

## Language ideologies and attitudes towards Arabic in contemporary Iran\*

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### 1 Introduction

Linguistic purism and ideologies of linguistic ownership are often considered crucial in colonial linguistics, whereby the focus of the discussion tends to be on European colonialism. This paper discusses animosity towards Arabic elements of Persian among some groups of Iranians (inside and outside Iran), a well-known phenomenon to (most) Persian speakers, as well as to scholars interested in Iranian studies worldwide, that can be seen as a form or manifestation of anti-Arabism in Iran.<sup>1</sup> Persian (written with a variant of the Arabic script) is the (only) official language of the Islamic Republic of Iran; it is the national language and is an important dimension of national identity in Iran, a country with considerable ethnic and linguistic diversity

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. the article ‘Anti-Arabism in Iran’ (*arab-setizi dar iran*) in Persian Wikipedia:

[https://fa.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%E2%80%8C%D8%B3%D8%AA%DB%8C%D8%B2%DB%8C\\_%D8%AF%D8%B1\\_%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86](https://fa.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%E2%80%8C%D8%B3%D8%AA%DB%8C%D8%B2%DB%8C_%D8%AF%D8%B1_%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86) (last consulted on 13 August 2018); or the section on Iran in the article ‘Anti-Arabism’ in English Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Arabism> (last consulted on 13 August 2018).

(see e.g. Ahmadi 2005; Meskoub 1992).<sup>2</sup> This is a very sensitive and controversial issue that can quickly become passionate. Indeed, it touches upon sentimental and intimate notions such as (national) identity and is closely related to socio-political dominance and power.<sup>3</sup>

The close relationship between language, identity, political dominance, and power relations is a much-studied topic in the discipline of linguistics and is of great interest for scholars interested in the issues of language ideology and language policy, such as those focusing on colonial and postcolonial linguistics. However, the Iranian case and debates around Arabic-Persian adversity have barely been discussed, even within the close circle of Iranian studies. This paper is an attempt to fill this gap.

Language-related anti-Arabism in present-day Iran can be seen as a continuation of modern anti-Arabism that appeared in Iran in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, based on European racist and nationalist ideologies; it served as an important dimension of the historical narrative that forged the modern Iranian national identity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The study of Iranian history, especially the period between the advent of Islam in the Iranian territory (7<sup>th</sup> century) and the so-called “Iranian renaissance” (9<sup>th</sup> century), was heavily

<sup>2</sup> Persian is also one of the two official languages of Afghanistan (alongside Pashto), more commonly known as Dari (or Dari Persian), and is the official language of Tajikistan, where it is written with the Cyrillic script and is known as Tajiki (or Tajiki Persian). Note that the variety of Persian spoken in Iran is sometimes called by its endonym name “Farsi”, in opposition to Dari and Tajiki. *Fārsi* or *Pārsi* are Persian words for “Persian”.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to bear in mind that, apart from the need to provide the historical and socio-political background, the scope and focus of this paper remains the domain of linguistics (in a broad sense). I shall emphasize here that the discussion I bring in this paper with respect to the background of anti-Arabism in Iran is built upon the existing literature. Therefore, the terminology used in this paper is mostly taken from the cited sources.

influenced in the past century by the political standpoints of the scholars working on these topics.<sup>4</sup> The advent of Islam, generally referred to as the “Arab conquest” (see e.g. Morony 1986), is considered by most historians as a pivotal moment in the Iranian history and is a much-studied subject and a yet unresolved debate.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, apart from its historical importance, this event and the following chapter (the so-called “Iranian renaissance” *rastāxiz-e irāni*)<sup>6</sup> are at the heart of modern Iranian identity concepts. As such, their study, especially in the past century, has not escaped the influence of passionate nationalistic and political standpoints. On the one hand, the Iranian pre-Islamic “glorious” history was one of the main foundations of Iranian modern national identity, forged during the 1<sup>st</sup> Pahlavi monarchy. On the other hand, in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, when the pre-Islamic dimensions of Iranian identity constructions and cultural concepts were downplayed in favor of Islamic identity and culture, these dimensions became an important part of the secular opposition discourse, highlighting “Iranian” (pre-Islamic) identity against “Islamic” identity (see e.g. Boroudjerdi 1998). It should

<sup>4</sup> At this point it should be noted that in the literature on Iranian studies and history (see e.g. Daryaee 2012), the terms “Iran” and “Iranian” (people, territory) are commonly used as inclusive terms to refer to the people from different ethnicities and languages who have lived or live on the Iranian plateau (Frye 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Also referred to as the Arabs’ “invasion” (*hamle* or *hojum*) of Iran (*hamle-ye a’rāb be irān*) or the Arab invasion (*hamle-ye arab*).

