

# Evolution of Iranian languages



The Iranian languages, a branch of the Indo-Iranian family within the larger Indo-European language group, have a rich and complex history that spans thousands of years. Various languages are spoken in Iran, making its linguistic landscape fascinating and diverse, with over 200 million speakers spread across a wide geographical area. The most widely spoken Iranian language is Persian, which has about 84 million speakers in Iran, Afghanistan (where it is known as Dari), and Tajikistan (where it is referred to as Tajik). Persian is particularly notable for its rich literary tradition and is the language of many classical poets, including Rumi, Hafez, and Ferdowsi. In addition to Persian, which is the official language in Iran, Azerbaijani (Turkic), Kurdish, Lori, Baluchi, Gilaki, and Mazandarani are among the languages spoken in the country. Arabic is also spoken primarily by the Arab people in Khuzestan Province, destinationiran.com wrote. Modern Iranian languages spoken in the Iranian plateau and surrounding areas are classified into two main categories:

**Western Iranian**  
**Farsi:** Also known as Persian, this is the modern form of the Persian language that evolved from Middle Persian.  
**Kurdish:** Spoken by Kurds across Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria.  
**Lori and Bakhtiari:** Spoken in the southwestern region of Iran.  
**Tati:** Spoken in the Republic of Azerbaijan and parts of Dagestan.  
**Taleshi:** Spoken in the Republic of



Azerbaijan and northwest Iran.  
**Mazandarani and Gilaki:** These languages are spoken along the southern coast of the Caspian Sea and are part of the northwest Iranian dialects.

**Eastern Iranian**  
**Tajiki:** Spoken in Tajikistan and parts of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan.  
**Ossetic:** Spoken by the Ossetians in central Caucasasia, it continues the western Scythian dialects.  
**Baluchi:** Spoken in Sistan and Baluchestan Province, and an area extending from Iran to Pakistan and Afghanistan.  
**Pashto:** While dominant in Afghanistan, it is classified as part of the Eastern Iranian languages.

**History**  
The Iranian languages, as a branch of the Indo-Iranian family, can be categorized into four phases: Proto-Iranian (circa 2000 BCE), Old Iranian (until approximately 400 BCE), Middle Iranian (400 BCE-

900 CE), and New Iranian (post-900 CE). These stages reflect the linguistic evolution shaped by migrations, cultural shifts, and interactions with neighboring languages.

**Proto-Iranian**  
The Iranian languages descend from Proto-Iranian, which evolved from Proto-Indo-Iranian, a reconstructed ancestor shared with the Indo-Aryan languages (e.g., Sanskrit). Proto-Iranian emerged after the split of Proto-Indo-Iranian, likely in the early 2nd millennium BCE. During this time, Iranian tribes migrated and settled across vast regions, including southeastern Europe, the Iranian Plateau, and Central Asia. Recent genetic studies link Proto-Indo-Iranian speakers to the Yamnaya culture (circa 3000 BCE) from the Pontic-Caspian Steppe, whose migrations facilitated the spread of Indo-European languages. The influence of Proto-Iranian is evident in the cultural and linguistic heri-

tage of the Iranian people. Many cultural and religious concepts, particularly those in Zoroastrianism, have roots in the Proto-Iranian language and the worldview of its speakers.

**Old Iranian**  
The Old Iranian period is characterized by the emergence of two directly attested languages: Old Persian and Avestan.  
**Old Persian:** Spoken in southwestern Iran, particularly known from the Bisotoun Inscription, commissioned by Darius the Great. By the 4th century BCE, Old Persian was transitioning into Middle Persian, as evidenced by grammatical errors in later inscriptions.  
**Avestan:** The sacred language of the Avesta, the Zoroastrian scriptures, includes Old (Gathic) and Younger Avestan. Old Avestan is linguistically archaic, comparable to Vedic Sanskrit, while Younger Avestan, though later, retained archaic features due to its liturgical use.  
**Other dialects:** Less documented,

Median and Scythian contributed to regional linguistic diversity.

**Middle Iranian**  
The Middle Iranian period witnessed the diversification of Iranian languages into Western and Eastern groups:

**Western Middle Iranian**  
**Middle Persian (Pahlavi):** The administrative and literary language of the Sassanid Empire, with notable texts including the Pahlavi scriptures of Zoroastrianism and the Shahnameh (Book of Kings), an epic work in New Persian reflecting many Middle Persian elements.  
**Parthian (Arsacid Pahlavi):** Another significant Middle Iranian language spoken in the Parthian Empire (247 BCE-224 CE), serving as a lingua franca across a vast territory and used in royal inscriptions, administrative documents, and literary works. Parthian employed the Aramaic script, which influenced the development of writing systems in other Iranian languages.

**Eastern Middle Iranian**  
**Bactrian:** Spoken in Bactria (modern-day Afghanistan), this language is another important Middle Iranian language. Inscriptions and documents in Bactrian, written in the Greek alphabet, provide valuable insights into the region's history and culture during the Kushan Empire (1st to 3rd centuries CE).  
**Sogdian, Khwarezmian, Saka, and Khotanese:** These notable Middle Iranian languages include Sogdian, which was a primary commercial language along the Silk Road, used extensively for trade and communication between different cultures.

## Zaman Khan Bridge; a reflection of Sassanid architecture

### Iranica Desk

Zaman Khan Bridge is a historic structure built in honor of one of the commanders of the Qashqai clan, spanning the Zayandeh Rud River. Located twenty-two kilometers north of Shahr-e Kord, the capital of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province, the bridge measures thirty meters in length

and twelve meters in height. As one of the historical monuments of Saman Town, Zaman Khan Bridge features two arches and is supported by three natural stone bases. A path connects Lilbeigi village to one of the arches. Historically, the bridge served as a vital passage for nomads and the travels of the Qashqai clan.

It was commissioned by Zaman Khan, the head of the Nafar family from the Ilbeigi clan, who belonged to a Turkish-speaking group within the Qashqai of Fars Province and was a notable commander under the Safavid kings. Ilbeigi village was once a favored destination for Safavid royalty. The current structure of Zaman Khan Bridge is the result of nu-

merous repairs and restorations over the years. It underwent repairs during the Safavid era and was restored twice by the elders of Ilbeigi. The most recent restoration included the addition of wall stones to enhance the bridge's strength. Architecturally, Zaman Khan Bridge bears similarities to structures from the Sassanid dy-

nasty, with many comparing it to the Dez Bridge in Dezful. The engineering of the bridge remains impressive even today, featuring two arches. The central pier is rotated thirty degrees from the water flow axis, and strategically placed windows help reduce the weight of the structure, preventing potential damage. Constructed primarily from

bricks, Zaman Khan Bridge employs pointed barrel vaults along with plaster and sarooj — a type of water-resistant mortar — contributing to its durability. Additionally, the rock foundation on which the bridge is built helps mitigate the forces of the Zayandeh Rud River, protecting the bridge from erosion and damage.

