

Iranian Languages as Gardens

Bo Utas

Uppsala University, Sweden

Bo.Utas@lingfil.uu.se

Abstract

The main West Iranian languages, i.e. Old Persian, Parthian, Middle Persian, New Persian and – in some respects – Avestan, may be studied in a uniquely continuous development stretching over close to 3 000 years. These languages are not only the result of their genetic inter-relations but also of their cultural, religious and political history. They may be labelled ‘high languages’ (‘Hochsprachen’), in the sense that they are cultured and standardized and used for a great number of purposes by people of various linguistic backgrounds. This article presents an over-view of their development seen from a specific perspective. The traditional Iranian walled-in garden, the *pairi-daēza* of the Avesta, is used as a metaphor for a high language in contrast to the free vegetation of spontaneous human speech in social interaction. The latter is here called ‘dialect’, a concept that includes both ‘geolect’ and ‘sociolect’. These high language ‘gardens’ are thus viewed as a kind of cultural artefacts. Among other things, this has implications for views on the dichotomy literacy/orality, showing that writing is *not* language and that ‘orality’ belongs both to ‘high language’ and ‘dialect’. It is furthermore argued that literacy and orality were present in complementary distribution throughout the whole known history of the Iranian cultural sphere.

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The enclosed garden is an age-old cultural phenomenon in Iran. It is common knowledge that the international word ‘paradise’, based on a Classical Greek *parádeisos*, goes back to Avestan *pairi-daēza*, ‘eine rings-, rundum gehende, sich zusammenschliessende Umwallung, Ummauerung’ as Bartholomae has it in his *Altiranisches Wörterbuch* (1904: col. 865), i. e. something walled-in. It is perhaps less ready knowledge that the regular New Persian development of this word is *pālīz* (classical *pālēz*, nowadays meaning ‘kitchen-garden’, ‘melon-bed’) (Horn 1893: 63, no 279), and that *firdaus* is a later re-borrowing from Greek.¹ One of the candidates for the original paradise is Takht-i Sulaimān, i.e. the old Ganzaka or Shīz, in Azerbaijan (Ringbom 1951: 86-91 *et pass.*; Ringbom 1958; Wikander 1946: 100 *et pass.*). This structure was situated on the top of an old volcano, where a small central crater lake fed streams that ran in the four directions down through what seems to have been a walled-in garden. For the sake of the metaphoric use I am going to make here of the garden, it is essential that it is walled-in, that it is separated from the wild vegetation outside. It is irrigated, cultivated, ordered and refined – perhaps through centuries or even millennia. It is what is called in Arabic an *ḥadīqa* (from the Arabic verb *ḥadaqa*, which corresponds rather precisely to the Avestan *pairi-daēza*).

Here I shall use the walled-in garden as a metaphor for a language, not any kind of language but a ‘high language’, a cultured language (at times written, at times not), like Persian, Latin, English and Mandarin Chinese. Gardens are cultivated by their gardeners in the same way as languages by language masters and grammarians. The gardener/grammarians prunes the wild, freely growing linguistic flora into a neat language garden. Even if this may seem an impersonal process, it is obvious that people of flesh and blood run it – although often anonymously. They are the ones who work with shaping and normalizing their cultural language and its written representations as well as

¹ The Persian word *pardīs*, used in the sense of ‘garden’ generally and in specific modern usages such as ‘university campus’, seems to be a recent innovation based on the old *pairi-daēza*.

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those workers in the vineyard who analyse and describe this language, i.e. the grammarians, the linguists – descriptive as well as prescriptive. Both kinds are occupied with questions of right or wrong, what belongs inside the fence and what should stay outside in the free vegetation – where right or wrong does not exist. Thus we are always weeding our gardens!

In the dawn of preserved grammatical thinking we see analysts like Pāṇini in the 4th century BCE in India and Dionysios Thrax some 200 years later in Alexandria. A couple of years ago I was looking in vain for traces of Thrax in what is now called the new Bibliotheca Alexandrina, but the spirit of his *Technē grammatikē* ('the art of letters') was perhaps still hovering over the facade of this huge, newly erected building, because it is inscribed with words from languages from all over the world – written words. Obviously language masters were active long before Pāṇini and Thrax, although they were rarely known by name. The old high languages, which are known from something like 5 000 years ago, hardly came into being without conscious activities by individuals in order to achieve minimal variation, standardization and a certain order of linguistic forms. In this way our predecessors could bring about languages that were such that messages could be memorized – or recorded – and thus passed on to others, more or less *verbatim*. We do not know much about how that was done, but we can draw some conclusions from what we know about standardization processes that have taken place lately.

