

# Editing (Virayesh) as a Movement of Resistance During the Iran-Iraq War

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## Abstract

The present study concerns editing of translations in Iran during the Iran-Iraq War, which in the official discourse of the country is known as the Sacred Defense. It argues that *editing*, in its local sense, advocated a linguistic purism inspired by a redefined nationalism, which went hand in hand with identity politics and snowballed into a movement of resistance.

**Keywords:** Editing; Translation; Resistance; Iran-Iraq War

## 1. Introduction

The role of language in shaping collective and national identities is of prime importance in socio-linguistic studies. The issue gains special significance in case of Iran. There are at least three reasons for this. The first is that Iran has historically been in constant contact with the foreign through political as well as economic, literary and cultural interactions. The second is that it accommodates a variety of ethnic groups, minority languages and dialects still spoken in different parts of the country. And the third is that since its conversion to Islam, Iran was exposed to Arabic, both as the language of religion and of the Moslem Self, and at the same time as the language of the Other.

For Persians, it seems, conversion to Islam was different from submission to Arab domination. Iranians contributed to the expansion of the religion through employing their language as the second vehicle of Islam. Yet, they resisted the hegemony of the Arab nation(s) as the Other, whose presence was, strangely enough, justified through the religion they brought to Iranians and later shared with them. The dilemma, it seems, created a tension between the national identity of Iranians and their identity as Moslems and the Umma of Islam in some historical periods.

Modernization, together with the development of a modern sense of nationalism in Iran in early the twentieth century required a definition of identity and of the Self to fit the new situation. This in turn meant identifying the Other(s), and by extension, *Otherizing* whatever threatened the solidarity of the Self. Goudarzi (2005) believes that in the Pahlavi era, some of the elite and intellectuals

resorted to antiquity in search of this definition, retrieving nostalgically the memory of a Golden Age of ancient Persia. Calling this attitude ‘a romantic nationalism’, Goudarzi (2005, pp. 102-3) claims that this definition:

- a. created a perception of the Iranian/Persian identity which rejected or trivialized anything foreign,
- b. assigned a pivotal role to the Persian language and literature in securing the Iranian/Persian identity,
- c. considered the ethnic and cultural diversity and multiplicity of regional vernaculars in Iran a threat to national solidarity,
- d. defined national unity in terms of cultural and linguistic unity,
- e. aimed at resisting Islam as the Other,
- f. gave way to Western values.

Mollanazar (personal communication, November 12, 2011) believes that among the many Others perceived and identified in and after the Qajar era, Europe was the most legitimized. He argues “as Iranians, we were convinced that we were underdeveloped, had to distance ourselves from the Arab Other and follow the European Other instead.” To him, modernization, Westernization, and nationalism went hand in hand in Iran in the early twentieth century.

The Islamic Revolution in 1979 required a redefinition of Iranian identity, this time in line with a mixture of Islamicization, nationalism, and patriotism which marked the revolution as different from many others. On the one hand, the religious aspect of the Revolution legitimized the presence of Arabic and recognized it as a strong aspect of the revolutionary Moslem identity. On the other hand, the attitude against the Arabic language as the Other, which had its roots in the prerevolution eras, persisted, and was even somehow intensified when the so-called Iran-Iraq War<sup>1</sup> started in the early 1980s, because ironically Arabic turned out to be the language of the enemy as well. This slowly led to a subtle, hidden, and untold tension between those who foregrounded the religious aspect of their shaping identity and those who underscored its historical-national aspect. It took few years for the state to resolve the issue. According to Mollanazar (personal communication, Nov. 12, 2011) Arabic was soon announced to be “the second language of the country” because of its wide distribution and the great number of its speakers in the southern parts of Iran, and started to be taught as the second language with improved curriculum and syllabuses in schools<sup>2</sup> and was categorized as the second, and not a/the foreign, language in the language teaching university programs in Iran. Gradually, Arabic was excluded from the list of Others, although it is still hard to speak of its possible assimilation into the Self. At the same time, the nationalistic aspect of the shaping identity started to be intensified with the break-out of the War. This required enhancement of patriotic sentiments which combined with religious devotion to protect the country. The nationalistic aspect

of the forming identity manifested itself in various dimensions, of which the linguistic is the concern of this article.

In April and May 1980, about a year after the Revolution and in fact only a few months before the break-out of the Iran-Iraq War, the universities were closed down all over Iran for the so-called Cultural Revolution. One of the major aims was to reform and redesign university curricula and produce teaching materials in line with the social, political, religious and ideological changes in the country. This meant that faculty members in all universities would not be teaching for some time (which was about four years in the case of humanities), but were entitled to their monthly salaries. They were therefore asked to send proposals to the Cultural Revolution Committee (Setad-e Enghelab-e Farhangi), which was then recently established as the academic authority in the country, for writing or translating books in their fields of study and expertise. Upon approval of the proposal, the faculty member would start the work, report the progress of the project each month to the department he or she worked in and to the Committee.

