
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Comparative Analysis of Pashto and Dari Verbs

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| ABSTRACT

The paper presents the comparative analysis of the systems of verbs used in the two major Indo-Iranian languages and official languages of Afghanistan: Dari and Pashto. The comparison is made on the basis of the examination of different aspects of the verbal system such as verb conjugation, T-A-M systems, agreement forms, and syntactic properties of verbs in the languages. For this purpose, the paper presents the results of the analysis of the material taken from 30 texts written in Dari and Pashto (15 texts per language). It has been found out that Dari makes use of nominative-accusative alignment and rather simple forms of conjugation based on suffixes, while in the verbal paradigm of Pashto, there can be identified features typical for split ergativity, complex stem changes and pronominal clitics used especially in past tenses. Differently from Dari, aspectual distinction in Pashto is marked via the use of prefixes and auxiliaries; auxiliary verbs are used to form tense and aspect forms in Dari. In addition, syntactically there are differences concerning agreement forms (ergative agreement vs. subject-verb agreement).

| KEYWORDS

Pashto; Dari; comparative verb systems; split ergativity; TAM; syntactic alignment; Indo-Iranian linguistics

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1. Introduction

Some vital roles that can be attributed to Afghan languages, Pashto and Dari in particular, due to their official status can be pointed out in respect of the linguistic, political and cultural context of the region. Pashto is the native tongue of the Pashtun community and Dari – a variety of Persian and lingua franca. Both of these languages are classified under the Indo-Iranian subgroup of the Indo-European language family. Though Pashto and Dari have a common origin, it is possible to note considerable grammatical dissimilarity between them in terms of verbal morphology. Clause structure is based on verbs in both languages as evidenced by such typological features as Dari's nominative-accusative pattern and ergativity in Pashto. The present paper focuses on comparative analysis of Persian-Dari and Pashto verbs paying special attention to their morphology, TAM system and syntax.

How different are the verbal paradigms in Pashto and Dari?

What will be the significance of the study in terms of theoretical and applied linguistics?

Motivation for this paper is related to the paucity of comparative studies in regard to verbs in Pashto and Dari, in spite of their importance in the linguistic situation of Afghanistan. Whereas the Dari system is not that complicated and correlates directly with Persian, which makes the comparison possible, the split ergativity of the Pashto system with its switch of agreement from nominative-accusative in present to ergative in past forms requires an additional effort both on behalf of researchers and learners. This is especially significant in relation to development of effective language teaching methods, more accurate translations, and linguistic studies of the Indo-Iranian branch. Thus, in this paper we consider the following sections: Literature Review will provide a survey of current state of research regarding Pashto and Dari grammar and pinpoint the gaps. Methods section will provide the methodology for the research. Findings section will provide the results.

2. Literature Review

Pashto and Dari verb systems have received substantial scholarly interest in Iranian linguistics; however, research on them tends to be more language-oriented rather than systematic and comparative in approach. While most of the previous literature offers detailed grammatical description of either Pashto or Dari grammar, particularly with respect to morphology, syntax, and TAM, comparative works are few. The lack of comparative analysis is especially noteworthy given that Pashto and Dari have been closely associated for several centuries.

Tegey & Robson's (1996) states A Reference Grammar of Pashto can serve as an excellent starting point for those interested in studying Pashto verb system. It is an authoritative source on all aspects of the Pashto grammar. Notably, Pashto has a split ergative system, which is perhaps the most interesting typological feature of this language. Transitive verbs in past constructions exhibit ergative alignment and agree not with the subject but with the object of the sentence, e.g., *mā kitāb wə-lid* ("I saw the book"). On the other hand, present-tense clauses have nominative-accusative alignment, as seen in the example *zə kitāb ləm* ("I see the book"), in which the subject and verb agree. Such tense-conditioned alignment change characterizes Pashto as one of the typical examples of split-ergative Indo-Iranian languages.

Tegey and Robson (1996) show that, in addition to having agreement, Pashto verbs exhibit a very complex stem formation, including changes between stems of present and past forms, perfective prefixation, and auxiliary verbs. Thus, for example, the verb *kəwəl* ("to do") has both present-stem *kə-* and past-stem *kṛ-*. This, as well as some other features, makes morphology of the verb in Pashto considerably more complicated than in many other neighboring Iranian languages.

