

ROUND TABLE

Monolingualism in Iran: The Politics of Writing in Azeri Turkish

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Throughout the twentieth century, Azeri Turkish was intermittently banned, occasionally tolerated, but always marginalized in relation to Persian, which was perceived as the unifying, defining, essential language of the nation. Despite the substantial population of Azeri Turkish speakers in Iran—the largest linguistic minority—any attempt to teach the language publicly or to publish in Azeri Turkish has often been regarded, even to this day, as a highly political act of dissidence. Historical analysis of Azeri Turkish texts and a review of policies in language teaching, publication, and censorship within Iranian Azerbaijan reveal a symbiotic but simultaneously paradoxical interaction between this mother tongue and the official master language.

Those authors who have opted for Azeri Turkish in their writing instead of Persian, particularly in narrative prose, have aimed for, or are invariably considered to have adopted, a subversive voice toward the master language, the language of power. Accordingly, by turning to the mother language in written work, one is (consciously or unconsciously) positioning oneself in a politically subversive stand. This positioning has highlighted historical associations with various ideological strands challenging the central power, including communism, Turanism, pan-Turkism, and sectarianism or separatism, particularly since the declaration of the Azerbaijan People's Government (APG) in the Azerbaijan provinces of Iran from November 1945 to November 1946. During that year, in Iranian Azerbaijan, with the support of the Soviets, immense emphasis was put on the Azeri Turkish language as the first language in schools and the official language of the governing administration. Persian was relegated to the position of second language and was to be taught after the third grade. Ever since, the turn to Azeri Turkish in writing has remained the main foundation for (re)constructing and asserting Azeri identity against that of a homogenized Iranian (i.e., Persian) identity. Regardless of the content, writing in Azeri Turkish represents a manifestation of the ambivalent and multilayered relationship between the “power of language” and the “language of power” in an environment in which language has been instrumentalized in the exercise of political power and its sustenance.¹

The disavowal of Azeri Turkish or any language other than Persian in Iran, or the repudiation of heterogeneous linguistic multiplicity in favor of homogeneous singularity, was not an exclusively Iranian phenomenon. On the contrary, it mirrored a broader trend of systematic repudiation of a heterogeneous realities in pursuit of an imagined singularity—in this case, a utopian purity of Persian linguistic identity. The Iranian rejection of multilingualism in favor of monolingualism echoed European concepts concurrent with the emergence of the nation-state.

1 See Johannes Weiß and Thomas Schwietring, “Die Macht der Sprache: Eine philosophisch-soziologische Reflexion,” in *Die Macht der Sprache*, ed. Jutta Limbach and Katarina von Ruckteschell, pp. 18–22

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Modernist propagation of total cultural and linguistic coordination aimed to preserve the “nation” and safeguard Iran’s integrity against further separations was, in fact, a reaction to the widespread colonial partition policies of divide and rule that relied on exploiting ethnic and linguistic differences, particularly in the neighboring regions: the disintegration of Ottoman territories, the surge of pan-Turkist sentiments, and the loss of eastern and northern Iranian lands. This solution entailed the disavowal of multilingualism and harboring of a particular vitriol against Turkish in Iran. As Turkey began to define its nation based on the Turkish language, enforcing strict Turkification policies, Iranian intellectuals resorted to Persian and Persianization to delineate their nation from their Turkic neighbours, similar to the way religious ideologies like Shi‘ism and Sunnism previously marked power and territory.

Furthermore, the adoption of the name “Azerbaijan” for the country north of Iran—originally the name of an Iranian province—heightened Iranian anxiety and apprehension. In this political atmosphere, a language in common with Turkey and Azerbaijan became increasingly unsettling. Additionally, in this aversion to Turkish, a repudiation of ruling Turkic dynasties, including the Qajars, who governed Iran till 1925, could sometimes be discerned. Following the fall of the Qajar dynasty and the rise of Aryan sentiments grounded in the Persian language and the centralization of power, the political significance of Turkic cities, notably Tabriz, bearing the title *Dār al-Saltane* and historically the residence of crown princes, was humiliatingly stripped away.

