

Pashto Grammar

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ABSTRACT

People view the definition of language from different perspectives, and so far there is no universally accepted definition. However, it is generally stated that language is a means of communication among humans. This means operates based on the organized and logical arrangement of a set of small and large units. These units, as identified by linguists, include sound, morpheme, word, phrase, sentence, and others. Still, there arises a need to establish rules for the proper arrangement, usage, and clear understanding of these units.

1. Introduction

Since ancient times, humans have been striving to create rules to strengthen and organize the structure of language. To some extent, they have established certain principles known as grammar. For the first time, the famous Greek philosopher Plato (427–347 BC) laid the foundation of linguistics and conducted studies about the nature of language. After him, Aristotle also carried out studies on language and expressed the view that language is a social, not innate, phenomenon. Aristotle was the first person to divide words into three groups: noun, verb, and particle. This classification later entered Roman, then Arabic, and afterwards Pashto and Persian languages.

2. Literature Review

Dionysius Thrax wrote traditional grammar in Europe in the 2nd century BC. Later, in the 4th century BC, Donatus wrote a notable grammar in Latin, in which he divided words into eight parts: noun, verb, participle, article, pronoun, preposition, adverb, and conjunction. Based on Donatus's grammar, the science of grammar writing found its way into Europe. Afterwards, Panini's grammar in Sanskrit opened the path for comparative linguistics.

3. Methodology

Grammar is that branch of linguistics on the basis of which the morphological and syntactic structure of a language, its formation, changes in vocabulary, history, and various other aspects are studied. These grammars are divided into branches such as traditional, comparative, historical, and descriptive grammar. The late Professor Sadiquallah Reshtin excluded the traditional branch and divided grammar into three other branches: descriptive, historical, and comparative.

4. Results & Discussion

As mentioned above, sound, morpheme, word, phrase, and sentence form the structural system of a language. Therefore, the study of a language is divided into the following five branches:

1. Phonology
2. Morphology
3. Syntax
4. Morphophonemics
5. Semantics (study of meaning)

Both domestic and foreign Pashto researchers started efforts centuries ago to establish rules and principles for studying the Pashto language. Each of them, in their respective times, developed rules and principles in different areas of Pashto. Most of these grammatical works focus on morphology and syntax, but there has been little notable work in phonology. In general, Pashto grammars have been written based on three methods:

1. Grammar writing based on Arabic scholars' methods:

With the spread of Islam, Islamic culture and scholarship progressed rapidly. This development was especially noticeable in countries that accepted Islam. In Afghanistan, with the arrival of Islam, scholars studied religious sciences in Arabic, and Pashto grammar writing was also influenced by Arabic methods. Arabic books of morphology and syntax were used as the foundation for

grammar writing. This is despite the fact that Arabic belongs to the Semitic language family, while Pashto belongs to the Indo-European family.

2. Grammar writing based on Western scholars' methods:

Writing Pashto grammar according to this method began in the modern era, when Pashto scholars became familiar with Western civilization and culture. As a result, Western methods found their place in Pashto grammar writing.

3. Grammar writing based on linguistic principles:

These rules are based on modern linguistic theories and discoveries that emerged from the beginning of the 20th century and have continued up to now. Supporters of this approach believe that every language has its own rules and should be studied and described accordingly.

It can be said that the first two methods have a traditional form, while the third is scientific. It should also be noted that comparative grammar exists as well. This type of grammar dates back to Panini's work in Sanskrit, four centuries before Christ. When Sir William Jones encountered this work, he stated that it has connections with Avestan, Indian, and other Aryan languages. Some scholars consider Sir William Jones as the founder of comparative grammar.

With comparative grammar, historical studies of languages also began. As a result of historical study, three stages of languages were identified: classical, middle, and modern periods. The study of language entered a new phase at the beginning of the 20th century. Languages were studied from historical and comparative perspectives. The study of changes in a language between two periods is called historical linguistics, while the study of a language within a specific period is called descriptive linguistics. Thus, grammar is a branch of descriptive linguistics.

