

## **Turkish Language in Iran** (from the Ghaznavid Empire to the end of the Safavid Dynasty)

Zivar Huseynova

Khazar University

The history of Turks in Iran goes back to very ancient times, and there are differences of opinion among historians about the Turks' ruling of Iranian lands. However, all historians accept the rulers of the Turkish territories since the Ghaznavid Empire. In that era, Turks took over the rule of Iran and took the first steps toward broadening the empire. The Ghaznavi Turks, continuing to rule according to the local government system in Iran, expanded their territories as far as India. The warmongering Turks, making up the majority of the army, spread their own language among the army and even in the regions they occupied. Even if they did not make a strong influence in many cultural spheres, they did propagate their languages in comparison to Persian. Thus, we come across many Turkish words in Persian written texts of that period. This can be seen using the example of the word "*amirakhurbashi*" or "*mirakhurbashi*" which is composed of Arabic elements.<sup>1</sup> The first word inside this compound word is the Arabic "amir" (command), but the second and third words composing it are Turkish. Amirakhurbashi was the name of a high government officer rank. Aside from this example, the Turkish words "*çomaq*" ("*chomak*") and "*qalachur*" ("*kalachur*") or "*qarachur*" ("*karachur*") are used as names for military ammunition.<sup>2</sup> It is likely that the word karachur, which means a long and curved weapon, was taken from the word qılınç ("kilinç," sword) and is even noted as a Turkish word in many dictionaries. In addition, the name used in the palace "*ağaçi khasse*"<sup>3</sup> ("*aghachi khasse*"), meaning a group made up of eunuchs, is also a Turkish word comprising Arabic elements. Aside from these words, there are many Turkish words in "Tarixi

---

<sup>1</sup> - Anvari H, Estelahati divaniye doreyi Qaznavi va Salcūqiyān, p. 209

<sup>2</sup> - Bosworth E, Tarix-e Gaznaviyan, p. 119

<sup>3</sup> - Bosworth E, Tarix-e Gaznaviyan, p. 138

Beyhaqi” (“Tarikhi Beyhaki”), a well-known historical work of the Ghaznavid era. In his article entitled “Luğati Torki, Moğoli, Çini dar tarikhi Beyhaqi” (Turkish, Mongolian and Chinese words in International History), the historian Qiyamaddin Rai, who researches this topic, lists not only Turkish words, but also several Mongolian words that passed through Turkish into the Persian language.<sup>4</sup> Aside from these facts, there is also proof of government talks that took place in Turkish among government circles because they were Turks. The following facts from a Ghaznavid history book show that the soldiers in the army were Turkish-speaking and even that the Sultans conducted talks in Turkish: “the Ghaznavid Sultans were of Turkish lineage and spoke in Turkish at least until the time of Masud.”<sup>5</sup> In another place it is written that “without a doubt Masud and even more so his father preserved their own ancestors’ language, Turkish, and spoke Turkish at unofficial times with their own Turkish soldiers.” In this same source there are also confident statements made that the influence made by the Turkish language on the Persian language was not insignificant.<sup>6</sup>

In later periods the rule was mostly continued by the Kharazmshahs, who ruled Iran’s eastern regions from 1097 to 1231, and the Ghurids, who ruled Khorasan, Afghanistan and the northern part of India from 1000 to 1215. However, the empire of the Seljuks of the Oghuz clan, which was one of the successions that left deep marks on history, was in place for a long period of time. Along with the large geographical changes made in the Caucasus, Iran, and Turkey during that period, it was also a period of great significance for the Islamic world.

If the former Turkish governments were mostly ruling the eastern lands, the Seljuks were able to submit all of the Iranian lands to their rule. The abovementioned lands completely passed into Turkish control during the period in which the Seljuks governed. To use the words of Iranian writer Zabihullah Safan, that period could truly have been called the period of Turkish governments.<sup>7</sup> Even during the Seljuk period when the official language was Persian, the Turkish language was widely spoken among the population. Already from that same period onwards, the influence that Turkish had on Persian was gradually increasing and many military, public and institutional words were replaced with Turkish terms. Aside from those words, we can observe the spreading of people’s names and geographical place names in Turkish. During the same era both Turkish-speaking and Persian-speaking poetry writing in Persian used Turkish words in their poems.

