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Persian language planning: Abbreviation

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Abstract. One of the challenges facing translators, terminologists and language planners in some countries, including Iran, is the English abbreviated forms which increasingly enter textbooks and academic discourse. In Iran there is no general agreement on how to deal with abbreviated forms and the issue continues to be the focus of discussion to the present day. The Academy of Persian Language and Literature pursue the coinage of Persian abbreviated forms as equivalents for English ones.

The main objective of this study is to determine the applicability of abbreviation in the Persian language and the outcomes of the Academy of Persian Language and Literature are the source of data gathering.

The investigation reveals that Persian employs its own method for shortening terms and appellations which is in harmony with the morphosyntactic and phonological structure of the language as well as the psycholinguistic paradigms of the language community.

This study does not abandon the use of abbreviation in Persian but indicates that Persian language planners can play a valuable role in streamlining abbreviation in the language to reduce the disadvantages of abbreviated forms and to make the outcomes more intelligible for the language community. In order to attain this goal language planners need to consider all existing Persian-specific word/term formation methods and the language community's psycholinguistic factors.

Keywords. Language planning, abbreviation, Persian, The Academy of Persian Language and Literature.

1. Introduction

Abbreviation is considered as a powerful method of word/term formation in some languages, like English and German, and the number of abbreviated forms in such languages is rapidly increasing in business, scientific, and technical language, as well as in everyday use. However, the review of abbreviated forms in the Persian language reveals the limited recognition of abbreviation as a dynamic word/term formation method. The infrequency of abbreviation in Persian is widely considered as a problem which is not yet solved (Kafi 1991, Mansouri 2007, Zahedi and Sharifi 2009, Mokhtari-Memar 1998, Zakei 2001). There are even some official efforts undertaken to accelerate the coinage of this method by the Academy of Persian Language and Literature.

Extensiveness of English academic abbreviated forms on the one hand, and the lack of a strategic direction on how to deal with them in Persian on the other hand, lead to decision-making on a case by case basis. This procedure is time consuming and expensive for authors and translators as well as terminology committees and councils at the Academy of Persian Language and Literature.

This study focuses on the abbreviation policy introduced by the Academy of Persian Language and Literature and its outcomes. The main objective is to determine the applicability of abbreviation in the Persian language. The main audience of this paper is language planners, terminologists, translators and textbook compilers.

The abbreviated forms approved by the Academy in different fields of knowledge are the source of data gathering for this study.

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This paper is structured as follows: section 2 is a historical summary of the issue; section 3 presents a study of efforts in this field conducted by the Academy of Persian Language and Literature and the results; section 4 is a discussion, and section 5 summarizes and concludes the paper.

I need to mention that while acknowledging that a number of different definitions for and categories of abbreviation designations exist, in this paper I mainly follow ISO documents. Therefore, abbreviated form is used as a superordinate term for short forms, clipped terms, abbreviations, initialisms, acronyms, and the like (ISO 704- 2009).

2. Background

It is believed that the need to convey more information in less space and the difficulty of engraving on coins, seals and inscriptions induced the application of abbreviated forms in Old and Middle Persian. New Persian, which is the natural continuum of Old and Middle Persian, is the Persian language spoken from the time of the Arab conquest of Iran in the 7th century and which is written with the Perso-Arabic script. No abbreviated forms were used in early new Persian scientific books, including those by the influential philosophers Avicenna and Abu Rayhan Biruni, while at the same time, abbreviated forms were common in the Arabic religious and philosophic books of the time including those authored by Iranians (Kafi, 1991).

In contemporary Persian, the number of abbreviation designations is not considerable. The number of abbreviated forms in Persian is estimated to be less than 1,000. Zahedi and Sharifi (2009) found about 400 in dictionaries, articles and advertisements. Mokhtari-Memar (1998) extracted about 500 abbreviation designations from different Persian texts and shop signs, and the Committee for Abbreviation (2000: 11) at the Academy of Persian Language and Literature reported about 900 in its report. Abbreviated forms are chiefly used in dictionaries, encyclopedias, and the appellations of organizations and institutions.

