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Aims and Scope

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The Problem of the Formation of Philosophical Prose in Persian

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Original research paper

Abstract

The article discusses the problem of the formation of philosophical prose in the Persian language. The first section presents a brief excursion into the history of philosophical prose in Persian and the stages of formation of modern Persian as a language of science and philosophy. In the Arab-Muslim philosophical tradition, representatives of various schools and trends contributed to the development of philosophical terminology in Farsi. The author dwells on the works of such philosophers as Ibn Sīnā, Nāṣir Khusraw, Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, 'Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī and gives an overview of their works written in Persian. The second section poses the question whether the Persian language proved able to compete with the Arabic language in the field of science. The author examines the style of philosophical prose in Farsi, considering the causes of creation of Persian-language philosophical texts and defining their target audience. The article presents viewpoints of modern orientalist researchers as well as the views of medieval philosophers who wrote in Persian. We find that most philosophical texts in Persian were written for a public who had little or no knowledge of the Arabic language, yet wanted to get acquainted with current philosophical and religious doctrines, albeit in an abbreviated format. The conclusion summarizes and presents two positions regarding the necessity of writing philosophical prose in Persian. According to one point of view, Persian-language philosophical works helped people who did not speak Arabic to get acquainted with the concepts and views of contemporary philosophy. According to an alternative view, there was no special need to compose philosophical texts in Persian, because the corpus of Arabic philosophical terminology had already been formed, and these Arabic terms were widely and successfully used, while the new Persian philosophical vocabulary was difficult to understand.

Keywords: Arab-Muslim philosophy, philosophical terminology, Persian, translation, Falsafa, Ismailism, Sufism, Ishraqi.

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Проблема становления персоязычной философской прозы

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Оригинальная исследовательская статья

Аннотация

Статья посвящена проблеме становления персоязычной философской прозы. В первой части статьи дан краткий исторический экскурс в историю философской прозы на персидском языке, отражены этапы становления новоперсидского языка как языка науки и философии. Представители разных школ и течений арабо-мусульманской философской традиции внесли свой вклад в развитие философской терминологии на персидском языке. Автор подробно останавливается на творчестве таких философов, как Ибн Сина, Насир Хусрав, Насир ад-Дин ат-Туси, Ахмад ал-Газали, Абу Хамид ал-Газали, дает обзор их сочинений, написанных на персидском языке. Во второй части статьи автор ставит вопрос, смог ли персидский язык сравняться с арабским языком в области науки. Философская проза на персидском языке рассмотрена с точки зрения стиля, определены причины создания персоязычных философских текстов и их целевая аудитория. Автор излагает позиции как современных востоковедов-исследователей, так и самих средневековых философов, писавших на персидском языке. Установлено, что большая часть персидских философских текстов была написана для публики, которая не владела или слабо владела арабским языком, но желала познакомиться с актуальными философскими и религиозными учениями, пусть и в сокращенном формате. В заключении подведены итоги и представлены две позиции относительно необходимости написания философской прозы на персидском, а не на арабском языке. Согласно одной точки зрения, персоязычные философские сочинения помогали людям, не владеющим арабским языком, познакомиться с концепциями и взглядами философов-

современников. С другой точки зрения, персоязычные тексты были не нужны, т.к. уже сформировался корпус арабских философских терминов, которые были на слуху и успешно использовались, тогда как персидская философская лексика была сложна для восприятия.

Ключевые слова: арабо-мусульманская философия, философская терминология, персидский язык, перевод, фалсафа, исмаилизм, суфизм, ишракизм.

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Introduction

Originated on the Arabian Peninsula in the 7th century, Islam served as a powerful impetus for development of Arab-Muslim culture, including formation of medieval (classical) Arab-Muslim philosophy. In the 8th–14th centuries, this process was inextricably linked with the development of Islam as a religion but not limited to the latter. The very definition of “Arab-Muslim philosophy” implies two facts: (a) most of the texts were written in Arabic; (b) the nations of the entire Muslim world took part in the development of this tradition. A significant contribution was also made by Persian thinkers who wrote philosophical treatises not only in Arabic but also in Persian, facing the need to translate Arabic terms into Persian. Naturally, the language of the emerging Arab-Muslim philosophy was Arabic, as the sacred language in which the Qur’an had been revealed to people. The Arabic language developed under the influence of Islamic sciences (hadithology, or commentary to the Qur’an, or *fiqh* (1)), and therefore the emergence of a new vocabulary and of new meanings attached to familiar words proceeded naturally. The situation changed when more active translation activities began (in the 9th–10th centuries), and there appeared Arabic versions of the works of Greek philosophers, abundant in special terminology and concepts that had not previously existed in the nascent Arab-Muslim philosophical thought. There exist many works devoted to assimilation of Greek wisdom by Arab-Muslim philosophers and to issues of developing a specific vocabulary (see:

[Afnan 1964; D’Ancona 2011; Shehadi 1982; Goichon 1938; Graham 1965; Smirnov 1998; Jackson 2014]).