---

<sup>4</sup> - Rai Qiyamaddin, Lughati Torki, Mogholi, Chini dar tarixi Beyhaqi, p.188-193

<sup>5</sup> - Bosworth E, Tarix-e Gaznaviyan, p.131

<sup>6</sup> - Bosworth E, Tarix-e Gaznaviyan, p.55

<sup>7</sup> -Safa, Z. Tarix-e adabiyyat dar Iran, vol 2. p.3

Tan garche **su** o **akmak** az anan tam konad  
 Ke mohre Shah Batsoz o Boğra bar afkanad (Khaqani)  
 Ta bedasti shashae in khush **veshaq** tigh zan

Bengah luluyi shab ra har sahar **yağma** dahad (Jamaladdin Mahammad inb Abdürrezaq)

Ey torki mah chohre, che bashad agar shabi  
 Ayi behocreyi man o guyi: **Qonaq garak?** (Suzani)

In addition, in texts written in Persian such as *Siyasatnama*, *Rahatussudur*, and *Tarikh-i Salajiq*, many words appear such as “*yataq*”, “*chapar*”, “*ulağ*”, *qalavuz*, which means mounted soldiers defending the army, and “*attaş*” which means namesake. The suffix denoting participation at the end of the word *attaş*, “-taş” (daş) was in use in Persian and Arabic along with the suffix “-çi” (-chi) from Turkish that is used at the end of a word denoting activity or the concept of a job.

Though many shahs and sultans took Persian or Arabic language nicknames for themselves, some Seljuk padishahs took Turkish nicknames. The nicknames that the shahs Minkbarni and Ghursanji took on are examples of Turkish nicknames of Seljuk shahs.

There is also information available about the Khalaj Turks in the era of the Seljuks. They emigrated from Central Asia to the west and a large portion of them were located in Iran. The Khalaj Turks living in Iran have preserved their own language and dialects to this day.

The Mongols who followed the Seljuks caused several changes in Iran. That period was an important period for the development of the Turkish language in Iran. Although the Mongols are different from the Turks according to their roots, during the time that they were in power, they spread the Turkish culture even more than the Mongol culture. One of the main reasons for this is the large number and prestige of the Turks in the army, and another reason is that compared to the Mongol language, the migration to the Turkish language region began from even earlier times. Because they followed the laws of Chingiz Khan, ran the country with special Mongol reformers, relied on Turkish strength and for other reasons, the role of the Turkish language (and especially of Turkish mixed with Mongolian language) increased compared to previous eras. Along with the progress of

Turkification in the Mongolian army, the Turkish language gained prestige and influence among high strata of society and palace residents by means of the army.<sup>8</sup>

The gradual giving up of Arabic and Persian hegemonies and the continual rapid increase in the number of works written in Turkish during this period helped spread the language geographically.

According to the linguistic scholar Nizami Khudiyev, the geographical sources of Turkish and Azerbaijani language writings in the XIII-XIV centuries included the following areas: East Anadolu, North Azerbaijan (Shirvan), South Azerbaijan (Tabriz), Iraq (Baghdad) and Egypt.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the first written examples of Azerbaijani language and literature began to increase during this very period. Aside from that fact, after the same period the acute influence of Turkish language on Persian reached such a level that countless Turkish terms were used like basic words in Persian language and many of those terms are still used in modern Persian like basic words in the language. Such words can be found in that era in history books written in Persian such as *Jahanqoshaye Juvayni*, *Tarikh-i Vassaf*, *Cameut-tavarikh-i Rashidi*, *Zafarnameyi Nizami Shami* and others. In the period of the Mongols, the number of Turkish and Mongolian words in use in the Persian language was at such a level that the large majority of the words in the four-volume dictionary entitled *Türkische und Mongolische Elemente im Neupersischen* (Turkish and Mongolian Elements in Persian) compiled between 1963-1975 and published by German linguist Gerhard Döerfer were taken from texts written in Persian during the Mongol period. Many Turkish words are also included in another book, *Farhangi estelahati divaniye doran Moghol* (Administrative Terms of the Mongol Era) written by an Iranian by the name of Sharik Amin. These words include military, administrative, cultural and other words from various fields. As in previous eras, in this era the Turkish language was also widely used in the poetry of poets writing in Persian.

