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Persian vs. Farsi Dichotomy in the Internet

Mohammad Reza Falahati Fumani, Ph.D. Candidate

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Introduction

A large number of articles have already been written on the dichotomy of 'Persian' versus 'Farsi'. In fact, almost all articles, for example, Yarshater (1989) as one of the mostly cited ones, have reiterated that the correct name for the language spoken and written in Iran is *Persian* and that the term *Farsi* is only misused as a wrong substitute for Persian.

If all such articles are solely or mostly in favor of Persian (there are, of course, those who favor Farsi, for example, Tahmasebi (1996)), what is the justification behind writing another article on this issue? Is it to put some color - if not repeating - on what others have already stated? Or there is still something left unresolved and new to be discussed?

The author of this article believes that the latter is true and that is exactly the unavailability, or at least the dearth of any discussion on these two terms based on the material available in the Internet. In addition, we also need to visit the principles stated in linguistics and theories of translation in order to further clarify the use. Most discussions on the subject have been a diachronic analysis of the two terms in relation to social changes (Yarshater, 1989). To tackle the issue objectively, the author will employ: information extracted from the Internet, a brief interview with the authors of articles and a translation technique as three research instruments.

Actually, the author intends to put forward a real picture of these two terms as they are at the moment, i.e. the way they are used, the people who use them, the degree to which they have found their way into the language of people and, most important of all, the reasons triggering the application of these two terms.

Throughout the discussions the author will only establish a linguistic view of the issue in an objective manner. I will personally use the term *Persian* for the sake of consistency and, of course, following the pronouncement of Iran's Academy of Persian Language and Literature (IAPLL).

Historical Evidences

Within a historical framework, the term *Persian* has a much longer tradition than *Farsi*. Persian was the language of 'Parsa' who were an Indo-European nomadic people who migrated into the region, roughly the place where today's Iran is located, about 1000 BC (Internet Article 2).

Modern Persian has had two older versions as well namely, Old Persian (spoken until the 3rd century BC) and Middle Persian (between 3rd Century BC and 9th Century AD) (Internet Article 1).

Farsi, on the other hand, is said to have appeared through the Arabs. In fact, it has been stated that some 1400 years ago when the Arabs entered Persia (the term referred at that time to the land wider than the country now called Iran) they adopted the term **Farsi** from the already available term **Parsi** which referred to the language spoken in a region that now lays in the southern part of the present Iran (ibid).

There are four Persian sounds that the Arabic language lacks, these include /g/ as in 'game', /ch/ as in 'chalk', /p/ as in 'pool' and /ž/ as in 'measure'. It is said that the Arabs changed the term **Parsi** into **Farsi** because they did not have the sound /p/ (The term Parsi is still used in Iran and has acquired a formal and literary status compared to the more common term Farsi. In fact, within a synchronic framework, the only linguistic difference between Parsi and Farsi is in the degree of formality and genre though diachronically, the term **Parsi** has had a longer history in comparison to **Farsi**).

In the integrated Persian Database of the Regional Information Center for Science and Technology (www.ricest.ac.ir) 461 results were retrieved for Parsi and 95708 items for Farsi. Moreover, the majority of the articles carrying the term **Parsi** were related to the subject area of Language and Literature, whether prose or poetry.

Views Held Concerning the Suitability or Unsuitability of the Two Terms

Almost all those people who have written on the issue have stated that Persian can better represent the language of the people because it has a longer tradition in the western languages. Most important of all, Iran's Academy of Persian Language and Literature (2007) has argued in an official pronouncement that the name 'Persian' is more appropriate as it has the longer tradition in the western languages and therefore better expresses the role of the language as a mark of cultural and national continuity. Many books written by foreigners regarding Iran and its language have adopted the term **Persian**, the book written by Edward G. Browne (1902) *A literary history of Persia* is only one of the many examples.

As stated in (Internet Article 2) Farsi at best can function as a local term for the standard language in Iran and its use must at best be restricted to the present geographical borders of Iran, rather Persian is a broader term referring to the standard and national language of Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and it is spoken by minorities in a number of other countries like Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Yemen, to name but a few. They conclude that for correspondences outside the borders of Iran, Farsi must be avoided and Persian be used instead.

Different people and groups are also actively working to institutionalize the use of Persian and the avoidance of the term Farsi. One such effort, for example, forced **Language Weaver** (2007) to write a correction to its original press release in which it had used the term Farsi while announcing the commercial availability of a bi-directional Persian/English language pair module for its automatic translation product. In fact, the original announcement read as "... *Persian may also be referred to as Farsi...*" Their correction, however, reads as follows:

... after releasing the news we were contacted by several people that explained that the correct name for the language we referred to as 'Farsi' is 'Persian'. After consulting with several sources and reviewing the information sent to us after release, we would like to formally correct our original announcement to read 'Persian' (ibid).