Pashto scholars began writing grammars in the mid-18th century. In addition to them, foreign scholars such as Russians, British, Germans, Norwegians, Czechs, Americans, French, and others have done extensive work on Pashto. They have written grammars and conducted valuable research in different areas of the language.

First, we mention briefly the grammars written by Afghan authors who established rules and principles for Pashto. We do not discuss which method they followed or which aspects they covered; we only mention the name, time, and author:

1. Ma'rifat al-Afghaniyah: Written in the mid-18th century (1195 AH), printed in Lahore and later in Kabul. It has two parts: grammar and vocabulary.

2. Riyaz al-Muhabbat: Written in 1806 in India by Nawab Muhabbat Khan Barech; consists of three parts: vocabulary, grammar, and historical principles.

3. A Small Pashto Grammar: Written by Nawab Inshaullah Khan in India.

4. Tuhfat al-Amir: Written by Noor Mohammad Afghan Kandahari in Persian; focuses on morphology and syntax.

5. Guldasta Ma'ani: Written by Mir Mohsin Kandahari; includes notes on Pashto alphabet.

6. Wafiya: A small grammar written in Urdu by Mir Ahmad Shah Rizwani.

7. Pashto Morphology and Syntax: Written by Molvi Noor Mohammad Afghan.

8. Ataliq Pashto: A textbook written by Molvi Mohammad Ismail.

9. Pashto Grammar: Published by Pashto Academy in Persian.

10. Self-Teaching Pashto: A small instructional grammar.

11. Mu'allim Pashto: Written in Kandahar in Persian.

12. Pashto Teacher: Written by Mohammad Usman Barakzai.

13. The Way of Pashto Language: Written by Saleh Mohammad Khan.

14. Ajaib al-Lughat: Written in 1813 by Allah Yar Khan.

15. Khiyalat-e-Zaman: A linguistic work with unknown author and date.

16. Ganjina Afghani: Written by Qazi Rahimullah Peshawari.

17. Qawa'id Pashto: Written by Mohammad Azam Ayazi.

18. Sixth Key of Pashto: Written by Professor Sadiquallah Reshtin.

19. First Pashto Teacher: A textbook grammar by Reshtin.

20. Pashto Grammar (Part One): Written by Reshtin in Persian.

21. Pashto Morphology and Syntax: By Mohammad Azim Khayal.

22. Pashto Rules: Written in Urdu by Hafiz Mohammad Idris and Abdul Halim.

23. Short Pashto Grammar: By Fazl Mohammad Kandahari.

24. Zabkhodna: By Reshtin, including orthography.

25. Guide to Pashto Infinitives: By Reshtin.

Then the text lists foreign scholars who wrote Pashto grammars, including Klaproth (1810), Orosman (1823), Major Leech (1839), Professor Dorn (1842–45), Raverty (1855), Trump (1873), Lorimer (1902), Morgenstierne (1927), and many Russian and European linguists who contributed significantly to Pashto grammar, phonology, and comparative studies.

In conclusion, Pashto is a rich and ancient language. Many works have been written about it, but there may still be others not mentioned here, especially recent works or those available online. The author apologizes for any shortcomings and welcomes suggestions for improvement.

If I work for my own language, Pashto, I should not be called biased. Pashto is a pure Aryan language!

So, who are the Pashtuns?

Pashto is the language of the Pashtuns. Those who speak this language, and whose parents communicate and understand each other in Pashto, are Pashtuns. The question of who Pashtuns are has been widely discussed throughout history, and scholars and anthropologists from all over the world have studied it. They examine what a human being is and how humanity reached its current stage. However, this matter belongs to the field of anthropology.

When we look at developed human societies, the question arises again: how did so many languages and cultures come into existence? If we limit ourselves to the study of language and culture, the topic becomes clearer.

