

Language in Persian Diasporic Weblogs: From *Blogidan* to *Lezbian*

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of language in Persian diasporic weblogs published by a group of Iranian migrants in Australia. The data presented in this paper are part of a longitudinal study formed through grounded theory. The analysis specifically focuses on the intersection of the Persian language, Persian culture, and the host society and its effect on the discourse and online identity of the bloggers. The study investigates the strategies of word formation used by the Persian diasporic bloggers in their posts and comments, and ways in which the bloggers hybridise foreign/English and technical terms in Persian. The analysis of the data illustrates the existence of a hybrid language created from Persian written and spoken language combined with the jargon of the Internet and weblog technology and sociocultural terms from the host society. The new language used by the bloggers shows the creation of a new diasporic identity for the members of the diasporic weblog community which is governed by the Internet technologies, the social and cultural structure of the host society, and the bloggers' sociocultural background. The paper concludes with the presentation of a conceptual model that covers the range of language used.

Keywords: Persian/Farsi weblogs, weblog community, weblog language, diasporic weblogs, diasporic identity, hybrid language

Introduction

The widespread popularity of weblogs in cyberspace has inspired Iranians as well and there has been a rapid increase in the number of weblogs published by Iranians both inside and outside the country. The rapid growth of weblogs among Iranians is because they provide "a safe space in which [Iranian] people may write freely on a wide variety of topics, from the most serious and urgent to the most frivolous" (Alavi, 2005, p. 2). The popularity of weblogs among Iranians has caused the creation of a Persian blogosphere which is generally referred to as "Weblogestan". Hendelman-Baavur (2007) highlights the growth of Weblogestan as the fastest growing cyber-sphere in the entire Middle East that has become "a prominent feature in defining the new global phenomenon of online communities" (p. 1). While weblogs play an important role for Iranians in Iran due to the presence of heavy censorship and control of the main stream media by the government (Simmons, 2005), they have also gained popularity among the new generation of Iranians in the diaspora. Part of this popularity is related to the background of the new Iranian migrants as the majority are highly educated and technology savvy. Like the blog users in Iran, Iranians in the diaspora use weblogs for different purposes which may include discussing taboo subjects, spreading news, and circulating campaigns and petitions against the government for different causes in support of countrymen in Iran. Furthermore, weblogs are used in the diaspora as a communication bridge between the host society and Iran and within and across the Iranian diaspora around the globe. This has provided an opportunity for Iranians to develop social ties in cyberspace where they can practise cultural identity and be in touch with each other regardless of time and space. The network of weblogs among Iranians in the diaspora has created a virtual social space where they can communicate their thoughts and experience of life in the diaspora and seek help and support when needed. Most of this communication takes place via language as the main element of blogging. However, the type of language that Persian diasporic bloggers use in their daily interactions seems to be affected by the internet jargon and socio-cultural structure of the host society. What follows is a discussion and illustration of the type of language that is used by the bloggers in the diaspora.

Methods

The data used in this paper come from a network of Persian weblogs published by a group of Iranians residing in Australia. The weblog network consisted of forty four weblogs and their audience. There were some basic criteria that determined the choice of these weblogs. The first and most important criterion was that the nature of the weblog needed to be mostly diary-like in which the bloggers wrote mainly about their life experience in the diaspora. For this reason, weblogs that were purely political, technical, or vocational were excluded. The second criterion was to follow the weblogs that did not freeze in time or were removed from the Internet during the data collection period, and the bloggers continued writing. This aspect was important due to the longitudinal nature of the study. The final criterion was that the weblogs were published by Iranian migrants who were living in Australia and the language of the weblogs was Persian.

The data were formed through the open, axial, and selective coding of grounded theory. Based on the emergence of concepts and categories a linguistic and socio-cultural analysis of the weblog language was run in order to shed light on the strategies of word formation and ways in which foreign and technical terms were hybridised in the daily interactions of the bloggers in the diaspora. Special attention was paid to the manifestation of socio-cultural identities of the bloggers in their writing in the context of diaspora. Of interest was to see the intersection of the Persian language and culture and that of the host society and how this might affect the discourse and online identity of the bloggers.

