Randwick International of Social Sciences (RISS) Journal
Vol. 7, No. 4, October 2026 | Page: 259-267
ISSN Online: 2722-5674 - **ISSN Print**: 2722-5666
https://www.randwickresearch.com/index.php/rissj

Between Vernacular Speech and Classical Literary Tradition: The Layered Formation of Written Afghan Turkmen

DOI: *https://doi.org/10.47175/rissj.v7i4.1347*

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ABSTRACT

Afghan Turkmen is part of the story of the Turkmen language and its literature. Afghan Turkmen is similar to the Turkmen spoken in Turkmenistan. Its written works developed in a place where many different languages mixed. Afghan Turkmen writers used Turkmen dialects, Persian, Uzbek, and old Asian styles of writing. Experts have looked into these features by speaking with people who speak the language, by looking at the grammar, and by reading books that were published. These studies often focus on the features of Afghan Turkmen on their own. Do not put them all together. This article brings all those features together using a way of looking at them. It says that written Afghan Turkmen can be understood by looking at four parts that overlap: the local dialect part, the part that is like Standard Turkmen, the part that comes from Chagatai and Uzbek writing, and the part that uses words and styles from Arabic and Persian. This article is a summary based on existing writings, not a study done in the field. It mainly uses Muhammad Salih Rasekh's study of Afghan Turkmen dialects and the work of Rıdvan Öztürk and Savaş Şahin on written texts, grammar, dialects, and how the language is used in writing. The analysis shows that some forms that are seen as not standard compared to Standard Turkmen can still be organized and have a history within the way Afghan Turkmen is written. So written differences are better seen as a result of languages mixing, old ways of writing different dialects, the education people have, and the way the written language is still changing.

KEYWORDS

Afghan Turkmen; Turkmen literature; literary language; Chagatai; Uzbek; language contact; dialect; standardization; Afghanistan.

INTRODUCTION

Afghan Turkmen represents a relatively underdocumented branch of the wider Turkmen linguistic area. Muhammad Salih Rasekh's doctoral dissertation provides the most comprehensive modern dialectological investigation of the variety, based on extensive primary field material and covering phonology, morphology, lexicon, and selected sociolinguistic phenomena. Rasekh identifies two major groupings of Afghan Turkmen dialects, conventionally termed xāliṣ and nāxāliṣ, and emphasizes that their differentiation is associated substantially with ethnic rather than purely geographical divisions. His study also places Afghan Turkmen within a multilingual environment in which Dari, Uzbek, Pashto, and, more recently, Turkish interact with Turkmen. (Rasekh 2017, pp. 1–9, 23–27)

The written language presents a somewhat different problem. Rasekh observes that, despite governmental and publishing efforts, a universally acknowledged literary standard for Afghan Turkmen had not yet emerged. His discussion of Afghan Turkmen writing

distinguishes everyday dialectal speech from several forms of educated and written language, including forms strongly influenced by Persian and Arabic and a contemporary written variety influenced by Standard Turkmen of Turkmenistan. He consequently describes Afghan Turkmen writing as heterogeneous rather than governed by a single stable norm. (Rasekh 2017, pp. 7–9)

This observation is supported by textual studies. Rıdvan Öztürk demonstrates that published Afghan Turkmen texts contain morphological forms that do not correspond to Standard Turkmen of Turkmenistan. He further observes that the frequency of some of these forms varies according to writers' literary and educational backgrounds: forms associated with the Chagatai–Uzbek literary tradition occurs more prominently among writers educated in madrasas and classical literary environments, whereas they are less frequent among writers rooted primarily in oral tradition. (Öztürk 2010a, pp. 13–14)

Savaş Şahin's research shows that we cannot properly understand Afghan Turkmen without looking at both the dialects and the multilingual setting where they grew. His study of the Ersari variety uses dialect collections from towns and villages in Afghanistan along with writings by Ersari poets. He points out Uzbek influence in the poetry of Turkmen poets. He also finds a lot of Persian words used in Afghan Turkmen. (Şahin 2014, pp. 138–140)

The present article therefore addresses a question that differs from the basic identification of dialectal or non-standard forms: How can the coexistence of vernacular, standard-oriented, Chagatai–Uzbek, and Arabic–Persian elements in written Afghan Turkmen be interpreted as part of the formation of a literary language?