<sup>6</sup> Zarrinkoub (1957); see Section 4.

be noted that this viewpoint sometimes compares the Islamic Revolution to the Arab conquest, and waits hopefully for a similar comeback of “Iranian” identity.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the close bond between the two languages and almost ten centuries of “co-habitation”, some Iranians continue to consider Arabic elements of Persian as alien (*bigāne*). It is indeed quite common to hear from these Iranians even about common (Persian) words of Arabic origin: “It is Arabic not Persian”. This comment is rarely made as a purely factual statement about etymology, but carries an implicit negative value judgement and gives away an ideological and/or political viewpoint. Considering Arabic elements to be alien to Persian generally implies the idea that, coming from the language of the “invader”, they are imposed on Persian (and Iranians) as a form of unwanted political and cultural dominance. In short, the animosity against Arabic elements discussed in this paper (usually) converges with a specific ideological and political view of the Iranian (national) identity.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 briefly outlines the background in order to provide an understanding of the issue at stake. In Section 3, I discuss modern anti-Arabism in Iran, and, in Section 4, present the so-called “revival” of the Persian language and the controversy around the rise of the (New) Persian language. Section 5 addresses linguistic anti-Arabism in present-day Iran and Section 6 concludes the paper.

<sup>7</sup> To give an example, Ehsan Yarshater’s (see Section 4) article entitled ‘Re-emergence of Iranian Identity after conversion to Islam’ finishes with the following sentence: “Is Iran going to experience yet another revival of its cultural strength and creative vigor? This is a question that only the future can tell.” (Yarshater 2009: 12).

## 2 Background

Arabic was introduced into the Iranian territory as a new language of religion and power in the 7<sup>th</sup> century with the defeat of the Sasanid Empire, also known as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Persian Empire,<sup>8</sup> by Arab Muslims conquerors (coming from the Arabian Peninsula), who also brought the advent of Islam, thereby replacing Middle Persian as the language of the court, and Zoroastrianism as the dominant religion of the pre-Islamic era.

Contrary to the situation elsewhere, the dominance of the Arabic language in the Iranian territory did not last, being almost entirely replaced a few centuries later, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, by an indigenous Iranian language, namely (New) Persian. Developing from Middle Persian, this language had already emerged as a literary language in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, written with Arabic script and characterized by a significant number of Arabic loanwords.

As shall be seen in the following sections, the narrative of this episode of Iranian history, that is, the “revival” of the Persian language, also referred to as the “Iranian renaissance”, seen as an episode of resistance and survival, has played an important role in the formation of modern Iranian national identity. While prejudice against “Arabs” in the Iranian territory, or at least the anti-Arab vocabulary, can be traced back to this historical period, modern anti-Arabism in Iran, at the heart of the discourse that has fashioned modern national Iranian identity, emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (under the Qajar Dynasty) with the fascination of the Iranian intellectuals for European

<sup>8</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> Persian Empire was ruled by the Achaemenid Dynasty.

modernity and their feeling of backwardness. It is rooted in European racism, the “Aryan myth” in particular, and was nourished by Orientalist scholarship.<sup>9</sup>

In this period, Iranian elites learned about the historical and linguistic discoveries of European scientists, in particular with respect to 1) the Iranian pre-Islamic (antique) “glorious” past, and 2) the Indo-Aryan “race” and Persian’s kinship with the European languages, as opposed to Arabic as a Semitic language. In looking back with great nostalgia to the pre-Islamic era, Iranian intellectuals were led to their hasty and over-simplified identification of Islam, which they now considered the religion of Arabs, as the cause of Iran’s weakness and decadence. This nationalist discourse emerged alongside the intellectual movement against despotism that led to the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911. (see e.g. Ansari 2012; Tavakoli-Targhi 1990; Zia-Ebrahimi 2014).

At this point, it is necessary to add a word about who the Arabs in this discourse refer to. Interestingly, as pointed out in some recent studies, this narrative was developed in a context where Arabs were not a threat to Iran, but where enmity against Arabs was invented solely to serve the purposes of the narrative (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2014). So, it is less than clear who the Arabs referred to in this discourse were. Indeed, it seems that, rather than corresponding to any past or actual reality, the animosity was directed against an abstract figure of an Arab invader frozen in time.<sup>10</sup> What is most unfortunate in the continuation of anti-Arab attitudes in contemporary Iran is, however, the fact that the abstract, non-existent “Arab” figure in this narrative does indeed exist in reality, not only outside of Iranian boundaries but also within Iran, which has affected the

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Zia-Ebrahimi (2016a) on the impact of European racial thought, as well as of Orientalist scholarship, on the development of Arab-hatred among Iranian intellectuals in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>10</sup> See also Saad (1993).

country's Arab minority. The same is true of the Iranian diaspora, particularly in Western countries, where this anti-Arab discourse is particularly widespread among nationalists and Iranians hostile to the present government in Iran. This regrettable situation has been noted by a recent generation of historians, who try to remind these Iranian nationalists of the absurdity of this attitude, namely to talk about the Arabs as the 7<sup>th</sup> century invaders of Iran (see e.g. Touraj Daryaei's talk for the Iranian community in Toronto, Canada, on March, 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015).<sup>11</sup>

It is important to bear in mind that only one section of the Iranian elite embraced European cultural values and practices and was eager to display its participation in "modernity". The response of the religious elite, that is, the Shi'i clergy (the *ulama*) – who had significant (political) power and an entrenched influence, particularly among the uneducated masses and precarious people – to European culture and modernism was one of strong rejection. Indeed, the adversity between the two groups of protagonists, that is, progressive pro-Modernity figures (*tajaddod-xāhan*) and conservative traditionalist figures (*sonnat-garāyān*), is characteristic of this period (see e.g. Ansari 2012; Tavakoli-Targhi 1990).