Background

Previous findings on the use of language in computer-mediated communication (CMC) suggest that the language of CMC has many properties of both written and spoken language. Crystal (2001) claims that the type of language used in CMC is neither spoken nor written. Defining Netspeak as “a type of language displaying features that are unique to the Internet... arising out of its character as a medium which is electronic, global, and interactive” (p. 18) he argues that online language is complex and multifaceted and has features of both writing and speech. Drawing upon Crystal’s (2001) list of the differences between speech and writing, Nilsson (2003) argues that the language of blogs has much in common with features of both speech and writing. Blog language does not fall completely under one category but somewhere between speech and writing. Furthermore, Nilsson (2003) indicates that the majority of the posts in her data were usually written in “short, paratactic sentences” employing “informal, non-standard constructions and slang” (p. 28).

There are some other studies that have specifically looked at the use of language in weblogs. Cohen, Mehl and Pennebaker (2004), for example, used the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) tool to investigate psychological changes in language use in online personal journals in response to September 11, 2001. Their findings revealed that the bloggers expressed more negative emotions in the short term, wrote with greater psychological distance, and were more cognitively and socially engaged. However, all these features returned to the normal level over time.

Taking into account gender and the use of language, Huffaker (2006) studied a group of teenage bloggers. While he did not find any significant difference on the surface structure of their weblogs in terms of features such as word length and word count, there were differences between the gender use of language. He found that male bloggers tended to use more active language than females.

In spite of the fact that the above studies focused on the use of language in weblogs, the major focus was more on word frequency and semantic themes rather than the analysis of the type of language used in weblogs. What is more, the focus of these studies has been on English language weblogs whose authors do not have a migrant background. This leaves the issue of the Persian language in weblogs from the diaspora as a new area for exploration.

Discussion

With the above background in mind, this section will illustrate the use of Persian language by the bloggers in this study. But before that, I will provide a short background to Persian language and some of its features. Persian (also called Farsi) is the official language of Iran. The Iranian¹ Persian lan-

¹ I used Iranian Persian to distinguish between other varieties of Persian which are used in other regions such as Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

guage is an Indo-European language which uses an extended version of the classic Arabic script. In addition to the Arabic alphabet, it includes the four letters پ /p/, گ /g/, ژ /ʒ/, and چ /tʃ/. Although the original Arabic alphabet is used in Persian, the pronunciation of some of the sounds has been adapted to Persian. This includes the lack of certain phonemes such as interdental and emphatic alveolars. For example, Arabic sounds such as ز /z/, ذ /ð/, ض /dˤ/, ظ /ðˤ~zˤ/, are all pronounced /z/, and س /s/, ص /sˤ/, ث /θ/ are all pronounced /s/. On the other hand, capitalisation and diacritics are absent in most Persian written texts. The Iranian linguistic community is diglossic and there is a remarkable difference between the formal written and colloquial spoken registers of the language.

With the growth of the Persian blogosphere, the Persian language has become one of the top ten languages of the weblog community (Sifry, 2007). Focusing on blogs and virtual culture in Iran, Mina (2007) states that the style of the Persian language in blogs originates from the “sociolect” of young Iranians and does not follow the standard pattern of formal written Persian and “floats between written and spoken registers” (p. 31). According to Mina (2007), Persian syntax in Persian weblogs is generally simple, and bloggers use intentional misspellings and stylistic mistakes as a specific feature to weblogs.

In order to understand the type of language used in the Persian diasporic weblogs, I examined the use of the Persian language by the Persian bloggers in Australia. What follows is an exploration of the language used by the bloggers and their audience. Crystal (2001) notes that the use of the English language on the Internet is strongly influenced by the content of the site (e.g. personal diary, political, informational), and this leads to language variation on the Internet. Given that the bloggers in this study published their weblogs in order to record and share their life experience in the diaspora, the type of Persian language that they used in their writing was mostly colloquial. Their posts and comments were abundant with shortened verbal stems, attached pronoun forms, loanwords, free word order, and spelling that corresponds to colloquial pronunciation. Blogs also contained ellipses, emoticons, spelling mistakes, and new spellings which were the result of the Persian alphabet on keyboards which lacks certain symbols and diacritics.

A major use of conversational Persian in the blogs which was quite noticeable was in the verbal domain. The bloggers not only used modified inflectional endings but also shortened many of the verbal stems. Furthermore, they used many informal words and expressions which are not normally used in formal written Persian. The following excerpt from a blogger’s post illustrates the use of conversational language in Persian weblogs:

Persian excerpt transliterated

*Be hamun andaazeh ke verraaji va porchunegi va zadan-e harfaayeh bikhod **tu** edaareh mardud va naapasandeh be hamun andaazeh shaayad ham bishtar **tu** jamaayeh dustaaneh va mohitaayeh khaarej az ravaabet-e kaari va **hattaa** jame’e hamkaaraa dar baarhaa va kaafehaa va saayere amaaken-e omoomi va khosoosi matloob va pasandidas. Injoor jaahaa **ageh** kam harf bezanin va faghat baa baleh yaa kheir javaab **bedin** bi adab talaghi mishin.*

Translation

Although yakking, talkativeness and talking nonsense is not accepted in the workplace, the opposite is true outside the workplace in different places such as friendly gatherings, gatherings of colleagues in bars, cafes and other public and private places. In such occasions if you talk less and answer with just yes or no, you’re considered impolite.

