

*Persian* or *Farsi* ?

How should we call the official language of Iran when we speak English?

It is usually referred to as *Persian*, although some call it *Farsi*.

Similar to many other issues related to language, the choice of terminology in this case is a very sensitive one, and has been the topic of hot debates. Let's see if we can come up with some sort of middle ground based on facts.

*Persian* is the English version/translation of *Farsi*.

So, it makes sense to call it *Persian* when we speak English.

How would we then call the other two variants of the same language, namely *Dari* and *Tajiki*? If we label the three as *Persian*, *Dari*, and *Tajiki*, we will miss the tight genetic relationship between them: they are all derived from one single parent, and are linguistically variants of the same language. They are definitely not three different languages.

One solution is to employ *Persian* for *Farsi*, and call the other two variants *Tajiki-Persian* and *Dari-Persian*. This type of labeling clearly shows the relationship between the three variants, given the fact that all three variants are derived from *Middle Persian* or *Farsi-ye Miyane*.

But wait, the unmarked usage of *Persian*, referring to *Farsi*, gives the impression that this variant is the main version, and the other two have derived from it. This is not true linguistically though: the syntactic properties of *Tajiki* and *Dari*, for example, are closer to the syntax of the earlier stages of *Persian* than *Farsi* is.

A second solution is to follow the existing tradition used for other languages: the two major variants of Portuguese, for example, are called *European Portuguese* versus *Brazilian Portuguese*. *British English* versus *Standard American English* is another example. Given this analogy, we will arrive at *Iranian Persian* (for *Farsi*), *Tajiki Persian*, and *Dari (Afghani) Persian*.

I don't see any problem with this solution.

However, there is a simpler solution. Namely, we call the language simply *Persian* in our every day practice, referring to all three variants. When there is a need to specify which variant we are referring to, as it is definitely the case in linguistic analyses, we specify them as *Farsi*, *Tajiki*, and *Dari*, still under the cover term *Persian*.

In other words, *Persian* is used as a cover term in every day language, while *Farsi* is used in specialized academic/linguistic analyses.

This is how I have employed these terms over the last two decades. I am open though to any suggestion that is based on facts, rather than emotions. (Karimi@u.arizona.edu)