Interestingly, Persian abbreviation designations in army terminology are probably historically and quantitatively at the top of the list. Ahani (2010) suggests the necessity of observing the principles of security and cryptography as well as the importance of rapid transfer of messages in military forces are the reasons behind this phenomenon. Another opinion is that military education with the assistance of American advisors during and after the Second World War was the cause of the rather extensive use of abbreviated forms in Persian military terminology.

On the other hand, Abolhassani and Pooshaneh (2011) studied the increasing rate of abbreviated forms from 1960s to 1990s by contrasting the proportion of clipped forms, acronyms and blending, with other word/term forms in Persian political journalism. The result is not promising because the incidence of clipped forms and acronyms increased only 3% over the period and blends showed only a slight difference.

Those in favour of abbreviated forms believe abbreviation makes scientific and non-scientific texts explicit and elegant; and moreover that they save time and text. Hence, abbreviation methods should be encouraged in the Persian language (Ahani 2012, Ghiasi Rad and Abolhassani 2005, Kafi 1991, Mokhtari-Memar 1998, Zahedi and Sharifi 2009, Committee for Abbreviation 2000, Zakeri 2001). Kafi (1991) posits that in the modern age, the lack of abbreviations indicates insufficiency in a language. He argues the necessity of encouraging abbreviation in two ways: 1) Persian is widely used to transfer information in the language community. Therefore, it should be concise, clear, quick, economic and easy-to-transfer, and 2) if Persian abbreviations are not encouraged, then non-Persian ones will penetrate instead which result in damage to the language. He notes that there is no serious obstacle in Persian abbreviation processes and advises their coinage and usages as soon as possible. Mansouri, physicist, explains that physics PhD dissertations in Iran are written completely in Persian. Mansouri continues that he regrets the lack of a solution for abbreviation processes in Persian as a language of science (2007: 68). As a solution, Mokhtari-Memar (1998) introduces a number of existing and potential Persian

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abbreviated designations to encourage people to use them.

An alternative approach is made by Majd (2009, 2011) who examined a small number of abbreviated designations coined by the Academy of Persian Language and Literature. He claims abbreviation, or in his own words causeless omission of letters, is not applicable in the Persian language as it does not convey any meaning for Persian speakers.

Admittedly, abbreviation in Persian has received much attention in recent decades. Nevertheless, publishers, authors and translators of scientific books employ different strategies to address foreign abbreviated forms; including substitution by Persian equivalent's full form, adoption in its original alphabet, or transliteration into Persian. These chaotic methods of translation continue to be used arbitrarily to the present day.

Therefore, while there is no general agreement on how to deal with abbreviated forms introduced to Persian a number of new examples enter the language every day, especially from English as the global language, the language of science and technology and the primary form of international business communications.

The Academy of Persian Language and Literature decided to take the first official step to solve the problem in 1996. Historically, there were two other academies in Iran. The Academy of Iran was active from 1935 to 1941 and the Iranian Academy of Language was founded in 1970 and ceased all the activities after the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. The two first Persian academies did not engage in abbreviation. Their chief concern was to coin Persian equivalents for imported terms. The Academy of Persian Language and Literature (the third Academy), as the highest authority responsible for language planning in Iran, was established in 1991 to preserve and improve the Persian language. The Academy, that itself frequently encounters English abbreviated forms as it constructs equivalents for non-Persian terms, could not simply employ an arbitrary style as individuals and publishers have. Hence, it founded the Committee for Abbreviation at the Terminology Department in 1996 to examine present abbreviated forms in Persian and develop a strategy to address the issue.

The Committee for Abbreviation was primarily composed of two linguists, one engineer in electronics, one expert in librarianship and information science and one researcher in terminology. After about three years and the examination of 23 dictionaries, encyclopedias and biographical encyclopedia, the Committee released its conclusions in a final report in 2000.

The Committee concluded that abbreviations are vital for the enjoyment of easy communication and quick transfer of information. In terms of practical recommendations, the report advised the coinage of abbreviated forms for: 1) the ministries and organizations with multiple word appellations, and 2) university textbook terminologies. The Committee also recommended that it was necessary to standardize the abbreviated forms in dictionaries, encyclopedias and biographical encyclopedias. Although the Committee for Abbreviation ceased to be active in 2002, the issue continues to be the focus of discussion in terminology committees and councils at the Terminology Department to the present day.