Status of the Two Terms in the Internet

Everybody now has or can have an easy access to the Internet. The abundant dominance of the Internet and its ease of accessibility have caused the Internet to play a significant role in the way we live and the information as well as the terms we use. The Internet has had its impact on the parallel application of the two terms *Persian* and *Farsi* as well.

Today, a large number of information seekers use the Internet either as the main or even the sole source of information. Therefore, they are under the impact of the style, terms and, in general, the information presented through the Internet, whether it is an article, a book, a catalogue, a Weblog, etc.

A glance at Table 1 shows that Persian and Farsi appear highly frequently in the Internet though the frequency of occurrence of Persian is much higher than that obtained for Farsi. There are, of course, some cases where the number obtained for Farsi bypasses that obtained for Persian as in Metcrawler and Dogpile databases.

The difference between Parsi and Farsi has not been included in Table 1, and has just been stated as a note under that table, because it describes the way the two terms appear in Persian texts, which is not relevant to our discussion of the dichotomy of Persian versus Farsi here. It is stated as a note to elaborate on the fact that Parsi and Farsi are different with regard to the degree of formality and genre.

Table 1: Total number of items retrieved for Persian and Farsi from different search engines (data collected in December 2007).

	Yahoo	Google	Exite	All the Web
Persian	66 200 000	12 600 000	35	52 400 000
Farsi	25 600 000	2 370 000	35	10 400 000
	InfoSeek	MSN	AOL	Metacrawler
Persian	66 200 000	10 244 449	3 330 000	73
Farsi	25 600 000	9 296 283	400 000	76
	Dogpile	Search.com		
Persian	74	3240030		
Farsi	76	2130020		

Note: In the integrated Persian database of the Regional Information Center for Science and Technology that uses the ParsAzarakhsh Software, **461** results were retrieved for Parsi and **95708** items for Farsi.

A short interview run by the researcher with about 100 authors of articles, publishers of brochures, books, etc. (all published or written in English) shows that quite often a

reference is made to the Internet to see if an English term they are using is appropriate or another term must be used as an equivalent to the Persian term in question.

As soon as a person searches the Internet, he or she encounters: *Persian (Farsi)*, *Farsi (Persian)*, ... and thus considers both terms suitable. To validate the findings of the above interview, the researcher retrieved and reviewed more than 50 scientific articles that had been written on issues related to Persian, i.e. Persian stemmers, taggers, etc. In almost all the articles, the author(s) had started their articles with an introduction to the language of the people in Iran and often commenced with phrases like:

Persian or Farsi is the national language in Iran; Farsi or Persian ...;
Persian (Farsi)...; Farsi (Persian) ...

The conclusion to be drawn is that under the influence of the Internet, anybody may play a role in the process of term selection and adoption and this is one of the reasons why such a process often does not give way to what we often hope it must, i.e. consistency in the use of terms. The main reason for the use of the two terms has been the impact of the Internet because any person can publicize whatever piece of information through making a Web log, personal homepage, etc. where no filtering is often exercised.

Lack of Mastery of English among the Translators

But why do these variations, or better, inconsistencies occur? Let us look a bit more closely to the targets where these terms may appear. These terms may appear in articles, books, magazines, Weblogs, homepages, catalogues, etc. The point is that not all those Iranians who write English master that language and thus they sometimes do not use terms concisely and consistently. In fact, the person who writes in another language must have a comprehensive knowledge of both the source and the target languages, and this is something that does not always happen.

The solution to this problem is that papers, books, catalogues, magazines and other publications must be translated into English by those who know well the target language, in this case English, or at least such works must be edited by such people. But we cannot claim that experts who often hold a degree in English translation edit any single piece of work.

The State of Translation and Translators' Training

It is high time here to uncover the second issue, which is related to such experts. At the moment, students of translation do not pass many Persian courses at, i.e. B.A. level. So, it seems that such students will not acquire comprehensive knowledge about Persian and its terminology. This knowledge (knowledge of both source and target languages) is what can make an editor superior to all others. That is, we need editors who have full-fledged knowledge about and mastery of both Persian and English.

One good recommendation that I can make here will be to increase the number of Persian courses students of English Translation must pass at the B.A. level.

Another recommendation is that the authors of articles should have their works edited (preferably) by such experts before publication. Such a process is at work now for books written in English or Persian and even the name of the editor appears in the book, but in case of articles, although some sort of editing is carried out, it is not always carried out by editors who have a mastery of both the source and the target languages. Foreign editors, who most probably do not master Persian and only edit the misspellings, grammatical errors and the problems with the content of the articles, edit English articles sent for publication abroad.

Regarding catalogues, brochures, etc., the editing process is likely to be somewhat loose or done by people who are not that qualified in terms of the qualifications we mentioned above. As stated earlier, people can make their own Weblogs, etc., and upload whatever information they wish in the Internet even without editing, which is a decisive factor in producing and perpetuating unjustified term variants at times.