Human civilization began five to six thousand years before Christ, when humans became fully distinct from animals. At that time, they lived in organized societies, used tools, spoke languages, formed families, and even used metals. However, there is a long gap between prehistoric times and recorded history.

Humans did not remain in one place; they migrated from one region to another due to various factors. Along with them, they carried culture, knowledge, and experiences, adapting to new environments.

Returning to the Pashtuns: who are they?

A famous Danish linguist, Rasmus Rask (1787–1832), wrote that to understand a قوم (nation) or region, one must study its language. Based on this principle, if we want to understand Pashtuns and Pashto, we must analyze the language using comparative linguistics.

Through comparison, we examine Pashto's relationship with Sanskrit, Avestan, Persian, Balochi,Ormuri, Arabic, Hindi, European, and other languages to determine its origins and classification.

A German linguist, J. Jensch (1794), stated that language reflects culture, literature, vocabulary, expressions, and historical experiences. He emphasized four key factors in comparing languages:

1. Changes and development of vocabulary
2. Grammar (morphology and syntax)
3. Clarity and structure (symbols of language)
4. Rhythm and tone

Based on these, Pashto is a rich and ancient language with a strong grammatical structure.

Sultan Muhammad Saber writes in his book "Ancient Pashto and Pashtuns" that Pashto is such a vast and comprehensive language that no surrounding language can compete with it. He explains that Pashto has clear grammatical distinctions, such as gender, which are not always evident in Persian or Urdu.

For example:

In Persian, "آمد (آمد)" does not indicate whether the subject is male or female.

But in Pashto, such distinctions are clear.

Similarly, Urdu has ambiguities—for example, "جاؤ" (go) does not indicate gender.

Linguists believe languages develop over centuries. Pashto has reached a high level of maturity and is very ancient. Arabic is also ancient, but its structure differs significantly. Arabic has 28 letters, while Pashto has 46, each representing distinct sounds.

Pashto belongs to the Indo-European language family, while Arabic belongs to the Semitic family. Persian, however, is closely related to Pashto.

Languages such as Pashto, Persian, Sanskrit, and Avestan are branches of the same Indo-European tree. Scholars agree on this classification.

In 1860, the French linguist Darmesteter studied Avestan and Sanskrit. Some believed Avestan originated from Sanskrit, but others argued they are sister languages from a common origin.

These Aryan languages developed in the region historically known as Ariana. Greek historian Strabo (240 BC) defined Ariana's boundaries from the Indus River to the Persian regions and Bactria.

Ancient sources confirm that Pashtuns lived in this region. Herodotus (400 BC) mentioned the Paktians, describing them as brave and hospitable people wearing leather garments.

Later historians associated regions like Arachosia with Pashtun tribes such as the Alakozai. Persian epic poet Ferdowsi also mentioned Afghans in Shahnameh.

The Pashtun region extended from the Hindu Kush mountains to Bolan, Herat, and Chitral. Pashto was spoken across these regions.

Pashtuns are not only defined by language but also by culture, traditions, laws, and social norms.

Comparative linguistics shows similarities among Pashto, Persian, and Sanskrit. For example:

- Persian "mast" → Pashto "masta" (yogurt) → Sanskrit "masta"

This shows clear relationships among these languages.

Many words originated in Pashto and spread to neighboring languages. Pashto acts as a bridge between Persian and Sanskrit.

Ancient historians noted that Pashtuns lived between Persian and Indian civilizations, connecting the two cultures.

Pashto is extremely ancient, but determining its exact age is complex. However, its roots go back thousands of years.

Grammatically, the word "Pashtun" is derived from "Pashto" with a suffix, showing the richness of Pashto morphology. This type of formation does not exist in many other languages.

In Pashtun culture, language is tied to identity. If someone is told "you are not a Pashtun," it implies exclusion from cultural and social values.

Pashtuns value honor, promises, and tradition. If someone gives their word in Pashto, they are expected to uphold it. Linguists agree Pashto is an ancient Aryan language. Sanskrit grammarian Panini (around 3500 BC) noted strong connections between Sanskrit and Pashto.