3. Abbreviation planning in Iran

One of the main activities of the Academy of Persian Language and Literature is to make equivalents for non-Persian terms which enter into Persian terminologies. The policy is implemented by the Terminology Department that began its activity in 1996 and presently is comprised of over 70 terminology committees across different fields of science, arts and humanities.

One of the challenges facing the Terminology Department from the beginning of its activity is the English LSP abbreviated forms which increasingly enter textbooks and academic discourse. Hence, abbreviation in Persian is a very familiar issue for researchers and the members of terminology committees and councils who devote much time to discussing it. The policy of the Department, as it was outlined in the report of the Committee for Abbreviation, is to pursue the coinage of

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Persian abbreviated forms. The outcomes of the Committee for Abbreviation, as well as the experiences gathered via making equivalents for English terms (including abbreviated forms) at the Terminology Department, resulted in a revised version of The Principles and Regulations of Terminology being issued by the Academy of Persian Language and Literature in 2009. This resource categorizes Persian abbreviated forms as follow: 1) Single-letter abbreviations, 2) Multi-letter abbreviations (Initialisms), 3) Truncated forms, 4) Contracted forms, 5) Blended forms, and 6) Acronyms.

In keeping with this categorization, in this section I investigate the two proposed fields for abbreviation as recommended by the Committee for Abbreviation: 1) the appellations of ministries with multiple word appellations, and 2) academic terminologies. The first has been followed up by neither the relevant bodies nor the Terminology Department, and the latter has remained the main mission of the Department to the present time. The main objective of the first examination is to understand the natural and unplanned behavior of Persian and the second part attempts to evaluate the potential for Persian abbreviation to move forward as quickly as in English.

3.1. Abbreviation for ministries with multiple word appellations

The Committee for Abbreviation advised the coinage of abbreviated forms for the ministries with multiple word appellations, that is, 13 out of 18 Iranian ministries. Investigations show none of them but one has ever officially used any of the six abbreviated forms named in The Principles and Regulations of Terminology. However, all 13 ministries already enjoy a method of abbreviation which is not formalized in the mentioned resource. They use an abbreviated method that uses fewer words to designate the same concept, a result known as short form (ISO, 2009: 52). An English example is Security Council as a short form for Security Council of the United Nations. All short forms are formulated through natural and unplanned processes by ordinary Persian speakers and are commonly used in spoken and written Persian; the same way that many of abbreviations and acronyms in English are created.

Interestingly enough, the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs which is founded in less than two years ago received its short form from its establishment by Persian speaking community and appeared in media and everyday usage.

The only ministry possessing an acronym form is the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology. To obtain a phonologically pleasant acronym, it is transliterated into English as ATF while OTF corresponds to the phonology of the relevant full form and this makes decoding the acronym more problematic. In any case, The acronym form is not yet a workable substitute for the short form so far and is unfamiliar to the community.

The other five ministries have single word appellations and obviously have no need to be shortened.

Thus, if the Academy of Persian Language and Literature does officially recognize short forms as a Persian abbreviation method, not only it will enjoy one of the most practical term formation methods but also will avoid some difficulties, such as interference of the potential abbreviated forms with the existing ones, that is, the short forms.

3.2. Abbreviation in academic terminologies

In order to investigate the potentiality of abbreviation in Persian, data has been gathered from approved terms after the implementation of abbreviation planning for academic terms.

The Academy of Persian Language and Literature has approved about 35,000 equivalents for non-Persian terms to date and has published them in 9 volumes. The collection of all approved terms during the period of 2008 to 2011 was selected as the material for this study, that is, volumes 5, 6, 7 and 8. Subsequently, English and coined Persian abbreviated forms were

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extracted for analysis. Finally, English and Persian abbreviated forms were contrasted to see: 1) to what extent it was possible to coin Persian abbreviated forms for English ones, and 2) which of the six abbreviation methods named in The Principles and Regulations of Terminology were employed more frequently.

During the period of 2008 to 2011 the Academy of Persian Language and Literature approved 16,800 Persian equivalents for English terms from a wide range of fields. As Table 1 shows, 293 of the English terms have abbreviated designations, and after several discussions in terminology committees and councils, 84 of them acquired Persian abbreviated equivalents.