Yasemin Yildiz’s influential work, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, delves into the historical shift from premodern multilingualism to modern monolingualism.² The concept of monolingualism and the notion of a “mother tongue” was initially propagated by eighteenth-century German philosophers like Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), and Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). Their assertion that a single mother tongue served as a fundamental element for shaping a cohesive and homogeneous nation-state swiftly became an essential feature of modernity. Despite encouraging the learning of multiple languages, these intellectuals promoted monolingualism. The idealized notion of homogeneity, organically bound by a sole language, was adopted to structure institutions and disciplines. Striving for a nation unified by a single language became a moral obligation for both individuals and institutions. This pursuit of the ideal nation-state necessitated “active processes of monolingualization,” as Yildiz called it, at both individual and collective levels.³

During the increased interactions between Iranians and Europeans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a cohort of Iranian nationalist intellectuals emerged. Often referred to as the first-generation modern intellectuals, figures such as *Mīrzā Fath‘Alī Ākhūndzāde* (1812–1878), *Sayyed Jamāl al-Dīn Afghānī* (1839–1897), *Mīrzā Āqā Khān Kermānī* (1854–1896/97), *Mīrzā Malkam Khān* (1834–1908), and *Mīrzā ‘Abdorrahīm Ṭālibov Tabrīzī* (1834–1911) criticized Iran for its intellectual and cultural stagnation. These intellectuals aimed to reformulate Iran along the lines of the Western nation-state model and establish a powerful central government. Many attributed Iran’s backwardness to the seventh-century Arab invasion and the subsequent imposition of Islam, advocating a return to the ancient golden era.⁴ The vision of these archaic nationalists entailed rejecting cultural aspects from later periods when Iran was under the domination of the Arabs and later the Mongols and various Turkic tribes, labeling these elements as foreign and a hindrance to progress.

The notion of monolingualism as an essential component of a unified nation-state was touted by a group of Iranian modernist intellectuals and propagandists, often regarded as

² Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*.

³ Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, 2.

⁴ For an early example of archaic nationalism rooted in aversion toward Arabs, see Rahimi Bahmany, “*Mīrzā Fāṭali Axundzāde*,” 461–76. *Ākhūndzāde* not only criticized Arabs and their religion but also condemned their alphabet, which he referred to as “the letters from the time of barbarity.” He saw the Arabic alphabet as the root cause of Iranians’ public illiteracy, ignorance, corruption, and social backwardness, and as the primary impediment to liberation and civilization (467).

the second generation of modern thinkers, influenced by the Enlightenment ideas of eighteenth-century Europe. Figures like Sayyed Ḥasan Taqīzāde (1878–1970), Taqī Arānī (1903–1940), Maḥmūd Afshār Yazdī (1893–1983), Sayyed Zīā' od-Dīn Ṭabātabā'ī (1888–1969), 'Abbās Eqbāl Āshteyānī (1896/97–1956), and Moḥammad 'Alī Forūghī (1877–1942) emerged as prominent proponents of monolingualism.⁵ Ḥossey-n-Qolī Kātebī (d. 1991), advocating for monolingualism, explicitly stated that “German intellectuals regard the unity of race and language as the foundation of a nation.”⁶ Afshār proposed an “Iranization” (*īrānī sākhtan*) model based on the “Americanization” system, emphasizing the properness of this model for Iranians.⁷ Additionally, Yaḥyā Māhyār Navvābī (1912–2000), a scholar of ancient Iranian languages and culture, proposed establishing “towns for children” in Azerbaijani areas to promote the Persian language as one of his Persianization policies.⁸ Navvābī likely drew inspiration from the boarding schools in North America designed to assimilate Native American children.

In a 1920 article published in Berlin, Sayyed Ḥasan Taqīzāde emphasized the propagation of Persian monolingualism as a means of forging a homogenous national identity. Although Taqīzāde espoused total and selfless emulation of Europeans in all material and spiritual domains as the only path for Iranians to liberation from backwardness (“Iran should outwardly and inwardly, physically and spiritually, become European in style,” he nevertheless contended that in the linguistic domain—in language and literature—Iranians should adhere to Persian, striving to enhance and disseminate the Persian language and literature.⁹

Following Taqīzāde and his Berlin circle, others swiftly joined in pressing for monolingualism. Their primary strategy involved the deliberate disassociation of Azeri Turkish from the Iranian territory by asserting that it was a “foreign” element brought in by adversaries of Iran, therefore its eradication was required. Through this systematic deterritorialization of Azeri Turkish, it became widely accepted that Turkish had been imposed on Iranian soil by the Mongol or Turani invaders; it was viewed as an “affliction” (*moṣibat*) or the “foul remnants” (*āṣār-e kaṣīfe*) of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane.¹⁰