The excerpt is a direct reflection of the way people use Persian colloquial language and the majority of the words are written the way people pronounce them in conversation. The conversational pattern in the post can be summarised as:

1. the use of informal *tu* (in/inside) instead of formal *dar* (in/inside);
2. the alternation of /aan/ to /un/ in many words especially verbals. Examples include: *porchunegi* (talkativeness) instead of *porchaanegi*;
3. the replacement of verb copula **ast** (to be) with /eh/. For example, *naapasandeh* (is not accepted) is in fact *naapasand **ast***;
4. shortening or reduction of suffixes and contracting them with preceding words especially when present perfect tense or past participle is used in adjectival forms: e.g. *pasandideh-**ast*** (is accepted) is reduced and contracted as *pasandidas*.
5. using shortened verbal stems and inflectional endings: *mishin* (you become) versus *mishavid*; *bedin* (give) versus *bedahid*.
6. using new spellings (or misspelling) that do not exist in Persian written language: *hattaa* (even) instead of *حتی*; *aslan* (indeed) instead of *اصلا*;

7. the elimination of /r/ at the end of some adverbs and replacing it with /eh/ and changing the pronunciation of the last sound before adding /eh/: *ageh* (if) instead of *agar*.

The blogs in this study also contained a great deal of loanwords from the English language which were written in Persian and naturalised according to the morphological and phonological rules of Persian. Two categories were quite remarkable: the first category was the use of scientific and technological terms especially with respect to Internet technologies such as blogs and blogging. Some of the words which were widely used by the bloggers are illustrated in table 1²:

Table 1: Some English words used by the bloggers in Persian writing

Persian word	Transliteration	English source
پابلیش	<i>paablish</i>	publish
پست	<i>post</i>	post
کامنت	<i>kaament</i>	comment
آنلاین	<i>aanlaayn</i>	online
آفلاین	<i>aaflaayn</i>	offline
ایمیل	<i>imeil</i>	email
چت	<i>chat</i>	chat
کیبورد	<i>kibord</i>	keyboard
مونیتور	<i>monitor</i>	monitor
لپتاپ	<i>laptaap</i>	laptop
لینک	<i>link</i>	link
ویندوز ویستا	<i>vindoz-e vistaa</i>	Windows Vista
آفیس	<i>aafis</i>	office
کلیپ	<i>klip</i>	(video) clip
بلاگ اسپات	<i>blaag espaat</i>	BlogSpot
سرور	<i>server</i>	server
پینگ	<i>ping</i>	ping
بلاگ رول	<i>blaagrol</i>	blogroll
پادکست	<i>paadkast</i>	podcast
دانلود	<i>daanlod</i>	download

One interesting point in using English words in the weblogs was the bloggers' coinage of neologisms which were a combination of English and Persian words using word formation rules from Persian. None of these words exist in Persian whether formal or informal and I assume that they are meaningless to people without knowledge of computers and the Internet. In making the new words, the bloggers used the English loanwords as the base and added inflectional suffixes to make new verbs or nouns. The following table shows some of these words and their word formation patterns that were used as common terms in the weblogs as if they were originally Persian:

² This table is not comprehensive and includes some examples from the blogs used in this study.

Table 2: Neologisms coined by the bloggers

English word as the base	Persian inflection and its meaning	Neologism	Meaning in English
blog	+ <i>idan</i> (to do)	<i>blogidan</i>	to blog
log	+ <i>idan</i> (to do)	<i>logidan</i>	to blog
click	+ <i>idan</i> (to do)	<i>clikidan</i>	to click
download	+ <i>idan</i> (to do)	<i>daanolodidan</i>	to download
chat	+ <i>idan</i> (to do)	<i>chatidan</i>	to chat
chat	+ <i>kardan</i> ³ (to do)	<i>chatkardan</i>	to chat
hack	+ <i>kardan</i> (to do)	<i>hack kardan</i>	to hack
hack	+ <i>shodan</i> (to become)	<i>hack shodan</i>	to be hacked
hang	+ <i>kardan</i> (to do)	<i>hang kardan</i>	to hang
email	+ <i>zadan</i> ⁴ (send)	<i>emeil zadan</i>	to email
email	+ <i>fersetaadan</i> (send)	<i>emeil feresetaadan</i>	to email
link	+ <i>dooni</i> (storage)	<i>linkduni</i>	blogroll