Admittedly, the results from this recent period are based on the knowledge and experiences of the Department in the field of abbreviation gathered during its several years of experience with the issue, forming a valuable basis for implementing its abbreviation plan. Despite this extensive experience however, only 84 out of 293 English abbreviated forms attained Persian equivalents, namely 28.6%.

Year	Approved Terms	English Abbreviated forms	Persian Abbreviated equivalents	Persian Abbreviated forms
2008	5000	118	12	0
2009	4200	115	5	0
2010	3700	34	38	4
2011	3900	26	29	3
Total number	**16800**	**293**	**84**	**7**

Table 1: Number of approved terms by the Academy of Persian Language and Literature

Another striking result is that Persian abbreviated designations are barely coined for the English terms with no abbreviated forms; that is, in only 7 cases. Thus, it may be reasonable to assume that in almost all cases the mere existence of English abbreviated forms initiated the coinage of Persian abbreviated equivalents, rather than a need for filling a gap deriving from the Persian language. A closer look at the data shows that it seems no other criteria, such as term length or frequency, played a role in selecting term candidates for abbreviation.

In addition, the examination indicates that in constructing the majority of approved abbreviated forms, combinations of the six abbreviation methods named in The Principles and Regulations of Terminology—alongside some undefined methods—were employed to obtain phonologically pleasant acronyms.

4. Discussions and results

In this section, I discuss 1) both the natural and the planned behavior of the Persian language in dealing with abbreviation, based on the results obtained in this study, and 2) whether the infrequency of abbreviation in Persian is a matter of regret. Finally, I will provide some basic issues for language planners to resolve, which may shed some light on the subject and fill a gap in Persian terminology, translation and especially language planning.

4.1. Abbreviation in Persian: Unplanned versus planned

Kafi (1991) investigated Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary and estimated nearly 10% of English words and compounds are abbreviated forms; or in Zhou's words around 5,000,000 (2012: 102-103), while the previous studies on abbreviation, using the existing materials, reported maximum 900 Persian abbreviated forms (Committee for Abbreviation, 2000). These statistics reveal that the applicability of abbreviation methods in Persian and hence the number of abbreviated forms, in comparison with English, is paltry in comparison. In spite of this fact, the above-mentioned studies, that supported abbreviated forms, principally abbreviations and acronyms in English, concluded that the Persian language is potentially capable of making abbreviated forms likewise.

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However, the results of this study provide more nuanced information for assessing the applicability of abbreviation in Persian than merely encouraging it or seeking ways to increase the number of abbreviations and acronyms. The Persian speaking community enjoys its own strategies for shortening terms and appellations; first and foremost short forms. In addition, as Table 1 shows, employing an official plan which ignores the most feasible alternative for English abbreviated forms (short forms) seems to be fulfilled in only a small percentage of cases (less than 30%). It should be noted that the chance of the acceptance of the coined abbreviated forms by Persian speaking community is another question which needs a separate psycholinguistic study.

4.2. Infrequency of abbreviation: Regret or satisfaction

This study does not probe the reasons for infrequency of abbreviation in Persian but it evaluates the situation in order to develop a more practical plan for abbreviation. The actual situation is that Persian planners encourage abbreviation (other than short forms), both in theory and in practice. However, as it is explicitly mentioned in the report by the Committee for Abbreviation, abbreviation processes are not commonly accepted by the language community and full forms are repeatedly used in spoken and written Persian without being acknowledged as a source of annoyance (2000: 2). Although it is not noted in the report, it should be indicated that wide usage of short forms, pronouns and some other strategies, play an important role in avoiding annoying repetitions. Therefore, it seems the Persian speaking community does not see a lack and hence does not welcome abbreviation methods warmly; seemingly with the exception of short forms. The report by the Committee confirms this notion by suggesting that while the majority of abbreviations are chiefly used in dictionaries, encyclopedia, and some geographical dictionaries, they are rarely used in other scientific texts and even if they do appeared in such texts, they are mostly expressed as full forms (Committee for Abbreviation, 2000).

It may be reasonable to infer that Persian employs its own method for shortening terms and appellations which is in harmony with the morphosyntactic and phonological structure of the language as well as the psycholinguistic paradigms of the language community.