In this modern context, monolingualism was upheld as a natural norm, whereas having more than one language was pathologized as an aberration and subsequently rejected. Within Iran, writing in any language other than Persian, which by definition would be an unsanctioned language, has been regarded as a personal malady or contagion, posing a threat to social cohesion and Iran's integrity. For instance, Maḥmūd Afshār Yazdī, a political figure, journalist, and poet, for whom the eradication of other languages by imposing Persian became a passionate lifelong pursuit, advocated for the elimination of any sort of differences, both cultural and linguistic.¹¹ Afshār labeled other languages “foreign languages” (*zabānhā-ye bigāne*); however, his aversion was particularly directed toward Azeri Turkish. He vehemently disapproved of the continued existence of the Turkish language in Iran, describing it in terms of a repugnant ailment, an infection (*ʿofūnat*) and disease, urging the “disinfection” (*zedd-e ʿofūnī*) of Azerbaijan provinces through the propagation of the Persian language and the teaching of Iran's history.¹² Similarly, Gholām-'Alī Ra'dī Āzarakhshī (1909–1999), a poet born in Tabriz, expressed anti-Turkish sentiments in his

5 For an in-depth exploration of these figures' perspectives on monolingualism, see my forthcoming book, tentatively titled *Azeri Turkish Narratives: Monolingualism in Modern Iran*.

6 Kātebī, *Āzarbāyjān o vaḥdat-e mellī*, 12.

7 Afshār, “Yegānegī-ye Īrānīān o zabān-e fārsī,” part 2, 131.

8 Navvābī, “Zabān-e konūnī-ye Āzarbāyjān,” 144.

9 Ḥasan Taqīzāde, “Dore-ye jadīd,” 2.

10 Mahdavi, “Madāres-e qadīme rā bāyad bast!” 136. Also see Arānī, “Āzarbāyjān yā yek mas'ala-ye ḥayātī o mamātī-ye Īrān,” 251; Afshār, “Yegānegī-ye Īrānīān o zabān-e fārsī,” 130, 133; Afshār, “Āghāznāme,” 6; and Afshār, “Zabān, adabīyyāt o khaṭṭ-e fārsī az naẓar-e siyāsī,” 165, 174–175.

11 See Afshār, “Āghāznāme,” 5–6; reprinted in Afshār, “Yegānegī-ye Īrānīān o zabān-e fārsī,” part 2, 132; reprinted in Īraj Afshār, *Zabān-e fārsī dar Āzarbāyjān*, 274–91.

12 Afshār, “Enteqād-e siyāsī dar moẓū'c-e mo'āhede-ye jadīd-e Īrān o ʿoṣmānī,” 571.

Persian poems. For instance, he extensively compared Persian and Azeri Turkish, metaphorizing Persian as a tulip (*lāle*) and Turkish as a poisonous weed (*kharzahre*), or Persian as honey (*shahd*) and Turkish as venom (*zahr-e mār*).¹³

Suppression of the coexistent diverse languages inside Iran's borders and replacing them with Persian emerged as a primary state initiative under the rule of the first Pahlavi monarch, Reza Shah (r. 1925–1941), with the goal of crafting a homogenous Aryan European nation. These endeavors were rooted in the tripartite principles of modernism, centralism, and secularism.¹⁴ Reza Shah's authoritarian and centralized modernization efforts, steeped in Aryan illusions, were often enforced with violence and brutality.¹⁵ Following World War II, the policies of centralization and Persianization persisted under Reza Shah's son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (r. 1941–1979), and have sporadically continued after the 1979 revolution to the present day. These policies, along with their cultural underpinnings, have been labeled differently by linguists, often as “monolingual bias” or “monolingual chauvinism.”¹⁶ Within the Iranian context, they are commonly referred to as “fārs chauvinism.” At a personal and communal level, there arose a moral, social, and political obligation to rectify this perceived ailment by eradicating linguistic diversity, considering it the aberration that needed correction.

