



LORI LANGUAGE II. SOCIOLINGUISTIC STATUS OF LORI

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The array of related dialects collectively known as Lori (autonym: *lurī*) is spoken among the Lori and Baḵtiāri peoples of the Zagros mountains of western and southwestern Iran and surrounding areas. Linguistically, these varieties form a continuum between Kurdish and the Southwest Iranian varieties of [Fārs province](#), including Persian.

This article deals with the sociolinguistic status of Lori: the distribution of the language; complexities in the relationship between language and ethnicity; relation to other languages, and dialectology; language use and vitality; and the emergence of Lori literature and media.

Distribution. The regions in which Lori is spoken are contiguous, following the northwest/southeast axis of the Zagros mountains and extending from the south-western slopes of the range into the Mesopotamian plain. As a result of administrative partitions, speakers of the language are dispersed among ten of Iran's provinces. Lori speakers constitute a clear majority in two provinces,



Lorestān and Boir Aḥmad va Kohgiluya; in the province of Čahār Maḥāl va Baḳtiāri, the proportion of Lori and Persian speakers is evenly divided. Significant Lori-speaking minorities are also found in the provinces of Fārs, Isfahan, Hamadān, Ilām, and Khuzestan; and S. Amān-Allāhi highlights the existence of Lori-speaking zones in Bušehr and Markazi Provinces (Amān-Allāhi, p. 8). A population identifying itself as Lori was formerly found in Iraq, across the border from Ilām, but this group was displaced as a result of large-scale migration to Iran in the last decades of the 20th Century.

In 2003, the Lori-speaking population in Iran was estimated at 4.2 million speakers, or about 6 percent of the national figure (Anonby, 2003b, p. 173). Given the nationwide growth in population since then, the number of Lori speakers in 2012 is likely closer to 5 million. Of the three main varieties, Northern Lori (NLori), centered in Lorestān Province, is spoken by 2 to 3 million people (depending on the status of the languages in Ilām; see below); Baḳtiāri, centered in Khuzestan, Čahār Maḥāl va Baḳtiāri, and eastern Lorestān, counts over a million speakers; and the remaining Southern Lori (SLori) varieties, centered in Boir Aḥmad va Kohgiluya and northwestern Fārs, together number close to a million speakers.

Language and ethnicity. For the most part, Lori is spoken by members of the Lori cultural family (*qawm*). However, in several cases, the correspondence between language and ethnicity is more difficult to define. First of all, even though members of the Baḳtiāri ethnic group speak varieties of Lori and recognize a cultural link with other groups in the Lori *qawm*, their primary, high-level ethnic reference is to their own Baḳtiāri tribe (*ēl/īl*), which has a long history as a highly organized political confederation.

Secondly, there are a number of groups which identify themselves as ethnically Lori, but which speak other languages. These include many of the communities of Lors which have been resettled, often forcibly (as in the period of Reza Shah Pahlavi), in areas as distant as Qazvin, Qom, and Kermān, or groups such as the Šuli of Fārs. In these cases, Lors have adopted the Persian language spoken by the surrounding populations. In the northwestern section of Lorestān and adjacent areas of Kermānšāhān, a significant population (about 80,000) which identifies itself as ethnically Lori speaks Laki (q.v.), a language that shares many areal features with NLori but which is more closely related to Kurdish (Anonby, 2004). Conversely, the Nehāvand sub-province of Hamadān is home to ethnic Persians who speak NLori as a mother tongue.



Finally, in areas which are transitional between Lori and Kurdish or Persian dialects, ethnic affiliation is in general a poor indicator of which languages are spoken. The province of Ilām, located at the northwestern edge of the Lori-speaking bloc, is characterized by a large zone of linguistic and cultural convergence among Lori, Laki, and Kurdish. The linguistic situation there is complex and still poorly understood, but it is clear that ethnic self-identification does not always correspond to linguistic affiliation. The same is true of areas to the southwest, south, and east of the Lori language area (for example, Dezful and Šuštar in Khuzestan, the outlying districts of Ardakān in Fārs, and Šahreḳord in Čahār Maḳāl va Baḳtiāri): while the varieties spoken there show more structural similarity to Lori than to Persian, speakers identify themselves as ethnically Persian.

Classification. Lori varieties have been classified as part of the “Perside” group, itself parallel to Persian and Persian varieties within the Southwest subgroup of West Iranian. Alongside Lori, other members of the Perside group include Dezfuli-Šuštari as well as Davāni (see Davān), and a heterogeneous ensemble of other Fārs dialects.