In this article, we consider the formation of Persian-language philosophical prose and its relation to the body of original Arabic texts.

Persian as a language of philosophy and science

As a result of the Arab conquests in the territory of the former Sasanid Empire (in the middle of the 7th century), Zoroastrianism was replaced by Islam. The Arabic language became the language of government and of the educated strata, and after some time it supplanted Middle Persian as a language of literature.

The development of modern Persian is inextricably linked with Islamization of the region. The modern Persian language first became the spoken, or “vernacular” *lingua franca* for all social strata in the conquered territories of the former Sassanian Empire, thus mostly influencing social communication and everyday vocabulary. Many concepts related to such areas as religion and science were borrowed from Arabic sources, the “written” *lingua franca*. From the 9th to the 11th centuries, the Persian language experienced a new rise, ceasing to be the language of the uneducated and becoming the language of court intellectuals [Lazard 1975, 606]. As a result of the development of literature, the Persian language acquired a standard shape, while previously it had existed in the form of many regional dialects.

The rulers of the Samanid dynasty (819–999) patronized sciences and arts, with Samarkand and Bukhara becoming centers of development of Persian literature. The Persian language soon became the recognized language of poetry, but in the field of prose, and especially in science, it developed considerably slower. Until the 9th century, there were very few prose works in Persian, mostly represented by translations from Arabic.

There are five principles underlying philosophical terminology in the works of 9th–11th centuries: (a) the use of everyday vocabulary to designate philosophical concepts (*andisha* “thought,” *āfridgār* “creator,” *dānish* “knowledge”); (b) commonly used words acquired functions of terms (*būdish* “being,” *kh^wāst* “will,” *chandī* “quantity”); (c) coining of new philosophical terms from native and borrowed word-stocks (*hayūlā-yi nakhustīn* “primary matter,” *junbish-pazīr* “able to move”); (d) the calque translation of Arabic philosophical terms (*jān-i sukhanguū* – *al-nafs al-nātiqa* “rational soul”); (e) the borrowing of philosophical terminology [Sultonov 2008, 182–183].

The beginning of the development of Persian as the language of philosophy was laid down by 'Abū 'Alī Ibn Sīnā (980–1037). Ibn Sīnā was a Persian born in Afshan, near Bukhara. Ibn Sīnā was an outstanding thinker, philosopher and physician of his time. He studied translations of the works of Greek scholars and commentaries to them created by Arab thinkers, he wrote essays in various fields and kept correspondence with another great polymath Al-Bīrūnī (937–1048). The heritage of Ibn Sīnā embraces such fields as medicine, mathematics, music, poetry, philosophy, etc. However, we focus on his treatise *Dānīsh-nāma* (*Book of Wisdom*), written in 1024–1037 for 'Alā' al-Dawla Muḥammad Ibn Kākūya (d. 1041) [Ibn Sina 1394 SH].

This treatise was the first philosophical work to be written in the Persian language. To express the concepts of Arab-Muslim philosophy in Persian, Ibn Sīnā applied loan translations of Arabic terms, concretizing meanings of familiar words, and also used methods of word formation that were typical of the Persian language. Ibn Sīnā enriched words existing in Persian with new, terminological meanings. This process involved verbs (for example, the infinitive of the Persian verb *gushādan* “open, reveal, untie” acquired the meaning of substantive “decision,” which corresponds to the Arabic term *ḥall*), nouns (Persian *kinār* “edge, shore” for Arabic *ṭaraf* “region, extreme term (of a syllogism), extreme member (in a row)”) and adjectives (Persian *barābar* “equal, paired, opposite” for Arabic ‘*aks* “reflection (of rays),” *mutaqābil* “mutually opposite”).

