

Afghan Languages (Dari and Pashto) as a Source of Unity Rather Than Division

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Abstract

The government in Afghanistan, and more specifically the ministry of Education, clearly has generated a certain level of conflict between linguistic communities through its educational policies. There has been linguistic tension in Afghanistan for quite a long time and Dari-speaking students at the University of Kabul have demonstrated these tensions through protests. The protestors demanded that Kabul University (and Mazar University) use the word for university in both languages, *Daanish Gah* in Dari and *Pohantoon* in Pashto. However, the government, like its predecessors, insisted on being monolingual and showing deference to Pashto. Reaction to the protests triggered clashes with police and reignited ethnic tensions, as groups of Pashtuns heckled the students in the latter language. Indeed, language is a divisive issue in Afghanistan.

Language, however, should be a source of unity. According to the Asia Foundation's most recent statistics, nearly half of all Pashtuns report being speakers of Dari. Other experts believe that the percentage of Dari-speaking Pashtuns is higher.

Statistics tell one story, but the commonalities between the two languages are striking and present a better case for unity. When people observe a phenomenon, it has a greater effect than simply reading about it. University of Wisconsin Professor Robert Kaiser, in his research on election fraud in Russia, has noted for instance that seeing officials commit fraud on television had a far greater effect than reading about it. My paper will present these points of intersection with the tacit intention of showing that seeing is believing: seeing commonalities between the languages.

In the same vein, I want to emphasize the commonalities of the two languages through visual aids and go on to make suggestions from a linguistic and not a political scientist point of view, as to why these linguistic divisions need not exist (Mariam Alamyar, a Purdue Alumnus, wrote a similar thesis on this issue, but she focuses mainly on power politics).

In doing so, I include a sample of *Tabestaney Zalmay* (Zalmay's summer) in the text, a short narrative about a Pashtun college student and his family. The narrative will show numerous words that are common to Pashto and Dari in red and few words in black that are unique to Dari. In particular, this paper will show a surprising observation about the two words, *Danesh Gah* and *Pohantoon*, which have caused linguistic division. Both words appear early in the narrative.

In addition to the narrative, I will also show that there is a high amount of positive transfer between the two languages. Both share similar word orders and have a plethora of common verbs and subject matter. There is also negative transfer between the two languages but whether there is more negative than positive transfer is not a concern of this paper. Scholars tend to argue that there is more of the former than the latter between languages. To do so would deviate from the topic. However, I have to briefly mention both forms of transfer since the paper deals with comparing two languages.

The background behind linguistic tension in Afghanistan

For years Afghanistan has had many divisive issues. The most over looked issue, aside from corruption, poverty, and the insurgency, is that of language. Indeed, there has been linguistic tension in Afghanistan for a long time. The government and its predecessors have clearly generated conflicts between linguistic communities (Dari and Pashto) through their educational policies. Often, the governments in Kabul (or different language groups within the government) have tried to promote their language over the other (Alamyar, 2010).

From the reign of Zahir Shah to the Taliban Pashto was promoted as the medium for instruction and administration (Alamyar, 2010). The first government failed to utilize Pashto in different settings and thus the Ministry of Education recommended a compromise (Alamyar, 2010). The government created Dari schools in areas where the majority of people were Dari speakers and vice versa with Pashto speakers (Alamyar, 2010). Yet, higher instruction would be in Dari. Implementation of this program failed and teachers were unable to teach in Pashto (Ibid). Alamyar (2010) notes in her thesis that different types of conflicts were created, especially as another administration encouraged people to raise the issue of language.

Currently, the Ministry of Education’s curriculum and the Constitution’s language policy calls for language segregated schools (like those of earlier governments) in areas where one group is prevalent (Alamyar, 2010). Even within the government workplace, language groups generate linguistic tension by discriminatory practices. Alamyar (2010) notes that some Farsi Dari (or simply Dari) and Pashtu speakers in different governmental (and NGOs) discriminate against each other based on the language they speak.

Sometimes Dari speakers have reacted with resentment to these policies, especially when one considers Mustafa Siddiqi’s experience, as included in Alamyar’s thesis (2010). He attended Kabul University when the Taliban were in power. He had serious issues with a teacher who was sent by that regime. Siddiqi tells of how the teacher refused to teach in Persian and cursed at the students when they made that request (Alamyar, 2010). His contempt for the teacher is clearly expressed as Siddiqi referred to the later as a “turbaned, inexperienced, and inept teacher-I can’t call him teacher...he was really non-professional (Alamyar, 2010).”

