



Youli loannesyan

The Persian Dialect of Herat

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Abbreviations	7
Transcription System and Diacritical Signs	9
1. Phonology	11
Vowels and Diphthongs (and their major alterations)	11
Consonants and Semivowels (and their major alterations)	13
Most Common Contractions	15
2. Morphology, Grammatical Categories, Syntactic Elements	17
Nouns and Adjectives	17
Pronouns	18
Verbs	22
Prepositions and a Circumposition	25
3. Lexicon	29
Vocabulary of Dialectal and Common Words	31
4. Sample Texts in the Herati Dialect (stories in transcription and translation)	43
Text 1	43
Text 2	46
Text 3	48
Text 4	56
Text 5	60
Text 6	61
Text 7	66
Text 8	67
Text 9	68
Text 10	68
Text 11 (dialogue)	69

Text 12 (dialogue)	76
Supplements	79
Supplement 1: information about the major dialect informants	79
Supplement 2: variants of the most common verbs present and past stems	81
Supplement 3: conjugation of the most common verbs in present and past absolute	89
Referenced Literature	97

Introduction

This work presents a description of phonetic and grammatical features of the dialect spoken by the settled Persian-speaking population of the region of Herat (Herat city and some adjacent districts) in the north-west of modern Afghanistan as well as texts in transcription and translation recorded from speakers of this dialect. It summarizes the results of a series of studies in the Herati dialect undertaken by the present writer. The work also includes a brief review of some lexical peculiarities and a vocabulary of dialectal and common words used in Herati. Some grammatical issues are presented in the Supplements.

The Persian-speakers of Herat Province (and the rest of North-West Afghanistan) known as *Farsiwans* are basically almost identical to the Persians of Iran due to their various similarities. They are generally distinguished from Tajiks not only by their adherence to Shia Islam as opposed to Sunni Islam professed by the majority of Tajiks, but also by their closer cultural and linguistic association with Iranian Persians than the rest of Persian-speakers in Afghanistan, as the subtypes of the dialect spoken by Farsiwans in Herat Province belong to the Khorasani group of Persian dialects and are in many aspects similar to Iranian Persian as opposed to Kabuli Persian (also known as “Afghan Persian”) and Tajiki of Central Asia. However, as L. Dupree rightly points out, “in the literature, they (i.e. Farsiwans) are often mistakenly referred to as Tajik.”¹

Linguistic, cultural and ethnographic studies in the region of Herat are of great importance. For centuries Herat was one of the main cultural centers of Khorasan province, which played a significant role in the development of the Persian classical language and literature. According to the reliable historic source—the “*Tārīkh-i Sīstān*” (“The History of Sistan”, 11th century CE chronicle), it was in Herat that the first poetical piece in New-Persian (Farsi) was composed. The chronicle describes events

¹ See Dupree, 1982.

related to the seizure of power in Sistan, Kabul, Kerman and Fars by Ya‘qūb ibn al-Layth, founder of the Saffarid dynasty.

Having returned in 867 CE to previously conquered Herat from a successful military campaign, Ya‘qūb, according to the account in the above historic source, slew several of the remaining disloyal people there and confiscated their possessions. Local poets reacted to this event by composing a panegyric in Arabic in his honor. When the panegyric was read out, Ya‘qūb, who was uneducated and did not understand it, exclaimed: “What is the use of saying what I don’t comprehend?”. Then someone named Muhammad, the son of Vasif, a scribe well-versed in literature who happened to be there, began to compose poetry in Persian. He, according to the chronicle, was the first among the Persians to compose poetry in Persian after the Arab conquest.²

Pre-Islamic Persians practiced singing or reciting verses to the accompaniment of a harp, but this practice came to an end at the beginning of Islamic era when ethnic Persians wrote poetry in Arabic, until Muhammad, the son of Vasif, composed the first verse in the New-Persian language. Other poets soon followed suit and this event marked the beginning of Persian poetry. Thus, the chronicle describes the exact circumstances of this revolutionary event and reveals how Herati and Sistani court poets started to compose poetry in Persian which led to the emergence of classical Persian poetry.³

A great number of most prominent Persian (Persian-speaking) poets such as Firdawsī, F. ‘Attār,⁴ Khayyām etc. came from this province (Khorasan), while some of them like Jāmī, Ansārī etc. were originally from the Herat area (their shrines are located in the city). The language of the Persian classical literature is deeply influenced by “Khorasani features”. The fact that poets, coming from this region spoke their local

² For the original Persian text of this source and the account of this event, in particular, see *Tarikh-i Sistan*, pp. 208-210 available on the following internet site: <http://tarnama.org/ddata/Tarikh%20Sistan.pdf>

³ See also Oranskiy 1988, 261-262.

⁴ Here and below in the transliteration of classical Persian names and titles, subscript diacritical marks are not used.