Relevance of the Issue to a Translation Technique

Synonymy is a common linguistic phenomenon in any language. In fact, for a large number of concepts there is always more than one linguistic form to be used. Nevertheless, there is no absolute synonymy in language, that is, synonymous terms could not be interchangeably used in all contexts – there will at least be some context where one synonymous term would be appropriate whereas the other one would not. In fact, the presence of absolute synonymy would violate the 'principle of economy' in language and would introduce redundancy.

The problem of the presence of multi equivalents will be more of an issue when we come to the interaction between different languages. This is exactly the place where a translator or a writer must decide which term to use and which term to avoid. Efforts are also made in languages to find native equivalents for borrowed terms, i.e. this is usually done by translators, writers and, most important of all, by Iran's Academy of Persian Language and Literature which includes a number of outstanding scientists and subject experts.

One technique mostly used by the translators to introduce a new term is to use parentheses. This procedure requires three steps, each requiring a period of time, as follows:

- i. *Use the already existent term and put the new proposed term in parentheses right after the old term.*
- ii. *Take the new word out of parentheses and put the old term into parentheses (the opposite of step i).*
- iii. *Delete the parentheses and the word within it and use the word that is out of parentheses thereafter.*

Now, let us return to our problem of Persian versus Farsi. Surfing the Internet simply reveals that all the three steps have already been taken, that is, there are numerous examples where the two terms have come together with one of the two terms in parentheses or even alone without the presence of the other. The small difference found between what happens and in the Internet the above three-level technique is

that in the latter case there is a unique methodology for replacement of one word with another term step by step, but regarding the dichotomy of Persian and Farsi in the Internet all variants are continuously used: *Persian (Farsi)*; *Farsi (Persian)*; *Persian or Farsi*; *Farsi or Persian*; *Farsi*; *Persian*.

This shows a sort of mess in the use of these two terms in the Internet. That is, many users may not have a clear idea of the differences between the two terms and thus mention both for the sake of clarity and often following the form in which these two terms have appeared in the Internet.

The conclusion drawn from this part is that because not a single and uniform direction for change (neither from Persian to Farsi nor from Farsi to Persian) has already been established in the Internet, none of the two terms will possibly be deleted and, as a result, the two terms will survive.

Concluding Remarks

The main purpose of the present paper was to analyze the current status of the terms *Persian* and *Farsi*. While some favor Farsi, many support the application of Persian as a true representative of the language of the people who live in Iran. Most of the previous discussions had made prescriptions on the use of one of the two terms, but the present researcher tried to tackle the issue from a mere linguistic point of view and by opening a discussion of the situation found in the Internet.

The present study revealed a number of points with regard to the application of these two terms, a brief account of which is given below:

1. Due to the ever-growing influence of the Internet and the abundant and free use of the two terms in the Internet, it is most probable that the two terms will survive side by side, although all pieces of evidence collected and particularly the pronouncement of Iran's Academy of Persian Language and Literature reiterate that the term *Persian* must be preferred since it better represents the language of the people in Iran and has a longer tradition in the west.
2. The findings in this article revealed that one source of problem is the possibility of uploading any sort of unfiltered or unedited information in the Internet. One interesting example I found in the Web was the following URL (<http://www.persianmirror.com>), which carried the name *Persian* in its URL but when introducing its editor-in-chief it stated, "...*she (the Editor-in-Chief) can speak Farsi and ...*" which is a clear example of terminological inconsistencies found in the Internet (Internet Article 3).
3. Iranian writers of English articles, books, brochures, catalogues, Weblogs, etc., comprise the main groups who have introduced this dichotomy. It was recommended that such works be edited by those who not only master English but also have a good command of Persian, i.e. its grammar, terminology and history.
4. Graduates of English translator training programs comprise the main bulk of editors but they are mostly exposed to English courses during their education, i.e. at the B.A. level. It was recommended that the number of Persian courses be increased to the level that will guarantee the mastery of both the source and

the target languages. Certainly, this will make students better translators in the future.

5. Both Iran's Academy of Persian Language and Literature and Iranian authorities could play a significant role in this regard. Evidence shows that Persian language and its prominence as well as history is what they all care for which is evident in the approvals of the IAPLL, holding national and international seminars on Persian language and so on. One good example of such support could be found in a recent news article that appeared on 23 February 2008 in *Ettela'at* Newspaper. The news elaborated on a policy of the Ministry of Telecommunications and IT to decrease the mobile SMS charges sent by Persian characters from 147 to 89 Rials and to increase those sent by English characters from 147 to 222 Rials from June 2008. As stated before despite all these effort it seems that the Internet and its whole content has already played a decisive role in the way we write as well as the words and the information we use.

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Mohammad Reza Falahati Fumani, Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Studies in Linguistics
University of Mysore, India and
Faculty of RICEST, Iran
falmysore@yahoo.com