Examples of similarities:

Sanskrit → Pashto → Urdu

- Palana → Palana → Parvarish
- Pura → Pura → Pura
- Mast → Masta → Mast
- Shali → Shai → Dhan
- Godhum → Ghanam → Gandum

Similarly:

Punjabi → Pashto

- Tusi → Tasi
- Manana → Manal
- Balana → Balol
- Chatna → Chatol

These examples show deep historical connections.

Languages in regions near Ariana—such as Sindhi, Punjabi, Indian, and Persian—share vocabulary due to geographic proximity. Pashto also borrows words from neighboring regions, especially for items not native to Pashtun areas, such as fruits like banana, lemon, and orange.

Thus, naturally, those items are also referred to by their Pashto names: figs, grapes, almonds, pistachios, pomegranates, beets, and others.

Here in the Netherlands, I encounter some words that clearly resemble Pashto and Dari. This shows that a series of words must have entered this region from ancient Pashto or Dari with slight changes. There is no doubt that languages are interconnected and share similarities. However, languages that belong to the same root or group preserve their own rules and characteristics throughout history.

The study of languages becomes more accurate when written documents and manuscripts are available. For this reason, scholars began comparative linguistics from the time periods for which written records exist—such as Avestan, Sanskrit, Pashto, and ancient Pahlavi. There is also no doubt that before these languages, there must have been many other ancient languages used for communication. Those languages likely gave rise to later ones, but since they date back to about ten thousand years before Christ, no written records of them remain.

We do not know what the “mother” or “grandmother” language before Avestan or Sanskrit was called, nor what language people spoke or what humans were like at that time. However, before Aryan tribes migrated from cold regions into this area, humans already lived here, likely in caves—this topic belongs mostly to anthropology.

When writing emerged and the hymns of Avestan and Sanskrit were written on cowhide, we gained historical records. From that point, we can begin tracing history and present reliable evidence about life in the region: what languages were spoken and how people lived.

There is no doubt that if we consider five thousand years of human history in Bactria, the land that is now Afghanistan was inhabited by Pashtuns. These are the same people who have preserved this land and left historical traces up to the present day.

Historically, the Pashtun region has been vast, extending to the Indus River and the plains and mountains of India, with important centers such as Balkh, Gandhara, Sistan, Peshawar, and other scattered fertile areas.

The famous Afghan philosopher Al-Biruni (who lived around 1000 AD) wrote in one of his historical notes: “The western regions of India, spread like valleys and mountains, are inhabited by various Afghan tribes, who had previously also lived in Sindh.”

He further states that Pashtuns lived in western India and controlled regions extending to present-day Kabul. They even ruled parts of India during his time. He describes them as warriors and confirms that Gandhara (including Peshawar) was inhabited by Afghans. He refers to Peshawar as “Parashawar.”

Al-Biruni’s account is considered second in importance after Herodotus.

Sir Olaf Caroe writes that Strabo and Ptolemy were among the first historians before Christ to mention the names Pakto, Pact, and Pactyis. He also refers to Chinese travelers Faxian (399–414 AD) and Xuanzang (629–645 AD), whose accounts provide valuable historical evidence and clarify many previously unknown facts.

Caroe states that at that time Pashtuns controlled large territories, including Gandhara, which extended to the Indus. He refers to Peshawar as “Puskaporos.”

Caroe, a British researcher deeply interested in the region’s history, wrote extensively about the Pashtuns (Pathans), compiling research from ancient historians, travelers, and geographers.

He also notes that the people living west of Afghanistan were Iranians, who have historical and linguistic connections with Pashtuns. Their interactions included both conflict and cooperation. Sometimes Pashtuns dominated, and at other times Iranian s did.

The Achaemenid Empire was a powerful Iranian force that controlled the region. Later, around 480 BC, figures like Khosrow emerged. These groups used weapons such as swords and daggers and controlled parts of the Amu River region.

