An Introduction to the Persian Language
By Narguess Farzad

Persian is one of the oldest living languages of the world and one of the few whose millennium-old prose and poetry is perfectly understood by its modern native speakers and by those who learn it properly as a second language.

Persian is an Indo-European language and therefore speakers of European languages will find it a lot easier to learn than, say, a Semitic language such as Arabic or a Sinitic language such as Chinese. As a speaker of a European language you already know several dozens of Persian words that share a common ancestry with languages such as English or German, and I do not mean European words such as ‘tāksi’ (taxi), ‘terāctor’ (tractor), ‘sinemā’ or ‘resturān’, (restaurant) but rather words such as ‘barādar’ (brother), ‘abrou’ (eyebrow), ‘dokhtar’ (daughter), ‘setāre’ (star) or phrases such ‘nām-e man’, (literary meaning ‘name of mine’, or ‘my name’). Many English words such as band, beggar, builder, check-mate, pyjamas, chinaware, tulip, taffeta, orange, lemon, spinach, aubergine, cash and many more have their origins in Persian.

Persian is the official language of Iran, as Tajiki, written in the Russian, Cyrillic alphabet, it is the official language of Tajikistan and as Dari it is one of the two official languages of Afghanistan.

As Muslim armies of Arabia began to conquer their neighbouring lands in the 7th century the local languages of conquered Iraq, Syria and Egypt, for example, were gradually wiped and were superseded by Arabic. Iran was the
only country in that region whose language, Persian, was not replaced by Arabic. Although Persian started to be written in what became the Perso-Arabic script it retained its solid grammatical features and indeed after it became a Muslim empire in its own right, it took the Perso-Arabic script and numerous Persian loan words further East to many parts of the Indian subcontinent, the Malay Archipelago, Brunei (Jawi script) and to the borders of China (Uyghur). Until the 18th century Persian was the official court and administrative language of India.

Learning the script may strike you as daunting but be assured that it is more difficult for a speaker of Persian to learn English than it would be for you to learn Persian.

Many westerners’ first encounter with Iran or the word Persian could have been through a whole host of media, old and new. These days hardly a day passes when some reference to Iran, positive or negative, is not covered by global news outlets. However, for many the image of Iran, or Persia, is conjured through the study of ancient history and wars with the Greeks, travel books, works of literature, films and of course the spectacular examples of Islamic architecture.

In the 1588 play Tamburlaine, Christopher Marlowe intrigued his audiences with accounts of conquests of the great central Asian emperor of the same name as he wrote: ‘is it not passing brave, to be a king, and ride in triumph through Persepolis’, and in 2007, the Academy Award nominated film, Persepolis, based on Marjane Satrapi’s autobiographical graphic novel, once again brought the name of the seat of the ancient Persian empire, to audiences across the world.
Persepolis, this most spectacular of ancient desert cities world-over and a UNESCO World Heritage site, known as Takht-e Jamshid, throne of Jamshid in Persian, is about 850 km south of the Iranian capital Tehran and was founded at around 515 BCE by Cyrus the Great, the founder of one of the greatest empires, both in size and influence, that the world has ever known. The cuneiform tablets, rock-reliefs and other archaeological finds in this city give us examples of Old Persian, the first phase in the development of the modern language of Iran (known to its local speakers as Farsi), large sections of Central Asia (known as Tajik) and Afghanistan (known as Dari).

Persepolis (Greek interpretation of perses polis ‘Persian City’) is situated in central Iran with its famous city of Shiraz, homeland of some Iran’s most famous poets, enchanting rose-gardens and lush, paradise-on-earth orchards, and of course the home of the Shiraz grape. This region is historically, the true home of Persian, although dialectical features of Persian vary as you travel throughout Iran.

Robert Byron, in his critically acclaimed book The Road to Oxiana, (1937) gives a magical and entertaining account of his ten-month travels in Iran and Afghanistan in 1933 and 1934, including a journey to Persepolis. This book has captured the imagination of, and inspired many later travel-writers. He interlaces his observations on Persian architecture, gardens, customs and officialdom with references to the language too:

“The day’s journey had a wild exhilaration. Up and down the mountains, over the endless flats, we bumped and swooped. The sun flayed us. Great spirals of dust, dancing like demons over the desert, stopped our dashing Chevrolet. Suddenly, from far across a valley, came the flash of a turquoise jar,
bobbing along on a donkey. Its owner walked beside it, clad in a duller blue. And seeing the two I understood why blue is the Persian colour, and why the Persian word for it means water as well.”

