

NAILC1 abstract

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Is there continuity between Gilaki and Mazandarani?

The Caspian provinces of Gilan and Mazandaran are home to people who identify themselves as *gelək* and their languages as *geləki*. The endonym roughly corresponds to what philologists call the Caspian language family, consisting of Gilaki and Mazandarani. Neither, however, is a standard or written language; each may be defined in pure linguistic terms as a language group of contiguous dialects. Flanked by these two languages stand a region from Rāmsar to Čālus, roughly corresponding to historical Ruyān, which can be classified as neither Gilaki nor Mazandarani. Donald Stilo (2001) has coined the term ‘Central Caspian’ for these vernaculars, which have received but meager scholarly attention.

One may suppose that Central Caspian should hold the expected continuum between Gilaki and Mazandarani (Stilo 2001), i.e., starting from a given locality, one would observe language change accumulated as she travels latitudinal along the Caspian shoreline. This, however, is just a hypothesis that needs to be examined empirically. This author had long assumed continuity between Persian and Caspian until his study (Borjian 2013) proved the opposite: the emerging picture disclosed an interruption along the longitude in the upper course of the Jājrud in south-central Alborz.

That unexpected finding led me to pursue a similar line of research on the fuzzy linguistic zone between Gilaki and Mazandarani to see how smooth the transition, if any, is across the Caspian provinces. This study thus includes a quantitative analysis of grammatical, lexical, and phonological features, involving well over 150 isoglosses. In a broader perspective, the study aims at setting criteria to measure the rate of change in the Caspian language group as one set off from Rašt and travels eastward across Alborz-fed streams to Lāhijān, Rudsar, Rāmsar, Tonekābon, Kalār, Kojur, and Nur, before reaching the plains of Mazandaran, which encompass the cities of Āmol, Bābol, Šāhi, and Sāri (constituting ‘Mazandaran proper’) and their upland dependencies. The data have been collected from more than fifty localities toward the compilation a linguistic atlas of Caspian languages—an ongoing project undertaken by this author.

The outcome of the data processing bears mixed results. In historical phonology ten isoglosses can be arranged in a diagram in which sound changes neatly align with geography in an accumulative differentiation (Table 1). The diagram reveals a gradual increase in the number of reduced sounds as one starts from West Gilan and travels eastward toward Mazandaran. Noteworthy is the close agreement between East Gilaki and Central Caspian, when compared with the crevices that isolate West Gilaki and Mazandarani on either side of the table.

No such smooth distribution does emerge for morphosyntax (Table 2). Out of the ten isoglosses applicable to the Caspian language family, only five (nos. 1 and 7-10) offer a step-like pattern that would support a dialect continuum. The intruding features (nos. 2-6) are imposed by the

Central Caspian languages. Their unusual imperfect formations, e.g. Tonekāboni *paj-ene bâ-m* “I would/used to cook” and Kalāri *el-imi-ame* “I used to put”, contrast sharply with those of Gilaki and Mazandarani. While the imperfect on the present stem (no. 3) is also found in certain Tatic dialects (e.g. Talysh of Asālem *a-vrij-i-m* “I used to run”), the nasal infix (no. 2) seems to be characteristic to Central Caspian (and its extension into Upper Tāleqān in the south). The uneven distribution of the grammatical isoglosses manifests itself in Mazandarani being more closely related to East Gilaki (five common features) than to either Kalāri or Tonekāboni (sharing four features with each), and that the lowest level of relatedness is between East Gilaki and Kalāri (one feature). Note also that Central Caspian itself splits by four grammatical isoglosses that separate Tonekāboni and Kalāri.

Finally, lexical isoglosses are to tell much in our investigation. Unlike phonology and grammar, which offer a limited number of distinctive features in a typological study, the lexical isoglosses that bisect the Caspian linguistic map are virtually boundless in quantity.

Table 1. Phonological Isoglosses

OIr.	WGil.	EGil.	CCasp.	Maz.
*fra-	fa		ha	
*-ft-	ft		t	
*-xt-	xt		t	
*-γ-	γ		ø	
*-fr-		fr		r
*-xr-		lx		l
*-rd-			rd	l
*-rz-			rz	l
*-št-			št	ss
*ū, ō			u	i

Table 2. Grammatical Isoglosses

#	Features	Gilaki		Central Caspian			East Maz.		Maz. proper
		WGil.	EGil.	Rāms.	Tonek.	Kalār	Kojur	Nur	
1	Present tense formant <i>-ən-</i>	–	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
2	Imperfect marker	-i-	–	-nâ-	-ne-	-(i)mi-	–	–	–
3	Imperfect on pres. stem	–	–	+	+	+	–	–	–
4	Plural marker	-an	-an	-šân	-šon	-šon	-un	-un	-un
5	Ending plural 2 ≠ 3	–	+	+	+	–	+	+	+
6	Ending singular 2 ≠ 3	+	+	+	+	–	–	+	+
7	Progress. auxil. before verb	–	–	–	+	+	+	+	+
8	Pres. ending is vowel final	–	–	–	–	+	+	+	+
9	Enclitic with reflexive	+	+	+	+	–	–	–	–
10	Preverb in pres./imperfect	+	+	+	+	+	–	–	–

References:

Borjian, H. 2013. *Is there Continuity between Persian and Caspian? Linguistic Relationships in South-Central Alborz*, American Oriental Society, New Haven.
 Stilo, D. 2001. Gilān x. Languages. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 10, fasc. 6: 660–668.