Commentary

Texting: A threat or an innovation; the case of “Persian present perfect” and “Persian past simple”

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Accepted 24, February 2014

Sociolinguistic approaches study language as actually used; and it is seen as inherently variable. All living languages change with time. All segments of a language, namely, Phonology, Morphology, Lexicon, Semantics, and Syntax are subject to this process. As the German philosopher, Wilhelm von Humboldt states in 1386, “There can never be a moment of standstill in language…” However, this change is slow enough to make it almost unnoticeable to us, at least, as far as Syntax is concerned. According to another more general classification in the literature on language change, this natural process has been considered to take place in two segments of language, namely, Lexicon (the open class) and Syntax (the closed class). The change in the open class is more readily noticeable to the speakers, since they notice new words and expressions coming into vogue, and then out. But the changes to the closed class of segments take place very slowly and not readily noticeable, at least to the common speaker. This study deals with the different forms of Persian Present Perfect (PPP) and the Persian Past Simple (PPS) tenses and their representation in the new writing symbolic modes and the effect these two exert on the language itself. The brackets [] are used for the phonetic, and the slant lines // for the phonemic representations.

Key words: Persian, Present perfect, Present simple, Language change, Orthography, New writing modes

INTRODUCTION

Language change is a natural process. This change has sometimes worried us, especially when the effect of the new technology on language is the main concern. Socrates feared that writing, the new technology of his day, would lead to a decline in memorization and an impoverishment of discussion (Dudeney, et al., 2013). There are no clear answers to the reasons why languages change. Also, this process takes place at different rates in different languages. For example, Persian has changed relatively little over 1,000 years from the time Shahnameh was compiled, but English has evolved rapidly in just a few centuries. It is further believed to be either internally-driven, in which case the change is sensed by its users as necessary through time to cater to the emergent needs that come up, and which takes place to the Structure of that language, a process which is steady and slow enough to make it difficult to notice during one or more generations; or otherwise, which is called externally-driven change. In the internally-driven change, the needs of speakers drive the change (Aitchison, 2001).

Up until about 400 years ago, pease referred to either a single pea or many peas in English. At some point, people mistakenly assumed that the word pease were the plural form of pea, and a new word was born. A similar, but recent case has happened recently in Persian morphology. The word عینک /einak/[^ej’naeк,] which means glasses, has recently (during the past ten years) been misused or misunderstood in terms of its morphological structure, and as a result of overextension of the Persian plural bound morpheme (ها /ha/^[ha:]. The word عینک is an Arabic word which literally means the minor/ little eye. The English equivalent of the word is the plural noun glasses. But in Persian this word is singular. During the mentioned period there can be heard numerous cases of overextension of the plural rule, yielding the unconventional and strange form عینک ها /einak,ha[^ejnaeк’ha] to refer to a single instance of the word glasses, which, as mentioned, is not a plural noun despite its English counterpart. This rule overextension is markedly mostly taken up by the less literate people of society, who have no or limited knowledge of the internal bearings of this word. Persian has tenses that cover the three cardinal temporal dimensions, namely, Present, Past and Future tenses. Each of these tenses has Perfect and Progressive
forms as well, except for the future tense, which has no corresponding perfect form. And there is another mood, which has no counterpart in English. This is the potential mood, which functions for each of Present, Future and Past tenses. This latter potential mood is a big benefit of Persian over many other languages, since it adds to the density of the message as expressed in fewer tokens, and hence the economy of language. This mood, in English, is represented by adding modal indicators to the main verb; therefore, the verb conjugation in this mood sometimes equals a sentence in those languages (i.e. Circumlocution, or using more tokens). Here is an example of this mood for the first person singular, present tense:

shall I go? = /beravam/ [berævæm ‘RISING’]
I shall go. = /beravam/ [berævæm ‘FALLING’]