The other prevalent reaction to European domination among the intellectuals of the Islamic world came from the pan-Islamic anti-imperialist movement outlined by the Iranian Seyyad Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838/39–1897),<sup>12</sup> an important Islamic ideologist, an advocate of reform and modernization as well as a political activist. Interestingly, al-Afghani, who was feared by the monarch and discredited by (some of) the clergy, was welcomed by the Qajar

<sup>11</sup> This talk was given at the invitation of Agora Philosophical Forum (<https://www.agorapf.org/>) and is available online from the following YouTube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hixxbryFNSA> (from minute 39; last accessed on 14 August 2018)

<sup>12</sup> Known in Iran as (Seyyad Jamal al-Din) Asadabadi.

intelligentsia and is considered an influential figure in the Constitutional movement (see e.g. Ansari 2012; Keddie 1972; Mishra 2012). While the Islamic anti-imperialist movement was not successful in 19<sup>th</sup> century Iran, the country witnessed another revolution a century later, which was in line with the ideologies outlined by al Afghani, namely to combat the (Pahlavi) monarchic regime as well as the Western domination that had laid the ground for the Islamic Republic (see e.g. Daryaei, 2012).

### **3 Anti-Arabism in Iran**

The episode of Iranian history between the “Arab conquest” and the “Persian renaissance”, along with other episodes of invasion and survival, such as the Mongol invasion in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, stands at the core of the historical narrative that has forged the (modern) Iranian national identity. Thus, the anti-Arabism that I discuss in this paper should be seen in the light of a (self-serving) nationalist memory narrative, in which “Arab invasion”, considered a historical disaster, serves Iranian nationhood (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016b).

In this national history narrative, pre-Islamic Iran is portrayed as “a utopian society that witnessed every possible human achievement”, while Arabs are seen as Iranians’ inferior “Other”. They are depicted as an uncivilized savage “lizard-eating” people who “sprang out of the desert” and annihilated Iran’s glorious past, plunging Iran into backwardness (Zia-Ebrahimi 2014: 1045).



This nationalist ideology, referring to the *Shu'ubiyah* movement<sup>13</sup> in the 9<sup>th</sup> century – a literary controversy over the position of Arabs and non-Arabs within Islam – as well as to Persian's most well-known epic poet Ferdowsi, was built on claims that animosity towards Arabs is an ancient and perennial feature of Iranianness (Zia-Ebrahimi 2014). For instance, the following verses, attributed to Ferdowsi,<sup>14</sup> are quoted by 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-Arab nationalists to support such ideas. Indeed, in this view, Ferdowsi's *Shahnāme* ('The Book of Kings'), widely seen as a masterpiece of the Persian language, is considered as an essential text, articulating the resistance of Iranians to Arab-Islamic domination.

*From drinking camel milk and eating lizard,  
the Arab has reached the point  
to wish for the (Persian) crown,  
Spit on you O' wheel of fortune!*

Attributed to Ferdowsi's *Shahnāme* (ca. 977–1010).

<sup>13</sup> The *Shu'ubiyah* movement is primarily said to be a literary controversy over the position of the Arab and the non-Arab peoples, and especially of Iranians, within Islam, that emerged under the Umayyad Caliphate during the 8<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, particularly as a reaction to the Arabs' hostile attitude towards and discriminatory treatment of non-Arab Muslims, whom they considered to be their inferiors (see Mottahedeh 1976).

<sup>14</sup> Note that according to most experts, these verses were not included in the original text but were added in later copies. It is worth noting that even if these verses were original, they cannot be taken to express Ferdowsi's own opinion, when they are read in the context of the entire poem.

Meanwhile, as Reza Zia-Ebrahimi (2014) argues, modern anti-Arabism is essentially different and is a much more recent phenomenon. To him, modern anti-Arabism is rooted in European racism, the “Aryan myth” in particular, and nourished by Orientalist scholarship. It emerged, Zia-Ebrahimi argues, out of the encounter of the Iranian elite with Europe: as a response to the “trauma” of their perceived backwardness vis-à-vis Europe and the need for a scapegoat to explain this situation, Iranian intellectuals developed a nationalist discourse in which they idealized the glorious, ancient, pre-Islamic past and blamed Islam and its Arab progenitors for plunging Iran into backwardness, religious fanaticism, and superstition. The antidote was hence simple: eliminate the heritage of Arabs and Islam (2014: 1044).