The Ismaili philosopher, poet and preacher Nāṣir Khusraw (1004–1074) was Ibn Sīnā's successor in development of Persian philosophical terminology. His treatises surviving to our days are all written in Persian: *Jam' al-hikmatayn* (*Twin Wisdoms Reconciled*), *Khān al-iḥwān* (*The Meal of the Brothers*), *Gushāyish wa rahāyish* (*Knowledge and Liberation*), *Shish Faṣl* (*Six Chapters*), *Wajh-i dīn* (*The Face of Religion*), *Zād al-musāfirīn* (*Traveling Provisions of Pilgrims*). Nāṣir Khusraw sought to replace Arabic terms with their Persian equivalents, creating new terms or specifying meanings of existing words. Researchers note that the works of Nāṣir Khusraw are difficult to study, namely because he used a minimal number of Arabic terms. It is interesting to note one stylistic feature of his work *Knowledge and Liberation*: Nāṣir Khusraw explains Persian terms through their Arabic equivalents: “Know, brother, that the word ‘matter’ (*hayūlā*) is borrowed from the Arabic language, and in Persian it is ‘primordial’ (*ārāsta shuda-i awwal*)” [Nasir Khusraw 1999, 28]. Another example is: “Know, brother, that ‘form’ (*ṣūrat*) is the Persian ‘form’ (*chahra*)”

[Nasir Khusraw 1999, 29]. Also: “Know, brother, that *širāṭ* is the Persian ‘path’ (*rāh*)” [Nasir Khusraw 1999, 47].

Another prominent Ismaili philosopher who wrote in Persian was Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (1201–1274), a well-known mathematician and astronomer. Naṣīr al-Dīn was a Shia-Twelvever, but around 1227 he entered the service of Naṣīr al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥīm ibn ‘Abī Maṣṣūr (d. 1257), the supreme *dā‘ī* (2) of Northern Persia. Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī spent about 30 years in the Nizari Ismaili fortresses in Kuhistan and during that time wrote many works on astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, music, and other sciences (for more detail, see: [Daftari 2006]). Many of his works have survived to this day, including those written in Persian. Among his philosophical writings, it is worth highlighting the commented translation from the Arabic, *Kitāb al-ṭahāra* by Abū ‘Alī Aḥmad Miskawayh, completed in 1235 and known as *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī* (*Nasirean Ethics*), and the treatise *Rawḍat al-taslīm* (*Meadows of Humility*) (1243), which outlines the philosophy of the Ismaili Nizari of the Alamut period. The style of Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī’s writings varies from one period of his life to another: in the Ismaili period he wrote in “purer Persian” and tried to imitate the early Ismaili authors, and after the Mongol conquest (1256) he became an astrologer at the court of the Mongolian ilkhan *Khulāgū* (1217–1265). Then he continued to write in Persian but preferred to resort to Arabic terminology.

Besides the Ismailis, a great contribution to the development of Persian-language philosophical terminology was made by theorists of Sufism. ‘Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Gḥazālī (1058–1111) was born in Tus and studied in Nishapur. He wrote several treatises in Persian. The most important of these is his four-volume work *Kimiya’-i sa‘ādat* (*The Alchemy of Happiness*), which is in fact a simplified and abridged version of al-Gḥazālī’s Arabic treatise *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (*The Revival of Religious Sciences*). *Zād-i ākḥirat* (*Provision for the Forthcoming Life*) is also a Persian rendering of al-Gḥazālī’s work in Arabic *Bidāyyat al-hidāyya* (*Beginning of Guidance*).

‘Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Gḥazālī (d. 1126), the younger brother of ‘Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Gḥazālī, was an eminent Sufi philosopher who wrote works both in Arabic and Persian. His writings in Persian include *Baḥr al-ḥaqīqa* (*Sea of Truth*), *Risāla al-ṭuyyūr* (*Treatise on the Birds*), *Risāla-yi ‘ayniya* (*Treatise ayniya*), *Nāmahā-yi Aḥmad Gḥazālī* (*Letters of Aḥmad Gḥazālī*), *Waṣīyat-nāma* (*Book of Advice*),

Maqāla-yi rūkh (*Conversation about the Spirit*) and *Sawānih fī-l-‘ishq* (*Revelations about Love*) [Drozdov 2015, 54].

ʿAḥmad al-Ḡhazālī became a model of behavior and a spiritual mentor for Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (1155–1191), who founded the philosophy of illumination (*ḥikmat al-‘ishraq*). Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī was born in the village of Suhraward in northwestern Persia and studied in Maraga and Isfahan. He authored over 50 works in Arabic and Persian. In his treatise on mystical love, *Muʿnis al-‘ushshaq* (*Friend of the Lovers*), which is a fine example of Persian prose, Suhrawardī reveals the meaning of the doctrine of emanation, using the Qurʾanic story of Joseph and endowing it with new meaning.

