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Language Policy and Language Conflict in Afghanistan and Its Neighbors

The Changing Politics of Language Choice

Edited by

Harold F. Schiffman

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Cover illustration: Afghanistan landscape and village, Band-e-Amir lakes and canyons, Bamyan Province. © Christophe Cerisier, 2010.

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PREFACE

In Afghanistan and the countries around it in Central Asia it is difficult to trace the historical process of language policy formulation, or even events that suggest an awareness of relationships between languages, back beyond the later decades of the 19th century at the earliest. However, it is not possible to understand what has happened since then without some knowledge of the earlier history. The situation is further complicated by the regime changes of the past three decades: the Iranian revolution of 1978, the Afghan Putsch of 1978 and continuing warfare since then, the passage back and forth between democracy and military rule in Pakistan, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. As the result of a workshop held at the University of Pennsylvania in December 2003, when a number of scholars presented papers on language policy issues, focusing on topics as varied as 19th century British policy in what is now Pakistan, Soviet and post-Soviet policy in Central Asia and in Afghanistan, and Iran in the internet age, a better picture is now available about what is official and explicit, what is not official but is implicit or in general practice, and what the likely future developments might be. Among these, orthographic shift and reform is likely, as attempts to turn back the clock on Soviet orthographic policy take various turns. What is very clear is that multilingualism, whether it involves Persian, Russian, or English in addition to other languages, has always been a part of the scene, and will probably continue to be.

The contribution of this collection of articles is an updated account of language policy in the region, giving potential language learners a clearer picture of the relative standing of various languages in relation to each other, the resources that exist for learning them, and what is still needed.

Finally, a note about fonts, scripts, place names and other nomenclature used by various authors in their contributions. Because of script changes and orthography reforms, especially in the former Soviet Central Asian republics, names used by one author may differ from usage in that of another. This may occur because of having been transliterated from one Central Asian script into Russian, then back into the script (either Cyrillic, Arabic, or Roman) used in another. We have made no attempt to 'standardize' or reconcile these differences.

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The editor of this volume is grateful to a number of sources for funding for a workshop held in December, 2003 devoted to the question of languages and language policy in Afghanistan and its neighbors. The South Asia Language and Area Center of the University of Pennsylvania provided the original funding, which was supplemented with funding from the South Asia Language Resource Center, located at the University of Chicago, and the Consortium for Language Teaching and Learning, of New Haven, Connecticut, which helped pay for travel support. The papers delivered at the workshop were eventually supplemented by other contributions from additional authors. It should be noted that the material in the Introduction on the subject of diglossia is based on earlier research by Schiffman entitled 'Diglossia as a Sociolinguistic Situation.' This appeared originally in Florian Coulmas (ed.), *The Handbook of Sociolinguistics.* London: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1997, and is used here with their permission. Funding for the preparation of the index was provided by a grant from the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters. Also, the map of Central and Southwest Asia, and the map of regions where Balochi is spoken were provided by Kimberly Leaman of the University of Pennsylvania Museum.

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CHAPTER ONE

AFGHAN LANGUAGES IN A LARGER CONTEXT OF CENTRAL AND SOUTH ASIA

Harold F. Schiffman and Brian Spooner

In a workshop held at the University of Pennsylvania in December 2003, a number of scholars presented papers on language policy issues in Afghanistan and neighboring countries. They focused on topics as varied as 19th century British policy in what is now Pakistan, Soviet and post-Soviet policy in Central Asia, and in Afghanistan and Iran in the internet age. Some of the papers presented at this workshop, together with others commissioned or included since, have been brought together in this volume in an attempt to provide a better picture of the current language situation in the area: what is official and explicit, what is not official but implicit or general practice, and what the future developments might be expected to entail. In editing this collection we have adopted the position that language policy consists not just in the official, explicit, *de jure* statements about language that are found in constitutional provisions, laws, or administrative codes, but also in the implicit, popular, unofficial, ad hoc usages and practices that are empirically observable. That is, we are assuming there is always some kind of language policy at work—the lack of official policy is not the same as the absence of policy. The result is intended to provide an updated picture of languages and language policy in the region, as well as a clearer picture of what kinds of resources exist for those wishing to acquire any of the languages, and what is still needed.

We also will attempt to determine which model of multilingualism best characterizes the various multilinguistic relationships in the area. The area in question is clearly multilingual, with no one language exclusively dominating any of the polities; in Afghanistan in particular, none of the major languages are exclusive to that nation, but are also used in various ways in other political units in the area.