The oldest known Iranian languages are no exception in this respect. We know neither time nor place of the language masters, their gardeners, so to speak, who shaped them. There was the Median language, which we know only by loan-words and hearsay, Old Persian, of which we have only access to some 6 500 words of running text, and the often abstruse Avestan. We do not know how they came into being, but at least as regards Old Persian and Avestan we may conclude that they were settled high languages – cultivated gardens, using my metaphor – with standardized case forms in the declination, regular verbal forms in the conjugation and reasonably pruned syntax and hypotax (although

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conjunctions exhibit a rather wild growth in both languages). Here I must point out something that is self-evident but still often over-looked: We have *no* direct access to these languages, only to the written specimens that happen to be preserved down to our days, and the writing is *not* the language. It should rather be regarded as something like musical scores of sounded statements. The perhaps greatest Swedish poet of the 20th century, Gunnar Ekelöf, expressed this with the following words: “A text, of any kind, is nothing but a sort of musical score of ideograms combined with phonetic instructions” (Ekelöf 1971: 240; my translation).

The three just mentioned Old Iranian languages demonstrate this nicely. No writing is known for Median – perhaps there never was one, or we have not been fortunate enough to find any specimens of it. That does not mean that there was no Median high language. Old Persian was written with an especially composed cuneiform syllabary, but, strangely enough, that writing seems to have been used only rarely for practical purposes. In the administration they used instead Elamite, Babylonian and Aramaic. Avestan, finally, was probably never written at all during the first millennium of its use. These “holy scriptures” were originally not memorized in writing but for ages passed on through oral tradition. When they finally were written down, perhaps first in the 6th century CE, it was in a writing system that carefully registered how they should be recited (with no less than 34 consonant signs and 14 vowel signs). This Avestan alphabet must have been created by veritable language masters, but these masters have left no individual trace behind – no phonetic or grammatical treatises, only a couple of bilingual word-lists. The oldest known manuscripts are only from the 13th century CE, and still some people think that in them we can find certain evidence of how Zoroaster and his community *spoke* some time around 1 000 BCE! Whatever kind of language this Avestan may have been, it could not have been a spoken language in daily life. It was rather a ritual language that had crystallized already many centuries before the composition of the texts that we now call the Avesta (Utas 2005: 66).

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How were these “linguistic gardens” established? – The Median dynasty, which ruled over north-western Iran from around 700 BCE (with Ecbatana/Hamadan as its capital), had freed itself from Assyrian sovereignty, defeated Urartu and together with the Babylonians overthrown Assyrian power and conquered Nineve (612 BCE). From this historical map it should be possible to get clues about what shaped the political culture of the Medes and thereby contributed to the formation of a Median high language – or at least the beginnings of one. Therefore, one would expect that the Medes introduced some kind of writing system like their models, but that writing remains unknown. This Median language should have been formed on the basis of spoken varieties (‘dialects’) of a north-western type, most probably in order that the dialect of the ruling family, clan or tribe was launched as some kind of supralectal prestige variety. Then this prestige variety must have been standardized in such a way that it became fit for use in laws, decrees, administration and political – possibly also religious – rituals. As for what we nowadays would call literature we have few clues, but it seems most likely that Iranian narration and epics at that time were completely oral. Vague references in old Greek sources point in that direction, like the story about the Median prince Zariadres and the Scythic princess Odatis, mentioned by Athenaios in the 3^d century CE (Athenaeus 1950: 13.575).

The Median Empire lasted less than two hundred years as an independent state. How much of a political apparatus and linguistic conceptualization may be accomplished in 150 years’ time? When the vassal king Cyrus in the southern province of Pars defeated the Median king Astyages in the year 549 and took over Hamadan as his capital, he probably inherited a “language garden” that was rather simple, but still something to build upon. The walls had been raised and the most important plantations and paths had – so to speak – been laid out. Here was the basis of a conceptual machinery and a cultural language that was to develop and extend itself more or less continually through the following millennia, in fact up to our own days.