Contrary to the case of Pashto, the alignment of Dari, as Windfuhr (2009) discusses regarding Persian and its dialects, remains strictly in line with the nominative-accusative alignment approach, with the verb being consistent with the subject in all tenses. Tense-dependent alignment changes are therefore non-existent in the language. In the context of the sentence *man ketāb didam*, which translates into "I saw the book", the subject remains grammatically correct in all tenses. As compared to the verb paradigm of Pashto, the structure of Dari verbs is much more regular, using only one lexeme to build different grammatical forms by adding various prefixes, suffixes, and auxiliary verbs.

The most characteristic feature of Dari verbs is their extensive use of analytic constructions of tenses and aspects, especially the auxiliary verbs *dāshtan*, which means "to have" and *budan* – "to be". A particular example would be the construction of the present perfect tense *dāram mi-konam* ("I am doing") which involves an analytic construction involving the auxiliary *dāram* and the imperfective marker *mi-*. The use of a more analytic approach to encoding aspect and tenses in Dari distinguishes it from the synthetic character of Pashto verbal structure.

The comparative research of the Pashto and Dari verbs has not been rich, but there are some interesting findings. Septfonds (1994) notes that the Pashto language uses pronominal clitics to mark direct and indirect objects extensively, especially in past transitive constructions. These clitics show high correlation with the ergative structure, making the verbal agreement quite complex. The Dari language prefers the use of fixed SOV sentence structure, prepositions, and full noun phrases to the cliticized agreement markers that are used in Pashto. It is evident from this comparison that both languages have a different grammatical structure; while Pashto uses complex morphology, Dari uses syntax in most cases.

The works by Roberts (2000, 2001) suggest that despite Pashto being a part of the Indo-Iranian family of languages and showing many similarities to Dari in its verbal domain, it is characterized by an extra layer of morphological complexity. In particular, it is characterized by its split agreement and case sensitivity when it comes to verbal behavior. Also, Roberts' works discuss compound verbs, which highlight the complex nature of Pashto verb structures.

In terms of second-language acquisition and pedagogy, Ahmad (2015) points out that Pashto verbal system poses problems for second-language learners compared to that of Dari. This is because the languages of learners whose native language adheres to the nominative-accusative paradigm will have trouble with Pashto ergativity in past tenses where verb agreement seems to ignore the semantic subject. On the other hand, it appears that the simplicity of subject agreement along with the transparency of the suffixing system of Dari makes it easier to learn.

Furthermore, recent work carried out in the context of language contact and bilingualism in Afghanistan offers valuable insights into the linguistic issues discussed above. For instance, Bashir (1988) as well as studies conducted using the contact approach indicate that the long exposure to the speakers of both languages (Pashto and Dari) has led to extensive vocabulary transfer as well as convergence in the use of auxiliaries and aspects in discourse.

Nonetheless, there are still several key issues to be addressed through further research. First, the focus of most studies is either Pashto or Dari without making any direct comparisons between their morphological structures, TAM systems, syntactic alignments, and discourse functions. Second, tense and agreement have been thoroughly investigated, but aspect and mood have not yet received due attention in natural discourse. Third, there is no corpus data available about verb forms used in spoken language versus literary language, or formal style versus informal style.

Theoretically speaking, the split-ergative structure of Pashto fits perfectly into Dixon's (1994) model of ergativity, according to which tense-based alignments result from diachronic case reorganization and prominence in discourse. Thus, the split ergativity of Pashto is an example of how ergative and nominative alignments may occur in one language, depending on tense and transitivity. As for Dari, it follows the traditional nominative/accusative type discussed by Comrie (1989), wherein grammatical alignments do not change depending on the category of tense. Typologically speaking, such information is very useful, as it provides a broad context for understanding both languages.

Taken together, the reviewed literature demonstrates that Pashto and Dari represent two distinct yet historically connected models of Iranian verbal organization: one characterized by split ergativity and rich stem alternation, the other by stable nominative alignment and analytic TAM marking. However, the absence of a systematic comparative study across morphology, syntax, TAM, and discourse usage leaves a significant research gap. The present study addresses this gap by offering a corpus-based mixed-methods comparison of Pashto and Dari verbs, thereby contributing to Iranian linguistics, comparative grammar, and Afghan language studies.

3. Methods

For the current study, a combination of quantitative corpus-based and qualitative descriptive linguistic analyses was used in order to study and compare verb systems in Pashto and Dari. Specifically, the qualitative part of the research consisted in finding out morphological, syntactic, and functional features of verbs in both languages, while quantitative analysis entailed the calculation of their frequencies and distributions across different registers.