The article does not claim that these linguistic layers have previously gone unnoticed. Rather, it proposes a new synthesis of documented findings. Its contribution is interpretive: it brings together evidence that has generally been examined through separate dialectological, grammatical, and textual studies and considers what their coexistence means for the development of written Afghan Turkmen.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dialectological Research

Rakesh's dissertation is a foundation for understanding the linguistic diversity of Afghan Turkmen writing. I find that the study is based on fieldwork and looks at Afghan Turkmen dialects in detail using morphological, lexical, and sociolinguistic evidence. The dissertation structure itself shows how broad the study is, with sections on Afghan Turkmen dialect distribution, neighboring languages, Afghan Turkmen sociolinguistic phenomena, phonology, morphology, and lexicology. (Rasekh 2017, pp. 3–5, 23–27)

The importance of this research for literary studies is that written language cannot be separated completely from the spoken varieties used by writers and readers. Rasekh's observations concerning educated and non-educated speakers are especially relevant. He reports significant differences between the speech of people with formal education and that of people without formal education, particularly in the incorporation of Persian vocabulary and grammatical structures. He also records a strong Arabic influence in the speech of some religiously educated groups. (Rasekh 2017, pp. 35–42)

These findings warn against treating each form in a literary text as a single oddity. Some unusual forms may come from dialects, while other unusual forms may come from educational or religious language styles in a literary text.

Research on Written Forms

Öztürk's study looks at standard forms found in Afghan Turkmen texts. This is especially

important for the analysis being done here. The study points out grammar patterns that're different from Standard Turkmen. It shows these forms do not come from one source. Some come from dialect features used by Afghan Turkmen. Others match forms from the Chagatai–Uzbek tradition. (Öztürk 2010a, pp. 13–14)

The detailed examples in the study demonstrate that such variation is not limited to one grammatical category. Öztürk documents differences in tense and mood formations, including irür constructions, imperative forms, -GAy, -GUsI, and other forms associated with older or Chagatai–Uzbek literary usage. (Öztürk 2010a, pp. 16–21)

His study of the -TI past-tense suffix provides another example. Standard Turkmen generally uses the voiced -dI form, whereas certain Afghan Turkmen texts contain the voiceless -tI form in particular contexts. Öztürk treats this as a textual feature requiring explanation rather than as an arbitrary error. (Öztürk 2010b, pp. 175–180)

Öztürk's investigation of possessive constructions provides further evidence of incomplete uniformity in written Afghan Turkmen. He identifies temporary possessive constructions without the expected third-person possessive suffix and shows that both suffixed and suffixless forms may occur within the same text. He interprets this coexistence as evidence that the relevant construction had not yet undergone complete standardization. (Öztürk 2010c, pp. 586–592)

Literary Texts as Evidence

The literary dimension is particularly visible in Öztürk's study of a poem by the Afghan Turkmen poet Abdülkerim Behmen. The poem was constructed using the Arabic-script rhetorical practice known as *hazf*, and the study demonstrates that forms outside the dominant standard could be employed in connection with intelligibility and the technical requirements of the poetic text. (Öztürk 2009a, pp. 58–61)

This finding is important because it challenges an exclusively prescriptive interpretation of literary variation. A form that differs from the dominant standard may have a communicative or literary function within a particular text.

The scholarship therefore provides considerable empirical material. What remains less explicitly developed is a synthetic interpretation of how dialectal, standard-oriented, classical literary, and contact-induced elements coexist within the written language. The research gap addressed here is consequently analytical rather than empirical.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative, literature-based research approach. It does not involve fieldwork or the collection of new empirical data. Instead, it analyzes and synthesizes existing research on Afghan Turkmen language and literature.

Data Sources

The study primarily draws on the works of Rasekh (2017), Öztürk (2009, 2010), and Şahin (2014, 2016). These studies provide evidence on Afghan Turkmen dialects, written forms, literary traditions, and language contact.

Data Analysis

The selected studies were reviewed comparatively and thematically. The linguistic evidence was organized into four main categories: (1) vernacular-dialectal, (2) Standard Turkmen-oriented, (3) Chagatai–Uzbek literary, and (4) Arabic–Persian layers.

Interpretation

Finally, the identified features were interpreted in relation to dialect variation, language contact, literary tradition, writers' educational backgrounds, and incomplete standardization. This process was used to explain how different linguistic resources coexist in written Afghan Turkmen.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analytical Framework: Written Afghan Turkmen as a Layered System

The term “layered” in this article is an analytical concept proposed to organize findings documented by previous researchers. It does not mean that Afghan Turkmen speakers consciously divide their language into four separate systems.