Be **yurtgahi** to ta **kuch** koni zeinja  
 Hezar bar beruzi berafteam beziyarat (Nezari)  
 Hokmi qaza dar jahan nafaz nabayad  
 Ta nakonad ba nofuzi amri to **kanqaj** (Khaju)

Alongside the rule of the Mongols in a broad region, the entrance of Teymur on the Eastern political scene marked the appearance of a new historical period. Teymur, in the country's capital Samarkand, and his deputies placed high importance on Eastern Turkish, which was their own mother tongue. In the time of Teymur's

<sup>8</sup> - Hacıyev T. Valiyev K. Azerbaijan dili tarixi, p.102

<sup>9</sup> - Khudiyev N. Azarvayn adabi dili tarixi. p.115

grandson Ulugh bay, an organized cultural center in Samarkand moved the ruins that the Mongols had created to Herat and renovated them, and at the initiative of Sultan Baykara, Herat became the capital in 1469. Amir Alishir Navai played a large role in Sultan Baykara's interest in culture. Navai, as a skilled ashug, writer and linguist, gave the Turkish language direction among a recognized circle whose taste was for the Persian language, Iranian writing and mature poetry.<sup>10</sup>

His school gave the Jaghtay literature and language a great influence among the languages and literatures of Turkey, Iran, and Azerbaijan. His books written in Jaghtay language, *Macalisun-nafais* and *Muhakimatul-loğateyn*, prove that his own language was an academic language. Sultan Huseyn Baykara, a padishah of the Teymuris who highly valued Turkish, greatly served the language and wrote Turkish poetry with the pseudonym "Huseyni." He loved the Turkish language and gave orders in Turkish.<sup>11</sup> The Jaghtay language was continued in later centuries by means of Babur and other Central Asian poets and writers.

In the XV century, Teymuris' contemporaries the Shirvanshahs also had strong empires in the north. However, the Kara Koyunlus, who had entered the political arena in the southern region of Azerbaijan, founded the Kara Koyunlu era by absorbing the western and southern parts of the Caucasus and the most important parts of Iraq and Iran into their empires. A short time later in 1467, another succession of Turks, the Aq Koyunlus, took control of all the land as far as Baghdad. The Kara Koyunlus and Aq Koyunlus each promoted their own mother tongue in their turn, playing a large role in the development of Turkish language with their patronage of scholarship and literary works. One Kara Koyunlu Jahanshah wrote poetry in Turkish under the pseudonym "Hakiki." Likewise, in the same era many independent and translated works as well as poetry and prose were penned in Turkish language.<sup>12</sup>

Finally the Safavid era, which would result in the most development and the greatest geographical spread of Turkish on the level of an official language, began. Indirectly, the Turkish language held high significance because the first periods of the Safavids were centered in the lands of Azerbaijan and because the Kizilbash Turks played a large role in the formation of that empire. The Safavid padishahs, messengers, and governors spoke Turkish as an official language, and they wrote many orders, contracts and official letters in Turkish. Several examples of this are Shah Tahmasib I's letters about Shahzada Salima Bayazid, letters sent from Shah

---

<sup>10</sup> -Bozkurt Fuat, *Türklerin Dili*, p.180

<sup>11</sup> - Heyat C., *Seyri dar tarixi zaban va lahcehayi torki*. p.91

<sup>12</sup> - AMEA Nizami adına Adabiyat İnstitutu Kollektiv, *Azerbaijan Adabi dili Tarixi*, vol 3. Elm, Baku 2009, p.255-262

Abbas I to Osmanli Farhad,<sup>13</sup> and two Turkish letters sent by Shah Safi I to Mikhail Romanov and Shah Abbas II to the governor of Shirvan Manuchehra.<sup>14</sup> Four more letters that were written in Turkish and sent from Mahammadrza bay, the vizier of Shah Soltan Huseyn, who was among the last padishahs of the Safavid dynasty, to the Ambassador of France are still kept in the archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of France.<sup>15</sup> The 1539 contract between the Ottoman Empire and “Kasri Shirin” serves as an example of a contract in Turkish.