In general, however, readers will find a clear focus on multi-lingual conditions of the type that have been generally classified as "diglossia"

(Ferguson 1959). In this region, as a result of the accelerating speed of sociolinguistic change over the past hundred years it might be more useful to think in terms of "shifting diglossias." The major languages—those that have acquired a tradition of literacy—are in competition with each other for cultural value, and the hierarchy of their differential evaluation continues to change. The "H" (high) and "L" (low) varieties vie for preference, as political, religious and demographic conditions change in the wake of British, Russian, and more recently Soviet withdrawal, and capitalist, nationalist and Islamist encroachment together with the progress of globalization.

Not only has the change in territorial borders, and in the technology of communication, with resulting change in communication patterns, changed the way people think about their vernacular languages, but the underlying significance of various larger frameworks of administrative and cultural literacy, in Persian (since the 9th century), and in Russian and English (since the 19th), also continues to change. Orthographic shift and reform[1] is an issue that introduces an additional complication. The prevalence of multilingualism and how it is changing is another focus, whether it involves Persian, Russian, or English in addition to local, or other emerging national languages. In this introduction we review the history of Western and local thinking that continues to influence linguistic change in the region today, at both the local and the international level. We ask readers not to be too quick to translate the details into the terms they are familiar with from linguistic study in other parts of the world, but to give priority to developing a fuller regional picture.

1.1. The History of Afghan Language Study

The pioneer Western investigator of the languages of Afghanistan, Georg Morgenstierne, who began his work in 1924, called Afghanistan linguistically one of the most interesting countries on earth. Linguistic work by local scholars began in the following generation. When one of us [Spooner] first met Dr. A.G. Ravan Farhadi (the author of *Le Persan Parlé en Afghanistan*, 1953) in Kabul in 1972, he announced that in

[1] For more on this issue, see the chapter by Schlyter, this volume.

the latest count the number of languages known in Afghanistan had reached 32 (see Farhadi 1970).

Any study of the languages of Afghanistan must take into account a number of factors relating not only to the geography of the territory itself, and the historical composition of Afghan society today, but also to the way our knowledge of it has developed since the beginning of the 19th century. These factors tend not only to color but to distort any efforts to explain what is going on today. Our modern Western study of Afghanistan began with the formal visit of Mountstuart Elphinstone on behalf of the British East India Company to the then Afghan shah, Shah Shoja, in Peshawar (now Pakistan) in 1809. The British interest had been awakened by rumors of a possible collaboration between Napoleon and the Russian czar (Alexander I) to invade India from the northwest—the only feasible land entry to the Subcontinent. The British invaded Afghanistan in 1839, via the Bolan Pass and Quetta, and despite significant and heavy reverses in two Afghan wars dominated the government of Afghanistan from then until 1919 formally (though "indirectly," i.e., without attempting to install any administrative apparatus). and informally until the British withdrawal from South Asia in 1947. During this period of over a hundred years Afghanistan became relatively isolated from the rest of the Islamic world, and barely saw any of the other wider contacts that formally administered territories such as India enjoyed during the colonial period. However, because of the strategic value of the frontier with Russia British agents and travellers compiled a rich library of material concerning the contemporary history and culture of Afghanistan, including the part that became British Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Province, and is part of Pakistan. A few scholars from other European countries, especially Germany, contributed to this endeavour.

Although a number of prescriptive grammars of Persian and Pashto appeared in the 19th century, the systematic study of the languages of the area was launched by Morgenstierne with a series of publications, beginning in 1928, based on his own field research. Both the historical and the linguistic study of the area since these foundations have been conditioned by the efforts of the rulers of Afghanistan from 1880 onwards to build and maintain a viable and cohesive political identity in the face not only of local centrifugal forces, but of first English, then Russian and more recently American interests. The centripetal force of an Afghan (or even, more narrowly, Pashtun) nationalism did not begin to emerge until a century ago, and has never become

politically significant for all classes of the society throughout the country. As a result of the British interest in the area up to 1947, the Russian until 1917, the Soviet from 1917 to 1991 and American activities in the region since 1948, and especially since 1979, there is considerable variation among the various approaches of both Western and local scholars.[2]

