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ENGLISH IN IRAN

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BEFORE THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION OF 1978-79 EXPELLED the secular Pahlavi dynasty ruled by Mohammad Reza Shah, replacing it with a Shi'ite Islamic republic under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, English was widely taught and studied as part of the country's push for rapid modernization. Hundreds of foreign ESL instructors worked throughout the Iranian educational system, while thousands of Iranians studied in English-speaking universities in England, the United States, India, and the Philippines. Between the mid-1950s and late 1978, English steadily expanded as the most common second language in Iran, and became the major technical language of business, the military, higher education, and the media.

Despite the penetration of English into vast areas of Iranian life, its use decreased dramatically after the revolution of 1979. One reason was its close association with the United States, which was the primary external opponent of the revolution. But a

more important reason was the abandonment of the modernization programme in which English played a key role, and which had become identified with increasing domination of Iran by a Westernized elite and by Western institutions which they supported.

English under the Shah

In Iran, as in other countries, the relationship between English and modernization must be understood within the context of recent history. Although the history leading up to the Iranian revolution is beyond the scope of this book, it is impossible to explain the fate of English after 1978–79 without a basic understanding of its role in Iran under the Shah. Under the Pahlavi regime, Iran was increasingly integrated into the Western military and economic structure, with English as its primary language. Though this process of integration began in the 1950s, it dramatically accelerated in the 1970s due to two main factors: the rise in oil prices beginning in 1973, and the close military alliance between the Shah and the United States.

The OPEC oil price increases initiated in 1973 stimulated an incredible surge in Iranian GNP, 34 per cent in 1973 and 43 per cent in 1974, adjusted for inflation (Vakil 1977; Beeman 1986, p.202). From less than a tenth of the total GNP in 1959, oil came to represent nearly half of Iranian GNP by 1974. As a result of this spectacular growth, Iran was awash in oil-based monetary wealth. With a long history of Western involvement in Iranian business and politics, Americans and Europeans aggressively sought to exploit this wealth. Business investors by the thousands came to Tehran seeking government-subsidized contracts and entrance into the oil-rich Iranian market. Hundreds of companies established offices in Tehran, while dozens built company towns and complexes that included housing, recreational facilities, supermarkets, and other services. More than 200 American educational institutions arranged cooperative ventures with Iranian universities, often as a way to bankroll American colleges hit with rapidly rising costs and shrinking enrolments during the 1970s (Beeman 1983).

At the same time, the Shah undertook a major expansion and modernization of the Iranian military, spending billions on new weapons and military technology. Virtually

all high military officers went to the USA for training, including ESL classes. Thousands more military personnel enrolled in ESL classes in Iran to prepare themselves to work with American advisors, to service aircraft and other equipment purchased from the United States, and to train with US military forces. In 1973, an estimated 3,600 US technical specialists were working on military projects alone, while thousands of what some critics called ‘white collar mercenaries’ were employed in other sectors of the economy (Mare 1980, p.51).

Among this group were large numbers of ESL instructors and teacher trainers, who found their skills in great demand under the Shah’s modernization programme. Private employers sought instructors for programmes run by multinational corporations and the military (for instance, to teach helicopter repair crews how to read English-language repair manuals). Universities in the USA hired instructors for exchange programmes in Iran. Iranian universities sought full-time ESL instructors and teacher trainers for regular faculty positions. Schools enrolling children of foreign business and military families hired English-speaking instructors for all subjects. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of Iranian students went abroad to study English. So many Iranians entered American universities that professional publications in ESL printed articles focusing exclusively on the language problems of Iranians in the United States (e.g., Monshi-Tousi, Hosseine-Fatem, and Oller 1980).

The Shah sought to link English and modernization by using English for many of his speeches and his most important writings. In his major statement of his vision of Iran’s future, *The White Revolution*, the Shah quoted Washington, Lincoln, Emerson, Shakespeare, Wellington, and Disraeli (Pahlavi, no date). He called Western countries ‘progressive’ and praised Iranian students studying abroad. He instituted changes in vocational education that prepared Iranians to work for international and Western agencies, and he praised Iran’s close ties with the West.

At the same time, the Shah sought to establish new educational institutions based on Western models. Teacher training colleges, a network of private high schools, and new programmes at existing institutions were established. Although justified in the name of ‘modernization’, these steps were also designed to weaken the influence upon education of the Islamic clergy, the Shah’s principal domestic opponents (see

Bakhash 1984). For this reason, the educational system would be a particular focus for change after the revolution.

English in the Islamic Revolution

The Islamic revolution of 1978–79 was partly a revolution shaped by rhetoric, in particular the Friday sermons by Moslem clergy that effectively defined issues and shaped public opinion. Moreover, the close association of English with the Shah's modernization programme ensured that the revolution would have linguistic consequences.

