HENDERSON: Four Varieties of Pashto

BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

Four Varieties of Pashto

Four varieties of Pashto are identified by the pronunciation of the spirant in the name of the language. The regional distribution of the varieties is discussed, followed by evidence and speculation concerning the chronology of phonetic and phonological changes that led to the present situation.

1. Pashto, an Iranian language spoken in Afghanistan and Pakistan, can be divided into four varieties on the basis of the pronunciation of the second consonant in the name of the language. The four varieties are Pashto, spoken around Kandahar; Patho, spoken around Quetta; Pashto, spoken in the northeast part of the Pashto area; and Paktao, spoken around Peshawar (see Figure 1).2

Only in the \( s \) area is there an eight-member contrastive set \( /f s z k g x y/\), corresponding to the orthography.3 In the other areas, \( g \) corresponds to Kandahar \( z \), and various other sound types correspond to Kandahar \( z \), as shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kandahar</th>
<th>Patho</th>
<th>Quetta</th>
<th>Paktao</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kandahar</td>
<td>Poto</td>
<td>Soto</td>
<td>Soto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quetta</td>
<td>Poto</td>
<td>Zoto</td>
<td>Zoto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NE</td>
<td>Poto</td>
<td>Zoto</td>
<td>Zoto</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In one part of the \( s \) area, Wardak Province, a palatal \( s \) corresponds to \( z \), but most speakers of \( Pato \) use \( g \). In the \( Pato \) and \( Paxto \) areas there are only six members in this class of opposition.

2. Geiger gives \( s \) as the reflex of Avestan \( sr \), \( rs \), \( rs \), and the \( s \) corresponding to PIE *\( *\) \( s \). The intervocalic allophone of \( s \), \( z \), achieved phonemic status through final vowel loss, as in \( \gamma \theta \omega z \) ‘ear’ <AV. gura. Geiger notes (p. 209) only two varieties of the language, “Pbhot” and “Paxto”.

Darmenster also describes only two varieties, “Pashto” and “Pukhto.” Despite his investigation of Pashto in areas where the opposition \( z \) is phonemic, he appears not to have heard the difference between the initial consonants of \( *p \) ‘night’ and \( *z \) ‘good’, and he incorrectly states that ‘night’ is \( *p \) in the north. He may have been misled by the orthography, since a grapheme to represent \( s \) separately from \( z \) was not finally standardized until the middle of this century.4 In a discussion of the relative antiquity of the two varieties he describes, Darmenster decides that “Pukhto” must be a later development, \( A \) being a “faussa pronunciation” of \( s k \).5

3 Many other features—lexical, syntactic, morphological, and phonological—vary widely in Pashto, and few of their inferences coincide. For the purposes of this paper, however, I shall focus only on the four named varieties. I am extremely grateful to Justice Mohammad Anwar Wardak and Engineer Hanafi for helping me with the Pashto language in 1966 and 1967.

4 In Paxtao, there is no contrast between \( z \) and \( s \). This contrast survives, though with low functional load, in the other varieties.


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6 Penz, p. 6. It is also possible that Darmenster’s informants led him astray, if they were from outside the Paxtao area. Speakers of Paxto or Paxto trying to imitate speakers of Paxto (the prestige dialect in Afghanistan) usually replace \( s \) with \( z \).
3. The development of retroflex stops and spirants in Pashto is a fascinating topic. All varieties include, in addition to the sounds discussed above, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /ʃ/, and /ŋ/. All of these occur initially, medially, and finally, in contrast to the more limited privileges of occurrence of retroflex stops, liquids, and nasals in Indie languages. The liquid, /ʃ/, appears to have developed from Av. /r/ and /r/, and the nasal from /n/. It is very difficult to find etyons for words containing /ʃ/ or /ʒ/; most may be borrowed from Indie (specifically Lahnda). What is of interest now is the development of the four varieties of Pashto described above.

The Pashto and Pachtō areas are small and peripheral. If it could be demonstrated that they share some archaic features, then the other areas could be said to have innovated the /ʃ/ vs. /ʒ/ contrast. No such evidence appears to exist. The Pashto area has been strongly influenced by the politically dominant Baluchi language, and Pachtō by Urdu (Penel, p. 8). In fact, Pachtō, spoken in the largest area, was probably the most isolated, since the trade routes largely bypassed it. The smaller areas lay across important routes into and out of Afghanistan.

It therefore seems likely that Pachtō is the most conservative variety. Given the extreme phonetic and phonological changes in Pashto, and the nomadic habits of its speakers, it is impossible to tell whether the change /ʒ/ is more likely than the reverse, since it amounts to only a phonetic change. However, the merger of /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ is much more likely than the split of /ʃ/, there being no evident conditioning factors for such a split.

The most likely sequence of events, then, is this: Old (i.e., Avestan or a similar Old Iranian language) /ʃ/ > /ʃ/; which was /ʃ/ after /x/ and /x/ elsewhere. Loss of preconsonantal /x/ led to the split of /ʃ/ and /ʃ/. In the northeast, /ʃ/ became a palatal spirant /ʃ/, which subsequently merged with /ʃ/ in Pachtō only. The voiced member of the pair, /ʃ/, underwent a similar shift in point of articulation to /ʃ/, which survives in Wardaki Pachtō. Why this sound then merged with /ʃ/ in Pachtō and other dialects of Pachtō, instead of following the voiceless pattern and merging with /ʃ/, must remain for the moment an open question. In the south (Baluchistan), there are two possibilities: (a) /ʃ/ and /ʃ/ never split but were always pronounced /ʃ/, or (b) they split, as in the other varieties, after the loss of /ʃ/, and subsequently merged. It seems slightly more likely that they never split, since if they had /ʃ/ might well have gone the way it did in the northern varieties rather than merging with /ʃ/.

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11 In some German dialects, /ʃ/ has changed to /ʃ/, but in Spanish /ʃ/ changed to a velar or uvular spirant.

12 Possibly, /ʃ/ was felt to be a more 'native' phoneme than /ʃ/. The latter, though already present in Pashto, was made considerably more frequent (and perhaps raised to full phonemic status, as English /ʃ/ was under the influence of French) with the introduction of Arabic loans. But this is pure speculation.