1.2. Geographical and Historical Factors

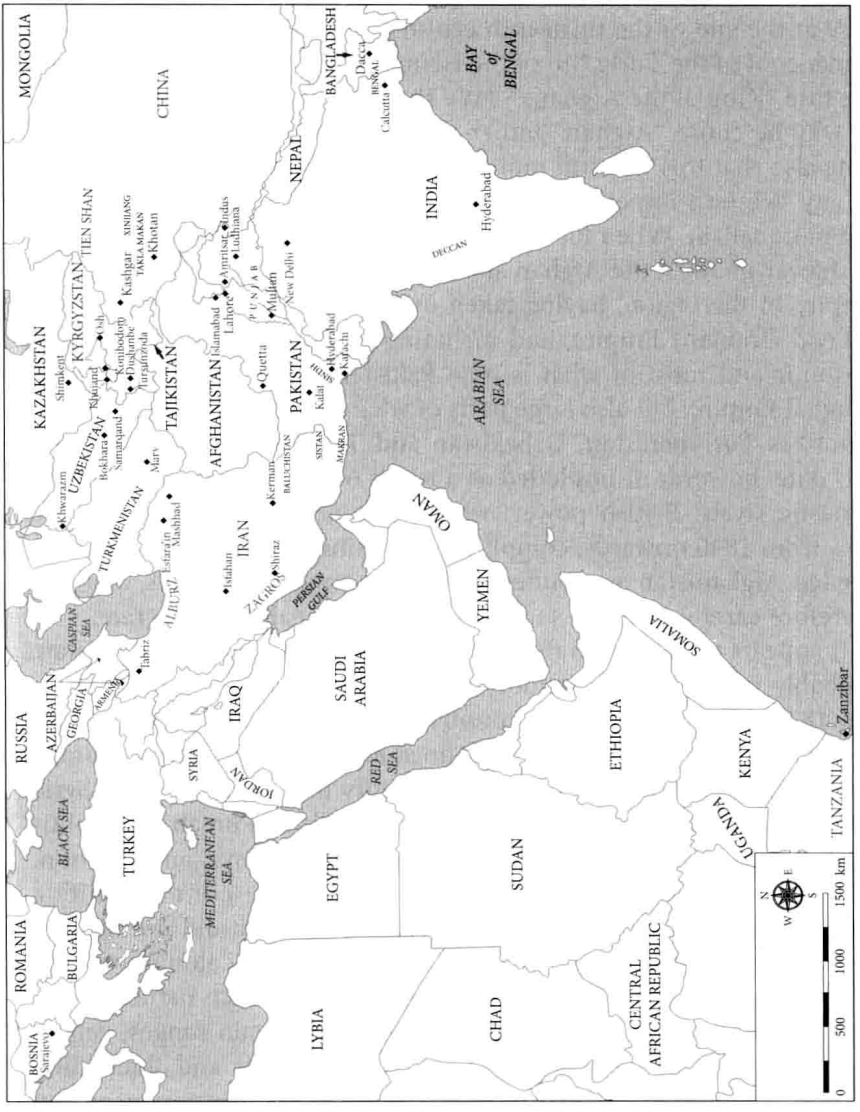
In the study of the languages in and around Afghanistan we are dealing with language history and process on three scales: local communities; Persianate (or eastern-Islamic) civilization; and colonial, which has now merged into various post-colonial processes under the influence of globalization. The ways in which various factors deriving from each of these three scales of operation continue to interact makes Afghanistan a special case with regard to questions of language use. In what follows we introduce these scales and the way they impinge on each other. Readers without specialist knowledge of the area will find this information important as an introduction to the papers that follow. We hope that specialists will also find the statement useful.

1.2.1. *The Issue of National and Local Identities*

Behind the languages we are studying lie political identities, modern states, and regional and international encumbrances that owe their current form, if not their existence, to the activities of the British and the Russians, or Soviets, since 1800. But whereas the boundaries and language policies of the other states of Central and South Asia were established entirely by the British and the Russians or Soviets, the emergence of modern Afghanistan, and of its current hierarchy of languages, has a different history. (Only the history of Iran is comparable in this regard, and it is introduced briefly below.) It is a history not well understood, or easily accessible, and the experience of Afghanistan in the recent past has been seriously misunderstood as a result.

Although the city of Ghazni, in the southeast of Afghanistan, had served as the base for a major imperial episode between 975 to 1187 AD, there was no historical precedent for a specifically local state of

[2] See in particular the chapters by Nawid, and by Hakala, this volume.



Map 1. Central and Southwest Asia