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Cyrus certainly introduced his own ruling culture, created in Pars under the influence of the old Elamite Anshan with traditions of written language going back more than 2000 years. When Cyrus, and after him a third cousin of his son Kambyses, i.e. Darius the Great, built an empire that stretched from India to Egypt, they also had to build a political language. The basis was probably, once more, the prestige dialect of the ruling family, this time of a south-western type. However, the Achaemenids also took over the Median administration and chancelleries and through them a political terminology and useful linguistic practices.

However, the new empire required a much bigger administrative machinery: chancelleries of all kinds - for central administration, for local management, etc. As already mentioned, the new high language, Old Persian, was written with a newly created script, a syllabic writing consisting of simple cuneiform symbols (36 signs), surely invented under the influence of the Aramaic alphabet, which at that time spread victoriously over all the Near East. Remarkably, however, it seems as if this Old Persian was mainly intended for use in monuments that proclaimed the national aspirations of the new dynasty, especially, of course, in the tri-lingual Bisutun inscription (from around 520 BCE). To judge from preserved texts (generally clay tablets), Elamite was normally used for local administration in the capitals Persepolis and Susa, and Babylonian (at least initially) in Mesopotamia – and possibly also in the third capital of the empire, Hamadan (we do not know much about this, since there have been very few excavations there). Finally, Aramaic (so called Imperial Aramaic, Reichs-Aramäisch) was used for communication with other provinces. That is what was written, but what was read?

In a famous article with the title “The alloglottography of Old Persian”, Ilya Gershevitch (1979) has endeavored to prove that what *looks* like *Elamite* in Achaemenid documents, i.e. not only the writing itself but also words and grammatical elements, actually often was intended to be read out in *Old Persian*. Similarly, Jonas Greenfield (1985: 707-708) has pointed out that

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Aramaic documents, found, for instance, in Egypt, also could have been intended to be read in *Old Persian*. It has even been proposed (e.g. by Gershevitch) that the administration of the whole of the Achaemenid Empire was made possible by this peculiar multi-lingual technique, namely that letters etc. from the central administration were dictated in Old Persian and written down in Aramaic, which by the receiver again could be read in Old Persian, or possibly in a local language, by the Aramaic scribes. If this is true it demonstrates clearly that what is written is *not* the linguistic statement itself but just a way of memorizing and transmitting this statement. It has to be “read out”, i.e. “sounded” (cf. Middle and New Persian *khvāndan*) in order to become language.

In the Book of Esther in the Bible, there are some verses that seem to contradict this conception of Achaemenid imperial practices. According to the Bible, Esther, who was a Jewess and foster daughter of a certain Mordecai, was chosen to become the queen of Ahasuerus, the Great King of Persia. In Esther 8:9-10 we read (Oxford Univ. Press 1885):

9. “Then were the king’s scribes called at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the three and twentieth day thereof; and it was written according to all that Mordecai commanded unto the Jews, and to the satraps, and the governors and princes of the provinces, which are from India unto Ethiopia, an hundred twenty and seven provinces according to the writing thereof, and unto every people after their language, and to the Jews according to their writing, and according to their language.”

10. “And he wrote in the name of king Ahasuerus, and sealed it with the king’s ring, and sent letters by posts on horseback, riding on swift steeds that were used in the king’s service, bred of the stud.”

And in Esther 10:2 we furthermore read:

2. “And all the acts of his power and of his might, and the full account of the greatness of Mordecai, whereunto the king advanced him, are they

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not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?”

“An hundred twenty and seven provinces according to the writing thereof, and unto every people after their language”! This seems irrefutable. However, from a strictly historical point of view, the Book of Esther seems to be more a piece of Jewish propaganda than a neutral record. There are no independent sources that even hint that these events ever took place. Neither are examples of such multi-lingual documents known to exist. King Ahasuerus is generally identified with one of the three Artaxerxes, although the Hebrew form of the name, Akhashwērōsh, is rather a distorted form of Old Persian Khshayārshan, i.e. Xerxes. The life of Xerxes is rather well documented (especially by Greek historians), and it hardly leaves room for a Queen Esther. The name Artaxerxes is rather to be found in the biblical name Artasasta (Ezra 4), a rendering of Hebrew/Aramaic Artakhshastā from Old Persian Artakhshaça (Utas 1998: 75).