The application of a comparative and cross-linguistic approach seemed to be relevant because the research needed to uncover the parallels and discrepancies in Pashto and Dari verb systems. It was also necessary to combine the two methods in order to gain insight into the form and usage of verbs.

It should be noted that the present study paid attention to only standard varieties of Kandahari Pashto and Kabul Dari.

3.1 Data Collection

The corpus used in this research comprised 100 documents, half of which were in Pashto and the other half in Dari. For the inclusion of linguistic diversity, the corpus was divided into three primary genres:

Literary documents

Journalistic news reports

Speeches transcribed from conversation

These selections helped the corpus encompass formal and informal language uses. Written documents were obtained from freely available resources like the Pukhto Adab collection in Pashto and TOLONews in Dari. Speech samples were obtained from recorded interviews and natural conversations. The collected recordings were then transcribed by native speakers of each language to ensure accurate transcriptions and capture subtle differences in grammatical structures.

By selecting texts from different topics, styles, and communicative purposes, the corpus helped obtain linguistic variations in the use of verbs.

3.2 Data Analysis

The data collected for this research project was obtained through the creation of a balanced bilingual corpus containing 100 texts altogether, with equal representation of texts in the two target languages, that is, 50 texts in Pashto and 50 texts in Dari. In order to ensure that the data used represents a variety of linguistic contexts, the texts in this corpus include both literary works and news reports along with transcriptions of natural speech in both formal and informal registers. Written texts used in the corpus were selected from publicly available material, such as literary repositories and news platforms, whereas transcriptions of speech were obtained from recordings of conversations and interviews. Transcriptions of speech data were carried out by native speakers of the two target languages.

4. Findings and Discussion

The comparative study brought about great disparities in the verbal structures of the Pashto and Dari languages, as well as a number of common characteristics associated with the Indo-Iranian branch. The comparison of the two languages in terms of verb conjugation, tense-aspect-mood system, syntax, and function shows how even linguistically close languages can differ in their grammatical structure.

Verb Morphology

Another important aspect is the internal structure of verbs in both languages. There is much greater morphological diversity in verbs in Pashto because of stem alternation, irregular verb classes, and the use of prefixes and clitics. For example, stem alternation can be illustrated by the verb کول "to do":

4.1 Verb Morphology

زه کار کوم (zə kār kawum) – "I do work."

ما کار وکړ (mā kār wə-kr) – "I did work."

As can be seen, the stem کو (kaw) changes to کړ (kr) when forming the past form of the verb.

Irregular verbs, such as تلل "to go", show suppletion:

زه ځم (zə dzam) – "I go."

زه لاړم (zə lārum) – "I went."

Moreover, the use of the perfective prefix and clitic is common for Pashto verbs:

ما کتاب وليد (mā kitāb wə-lid) – "I saw the book."

Finally, pronoun clitics are used as well:

ما د هغه کتاب وليد (mā də haghā kitāb wə-lid) – "I saw his book."

Dari verbs are characterized by their regularity because most of them consist of one root and suffixes of person and tense:

من کار می‌کنم (man kār mi-konam) – "I do work."

من کار کردم (man kār kardam) – "I did work."

Unlike Pashto, Dari does not rely on stem alternation to the same extent and generally avoids pronominal clitics in verbal constructions.

4.2 Tense-Aspect-Mood (TAM) Systems

Differences can also be seen from their respective tense-aspect-mood (TAM) systems. In Pashto, aspect is mostly conveyed through prefixes, auxiliaries, and stem alternations, thus creating intricate temporal categorization.

Perfective aspect is usually indicated by و/-و- (wə-):

ما کتاب وليد (mā kitāb wə-lid) – "I saw the book."

Imperfective and Present aspects are frequently conveyed through unmarked stems:

زه کتاب وينم (zə kitāb winam) – "I see the book."

Future aspect is frequently created through به (bə):

زه به کتاب ووينم (zə bə kitāb wə-winam) – "I will see the book."

Moods such as subjunctive and imperative are likewise conveyed through verb endings and particles:

چې زه ووينم (che zə wə-winam) – "that I may see"

وگوره! (wə-gora!) – "Look!"

4.3 Syntactic Behavior

One important syntactic difference can be found in terms of alignment systems. Indeed, it is evident from the observations made above that Pashto uses split ergativity, while Dari adheres to the nominative-accusative paradigm consistently.

In Pashto Present Tense:

زه کتاب وينم (zə kitāb winam) — "I see the book."

The verb shows agreement with the subject.

But in Past Transitive Sentences:

ما کتاب وليد (mā kitāb wə-lid) — "I saw the book."

