the same across the dialects in question.

Vowel shift was seen to be one of the frequently cited movements toward standard norms in Birjandi dialect. As an example, young speakers pronounced *dandan* 'dændʌn' (tooth) as 'dændu', however, old speakers pronounced it as 'dundu'. In fact, the first syllabus of this word has been changed to the standard dialect in the speech of the young speakers. In addition, some cases of lexical and syntactic changes were observed. For example one of the noticeable syntactic changes in Birjandi dialect was the omission of the inflectional suffix /də/ from the end of the past perfect verbs. The frequency of the omission of /də/ suffix in the speech of the young group was 43 out of 56 times that they articulated verbs containing it.

Much differently however, in Neyshaboori dialect lexical change toward standard norms was conspicuous. In other words, compared to their old counterparts, young participants showed many more instances of standard forms of lexicon. The following table summarizes a few cases of frequent lexical shifts in Neyshaboori dialect.

¹ It should be mentioned that in order to observe the ethical considerations, the participants were informed in advance that their speech would be recorded, and they were ensured that the recorded data would be kept highly confidential.

Table 2: lexical change in Neyshaboori dialect

Term	pronunciation	English equivalence	Old group's lexicon	Pronunciation	Young group's lexicon	pronunciation
مغازه	mUqAZə	store	مغازه، دکو	mUqAZA, duku	مغازه	mUqAZə
فردا	færdA	tomorrow	فورداء، سبا	furdA	فورداء، فردا	færdA, furdA
چطوری	tʃʊturi	How are you	ایشتوری	əʃturi	چطوری	tʃʊturi
کوچک	kʊtʃək	short	خوردو	xurdu	کوچک	kʊtʃək
بزرگ	buzurg	big	بزرگ، کلو	buzurg, kælu	بزرگ	buzurg
دوباره	dʊbArə	again	آزک	Azæk	دوباره	dʊbArə

In Yazdi language corpus in addition to phonological and lexical shifts, some syntactic variations were observed. For instance, the young participants used present tense to introduce themselves, whereas their older counterparts tended to use past tense to do so. Also, other syntactic changes were observed such as:

Young generation: مسخره ام می کنی؟! *'Mæsxæreæm meikUni'* (you make fun of me!)
 Old generation: مسخره ی من می کنی؟! *'Mæsxærei mæn meikUni'* (you make fun of me!).

Conclusion

The theoretical argumentation and the empirical evidence presented in this paper indicated that the process of globalization and standardization accompanied by the effects of modernization, urbanization, monolingual educational system, and mass media has resulted in the modification of Persian

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dialects toward the standard norms. Also the paper argues that while the effects of globalization on language change and identity have been well documented; it seems to be necessary for sociolinguists to be aware of its effects, and tries to reconsider or redefine some of the basic concepts in sociolinguistics such as speech community according to these new developments.

We hope that the present work makes sociolinguists aware of this fact that sociolinguistics is an interdisciplinary field, and we must look at the language both locally and translocally, as well as catalyzing their curiosity to try to redefine some of the current concepts in sociolinguistics which are not in line with the new development.

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