Isn't the wealth of details in this story (such as “the twenty-third day of the third month”, “127 provinces” and “letters sent by posts on horseback”) just the kind of *étouffage* (“padding”) that a skilful author would add in order to give an impression of authenticity? The statements on a variety of languages and writings should probably be put down to that account, too. This is the way they conceived of the Achaemenid Empire at the time when the Book of Esther was edited in the form that has reached us. On the other hand, we have no reason to doubt the existence of written records as mentioned here, “in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia”, since such chronicles are mentioned in many other sources – and they really were written.

Thus writing was used in many forms and for many purposes under the Achaemenids. This was a literate culture in many respects but it was probably oral in many more. Religion, narration and poetry (i.e. epics and songs) seem to have belonged completely to the oral sphere. The borderline between high language and spoken language (what I prefer to call “dialect”, including both “sociolects” and “geolects”) was thus not to be found between what was written

and what was not written but between the kind of statements that were purposely formulated in a standardized language suitable for memorization and recording, on one hand, and spontaneous speech used in direct social interaction, on the other hand. The first kind was what we may find within the walls of the language garden, while the second kind was the wild vegetation growing outside (a “*langue sauvage*” one might say; cf. Utas 2005: 66-67).

What happened to the imperial chancelleries when Alexander the Great conquered Susa, Hamadan and Persepolis around 330 BCE? The fact that he chose Babylon as the capital of his new empire suggests that he was not trying to impose Greek language and Greek culture on this age-old imperial center. Alexander and his generals most probably continued to administrate the previously Achaemenid provinces through the inherited, basically Aramaic-writing scribal institutions. There is so little material about these processes in Iran under the Seleucids that it is difficult to judge how far the introduction of Greek went, but the Aramaic scribal traditions seem to have survived until the Arsacids took over Iran (around 250 BCE). At that time a new high language appeared, which was also put to writing. Here again we have no real information on how this came about. The development of a spoken Parthian dialect (of a north-western type) to become a high language was obviously a collective process, although to a certain extent it must have been based on linguistic analysis and conscious politics.

Where were the language masters of those days? One kind was found in the chancelleries, where the time-sanctioned scribal methods were still in use. The scribes had to invent a way to write the new royal language. Their solution seems to have been that they wrote Aramaic but added minor phonetic instructions (“complements”) that could help a reader retrieve the original Parthian wording – in important documents certainly *verbatim*. This did not only put constraints on the technique of the scribes but also on the language that was to be memorized, i.e. written down. Variations in declination and conjugation, as well as in the use of prepositions and conjunctions, had to be

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minimized. Here strict language gardeners were certainly needed. Unfortunately, we do not have much material to substantiate this hypothesis, but a good example is found in the so-called Awroman documents, a set of legal texts written in the first century CE. Except for a few Iranian names, these documents are written in something that looks almost completely like Aramaic. Only a few complements placed after verbal forms indicate that these documents were intended to be read in Parthian (Nyberg 1923). On the other hand, there are no substantial texts written in straight Parthian preserved from Arsacid times. What we have is mainly coin legends and accounts on ostraca. For more comprehensive texts written directly in Parthian we must go to the next dynasty, to the Parthian parallel texts found in Sasanian inscriptions, and, of course, to the Manichean texts found in East Turkestan (especially Turfan).

We know much more about the next step in the development of Iranian high languages. Again, a provincial governor in Pars led to the fall of the mighty empire. The House of Sasan replaced the Arsacid dynasty. Like the Achaemenid Cyrus long before him, Ardashir, the governor of Pars, brought his local language, Middle Persian, to the center of power. It is hard to say how far this was already a standardized language, and it is also difficult to define more precisely the relation between this Middle Persian of Central Iran in the third century CE and the Old Persian of the waning Achaemenid Empire at the beginning of the third century BCE. There were around 550 years of unknown development in between, and by the time of Ardashir there was probably no living knowledge of the Old Persian writing system and the language that was recorded in the inscriptions that still could be seen on the walls of rocks and other remaining monuments from Achaemenid times.