Soon after this, in September 1980, the Translation, Writing, and Editing Committee was established. According to Pourjavadi (1980, pp. 4-7), it was an extension of the Cultural Revolution Committee, and its goal was to encourage academic production in the postrevolution society. The designation of the Committee suggests that at that time translation was assigned greater importance than writing and editing, perhaps for the very realistic reason that it was hard to write in the absence of both students and research funds which were impossible to afford at that time. In line with this translation project, Iran University Press (Markaz-e Nashre Daneshgahi), a state-sponsored publishing house, was established, which started work at about the same time the war broke out, to publish and distribute the products of this huge activity. By 1983, a number of translated books were waiting to be published by the Press. But close examination of the quality of the translations showed that a huge volume of them required substantial correction and editing. The major problem was the unnatural and most-of-the-times incomprehensible translational language which emerged and rendered many of the works produced in this project unpublishable.

The translational problems were due to one or more of the following:

1. Poor knowledge of the source language(s) (normally English and French);
2. Poor knowledge of Persian, as the TL, particularly its potentials for terminology;
3. Inadequate writing practice in Persian on the part of the academics;
4. Poor knowledge of the subject area;

5. Lack of what is known today as 'transfer competence' in Translation Studies literature and which distinguishes a bilingual from a translator;
6. Lack of up-to-date bilingual dictionaries and reference books.

All the above resulted in literal translation, calque and incorrect renderings, which paved the way for the direct transfer of foreign structures and terms. The translational errors were basically grammatical and lexical. Grammatical errors ranged from inappropriate use of prepositions to transfer of foreign syntactic patterns into Persian. Lexical errors concerned the use of inappropriate equivalents for ordinary words and, of course, for technical terms.

To make the translations publishable, Markaze- Nashr took three initiatives. First it set up terminology groups in many fields. Specialists in different areas, some of whom were already fired from university positions for their political orientations, worked in these groups and started publishing small bilingual glossaries. Second, it established an Editing Committee in 1983 which started publishing guidelines for proper writing in Persian, appearing first in the form of articles, and later as manuals and style sheets for writers and translators. Third it started editing courses to train editors and improve the quality of the translations. One of the first outcomes then was the coinage of the words *virayesh* and *virastar* (derived from the root *pirastan* in old Persian, literally beautifying), to mean editing and editor<sup>3</sup>, respectively. Marandi (1980, p. 16) justified the coinage by saying "Virayesh is a Persian word, which is now being used as a translational equivalent for the English word editing. It means adding to or modifying the content of a work or correcting and improving its quality and preparing it for publication." The work of *virastars* (editors) then covered a wide variety of areas, ranging from copy editing to content modification, securing terminological consistency, and using standard and eloquent Persian and linguistic improvement.

The last two categories listed above were gradually accentuated in the editing style sheets, because the language which emerged in this nation-wide translation project turned out to be a mixture of Persian and some foreign source language(s), filled with abusively literal translations, borrowed words and structures and incorrect, noncohesive target texts. The emerging language was therefore unnatural, incomprehensible and far from eloquent. One way to improve the situation and save the Persian language against the foreign, it seemed, was to explore and employ all its potentials. This solution soon turned into an urge for linguistic purism, which rested on nationalist and patriotic sentiments of the people in a rapidly changing post-Revolution society who woke up one day to find their country at war. In this process, the translationese started to be interpreted as a threat against the Persian language and, by extension, against Iranian identity. In

addition to the enemy confronted in the fronts, a second enemy was recognized. It was the body of foreign languages which was threatening the Persian language through translations, and whose alleged agents were translators. The role of translators remained in focus ever since, so much that several years later, Najafi (1987, p. 7), in his monumental book<sup>4</sup> *Ghalat Nanevisim* [Let's Not Write Incorrectly], a manual for writers and translators, said: "any threat against the Persian language is posed by inexpert translators, particularly news translators who, due to haste, resort to literal translation of foreign words, compounds and structures and who are copied unwittingly by some writers".