Since the reception of nationalism and its monolingualism in Iran, intellectual propagandists and cultural policymakers have persistently argued that writing, publishing, or reading in languages other than Persian disrupts the envisioned uniformity of the nation. Expressing distinct identities through cultural or linguistic differences continues to be frowned upon and systematically penalized by advocates of Persianization, even though the ban on non-Persian languages was officially lifted after the 1979 revolution, and communicating in a language other than Persian is no longer legally criminalized. Since the inception of monolingualism, works in Azeri Turkish have faced censorship, denial of publishing licenses, or outright bans. Manuscripts or published works in Azeri Turkish are often denied cataloging or even destroyed. Authors who write in Azeri Turkish face systematic threats, forced exile from Azerbaijani provinces, incarceration, torture, and even murder. They are stigmatized as communist, pan-Turkist, separatist, or a traitor to Iran. These punitive measures are not solely enforced by Persian speakers or directed from the “center”; the most vehement reactions come from individuals who believe they have successfully suppressed that part of their own identity and view disavowing their linguistic heritage as a moral, communal, and political obligation. They have internalized the modern ideal of monolingualism and strive to assimilate entirely into a homogeneous whole. Strikingly, some of the earliest proponents of monolingualism, like Sayyed Ḥasan Taqīzāde (1878–1970), Taqī Arānī (1903–1940), and Ḥosseyṅ-Qolī Kātebī (d. 1991), or the poet Gholām-ʿAlī Raʿdī Āzarakhashī (1909–1999), were themselves Turkophones. Afshār himself was an Azerbaijani Urmia descendant.¹⁷

As in other nations that uphold monolingualism, in Iran national narratives of monolingualism, the enforcement of Persianization, and the eradication of the “foreign” element (Azeri Turkish) and healing of the nation from “affliction” or “infection” have been advocated from above and the center, and by repeated appeals to Turkophones to align with the coordination campaign from the bottom up, or from the periphery to the center.¹⁸ On a personal level, many Iranian propagandists even believe that Turkophones, as a moral and political obligation to their nation, should sacrificially endeavor not only to abandon their language but also to annihilate its traces, including their accent.¹⁹ These

13 Raʿdī Āzarakhashī, “Zabān-e fārsī o vaḥdat-e mellī,” 235.

14 See Katouzian, *The Persians*, 194, 228.

15 See Motadel, “Iran and the Aryan myth.”

16 Grosjean, *Studying Bilinguals*, 10; Pavlenko, *Emotions and Multilingualism*, 1, 5, 302, 311; Davidson, *Medievalism, Multilingualism*, 1, 44, 134, 210; Fishman, “Positive Bilingualism,” 49; Hassan, “Translator's Introduction,” xix.

17 See Afshār, “Zabān, adabiyāt o khaṭṭ-e fārsī az naẓar-e siyāsī,” 175, 169n2; and Afshār, “Yegānegī-ye Īrānīān o zabān-e fārsī,” 290, 283n10.

18 Arānī, “Āzarbāyjān yā yek masʿala-ye ḥayātī o mamātī-ye Īrān,” 253.

19 See *ibid.*; and Afshār, “Zabān, adabiyāt o khaṭṭ-e fārsī az naẓar-e siyāsī,” 175, 176.

propagandists seem unable to conceive of in-between spaces, multiple attachments, or the frontier, liminal, and hybrid identities shaped by multilingualism. Afshār vehemently concludes, “An Azerbaijani is either Iranian or not. If he is [Iranian], he cannot be a Turk!”²⁰

Despite a century of bans, censorship, and societal pressures that reflect a monolingual bias, the language and literature of Azeri Turkish persist and continue to evolve and flourish. The resilience of this minor literature against the backdrop of dominant monolingualism signifies a shift into what Yildiz calls the “postmonolingual era.” Yildiz defines “postmonolingual” as a dynamic space, “a field of tension in which the monolingual paradigm continues to assert itself and multilingual practices persist or re-emerge.”²¹ In my forthcoming book, I have presented a survey of narrative prose books written in Azeri Turkish and published in Iran between 1944 and 2000.²² The literature produced in this minor language over the last century has collectively shaped a body of “small literature.”²³ Its peripheral, nonconformist, and subversive essence holds immense potential to contribute to the democratization of Iranian literature and culture. This body of work challenges norms and offers alternative perspectives, enriching the cultural landscape by embracing diversity within Iranian literary traditions.

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20 Afshār, “Zabān, adabiyāt o khaṭṭ-e fārsī az nazar-e siyāsī,” 176.

21 Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, 5.

22 The tentative title of my work is *Azeri Turkish Narratives*.

23 The idea of *kleine Literatur*, translated as “minor literature,” “small literature,” or “literature of minority,” was introduced by Frank Kafka in his diary in 1911 to define the contemporary Jewish literature in Warsaw.

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