Was the Middle Persian that became the state language of the Sasanian Empire mainly a standardization of a local spoken dialect in the Province of Pars or was it rather an inherited linguistic-cultural-political system that had developed continually through these 500 years – in spite of all political reversals and national disasters? The former alternative is nearest at hand, but on its own

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it is hardly sufficient to explain that there are parallels in conceptualizations, forms of expression and perhaps also in grammaticalization that point to some kind of continuity. This may be demonstrated by the similarities as regards contents, disposition and phrasing that we can find between the great tri-lingual Bisutun inscription of Darius and the likewise tri-lingual inscription of the second Sasanian king, Shapur, at Naqsh-i Rostam. It is especially interesting to note that the scheme and mode of representation of these inscriptions are also found in monuments in adjacent empires, namely the rock inscriptions of the Indian Maurya king Ashoka from around 300 BCE and the so-called *Monumentum Ancyranum*, a bi-lingual inscription (in Greek and Latin) set up by the Roman emperor Augustus at the very beginning of our era (Pollock 2005: 415-422). The inscription of Augustus is also known as *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (“Achievements of the Divine Augustus”), and this parallelism obviously induced André Maricq (1958), who published the three versions of the Naqsh-i Rostam inscription, to call the latter *Res Gestae Divi Saporis* (“Achievements [*kārnāma!*] of the Divine Shapur”).

This Sasanian Middle Persian was not any longer written as Aramaic, but still with a development of the Aramaic alphabet. As regards the Middle Persian writing system (“Pahlavi”), there is every reason to apply the definition of writing by the Swedish poet Ekelöf that was quoted above: “A text, of any kind, is nothing but a sort of musical score of ideograms combined with phonetic instructions.” Although it was not meant like that, this is a good description of the Pahlavi writing system, in which we talk of “ideograms” (also called “heterograms”, “allograms” or “aramaeograms”) supplemented with phonetic annotations in the form of Iranian endings and other supplementing morphemes that indicate how the respective word should be read out (*khwānd-*, i.e. called, sounded). This peculiar hybrid way of writing must have emerged by gradual Iranization of an originally completely Aramaic way of writing (an ‘alloglottography,’ the term used by Gershevitch) Old Persian, Parthian, Middle Persian and probably also Sogdian.

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When Aramaic was regularly written in order to record one and the same Iranian language, it was natural to introduce auxiliary phonetic elements. Gradually, the scribes for the sake of simplification started to write whole Iranian (Middle Persian) words in phonetic writing, and soon we had the mixture of Aramaic and Persian elements that we see in the Sasanian texts, both in the official inscriptions and in the Zoroastrian books. Thus the writing remained a kind of musical score that only specialists could interpret, so that not only the wildly flourishing dialects but also the neatly walled-in language gardens remain difficult to access for us. We only see them “in a mirror darkly”, as it says in the Bible (1 Cor. 13:12). Legends, stories, epics, songs and court poetry obviously remained oral all through Sasanian times. Only with the advent of Islam – and especially with the art of papermaking a couple of centuries later - did this start to change.

New Persian is a peculiar sort of language garden. It rose from the ashes of the Sasanian Empire as a language for the new Muslims, a language that was both truly Islamic and truly Iranian. During the 8th century, Arabic substituted Middle Persian in the administration, and Middle Persian lived on mainly as the religious language of the shrinking Zoroastrian community. The process that led to the emergence of a new Persian high language, which also became a written language, has been much discussed, not least in a series of important articles by Gilbert Lazard, collected in a volume entitled *La formation de la langue Persane* (1995), and Iranian scholars like ‘Alī Ashraf Ṣādiqī (1359?), but this process is still far from clear. Old Persian, Parthian and Middle Persian had grown from an identifiable dialect basis and in a specific imperial tradition. The dialect basis of New Persian – if there was one – is not at all clear, and the Iranian imperial tradition was for a long time broken by the Arabic-Islamic Caliphate. Of course, the Caliphate gradually absorbed much of both Iranian and Byzantine royal traditions, but before that it brought about a complete break in the rule of Iran.