Indeed, modernization in Iran went hand in hand with this ideology, influenced by the model implemented in Turkey. Intellectuals started campaigning for language purification and the coinage of Persian words to replace Arabic loanwords. The idea of replacing the Arabic alphabet was also proposed during this period (see e.g. Tavakoli-Targhi 1990).

It is important to bear in mind, however, that this ideology was not the only prevailing view of Iranian national identity. Indeed, the above-mentioned narrative, which is usually qualified as “Iranian” in the sense of emphasizing non-Islamic (that is, pre-Islamic) features of the collective identity, is in direct competition with another narrative, namely the “Islamic” identity, which considers (Shi’i) Islam as the main pillar of Iranian identity. While the former was the official ideology of the Pahlavi state (1925–1979), the latter is the official narrative of the Islamic Republic, which came into power after the 1979 (Islamic) Revolution and the overthrow of the second and last Pahlavi monarch. What is crucial in understanding the contemporary

adversity between the Islamic and the Iranian identities is the fact that in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, the pre-Islamic heritage was downplayed.<sup>15</sup>

Hence, under the Islamic Republic, promoting the “Iranian” identity can be conceived of as subversive, and as such is at the heart of some of the opposition’s (secularist) discourse (see e.g. Boroujerdi 1998). Given the difficulties in expressing critical secularist views in contemporary Iran, the Arabic language can be seen as serving as a symbol for Islamic dominance. Note that (Classical) Arabic, as the language of the holy Qur’an, has a privileged status in Iran and is part of the national (obligatory) education, as specified in the Constitution of Iran<sup>16</sup>.

#### **4 The so-called “revival” of the Persian language**

As previously mentioned, Persian plays a primordial role in the historical narrative of national identity in Iran. Indeed, the survival of the “Iranian” (pre-Islamic) identity despite the Islamization of Iranian territory is said to be due to the “revival” of the Persian language. The

<sup>15</sup> The following statement from Daryaee (2009:583) expresses these two extremities eloquently: “The Pahlavi dynasty’s attempt at connecting its rule to that of the Achaemenids and to Pasargadae would have repercussions some eight years later when there was an attempt at bulldozing the tomb of Cyrus the Great by the new revolutionary government of Iran.” Note that Daryaee is referring to the extravagant and lavish celebrations organized in 1971 by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pahlavi (as the 2500<sup>th</sup> birthday of Cyrus the Great) at Persepolis.

<sup>16</sup> Article 16 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran: “Since Arabic is the language of the Qur’an and Islamic culture and scholarship, and since Persian literature is completely interwoven with it, Arabic must be taught after elementary school, until the end of high school, and in all classes and in all fields of study.”

following passage from the late distinguished Iranian historian and linguist, Ehsan Yarshater, emeritus professor of Iranian Studies at Columbia University and the founding editor of the “Encyclopedia Iranica”, comments on the “retention” of Persian:

[...] in spite of conversion to Islam, despite some 200 years of strict Arab rule and in spite of Persian strides towards developing and consolidating Islam and the Islamic civilization, Persia was the one country that, in contrast to Iraq, Syria and Egypt, was able to maintain its separate identity within the Islamic world, best expressed by the retention of the Persian language. The countries I have just mentioned were all heirs to magnificent ancient civilizations, but once they were conquered by the Arabs and had adopted Islam, they quickly shed their former identity, abandoned their original language, adopted Arabic as their vernacular and assumed forthwith an Arab identity – an identity that they have kept ever since. [...] The importance of language, which is the vehicle for the narration of history and legend expression of literary arts, cannot be overestimated. Through the Persian language, Iran remained connected to its past history and culture. (Yarshater 2009: 9–10).

Indeed, Persian is cherished by Iranians as a precious cultural and historical legacy. It is also considered by many scholars (of different political persuasions, both inside and outside Iran) as a core dimension of national identity, uniting Iranians and enabling a continuous national narrative by maintaining a historical bond. According to Hamid Ahmadi (2005: 7), professor of political

science in Tehran University, Persian, along with the Iranian political and historical heritage, and the Islamic religion, are three unifying factors of contemporary Iranian national identity.<sup>17</sup>

Iranian cultural heritage, as the main recorder and bearer of the memory of Iran's political heritage, [...] has played an important role in giving a sense of being Iranian to different groups with diverse local dialects, languages and religious attachments. This cultural heritage has manifested itself in classical and modern works, both in prose and poetry, in the Persian language.

Hence, capturing the significance of the Persian language as an essential dimension of Iranian identity is crucial for the issue under discussion in this paper. To this end, I first provide a brief description of the language and an outline of prevalent views on its emergence.

Persian is a (West-)Iranian language, that is, it belongs to the Indo-Iranian branch of Indo-European languages. The Iranian languages are known to have had three chronological stages, commonly referred to as Old, Middle, and New Iranian. Persian is the only language of which all

<sup>17</sup> Here are two more quotations from two scholars in different fields (social science and literature): "Throughout history, Iran has witnessed waves of invasions from the outside. Thanks to the rich cultural heritage, Iranians have survived such devastating experiences and each time have adapted themselves to the new conditions while preserving some aspects of their ancient civilization, most notably the Persian language." (Mashayekhi 1992, quoted by Ahmadi 2005: 7).