The second category of English words used by the bloggers included words written in Persian with almost the exact English pronunciation. There could be several reasons behind this. One reason might be the Persian socio-cultural schemata of the bloggers and the way Persian culture views certain things. For example, some bloggers used the word پارتنر /paartner/ (partner) when talking about different types of relationships among people in Australia or لزبین /lezbian/ (lesbian) in talking about homosexuality in their weblogs. This is because in Persian culture the concept of 'partner' does not have any place and meaning regarding relationships since people cannot live together outside marriage. For such a reason, the bloggers avoided translating the word "partner" as the translation in Persian bilingual dictionaries is *sharik* (business partner), *hamdast* (accomplice), *yaar* (a sport team mate), and none of them reflect the view of partner in relationships in English. Homosexuality is also a taboo concept in Iran due to the country's Islamic socio-cultural structure and people normally do not talk about it. Furthermore, there is no gender differentiation in the Persian word همجنس باز /hamjens baaz/, which literally means 'fancying the same sex' in Persian. Therefore, the bloggers used the exact English word in order to transfer the exact meaning in English. Another reason could be the effect of the new environment on their language. After living in the diaspora for several years, they might have found it difficult to have an exact translation as they wrote their posts. For example, some bloggers wrote in Persian some words such as اتنشن /atenshen/ (attention), رپورت /riport/ (report), میدل ایستی /midel isti/ (Middle Eastern), and so forth as if they were Persian words. Yet another reason for the use of original English words could be lack of a single word in Persian to replace the English one. For instance, some bloggers used words such as تاپ لس /taaples/ (topless), ترمزاند کاندیشنز /termz and caandishenz/ (terms and conditions), اف-ورد /ef vord/ (F-word) in their posts since the equivalents of such words and phrases in Persian are definitely not single words and need a bigger phrase or explanation.

³ *Kardan* in Persian is an infinitive which basically means "to do" or "to make". However, it is mostly used with other words to make compound verbs. For example, *telefon* (telephone) + *kardan* make *telefon kardan* which is "to phone" in English.

⁴ *Zadan* in Persian is an infinitive that can be used on its own to mean "to hit" or "to beat" and as an infinitival morpheme with different words to make compound verbs with different meanings. For example, it can be used with items of clothing, perfume, glasses, etc with the meaning of "to wear" in English.

Another trend in the use of language in the blogs that was widespread was using English words or phrases in Persian when discussing issues such as sexuality. Such concepts are taboo in Persian or too private to talk about and may bring shame and embarrassment to the speaker. Stepping out of the Persian language, so to speak, is just one strategy to avoid shaming Persian identities. In addition, it may not be easy to find a Persian equivalent that transfers the exact meaning of the word or expression to Persian speakers as it is used in English language and culture. In such cases, some bloggers especially women used deliberate misspellings or telegraphic writing of the English word in Persian. Regarding this type of language in Persian, a female blogger published a post:

Making Love

The title that you see doesn't mean "to love". It means to have a sexual relationship or to have an affair. If they want to use the interrogative form, then they ask, "Did you make love with her/him?" Or if they want to talk about their relationship with someone, they say, "We made love". Very probably you have heard that a lot in movies or songs. Of course, they also use the famous word 'sex' [the original Persian word was written in telegraphic form *س/ک/س*, that is, without vowels s/k/s in English] which doesn't have any emotion in it and it's more like a need for sexual relationship than an emotional relationship between two people. Fuck [written *فاک* pronounced *faak* in the Persian post] is more an insulting word than what we infer from the word....Now if an Iranian man wants to talk about his sexual relationship with a woman, how does he say it? Except for that disgusting word that interprets a woman as an object for satisfying a man, what really is the best word?...

In this post the blogger uses English words and phrases in her Persian writing because she feels that the Persian language does not have proper equivalents that can be used to replace them. Part of the reason for this kind of writing may originate from the translation of words such as 'fuck' in Persian bilingual dictionaries. The Persian translation of such words is usually a very negative and insulting word or phrase that cannot be used in a polite conversation in a normal situation, and mentioning them is more of an insult and may bring shame and embarrassment. On the other hand, there are a few formal words or phrases in Persian language, some from Arabic, that are too formal and are not used in an informal conversation. This seems to have made the use of such words in original English more comfortable for the bloggers in their Persian writing.