From the beginning to the end of the Safavid period, Turkish was preferred over Persian and was spoken for all the government’s official affairs; army officials spoke precisely this language. Even padishahs themselves spoke Turkish with their Turkish-speaking foreign guests. One example of this that can be shown is the Italian traveler Pyotro De Lavali, who learned Turkish after staying in the Ottoman shah’s palace for a long period of time, and who wrote his memories from a time when he was in the Shah’s presence. He wrote: “The Shah asked whether we knew Turkish or not, and they answered him that I spoke it very well. That is because I had been speaking it with them for that whole day. Thus, after sitting in his own seat, the shah looked at me cheerfully and said as they say in Turkish, ‘Khosh galdi, safa galdi’ (welcome).”<sup>16</sup> He gave other information throughout his writings about the shah speaking in Turkish.

De Lavali sent a letter on December 18th, 1617 from the city of Isfahan to his friend Mario Eskipanoya, writing about the Turkish language: “Generally in Iran they speak Turkish more than they speak Persian, especially among the palace residents and among high-ranking people... Iranians speak this language not because they value it over Persian, but because the entire army is made up of Kizilbash Turks. The shahs’ assistants in various tribes speak Turkish and do not know Persian. That’s why Turkish is spoken not only by the amirs in relation to the army, but even by the shah himself in order to announce his thoughts, as he spends much of his time among them. For that reason this language has been diffused among all of those in the palace, among women and others.”<sup>17</sup>

The same traveler, who also wrote poetry in Turkish, wrote a *Turkish Grammar* book in 1620 during the time that he was living in Iran. In that book’s introduction,

<sup>13</sup> - Hüseynova Z., Tasire zabane Torki dar Farsi dar neveShtehaye tarixiye doreyi Safavi. p.266-271

<sup>14</sup> Onullahi P.,Safavi hökmdarlarının daha iki namalum maktubu haqqında, ADU-nun «Elmi asarlari »(Tarix va falsafa seriyası) 1974, no.4, p.89

<sup>15</sup> -Tacbaxsh A., Barresihayi tarixi jurnalı, 9-cu il, no.2. p.11,21,26,28

<sup>16</sup> - De Lavale P., Safarnameyi Pyotro De Lavale, c.1. p.656

<sup>17</sup> - Ganceyi T., Zabane torki dar darbare Safaviyye dar İsfahan, p.58

he touched on the significance of learning the Turkish language because of the Ottomans' rule of Europe, Asia and Africa; the Safavids' rule of Iran, and other Turkic peoples' rule of Central Asia.<sup>18</sup>

Other travelers also have written about the prestige of the Turkish language. Adam Olarius, who was sent to Russia and Iran by Fridrich Fen Helstein of the German palace in order to fulfill his duties as a scribe, stayed in Iran from November 1636 to February 1638 and wrote about the Turkish language: "Iranians try to speak Turkish aside from their native language."<sup>19</sup>

Another European traveler named Sanson wrote the following to witness to the significance of the Turkish language: "In 1683 I was sent to Iran as part of a Christian evangelists' group. My first job was to learn Turkish and Iranian (Persian) languages. Because without learning these languages, I would not be of any use in this work, and I knew I would not have any success..."<sup>20</sup>

Another interesting fact is in the writings of a traveler named Engelbert Kampfer, who came to Iran for scribe work in 1684. In his own travelogue, he wrote about the wide use of Turkish language: "The language that is used in the palace of Iran is the mother tongue of the Safavid dynasty, and this language is different from the ordinary people's language in the country. The Turkish language has been esteemed by high-ranking people from the palace and in the homes of respected people, therefore such a situation has come to pass that anyone wishing to earn the shah's respect speaks in that language. Today this has progressed to such a level that if a person who is of any worth doesn't know Turkish, it is considered a shame for him." He also wrote in another place about the Turkish language: "Turkish is easier than all the eastern languages. That's because the declension of words (morphology) and grammatical structure is easy. Turkish words have their own majesty and their harmony has a pleasant effect on the ear, which are the reasons why this language is the spoken language in the castle of this kingdom."<sup>21</sup>

The Turkish language was already being used in educational institutions as a result of the demands of the people. In the same period Turkish, Persian and Arabic were used side-by-side in active schools in the big cities of Tabriz, Shirvan and other places where Turks lived, and the people living in these regions obtained education in their own mother tongue. As a result, little by little the demand for books in Turkish increased. In order to meet these demands books were written on various