"We [Iranians] maintained our nationality, or perhaps it is better to say, our national identity (Iranianness), through the blessing of language, by means of the vitality of Persian as a refuge." (Meskoub 1992: 10, my translation).

three stages are known. It is the language originally spoken in the province of *Fārs*<sup>18</sup> (Lazard 1975):

1. Old Persian (the language of the Achaemenid Empire: 6<sup>th</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD);
2. Middle Persian (Pahlavi) (the language of the Sasanian Empire: 3<sup>rd</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries);
3. New Persian, appearing after the Islamic conquest of Iran, also known for its three stages, roughly: Early New Persian (8<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup>), Classical Persian (14<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup>), and Modern Persian.

There is no written trace of this language in the first two centuries of the Islamic period, with the first attestations (written in Arabic script) being from the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, the emergence of the New Persian language and literature remains enigmatic and is the subject of ongoing controversial debate. In particular, the popular nationalistic narrative (as well as the standard scientific one for a long time) is one of misleading terms such as “renaissance” and “revival”, as a result of Iranian resistance to Arabic domination, best formulated in the last lines of the emblematic monograph *Two Centuries of Silence*, by a pioneer Iranian historian with noted nationalistic (anti-Arab) views, Abdolhossein Zarrinkoub:

The Iranian language, which [...] had born “two centuries of [heavy] silence”, was now breaking the spell of silence [...] and preparing itself to chant the most immortal

<sup>18</sup> Arabized form of *Pārs*.

lines of world literature. [...] Iran (like a phoenix) was again arising from underneath the ashes. (Zarrinkoub 1957: 292, my translation).

This “nationalistic” view has for a long time been the prevalent historic view and it is only recently that other accounts have begun to gain ground in the literature (see e.g. Darayee 2009; Rezakhani 2016).

Gilbert Lazard, the late distinguished scholar of the Persian language, as well as other specialists of Iranian languages such as John Perry and Bo Utas, have convincingly debunked the nationalistic narrative. Their work has shown that the emergence of New Persian, that is, the transition from spoken Middle Persian to the literary New Persian, was one of continuity and adaptation, shaped by geopolitical and sociolinguistic dynamics. It is interesting to note that Lazard (1975: 597) qualifies New Persian as a “mixed language based on the Persian dialect but bearing marked traces of other Iranian languages and infiltrated by Arabic words” (1975: 595), while Utas even suggests that it may be considered as a case of “creolization” (2008: 73).

In a nutshell, before becoming a literary language, Persian – or, to be more exact, a simplified version (e.g. loss of case inflection) of the spoken Middle Persian, that is the Sasanid vernacular – first emerged as a *lingua franca*.<sup>19</sup> As argued by Perry (2012: 71–72), in contrast to other languages such as Aramaic, Syriac or Coptic, as well as (written) Middle Persian directly associated with the Zoroastrian priesthood, Persian was an inclusive and secular language, that is,

<sup>19</sup> Other Iranian languages, e.g. Parthian, Bactrian, Sogdian, Khwarazmian, Khotanese, (non-Iranian) Indo-European languages, e.g. Tokharian, and non-Indo-European Turkic languages were spoken on the Iranian Plateau and Transoxiana, where (New) Persian appeared as a *lingua franca* (Utas 2008: 73–74)

at that period, it carried no immediate religious association (and as such presented no threat to Arabic as the new religious language). It was used as the vernacular for Zoroastrians, Jews, Manichaeans, Christians, and Muslim converts in Iran without serving as a regular vehicle for any scripture or liturgy. Written in the Arabic script and with a significant number of Arabic loanwords,<sup>20</sup> Persian began to be considered an Islamic language (with the advantage of being more accessible to the population than the Arabic language)<sup>21</sup>, and with the rapid Islamization of the eastern lands (namely, Central Asia), away from the centers of the Arab culture, it expanded and gained power smoothly.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in this context, access to power implied conversion to Islam and the adoption of Persian as the vehicle of communication.

Persian flourished as a language of poetry and literature between the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries in the courts of Iranian (local) dynasties and under their active patronage, particularly the Samanid (succeeded later by the Buyied, Ghaznavids, and Seljuks), who came into power in the eastern lands in the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century when the Abbasid Caliphate gradually lost military and political influence. During this period, Persian was established as a (complementary) literary language of administration, secular sciences, and the humanities (see Perry 2012), and historical

<sup>20</sup> According to Lazard (1975), departing from Middle Persian, New Persian has also borrowed an important number of loanwords from other Iranian dialects such as Parthian and Sogdian.

<sup>21</sup> Utas argues that Iranians showed little capacity or motivation to learn Arabic (2008: 72).