The Persian word for water is ‘āb’, formed from the first two letters of the Persian alphabet, ‘ā’ and ‘b’, written in the Perso-Arabic script (read from right to left) as آب. Wherever there is ‘āb’, or water, there will be prosperity and the first steps in development of human settlements. You find the Persian word ‘ābād’, a euphemism for city, in many Central and South Asian city-names such as Ahmadabad, Hyderabad, Ashgabat and Islamabad. Does the Persian word ‘ābād’ not remind you of the English word ‘abode’? This is only one example of the numerous words that thanks to their common Indo-European ancestry, Persian and English share.

The Persian words for several colours are formed by adding an –i sound (pronounced as the ‘ea’ in ‘easy’) to an object or fruit that is in that colour. Therefore, as Robert Byron discovered, Persian for ‘blue’ is ‘ābi’, that is ‘āb’ (water) + i. Similarly, the colour described in English as ‘khaki’ comes from the Persian ‘khāk’ (dust, earth) + i. Colour brown is: ‘qahve’+i which is made up of ‘qahve’ (coffee, or closer still think of cafe) and ‘i’. Can you guess what colour ‘nārenji’ is? Think of the Italian pronunciation of a particular citrus fruit.
Numbers

Persian numbers originate from the Hindu-Arabic numeral systems, developed by Indian mathematicians and then adopted by the Persian mathematician Khawrazmi in 825 CE. After further modification by Arab mathematicians these numbers spread to the western world in the 11th and 12th centuries. You can see, for example, that if you rotate the Persian number ٣ by 90° anti-clockwise, you will arrive at the European, ‘Arabic’ number 3. The table below shows the common Arabic and Persian numbers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Western Arabic numbers</th>
<th>١</th>
<th>٢</th>
<th>٣</th>
<th>٤</th>
<th>٥</th>
<th>٦</th>
<th>٧</th>
<th>٨</th>
<th>٩</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Persian numbers</td>
<td>۱</td>
<td>۲</td>
<td>۳</td>
<td>۴</td>
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<td>۶</td>
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<td>۹</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arabic numbers</td>
<td>۱</td>
<td>۲</td>
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<td>۶</td>
<td>۷</td>
<td>۸</td>
<td>۹</td>
</tr>
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The Persian numeral ۵ is ‘panj’ and is written as ۵ looking like an upside down heart. The Indian State ‘Punjāb’ is really the Persian ‘panj-āb’ literary meaning ‘five waters’ that is the land of five rivers. The shape of the numeral five is derived from the print of the sole of one’s hand, where the five fingers point upwards and the middle finger is the tip, while the lower part reflects the heart shaped base of the hand.

Persian numbers are written from left to right and on the whole, and compared to some other combined number systems such as French for example, are remarkably easy to learn.
Persian, known to its native, Iranian speakers as *Farsi*, is the official language of modern day Iran, and in its varieties is spoken in many parts of Afghanistan and the central Asian republics of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Historically Persian has been a much more widely understood language in an area ranging from the Middle East to India. Sizeable minority populations in other Persian Gulf countries (Bahrain, Iraq, Oman, People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen, and the United Arab Emirates), as well as large diaspora communities in Turkey, Europe, Australia, the USA and Canada, also speak Persian.

The Persian spoken in Afghanistan is known as *Dari*. The dialectal variation between *Farsi* and *Dari* can be compared to that between European French and Canadian French, or the BBC received pronunciation of English and the English spoken in Australia or South Africa.

The Persian language of Tajikistan is known as *Tajiki*, which is written in the Cyrillic (Russian) script. *Tajiki* had minimal contact with other Persian speaking countries during the Soviet era and contains a large number of Russian words as well as archaic Persian words.

Modern Persian, also known as New Persian is the linguistic continuation of Middle Persian, itself a successor to Old Persian, the language of ancient Iran up to about 330 BCE. Old, Middle and New Persian represent one and the same language at three stages of its history and development.

The oldest records of New Persian that have survived date from about the middle of fourth century CE.
Iran is one of the few countries that has had a continuing influence in shaping contemporary history and also played a prominent role in the early history of civilization.

Iran's history as a nation of people dates back to the second millennium BCE. In succession to the empires of Assyria and Babylon, Iran became the major power in the Middle East in the sixth century BCE, when the Persian Empire of Cyrus, Xerxes and Darius stretched from the shores of Greece to the edge of India. In the fourth century BCE Iran's hegemony was briefly interrupted by the short-lived dominion of Alexander the Great and his successors, but under the Parthian and Sasanian rulers Iran was again a dominant political power.

