



IRAN VII. NON-IRANIAN LANGUAGES (6) IN ISLAMIC IRAN

IRAN vii, continued

vii(6) Non-Iranian Languages in Islamic Iran

LANGUAGE FAMILIES

The non-Iranian languages spoken today in Iran include members of the following language families: (1) Altaic: (a) Oghuz Turkic, with several members; (b) Khalaj Turkic; (2) Afro-Asiatic Semitic: (a) Arabic; (b) Neo-Aramaic; (3) Indo-European: (a) Armenian; (b) Indo-Aryan Gypsy; (4) Caucasian: Georgian; (5) Dravidian: Brahui. Of these, Turkic speakers constitute an estimated third of the total population of Iran (Persian, 58 percent; Turkic, 28 percent; other Iranian, 12 percent; and all others, 2 percent).

Bilingualism and even multilingualism are the norm in many regions, given that Persian is the superstrate language, and particularly varieties of Azarbaijani Turkic (Azeri) are widely used as the language of the bazaar. Identity, therefore, is determined by complex, intersecting layered patterns of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic affiliations. The only published detailed



information on the linguistic composition of individual locations is H-'A. Razmārā's *Farhang-e joḡrāfiā'i-e Irān* (1949-54). Detailed population estimates on all ethnicities by country and language affiliation, including subgrouping, are found at the Library of Congress website (<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Iran.pdf>).

There were two successive periods of major overlays of speakers of non-Iranian languages over most of the Iranian linguistic ground. Both covered the entirety of Greater Iran from the western to the eastern regions, including Greater Khorasan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. The first was the Arabic overlay, which began before the Islamic period and continued for the next few centuries. The second was the Turkic overlay, which began in the 11th century.

Literary Arabic, as the administrative superstrate during the early centuries of Islam, and as the language of the Qor'ān, left an indelible impact on Persian and, through it, on virtually all language of Greater Iran, prominently in their lexicon, but also in phonology and morphology. The local Arabic overlay in the heartland and hinterland of Iran is now reduced due to assimilation to a few pockets in eastern Iran (as well as northern Afghanistan and Central Asia). Quite distinct is the situation of the Iranian Arabic-speaking regions in the southwest and along the littoral of the Persian Gulf, which are in direct or in close contact with the Arabic-speaking regions of Iraq and the Persian Gulf states.

By contrast, once Turkic speakers had settled first in Greater Khorasan in the northeast, then in Azarbaijan in the northwest, and then mostly from there in Fars in the southwest, they began to overlay the Iranian languages. Historically and geo-linguistically, this triangular pattern of Turkic settlement repeated the pattern of the original Iranian settlement some two thousand years earlier. It resulted in the Turkicization during the last millennium of most of the Iranian-speaking areas in Azarbaijan, leaving a few Iranian-speaking pockets, and of much of the Tati-speaking areas in western Iran, including the areas along the Alborz up to Qazvin and the areas east of the Zagros mountains. Moreover, dynasties of original Turkic speakers ruled the country for most of the second millennium, the most important of all being the Safavids. As such, Turkic has had a distinct impact on Persian and other Iranian languages, both in the lexicon and grammar, particularly in the regions in contact with Turkic in the northeast and the northwest of Persia and beyond. Here may also be mentioned Altaic Mongol, which left some



traces in the Persian lexicon as well as in the toponymy, mainly of Persian Kurdistan (see also Kieffer, on Afghanistan, Hazāra [q.v.], and Mogholi).

Unlike Turkic and Arabic, the other non-Iranian languages in Iran are mostly confined regionally and confessionally. Neo-Aramaic is still spoken by small Christian and Jewish communities in Azarbaijan and Kurdistan, as well as by small communities in major cities and towns, and by a few Mandaean families in Fars and Khuzestan, all of whom may now have emigrated.

Armenians are found regionally in Azarbaijan and in the area of Isfahan, where they had been deported (see [DEPORTATION iii](#)), together with Caucasian-speaking Georgians and Circassian, in the early 17th century by Shah ‘Abbās I (q.v.). Moreover, a considerable number of Armenian speakers immigrated there from the Ottoman empire in the early part of the 20th century. Early and later immigrants mostly settled in the capital and urban centers, but some also in villages (e.g., in Gorgān).

