

Foreword

Since the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, when linguists such as W. Whitney, F. de Saussure and A. Meillet noted that language is a social possession and a social institution, many linguists started to pay attention to the social aspects of language. After pioneering and seminal works by sociolinguists like W. Labov and J. Fishman in the 1960s, various fields of social studies of language were founded and considered as inextricably entwined with myriad domains of linguistics. However, the asocial viewpoints and theories developed by leading figures of twentieth century linguistics, such as L. Bloomfield, C. Hockett, Z. Harris and N. Chomsky, strongly dominated and mainly focused on the description of the internal structure of language, while social aspects of linguistic investigation remained understudied.

A similar approach was dominant in Iran and valuable descriptive research was conducted by Iranian and non-Iranian linguists on Iranian and non-Iranian languages and dialects, while the sociolinguistic studies remained largely marginal. In other words, most of the studies on the languages spoken within the borders of Iran and adjacent areas focused on corpus type languages, and not on the language status or language use.

During the last few decades, however, serious studies have emerged, focusing on different areas of the social aspects of language, including urban dialectology, linguistic variation, minority languages, bilingualism, multilingualism, contact linguistics, language attitude, language shift, language maintenance, language loss, language extinction, identity, power, and linguistic consequences of migration and globalization (as two major social processes) in Iran and the neighboring countries.

One of the most important linguistic phenomena in the contemporary world is engaging with the minority linguistic communities and a considerable decrease in the number of the world's languages. The total number of world languages is estimated at around 5000 to 6000: more in some sources. There are various reasons for the rapid decrease in the number of world languages, particularly as pertains to minority and endangered languages. One of the most important consequences of this process is the loss of valuable linguistic and cultural heritage. According to M. Krauss (1992), by the end of the twenty-first century more than 4000 languages will be extinct. Regardless of how realistic this prediction is, the result is nevertheless a significant loss of linguistic and cultural heritage of mankind. Thus, investigation and documentation of minority language communities, both structurally and socially, seems crucial.

As a country with considerable linguistic and ethnic diversity, Iran or the Iranian linguistic and cultural territory as a whole, is ideal for sociolinguistic studies. Various linguistic, ethnic, and religious communities such as Muslim, Zoroastrian, Armenian, Mandaic, Assyrian, Jewish, and all their separate sects, have lived together in Iran for centuries, and yet are able to conserve their own languages, religious beliefs and ceremonies, and cultural traditions. The native languages and religions of such communities are certainly the most important influences in sustaining their group solidarity.

The study of minority languages in general, and endangered languages more specifically, is of great importance from various linguistic, ethnographic, cultural, social and historical viewpoints. Minority languages with less social prestige, limited use in different social domains (such as mass media, educational system, or even in family), may, gradually lose their social status and their number of native speakers as well, and therefore, can be classified as endangered languages in the long term. Some of the endangered languages such as Mandaic, Vakhi or Tati for instance, that are still spoken within the Iranian linguistic and cultural territory, only have a few thousand native speakers or less. Thus, they are likely to be in danger of extinction by the end of the twenty first century.

The present companion, intending to bridge the gap in the study of language status and language use (minority and endangered languages, etc.) within a wider linguistic territory of Iran and the neighboring countries, has several advantages. Firstly, the volume focuses on a particularly important subject, i.e., the Iranian linguistic heritage, both at home and in the diaspora. Secondly, the book covers studies on Iranian languages (like Kurdish, Balochi), along with non-Iranian languages (such as Armenian, Mandaic, Turkmen, and Azeri), that have been spoken in the region for centuries. Moreover, the volume features studies done in recent years and by modern and more reliable experimental and observational methods of data collection, which differ from traditional methods of studying the Iranian languages and endangered and minority languages. A further significant feature of this collection is that it covers excellent studies, which to the best of my knowledge, are mostly conducted by enthusiastic and learned younger generations of Iranian linguists working inside and outside of the cultural and linguistic territories of Iran.

The papers in the present book are divided into three main categories, based on their subjects or contents: Iranian minority languages, non-Iranian minority languages, and the Iranian heritage languages in the diaspora. Moreover, the topics of most chapters covered in this volume are Iranian and non-Iranian languages, spoken today within the present borders of Iran. However, some minority languages like Vakhi are studied mostly in diasporic contexts. Thus, the present companion explores multilingualism within Iran and its neighboring countries on the one hand while investigating Iranian heritage languages within the diasporic context of the West on the other. Therefore, the book can be considered an essential reference for scholars and students interested in key fields of language studies, such as sociolinguistics, Iranian languages, minority languages, heritage languages, bilingualism, migration and diaspora studies, and language policy and planning.

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