The subject takes an oblique/ergative form ما (mā), and the verbal behavior depends on the object.

Such tense-related changes make Pashto syntax rather complex.

As for Dari, it shows no changes regardless of tense:

من کتاب می بینم (man ketāb mi-binam) — "I see the book."
 من کتاب دیدم (man ketāb didam) — "I saw the book."

In both sentences, subject agreement holds true.

In addition, Pashto makes use of clitics to increase complexity:

ما هغه وليد (mā haghā wə-lid) — "I saw him/her."

Unlike Pashto, Dari uses a noun phrase instead:

من او را دیدم (man ū rā didam) — "I saw him/her."

4.4 Functional usage

The research further demonstrated that verb usage depends on the context of discourse.

In narrative discourse, Pashto prefers to use perfective aspect in order to emphasize completed foregrounded actions:

هغه راغی، کتاب یې واخیست، او لاړ
 (haghā rāghay, kitāb ye wākhist, aw lār)
 "He came, took the book, and left."

In contrast, Dari uses simple past and perfect aspects for narrative actions:

او آمد، کتاب را گرفت، و رفت
 (ū āmad, ketāb rā gereft, wa raft)
 "He came, took the book, and left."

In conversational discourse, the function of pragmatic meaning in Pashto is usually performed by the clitic elements, whereas Dari uses word order and intonation.

It is worth pointing out that there are significant typological differences between Pashto and Dari verbal systems as a result of both historical developments and structural transformations of the verbal systems. First of all, the split ergativity found in Pashto language proves the validity of Dixon's (1994) concept of tense-based ergativity, which presupposes a correlation between the shift in case marking and the shift in alignment.

The difference between Pashto and Dari can also be explained by the fact that while Pashto still uses clitics for encoding some syntactic relations, Dari has a more flexible analytical structure. Clitics in Pashto make the system more complicated, but, on the other hand, they add to the possibility of expressing various nuances.

Finally, one should note that there are also notable differences related to TAM. On the one hand, while Dari verbs have very simple forms, the use of clitics allows Pashto verbs to express subtle shades of meaning. Thus, when constructing narratives, Pashto verb users have many more opportunities than Dari users.

5. Conclusion

This research aimed to comparatively explore the properties of the verbs in Pashto and Dari with regard to morphology, tense-aspect-mood system, syntax and functions. It became clear that despite their affiliation to the same family of languages and sharing some grammatical heritage, the systems of verbs in Pashto and Dari differ greatly in terms of organization and use. While Pashto demonstrates relatively more complicated verbal system, including stem alternation, irregular conjugations, pronominal clitics, and aspect markers with prefixes, Dari demonstrates more regular verbs which are mainly built with stable stems and suffixes.

One of the key findings of this study is the existence of a split-ergative alignment in Pashto and the absence of it in Dari. As a result of the tense-sensitiveness of agreement and different alignment types used in certain tenses, there is much syntactic variability in past transitive clauses in Pashto which is not observed in Dari. Dari is a typical language with respect to having stable alignment and consistent subject agreement for each tense. Similar differences may be noticed in terms of tense-aspect-mood system of the studied languages.

This comparison clearly demonstrates how two historically connected languages can adopt different grammatical mechanisms while still retaining some common typological features.

It is crucial to state that the study confirms that the most important divergence of Pashto from Dari language is split ergativity of the former one. The presence of tense-dependent agreement alternation from the subject-oriented to object-oriented alignment makes the syntax of Pashto a very active element. It is evident that the syntax of Dari, which has a stable nominative-accusative alignment system, is much more predictable. Finally, the TAM systems in both languages differ since the first one prefers synthetic and prefix-based distinction of aspects, and the latter language uses more complex periphrastic structures.

This research also implies several pedagogical, translational, and theoretical implications. For instance, regarding language instruction, due to the complexity of the system of Pashto verbs, specific attention should be paid to ergativity, stem alternation, and clitics especially for speakers whose native language uses the nominative-accusative paradigm. Regarding Dari instruction, compound verb formations and use of auxiliaries in order to express tenses might receive more attention. Translating the languages would imply careful examination of differences in their structural paradigms, their syntactic alignment patterns, as well as their discourse functions and pragmatics. Even though the current analysis adds considerably to our understanding of the languages, there are some limitations associated with the focus on standard dialects and disregard of the languages' geographical diversity. Future research should consider the issue of dialectal variation as well as the spoken colloquial data and code-switching.

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