

Salient Linguistic Features and Isoglosses in Chahar Mahal va Bakhtiari Province, Iran

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This paper investigates key linguistic features of languages spoken in Chahar Mahal va Bakhtiari (henceforth C&B) Province, located in the heights of the Zagros mountain range in south-west Iran. This province's population, which totals nearly 900,000 inhabitants, is distributed among about 800 towns and villages (ISC, 2011). The findings in this paper are part of a large-scale study of languages and dialects in C&B (Taheri-Ardali et al, 2016). To achieve this goal, essential linguistic data have been gathered by means of a comprehensive questionnaire which has been developed for the description of language variation in Iran (Anonby et al. 2016). The data were collected from twenty-one locations across the province, selected to ensure that the geographic and linguistic coverage is both representative and diverse.

Linguistically, the Southwestern Iranian language Bakhtiari, which is spoken in the north-west, west, south and central areas of the province, is dominant. Although the capital city Shahr-Kord is outside of the main Bakhtiari language area, Bakhtiari is also the largest language there. The province's other vernaculars – Persian, Urban Charmahali, Rural Charmahali and Turkic – are spoken mainly in the north-east and eastern sections of the province (Taheri-Ardali et al, 2016). It is also worth noting that Persian is widely used as a lingua franca by almost all speakers.

Our initial analyses of the questionnaires provide a first overview of linguistic structures used across the province. The collected linguistic data reveal a number of salient features and isoglosses as follows:

- The softening of the plosive /d/ to an approximant is characteristic of, and exclusive to, the Bakhtiari-speaking areas of the province. Specifically, /d/ is allophonically weakened to [ð] between vowels and post-vocally at the end of words, for example, *šād* [ʃað] 'happy' and *sedā* [seða] 'voice'. Windfuhr (1988) has finely addressed this issue as "Zagros-d," i.e., the intervocalic lenition, or loss, of *d*.
- In the case of Bakhtiari of Sar Aqa Seyyed, the softening of *d* is phonemic: historical *d* has shifted to *r* [r] in this position. The softening of /d/ to [r] intervocalically and word finally is an only attested feature of Bakhtiari in Sar Aqa Seyyed - an impassable village in the far north-western part of the province. This phenomenon has not yet been reported for other Bakhtiari-speaking areas. For example, /xora/ 'God', /čamerav/ 'suitcase', /esbir/ 'white', /dir/ 'he/she saw', etc.
- The patterning of [g] and [q] and their differing phonological values is a key point of differentiation among the language varieties of the province. The voiced uvular stop [g] and its voiceless counterpart [q] are distinct phonemes in most Bakhtiari districts, but this phonological distinction is leveled in Bakhtiari areas in the eastern part of the province, such as the town of Ardal (Eidy, 1996/1375). Similarly, in the remaining parts of the province, where Persian, Turkic, Urban Charmahali and Rural Charmahali are spoken, [g] and [q] are not phonologically contrastive.
- Absence of glottal stop can be assumed as another typical feature of Bakhtiari. The emergence of a phonemic glottal stop in speech of the younger generation is likely a result of the impact of standard Persian through schooling and media.

- Although the superlative marker of /tarin/ is used in the language of almost all speakers of the new generation in the province, it has been found absent in the language of older generations. However, it is interesting to note that the comparative form of /tar/ itself or the reduplicative form of this marker i.e., /tartar/ is used to show the superlative construction.
- A phonemic distinction between back round high vowel *u* [u] and front round high vowel *ü* [y] has been attested in C&B only in Sar Aqa Seyyed. This distinction can be found in minimal pairs like *dü* ‘smoke’ and *du* ‘yoghurt drink’.
- The pervasive phenomenon of language contact in the province has caused some convergence in the language systems spoken in the area. The in-depth examination of the impact of Bakhtiari and Persian on Turkic of Boldaji (a small town with nearly 12,000 inhabitants) is a case in point (Anonby et al, 2017). In an in-depth examination of the vowel system in Turkic of Boldaji, a vestige of the vowels /ü/ [y], /ö/ [œ] and /ı/ has been attested in the language of the old generation. Yet, no sign of these vowels in the new generation has been detected. Hence, the vowel system is gradually moving toward the simple vowel system of Persian.

This paper as a preliminary study of the current status of the languages in C&B province will hopefully pave the way for the investigation of the linguistic features at morphosyntax based on texts. Furthermore, the division of the Charmahali into two urban and rural types and also the structural similarity of rural type with Bakhtiari on the one hand and its different ethnic identity with Bakhtiari are the issues which are going to be scrutinized by the author, the topics which have not been previously addressed in the literature (Madadi, 1996/1375).

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