Regarding the case of PPP, and its vulnerability to the vernacular style and its reflection in orthography, it seems that this tense is undergoing a change or, even, in some respects, a loss of functionality, at least in vernacular style of speaking. In our mental lexicon, every entry for every sound-meaning unit (word) includes some information about the Syntactic Class of that unit as well. But, Literacy and Alphabet, and the emergent issue of Digital Literacies (Jenkins, 2009) add another dimension to language. When language tokens are represented via these systems as alphabet or other symbolic characters used in texting, emailing, etc. it puts a pressure back into the language itself. The motivations like Purism and the very fact that we assign the adjective “phonetic” to some alphabets of languages like Spanish, pay witness to this mental tendency. We have been somehow accustomed to see language in the form of symbols, even the new symbols we invent in our everyday 21st Century lives. Emoticons, Symbolic Alphabets of some Adolescents, Texting, the Brands of companies and Trademarks incorporating alphabetical characters alongside other symbols conjured up as the result of the sounds those alphabetical characters represent (like Pif Paf®), and other such inventions add new dimensions to the issue of alphabet-language interactions. One of the junctures where language and alphabets and Neo-Alphabets come together is the case of Persian Present Perfect.

Persian Present Perfect

For making the present perfect from a root, for example, “to go”, which is “رفتن” in Persian, pronounced as [ræftæn], with the main stress on the second syllable –tan, which is an infinitive marker, along with its allomorph –dan, firstly the final /n/ is deleted, by which the past root is produced; and then a final /v/, usually pronounced as [e] is added, making the objective adjective:

رفته [ræft] = رفته (rafte)

To this objective adjective /rafte/[ræfte], a verbal person suffix is added which is the conjugated form of the verb “be” in Persian (called Shenaseh [ʃənæʃ]), functioning as a bound morpheme:

The above Shenaseh’s have the meaning of be. However, they do not stand alone as free morphemes (except for the 3rd person singular Shenaseh). The problem surfaces when in vernacular (informal style of) speech the perfect forms are contracted. When contracted, their difference from their corresponding Persian Past Simple (PPS) is under-represented in the writing system of the Persian alphabet, and the difference just exists in the stress pattern in speech.

Persian Past Simple

The Past Simple is made in the same way as for the PPP except that the /h/ letter sounding as [e] is not added after the infinitive marker /-an/ is deleted. Then the Shenaseh’s indicated above are added.

In the table 2, the boldfaced verb forms are the contracted (informal) counterparts of the written (formal) forms. As indicated in table 2, the underlined contracted forms of the PPP are the same as the PPS tense forms for the 1st and 2nd person singular, and the 3rd person plural as far as the phonemic representation (the orthographical form) is concerned, and the only difference which is the stress pattern remains at the level of phonetic (speech) representation. In other words, the Persian alphabet, which is in essence the modified version of the Arabic alphabet, fails to differentiate between the simple and perfect forms in writing in new representational forms, and the informal style of writing using the regular alphabetical characters. The 3rd person singular PPP does not follow the same pattern, since its Shenaseh stands as a free morpheme and can be a verb (be) in its own right elsewhere. This is also true for the English modal verbs be and have, which operate both as modal operators and main verbs in their different functionalities:

Modal: I have done the dishes.
Main verb: I have many online friends.

However, in the case of 3rd person plural (double underlined), the complexity escalates further, because, in

Persian Infinitives and Roots

In Persian, every verb has a root. There are two different kinds of roots, one present root and the other past root, from which the verb forms are produced by adding certain inflectional affixes.

Present root: رفتن رفته
Infinitive “to go”: رفتن [ræftæn]
Past root: رفت [ræft]
texting and such other writing ways, this **contracted** (informal) PPP form is identical to the contracted **(informal)** PPS form and also identical to the usual **writing** of the infinitive (رفتن [رفت‌ان]). In the case of the infinitive, the second syllable is stressed, which is also the case for the contracted PPP, leaving the identification criteria solely to be the context in which it occurs. The following is an example to further clarify the point:

1. **PPS**: *Jamshid and his family have left.*
   
   جمشید و خونوادش فرستاده‌اند.

2. **PPP**: *Jamshid and his family have left.*
   
   جمشید و خونوادش فرستاده‌اند.

