



IRAN VI. IRANIAN LANGUAGES AND SCRIPTS

IRAN

vi. IRANIAN LANGUAGES AND SCRIPTS

Overview.

vi(1). *Earliest evidence.*

vi(2). *Documentation.*

vi(3). *Writing-systems.*

vi(4). *Origins of the Iranian languages.*

vi(5). *Indo-Iranian.*

vi(6). *Old Iranian languages.*

OVERVIEW

The term “Iranian language” is applied to any language which is descended from a proto-Iranian parent language (unattested by texts) spoken,



presumably, in Central Asia (q.v.) in the late 3rd to early 2nd millennium B.C.E. In historical times, Iranian languages have been spoken over an area stretching from easternmost Chinese Turkestan (q.v.; Xinjiang province, in the case of Sogdian and Khotanese) to western Europe (see [ALANS](#); for Alanic, see below). The proto-Iranian language was closely related to proto-Indo-Aryan (unattested by texts), from which various modern Indic languages are descended (e.g., Hindi, Gujarati, Urdu, Bengali), as well as the Dardic languages (q.v.) spoken in northwestern Pakistan. The Iranian and Indo-Aryan language groups are commonly referred to as the Indo-Iranian (Iir.) branch of the Indo-European language family, which would have been spoken several millennia earlier somewhere, perhaps, in the area of southern Russia. A third group, the Nuristani languages, appears to constitute a separate branch of Indo-Iranian, but the exact relationship is disputed.

The Iranian languages are known from three chronological stages, commonly referred to as Old, Middle, and New Iranian (see Documentation, below). The only language of which all three stages are known is Persian, the language originally spoken in the province of Fārs, which is descended from Old Persian, the language of the Achaemenid empire (6th-4th centuries B.C.E.), and Middle Persian, the language of the Sasanian empire (3rd-7th centuries C.E.).

The other known Old Iranian languages are Old and Young Avestan (OAv., YAv.; see [AVESTAN LANGUAGE](#)), the languages of the *Avesta* (q.v.), which were probably spoken in Central Asia and the area of modern Afghanistan between the mid-2nd and mid-1st millennia B.C.E.

Other Old Iranian languages from which no texts survive, but which were the ancestors of known Middle Iranian and New Iranian languages, include Median, the language of the Median state, known chiefly from loanwords in Old Persian, and several Scythian or Saka languages spoken north of the Black Sea.

The known Middle Iranian languages, spoken from about the 3rd century C.E. to about 1000 (some even later) include the following (from east to west): Khotanese, spoken in the Buddhist kingdom of Khotan located along the western part of the Southern Silk Road in Chinese Turkestan (q.v.); Sogdian, the language of the kingdom of Sogdiana (approximately modern Uzbekistan); and the Chorasmian language of the Chorasmian state located along the upper course of the Oxus river (Amu Daryā). In the Kushan empire, or Bactria (approximately northern Afghanistan), Bactrian was spoken, which had



inherited the Greek script of the settlers Alexander had left behind. In Parthia, east of the Caspian Sea, Parthian was spoken, the language of the Parthian, or Arsacid (q.v.), empire; and in Pārs, under the pre-Sasanian dynasties, Middle Persian, also called Pahlavi, was spoken, which became the official language of the Sasanian state and was the language of the Zoroastrian “Pahlavi” literature. In the area of the Caucasus, Alanic languages, descendants of Scythian, were spoken, of which little is known.

Today, Iranian languages are spoken from Turkey, Iraq, and the Caucasus in the west to Chinese Turkestan and Pakistan in the east, as well as widely in the diaspora, especially in Europe and America. There are several literary languages, among them the following: Persian (Fārsi), spoken throughout Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and in adjacent areas; Ossetic, spoken in Ossetia in the southern Caucasus in two main variants, Digoron and Iron; Kurdish, spoken in three principal variants in eastern Turkey and Syria, northern Iraq, and western Iran, as well as in surrounding areas; Baluchi (several dialects), spoken in eastern Iran and western Pakistan, but also in southern Afghanistan and Central Asia; and Pashto (several dialects), spoken mainly in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Non-literary languages and dialects comprise the following:

Northwestern and central Iran: Ṭāleši on the western shore of the Caspian Sea and Tāti and Āzari dialects from Iranian Azarbaijan through the Central Province and into Gilān, corresponding roughly to ancient Media; the Caspian dialects, Gilaki in Gilān and Māzanderāni; Zaza (Dimli) in eastern Turkey and Gurāni (including Awromani) in eastern Iraq and western Iran; several dialects on the northern edge of the Dašt-e Kavir, among them Semnāni; and the Central dialects, comprising a number of more or less interrelated dialects spoken in an area between Hamadān, Dašt-e Kavir, Kāšān, and Isfahan.

Southwestern and southern Iran: Lori (in several varieties) and Baḳtiāri; Fārs dialects in the province of Fārs; Lārestāni (in several dialects) in Lārestān; dialects in the area from Bandar-e ‘Abbās (Bandari) and Hormoz to Mināb and further north to Jiroft and Kahnuj; Baškardi in two dialects in Bašākerd, southeast of Bandar-e ‘Abbās; and Kumzāri on the Musandam peninsula across the Strait of Hormoz. These are also called the “Perside” dialects.

