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Abstract

Language Shift in Central Iranian Plateau

The so-called Central Plateau Dialects (CDs) are spoken in central Iran, roughly around the Karkas range within the triangular area with Khunsar, Kashan, and Yazd at its corners. Historically, the entire area used to speak these dialects, but the dominant influence of Persian resulted in the ousting of the CDs not only in major towns but also in majority of villages. Currently, CDs are spoken to some 200 villages as well as the older generation of Jewish and Zoroastrian communities in a few cities and in diaspora. It is highly unlikely that CDs could survive long given the rapid expansion of the Persian education and mass media.

In this paper I will try to show the dynamics of language shifts in CD area. Historical evidence suggests that CDs were native to the entire area, larger towns included, until the late medieval times. The big shift must have taken place during the Safavid dynastic rule, perhaps as a result of forceful propagation of Shiism. Positive evidence becomes available in the later 19th century when European travelers and Persian geographers begin to report on the language situation of the area. These data enable us to show patterns and rate of language shift in different regions within the CD area in the last century and half. Subsequently, causes of the shift within different communities (rural and religious minorities) will be discussed. Part of the data comes from my own field documentation in the last few years.