The first layer is the dialectal layer. This layer includes features that come from the varieties of Afghan Turkmen. I find Rasekh's fieldwork interesting: Afghan Turkmen has internal dialects, and Afghan Turkmen dialects can differ in phonology, morphology, lexicon, and sociolinguistic behavior. (Rasekh 2017, pp. 23–27)

The second is the Standard Turkmen-oriented layer. Afghan Turkmen writers have at various points used Standard Turkmen of Turkmenistan as a model for written production. Rasekh documents this orientation in the history of Afghan Turkmen publications and describes attempts to employ the Turkmenistan standard in newspapers and educational materials. (Rasekh 2017, pp. 6–9)

The third is the Chagatai–Uzbek literary layer. Öztürk identifies forms in Afghan Turkmen texts that correspond to Chagatai–Uzbek literary usage and notes that these forms are particularly associated with writers educated in classical literary environments. (Öztürk 2010a, pp. 13–14, 16–21)

The fourth is the Arabic–Persian lexical and stylistic layer. Both Rasekh and Şahin document strong Persian influence and, in particular social and educational contexts, Arabic influence. Rasekh's field observations show that educated urban speakers and some religious scholars may incorporate Persian or Arabic lexical, grammatical, and syntactic features into their speech. (Rasekh 2017, pp. 35–42) Şahin likewise identifies Arabic and Persian lexical influence in Afghan Turkmen. (Şahin 2014, pp. 138–140)

These layers should not be regarded as mutually exclusive. A literary text can contain several simultaneously.

The Vernacular-Dialectal Layer

The spoken varieties of Afghan Turkmen provide an essential foundation for understanding its written literature.

Rasekh's field research shows that Afghan Turkmen dialects display meaningful internal differences and that these differences are not reducible simply to geographical separation. His study places particular emphasis on phonology as a major marker of dialect differentiation. (Rasekh 2017, p. 52)

Şahin's study of Ersari provides concrete examples of such variation. His description records differences in vowel length, vowel quality, consonant realization, and other phonological processes in Afghan Ersari. For example, he documents both short and long vowels and describes pronunciation differences that distinguish Afghan Ersari from Standard Turkmen. (Şahin 2014, pp. 142–144)

He also documents variation in morphological forms. His discussion of case marking, for instance, shows that forms occurring in literary texts do not always correspond directly to forms found in everyday Ersari speech. He specifically notes that the *-dIn* ablative form occurs in literary texts even though it is not used in the Ersari dialect described through his

fieldwork. He associates its literary occurrence with the influence of Chagatai literary language. (Şahin 2014, p. 144)

The distinction between spoken and literary usage is therefore essential. A literary text may preserve local speech features, but it may also contain forms that speakers do not normally use in everyday communication.

The vernacular layer should consequently not be regarded merely as an imperfect form of the literary language. It is one of the resources from which Afghan Turkmen literary expression is constructed.

The Standard-Oriented Layer and Incomplete Standardization

The development of written Afghan Turkmen has repeatedly involved reference to Standard Turkmen of Turkmenistan.

Rasekh's historical account shows that the publication of the newspaper *Göreš* generated discussion about which variety and orthography should be used. One group favored adopting the Turkmen language of Turkmenistan, while another argued that Afghan Turkmen writing should be based more closely on the Afghan Ersari dialect. The decision at the time favored the Turkmenistan standard, but Rasekh reports that this did not result in the establishment of a stable Afghan literary standard. (Rasekh 2017, pp. 7–8)

Rasekh further reports that Afghan Turkmen schoolbooks and other publications continued to display considerable linguistic heterogeneity. He describes contemporary written Afghan Turkmen as a heterogeneous variety influenced both by Standard Turkmen and by Persian. (Rasekh 2017, pp. 8–9)

Öztürk's textual studies provide linguistic evidence for this situation. His investigation of possessive constructions shows that the same or similar constructions may occur both with and without the expected possessive suffix, even within the same work. He interprets this variation as evidence that standardization had not been completed. (Öztürk 2010c, pp. 591–592)

The significance of this evidence is that lack of standardization should not be equated with lack of structure. The texts contain recurring grammatical patterns; the issue is that different patterns coexist without one fully displacing the others.

The Chagatai–Uzbek Literary Layer

The Chagatai–Uzbek literary tradition provides one of the clearest explanations for forms that cannot be accounted for solely through contemporary Afghan Turkmen dialectology.

Öztürk explicitly identifies Chagatai–Uzbek literary forms among the non-standard features found in Afghan Turkmen texts. He observes that these forms are more frequent among writers educated in madrasas and classical literary environments and less frequent among writers whose literary background is primarily oral. (Öztürk 2010a, pp. 13–14)

The textual evidence demonstrates that these forms occur in several grammatical domains. Öztürk records *irür* constructions in predicates, special imperative forms, *-GAy* forms associated with future or desiderative meanings, and *-GUsI* constructions associated with the Chagatai–Uzbek tradition. (Öztürk 2010a, pp. 16–19)

The significance of these examples lies in their literary distribution. If the same forms occur more frequently among writers with classical literary education, their presence cannot be explained adequately as simple accidental interference from contemporary spoken Uzbek.

