

Dialectology in Iran

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Iran is a country with an extraordinary variety of dialects and languages to an extent that it is perhaps comparable to India. Apart from the large number of languages that belong to the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European family, such as Persian, Kurdish and Balochi, in Iran we also find dialects of languages of other stocks, such as Turkish in the north-west and north-east of the country, and Arabic in the south-west. Bilingualism or multilingualism are then usually the rule.

Despite this linguistic richness, until quite recently native scholars were not much interested in dialect research, and they were more likely to be concerned with studies connected more directly with classical Persian and Old Persian, because they were strongly favoured and supported by the defunct royal ideology. In fact, the first “propaedeutic” handbook concerning methodologies of fieldwork in dialectology, published in 1962-63, by the pioneering dialectologist Sadeq Kiya, passed almost unobserved.

However, we have more recently witnessed an important and significant proliferation of publications on individual Iranian dialects, both by academic scholars and by local amateurs who want to preserve their traditions. It is perhaps unavoidable that the main occupation of dialectologists has been the collection of lexical repertoires, as opposed to the strictly linguistic study of phonology and morphosyntax, or to sociology.

This seminar will provide a brief survey of the history of dialectology in Iran, together with a look at the very recent – though marginal and hitherto unsuccessful – proposals of the Academy of Persian Language and Literature to use dialect material to create new words and to replace ordinary foreign words in standard Persian. It will also discuss issues related to methodology in dialect lexicography, in particular, the treatment of lexicography as “palaeontology”, with the tendency – not uncommon also among western dialectologists – to record, e.g., words which have already died out in common use, and to neglect everyday, and thus “uninteresting”, vocabulary items.