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As for the dialect basis of New Persian, there have been many suggestions. The traditional approach is to regard New Persian as a more or less regular continuation of late Middle Persian, as it was used in the Sasanian court, i.e. as a natural change of written language under the influence of developments in educated spoken language. In many articles Gilbert Lazard (1995) has developed a quite ingenious model for this. He argues that there were two main varieties of Persian at the end of the Sasanian era. One of them was a natural continuation of the old dialect of Fars (Pars) that in the beginning of the Muslim period was known as Pārsī and was used in the central and southern parts of Iran, and the other was a heavily parthianized variety that was used in and around the Sasanian court and thus called Darī, the court language. This Pārsī was written only to a small extent, but is documented in an interlinear Qur'an translation (*Qur'ān-i Quds*, publ. by 'Alī Ravāqī 1364) that according to its editor and Gilbert Lazard (1995: 143) was written in Sistan. Darī, on the other hand, was in wide use in the northern and north-eastern parts of the empire and became, again according to Lazard, the basis for the emerging new Persian. One argument for this is that we find the beginnings of Persian literature (i.e. mainly poetry) in the north-east, in Khorasan and Transoxania.

This is certainly a strong hypothesis, but it seems to me that it does not take full account of the differences between dialects (i.e. spoken language), on one hand, and what I here call high language and written language on the other. The two "varieties" of Lazard, Pārsī and Darī, could only have been a small part of a very complicated dialect map, and the path from spoken language to a standardized high, and eventually written, language must be quite long. Therefore, as I see it, and considering the principal difference between high language (which, of course, also may appear in formalized speech) and genuine spoken language used in dialects that are not neatly separated from each other, the process that led to the formation of New Persian, as we know it, is still enigmatic.

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If, hypothetically, there never *was* any specific basic dialect, neither late Sasanian educated speech, nor some other prestige variety, what process could have led to the emergence of this new language? The earliest form of New Persian that we can discern seems to have been a structurally quite simple language. There are some indications that it first came in use in the 8th century among the new Muslims in Khorasan and Central Asia, who were speakers of both Iranian and non-Iranian dialects. The oldest reasonably substantial New Persian that we know of is a letter in Hebrew writing written by a merchant in far-off Singkiang. The fragment in question was found at the ruin site of Dandān Uiliq in the Taklamakan desert (Utas 1968).² This early New Persian seems to have been put together with very simple elements, taken from Sasanian Persian but also from Parthian (and other north-western dialects) as well as Sogdian, which after all was the pre-Islamic *lingua franca* along the trade routes in the east. Perhaps there were no language masters around at that time, just practically inclined merchants and caravaneers who had to make themselves understood across all dialect differences.

This new language signaled that it belonged to the Muslim cultural sphere by introducing great numbers of Arabic loan words and, eventually, by being written with the Arabic alphabet. It was *not*, however, created in order to express the new religion. Arabic remained the language of Islam – only much later Persian became a kind of “substitute Arabic” for a specific form of Islam, namely Sufism. On an earlier occasion, I have suggested that the emergence of New Persian might be seen as the result of a process similar to what we nowadays know as “pidginization” or “creolization” (Utas 2006: 241-251). Lars Johanson (1992: 122) has instead suggested “a leveling through koineization”. The latter suggestion again seems to presuppose some kind of basic language or dialect. In a forthcoming article, “On differences between Middle and New

² Another very similar letter has since been found (personal communication from P.O. Skjærvø).

Persian”,³ I have reconsidered this matter and modified my ideas about a pidgin-creole type of origin of New Persian. This is certainly a quite new language in many respects, but there are also so many uninterrupted connections back to Middle Persian that there ought to have been some common basis for this new koineization.

At a somewhat later stage of the development of Persian we can, for the first time, discern some of the language masters that were involved. The Samanid dynasty, which created a practically independent state in north-eastern Iran from the end of the 9th century CE with the old Sogdian center Samarkand as its capital, adopted this newly arisen Persian koine. During the Amir Naṣr b. Aḥmad (914-42) we see two grand viziers, Abū ‘Abdu’llāh Jaihānī (914-22 and 938-41) och Abu’l-Faḍl Bal‘amī (922-38), who both systematically furthered Persian literature, as well as scholarship and science written in Persian. Both of them patronized the legendary poet Rūdakī (d. 941), who developed all the main genres of classical Persian poetry and finally integrated Arabic poetics (*‘arūḍ*) in Persian literary practice. Jaihānī himself furthermore wrote geographic and astronomic treatises in Persian. One generation later Abu’l-Faḍl Bal‘amī’s son, Abū ‘Alī Muḥammad Bal‘amī, was the grand vizier of the Amir Maṣṣūr b. Nūḥ (961-976), and through their common efforts a number of central Arabic works were translated into Persian, prominently the *Ta’rīkh* (World History) of Ṭabarī (abridged and translated by Bal‘amī himself) and his *Tafsīr* (Qur’an commentary). This looks very much like conscious language planning (long before the term was invented), since it took place at the same time as a change was made from Arabic to Persian as administrative language.

