



McGill

Persian Language Courses
Institute of Islamic Studies
McGill University



Persian Language Courses

The Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University offers four full years of language courses, ranging from introductory through lower Intermediate and higher intermediate to advanced levels, as well as two Persian literature courses: one at the undergraduate and the other at the graduate level.

Full time faculty:

Dr. Prashant Keshavmurthy (Assistant Professor of Persian Language and Literature)

Dr. Pouneh Shabani-Jadidi (Senior Lecturer of Persian Language and Linguistics)

Persian language and literature courses:

Introductory Persian (ISLA 541, D1-D2)

In the introductory course, you will be introduced to the language first with an intensive focus on the alphabet, which will be demonstrated with examples and in comparison to the English alphabet and corresponding phonemes. Once you have acquired the alphabet and the corresponding sounds, you will learn how to combine them in writing and in pronunciation.

The focus of the course then moves smoothly to vocabulary and grammatical structures needed to communicate in simple dialogues, to read simple texts, and to write simple paragraphs. You will learn the colloquial version of Persian through simple dialogues as well as the more formal written language. The dialogues, sample examples, reading texts, and photo captions are all designed to familiarize with Persian culture and literature.

At the end of this yearlong introductory course, you will have covered all the basic principles of Persian grammar and a scope of vocabulary, which will enable you to read and write simple texts in Persian with ease. You will also be able to understand and speak about everyday topics and cultural themes.

Lower Intermediate Persian (ISLA 542, D1-D2)

This level focuses on a variety of texts. Persian language and Persian literature are closely tied; therefore, you will be introduced to different modern and classical prose and poetry at this level. In addition, you will learn morphological, semantic and syntactic complexities of the Persian language. You will be involved in different tasks and exercises to acquire these complexities and to learn to use them in speaking and listening as well as reading and writing.

At the end of this yearlong intermediate course, you will have read and discussed excerpts from a wide variety of classical and modern Persian texts both in prose and poetry. Therefore, you will be able to read, write, understand and speak about a variety of literary, historical, cultural and journalistic topics with ease.

Upper Intermediate Persian (ISLA 543)

During these two courses, you will read a variety of newspapers published in Iran (*Ettelā'āt*, *Keyhān*, *Sharq*, *E'temād*, *Irān*, and *Mardomsālāri*). The aim of this course is to provide you with an opportunity to read and discuss a variety of contemporary texts in Persian. Through various exercises, you will become familiar with news terminology as well as complex expressions and proverbs commonly used in news articles. You will also become acquainted with a variety of perspectives on international, national, and local affairs and on the arts.

Through extensive exercises, you will acquire the skill to quickly grasp the information contained within each news title and sub-title. In addition to the textbook, every week, you will practice translating a Persian prose or poetry text. At the end of these courses, you will have acquired a vast scope of vocabulary and news terminology, as well as different ways of paraphrasing a structure to a different structure while retaining the meaning. You will be able to read and translate complex Persian texts with ease.

Upper Intermediate Persian (ISLA 544)

This course is mainly in Persian. Vocabulary and grammar are not taught explicitly, but rather implicitly through the means of literature.

During this course, you will become familiar with the canonical writers, genres, and works of Persian literature that students of Persian language and literature, whether in Iran or any other country, are universally expected to know. In addition, you will encounter subtle and complex structures in the grammar implicitly through literary texts. Finally, you will achieve a general overview and understanding of major literary genres in Persian literature. Through the primary texts followed by readings, questions, and exercises in Persian, you will be involved in communicative learning and meaningful Persian input as opposed to the passive reading and translating of texts.

As recent work in linguistics has shown, the study of language, with special attention to genre, is a better way to acquire information. In addition, it helps you retain information longer and achieve higher levels of proficiency in the language.

Advanced Persian (ISLA 545)

Presupposing competency in Upper Intermediate Persian or its equivalent, this course aims to familiarize you with the rhetorical atmosphere and conventions of classical Persian literature (roughly from the 10th to the early 20th centuries C.E.) as well as modern Persian literary criticism on it. The term “literature” is here understood to cover poetry, literary prose and historical prose. Accordingly, readings for the two classes every week will alternate within the week between classical poetry/literary prose and history writing, ranging from some of the earliest instances of both genres to the latest.