Thus, we see that the Persian-language philosophical terminology was developed by representatives of various trends of Arab-Muslim philosophy.

Persian vs. Arabic

Persian-language philosophers did not only actively borrow from Arabic terminology but also formed their own Persian terminological base. Was the Persian language equal to Arabic in the field of science? Here, we can assess evidence left by the philosophers and scientists themselves as well as opinions of modern oriental scholars.

Sayyid H. Nasr (b. 1933), an Iranian philosopher and specialist in Sufism, believes that Ibn Sīnā’s attempt to replace Arabic terms with Persian was “as unsuccessful as if someone began to write a philosophical work in English, not using words of Latin origin at the same time... Although Ibn Sīnā’s attempt was heroic, it put off for two centuries the use of the Persian language as suitable in philosophy” [Nasr 1996, 157]. On the contrary, V. Livshits and L. Smirnova noted that “the terminological apparatus of the *Dānish-nāma* treatise would serve as a model for Nāṣir Khusraw, Ḡhazālī, Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī and Kāshāni, who adopted many terms from Ibn Sīnā and created a number of new ones” [Livshits & Smirnova 1981, 115]. Undoubtedly, Ibn Sīnā’s work influenced the language of Nāṣir Khusraw. This may be due to the affiliation of both philosophers to Ismailism (3). Sayyid H. Nasr believes that the philosophical terminology developed by Nāṣir Khusraw did not take root precisely because he was an Ismaili [Nasr 1996, 157]. A.E. Bertels, noting the originality of the terminological apparatus of Nāṣir Khusraw, believed (following S.H. Nasr) that the terminology developed by Nāṣir Khusraw did not become popular as it was related to the philosopher’s Ismaili outlook [Bertels 1970, 78].

Following their determination to write in Persian, Ibn Sīnā and Nāṣir Khusraw often neglected euphony and style. Scientists note that the works of both philosophers written in Persian are rather dry and hard to read. Speaking about the style of Nāṣir Khusraw, we should note that for many years even the quality of his poetic works was hotly debated. In his article “Nāṣir Khusraw and His View of Poetry,” Y.E. Bertels wrote that in his *History of Persian Poetry* the Italian scholar I. Pizzi [Pizzi 1894] omitted Nāṣir Khusraw’s *Dīwān*, declaring it void of poetic value [Bertels 1988, 314]. I. Pizzi assessment was later confirmed by V.A. Ivanov, an outstanding Russian orientalist, internationally recognized as an expert on the Ismaili school, who laid a solid scientific basis for the study of history and philosophy of Ismailism. Y.E. Bertels himself denied any “euphony” in Nāṣir Khusraw’s verse, explaining this by the poet’s desire to address readers of books rather than listeners; and his conclusion was to be expected: this poetry appeals to the mind rather than to emotions [Bertels 1988, 322].

From the above summary, it can be concluded that the first philosophical prose in Persian did not become a model of style for later authors, but the attempts of early philosophers while picking Persian equivalents for Arabic terms gave their successors an option of choosing between the terms existing in these two languages.

Later authors paid more attention to the requirements of style, among those, Bābā Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī (d. 1213/1214). He wrote original poetry and prose in Persian and also performed a number of translations of Greek scholars’ works via Arabic. His religious affiliation is uncertain: yet, there are claims for his being Ismaili, Sufi or Shia. Bābā Afḍal wrote in Persian, taking great care of style, and he used Arabic terms where they were more suitable for clarity. As W. Chittick notes, “Bābā Afḍal [Afḍal] employs a great deal of Persian vocabulary where others would have used Arabic, but unlike Ebn [Ibn] Sīnā he chooses only attractive and mellifluous terms, making his works a delight to read” [Chittick 1988].