Şahin makes a similar observation when discussing Afghan Turkmen literary texts. He warns that forms entering Afghan Turkmen through Uzbek and Chagatai influence should not automatically be represented as inherent features of Turkmen itself. (Şahin 2014, pp. 139–140)

This distinction between language contact and literary inheritance is therefore important. A form may enter a text because of direct contact with another spoken language, but it may also survive because it belongs to an inherited literary repertoire.

Arabic–Persian Influence and Literary Register

The fourth layer is associated primarily with vocabulary and, in some contexts, syntax and style.

Rasekh's fieldwork shows that formal education is associated with increased incorporation of Persian vocabulary and, among some educated speakers, Persian-influenced morphology and grammar. His observations concerning religiously educated speakers also identify substantial Arabic influence in vocabulary and grammatical structure. (Rasekh 2017, pp. 35–42)

Şahin draws a conclusion from his study of Ersari. He states that Afghan Turkmen have been taught in a setting where Persian and Pashto had major roles and where Urdu, Hindi, Arabic, and Tajik also showed up in schools. He specifically highlights how many Arabic and Persian words entered the Turkmen language. (Şahin 2014, pp. 138–140)

The influence is not limited to isolated vocabulary. Rasekh records examples in which the speech of some educated Turkmen appears heavily influenced by Persian morphology and grammar. He also describes the language of some religious scholars as strongly influenced by Arabic and older literary forms. (Rasekh 2017, pp. 41–42)

This evidence suggests that Arabic–Persian influence should be treated partly as a matter of register. Vocabulary and structures associated with religion, education, intellectual discourse, and formal expression may have different distributions from those of everyday speech.

Consequently, the presence of Arabic–Persian elements does not by itself demonstrate replacement of the Turkmen linguistic system. It demonstrates that Afghan Turkmen literary and educated usage has developed within a multilingual cultural environment.

Writer Background and Literary Choice

One of the strongest arguments for interpreting written Afghan Turkmen as a layered system comes from the relationship between linguistic form and writer background.

Öztürk's study directly associates the frequency of Chagatai–Uzbek forms with literary education. Writers educated in madrasas and classical literary circles employ these forms more frequently than writers emerging primarily from oral traditions. (Öztürk 2010a, pp. 13–14)

Rasekh's fieldwork provides complementary evidence from spoken language. He reports significant differences between the speech of literate and illiterate speakers. Educated urban speakers may incorporate Persian vocabulary and even Persian-influenced grammatical and syntactic structures, while people without formal education tend to use a higher proportion of locally familiar Turkmen vocabulary. (Rasekh 2017, pp. 35–42)

These observations suggest that the linguistic repertoire of an Afghan Turkmen writer may contain resources acquired from several domains: family and community speech, formal education, religious education, literary reading, and contact with neighboring languages.

Literary texts can consequently reflect not simply the dialect of the writer but the writer's entire linguistic repertoire.

This interpretation is reinforced by Öztürk's analysis of Abdülkerim Behmen's poetry. In the poem examined by Öztürk, the poet uses forms that differ from the dominant standard in connection with a specific Arabic-script poetic technique and the communicative requirements of the text. (Öztürk 2009a, pp. 58–61)

The implication is important: variation in literary language may sometimes be a choice rather than an accidental failure to follow a standard.

Variation Within the Same Text

Another important feature of Afghan Turkmen writing is that variation can occur within a single work.

Öztürk's study of possessive constructions provides a clear example. The same or closely related nominal constructions may appear both with and without the third-person possessive suffix. The author gives paired examples occurring within the same textual corpus and interprets this coexistence as evidence of incomplete standardization. (Öztürk 2010c, pp. 591–592)

Similarly, his broader study of non-standard forms records cases in which different forms serving comparable functions occur within the same work. For example, both standard-oriented and Chagatai-associated forms may appear in the same texts. (Öztürk 2010a, pp. 14–16)

This phenomenon is theoretically important because it weakens the assumption that every Afghan Turkmen writer consistently follows one linguistic model.

Instead, a writer may move between linguistic resources according to context, genre, education, audience, poetic requirements, or inherited literary convention.

The literary text is therefore not necessarily the direct written representation of one spoken dialect.

