

Non-standard grammatical phenomena in German and Persian text messages

Everyday written communication via messaging services like WhatsApp plays an important role in both Germany and Iran. Text messages sent in either language via such channels include numerous non-standard phenomena on a grammatical level (e. g. pertaining to verb inflection, syntax). Some of them arise from characteristics of spoken language being adopted in written language but constructions are also used which have no equivalent in spoken language. Ultimately there would be a case for expanding the comparative-linguistic analysis of non-standard phenomena to other areas of language (e. g. lexicon, orthography).

Section 1 starts with comments on the differences and similarities between German and Persian. Both languages use an alphabetic writing system (Roman/Arabic alphabet) and both are pluricentric. This article focuses on the use of German in Germany and Persian (Farsi) in Iran. In both countries, online everyday communication is very popular. In Germany this is illustrated, for example, in the results of an annual survey on internet use by the two public service broadcasting stations, ARD/ZDF (<http://www.ard-zdf-onlinestudie.de>, last access: 19.1.2021). As far as Iran is concerned, the company “Hootsuite” has information on its website (<https://de.slideshare.net/DataReportal/digital-2019-iran-january-2019-v01>, last access: 19.1.2021).

Persian grammar is the subject of section 2. Two factors are discussed which, in Persian and German alike, can lead to variations on the canonical SOV word order, namely theme-rheme (i. e. the distinction between old and new information) and topic marking (i. e. the identification of an element as the focus of what is being talked about). Further points include the principles of object marking, the possibility of omitting the subject, the position of attributes and characteristics of verb conjugation in Persian.

Section 3 forms the core of the article. Here grammatical phenomena are discussed which are considered to be non-standard in both German and Farsi but which are common in everyday written communication. Examples for German were taken from the MoCo database, which includes nearly 20,000 messages (see <http://mocoda.spracheinteraktion.de>). The Persian corpus consists of 300 messages in WhatsApp conversations between students at the Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran; more data are necessary in order to validate the findings as part of a larger empirical study. The section commences with a definition of the term non-standard phenomena, namely constructions which do not appear or would not be expected to appear in newspaper articles. These phenomena include verbs in second position in subordinate clauses in German (1) and omitting subject/object pronouns as well as verbless constructions (2).

- (1) Verb in second position (*weil dann hätte ich was besseres zu tun gehabt*; ‘because then would I have had something better to do’)

Eigentlich schon, wollte nur nicht alleine hin, weil dann hätte ich was besseres zu tun gehabt...

Nachricht #3 - 22.11.2011 - 18:01:05

<https://mocoda.spracheinteraktion.de>, Dialog #1379 – Training (last access: 7.1.2021)

- (2) Subject ellipsis (*bin seit Montag krank*; ‘have been ill since Monday’) and verbless constructions (*nur ne Erkältung*; ‘only a cold’)
<https://mocoda.spracheinteraktion.de>, Dialog #2458 – Unterrichtsabsage (last access: 7.1.2021)

The analysis of these non-standard phenomena is followed by examples of constructions without prepositions or articles (e. g. *in Mensa*; ‘in canteen’) and a reduced form of the infinitive (e. g. *grins*; ‘grin’), a so-called inflective, in German text messages. The former have already been dealt with extensively in the literature (cf. Frick 2017), including in relation to SMS texts. In German, such formulations are strongly marked, both in written and in spoken language. This is not the case in Farsi, where prepositional ellipsis, for example, is not unusual in spoken language (cf. Mahmoodi-Bakhtiari 2018, pp. 201–204). This is particularly true for the prepositions *dar* (‘in’) and *az* (‘from’). An example of this can be found in (3), where the preposition *dar* is missed out in this text message (cf. *dar xane*; ‘at home’).

- (3) man emšab xāne nist-am
 I tonight home NEG.be-1.SG
 “I am not at home tonight.”

Other non-standard phenomena in Persian text messages relate to marking the plural (cf. Ghomeshi 2018), verb conjugations, use of the particle *ke* (cf. Mahmoodi-Bakhtiari/Tajabadi 2013) and the structure of compound verbs. There are two plural suffixes in Farsi, *-ān* and *-hā* (cf. *mard-ān/mard-hā* – *die Männer*; ‘the men’); in spoken language but also in text messages, the suffix *-hā* is used almost exclusively. In the third person singular present indicative and subjunctive, the standard ending is *-ad* while in text messages, the ending *-e* occurs relatively frequently (cf. 4).

- (4)

چرا انقدر بد فکر میکنه !?

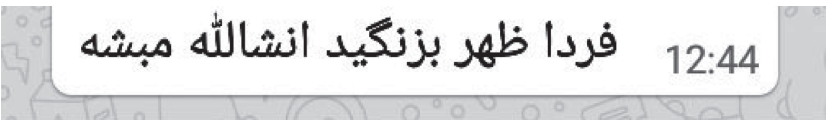
20:12

čerā	enqadr	bad	fekr	mi-kon-e
why	so much	bad	thought	DUR-make-3.SG

“Why does he/she think so negatively?”

In the example below, the semantically weak verb *zadan* appears in combination with *zang* (‘bell’), meaning *to ring up*. Instead of the noun-verb combination, a verb is used which does not actually exist in Persian, *zangidan* (‘to ring up’). This is a verb form which appears frequently in text messages but is very strongly marked in spoken language. A similar case is illustrated in (6), in which the compound verb *harf zadan* (‘to speak’) is replaced by *harfīdan* (or rather the relevant conjugated form *mi-harf-im*). Here only the

harf ('speaking') element of the compound verb is retained, with the verb *harfidan* being formed out of it. This, too, is a typical characteristic of informal writing.

- (5) 
- | | | | | |
|----------|--------|---------------|------------|-----------------------|
| fardā | zohr | be-zang-id | inschallah | m-b-še-Ø ¹ |
| tomorrow | midday | IMP-bell-2.PL | inschallah | DUR-will be-3.SG |
- “Call tomorrow at midday, it'll work out inschallah.”
- (6) hālā mi-harf-im
still DUR-speaking-1.PL
“We'll speak later.”

In the fourth section, the findings are compared and contrasted, allowing conclusions to be drawn. It is noticeable that in both German and Persian text messages, elements of spoken language are used. This is not at all surprising as the communicative conditions are the same: in both languages, text messages are dialogic in character. Differences are to be found in the individual languages, however. For example, subject ellipses in German are characteristic of informal written language; this is not the case in Persian. On the other hand, variations in conjugations and ellipses in compound verb structures appear in Persian text messages but not in German ones, although there is also one non-standard variation in verb conjugations in German text messages, namely the use of a reduced form of the infinitive (*grins* ('grin'), *freu* ('rejoice'), *stöhn* ('groan'), etc.). These inflectives are not used on a propositional level, however; they serve as comments on the proposition. Reduced compound verb structures represent another difference, where informal writing again makes use of new verb forms; these are used instead of the regular noun-verb compounds functioning as the predicate. Finally further areas are mentioned where characteristics of everyday written communication appear which are not located on a grammatical level but on a graphic or lexical level (e. g. the repetition of capital letters and punctuation marks, the use of emojis, interjections and swearwords). It would be interesting to compare German and Persian text messages with respect to these phenomena as well.

References

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¹ In the text message, *m-b-še* was written at the end but this is a typo; it should read: *mi-še-Ø*.