The threat became central to all discussions of translation and editing in the early years of the War, pioneered by Najafi and Iran University Press. In a seminal article entitled<sup>5</sup> "Is the Persian Language in Danger?," Najafi (1982, p. 4) said, "the impact of foreign language(s) becomes a concern when the grammar gets affected . . . Grammar is, of course, resistant to foreign influence, but is not undefeatable." To him, the major threat was "the drastic changes" that Persian grammar and structure would undergo if constantly influenced by foreign languages. Further, he (p. 5) said: "This will in turn have at least two negative outcomes. One is losing contact with our cultural heritage recorded in the works of the past. The other is failure to communicate with other members of our society." In the light of such discourse, translation strategies required a rethinking. Najafi (pp. 4-5) believed that borrowing and literal translation of terms posed no threat to the language, whereas calque, as a literal transfer of foreign structures did. In this linguistic-nationalist context, Najafi's monumental book *Ghalat Nanevisim* [Let's Not Write Incorrectly] sold 10,000 copies in the first month of its publication, received more than ten excellent and positive reviews in the same period and was elaborately discussed in radio broadcasts inside the country and outside the borders. One major reason for this success was perhaps its appeal to patriotic sentiments. According to a review published a few months after the first print of the book in the Iran University Press journal, *Nashr-e Danesh* (1988, p. 85), the success was due to the fact that "the focus of the book is the Persian language, and the love of Iranians for this language and its protection". The book went through numerous reprints ever since.

Suddenly everybody became conscious of the foreign words and structures in Persian translations and writings which metaphorically represented the presence of the Other. The situation called for action. Foreign presence had to be fought, the same way the enemy was fought on the fronts. The military war to protect the borders was paralleled by a linguistic war to protect the language and the identity. To achieve this, first all foreign languages were targeted as the Other. But gradually, Arabic was excluded from the list because of its religious significance.

European languages, particularly English, French and German, however, remained on the list as the Others. Meanwhile, the Persian language, which was already under the pressure of adapting itself to the post-Revolution discourse, filled with long lists of new words and concepts, coinages, and changing meanings, had to become stronger to enter this war and resist the foreign presence in texts. Seminars were held for exploring the potentials of the Persian language in dealing with the so-called invading foreign terms and structures. Examples are the proceedings of a conference titled *Farsi, Zaban-e Elm* [Persian, the Language of Science] and a series of articles on the morphological potentials of Persian by Ali Ashraf Sadeghi in the *Nashr-e Danesh* journal. A sort of linguistic purism was thus encouraged. All this highlighted not only the role of Virayesh (editing) in resisting the foreign and in securing national unity, but also the role of Virastars (editors) as mediators of this ideology.

Virayesh gradually snowballed into a movement by extending in scope and range beyond academic translations and writings to almost all other types of linguistic productions in the country. What started during the War as an act of resistance in the academia developed into a nationalist movement inspiring several other activities which targeted the whole nation and went on for some time even after the War. Of all these, four were major. The first was the establishment of a Virayesh Council in IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting). The second was the inclusion of some major Virayesh principles in high school textbooks and syllabuses all over the country. The third was the establishment of Virayesh courses. The last was the establishment of the third Academy of Persian Language and Literature. These are discussed below.

In 1988 a conference was held in Tehran on the poor quality of the language used in IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting) and ways of improving it. This concerned not only the translated material in IRIB, but also the authentic, non translated Persian texts presented orally or produced spontaneously in live programs. The causes of the problem were identified as calque, unnecessary use of formal and flowery language, verbiage, poor logical coherence, and poor knowledge of rhetoric on the part of those who wrote or performed the programs. To improve the quality, three years later:

- A Virayesh Council was established in IRIB,
- Short term Virayesh Courses were held to train Virastars (editors) for radio and TV programs,
- Virayesh guidelines and style sheets were published by IRIB for all those involved in the radio and TV programs,
- A number of trained Virastars were employed through administration of Virayesh tests.

The incentive behind the establishment of the Council was stated (1991a, p. 2) as follows:

. . . The Persian language is the carrier of the ancient and glorious culture of Islam and Iran, and if it degenerates, our cultural ties will lose strength and the potential of the language for performing its historically critical role will degenerate as well.<sup>6</sup>

The goals of the Council were announced (1991a, pp. 2-3) as follows:

- To protect standard Persian and provide remedy for the dangerous illness which was said to threaten the language and unity and solidarity of the country
- To equip IRIB programs with a fine, eloquent and purified language

The Council received financial support from the President's Office. The patronage contributed to the authority of the Council in IRIB, where all its guidelines had to be followed.

