

REVIEW

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MIRVAHEDI, S. H. (ed.), *The Sociolinguistics of Iran's Languages at Home and Abroad: The Case of Persian, Azerbaijani, and Kurdish*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019, 294 pp.

As one of the world's oldest civilizations, the contemporary Iran is a land for peaceful coexistence of numerous ethnic and linguistic groups. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the country is an excellent research laboratory; there are many aspects in the sociolinguistics of its languages that are in dire need of consideration as many of them remain either unexamined or under-researched. *The Sociolinguistics of Iran's Languages at Home and Abroad* touches some of the most important concepts and emerging issues in this context, written with the purpose of providing insights into Iran's three main languages (i.e., Persian, Azerbaijani, and Kurdish) as spoken by about 80% of the Iranian population both at home and in the diaspora. Organized around an opening chapter, eleven chapters headed by three parts, and finally a closing chapter, the volume builds mostly on research by Iranian national and international scholars. In Chapter 1 (pp. 1-21), Mirvahedi, the editor, opens the volume with an account of Iran's sociopolitical upheavals and shifts, political philosophy, and language regimes during three distinct governmental periods; i.e., (a) Qajar Dynasty (1796-1925), (b) Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979), and (c) Islamic Revolution (1979-present). From this brief account, the reader observes the most significant sociopolitical and historical

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developments in Iran over the past two centuries. At the end of this chapter, Mirvahedi introduces the structure of the volume.

Part I (Chapters 2-4) deals with the controversial status of Azerbaijani and Kurdish at home. In Chapter 2 (pp. 25-50), Jafari traces language shifts in Azerbaijani-Persian bilingual families in Ardabil, a northwestern city in Iran. The purpose is to examine unequal relationships between Persian (Iran's majority language) and Azerbaijani (a minority language spoken by 24% of Iran's population) as reflected in heritage language proficiency, attitudes, and practices. Based on semi-structured interviews with parents of young children, the author finds that there has been a decline in the interviewed parents' proficiency in Azerbaijani, and that the language has mostly turned into an oral/aural language, probably due to language family policy and practice tensions. Azeri families in Ardabil, especially those in the upper class, heavily invest in Persian as the most important choice in Iran's linguistic market, with significant repercussions for academic success and upward social mobility. Yet, Azerbaijani constitutes the core value and principle marker of the ethnic identity of these families, and the Ardabil society in general. In Chapter 3 (pp. 51-75), Mirvahedi scrutinizes the linguistic landscape of Tabriz, another northwestern city in Iran with nearly two million Azerbaijani-speaking people. Linguistic landscape is a sociolinguistic register defined as "visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region" (Landry & Bourhis 1997: 23); it is usually considered as an index of "authentic language in very dynamic and energetic uses" (Shohamy & Gorter 2009: 3). Following different theories on language policy and maintenance along with the principles of geosemiotics, Mirvahedi examines the governmental and private signs of three main streets in the city. His findings show the noticeable absence of Azerbaijani as the native language in the linguistic landscape of Tabriz. This seems to have resulted from Azerbaijanis' lack of devotion to, and perhaps negative attitudes and perceptions towards, using their native ethnic language in the linguistic landscape, which can endanger Azerbaijani maintenance in Tabriz over a long term. In Chapter 4 (pp. 77-106), Rezaei and Bahrami employ questionnaire, interviews, and ethnographic observations in order to explore the social status and ethnolinguistic vitality of Kurdish and native bilingual Kurdish-Persian speakers' attitudes towards and governmental

support for this minority language in Ilam, the third largest Kurdish city in Iran. The findings on the status of Kurdish in its ethnic society are rather mixed; some of the participants feel proud and honored to be affiliated with this minority language while some others feel humiliated as using Kurdish probably labels them “as *shahrestani* (non-Tehrani) when in Tehran” (p. 103, emphasis is original). Nonetheless, the majority of the participants have had very positive attitudes toward Kurdish; the results also provide evidence on the vitality and maintenance of Kurdish in Ilam.

Part II (Chapters 5-7) deals with Persian use and maintenance in the diaspora. In Chapter 5 (pp. 109-139), Gharibi and Seals study family language policies on heritage language acquisition and maintenance among twenty-four Iranian parents in New Zealand with children aging 6 and 18 years old. The purpose of the chapter is to contribute to research on family language policies on the acquisition and maintenance of heritage language literacy as practiced by an immigrant population residing in a geographical area with no heritage language community schools available in the host country. Analysis of semi-structured interview data shows that the interviewed parents hold positive attitudes towards the development of Persian literacy skills in their children. In practice, however, they have had less chance to do so, and thus, they have more committed themselves to maintaining Persian via developing their children’s oral Persian proficiency by practicing it in the private domain of their homes. With a similar research purpose in mind, Ghandchi aims in Chapter 6 (pp. 141-168) at scrutinizing literacy trends and language use, ideologies, and attitudes towards Persian among the Iranian migrants in Denmark. In contrast to New Zealand where Iranians do not have access to community schools and teaching resources for Persian language literacy and skills, Denmark is sociolinguistically known as an ideal European destination for the Iranian migrants as in this country their schoolchildren can acquire Persian literacy in mother-tongue courses outside the ordinary curriculum on weekends. In this chapter, ethnographic data collected via audio-recording of class and home interactions, interviews with parents and the teacher, and field notes demonstrate that Persian, Danish, and to a lesser extent English, are concurrently used in these courses. The findings also indicate that the students would hold positive or negative attitudes towards participating in the courses based on such factors as their family types,