Two important characteristics of the Lori group which have often been overlooked are its internal diversity (see below) and its status as a continuum between Kurdish and Persian. Specifically, the varieties on the ends of the continuum (NLori and SLori) have more in common with neighboring languages than with each other. Laki, a Kurdish language beyond the northwestern end of the Lori continuum, shows a great degree of phonological similarity and shared vocabulary with NLori; in Ilām Province, the division between the two languages is still unclear (see “Language and ethnicity,” above). Similarly, the Mamasani variety of SLori shares much in common with neighboring dialects of Fārs (and even with the near-extinct old dialect of Shiraz), and the linguistic boundary between the two is difficult to define. This contrasts with NLori and SLori, which are unintelligible with one another. Even Baḳtiāri, which is transitional between the two, is not intelligible with NLori (e.g., Ḳorramābādi) and SLori (e.g., Mamasani) dialects at the ends of the continuum.

The structural nature of this continuum is illustrated in the phonology, for example, by the status of the palato-alveolar fricative *ʒ* in the three dialect groups. In NLori, as in Kurdish and Laki, *ʒ* is a common phoneme (e.g., NLori (Ḳorramābādi) and Laki *murīʒ* “ant,” Ḳorramābādi *miʒnā*, Laki *maʒī* “he/she sucked”). In Baḳtiāri, it is still demonstrably contrastive, but is the rarest of the



consonantal phonemes (*lūža* “evading,” *žāž* “cheap,” *mažma* “tray”). In SLori, as in many of the Southwest dialects to the south, it is not contrastive; rather, it is only found as an allophonic variant of *š* preceding voiced obstruents (*hišdah* □ [*hiždah*] “eighteen,” *hulaš dā* □ [*hulaž*] *dā* “he/she pushed”).

The gradient nature of the continuum is equally illustrated in the lexicon by words such as “finger” (varieties are given from northwest to southeast):

kilik Laki (Lorestān), NLori (Korramābād)

kilik NLori (other varieties of Lorestān and Khuzestan)

kilij Baḳtiāri (Haflang varieties of Čahār Maḳāl va Baḳtiāri)

kilič SLori (Boir Aḳmadi)

čilij SLori (Kohgiluya)

tīlū SLori (Mamasani)

In addition, the long-standing influence of Persian on the southern edges of the language area is evident from the forms *angulī* (Čārlang varieties of Baḳtiāri in Čahār Maḳāl va Baḳtiāri) and *angušt* (Baḳtiāri of Masjed Solaymān and some varieties of Mamasani).

One grammatical morpheme attested in and beyond the Lori language area in the Zagros is the plural morpheme *-gal/-yal/-al*. It is the regular plural marker in SLori (*īn-gal/ūn-gal* “they (proximal/distal),” *hūna-yal* “houses,” *kur-al* “boys”) and has been retained in Baḳtiāri for many animate/human nouns (*sayal* “dogs,” *kur-gal*, *kur-yal* “boys,” *bačal*, *bača-yal* “children”). It is also found to the northwest in some varieties of Kurdish as a plural/collective morpheme (for example, *kurr-gal* “boys, group of boys” and *sagal* “dogs, pack of dogs” in the Ardalāni variety in the province of Kordestān; data from Jaffer Sheyholislami, personal communication in 2012), and to the south of the Lori-speaking area in varieties such as Davāni, where *-gal* is the regular plural marker (Morgenstierne).

Kumzari (q.v.), a Southwest language spoken on both sides of the Strait of Hormuz, 600 km away from the Lori language area, has been classified as a close relative of Lori in several publications. However, setting aside foundational, shared Southwestern innovations such as pre-Iranian **dz > d*,



the additional shared sound change of $b > w$ following a/\bar{a} (Lori *aw*, Kumz. *āw*, Lori, Kumz. *šaw* “night”), which is common in the Southwest division outside of Lori, and sporadically shared lexical retentions (*bard* “stone,” *gap* “big,” Lori *xāg*, Kumz. *xāyg* “egg,” Lori *kur*, Kumz. *kōrk-* “boy,” and Lori *vābī*, Kumz. *wābur* “became”), most or all of which all have reflexes in languages outside of the Perside group, there is little evidence to suggest that within the Southwestern division Kumzari is particularly closely related to Lori, or even that it should be part of the Perside group.