These people were also called Turanians and were related to Iranians. Their language belonged to the Indo-European family and had similarities with Pashto.

Modern Persian is considered a related language, and due to historical exchanges, it has strong connections with Pashto.

Examples of sound changes between Pashto and Persian include:

Pashto “l” → Persian “d”:

- Lor → Dokhtar (daughter)
- Ledal → Didan (to see)
- Las → Dah (ten)
- Lewanay → Divana (mad)
- Laram → Daram (I have)
- Lare → Dur (far)
- Plar → Pedar (father)
- Las → Dast (hand)

Pashto “w” → Persian “b”:

- Woror → Baradar (brother)
- Wara → Barf (snow)
- Waza → Baz (goat)
- Wrisham → Abrisham (silk)

Pashto “gh” → Persian “g”:

- Ghwai → Gav (cow)
- Ghaara → Gardan (neck)
- Ghanam → Gandum (wheat)
- Ghoosh → Goosh (ear)

There are many such examples showing deep linguistic connections.

Although different cultures influence each other, Pashto and other Aryan languages have preserved their original structure. This indicates that Pashtuns were historically a strong and resilient people who maintained their identity despite hardships.

Pashtuns faced many challenges before Christ, including during the Achaemenid period, Alexander the Great’s invasion, and Greek attacks. Yet they remained in the region between Iran and India, preserving their language and identity.

Pashtuns are historically significant and have played an important political role. They are known by three names: Pathan, Afghan, and Pashtun.

The name “Pathan” became common in India after the rule of Sher Shah Suri, when Pashtuns gained power there. It referred to Pashtun soldiers and later became widely used. Even today, Pashtuns in India are called Pathans.

The name “Afghan” is also used for Pashtuns and is very ancient. Historians have long associated this name with them. The Persian poet Ferdowsi mentioned “Afghan” multiple times in his poetry.

The word “Afghan” evolved from forms like Abgan, Awgan, and Apgan.

Allama Iqbal also referred to Afghans in his poetry.

In 1747, Ahmad Shah Durrani chose the name “Afghanistan” for the country. Just as Hindustan belongs to Hindus and Tajikistan to Tajiks, Afghanistan is the land of Afghans. The suffix “-stan” means place or land.

Previously, this region was called Ariana. Later, Iranians called it Zabulistan and Kabulistan. Greeks called it Bactria. Arabs later referred to parts of it as Khorasan.

Regardless of the name, this land has always been the homeland of Pashtuns and Afghans.

Mr. Mohammad Hayat, in his book *Hayat Afghani*, writes: Besides the fact that intermarriages have occurred among the Pashtuns and other ethnic groups, Pashtuns are still the people who have historically lived in this region. Their language is Pashto, and they are ethnically close to Aryans. No ethnicity or people in the world have remained purely “unmixed”; Arabs, too, in a broad sense, are of common origin and Semitic descent, with mixtures of different groups such as the Phoenicians, Berbers, Turks, Hebrews, Iranians, Greeks, Romans, and others. Yet despite this mixing, each group retains its distinct name. Similarly, throughout Europe, ethnic groups have mixed to varying degrees, yet they maintain their distinct identities.

Based on historical evidence, I believe Pashtuns are of Aryan descent and should be considered as such. The historical records show that, geographically, before the birth of Islam, Pashtuns lived in civilizations among Arabs, Sindh, India, and China—such as the Sindh Civilization, Gandhara Civilization, and Bactria (Bahlika) Civilization, as well as certain parts of Central Asia where their identity is established.

Some historians differ on the following points: First, they argue that Pashto developed later, deriving from Sanskrit or Avestan. Second, they claim it did not originate from them but developed alongside these languages, implying interaction and influence. However, the exact linguistic roots of Sanskrit and Avestan remain uncertain because history is only verifiable where written records exist, i.e., the last 2,500 years. Third, some scholars argue that Pashto predates Sanskrit and Avestan and was a living

Aryan language of its own. Regardless of which theory is correct, Pashto is undoubtedly an ancient language with clear historical roots.