Iran's ancient religion, Zoroastrianism, is considered one of the earliest monotheistic religions. It has probably influenced mankind more than any other faith, for it had a profound impact on Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Strong adherence to Zoroastrian beliefs and rituals continues among its modern followers in Iran, India and throughout the world.

Historically the Silk Road, a trade route that made ancient economic exchanges between the West and the East possible and allowed this delicate commodity to reach the markets in Rome, passed through Iran, which acted as a major junction between these trading nations.

Iran is also an immensely fascinating modern state. One of the more significant countries of the Middle East with a predominantly young population of nearly 70 million and sixteenth in size among the countries of the world, Iran is located in one of the most strategically important parts of
our planet, linking Central Asia and the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent to Europe. One of the founding members of the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Iran is also the third largest oil producing country with one of the largest natural gas reserves and oil tanker fleets.

For veteran travellers in search of the new and the under explored, Iran is an exciting tourist destination, offering breathtaking contrasts of nature as well as a wealth of ancient and medieval sites. Of the world’s 12 places recognised and registered in the “Index of World Human Heritage” by UNESCO, three are located in Iran, making it seventh in the word in term of possessing significant world heritage sites and according to the photo journalist Nick Smith, Iran “knocks spots off the overcrowded, commercialized mega-archaeology of Egypt, Greece and even Turkey”.

The home of miniature paintings, calligraphy, exquisite carpets and vibrant glazed tile-works, the art of Iran remains a popular area of research and study for artists and students alike.

In recent years the success of Iranian films in international festivals winning hundreds of prestigious awards, world-wide retrospective of Iranian directors, and popular screenings in many major capitals, has placed Iranian cinema firmly on the map, inviting comparison to Italian neo-realism and similar movements in the past decades.
Linguistic Development

It is estimated that the Iranian tribes came to settle on the plateau of Iran at the beginning of the first millennium BCE. However, the most ancient traces of Old Persian dates back to about the 600 BCE. Examples of Old Persian are found in the form of inscriptions of Cyrus the Great and Darius I at Bisitun and Persepolis in Iran, sites that feature as highlights of archaeological tours of Iran.

By 400 BCE, Old Persian was heading for extinction and a new system of linguistic expression with relatively greater simplicity was established as the *lingua franca* of the Persian Empire. Middle Persian became the official, religious and literary language of Iran in 3rd-7th centuries CE.

By the end of the 10th century CE, some three hundred years after the Islamic conquest, New Persian came to be written in the much clearer Arabic alphabet that replaced the old, Aramaic ideograms. Before long New Persian spread over a much larger area extending to Xinjiang and to Central and South Asia.

Phonetically and grammatically, the degree of evolution from Old to Middle Persian is considerable, the differences being comparable with differences between Latin and French for example. On the other hand New Persian remains in many respects quite close to Middle Persian. For example more than 60% of Persian vocabulary is identical to the Middle Persian words. This means that most educated Persian speakers would have some idea of
what their fore-bearers of more than a millennium ago might be saying in the event of a chance meeting. Another distinctive difference is that Old Persian was written from left to right, but Middle and New Persian are written from right to left.
Does learning Persian help with learning other languages?

In a word, yes. Until recent centuries, Persian was culturally and historically one of the most prominent languages of the Middle East and the Indian sub-continent. Persian is the second language of Islam and was instrumental in the spread of the faith during the reign of the Moguls in the Indian subcontinent. For example, it was an important language during the reign of the Moguls in India, where knowledge of Persian was cultivated and held in very high esteem. To a lesser extent it was instrumental in bringing the Arabic script, known as ‘Jawi’, to Malaysia. Nowadays, ‘Jawi’ is less commonly used and a Romanised Malay writing script has gained more of an official status. However, Jawi is written in the Perso-Arabic script. The use of Persian in the courts of Mogul rulers ended in 1837 when it was banned by officials of the East India Company, but not before the development of a Persian-Indian vernacular. Persian poetry is still a significant part of the literature of the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent.

Very close links between Persian and Urdu, and the presence of numerous Persian words in Turkish, offers a high degree of mutual intelligibility to speakers of these languages and the study of Ottoman Turkish literature without the knowledge of Persian would be meaningless. ‘Malay’ also contains endless Persian words and for scholars of Malay literature a classical Persian dictionary is often amongst their most used reference books.

If you are interested in learning other modern Iranian languages, such as Baluchi or Kurdish, knowledge of Persian and the Perso-Arabic script helps.
For example, all the languages listed below are all written in this script or were written in it until very recently:

    Assyrian, Southern Azeri (spoken by 20 million people in Iran), Hausa (gradually superseded by Romanised script), Kashmiri, Punjabi of Pakistan, Pashtu, Sindhi and Uyghur until very recently, although there are now efforts underway to use an adapted Latin alphabet for writing in this language.
How Difficult is Persian to Learn?