Admirers of abbreviations and acronyms adduce the principle of least effort and the economy principle in support of it. Nonetheless, as Leopold argues: "Linguistic development follows not one tendency, but two opposing ones: towards distinctness and towards economy. Either of these poles prevails, but both are present and alternately preponderant." (Leopold, 1930: 102) The results of this study show Persian speaking community tends towards the middle of the spectrum and employs the construction of short forms as prevailing abbreviation method. This method not only meets the economy principle and the principle of least effort in a moderate manner but also avoids some problematic consequences of abbreviations and acronyms; such as:

- ○ increasing homonymy and ambiguity,
- ○ intransparency of terms,
- ○ phonological variants,
- ○ enlarging the gap between generations, among professionals from different disciplines and between professionals and non-professionals,
- ○ forming a barrier between industry and academia, and
- ○ imposing extra expenses for publishing abbreviation dictionaries and the time spent looking up and decoding an encrypted language in the same language.

4.3. Future prospects for abbreviation planning

The realization of a practical plan requires resolving some theoretical issues:

1. As every language presents different characteristics, the question is whether the Persian language is morphologically capable of constructing abbreviated forms?

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2. Even some supporters of abbreviation who regret the infrequency of abbreviated forms believe that the Persian language is capable of communicating properly even at higher and more specialised levels (Mansouri 2007, Committee for Abbreviation 2000). Therefore, a fundamental question is whether rapidly increasing abbreviated forms in English creates intimidation and turns abbreviation into a highly intriguing topic in Persian or whether it heightens the need for enhanced abbreviated forms.

3. As this study shows, on the one hand short forms are the most common abbreviated forms in Persian and on the other hand some other abbreviated forms which are advocated by the Academy of Persian Language and Literature are not widely used by the language community. The question is, as the Academy ignores short forms and insists on its own coined abbreviations, what psycholinguistic response the language community will have to the coined abbreviated forms. Another question is whether language planning is more fruitful if it behaves like genetic engineering or like gardening.

Even after resolving the above-mentioned issues, the key issue remains open to question, that is, whether abbreviation plays a role in efficient communication, and the development of languages, science and economy.

5. Conclusion

Prior works have stressed the necessity of increasing abbreviation in the Persian language. However, these studies have either focused on the extensive number of abbreviated forms in English or stressed on the principle of least effort and the economy principle. In this study I examined the plan by the Academy of Persian Language and Literature which supports abbreviation and names single-letter abbreviations, multi-letter abbreviations, truncated forms, contracted forms, blended forms and initialisms as Persian abbreviation methods.

The first investigation in this study examined the ministry appellations which were suggested to gain abbreviated forms by the Committee for Abbreviation in order to test the necessity of abbreviation forms in the suggested scope and understand the unplanned behavior of the Persian language. The results showed that all the appellations already enjoy short forms, and the potential abbreviated forms can hardly substitute them. The only problem is that short forms, in spite of their frequent occurrence in the language, for an unknown reason are not officially recognized as abbreviated forms by the Academy.

The second part of the study examined the approved abbreviated forms to assess the potentiality of abbreviation in Persian based on the extent to which the Academy's abbreviation plan has met its intended aims. According to the findings it seems that in less than 30% of the cases it was possible to coin abbreviated equivalents for English abbreviated forms. In other words, apart from the fact that term coinage does not necessarily imply its acceptance by the language community, the plan is still far from obtaining the desired results. The reason lies beneath this basic question that if the plan is aimed to fill a gap in Persian, or as Fishman argues, "Language planning – when engaged in under auspices of modernization and with modernization as the goal, generally results in making languages even more capable of translating American life, even when suffusing the translations with the aura and the pretense of greater or lesser degrees of indigenization. (2000: 50)

This study does not abandon the use of abbreviation in Persian but indicates that Academy's policy and plan towards abbreviation requires reconsideration. Persian language planners can play a valuable role in streamlining abbreviation in the language through delimiting the scope of usage and application as far as possible to reduce disadvantages, and defining abbreviation and its methods clearly so that the outcomes will be more intelligible for the language community and enhance communication in general and professional contexts. The Academy needs to consider all existing Persian-specific methods as well as the language community's psycholinguistic factors in order to increase the likely success of its strategies.

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