3. **Infinitive**: *That Jamshid and his family left (= going of/to go off Jamshid and his family) is so difficult for me (to bear).*
   
   جمشید و خونوادش خیلی سخته برام.

It is expected that the Homonymy Avoidance Principle would deter cases in sentences 2 and 3 from happening, since it makes the infinitive identical to the third person plural PPP, phonetically and morphologically; however, such is not the case. This is while in many dialects of English, word-final consonant clusters are usually simplified by deleting a coronal stop: *cost me → cos’ me*; however this simplification does not occur if the resultant form would be identical to the present tense form: *tossed is not simplified to toss* (Chambers et al., 2003). It is yet to be discovered why this does not take place herein.

### The Looming Change

One might wonder here that what all these issues have to do with language change. The answer is, if we were living in thirty, or even ten years ago, this would probably be out of the question. Before the introduction of new media into everyday life aspects, these vernacular forms were just present in speech, and only written in texts reflecting a special style and mimicking the everyday speech. We used to *just hear* them. Agencies like TV broadcasters and News agencies, which formerly made use of the more careful style, have come to use the styles incorporating more contracted forms, as a way to decrease the gap felt between the government and their audience. Apart from this trend in these **conventional** media, in the emergent virtual spaces like the internet and mobile applications, this style is the usual trend, since the interlocutors feel less assumed space among each other, and also like to make it take less time to transfer a message (economy of language). Text messaging (Texting), as Crystal points out, has spread like wildfire, and is so widespread that many parents, teachers, and media pundits have been outspoken in their criticism of it (Crystal, D. 2008).

This increased application of the contracted PPP forms is laying the setting for a mentality which may move toward the **leveling** of the difference between the two (initially in writing), and a marked decrease in the stress pattern differences (to the benefit of the PPS) in the long run. Persian seems to take influence of its writing system, which is deemed as an inadequate system, because of the issues discussed herein. When using the new electronic representational systems, the writing system also seems to undergo **vernacularization**, a process during which the shape of the tokens of language change and get shorter to be handled more easily. It is often seen that in texting, the contracted forms of the PPP, which, were once the **sole** written representation of the PPS, have

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st p. sing.</td>
<td>-/am/ ʃæm/</td>
<td>[æm]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd p. sing.</td>
<td>-/i/ ʃæt/</td>
<td>[iː]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd p. sing.</td>
<td>/ast/ (free morpheme)</td>
<td>[æst]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st p. pl.</td>
<td>-/im/ ʃæt/</td>
<td>[iːm]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd p. pl.</td>
<td>-/id/ ʃæt/</td>
<td>[iːd]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd p. pl.</td>
<td>-/and/ ʃæt/</td>
<td>[ænd]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 1. The conjugated *Shenaseh* (S).
Table 2. The formal and informal (contracted) forms of PPP & PPS of the infinitive “To go”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjective Person</th>
<th>PPP Form</th>
<th>Formal</th>
<th>PPP Informal</th>
<th>English Equivalent</th>
<th>PPS Form</th>
<th>Formal</th>
<th>PPS Informal</th>
<th>English Equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st p. Sing.</td>
<td>رفته ام  / رفته / (I) have gone.</td>
<td>/RAFTAM/</td>
<td>/RAFTAM/</td>
<td>No change</td>
<td>(I) went.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd p. Sing.</td>
<td>رفته ای  / (You) have gone.</td>
<td>/RAFTI/</td>
<td>/RAFTI/</td>
<td>No change</td>
<td>(You) went.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd p. Sing.</td>
<td>رفته است  / (He, She, It) has gone.</td>
<td>/RAFTE/</td>
<td>/RAFTE/</td>
<td>No change</td>
<td>(He, She, It) went.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st p. Pl.</td>
<td>رفته ایم  / (We) have gone.</td>
<td>/RAFTIM/</td>
<td>/RAFTIM/</td>
<td>No change</td>
<td>(We) went.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd p. Pl.</td>
<td>رفته اید  / (You) have gone.</td>
<td>/RAFTID/</td>
<td>/RAFTID/</td>
<td>No change</td>
<td>(You) went.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd p. Pl.</td>
<td>رفته اند  / (They) have gone.</td>
<td>/RAFTAN/</td>
<td>/RAFTAN/</td>
<td>went.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

now come to be also seen as the PPP written forms, leaving it on the reader to infer their difference, which depends on the co-text where the verb form occurs. Let’s now look at a real-life example:

SMS Message:

"نه، نیاز نیست بری؛ من رفتم."  