It can be a site of negotiation between several linguistic traditions.

Discussion: From "Non-Standard" Forms to Literary-Language Formation

The evidence reviewed above permits a reinterpretation of the category "non-standard."

From a comparative perspective, Öztürk is justified in describing forms that differ from Standard Turkmen of Turkmenistan as non-standard. Such comparison is useful for identifying linguistic differences between the two written traditions. (Öztürk 2010a, pp. 13–14)

However, the label becomes insufficient when the objective is to understand the literary history of Afghan Turkmen.

A form can be non-standard relative to Turkmenistan and simultaneously be systematic within an Afghan Turkmen dialect, inherited from Chagatai literary tradition, or selected for a particular literary purpose.

The *-dIn* form discussed by Şahin provides a useful example. Its occurrence in Afghan Turkmen literary texts does not correspond to ordinary Ersari speech, but Şahin connects its literary use with Chagatai influence. (Şahin 2014, p. 144)

Likewise, the *-tI* past-tense form documented by Öztürk is not simply evidence that writers have failed to learn Standard Turkmen. It represents a recurrent textual form whose distribution requires linguistic explanation. (Öztürk 2010b, pp. 175–180)

The same principle applies to suffixless possessive constructions. Their occurrence alongside suffixed constructions within the same texts suggests a developing written system in which competing patterns coexist. (Öztürk 2010c, pp. 591–592)

Taken together, these findings support a model in which Afghan Turkmen written language is developing through interaction among several resources rather than moving along a simple line from "dialect" to "standard."

Implications for the Study of Afghan Turkmen Literature

The layered model proposed here has several implications for future research.

First, literary texts should be studied together with dialectological evidence. Rasekh's field materials demonstrate that Afghan Turkmen contains significant internal variation, while Şahin's work shows how specific Ersari forms can differ from both Standard Turkmen and literary usage. (Rasekh 2017, 23–27; Şahin 2014, pp. 142–144)

Second, researchers should pay attention to the educational and literary background of individual writers. Öztürk's evidence indicates that classical literary education is associated with a higher frequency of Chagatai–Uzbek forms. (Öztürk 2010a, pp. 13–14)

Third, future studies should distinguish between direct language contact and literary inheritance. The occurrence of an Uzbek- or Chagatai-associated form does not necessarily demonstrate direct borrowing from contemporary spoken Uzbek.

Fourth, literary variation should be analyzed in relation to genre and communicative purpose. Öztürk's study of Behmen's poetry demonstrates that non-standard forms may have a function within a specific literary technique and communicative strategy. (Öztürk 2009a, pp. 58–61)

Finally, the development of a written Afghan Turkmen standard should be examined as a sociolinguistic and literary process. Rasekh's account shows that attempts to establish a written standard have involved newspapers, educational materials, publishing, and competing views concerning whether Afghan writing should follow Turkmenistan's standard or develop from Afghan dialectal foundations. (Rasekh 2017, pp. 7–9)

CONCLUSION

The evidence examined in this article indicates that written Afghan Turkmen cannot be adequately described as either a direct transcription of local speech or a simple non-standard version of Standard Turkmen.

Its written development has taken place at the intersection of several linguistic and literary resources. Local dialects provide the vernacular foundation; Standard Turkmen provides an important external model for written standardization; the Chagatai–Uzbek tradition contributes inherited literary forms; and Persian and Arabic contribute substantial lexical, educational, religious, and stylistic resources.

These elements do not necessarily function independently. They may coexist within the same text and sometimes within the same construction. The evidence of variation within individual works, the association of particular forms with writers' educational backgrounds, and the coexistence of dialectal and literary features all indicate that written Afghan Turkmen is a heterogeneous but meaningful literary practice.

The central contribution of the layered approach is therefore interpretive. Rather than treating every deviation from Standard Turkmen as an isolated irregularity, it asks what historical, social, literary, or communicative process may account for its occurrence.

This approach does not deny that comparing with Standard Turkmen is useful. In fact, comparison is still vital for spotting Afghan forms. What shifts is how we see those differences. A form could be non-standard in one comparison. It may be locally systematic, historically inherited, or chosen deliberately in another.

I believe the creation of written Afghan Turkmen should be seen as a negotiation between everyday speech writing that aims to follow a standard classical literary heritage and contact with many languages. Future studies that look at sets of Afghan Turkmen poems and stories could test this idea by measuring how these layers appear among different writers, genres, regions, and time periods.

The evidence we have already shows that the literary history of Afghan Turkmen is inseparable from the linguistic variety and the multilingual cultural setting in which its written tradition grew.

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