It is worthwhile to define the audience of Persian-language philosophical texts. In his preface to the treatise *Dānish-nāma*, Ibn Sīnā thus sets out the purpose of his work: “We have received the high decree of our sovereign, the fair king whom God has assisted, the victorious supporter of our religion, ‘Alā’ al-Dawla, who is the pride of our people and the ornament of the community of ‘Abū Ja’far Muḥammad ibn Dushmanziyār, the ruler of the stronghold of the faithful. May his days be numerous, his fate victorious and his rule long. The decree orders

me, as a servant of his court who in his service has satisfied all he has desired regarding safety, fame, splendor, content, pursuit of science and closeness to the sovereign, that I write the book in the language of Farsi-Dari for his friends. It should very briefly cover the basics and issues of the five sciences of ancient wisdom” [Ibn Sina 1394 SH, 7–8]. So, the first philosophical work in Persian (Farsi-Dari) was only intended for close associates of Ibn Sīnā’s patron. The philosopher was advised to introduce his readers to the basics of the five classical sciences: logic, physics, structure of the universe, the science of music and the science of what lies outside of nature, that is, metaphysics. Based on these, we can say that the purpose of the treatise was propaedeutic, and the treatise itself was intended for people unfamiliar with philosophy and science and possibly not proficient in reading Arabic.

In his preface to the treatise *Kimīya’-i sa’ādat*, al-Ghazālī writes: “The audience of this book is the townsfolk (*‘awāmm-i khalq*) who asked for an explication in Persian. And my speech should not go beyond their comprehension.” Similarly, he prefaces his work *Zād-i ākhirat* as follows: “Thus, we have composed this small book, calling it *Provision for the Forthcoming Life* (*Zād-i ākhirat*), because some devout people asked us to make this for those townsfolk (*qawmī az ‘awāmm*) who cannot comprehend the books *Ihya’ ‘ulūm* or *Kimīya’-i sa’ādat*. However, what we said in Arabic in *Bidāyyat al-hidāyya* is quite enough for them. They want Persians to get acquainted with the book of *Bidāyyat* and thus learn about the path of the God-fearing people” [Khismatulin 2017, 14–15]. From the above quotations, we can conclude that al-Ghazālī considered his Persian works as a “simplified” version of the Arabic treatises and “preparation” for more complex fuller works.

Conclusion

Based on the ideas of medieval philosophers and on present-day scholarship, we single out two views on the necessity of Persian philosophical treatises in that time and, consequently, of new philosophical lexemes to develop in the Persian language.

According to one point of view, the creation of Persian-language philosophical terminology in the 10th–13th centuries was due to the desire to popularize certain ideas, and to clarify what had already been phrased in Arabic. For this purpose, Ibn Sīnā, Nāṣir Khusraw, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī wrote in Persian. However, the most significant works of Persian philosophers were written in Arabic and employed the Arabic philosophical terminology.

Against this background, the body of Nāṣir Khusraw's work stands out as an exception. All other surviving works of that period are written in Persian. However, this does not refute the facts stated above.

According to another viewpoint, writing scientific and philosophical texts in Persian was difficult and, in fact, not so much required. G. Lazard quotes an excerpt from the work of Shahmardān ibn 'Abī-l-Khayr Rāzī (9th–12th centuries) *Rawḍat al-munajjimīn* (*Garden of Astronomers*) (1073/4): “The most amazing thing is that when they write a book in Persian, they claim that they use this language so that those who do not know the Arabic language can use it. But they will resort to pure Persian words (*darī-yi wizhā-i muṭlaq*), and those are more complicated than the Arabic ones. If they used the words that are used in the present day, they would be easier to understand.” He [Shahmardān Rāzī] adds that he personally uses only ordinary words (i.e. Arabic), which anyone can learn in five days” [Lazard 1975, 632]. Following a similar approach, S.H. Nasr gives an assessment of the Persian terminology used by Ibn Sīnā. This Persian philosophical terminology turned out to be too complicated for comprehension, since there had existed and functioned an Arabic-language philosophical terminological apparatus. The Arabic terminology entered the Persian vocabulary and was adapted in accordance with the current Persian grammar. This is how compound verbs (the first part of them is an Arabic word or Arabic grammatical form) and pairs of synonyms (when an inherited Persian word has a close corresponding word of Arabic origin with similar meaning) appeared and took root in Persian.

NOTES

(1) Fiqh is a set of ideas concerning legal norms as well as the rules of conduct for Muslims.

(2) Dā'ī is a “summoner, preacher,” a missionary who is responsible for spreading Ismailism by attracting new converts and acquainting them with the Ismaili doctrine.

(3) Although there is no direct evidence that Ibn Sīnā was an Ismaili, however, according to indirect evidence, it can be assumed that he was in sympathy with the Ismaili teaching. Ibn Sīnā is listed among Ismaili authors in the publications of Y.E. Bertels [Bertels 1988, 250] and G. Lazard [Lazard 1975, 631].

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