Internal diversity. As for its external situation and classification, the internal classification of Lori is also an important issue. Within the Lori continuum, three major dialect groups (or languages) may be distinguished: NLori, Baḳtiāri, and SLori. Baḳtiāri is linguistically intermediate between NLori and SLori, a point that has been obscured since the publication of S. I. Bruk and V. S. Apenchenko’s (pp. 70-71) map of the peoples of Iran, which presents a single, divided “Lori” ethnic group to the northwest and southeast of a separate “Baḳtiāri” group. As a result, on many of the language maps produced subsequently, Baḳtiāri is inappropriately shown as a distinct language family rather than as a transitional variety between NLori and SLori within a larger Lori group.

As Amān-Allāhi and C. MacKinnon (see above, i. Lori Dialects) have pointed out, a primary division within Lori is between the geographically northwestern varieties spoken by the Lor-e Kučak (centered in the province of Lorestān; = NLori) and the southeastern varieties spoken by the Lor-e Bozorg (applying both to the Baḳtiāri and to the SLori-speaking groups further to the south). While Amān-Allāhi calls these two varieties *Lori-e bāḳtari* “Western Lori” (not related to the term Baḳtiāri) and *Lori-e kāvari* “Eastern Lori” (Amān-Allāhi, p. 52), MacKinnon uses the labels of “Northern Lori” and a more general “Southern Lori” (see i, above).

With respect to the varieties spoken by the Lor-e Bozorg, it is important, from the viewpoint of structure, lexicon, and inter-intelligibility, to make an additional distinction between Baḳtiāri and the remaining varieties to the south (Anonby, 2003b). Consequently, the labels Northern Lori (NLori), Baḳtiāri, and Southern Lori (SLori) have been retained to refer to the three-way linguistic division in Lori.

Major dialects of NLori are centered in Ḳorramābād, Borujerd, Nehāvand, and Andimešk, as well as in ethnically defined rural zones such as the Bālā Garivā



region of southwestern Lorestān Province; important Baḳtiāri dialect areas, which correspond to towns and their surrounding areas, are centered in Masjed Solaymān, Aligudarz, Dorud, Čelgerd-Kuhrang, İda, and Haftgel; and the principal dialects of SLori are Boir Aḩmadi (centred in Yāsuj), Mamasani, Kohgiluya (Dehdašt district) and Liravi (northern Bušehr province).

Language use and vitality. In much of the Lori language area, communities are linguistically homogeneous, and language use is for the most part vigorous. However, a number of factors underscore the fragility of the language's continued vitality. As in most areas of Iran, with Persian as the language of administration, with the penetration of Persian-language media and universal schooling, and with on-going emigration to Persian-speaking areas for employment and military service, bilingualism is becoming the norm. This has led to the development of a diglossic situation, in which Persian is increasingly used in formal registers alongside or in place of Lori. The combination of diglossia and linguistic relation has initiated a process of hybridization between Persian and Lori across the entire language area, whereby some Lori structures are retained in Persian, but a massive amount of Persian vocabulary and many Persian grammatical structures (for example, *mī-* in place of *ī-* or *e-* for continuous aspect) are being incorporated into the Lori vernacular, often outside of the awareness of speakers. Urban varieties such as the dialects of Ḳorramābād, Masjed Solaymān, Šahrekord, and Nurābād (administrative seat of Mamasani sub-province) have been most profoundly affected, but the consequences of language change are evident in rural areas as well.

Literature and media. At the same time as Persian is steadily penetrating Lori language communities, and perhaps in response to this trend, there is a growing body of vernacular literature and language-related activity. In each of the three major Lori varieties (NLori, Baḳtiāri, SLori), language committees and associations have been established, and some of these are active in Lori communities outside of Iran. Audio and video recordings of Lori poetry, often accompanied by music and dance, were the first to appear and remain the most popular. Other types of oral literature include recorded folktales, comedy sketches, Lori-language radio and films dubbed into the language. Written texts representing each of the major varieties have also been produced through local initiatives: numerous dictionaries (*farhang*), folktale collections, and books of poetry constitute the foundation of Lori as a written language, and recent publications include a tribal history (Ḳosraviniā, 2011) as well as



an adaptation of the *Šāh-nāma* in Baḳtiāri (idem, 2001), reading primers (Anonby and Moḥammadi), religious texts, numerous Lori-language websites, and academic articles translated from Persian and English (for these latter three categories see, for example, loor.ir).

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