<sup>22</sup> New Persian, “a combination of the Middle Persian language with West Iranian dialects [e.g. Parthian]”, appeared as a “new Islamic language by being written in Arabic script and incorporating a wide array of Arabic loan words” and “started to supplant Sogdian as a *lingua franca* along the Central Asian trade routes from the end of 8<sup>th</sup> century” (Utas 2008: 72).



and scientific texts were translated from Arabic into Persian.<sup>23</sup> Its status was reinforced with the introduction of Shi'ite Islam as the state religion under Safavid in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

As a matter of fact, as Rezakhani (2016: 103) fittingly puts it, “as ironic as it might sound to the anti-Islam camp”, the emergence of Persian owes much to the rise of Islam rather than having emerged as a result of resistance against it.

## **5 The animosity against Arabic elements of Persian**

In the “nationalistic” historical narrative, the relationship between Arabic and Persian is sometimes depicted as conflicting from the start (see e.g. Azarnoush 2006), whereas the linguistic outcome of the language interference and contact in these times suggests that the attitude of Iranian (scholars) towards Arabic is best described as “hospitable” (Jeremias 2007: 407).

We have seen in the previous sections that after the advent of Islam, Arabic became the new administrative language in the Iranian territory, replacing Middle Persian. When after two centuries of Arabic domination, New Persian emerged as a literary language, it had already gone through a partial relexification by Arabic and had lost a significant part of its original (primary) lexicon. During this period, a substantial number of religious, scientific, and administrative Arabic words entered into Persian and replaced Middle Persian vocabulary.

<sup>23</sup> Arabic and Persian served separate functions for most Iranian scholars of that period, such as Al Biruni (c. 973–1050): while Arabic was the proper language of science, Persian was considered “less precise” and was reserved for poetry and literature. Ibn Sina (a.k.a. Avicenna, c. 980–1037) was a notable exception.

When, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Iranian scholars began to use Persian in their writing, they used the available Arabic words instead of trying to find Middle Persian words or to coin new Persian words (Sadeghi 2001). Arabic was the main source of lexical enrichment because the scholarly elite had mastered Arabic as the main vehicle of scientific and religious discourse. Indeed, Iranian scholars were among the most distinguished of the Islamic world during its period of flourishing. It should be noted that some scholars attempted to coin Persian equivalents for Arabic words, particularly Ibn Sina (a.k.a. Avicenna, c. 980–1037). However, this practice was not continued by other scholars.

In the spoken language, Arabic vocabulary was phonologically assimilated, but in the written language the original orthography was retained, including the distinctive Arabic letters representing sounds that were alien to Persian.<sup>24</sup> It is interesting to note that due to a phonological simplification that occurred during the evolution of Middle Persian into New Persian, a nominal ending in Persian (*ag* -> *a*) overlapped with a nominal ending in Arabic (*-a(t)*) and hence facilitated the incorporation of these loanwords (see Perry 2005). Also, at this period, forging morphologically “hybrid” words was common; that is, applying Arabic morphology to a Persian etymon and *vice versa*.<sup>25</sup> Hence, the new Persian lexicon developed as a mixture of both

<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that Persian orthography was standardized in that period and has changed very little ever since. As a result of further phonological simplification, the Persian alphabet contains a significant number of homographs that, among other things, make proficiency in literacy hard to achieve. To give an example, the phonemes /z/ and /s/ correspond to four and three graphemes respectively, that correspond to distinct phonemes in (classical) Arabic.

<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting that in the present-day prescriptive grammars, advice against employing “hybrid” forms in Persian is given, and a number of “hybrid” forms in current use are noted as “erroneous” (e.g. Nafisi 1969; Najafi 1981).

languages, blurring the etymological Arabic/Persian distinction, and making it hard to recognize the original provenance of commonly used words.<sup>26</sup>

Arabic remained the main source of lexical borrowing for Persian until the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>27</sup> when, as a result of contact between Iranians and Europe, and the advent of modern science and technology – as well as due to political ideologies described in the previous sections – a massive number of French (and also Russian and German) words were assimilated into Persian. More recently, English has become the main source of lexical borrowing. Interestingly, even when European languages became the main sources of lexical renewal, calques from those languages (French in particular) were introduced into Persian using Arabic (instead of searching for “purely” Persian words). Thus, “loanwords” of Arabic origin in Persian are not all “borrowed” but are also coined directly by Persian speakers. In short, the status of Arabic as a source of lexical enrichment for Persian can be compared to that of Latin or Greek on French or English.

As discussed in Section 3, nationalist views in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries led to the idea of linguistic purism and the desire to coin (etymologically) Persian words in order to ‘purify’ the language from Arabic, but also to stop the overwhelming borrowing from Western languages. The first language societies, including the first Persian Academy, were founded in this period (see Sadeghi 2001).

<sup>26</sup> See Faghiri (2010) for a discussion of the Arabic/Persian distinction with respect to the formation of nominal plurals in contemporary Persian.

<sup>27</sup> Note that with the Mongol invasion in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Turkic and Mongolian loanwords were introduced into Persian.

While the radical “purist” anti-Arabic movement ran out of steam rather quickly, and in present-day Iran followers of such an ideology are scarce, moderate anti-Arabism is fashionable in some sections of the Iranian society, and varying degrees of hostility against Arabic elements can be observed among ordinary middle class educated Iranians, the (so-called secular or non-religious) cultural elite, and intellectuals.