Resentment even spilled out into the streets. Arguably the most significant source of linguistic tension stems from the dispute over the word university. Government policy favors the Pashto word for university پوهنتون instead of the Dari word دانشگاه. The first word is Pohantoon and the second word is Daanish Gah. Dari-speaking students at Kabul University and Balkh University in 2008 demanded that the latter term be included on university signboards (Alamyar, 2010) Their attempts to hang a sign in Dari were unsuccessful as police in both instances prevented this from happening (Alamyar, 2010). The protests turned violent as the police and protesters clashed with each other, resulting in several injuries. The protests also reignited ethnic conflict as an Afghan who listened to Tolo TV blogged that “There was another mob talking in pashtu speaking against them (A. Muslim, 2008)”. He means a group of Pashtuns were heckling the Dari-speaking protestors.

Physical clashes over the word were not limited to Dari-speaking students and police, but another group. A bill regarding higher education was left unresolved because of a dispute of the word university. Ariana News (2013) reported last year that:

the Wolesi-Jirga has not been able to come to agreement on whether to use both the Pashto word for University (Puhantun) and the Farsi word (Danishga) in the portion of the law that pertains to universities.

Some of the MPs in the Lower House of Parliament wanted to only use the word Pohantoon in legislation that dealt with universities. There were those who wanted to only use Daanish Gah and others who wanted to use both. Ariana News reported that the disagreements led to loud shouting and physical assaults (Ibid). The picture on my presentation poster effectively shows that language can be a source of tension.



Photo from Ariana News

Afghan Language as a source of unity

Language, however, should be a source of unity. According to Keith Shawe, who worked on the Asia Foundation’s most recent Survey of the Afghan People (2013) nearly half of all Pashtuns who participated in the survey reported that they

could speak Dari. Based on Alamyar's statistics, 90% of Pashtu speakers understand and speak Farsi Dari and 50 to 65% of Farsi Dari speakers can understand Pashtu (Alamyar, 2010). Certainly, there are reasons for ethnic strife that transcend linguistics, but my study illuminates the fact that linguistic differences alone need not be a significant source of division.

One would take the same idea from Alamyar's thesis (2010). She asserts that language issues are among those who are high authorities and have power, not ordinary people. Indeed, she even notes that Afghan hospitality erases the language issue completely. She claims that when a Pashtun visits a Farsi Dari speaking-family, he need not speak Farsi Dari or, if the host family knows Pashtu, they should speak their guest's language. Likewise, when a Farsi Dari speaker visits a Pashtun family, the Pashtun family should speak in Farsi Dari to give more respect and show distinguished behavior towards the visitor (Alamyar, 2010). Indeed, the majority of her interviewees, which included a sizeable amount of Pashtun students, feel "comfortable" or "very comfortable" receiving instruction in Dari.

An approach to solving linguistic tension

Alamyar's interviews, statistics (as well as those from the Asia Foundation), and discussions of the cultural and political dynamics tell one story, but my study will show points of intersection of between Dari and Pashtu through linguistic evidence with the intention that seeing is believing: seeing commonalities between the two languages.

When people observe a phenomenon, it has a greater effect than simply reading about it. University of Wisconsin professor Robert Kaiser, in his research on election fraud in Russia, has noted for instance that seeing officials commit election fraud on television had a greater effect than reading about it (2012). In the same vein, I want to emphasize the commonalities of the two languages through visual aids and go on to make suggestions from a linguistic and not a political scientist point of view, as to why these linguistic divisions need not exist.

In doing so, I will include sample pages from Tabstaney Zalmay (Zalmay's summer), a short narrative in Dari about a Pashtun college student and his family. The narrative will show numerous words that are common to Pashtu and Dari in red and few words in black that are unique to Dari. In particular, the narrative will show a surprising observation about the two words, Daanesh Gah and Pohantoon, which have caused linguistic division.

In addition, I will show that the two languages have a high amount of positive language transfer through Tabestaney Zalmay and examples taken from my language courses at Indiana University and the University of Wisconsin. Positive Language transfer is when the forms, structures, vocabulary, and rules of the L1 and L2 coincide (Winer, 1989).

Before continuing it is important to mention that there is negative transfer between both languages. From my experience Pashtu requires learning more rules and sentence structures that can take more forms than Dari. Although Alamyar (2010) notes that there are both similarities and differences between Pashtu and Dari her interviewees believed that Dari speakers have had difficulty learning Pashtu and Pashtu instructors have had trouble themselves with the use of "ya" (a Pashtu letter that is similar to y in English). Scholars generally believe that there is mostly negative transfer between languages. Lise Winer (1989) argues that real and perceived closeness of language distance between similar languages (Trinidadian English and Standard English in her article) contributes greatly to persistent difficulties students have in writing English (standard).