As Beeman (1986) has shown, the key cultural issues in the revolution were the tension between the 'internal' and the 'external', and the rights and responsibilities of leadership. The debate over what is internal and external involved the question of what constitutes 'pure' Iranian culture. Beeman's analysis identifies three aspects of Iranian (internal) culture in revolutionary rhetoric. The *moral* dimension required that the self must be pure in thought and action. The *national* dimension proclaimed that core Iranian identity is pure, and that the political and economic corruption which had infected the country was due to external foreign forces. The *historical* dimension emphasized the frequent invasions by corrupting foreign forces, from Alexander and the Greeks, to the Arabs, the Mongols, and the British. The central responsibility of leadership, according to revolutionary rhetoric, was to resist the external forces of corruption. The brilliance of Khomeini's rhetoric was his ability to identify the Shah's regime with corrupt external forces, and the Islamic clergy with protecting Iranian purity.

In contrast to the Shah's support for English, Khomeini associated English with Western subjugation of the Iranian people (1980, p.206). He urged his followers not to buy or read books in which foreigners were quoted and he complained about the use of English in the names of stores, streets, clothing, and other common objects (1980, pp.205, 209). He linked English to opponents of the revolution, charging that the enemies of Islam were corrupted by agents of colonialism who communicated secretly in a foreign tongue (1979, p.63). In his writings, Khomeini condemned Western schools (1979, pp. 4–5) while stressing that liberation and justice were

possible only through prayer, which was one aspect of Iranian life not penetrated by English (cf. Bakhash 1984). Khomeini's call to revolution was expressed as a demand for an end to corrupting external influences (1979, p.14). When the Shah was identified with corruption, his downfall was implied.

In his analysis of the qualities of leadership appropriate to a purified Iran, Khomeini emphasized the ability to read, interpret, and teach the Koran; thus facility in Farsi was central to the ruler's legitimacy (1979, p.27). Leadership in the Iranian hierarchy, according to Khomeini, should depend not upon foreign education, but instead upon religious purity. These principles were applied after the revolution.

English after the 1978–79 Revolution

With the success of the revolution, the Islamic clergy did not need to invoke English as a symbol of the foreign domination of Iran. Instead, the revolution sought to nationalize the use of English. The end of the modernization programme begun by the Shah meant that English was no longer the dominant language of business, government, the military, and industry. Thus English was gradually restricted to limited areas in which it would be beneficial to newly defined Iranian interests (e.g., diplomacy and other contacts with foreign countries; access to scientific literature).

A reduced role for English also helped to restrict the power of the Western-educated elite. Purges of Westernized elements were particularly extensive in the Ministry of Education, which was seen as crucial for the development and spread of revolutionary ideology; only in the military were purges more widespread. In the school system, non-Islamic teachers and students were purged during 1980 and 1981; it is estimated that 20,000 teachers were fired (Arjomand 1988, p.144; Bakhash 1984, p.112). Textbooks and curricula were revised throughout the school system, with the primary goal of eliminating Western influences that had spread under the Shah. As the revolution sought to consolidate itself in early 1980, Khomeini delivered an especially harsh attack against the university system, declaring: 'We are not afraid of economic sanctions or military intervention. What we are afraid of is Western universities and the training of our youth in the interests of West or East' (Bakhash 1984, p.122). This speech led to an attack against Tehran Teachers' Training College, Shiraz University,

and other institutions. Finally, the government closed the universities in order to undertake Islamization of the institutions. They did not reopen until 1984.

These actions meant that Iranians who were most closely connected to American institutions and who spoke English lost their communicative advantages. While proficiency in English had been essential before the revolution for many activities in government, the military, and business, after the revolution students were subject to political and religious tests. Applicants to teacher-training schools were required to be practising Muslims and to declare loyalty to the Islamic Republic and the revolution. Non-Muslims were allowed to enter as students only in accounting and in foreign language study (Bakhash 1984, p.226). In the military, the technical language of the army was no longer English; the officers who had been trained in the USA were gone (Ashraf 1989). As the new revolutionary institutions began to take shape, they relied primarily upon Farsi. Moreover, a mass literacy campaign extended to large numbers of Iranians the opportunity for higher education in Farsi and involvement in politics and government (see Halliday 1989).

Thus the end of English domination was associated with the changing structure of power in Iranian society. By breaking economic, military, and industrial ties with the United States, post-revolutionary Iran dramatically reduced the need for English teachers. It nationalized its own cultural symbols and rhetoric, defined for itself what is 'Iranian' and what is 'foreign', and eliminated many mechanisms for the spread of Western culture and language. One symbol of the nationalization of English was its use on television. In 1988, nearly ten years after the revolution, fifteen minutes of English-language news was read each day on the state-run television by a woman wearing a chador (Simpson 1988).

As Iran sought increased ties to Western European nations in the late 1980s, some political leaders proposed foreign investment and aid for reconstruction after the war with Iraq. Once again, foreign delegations came to Tehran, hoping to secure contracts. By 1989, discussion of the appropriate foreign role in reconstruction had become central to Iranian political debate. After Khomeini's death, the prevailing view seemed to be that foreign debt should be avoided because it entails foreign domination, but expertise may once again be welcome (Hooglund 1989). This policy

may lead to expanded English language education, but it is unlikely that English will become the major technical language as it was under the Shah. As long as Khomeini's followers dominate Iranian political leadership, the role of English is likely to remain limited.

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