It is noteworthy that hostility against the Arabic influence on Persian can also be observed in scientific scholarship, building on the fact that Arabic and Persian are incompatible on linguistic grounds, given that Arabic is a Semitic language using non-concatenative processes (or derivation based on vocalic schemas) for word formation. For instance, the massive (and excessive) borrowing from Arabic in the past is considered responsible for “paralyzing” the morphological components of Persian and its ability to produce new words, especially with respect to the verbal lexicon. As a result, Persian is depicted as an “infertile” language, forced to borrow instead of coining new words in spite of its existing (but neglected) potential.<sup>28</sup>

One prominent example of such a view can be found in the writings of Darioush Ashouri, an eminent intellectual figure, important translator, and author of the first *English-Persian Dictionary of the Human Sciences* (1995). Ashouri has devoted much of his work to the evolution of Persian in the modern world and its capacity to catch up with ongoing technological and scientific advances. In his monograph entitled *(The) Open Language* (2008), Ashouri strongly (and justly) argues against purist movements and is in favor of linguistic openness, citing the heavy lexical borrowings in French and English from Latin and Greek. Yet he does not hold the

<sup>28</sup> See the article *Fārsi zabān-e aqīm?* ‘Persian an infertile language?’ by Mohammad Reza Bateni (1989), the author of one of the first descriptive grammars of Persian (written in Persian) adopting a modern linguistic theory (Bateni 1969).

same attitude towards Arabic. In particular, he strongly criticizes Iranian scholars of past centuries for their “excessive” borrowing from the Arabic language, which he argues has led to a “defection” of morphological components in the Persian language and has “paralyzed” Persian’s “natural faculty” for producing (new) words. Persian’s verbal lexicon, in particular, is depicted as deficient.

At this point, we need to briefly review the particularities of Persian’s verbal lexicon. Modern Persian is known for its limited number of simplex verbs: less than 250, of which only about 150 are commonly used. While a morphological lexeme formation process outputting verbs from nouns or adjectives (e.g. *xāb* ‘sleep (noun)’ > *xāb-idan* ‘to sleep’; *raqs* ‘dance (noun)’ > *raqs-idan* ‘to dance’) is available, it is no longer (actively) productive. The verbal lexicon is instead formed by (syntactic) combinations of a (light) verb and a non-verbal element, usually a noun, e.g. *bāzi kardan* ‘to play (lit. ‘play to-do’)’ or *dars xāndan* ‘to study (lit. ‘lesson to-read’)’); these constructions are known as complex predicates or compound verbs. New verbal concepts are regularly coined in such compounds, e.g. *telefon zadan* ‘to phone (lit. ‘phone to-hit’)’ or *eskan kardan* ‘to scan (lit. ‘scan to-do’)’ (see e.g. Samvelian 2012; Samvelian and Faghiri 2013).

Compound verbs are not exclusive to Modern Persian and were also used in earlier stages of the language, particularly Middle Persian. After the relexification by Arabic, compounding gradually became the main apparatus of verb formation in New Persian, and ultimately replaced morphological noun-verb derivation. Indeed, during this process, a number of complex predicates involving an Arabic *massdar* (verbal radical) and a Persian light verb such as *fekr kardan* ‘to think (lit. ‘thinking to-do’)’ replaced existing simplex verbs (see e.g. Khanlari 1995).

As witnessed in the following paragraph, Ashouri sees Arabic loanwords as the reason for the destruction of Persian’s morphological verb formation apparatus.

The driving apparatus of the Persian language (that is, the verb) is paralyzed (apparently, the virus of Arabization first targets the neuralgic system of the language). Instead of all or mostly simplex and derivational Persian verbs, we employ ugly, abnormal, and compound verbs that are not only hard to conjugate but also impossible to use in derivational morphology (in order) to coin (other) necessary (related) complex words. (Ashouri 1993: 33, my translation).

What Ashouri is commenting on is the fact that, for instance, instead of borrowing only a noun (e.g. *yon* ‘ion’), coining a simplex verb, and deriving other related words using Persian morphological apparatus, the “whole family” is directly borrowed. Hence, *yonise kardan* (lit. ‘ionize to-do’) is coined for ‘to ionize’, instead of *yon-idan* derived “in Persian” from the borrowed noun *yon*. As a consequence, *yonise* ‘ionized’ and *yonisation* ‘ionization’ (assimilated from French) are borrowed, while it would have been possible otherwise to coin Persian words, namely the past participle *yon-ide* (cf. *xābidan* <sub>verb</sub> ‘to sleep’ > *xābide* <sub>pp</sub>) and the deverbal noun *yon-eš* (cf. *xāndan* <sub>verb</sub> ‘to read’ > *xāneš* <sub>noun</sub>), and thus to limit the borrowing.<sup>29</sup>