Khorasani dialects in their everyday life is well attested by Ansārī's "Tabaqāt al-Sūfiyyih" (11th century CE) written in "the old language of Herat" and published by V. Ivanow in 1923. Hence a diachronic study of the Khorasani dialects in general and Herati in particular, which have still preserved many archaic features, casts considerable light on the formation of the language of the Persian classical literature—a common heritage of the peoples of Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia (Tajiks).

The Herati dialect linguistic importance from the synchronic perspective is based on two key factors. As one of the Khorasani dialects, which I class as "central" within the continuum of modern Persian-Dari-Tajiki dialects [Ioannesyan 2007, see also below], it serves as a bridge between the Persian dialects of Western Iran and the Tajiki of Central Asia, while given the geographic position of Herat as a city (situated on the border between modern Afghanistan and Iran) its dialect shares many common characteristics with both—the Persian dialects of Iran and those of Afghanistan, and in this sense serves as a bridge between the Persian and Afghan Persian languages. Though historically the name "Khorasan" in a broader sense can be applied to a vast region stretching from the territory of modern Eastern Iran further eastward and embracing the whole of modern Afghanistan, from a synchronic linguistic standpoint this term is applied to "minor Khorasan", which covers the north-eastern part of Iran (Khorasan Province) and the north-western part of Afghanistan (mainly Herat and Ghur Provinces). Accordingly, the "Khorasani dialects" imply the Persian and Afghan Persian (Dari) dialects of this geographic area.

The three closely related languages—Iranian Persian, Afghan Persian (Dari) and Tajiki—form a vast continuum of varieties, stretching from Western Iran to Afghanistan and Central Asia (Tajikistan, partly Uzbekistan). Because it is not easy to draw a geographical border between the dialects of Iranian Persian, Afghan Persian and Tajiki based on purely linguistic factors, as the varieties of each one of these languages overlap those of another and merge into them, it is therefore reasonable to conceive of this whole area as a single linguistic continuum within which three major groups can be defined,

namely, Western (Western and Central Iran), Central (North-Eastern Iran and North-Western Afghanistan) and Eastern (Central and Northern Afghanistan, Tajikistan and parts of Uzbekistan).

The Khorasani dialects are quite distinct and definable within the linguistic continuum of the Iranian Persian-Dari-Tajiki dialects. Thus, the assumption of the closer relation of the Khorasani varieties to the Eastern group is not confirmed by an analysis of fuller linguistic data. Rather, they appear to be equally close to and distant from both – the Western and Eastern groups, as represented by the Tehrani and Kabuli dialects. Consequently, they occupy an intermediate (middle) position between the mentioned groups, forming a group of their own, which given their position, both linguistic and geographical, can be defined as Central.⁵

“Herati dialect” as a term is not applied just to the variety of Herat city but to the local varieties of the whole area embracing Herat Province and some adjacent territories in North West Afghanistan. Though the Persian language spoken in this vast area is not entirely homogeneous, its local subtypes, despite some minor and insignificant variations, share basic commonalities, which justifies their being considered as one dialect.

The materials used for my study of the Herati dialect including those presented in this work were collected by me during my field research in Afghanistan in the 1980s from illiterate and (to a lesser extent) semi-illiterate dialect speakers (this is the category which has preserved their dialect in most purity and entirety). All the texts were first recorded on tapes and then transliterated. For studying and translating the texts I also used the help of educated dialect speakers (Afghan college and university students of Herati descent in Leningrad / St.-Petersburg).

Since the texts are not recorded from “professional” narrators but from average dialect speakers, who have experienced less outside influence, they are characterized by

⁵ The central group consists of Khorasani (type) dialects. For more information on these three groups, see Ioannesyán 2007.

features typical of common colloquial illiterate speech. They lack consistency, contain repetitive phrases and expressions. The narrator may always drop the sentence in the middle and either leave it incomplete or start it from the beginning. Sometimes he would go back a few sentences breaking narrative logic and retell the whole portion with a slight change of vocabulary. I have intentionally preserved the original texts in their dialectal purity the way they appear on the tape. As for translation I tried to reduce “redundancies and repetitions,” where possible, and also to a certain extent diversify the words introducing direct speech (which is always introduced by the verb “to say” in the original): “said, told, asked, replied”.

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Abbreviations:

Kb – Dialect of Kabul

LK – Standard literary Afghan Persian (based on the dialect of Kabul)

LP – Standard modern literary Persian

lit. – literally

pers. – person

plur. – plural

pres. – present indicative (tense)

The book presents a description of the Persian dialect of Herat as one of the most representative dialects of Khorasan, illustrated by texts recorded by the author from native dialect speakers during his field research in Afghanistan. It summarizes the results of a series of studies in Persian dialectology accomplished by the author. The description of the dialect covers phonology (including the major alterations of vowels and consonants), morphology, syntactic elements, and prepositions etc. Special attention is given to verbs, their stems and conjugation. The work also includes a review of some lexical peculiarities and a vocabulary of dialectal and common words used in Herati. Some grammatical issues are presented in the supplements.



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