



# FRANCE XVI. LOANWORDS IN PERSIAN

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## FRANCE

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The gradual entry of a large number of loan words into Persian from European languages and most notably from French began in the 19th century and continued through the 20th century as part of the process of modernization of culture and society in Persia. Several political and educational factors played a significant part in the selection and provenance of these borrowings. Although France did not have the perennial political and military influence of Russia or Britain on Persia, it served, particularly in the 19th and early part of the 20th century, as the most important model of modern secular culture for Persia as well as many other countries of the region. French was not only the language of the *corps diplomatique* and *haute couture* but was also used as a second language in European royal courts and aristocratic circles particularly when refinements of cuisine, manners, and etiquette were discussed.

As well as these somewhat nebulous and universal factors, there were specific historical events including the creation of modern educational institutions like the [Dār al-fonūn](#) in 1851, which strengthened the position of French as the main vehicle for the introduction of modern European culture and technical



and scientific vocabulary into Persian (Rouhbakhshan, p. 33). This process continued into the 20th century with the educational system at all levels modeled on the French system, in organization as well as curricula, and with the textbooks, particularly in the sciences, based on translations from French. French was virtually the only language secondary-school students took for six years to meet the European-language requirement, until it was replaced by English after the Second World War. At the University of Tehran (founded in 1935, see EDUCATION xvii), virtually all the professors in the scientific and technical fields, and not a few in others, had studied in French-speaking countries (Maḥbūbī, *Mo'assasāt* I, pp. 320-66), or otherwise received a French-influenced education in Persia. Persian literature, political discourse and personal dairies in the last two centuries, from the writings of Amīr (-e) Kabīr (Rouhbakhshan, pp. 53-53) and many minor Qajar poets (see, e.g. Browne, *Lit. Hist. Persia* IV, p. 323) to the satirical works of Taqī Dāneš, Īraj Mīrzā, and [Moḥammad-'Alī Jamālzāda](#) (*Zomorrodīān*, pp. 10-11; Shakoor Ahsan, pp. 74-78) provide many illustrations of the use of French vocabulary in Persian to convey modern concepts, and they often poke fun at its excessive and unnecessary employment by those eager to flaunt their knowledge of the French language and European ways.

These developments are reflected in the large number of French loan words in modern Persian vocabulary, in spite of the efforts of official institutions like the [Farhangestān](#) to curb this flow. The number of French words in Persian dictionaries are estimated at 820 (Dehḳodā), 1700 (Mo'īn), 1600 ('Amīd) and 1200 (Mošīrī). A detailed study of the subject completed in 1982 estimates the number at three thousand to four thousand (Tabataba'i, p. 165). French loan words exist in all domains of life. In the following list of examples, each word is listed in one semantic category, and English meanings are given only if not clear from the cognate terms or loan words in English. It should be noted that in the examples cited, a full philological description tracing the word's complete etymology is not given. Most of the words cited have their origin in Latin or Greek or may have first been used in some other European or non-European language, before entering French as loan words, as for example, the word *belof* 'bluff' cited below, which may be Dutch in origin and perhaps entered French through English, or *ūrāngūtān* 'orangutan' which is derived from Malay. What is significant for our study and the reason for their inclusion is that it was typically through the French language that they were transmitted into Persian, and in this the similarity of accent patterns in French and Persian as well as historical and cultural factors briefly mentioned above



have played a significant part.

Animals: *šampānza*, *gūrīl*, *pangūan*, *ūrāngūtān*.

Arts: *romān* “novel,” *te’ātr*, *ātolīa* “workshop,” *operā*, *konservātūār*, *konsert*.

Bureaucracy (*būrokrāsī*): *dosīa*, *pārāf* “initials,” *gīša* “ticket or information window.”

Business and economics: *ešāntīyon* “sample,” *vītrīn* “store window, display window,” *būrs* “stock exchange,” *būdja*.

Clothing: *bolūz*, *māntow*, *kerāvāt* “necktie,” *šāpo* “felt brimmed hat,” *dekolta* “in low cut style,” *mīnīžūp* “miniskirt.”

Communications and transportation: *otobūs* “bus,” *telegrāf*, *telefon*, *ābūnomān* “subscription,” *tīrāž* “circulation numbers,” *tambr* “stamp,” *post*.

Education: *kelās*, *konkūr* “competitive entrance examination,” *dīplom*, *līsāns* “bachelor’s degree,” *doktorā*, *būrs* “scholarship.”

Food: *sālād*, *omlet*, *sūp*, *rāgū*, *bīftek* “steak,” *kompot*, *servīyet*, *sos*, *sosīs* “sausage,” *žāmbon* “ham.”

Government (politics, diplomacy, law and order): *senā* “senate,” *kāndīdā*, *žāndārmerī*, *mānovr*, *āttāša*, *šāržedāfer*, *ājūdān*.

Health and medicine: *mīkrob*, *kelīnīk*, *āpāndīs*, *āsm* “asthma,” *vāksan*, *kūrtāž* “abortion,” *epīdemī*, *doktor*, *vīzīt* (a doctor’s charge for a visit), *mālārīā*, *tīfūs*, *seflīs*, *āmpūl*.

Housing: *āpārtnmān*, *āsānsor*, *korīdor*, *dūš* “shower,” *komod* “chest of drawers,” *mobl* “furniture.”

Organized activity: *komīta*, *komīsīūn*, *sandīkā*, *federāsīūn*, *demonstrāsīūn*.

Personal life: *fāmīl*, *rāndevū*, *mānīkūr*, *mātīk* “lipstick,” *rū*.

Science: *šīmī*, *atom*, *sīnūs* “sine,” *logarītm*.

