



Continuity of Ancient Iranian Structures in Semnani

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1. Introduction

Semnani is one of the most conservative Iranian languages spoken in Semnan Province, Iran. Owing to its relative geographical and social isolation, it has preserved numerous linguistic characteristics that disappeared from Standard Persian during the historical evolution of Iranian languages. Consequently, Semnani occupies a unique position within the Northwestern Iranian language group and provides valuable evidence for reconstructing the intermediate stages between Old, Middle, and Modern Iranian languages.

Historical linguistics has long recognized the importance of Iranian dialects in tracing language change and explaining the development of Persian. Nevertheless, previous studies have generally concentrated on isolated phonological, lexical, or grammatical features of Semnani. A comprehensive investigation examining the continuity of ancient Iranian structures simultaneously at the phonological, morphological, and syntactic levels has remained absent. The present study addresses this gap by identifying the linguistic features preserved in Semnani and evaluating their historical significance.

The principal objective of this research is to determine which phonological, morphological, and syntactic structures in Semnani can be regarded as direct continuations or historically modified forms of Old Iranian linguistic structures. By doing so, the study contributes to the reconstruction of Iranian language history while

emphasizing the necessity of documenting this endangered linguistic heritage.

2. Literature Review

Research on Iranian historical linguistics has a long tradition. Among the pioneering studies of the last two centuries are those of Bartholomae (1904), Christensen. (1915), Henning (1958), and Oranskij (1960, 1963), whose comparative investigations laid the foundation for the classification and historical reconstruction of the Iranian language family. Their work has greatly contributed to our understanding of the relationships among Old Iranian, Middle Iranian, and Modern Iranian languages.

The present study is theoretically grounded in the principles of historical-comparative linguistics as articulated by Campbell (2013) and Hock and Joseph (2009), together with the concept of linguistic continuity. Historical-comparative linguistics assumes that systematic correspondences among related languages reflect inherited developments rather than accidental similarities, providing the methodological basis for identifying retained features, distinguishing linguistic retention from innovation, and explaining language change through systematic comparison. This approach is complemented by structural linguistics, which examines the internal organization of contemporary language before historical comparison. Together, these perspectives provide a robust framework for evaluating the continuity and transformation of ancient Iranian phonological, morphological, and syntactic structures preserved in Semnani.

Within Iran, significant contributions to the historical study of Iranian languages have been made by Sadeghi (1978) and Rezaei Baghbidi (2010, 2020). More specifically, studies by Majidi (1980), and Pazhom Shariati (2011) have documented important phonological, morphological, and syntactic characteristics of Semnani. These studies demonstrate that Semnani preserves numerous archaic features that have disappeared from Standard Persian. However, most previous research has focused on individual linguistic domains, whereas a comprehensive analysis integrating phonological, morphological, and syntactic evidence for the continuity of Ancient Iranian structures has remained limited.

3. Methodology

This study is basic research employing a descriptive-analytical design within a historical-comparative framework. Data were collected from two principal sources. The first consisted of documentary materials, including grammars, dictionaries, historical studies, and previous research concerning Iranian languages and Semnani. The second comprised fieldwork involving semi-structured interviews and natural speech recordings from twenty native Semnani speakers (12 men and 8 women) aged between 50 and 85 years from different districts of Semnan.

The collected linguistic data were compared with documented forms from Old Persian, Avestan, and Middle Parthian using the comparative historical method. Analysis proceeded in four stages: (1) identification and classification of phonological, morphological, and syntactic features; (2) systematic comparison with corresponding structures in ancient Iranian languages; (3) determination of whether each feature represented direct preservation, historical modification, or innovation; and (4) interpretation of these findings in light of internal linguistic developments and external sociocultural factors such as geographical isolation and language contact.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Semnani retains a considerable number of ancient Iranian linguistic structures that have disappeared from Standard Persian.

At the phonological level, one of the most remarkable characteristics is the preservation of final vowels that were common in Old Iranian languages but later disappeared from Persian. In addition, Semnani preserves vowel sequences resembling ancient diphthongs, reflecting conservative phonological developments. These features support the hypothesis that Semnani has undergone fewer sound changes than Modern Persian and therefore preserves valuable evidence of earlier phonological systems.

At the morphological level, Semnani retains grammatical gender, remnants of an ancient case system, and verb inflection patterns derived from historical roots. Feminine marking, case distinctions between nominative and non-nominative forms, and gender-sensitive nominal morphology indicate a substantially more conservative grammatical system than that of Persian. These

features closely resemble structures documented in Old Iranian languages and demonstrate long-term linguistic continuity.

The syntactic analysis reveals additional conservative characteristics. Semnani consistently maintains the Subject–Object–Verb (SOV) word order typical of Iranian languages while preserving historical agreement patterns between verbs and their arguments. The study also reexamines structures previously described as split ergativity. Following Haig (2008), the analysis suggests that these constructions are more accurately interpreted as tense-sensitive agreement (TSA) rather than genuine ergative alignment. This reinterpretation provides a more accurate account of Semnani grammar and contributes to a better understanding of its historical development within the Iranian language family.

Collectively, these findings indicate that Semnani has preserved multiple layers of ancient Iranian grammatical organization despite gradual internal changes. The coexistence of inherited and innovative structures illustrates the gradual nature of language evolution and provides empirical support for theories of linguistic continuity.

5. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that Semnani is considerably more than a regional language; it represents a living repository of ancient Iranian linguistic structures. Evidence from phonology, morphology, and syntax confirms that many archaic features have survived in Semnani despite disappearing from Standard Persian. These findings reinforce the hypothesis that Semnani occupies an important intermediate position in the historical development of Iranian languages.

From a theoretical perspective, the research supports historical-comparative models emphasizing gradual language change and linguistic continuity. The reinterpretation of tense-sensitive agreement further refines previous descriptions of Semnani grammar and contributes to broader discussions concerning alignment systems in Iranian languages.

Beyond its theoretical significance, this study highlights the urgent need to document and preserve Semnani as an endangered linguistic heritage. Continued transmission of the language across generations, together with systematic linguistic documentation, will contribute not only to safeguarding an important component of

Iran's cultural heritage but also to advancing future research in Iranian historical linguistics.

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