Southeastern Iran: Baluchi, spoken chiefly in Iranian and Pakistani Baluchistan.



Afghanistan and Central Asia: Parāči and Ormuḷi in central Afghanistan and across the border in Pakistan; Eškāšmi and Sangliči to the west of the Wākān corridor; Yidḡa in eastern Afghanistan and Munji/Munjāni in western Pakistan (related to Bactrian); the Yazḡulāmi-Šuḡni group in northern Afghanistan and Central Asia, including Sarikoḷi in western Chinese Turkestan; Yaḡ-nobi in the Yaḡnob valley in Tajikistan (laterally related to Sogdian); and Wāki in the Wākān corridor in northeastern Afghanistan (laterally related to Khotanese).

These languages and dialects can be divided into several larger groups on the basis of phonetic, grammatical, and lexical features (isoglosses). For instance, the languages of southwestern and southern Iran often have a *d-* where other Iranian languages have a *z-* (e.g., the verb “to know”: Persian *dān-*, *dūn-*, but elsewhere *zān-*, *zūn-*, etc.). This isogloss separates Persian from most other Iranian languages and dialects, including Kurdish and Māzanderāni, for instance. Other isoglosses, however, such as the words for “to do” and “to speak,” are shared by Persian (and the other Perside dialects), Kurdish, and Māzanderāni, which all have forms from *kun-* *kart* (*kirt*) and *gōw-* *guft*, against surrounding dialects with forms from *kar-* *kart* (*kirt*) and *wāč-* (*wāč-*) *wāxt* (*wāt*). A grammatical feature typical of most Iranian languages (including Pahlavi), but lost in New Persian, Lori-Baḡtīāri, and the Caspian dialects, is the ergative construction, according to which, instead of saying “I saw them,” one uses a construction meaning literally “by me seen they are.”

For further details, see below.

Surveys and comprehensive bibliographies are found in *Grundriss der iranischen Philologie* (q.v., 1895-1901; especially vol. 1 on languages, but also vol. 2 on literature), *Osnovy iranskogo yazykoznanija* (Basics of Iranian linguistics; 3 vols., Moscow, 1981-87), and *Compendium Linguarum Iranicarum [CLI]* (1989), *Yazyki mira. Iranskie yazyki* (Languages of the world. Iranian languages; 3 vols., Moscow, 1997-2000), *The Iranian Languages* (ed. G. Windfuhr, 2009: typology of Iranian languages), as well as in *Current Trends in Linguistics* (vol. 5, 1969: D. N. MacKenzie, “Iranian Languages,” pp. 450-77; vol. 6, 1970: E. Benveniste, “Old Iranian,” pp. 9-25; M. J. Dresden, “Middle Iranian,” pp. 26-63; G. Lazard, “Persian and Tajik,” pp. 64-96; G. Redard, “Other Iranian Languages,” pp. 97-135; E. Yarshater, “Iran and Afghanistan,” pp. 669-89), in a variety of other encyclopedic and linguistic publications (Western and Soviet), and in several *Forschungsberichte*, e.g., of Avestan and Old Persian (Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, “L’étude de l’iranien ancien au vingtième siècle,” *Kratylos* 7, 1962, pp. 1-44; Jean Kellens, “L’aveistique de 1962 à 1972,” *Kratylos*



16, 1971, pp. 1-30, with “Addenda et corrigenda,” *Kratylos* 18, 1973, pp. 1-5; idem, “L’avestique de 1972 à 1990,” *Kratylos* 36, 1991, pp. 1-31; Manfred Mayrhofer, “Das Altpersische seit 1964,” in Mary Boyce and Ilya Gershevitch, eds., *W. B. Henning Memorial Volume*, London, 1970, pp. 276-98; idem, “Neuere Forschungen zum Altpersischen,” in R. Schmitt-Brandt, ed., *Donum Indogermanicum. Festgabe für Anton Scherer zum 70. Geburtstag*, Heidelberg, 1971, pp. 41-66).

A comprehensive bibliography to date is Y. M. Nawābi’s *Ketābšenāsi-e Irān/A Bibliography of Iran* (2 vols., Tehran, 1347-50 Š./1969-71). Annual bibliographies are also found in *Bibliographie linguistique, Fehrest-e maqālāt-e fārsi/Index Iranicus* (ed. I. Afšār, covering publications beginning in 1328 Š./1949), and “Indogermanische Chronik,” part of *Die Sprache*. Modern editions of Old and Middle Iranian texts and linguistic studies also as a rule contain full and up-to-date bibliographies.

There is no comprehensive etymological dictionary of the Iranian languages. The collaborative project to produce an etymological dictionary conceived long before World War II came to nothing (Bailey, 1979, p. vii), and, of the one planned by the *Bonyād-e Farhang-e Irān*, only one fascicle was published (Tehran, 1357 Š./1978).

Etymological dictionaries of individual languages containing much material for Iranian etymologies are V. I. Abaev’s *Istoriko-ètimologičeskii slovar’ osetinskogo yazyka* (1958-89: Ossetic) and H. W. Bailey (1979: Khotanese), both with exhaustive indexes, and Steblin-Kamenskii (1999: Wakhi). Recently, two volumes of an Iranian etymological dictionary by V. S. Rastorgueva and D. I. Edel’man have appeared (2000-).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Given in the text. See also below, (2) Documentation.

[Continue](#)