New Persian, that is the language of modern Iran, is written in the Arabic script, but as a language it belongs to the Indo-European family of languages like Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and English. This may in part explain why speakers of European languages find learning Persian relatively easy to begin with. Moreover, some basic vocabulary that is comparable to English, added to similarity of syntax, compensates for the initial strangeness of the alphabet. Words such as *barādar*, ‘brother’; *pedar*, ‘father’; *mādar*, ‘mother’; *dokhtar* ‘daughter’; *setāreh*, ‘star’; *tārik*, ‘dark’; *lab*, ‘lip’; *abru*, ‘eyebrow’; *dar*, ‘door’; and many more illustrate the common Indo-European genealogy which English and Persian share.

Look at the following examples of words with their Indo-European connections that are commonly used in Persian and English:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Persian</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>candy</td>
<td>qand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drug</td>
<td>dāru</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(orig:dārug)</td>
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<tr>
<td>physician</td>
<td>pezeshk</td>
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<tr>
<td>juvenile, Italian</td>
<td>javān</td>
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<tr>
<td>giovane</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>body</td>
<td>badan</td>
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<tr>
<td>internal</td>
<td>andarun</td>
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By taking a few certain rules into account you will see a closer similarity still between the words above. First rule is that unlike English, no Persian word begins with two consonants. Therefore a Persian speaker would find the English words like ‘brown’, ‘stop’ or ‘script’ quite odd. The order of appearance of vowels & consonants in Persian are either ‘vowel-consonant-vowel’, e.g. ‘above’ or ‘consonant-vowel-consonant’, e.g. ‘got’ or ‘vowel-consonant-consonant’, e.g. ‘act’. So, to the Iranian ear the word ‘must’ is okay but ‘star’ is not. However, if you separate the ‘s’ and the ‘t’ of ‘star’ by the vowel ‘e’ you will get the equivalent Persian word ‘setāre’, which is how the word is pronounced.

The other observation is that over the course of the development of Indo-European languages certain letters in one group have been changed by another. For example ‘f’ and ‘v’, or ‘d’ and ‘t’ seem to replace each other in words that evidently have a common root. For example, the English ‘dark’ becomes even closer to the Persian ‘tārik’ if we replace the ‘d’ with the ‘t’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Persian</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>graft</td>
<td>gereftan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>group</td>
<td>gorouh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>better</td>
<td>behtar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dark, tarnish</td>
<td>tārik</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iron</td>
<td>āhan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cow</td>
<td>gāv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dental</td>
<td>dandān</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>door</td>
<td>dar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>star</td>
<td>setāre</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The verb formation reminds learners of many similarities too, especially the verb ‘to be’. Compare the two sentences below, bearing in mind that Persian appears at the end of the sentence:

English: My name is Jasmine. (Closer still would be to write this sentence as: “name of mine is Jasmine.” Now compare this to the Persian:

“nām-e man ast Yāsaman.”

Do you see the closeness of the nouns ‘name’ and ‘nām’. Similarly, note the similarity of the third person, singular ‘is’ (and closer still the German ‘ist’) and the Persian ‘ast’.

For some simple noun, adjective and possessor structures, all you need to do to get the Persian equivalent is to read the English from right to left, having substituted the Persian words for the English. Remember to read the Persian words (written in transliteration) from the right to the left! For example:

My daughter’s name (nām-e dokhtar-e man)

Persian is not a very difficult language for English-speaking people to learn, in contrast to many other major language of the Middle East or some European languages that are much harder to grasp, and Persian is regarded as extremely sonorous, and beautiful to listen to.
Having said that, the correct pronunciation of some letters will take a little practice. The Persian ‘R’ for example does not come easily to all speakers of British or American English. The Persian ‘R’ is trilled with the tip of the tongue, quite similar to an Italian or Polish ‘R’, while a French ‘R’ is trilled with the back of the tongue.

As well as words that both Persian and English share due to their common Indo-European heritage, there are many English words that have derived from Persian, such as aubergine, lemon and peach, barbican, bazaar, cash, checkmate and cummerbund, jackal, carcass, pagoda, paradise; rank, rook, taffeta and tulip.

New Persian contains quite a few foreign words, the majority of which are Arabic, reflecting the extent of cultural and intellectual exchanges between Iran and its neighbours and of course the impact of Islam since the 7th century CE.