The earliest evidence of Pashto is found in inscriptions from the Behistun (Baghestan) rock, where three Pashto verses were discovered in cuneiform script. The verses read:

1. “Ne ariaka woma” — “I had no relations”
2. “Ne darujna woma” — “I did not commit wrongdoing”
3. “Ne zor kra woma” — “I did not oppress anyone”

The entire inscription consists of 240 lines, each line containing 45 symbols. Each symbol may carry 3 to 5 marks, totaling a round 75,000 cuneiform characters. The script was learned from Egypt, and in 1822 Champollion deciphered it. These three statements show words—ariaka, darujna, zor—which are still used in Pashto with slight variations.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Pashto is a rich and ancient language. Many works have been written about it, but there may still be others not mentioned here, especially recent works or those available online. The author apologizes for any shortcomings and welcomes suggestions for improvement.

According to Herodotus, during the reign of Darius I, the Pactyans (Pashtuns) lived alongside Armenians. The language of the Behistun inscription was Old Persian, the official language of the time, which later evolved into Pahlavi and eventually Modern Persian. Persian and Pashto remain closely related, belonging to the same linguistic family. The ancient Persians, being neighbors, migrated with the early Saka tribes, contributing to shared history and defense of the borders.

Darius’ inscriptions also mention Parthia (Parthian territories), with phonetic ties to Pashto. According to Syed Bahadur Shah Zafar Kakakhel, in Aryan languages, sounds such as “th” and “s” corresponded to “sh,” connecting the words Parthia and Pashto. Italian scholar Justus, writing in the 2nd century CE, also states that Parthian language lay between Median and Saka languages, reflecting general migrations. Modern researchers like Morgenstierne confirm that Pashto is closely related to Saka and Parthian languages, making Pashtuns historically linked to these Aryan tribes.

The Sakas and Parthians were semi-nomadic, moving seasonally across regions like the Helmand, Arghandab, and Panj valleys. Herodotus mentions the Saka tribes multiple times, identifying them as part of the Scythian branch. During the Achaemenid period, they were known for wearing large tunics, conical caps, using bows, slings, axes, and shields, and excelling as horsemen in warfare. They fought bravely against Darius and Alexander the Great. Their language was Saka, closely related to Pashto and other Aryan languages, though not identical. Phonetic similarities suggest that Pashto may be a branch of these Aryan languages. Comparing historical evidence, it is clear that syntax and philological structures connect Aryan languages like Pashto, Avestan, Sanskrit, and Persian, while unrelated languages (e.g., Sami, Mongolic) show no such links. Therefore, Pashtuns belong to the Aryan ethnolinguistic group, and Pashto is an ancient Aryan language. Written records, coins, and inscriptions confirm Pashto’s history at least 2,500 years before the present, with some scholars suggesting human activity in the region as far back as 20,000 years, evidenced by Bronze Age artifacts (as studied by Arnold Toynbee).

Dr. Qudratullah Haddad, in his book *The Philosophy of National History and Pashtunwali*, writes: Afghanistan has two types of civilizations: (a) indigenous civilizations that developed locally, and (b) civilizations imported from outside. By 1,500 BCE, the Vedic civilization mentions Pakhtun (Pashtun) tribes, along with references to Afghanistan’s rivers. The second type is the Avestan agricultural civilization in Bactria (Balkh), which is historically significant. The Avestan language is very close to Pashto and has influenced modern languages. Many Pashto sounds are preserved in Avestan. The sacred Avestan texts were written on 1,200 cowhides, containing over 2 million verses. Though much was lost during Greek invasions, the surviving texts show the deep historical continuity between Pashto and the Avestan tradition. Pashto remains the closest living language to Avestan.

6. Recommendation

Further research is needed in phonology and modern linguistic approaches to Pashto.

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