In line with all this, in 1991 and 1992, a series of short TV clips were broadcasted every night as part of a TV program entitled 'Farsi ra Paas Bedarim' [Let's Protect Persian]. In each episode, one incorrect Persian sentence, usually a calque, appeared in a frame. Then, the reason why it was incorrect in terms of Virayesh rules was given, and finally the correct form of the sentence was given. The program received a lot of attention from the public who were being sensitized to both the emerging and the current errors, coming from inappropriate mixture of foreign words and structures with Persian in the everyday language. Some of the clips were devoted to the incorrect use of Arabic roots and grammatical markers in Persian, such as, for instance, the use of Tanvin (an adverb marker in Arabic) with Persian words. Others concerned the literal transfer of grammatical patterns from English, French and German. The program contributed to the development of a nation-wide discourse concerning the Persian language and Iranian identity.

The second achievement of the movement was that some of the basic principles of Virayesh entered high school textbooks of Persian grammar in the 1990s and students were warned against the incorrect use of the language. The concepts of calque and borrowing were elaborately discussed and the ways to avoid them were introduced and practiced in classrooms all over the country.

The third concerned training of Virastars. Since 1986, a great number of Virayesh courses started to be offered by different government and nongovernment organizations, including Iran University Press, who pioneered the movement, and the Ministry of Guidance and Islamic Culture, the highest authority which controlled the publication and the book market in the country. A great

number of Virastars were thus trained, and started to work with the press and the publishers, who were now more conscious about the quality of the language in their works than ever before.

The last was the establishment of the third Academy of Persian Language and Literature, which was founded in 1989 and officially started work in 1991<sup>7</sup>. It was later recognized as a research institute working under the auspices of the President's Office. In its constitution (199, pp. 1-2), the Persian language is referred to as "the second language of Islam", "the key to the huge and invaluable scientific and literary heritage of Islamic civilization" and "the building block of the cultural identity of the Iranian nation". The major goals to be achieved by the Academy are listed as follows:

- Preserving the strength and originality of the Persian language as a manifestation of our national identity, as the second language of the Islamic world and as the vehicle of Islamic culture and knowledge
- Protecting the Persian language
- Improving its potential to meet cultural, scientific and technological needs
- Establishing the Academy as an internationally recognized authority in Persian language

The nationalistic and religious incentives behind the establishment of the Academy contributed to a redefined Iranian Moslem identity in the same way that the other three measures did.

## 2. Conclusion

Translation both shaped Virayesh and was shaped by it. Virayesh developed in line with translation, and as an offshoot of the nation-wide translation project was launched in and by the academia in Iran in the early years of the Revolution and of the Iran-Iraq War. The project was originally designed to introduce recent foreign knowledge into the country in all fields of science and technology. However, the transfer of such material through translation led to the transfer of foreign discourse and foreign structures, which in turn resulted in a consciousness against the foreign as the Other. Improving the translations gradually came to mean protecting and strengthening the religious and national aspects of Iranian identity as the Self by resisting the Other in text and discourse. Two solutions were sought to the problem. One was to encourage Self-promoting translation strategies, such as naturalness, which became the norm for translation of science and technology as the major topics in the translation project. Interestingly, as the Virayesh movement extended beyond the translation project to the translation market outside the academia, naturalness was practiced in the form of domestication in literary translation, aiming to erase or at least conceal traces of the Other in translated literature. The other solution was to encourage

linguistic purism, which started being practiced as Virayesh. But this linguistic purism was in serious conflict with translation in its essence. Translation takes place when people want to know about the foreign, and rewriting the foreign inevitably introduces and carries over the foreign discourse, which Virayesh stood against. The conflict was never resolved, but throughout time Virayesh became a movement of resistance against the Other. It targeted the foreign discourse, structures and words, which were thought to reflect the presence of the Other, first linguistically and then ideologically, and threaten national identity. Resisting foreign structures as a focal point in Virayesh became a metaphor for resisting foreign powers and a metaphor for nationalism. Virayesh grew into an elite movement of nationalism and resistance. The movement redefined the history of the nation and the nation itself in the new post-revolutionary context. It also redefined the subject of the nation-state in terms other than religion.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The phrase Iran-Iraq War is used in here in its common form and sense. One might as well use Iraq-Iran War instead, with a totally different ideological implication, which is not the concern of this article.

<sup>2</sup>Before the Revolution, English was taught in schools as a second language.

<sup>3</sup>The words Virayesh and Vvirastars are used here to mark the difference between the concepts of editing and editor in English and the local use of the concepts in Iran in the 1980s.

<sup>4</sup>The Persian title is *Ghalat Nanevisim*., which can be translated into “Let’s Not Write Incorrectly: A Dictionary of the Difficulties in the Persian Language.” It was a manual for writers and translators.

<sup>5</sup>The Persian title is.

<sup>6</sup>All translations from Persian are my own.

<sup>7</sup>The first was established in 1935, but closed after a few years. The second was established in 1969, and was again closed after the Revolution.

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