Surprisingly, what is usually ignored here is the fact that the same can also be achieved with a compound verb coined with the combination of a borrowed noun and (different) light verbs. Indeed, in Persian, with the verbal lexicon being mainly based on compounding, it is usual for morphologically complex words to be regularly formed as syntactic combinations. Consequently, valency alternations are obtained by changing the verbal element; for instance, the

<sup>29</sup> This example is brought up and discussed by Bateni (1989: 66).

passive voice can be obtained by replacing the verb *kardan* ‘to do’ with the verb *šodan* ‘to become’ (e.g. *pāk kardan* ‘to clean’ > *pāk šodan* ‘to be cleaned’). Moreover, in Persian the infinitive is clearly a nominal form (see Mir-Samii and Samvelian 2007), that is, deverbal nouns can be expressed by the infinitive, as well as through morphological conversion. Thus, for example, instead of *yonidan*, which native speakers may not adopt spontaneously, one may suggest *yonī kardan*. Then, to form the equivalent of *yonise* ‘ionized’, it is possible to change the light verb to *šodan* and derive the past participle: *yonī šodan* (lit. ‘ionized to-become’) > *yonī šode* (lit. ‘ionized became’).

It is possible that Ashouri considers synthetic (morphological) word formation to be “superior” to analytic (syntactic) formation. As a matter of fact, the idea of the superiority of the synthetic language type, which was believed to represent a more advanced stage of evolution, over the analytic type, believed to belong to more primitive stages, was a prevailing European linguistic ideology during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>30</sup> However, even though this classification is still relevant in modern linguistic typology, the assumed directional evolutionary hierarchy has been robustly debunked. Nevertheless, the belief in the superiority of complex morphology seems to persist.

<sup>30</sup> Evolutionary linguistic typology was developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (by German scholars such as Wilhelm von Humboldt and August Wilhelm Schlegel) and was inspired by the evolutionary models in biology. It identified three language types (isolating languages, agglutinating languages, and inflecting languages), corresponding to three stages of linguistic evolution, from a primitive stage to a fully complex stage. A closely related hierarchy draws an opposition between synthetic and analytic languages. The latter are characterized by a low number of morphemes per word and mainly make use of syntactic combinations (and/or compounding), while the latter rely mainly on inflectional morphology and display a higher ratio of morphemes per word.

Interestingly, in his monograph (*The Open Language*), Ashouri himself mentions different evolutionary patterns of Indo-European languages and, comparing the three main European languages (English, French, and German), states that French and English's becoming highly analytic forced these languages to rely mainly on borrowing (from Latin and Greek), but that German, as a synthetic language, is able to rely on its morphological potentials and on coinage rather than borrowing. He adds, furthermore, that the simplicity of English over German and French is key to its success in becoming a global language (2008: 39–43). It is hence startling that he is not inclined to the same openness for Persian (with respect to Arabic).

The question remains as to why new words like the English (*to scan*), French *scanner*, or the German *scannen*, should be considered superior to the Persian *eskan kardan*? Why should one blame Persian speakers for not using *eskanidan* instead? Why should Arabic be held responsible for depriving Persian of such a possibility? These beliefs are very likely to be the consequence of the hegemony of European languages and their long-lasting domination in the field of linguistics. They are also in line with the Iranian intellectual perception of Modern European culture and languages as their superior “Other” (particularly in opposition to Arabic) ever since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## **6 Conclusions**

The animosity towards Arabic as the language of the invader observed among some groups in contemporary Iran presents a complex phenomenon resulting from a history of interactions between the Iranian nationalist identity and European linguistic ideologies.



In this paper, I have shown that this phenomenon is deeply connected to the modern Iranian national narrative which developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (and which became part of the official ideology of the government in the 20<sup>th</sup> century), praising pre-Islamic Iran and attempting to eliminate the heritage of Arabs and of Islam. Bearing this in mind, this ideology has since been in competition with another narrative that emphasizes the Islamic identity (and downplays the pre-Islamic dimensions). This narrative became the official ideology of the government in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Indeed, anti-Arabism in Iran appeared as a direct result of the domination of European culture and ideologies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In particular, Iranian intellectuals who were unhappy with Iran's "backwardness" and fascinated by European advances embraced European linguistic (and race-related) ideologies, especially the Aryan myth. Consequently, in spite of Arabic's fundamental role in the emergence and development of Persian, language-related anti-Arabism has emerged and has had a wide range of forms and effects ever since. This ranges from identifying words as "Arabic" (meaning alien to Persian), to unsuccessful purist attempts like the fabrication of "pure Persian" equivalents for Arabic loanwords and advocating for the replacement of the Arabic alphabet. Last but not least, we see the recent linguistic approach of downgrading Persian as a "paralyzed" language incapable of coping with the needs and requirements of the modern world, while Arabic is blamed for the so-called deficiency of its verbal morphology.

As I have argued above, the idea of Persian's incapacity for lexical creation, as well as the claim that Arabic loanwords are responsible for the so-called deficiency of Persian, are linguistically unfounded and result from historically grounded linguistics beliefs and ideologies.

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