

Endangered Iranian languages in NYC: Sociolinguistic profiles and prospects for further research

Over the last several decades, New York and Los Angeles have become home to an impressively large amount of Iranian linguistic diversity. Much of this diversity comes from the large scale emigration of Jewish communities (Yarshater 1974), although it is by no means limited to these communities. In particular, the endangered Jewish dialects of Kashani, Shirazi, Bukharian as well as Juhuri, an Iranian language of Azerbaijan and Dagestan are now spoken more in a diaspora than in the areas where they originated. Yet there is very little work on which languages are spoken in the diaspora and what the life of these languages is like in American cities like New York and Los Angeles. In two of the few studies on Iranian language communities in NYC, Borjian and Kaufman (2016) and Borjian and Perlin (2016) provide a sociolinguistic overview of the Juhuri and Bukharian speaking communities, investigating their multilingualism, language attitudes, and prospects for the languages' continuation beyond the current generation of speakers. Here, we will provide similar overviews for other endangered Iranian languages with speakers in New York City. In particular, we will look at Judeo-Shirazi, Judeo-Kashani (two "Judeo-Median" languages [Borjian 2014; 2015]) and present an overview of the local Kurdish and Pamiri communities, in which Shughni, Roshani and Wakhi (among other languages) are spoken (Payne 1989; Morgenstierne 1938; Edelman and Dodykhudoeva 2009).

We focus on the language documentation and sociolinguistic work we have done with these groups in diaspora and what potential exists for further work. We also examine to what extent these languages are used in New York. In the case of Judeo-Kashani, there are speakers but very few contexts in which the language is spoken. In some cases, speakers are capable of composing texts in their mother tongue, but have largely lost conversational fluency. Overall, we have found that the attitudes on the part of Jewish Iranian minority communities towards their mother tongues are negative in the diaspora, as they are overshadowed by the tenacious prestige of Persian. The case is quite different for Juhuri and the Pamiri languages. In New York, Juhuri is in competition with Russian and English rather than Azeri, the national language of Azerbaijan (Borjian and Kaufman 2016), nor does the community have substantial contact with Persian speakers. Despite positive attitudes towards Juhuri, it is only rarely being passed down to younger generations. The local Pamiri community provides another interesting point of comparison. The Pamiri languages of Tajikistan are spoken by groups of Ismaili Muslims in a remote, mountainous region far removed, both geographically and culturally, from Dushanbe. Attitudes towards Pamiri languages among the community in NYC are also quite positive despite these languages being unwritten and unstandardized until very recently. Finally, Bukharian, a variety of Tajik spoken by the Jewish communities of Bukhara and Samarkand, seems, at this point, to represent more of a "repertoire" in the sense of Benor's (2008; 2009) analysis of Jewish English, rather than a distinct dialect. In this community, defining the difference between Bukharian and Tajik is itself contentious, which makes for an interesting comparison with the sociolinguistic status of other "Jewish languages" (Rabin 1981; Fishman 1981; Bunis et al. 2003).

We argue that socio-political distance from Persian correlates well with positive language attitudes. Speakers of Judeo-Median languages are often of the opinion that their languages are corruptions of Persian, despite the considerable linguistic differences. This view does not exist among the Juhuri and Pamiri communities, who in principle (but not always in practice) support intergenerational transmission of their languages outside the homeland. The socio-political distance from the center of Persian culture thus appears to allow the development of a language prestige independent of Persian.

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