Through contacts with China (through Chinese prisoners of war) at the end of the 8th century CE, the art of papermaking became known in Muslim Central Asia. Samarkand became the center for papermaking and remained so for

³ Read at the Workshop “Turco-Iranica: Language and History” at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in Uppsala, May 20-22, 2006.

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centuries). It thus became possible to produce written documents and books on a quite new scale. Cultural expressions (“texts”) that had been oral since time immemorial became scriptory. This meant great changes especially for poetry that earlier had been completely oral and now became something of a nucleus of Persian cultural-linguistic identity. Writing came closer to high language in a new way. To write and read was not any more the concern solely of professional scribes and administrators. For the first time it became possible to mistake the writing for the language, but that did *not* mean that the gap between the high language and the dialects (i.e. what people used between themselves in ordinary practical communication) decreased. All the dignitaries, officials, generals, tax-collectors, preachers, judges, poets and scholars who used the Persian high language in their public activities had their own home-dialects, which probably more often than not differed considerably from official Persian (Southwest-Iranian, Northwest-Iranian, East-Iranian dialects, and Semitic, like Arabic and Aramaic, as well as various kinds of Turkish).

Through the achievements of the 9th and 10th centuries the simple medium of communication known as Darī had developed and been refined into an efficient instrument for administration and an artful literary language. Under language masters like Rūdakī, Jaihānī and father and son Bal‘amī, a new language garden had been laid out, which was to flourish for more than a millennium to come, not only in Iran proper (whatever that was), but also far outside: on the Indian sub-continent, in Central Asia, and by and by in Turkish Anatolia, even as far as Bosnia. In contrast to its predecessors, Middle and Old Persian, this new Persian was originally not motivated by political (imperial) needs, but was an independent cultural creation which was used, and is still being used, in many countries and under various political systems. Not until the period of the Safavids in the 16th century, was it tied to a state of “Iran”, but even then it was rather the religion (Twelve-Imam Shi‘a) than the language that was the mainstay of a separate Iranian identity.

Today it has become natural to regard Persian as the national language of the present state of Iran. This idea seems to be fostered by an imported type of nationalism. As a consequence, it is common in political contexts to regard all varieties, dialects and even languages used in Iran as dialects of this national language, Persian – be it Khorāsānī, Gīlakī, Māzandarānī, Balōchī, Kurdish or even (in extreme cases) non-Iranian languages like Turkic Āzarī and Aramaic Āshurī. This, of course, may have very negative effects for the status and preservation of those dialects/languages. On the other hand, this has made Afghan and Tajik Persian fatherless, thus making it necessary to construct them as separate state languages and name them respectively Darī and Tājīkī.

From a historical point of view the Persian language is not an exclusively Iranian national concern. It is something much wider. It is a cultural creation of an exceptional kind that has played a central role in large parts of Asia during a millennium. It is a fragrant language garden, created, cultivated, pruned and refined through many centuries by “gardeners” of multifarious origins. It is a delightful abode on this earth – or as a small boy once said to me in the bazaar of Tashkurgan in Sinkiang: *fārsī shīrīn-ast*, “Persian is sweet”.⁴

[This article is a slightly expanded English version of a lecture that I delivered in Swedish at Uppsala University on June 4, 2003, and that was published with the title “Trädgårdsmästaren och de iranska språken” in *Annales Societatis Litterarum Humaniorum Regiae Upsaliensis*, Year book 2002, Uppsala 2004, pp. 139-150.]

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⁴ The boy really used this expression and not the more well-known *fārsī shīkar-ast* “Persian is sugar”.

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