# The Distinction Between Language and Dialect: Exploring the State of Gilaki Variety

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**Abstract**

The distinction between language and dialect is one of the most challenging issues in sociolinguistics and it has been the subject of numerous studies in the sociolinguistic literature of the past several decades. Most communities around the world are either bilingual or multiannual. As such, determining their states has received considerable critical attention.

In spite of the fact that there is only a single standard language (Persian) in Iran, a number of varieties, such as Gilaki, Mazandarani, Tati, Taleshi, Semnani, Lori, Kurdish, etc. are spoken among smaller communities as their means of communication. Whether these varieties are independent languages or dialects of standard Persian (hereafter SP) is a major area of interest within the field of Persian linguistics.

Although different proposals have been made with respect to the distinction between language and dialect and much is currently known about this main issue, none of them is entirely unproblematic. Hence, the criteria by which this issue can be settled have not been clearly established. In other words, there is no consensus on any of them in literature. To explore the state of Gilaki from linguistic and non-linguistic perspectives, this paper intends to critically review the best-known criteria such as mutual intelligibility, standardization, autonomy, norms, prestige, size, and writing systems. The data of this qualitative research are collected via the writer's linguistic intuition and checked with more native speakers and written sources if necessary. It is worth noting that the data presented in this study come from Eshkevarat Gilaki (hereafter EG).

First, we showed that the existing criteria suffer from fundamental shortcomings. As such, the state of Gilaki cannot be determined by taking a single criterion into account. Then, we argued that given the dominant linguistic, social, and political conditions as well as the function of Gilaki in Iranian speech community, this variety is regarded as a dialect from a non-linguistic perspective due to the fact that

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it neither functions as an official language nor has a different origin from Persian as the standard language in Iran.

From a linguistic perspective focusing on this issue, we followed the approach that if there are a number of linguistic (phonetic, morphological, grammatical) differences between two varieties, there will be two possibilities: 1. Their speakers can understand each other. 2. Their speakers cannot understand each other. In the former case, they are regarded as two distinct languages; while in the latter case, they will be taken as the dialects of the same language. We investigated linguistic differences between EG and SP, focusing on pieces of evidence from phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics/ pragmatics. Phonological differences provided in this paper had to do with a number of sounds in EG including /y/, /ø/, /ə/ which SP lacked. Furthermore, we pointed out that the phonological processes in EG were captured independent of SP. With respect to morphological differences, best attempts were made to shed light on two issues namely past markers and prefixing verbs in this work. Past markers in EG are realized differently from SP. In past verbs of EG, the prefix -bə attaches to the beginning of the stem and past markers, such as /t/ and /d/, etc follow stems. Interestingly, the prefix -bə is absent in negative past verbs beginning with the negative prefix -nə. Another morphological difference discussed in this paper had to with the high frequency of prefixing verbs in EG whose equivalents in Persian are either a simple verb or a complex predicate. In the section on the syntactic differences, we focused on adpositions, the order of head and complement in lexical phrases, the order of adjective and standard of comparison, Ezafe construction, split topicalization, and impersonal construction coming up with drastic differences between EG and SP. Finally, in the section of semantic/ pragmatic differences, we provided some words of EG which are used both for males and females which is not the case in SP. It is then concluded that all these differences can certainly have a great impact on the mutual intelligibility of their speakers. To be more exact, Persian speakers cannot easily understand EG. By contrast, most EG speakers have a good command of SP as it is used in various contexts including media, educational system, government business, etc.

The findings suggest that Gilaki is a language from a linguistic perspective as there exist a variety of linguistic differences not only between EG and SP but also between different varieties of Gilaki. As such, the findings of exploring the state of a variety from linguistic and non-linguistic perspectives do not necessarily verify each other; rather they can be in conflict.

This study offers some insights into the state of Gilaki in Iran. The findings can make a major contribution to encouraging Gilaki native speakers to attempt to maintain their language and keep it alive by getting their children to acquire it as their first language and making use of it in more contexts.

**Keywords:** Language, Dialect, Gilaki, Standard Persian, Mutual intelligibility