Style and format: *pārāgrāf*, *vīrgūl* “comma,” *parāntez*, *gīoma* “quotation marks.”



Technology: *pīston*, *sūpāp* “valve,” *volt*, *vāt*, *asīd*.

Plants: *gelāyol*, *okālīptūs*, *kāmelīā*.

Recreation: *sīnemā*, *kāfa*, *bīstro*, *bālmāska*, *gerāmāfon*.

Other: *mersī* “thank you,” *sūā* “subject,” *sūrprīz*, *alkolīsm*, *peransīp* “principle,” *belof* “bluff,” *fanātīsm* “fanaticism,” *mūza* “museum,” *serī* “series,” *bež* “beige,” *rezerv* “reservation.”

Practically all French loanwords have been adopted from written sources, as evidenced by the fact that the final consonant letters and the initial letter *h*, silent in French, are pronounced in Persian, e.g. *konsert*, *pāsport*, *hotel*.

The major phonological change, as far as the consonants are concerned, involves initial consonant clusters, where the vowel *e* is added after the first consonant, except in the case of *s*, where *e* is added before the consonant; e.g., “drame” > *derām*, “cravate” > *kerāvāt*, “sport” > *esport*. Sometimes, especially in rapid speech, vowels other than *e* are added, usually in assimilation to the vowel of the following syllable; e.g. *kīlīnīk* “clinic,” *porogrām* “program,” *boros* “brosse.” Nasal vowels are rendered as vowels followed by *n* or *m*, e.g., “antenne” > *ānten*, “timbre” > *tambre* (also *tamr*). Otherwise the French consonants all have counterparts in Persian, and cause no difficulty. The only one needing a relatively substantial phonetic adjustment is the French uvular fricative which is rendered as Persian alveolar liquid *r*. More substantive changes occur in the vowels, involving several which have no counterparts in Persian: /y/ > /ū/: “musical” > *mūzīkāl*, “cellule” > *sellūl*, *sūksa* < “succès”; /oe/ > /o/: *āsānsor*; ‘meubleδ > *mobl*; /ə/ is rendered as /e/, /u/, /o/, or /a/, depending on the phonetic context. Factors affecting vowel changes in general include the written forms of the words (both in French and in Persian), as well as the optional Persian rule of assimilation to the vowel of the following syllable. These changes are found in “gelée” > *žela*, “refusé” > *ro/ū/efūza*, “monsieur” > *mo/ū/so*, “marmelade” > *mārmālād*. Each nasalized vowel changes to a vowel followed by the consonant /n/ or /m/: “antenne” > *ānten*, “salon” > *sālon*; “ampoule” > *āmpūl*, “ampère” > *āmper*.

Relatively few semantic changes have occurred since most French borrowings are in science and technology. The few changes include *sīgār* “cigar,” *kotlet* “côtelette,” *žīgolo* “gigolo,” *pākat* “paquet,” which all have either different or additional semantic associations in Persian (Tabataba’i, pp. 70-71).



A less readily noticeable type of French impact is found in the relatively large number of loan translations or calques (*garta-bardārī*), e.g.: *rāh-āhan* “railroad” < “*chemin de fer*”; *ašk-e temsāḥ* “crocodile tears” < *larmes de crocodile*; *zīr-e cāp* “in the press” < *sous press*; *noqta-ye naẓar* “point of view” < *point de vue*; *esm-e kāṣṣā* “proper noun” < *nom propre*; *rūy-e kasī ḥesāb kardan* “to count on” (someone or something) < *compter sur qulequ’un*, and *čerā na* from French *pourquoi pas* or English “why not.” Scholars of stylistics and language, from Moḥammad-‘Alī Forūḡī to Parvīz Nātel Kānlārī and Abu’l-Ḥasan Najafī, have repeatedly pointed out with convincing examples in their influential works (see bibliography) that in clear, elegant, modern Persian prose these calques can normally be replaced by already existing Persian equivalents which do not play havoc with the syntax. But the trend continues, particularly in the mass media, where hasty translations from French or English are often riddled with new loan translations.

The French borrowings have not all had the same fate. In some cases, a French loanword and a Persian counterpart are both used; e.g. *bīyoloḡī* and *zīst-šenāsī*, *fenomen* and *padīda*. In others, the French loanword is more common, e.g., *hotel*, *līsāns*, *doktor*, *te’ātr* (rather than *tamāšā-kāna*). In most cases, there are no Persian counterparts, e.g., *post*, *šīmī*, *bānk*, (Deyhime, p. 91).

The reason for borrowing words is not always the same. In some cases it is necessity, as is the case, in general, with the words dealing with the material culture, including those in science and technology. In some cases, a borrowed word does not represent an entirely new concept, but a greatly changed version of an existing one; e.g. *restorān* and *kāfa* versus the old *qahwa-kāna*. Similarly, the terms in the area of government (including beaurocracy) represent greatly revised versions of existing institutions, requiring, *inter alia*, new techniques e.g. *pārāf*, *dosīa*.

Of special significance, in cultural terms, are French words borrowed in the general vocabulary for concepts already represented in Persian, often with more than one word. Thus, *mersī* “thanks” has virtually replaced the many synonymous words and phrases—certainly in urban areas. So has, to a lesser degree, *kādo* “gift.” *Berāvo!* is now a fairly common expression of praise and approval. *Māmān* “mommy” is now commonly used in many families. The degree to which this word has been integrated into the language is seen in the colloquial *māmānī* “dainty, delicate, cute,” derived from it.

The era of the preponderance of French linguistic influence on Persian came



to an end after the Second World War, when it was replaced by English. While it seems unlikely that many new French words will be borrowed, it appears that of those already borrowed many will remain in the language, in most cases perhaps as synonyms of native words or words from other sources.

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