Integrated with these readings will be selections of modern Iranian and Afghan literary criticism that will call on your Upper Intermediate level training in reading modern Persian to make sense of how contemporary Persian language scholars speak of texts in the classical canon. You will be expected to read as much of the assigned texts as you can before class with the help of dictionaries the course instructor will prescribe. The instructor will then lead a group reading and discussion of the text in class, guiding, correcting and supplementing your vocalized reading and spoken understanding of the text.

Persian Literature (ISLA 388)

This course is intended to introduce undergraduates, through the best available English translations, to a selection of major texts in classical and modern Persian literature from across a millennium. We will read these texts with attention to literary and conceptual topics that their authors and contemporaneous readers would themselves have attended to while also asking how our locations as twenty first century readers of medieval poems and modern novels might serve as points of interpretative vantage and disadvantage. The course aims to prepare you for future encounters with the key themes, motifs, images, values and politics of Persian literature as well as offering you an analogy for your encounters with other similarly old literary traditions.

Advanced Seminar in Persian Literature (ISLA 610)

This course will explore relations between norms and practices of literary authorship, using classical Persian literature as our main case. Our hypothesis will be that normative or theoretical thought is always somehow inadequate to its object, always in lag of it in a variety of ways. The literary norms or theories in question will range from some of the earliest Persian language reflections on *sukhan* (in its double sense as the elementary human sociality of speech as well as its elaboration as poetic fiction) from twelfth and thirteenth century Iran, India and Central Asia to medieval Sufi formulations on the semiotics and ethics of reading; from seventeenth and eighteenth century Indo-Iranian literary polemics from South Asia to meta-poetic statements embedded in late Safavid-Mughal autobiographies, masnavis, qasidahs and ghazals themselves.

These will be complemented with readings from modern Western reflections on literary authorship. Whether with reference to Euro-American literary theory or with reference to the literary theories proclaimed by pre-nineteenth century practitioners of Persian literature themselves, our aim will be to test the explanatory potential of such theories against instances from the classical Persian literary tradition. To what extent and how do such theories of linguistic meaning-making explain textual meaning? Where do they cease to explain the literary phenomena at hand, why and how might we explain the limits of these explanatory frames?



Why study Persian?

Iran's history pre-dates Islam by a thousand years to the Achaemenid Empire, and its modern vernacular - Persian - is an Indo-European language which still bears traces of its affinities with English, Germanic, and Latin-derived languages as well as Sanskrit and its cognate languages. It was already spoken in a form similar in grammar and vocabulary to its modern version by the 3rd century C.E. in Sasanid-ruled Iran. The conquest of Sasanid Iran by an Arab Muslim army in the mid 7th century and its incorporation into a succession of Muslim empires resulted in the elevation of the Persian vernacular spoken by commoners to literary status.

From the mid-eighth century until around the nineteenth century, Sasanid courtly practices informed the dominant traditions of Muslim kingship, and, from the tenth century onwards, literature and history-writing in the Persian language have formed a major Islamic civilizational tradition. This means that wherever Islamic civilization spread by land east of Iran, it was with and through the Persian language. By the nineteenth century the lands where Persian was esteemed as a language of high culture extended from Bengal to Bosnia. Studying Persian - which has changed relatively little over a thousand years - will allow you to access the classics of this literary culture and its imperial and mystical heritages within months of beginning to learn it. It will also allow you to communicate in a language spoken, written, and read by millions of people in Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, and in dispersed communities around the world.

Among the strengths of the Persian language program at the Institute are specializations ranging from modern media Persian to Sufi classics like Rumi and Hafiz. The program is structured to lead a student from the alphabet right through to the ability to read classical prose and verse, the ability to understand modern media Persian and speak modern Persian within two years. If you continue at the Institute after two years of Persian instruction you will be able to build on these abilities.

Prashant Keshavmurthy, Assistant Professor of Persian Literature

Student profile

Thomas Van Den Hoogan



Learning Persian was an incredibly fun experience. Prior to starting the classes, I had zero knowledge of the language, only speaking English and French. I had never considered myself as being gifted in learning languages, but the classes made learning an engaging and enriching experience. Learning Persian at McGill is more than just learning grammar rules and structures. The classes offer a unique cultural perspective and a tailored experience to ensure that students gain both a strong grasp of the fundamentals of the language and an understanding of how to communicate with native speakers.