I will not dispute Winer or Alamyar's findings nor question the interviewees on their beliefs about language. Nevertheless, I will make a strong case for positive transfer based on the commonalities in Tabestaney Zalmay and numerous examples in the last section. In addition, my language courses greatly assisted subsequent languages that I took. Pashtu provided the foundation for Tabstaney Zalmay, which was compiled from several

lists of common words between Dari and Pashto. A Dari speaker and/or linguist learning Pashto could learn a lot from a similar list and build a strong foundation.

The case against linguistic tension: Tabstaney Zalmay

I wrote Tabstaney Zalmay last summer (2013) at Indiana University. It is truly a blend of linguistic syncretism. It was my project for Dari where I took as many words that are common to Dari and Pashto and made them into a narrative. In addition it focuses on a Dari-speaking Pashto family. Usually, language and ethnicity are correlated in Afghanistan (Alamyar, 2010).

Most importantly, it visually (and thus effectively) shows how Dari and Pashto are sources of unity due to the abundance of common words. Some words in both languages are spelled exactly the same; others have slight differences but are the same word and have the same meaning. Nevertheless, linguists and non-linguists alike can clearly see the commonalities in red (pages 6-9):

زلمی دروازه خانه اش را باز کرد و داخل شد. مادرش کابلی پلو پخته کرده بود و پدرش يك چوکی را جور می‌کرد. زلمی به پدرش گفت: "پدر! سلام علیکم. مانده نباشید، شما چطور استین؟" پدر جواب داد: "وعلیکم سلام زلمی جان، زنده باشی من خوب هستم. تو چطور استی؟" زلمی گفت: "مه هم خوب استم تشکر. سلام علیکم مادر، خسته نباشید، شما چطور هستین؟" مادرش جواب داد: "وعلیکم سلام بچیم، سلامت باشید من خوب هستم تشکر. تو چطور استی؟ زلمی جواب داد: "مه هم خوبم. از دیدن همه شما زیاد خوشحال هستم." خواهر زلمی گفت: "سلام زلمی!" زلمی گفت: "سلام مریم، تو چطور هستی؟" مریم جواب داد: "مه خوب هستم تشکر لالا جان."

بعد از احوالپرسی آنها در میز نان شب را خوردند. پدر زلمی گفت: "ما صبا به بازار خواهیم رفت و میوه، ترکاری و گوشت مرغ خواهیم خرید." زلمی جواب داد: "خیر، خوب است."

روز بعد زلمی، پدرش و کاکایش که پاچا نام دارد، به بازار رفتند. آنها در يك دوکان بسیار میوه های تازه را دیدند. در آن دوکان، ام، انگور سرخ، انار، شفتالو، مالت و کیله بود. اما میوه ها بسیار قیمت بودند. آنها میخواستند که از دوکان بیرون بروند که دوکاندار صدا کرد: "صبر کنید، صبر کنید، من به شما ارزان تر خواهم فروخت." پدر زلمی گفت: بسیار خوب. پس آنها از آن دوکان پیاز، متر، کچالو و سبزی پالك هم خریدند و باز به دوکان دیگر رفتند. از آن جا گوشت مرغ و گوشت گاو خریدند. آنها بعد از بازار به خانه شان رفتند.

The narrative also questions the validity of linguistic tensions over the word university. It includes the controversial words Daanesh Gah and Pohantoon that are common to both languages. Logically speaking, since Gah گاه (place) is common to both languages, as seen in Daanesh Gah (دانشگاه) in Dari means university (found on page 2 of the narrative)) and Lashkar Gah لشکرگاه (Pashto (and Dari) word for a city in Helmand Province (found on page 4 of the narrative)) then there should be little, if any dispute over the word for university. In addition, Pohantoon پوهنتون (on page 2) is a Pashto word commonly used in Dari, as seen in Dari dictionaries (C. Bulkin, 2012) and Dari language texts (R. Arman, 2012).

These two words are manifested together in the narrative on page 2:

Zalmay is a student in (at) Kabul University (excerpt from page 2).

پوهنتون کابل / دانشگاه ی



Photo from Afghan Ministry of Higher Education Website

زلمی در پوهنتون کابل (دانشگاه ی کابل) محصل است.