Iranian Gypsies began to move into Persia from northwest India via northern and southern Afghanistan during later Sasanian times, from where Gypsies then spread further west into the Caucasus and Europe. All have lost their language and adopted the local languages and dialects. They did, however, retain some part of the lexicon and some morphology. In turn, this linguistic remnant of a social fringe minority contributed to the various jargons, argots, and secret languages throughout the Iranian-speaking and Persianate regions. By contrast, the Indo-Aryan language has been retained and is still spoken in two villages near Qazvin and near Qučān in northern Khorasan. These speakers were deported from the European part of the Ottoman empire, present-day Bulgaria, and have largely retained that variety of Gypsy language.

South Caucasian Georgian may be still spoken in some villages in the sub-district (*dehestān*) of Faridan (also spelled Fereydan, and similar) west of Isfahan. Similar to the Armenians, these speakers were deported, together with North Caucasian Circassian speakers, by Shah ‘Abbās I. All three, in various combinations or separately, were settled mainly along the main roads west and south of Isfahan, but others also in Khuzestan and Māzandarān. While Armenians generally retained their religion, most of the Georgians speakers and the even fewer Circassians quickly assimilated culturally and linguistically.



Brahui (q.v.) is spoken in Baluchestan (as well as the adjacent areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan). The language is the northernmost remnant of the Dravidian languages, which are now found mainly in the southern Indian subcontinent, but may once have been more widely found in Iran. This is suggested, in particular, by the possible distant relationship between Proto-Elamite and Proto-Dravidian.

Brahui and Gypsy (qq.v.) have been succinctly discussed in the respective articles of this *Encyclopaedia*, and will not be discussed in the following; nor will Armenian and Georgian be discussed, given the dearth of information on their dialectology in Iran (for these two minority languages, see: [ARMENIA iv. IRANIAN INFLUENCES IN ARMENIAN](#), *EIr.* II, pp. 445-65; [Azarbaijan viii–ix](#), III, pp. 245-51; Čarkas, pp. 816-19; [CAUCASUS ii. LANGUAGE CONTACT. CAUCASIAN LANGUAGES IN IRAN](#), V, pp. 94-95; [FARIDAN](#), IX, p. 28; [GEORGIA v. LINGUISTIC CONTACTS WITH IRANIAN LANGUAGES](#), X, pp. 486-90; [GEORGIA viii. GEORGIAN COMMUNITIES IN PERSIA](#), X, pp. 496-97).

LINGUISTIC GEOGRAPHY AND TYPOLOGY

There is no comprehensive study of the linguistic geography of the non-Iranian languages of Iran. Džhoĭ Edel'man (1968) is a milestone in this field, but is focused on Indo-Iranian. However, in that pioneering work and numerous others she does also address issues of non-Iranian linguistic substrates (lexical and other linguistic reflexes from one or more languages formerly spoken in a linguistic area).

Typology, contact, and diffusion. Recent impetus for the study of the non-Iranian languages in Iran has come from the Turkological programs at the Universities of Mainz and Uppsala, spearheaded by Lars Johanson, who developed an exquisite theoretical framework for language contact, code-copying, diffusion, and typology. So far, two volumes have been published with contributions that cover the three major language families represented, Turkic, Iranian, and Semitic (Johanson and Utas, 2000, on evidential verb forms; Csató, Isaaksson, and Jahani, 2005, on linguistic diffusion and conversion). Also pioneering are the studies of the geographic typology of Iran by Donald Stilo, beginning with his dissertation (1971, 1981, 1987, 1994, 2005). While focusing on specific subsets of Iranian dialects, and subsets of typologically significant features, these studies consistently include non-Iranian languages ranging from the Transcaucasus to Anatolia and more recently Central Asia. Among the typological and dialectological studies of Iran



they are unique in providing, not only ample comparative tabulation of features, but also ample detailed maps of cross-linguistic isoglosses (lines surrounding same or similar linguistic features).

Toponymy and onomastics. As discussed earlier, reflexes of the complex historical dynamics of people movements and patterns of affiliations are found in onomastics, including regional toponymy as well as the naming of sub-tribes, clans, and families. Among studies focusing on Islamic Iran, there is the pioneering work by Vladimir Minorsky (1957) on the Mongol place names in Kurdistan. It is to the memorial volume of this scholar that Brian Spooner (1971) contributed a study of the complex linguistic toponymy of Makran. Wilhelm Eilers (e.g., 1982, 1987) was one of the scholars who devoted much of his research to toponymy, thereby also addressing issues of non-Iranian substrates. Notable other contributions to Iranian toponymy include those by V. I. Savina (1964, 1980).

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