linguistic repertoires, parents' ideologies, and so on. In Chapter 7 (pp. 169-196), Izadi attempts to study language use and interactions in a Persian shop in Sydney, Australia, in order to show how knowledge of cultural complexities over different time-space scales is essential for immigrants to understand and manage interactions in a host country. For this purpose, Izadi ran mediated discourse analysis (Norris & Jones 2005) on conversational data obtained from visits to the shop over a two-year period. The results show that mastery of cultural complexities by Iranian immigrants, which in return rely on the depth of their sociocultural knowledge, gives them a distinct identity when interacting in a multilingual context in the diaspora. The author also discusses the strategies that the immigrants deploy to address the critical moments of conflicts in bilingual interaction, stemming from "different ideological differences which ultimately gave rise to different ways of thinking" (p. 190).

Part III (Chapters 8-10) deals with the role of English proficiency in the lives of Iranians, dwelling at length on a number of sociolinguistic themes such as Iranian identity, transnational identity, mobility, etc. In Chapter 8 (pp. 199-223), Shokouhi and Fard Kashani report on the linguistic and social barriers that two Iranian migrant groups in Australia would face. They interview eight male participants whereby half of them are asylum seekers and the other half are work/business visa holders. The findings show that lack of adequate English would put obstacles in the way of both groups trying to achieve their desired life in Australia. In addition, the asylum seekers have suffered from being excluded by their fellow Iranian migrants. The authors conclude that the majority of Iranian asylum seekers in Australia are socially under pressure, and this makes them feel powerless. In Chapter 9 (pp. 225-249), Sanei compares Persian-English speakers in Iran versus those in the United States on how their mobility across time and space influences their identity construction, bilingual practices, and ideological discourses. Via interviewing, the author collects data from educated female Iranian middle-class participants to explore the role that English played in constructing particular identities over national and transnational scales. Finding from the participants residing in Iran show that they employ Persian-English code switching in their daily life as an act for social differentiation and identity construction; i.e., differentiating between 'us', the educated middle-class, and 'them', the poorly

educated lower-class (p. 235). On the other hand, code switching is undertaken by the participants residing in the United States as an act of solidarity in the diasporic context, which would lead to formation of transnational identity. In a similar vein, the tendency of this latter group towards correct/native-like pronunciation is a tool not only for constructing solidarity with the natives in the host country, but also for solidifying links with the more established Iranian diasporic population over there. Like the previous chapter, Chapter 10 (pp. 251-277) centers on the concept of mobility. Borrowing the two notions of polycentricity (Blommaert 2010) and chronotopes (Agha 2007) in his research, Karimzad examines metapragmatic commentaries (i.e., references to language use and choice) by Iranian Azerbaijani migrants in the United States in order to study the role that ethnicity plays in shaping national and transnational identities abroad. For this purpose, the author resorts to ethnography to collect the required data from three different contexts in which the author positions himself as an Azerbaijani migrant whose life 'has involved socialization and education in different Azeri-, Farsi-, and English-dominant cities and communities in the contexts of Iran and the U.S. (p. 254). Analysis of the collected data reveals that factors such as ethnicolinguistic diversity, past and present subjectivities, and lived experiences, among others, affect the participants' linguistic and sociolinguistic conceptions and practices in the host country. These factors also shape their dynamic ethnic and transnational identities abroad, "leading to the dynamic construction of various, and sometimes conflicting, images of ethnolinguistic identity" (p. 272). Karimzad concludes that, in the globalization era, mobility does not necessarily mean the loss of the ethnic identity and mother tongue. In fact, access to new technologies facilitates the maintenance of these aspects.

Mirvahedi closes the volume with a synthesis of the themes raised and discussed throughout the chapters. In a moderate criticism to the status granted to the minority languages in Iran, especially in the educational system, he writes: "When a language is deprived of institutional power, it is inevitably restricted to informal domains, and it is then bound to be used simply as an oral/aural language". In his view, we should not complain that the same happens to Persian in the diaspora: "It is under these circumstances that the status and function of Persian in the diaspora becomes very

similar to the status and functions of the minority languages in Iran” (p. 288). Overall, the volume treats and discusses its sociolinguistic themes in a viable manner; thus, it can be a practical research source for scholars interested in examining these themes in similar contexts, especially because the authors of the volume have adopted a wide range of sociolinguistic methods that other scholars can use in their own academic works. Yet, the most significant contribution of the volume to research on the sociolinguistics of languages is related to its focus on an under-researched population, namely, the Iranian diaspora. Of course, the absence of research on Gilaki and Mazandarani whose native speakers comprise 8% of Iran’s population (Tohidi 2009) is probably a shortcoming in this edited volume.

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