The mixed character of modern Persian vocabulary is a basic feature of the language. A comparison can be made between Persian and English: the Arabic element in Persian has a similar status that Latin and Romance languages have in relation to the original Anglo-Saxon of English.

In the first quarter of the 13th century Iran began to experience the unimaginable havoc caused by the brutal invasion of the Mongols, who ruled Iran for more than one hundred years without challenge but over the next century they began to gradually lose their supremacy to independent local rulers. During the years of the Mongol rule a large number of Mongolian and Turkic words made their way into Persian. These are mostly words of military or administrative nature.
In the past couple of centuries, political and commercial contact with Europe increased and many of the Iranian elite travelled to Europe, mostly to Russia, France and Britain, encountering ideas, situations and objects for which there were no Persian names. In the opposite direction, many European visitors, mostly missionaries, merchants and military advisors arrived and settled in Iran. These exchanges meant that Persian has also borrowed many loanwords from European languages that are fully embedded in the everyday vernacular of Iranians. Most of these words are originally French and are uttered with a French pronunciation, ranging from the simple ‘merci’ for ‘thank you’ to names of European items of clothing such as ‘robe de chambre’ for dressing gown, ‘cravate’ for tie, ‘deux pièces’ ladies skirt-suit, ‘imperméable’, raincoat or rainproof outerwear, ‘manteau’, thin overcoat (the staple outerwear of women in Iran today), ‘sac’ bag, pronounced ‘sāk’, ‘papillon’ bow, and many others. Other European words invariably accompanied the arrival of modern technologies or utilities in Iran, e.g. words such as: telephone, television, radio, film, cinema, theatre, bus, pieces of machinery, decimal units of weights and measures, names of particular European dishes and some medical and modern scientific terminology. Again the majority of these terms are pronounced the French way.

Persian is the official language of Iran, and, although there are large areas of Iran where Persian is not the mother tongue, for example, in Azerbaijan, Kurdistan or Luristan, it is spoken or understood by most of the population and for at least half the 70 million population of Iran, Persian is their native tongue. In Afghanistan, Dari Persian, enjoys official status along with Pashtu.
The Study of Persian in Europe

Apart from the early familiarity of a handful of British scholars with the names and works of some mediaeval Iranian scientists and philosophers, the first steps towards the study of Persian in Europe were taken in the early fourteenth century. Moreover, European travellers, merchants, missionaries and of course the envoys and officers of European courts increasingly encountered Persian in the huge geographic sphere where it was spoken or existed as the lingua franca.

‘Systematic’ study of Persian in Europe, however, started in the seventeenth century with a steady increase in the number of Europeans interested in the orient and the literary treasures it offered.

In Britain alone this has resulted in publication of numerous books of grammar, dictionaries and readers over the past three hundred years written by diverse personalities ranging from envoys to adventurers, missionaries, and traders as well as the established scholars and Orientalists. Some of these earlier books make for surprisingly good reads and provide windows not only into the linguistic conventions of the time and general approach to study of foreign languages but offer fascinating descriptions of national characteristics of both the Persians and the visitors. The sketches offered in books to assist language acquisition for example tell a lot more about the circles in which the European emissaries moved and their main preoccupations than the usefulness of the manual as a tool for learning Persian.
The importance of immersion in the real language as spoken by its native speakers, however, was recognised early on. Reverend William St. Clair-Tisdall (1859-1928) for example who served as the Secretary of the Church of England's Church Missionary Society in Esfahan in Iran and who has likened Persian to ‘the Italian of the East’ refers to his own difficulties in communicating with Persians. Having studied and learnt to speak Persian in the Punjab in India he found, in the course of attempted conversations with the Persians he met in Bombay, that he was ‘almost if not quite unintelligible to them, since many of the words, phrases and idioms he had learnt from the pages of the poet Sa’di and other classical Persian authors had become obsolete and had been superseded by others in the modern language as spoken in Persia itself’. He writes in his introduction to Modern Persian Conversation Grammar (1923): ‘it was as if a foreigner, having discovered some corner of the world in which English was still spoken by the learned, just as it occurs in the Elizabethan writers and with the pronunciation of that distant day, had learnt the language from them and then tried to converse with the English people of today.’ Rev. St. Claire-Tisdall concludes that the conversation of such novice ‘would seem at once stilted and vulgar, and it would amuse everyone with whom he came in contact’. It is therefore essential for learners of modern Persian to try and have as much contact with native speakers or at least make use of the innumerable websites that allow the learner near immersion in the culture, music and media of Persian speaking countries, as well as sites such as www.persianlanguageonline.com that offer online teaching resources to complement grammar books and readers.