The small group setting allows the professor to get to know their students and provide a personalized learning environment. Knowing of my interests in law and business, the professor took the opportunity to introduce me to additional vocabulary specific to the things in which I was interested. The program is also broad in scope, covering classical Persian poems and philosophy, as well as modern news stories and literature.

Learning also happens outside of the classroom through weekly Persian movie screenings and the famous celebration of the Persian New Year. If you would like to delve into the richness of the culture, history and language of Iran, the Persian language program will provide you an unforgettable experience.

Thomas Van Den Hoogan, McGill Student of Law

Pauline A. Froissart



Le programme de cours de langue persane m'a laissé une impression profonde et durable. J'en suis ressortie avec le sentiment, non seulement d'avoir appris et progressé énormément au niveau linguistique, mais aussi de m'être enrichie au contact d'une culture qui m'était, jusque-là, presque entièrement inconnue.

La structure de la démarche d'apprentissage réserve une place prépondérante aux aspects sociaux et culturels, que ce soit, à titre d'exemple, au moyen de la projection de films en langue originale suivie d'un débat ou de la célébration en commun du Nouvel An persan. Les méthodes utilisées favorisent également, en créant de nombreuses situations se rapprochant de contextes d'immersion, le développement d'une aisance à l'oral qui facilite grandement la prise de contact avec des locuteurs persophones et la création de réseaux de contacts. La structure des cours est également pensée de manière à renforcer les différentes compétences linguistiques (lire, écrire, écouter et parler), à rendre accessible différents niveaux de langue (formel, informel, familier) et à proposer différents modes d'apprentissage, par exemple, en alternant, d'une part, l'immersion dans des contenus linguistiques plus complexes afin de développer une connaissance « intuitive » de la langue et de ses structures et, d'autre part, des exercices de structuration et de renforcement d'éléments grammaticaux, syntaxiques, ... présentés en classe. Les contenus du cours visent également à embrasser une diversité de thématiques, historiques et actuelles, ainsi qu'une variété de styles littéraires.

Les cours de langue persane auxquels j'ai pris part m'ont offert une expérience riche et stimulante, en mobilisant une large palette d'aspects linguistiques, littéraires et culturels, et en s'inscrivant dans un contexte se rapprochant, autant qu'il est possible dans le cadre scolaire, de l'expérience d'immersion.

Pauline A. Froissart, Doctorante en philosophie islamique postclassique à l'institut d'études islamiques

Giselle Naimi



As a native Persian, I would watch TV serials and movies with my parents but I would never fully understand what was happening as I only knew the basic slang dialogue that my friends and I spoke day-to-day. I was surprised at how quickly I learned the Persian alphabet and began picking up vocabulary learned in class and recognizing it in articles or films that I would watch. The classes offered provided an engaging and enjoyable environment to learn the fundamental aspects of the Persian language, as well as the culture. During Persian New Year, students gather and celebrate the tradition of the haft-sin table, sharing of poems and music with one another. The structure of the classes as well as course materials allow students to use the knowledge learned in class for greater purpose than in the classroom. I have never been confident in public speaking but with the presentations at the end of each term, I have improved and developed the courage to speak in front of a crowd, which will benefit me in my future path of pursuing Law. Class sizes are small which allow more one-on-one consultation with the Professor, allowing students to fully benefit from the program. Class materials cover more than just Persian language—it covers poetry, the media, weekly film screenings, as well as classical and contemporary literature. I not only gained experience and knowledge about the culture, history and language of Iran, but I gained a family who provided encouragement and support throughout the years!

Giselle Naimi, McGill Student of Political Science



The Institute of Islamic Studies offers an undergraduate degree in Persian, which can be combined with core subjects in the Institute including but not limited to Islamic Civilisation, Islamic Mysticism: Sufism, Islamic Philosophy and Theology, or with additional Islamic world languages, including Arabic, Turkish, and Urdu.

For more information, please visit the Institute of Islamic Studies at <https://www.mcgill.ca/islamicstudies/>