And finally, a somewhat novel way of writing in the blogs that might be considered specific to this group of diasporic Persian blogs was the use of certain English words in Persian writing which were environment bound and were encountered by the bloggers in the host society. Generally, when the bloggers wrote about certain organisations, social events, or any other concepts which were related to the host society, they wrote the exact pronunciation of the word, name, or phrase and in some cases they hyperlinked it to their websites or Wikipedia where people could get some information about them. Examples include *مدیکر* /mediker/ (Australian Medicare), *سیک* /sik/ (SEEK job website), *ماسمن دیلی* /maasman deili/ (the Mosman Daily newspaper), *سمبوکا* /sambukaa/ (Sambuca the Italian liqueur), and so forth. The main reason for such a kind of writing could be the assumption by the bloggers that such concepts were quite new to their readers in other countries especially Iran and writing a Persian equivalent (if available) would still be confusing.

Conclusion

The analysis of the data revealed that the use of language in this group of Persian diasporic bloggers does not simply come from Persian written and spoken language. The language of the blogs suggests "the possibility of a new variety of language found within the weblog communities" (Nilsson, 2003, p. 3). The type of language used in the blogs is a hybrid of Persian written and spoken language combined with the jargon of the Internet and weblog technology and terms from the host society. In fact, the language of the blogs in this study may present a conceptual model that covers the range of language used:

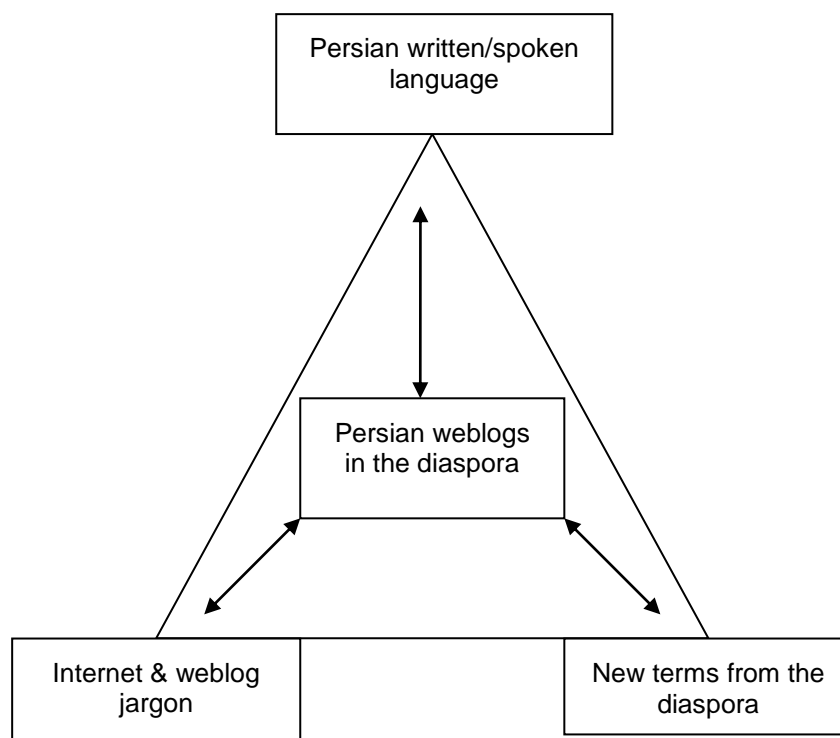


Figure 1. Persian diasporic language in weblogs

The linguistic feature of this specific Persian weblog community seems to be a bit different from other Persian blogs in that the language has been affected by the diasporic experience of the bloggers and the use of technology in the diaspora. Since almost all the weblogs were a written medium, the bloggers used Persian written form in a conversational style to write in their weblogs. As the weblogs were a means of reflecting on their life in the diaspora, they needed to use or introduce some English terms from the diaspora. This was accompanied by technological jargon as the majority of the bloggers were technology-savvy. The type of language used in this weblog community seems to be the result of a hybrid/diasporic identity that has been created from the interaction of the bloggers with the host society and the online community. And finally, as the bloggers were writing about their life experience in a diary-like fashion their sentences and posts were generally lengthy with minimum use of paratactic sentences, which are common in other weblogs in the blogosphere (see e.g. Nilsson, 2003; Mina, 2007).

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