The narrative also contains university-related words that are indisputable and common to both languages. I interviewed Omid Wali Shirzad, assistant professor at Nangarhar University and a Fulbright FLTA at the University of Georgia. He mentioned that all other university-related terms are accepted by both speakers of the two languages (Shirzad, 2014):

a)Table 1

Adjunct Instructor (page 12)	نامزد یو هیالی
Junior Teaching Assistant	یوهنیار
Senior Teaching Assistant	یوهنمل
Professor (page 12)	یوهاند / استاد

Thus, the narrative shows that there should not be any linguistic tension over university terms since the vast majority is accepted by Dari and Pashto speakers. Even the word for university is logically a source of unity because it is common to both languages.

The case against linguistic tension: positive transfer in both languages

The narrative, in visually portraying the abundance of common words, shows that there is a high amount of positive language transfer between the two languages. Indeed, Pashto and Dari share many common lingu-

tic elements. This section will visually illustrate those elements. It will have minimal discussion because the examples will speak for themselves. It will read like a math text book.

I. There is a high amount of Positive Transfer between the two languages (Krause, 2009-2013):

A) There are many common words and subject categories between the two languages

1. Words pertaining to family are similar:

a) Table 2

English	Dari	Pashto
father	پدر	پلار
mother	مادر	مور
sister	خواهر	خور
paternal uncle	کاکا	کاکا

b) Dari and Pashto share many words for geographical places (i.e. “cave” غار), colors (i.e. “red” سرخ), fruits (i.e. “peach” شفتالو), and numerous other categories.

B) Both languages share word order

1. Both follow (Subject-Object-Verb)

a) I eat grapes.

من انگور ها ميخورم. (Dari)

Verb Object Subject

زه انگورونه خورم. (Pashto)

C) Some verb tenses have the same structure and placement in both languages.

1. They share three tenses.

a) Present simple

زه اوبه څښم. (“I drink water” in Pashto.)

Personal ending for first person and present stem

من کار ميکنم. (“I am working” in Dari.)

b) Near Past

ما شربت څښلې دے. (“I have drunk cough syrup” in Pashto.)

To be Main Verb

او دري را درس داده است. (“He has taught Dari” in Dari.)

c) Far Past

ما شربت څښلې وو. (“I had drunk cough syrup” in Pashto.)

To be Main Verb

او دري را درس داده بود. (“He has taught Dari” in Dari.)

D) Placement of Adverbs is similar to both

1. “very” is similarly placed

دا هر څه هلته ډیر ارزان او تازه وو. (“All these things are very cheap and fresh over there” in Pashto.)

Descriptive word very

این کیک بسیار زیبا است (“That cake is very pretty” in Dari.)

E) Both languages contain similar verbs

a) Table 3

English	Dari	Pashto
To arrive	رسیدن	رسیدل
To cook	پختن کردن	پخول
To work	کار کردن	کار کول
To eat	خوردن	خورل

F) Negative transfer between Dari and Pashto.

1. Words that look the same have different meanings.

a) به in Dari means “to” and in Pashto means “will (do)”.

b) او in Dari means “he/she/it” and in Pashto means “and”

c) ما in Dari means “we” and in Pashto is the past tense for “I”

2. The gender of the verb in Pashto will be dependent on the object and Dari does not have this rule.

a) مایو خټکے او خورلو (“I ate a melon” in Pashto.)

Masculine ending of object influences verb ending

b) Not in Dari

ما اب ریختیم (“we pour water” in Dari)

3. Dari uses prepositions while Pashto use circumpositions

a) Table 4

English	Dari	Pashto
after	بهداز (word)	د (word) نه پس
in	در (word)	په (word) کښی

G) However, colloquialisms can turn negative transfer into positive transfer

1. Circumpositions can be omitted in Pashto colloquial speech and writing. As a result, both languages can have a similar sentence structure in regards to preposition placement.

a) زه د پښور يم ("I am from Peshawar" in Pashto.)

From

مه از پشاور هستم. ("I am from Peshawar" in Dari.)

There are many other examples of negative and positive transfer but for the sake of this paper all of them will not be listed.

Conclusion of Results

Despite the linguistic tensions that Afghanistan has experienced, this paper has proven that Afghan languages (Dari and Pashto) are a source of unity rather than division due to the large amount of positive language transfer between them, as seen in Tabestaney Zalmay and the linguistic evidence shown in section 3. Thus, there should be no linguistic tension in Afghanistan and Alamyar points this fact out as well. However, she takes another approach to the issue and focuses on a political, instead of a linguistic, point of view.

Disclaimer: This paper is current up to the Karzai Administration. It was written before the last presidential election. President Ghani's policies are unknown to the author at this time.

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