The intended meaning: No, you don’t need to go; I’ve (already) gone (there).  
The potential alternative meaning: No, you don’t need to go; I went (=I’m leaving).  
The *I went* in Persian (من رفتم) is the Syntactic Equivalent of *I am leaving* in English (i.e. its functional equivalent).  
My audience in this correspondence, a fellow, got the second potential meaning as my intended meaning and
got very angry as a consequence of my leaving…! The reason why she analyzed my intended message as her desired one is out of the concern of this paper. But the point is that she had the option to take either of them as my intended meaning on the input she had received. This is a common problem with the contemporary Persian alphabet, since they have a hard time how to represent the difference in their texts, which sometimes make them to write the complete (non-contracted) forms, which goes contrary to their connection formality level, and even sometimes leads to a humorous situation.

One may rightfully note that the process just mentioned only has to do with the written form of the language, and not the spoken form. This might be true, or may not. However, there happen some cases in contemporary Persian, in the Spoken form, which echo such a probable process of carrying this under-representation in the written form to the spoken form. The following is an example which just surfaced a few days ago when my interlocutor, a fellow English teacher, had a hard time selecting between the PPP and PPS tenses:

A Conversation Excerpt:

آره، منم دیدم

The intended meaning: Yeah, I saw (that) too.
The potential alternative meaning: Yeah, I’ve seen (that) too.

My envisaged mental image trying to describe, and to which my fellow added the note above, was a transitory event, an accident, which is normally treated utilizing the PPS, since it happened and ended in the past. However, in Persian, as is with English, one of the functions of PPP is to talk about an incident that happened in the past, but which either is not ended yet or its effects (mental or physical) continue to the present time in the mind of the interlocutors. This latter mistake is not a common incidence in Persian, but one can notice them once in a while, if one concentrates on the uttered propositions around them every day.

CONCLUSION

As stated earlier, languages change over time, due to many known and unknown reasons. It seems that one source of such changes could be the channel through which we represent it. We know that language is not speech, nor is it written text. These two are just representations and manifestations of that abstract competence we possess. Speech is the very first and, so to speak, the most liable channel through which we express our thought. It is fast and representing much more of a language than any writing system. We may be fluent in our native language, and still not able to read and write this language. So language is firstly speech. But this speech proves in some situations vulnerable, or a patient of the way it is represented by the orthographic systems developed over time to register our otherwise transitory propositions.

In this study we sought to find and track the delicate and small and maybe not publicly noticeable changes which are occurring in Persian language; changes which are discriminative. It shows that the speakers on the basis of their natural drive for an easier way of writing make contractions to the words, including verbs as well. This process of contracting is systematic, in a way that just contracts the bound verbal morphemes (Shenaseh) and leaves the corresponding free morphemes intact. It also reveals that spelling of the language affects the language itself, especially when new ways of presenting language in new semiotic systems are used. In such situations, when the differences among some verb forms fade away at the level of writing, the first and main key to inferring the right intended form is the stress pattern, and at the second level when the stress pattern is identical as well in the two different verb forms, the present (spoken) co-text acts as a last resort to differentiate between the alternative and the intended verb form. In such a case, the Homonymy Avoidance Principle is expected to occur; however, this principle does not seem to apply here. It could also be possible that, on the basis of an inability to write and read the contracted written forms in different writing systems, there might be a chance of fading the differences between the PPP and PPS at least in some respects, an issue which calls for more extended studies. Another statement proposed by this study is that, the current Persian alphabet, which is in fact the modified version of the Arabic alphabet, does not lend itself fully to register and indicate these subtle differences fully, which goes much beyond the mere fact that an alphabet may or may not be phonetic.

REFERENCES