---

<sup>18</sup> -Ganceyi T., Zabane torki dar darbare Safaviyye dar İsfahan, p.59

<sup>19</sup> - Olarius A., Safarnameye Adam Olarius, Moskov va İran (baxShe İran),p.304

<sup>20</sup> - Sanson, Safarnameye Sanson, p.19

<sup>21</sup> - Kampfer E., Safarnameye Lampfer be İran, p.167

subjects in Turkish and were translated from other languages, especially from Persian and Arabic. The first stage of meeting these needs was to translate books written in Arabic and Persian on various subjects into Turkish, and then later the work was continued with the writing of new books in Turkish about medicine, mathematics, history, and other fields.

The padishahs created even more of a foundation for the development of literature because of the fact that some padishahs such as Shah Ismail and Shah Tahmasib were inspired poets, and because in many of their palaces scholars, writers, poets and professionals were patronized. Precisely because many writers and poets wrote in their own mother tongue, within the Safavid empire Persian literature surrendered its place of honor to Turkish literature.

This development of Turkish continued to have a strong influence on Persian. During the same period, even more Turkish words were used in Persian texts than they had been as compared to previous periods, and the vast majority of such words are accepted even today as modern Persian words. The Turkish words used in Persian during that period came from various fields, particularly including military terms. The majority of these words are composed of full Turkish words; a small group of them also contain Arabic or Persian words or suffixes/prefixes. At the same time, in Persian texts there can be found Turkish documents, couplets, sentences and also, as in previous eras, Turkish proper nouns. I gave detailed information about the status and role of the Turkish language, the influence of Turkish on the Persian language, and Turkish terms in use in the Persian language in the Safavid period in my doctoral thesis entitled “Tasire zabane torki dar farsi dar neveshtehayi tarikhiye doreyi Safavi” (The Influence of the Turkish Language on the Persian Language in Historical Writings of the Safavid Period).<sup>22</sup>

The Turkish dialect that was dispersed throughout the lands of Iran is the Oghuz Turkish dialect of Azeri. The dialect that was called “Torki,” “Turkish language,” or in the Safavid period “Kizilbashi,” is the same that is called Azerbaijani Turkish in our modern era. This argument is supported by the fact that the language of literary works and documents from the Kara Koyunlu, Aq Koyunlu and Safavid eras matches up with the Azerbaijani Turkish of today. We must note that until the end of the Safavid period, the difference between Ottoman Turkish and Kizilbash (Azeri) Turkish was very small.

---

<sup>22</sup> - Hüseynova Z., Tasire zabane Torki dar Farsi dar neveshtehaye tarixiye doreyi Safavi.

The conclusions we can draw from all the above facts are the following:

1. The broad use of Turkish language in the army and in texts written in Persian, and the influence of the Turkish language on the Persian language during the Ghaznavid period, make it impossible to accept the influence on Persian as a separate event for that period. If we are in agreement with the opinions of historians who only know of the Turks' migrations to Iran during the Ghaznavid period and who say that Turkish was the language of the servants to the Ghaznavi rulers, then the situation of the Turkish language during the Ghaznavid period will oblige us to change our minds. The fact that through written texts we can see the influence of the Turkish language on such an ancient and literary language as Persian proves that Turkish was not just a language of slaves, but rather the language of the people and of the rulers, and that it was used in the same region in previous times.
2. We see that the Turkish language remained the language of the army, the palace, the ruling circles and even of the people in the periods of later dynasties.
3. The elevation of the Turkish language to that of an official language in Iran and surrounding regions happened precisely during the Safavid period. Although it was developed as a literary language in the preceding XIV and XV centuries, it finally had its golden age during the Safavid period.

## REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1- ANAS Institute of Literature named after Nizami, Azerbaijan Adabi dili Tarikhi (History of Azerbaijan Literary Language), vol. 3. Elm, Baku 2009.
- 2- Bosworth E., Tarikhe Gaznaviyan, translated by Anushe H. Amir Kabir Tehran. 1384 Sh. (Shahanshah calendar)
- 3- Bozkurt Fuat, Türklerin Dili, Türk Tarih Kurumu, Ankara, 2002.
- 4- De Lavale Pyotro, Safarnameyi Pyotro De Lavale, vol.1. translated by Bahruz M. Tehran. Qatre Press, 1380 p.
- 5- Anvari Hasan, Estelahati Divaniye Doreyi Qaznavi va Salcüqiyan, Tahuri, Tehran, 2535 (Shahanshah calendar)
- 6- Ganceyi Turkhan, Zabane Torki dar Darbare Safaviyye dar İsfahan, Fasle kitab jurnali, No. 12-13.
- 7- Hacıyev Tofiq, Valiyev K. Azarbaycan dili tarikhi (History of Azerbaijani Language), Maarif, Baku, 1983.
- 8- Heyat Cavad, Seyr dar Tarikhi Zaban va Lahcehayi Torki, Peykan, Tehran 1380 Sh.
- 9- Hüseynova Zivar, Tasire Zabane Torki dar Farsi dar Neveshtehaye Tarikhiye Doreyi Safavi; Tehran. Unpublished PhD dissertation. July 2009.
- 10- Kampffer Engelbert, Safarnameye Lampfer be İran; translated by Cahandari K. Tehran. Shirkate sahamiye intesharate KHarazmi nashriyyati, 1363 Sh.

- 11- Olarius Adam, Safarnameye Adam Olarius, Moskov va İran (bakhsh-e İran), translated and explained by Behpur A., Sharqi Berlin Press, 1363 Sh.
- 12- Onullahi Seyidagha, Safavi hokmdarlarinin daha iki namalum maktubu hakkında ("About Two More Anonymous Letters of the Safavid Rulers), ASU's «Elmi asarlari» ("Academic Works") (Tarikh va falsafa seriyasi) (History and Philosophy Series), no.4. Baku 1974
- 13- Rai Giyamaddin, Lughati Torki, Mogholi, CHini dar Tarikhi Beyhaqi, Macmueyi sokhanraniha, Yadnameyi Abulfazl Beyhaqi, Daneshgah-e Mashhad, Daneshkadeyi Adabiyat va Ulumi İnsani, Mashhad, 1350 Sh.
- 14- Sanson, Safarnameye Sanson, translated by Tafazzoli T. Ziba Press Tehran. 1346 Sh.
- 15- Safa Zabihulla, Tarikhe Adabiyat dar İran, vol. 2. Firdovs Tehran, 1386 Sh.
- 16- Nizamulmuluk Hasan ibn Ali. Siyasatname, Elm va Farhang, Tehran 1383 Sh.
- 17- Tajbakhsh Ahmad, Barresihayi tarikhi jurnali, 9-cu il, no.2. Tehran. Khordad-tir, 1353 Sh.
- 18- Khudiyev Nizami, Azarbaycan adabi dili tarikhi (History of Azerbaijani Literary Language), Muassiseyi fargagiye intesharatiye Rastan, Tehran 1377 Sh.

## **Summary**

### **Turkish Language in Iran (from the Ghaznavid Empire to the end of the Safavid Dynasty)**

**Dr. Zivar Huseynova**  
Khazar University

It is well known that throughout history Persians and Turks have been collecting within the same nation in states of peace and war and creating empires under the names of various dynasties. There are many sources giving evidence to the fact that Turks lived and ruled in these lands. In the article we will give information about the status of the Turkish language exclusively during the period of time from the Ghaznavid Empire until the end of the Safavid Empire.

Beginning by the Ghaznavid government in 961, in later centuries the Kharazms, Seljuks, Teymuris, Elkhans, Aq Koyunlus, Kara Koyunlus, and in the final period of our discussion, the Savafi Turks, large and strong states were built in large territories of Iran. Because these governments were Turkish, they spread their own cultures and languages through the region. Likewise, the Turks in Iran expended great efforts to teach their own cultures to the peoples living in these lands.

The same situation is even more clearly visible in the Safavid era which followed the Aq Koyunlu and Kara Koyunlu periods. The Turkish language, which is in available manuscripts written after the 13th century, began to spread even more in the lands of Iran after the 14th century and began to be used as an official language along with Persian during the Safavid Empire. Turkish letters and documents prove that only Turkish was dominant in the palace and army. On the basis of these documents, we will give detailed information about the situation of the Turkish language in the territory of Iran.

Key words: Turkish language, Iran, Azerbaijani Turkish, Turks.