Christian And Sikh Communities In Iran And Role Of Language Identity: A Comparative Approach To The Social-Linguistic Aspects Of The Christianity And Sikhism In The Middle East

Rajdeep Singh[1]

[1] Department of Linguistics, Payame Noor University, Tehran, Iran

Abstract

Middle East is the birthplace of all major Abrahamic religions. However, the Christian community in the Middle East does not enjoy the same diversity as Christians enjoy in the West. In this study, we approach the Christian faith in Iran from the socio-linguistic perspective which can be further applied to the wider region because we observe the same trend in the region. We look at the role of language and its influence on the development of the religion. By conducting a qualitative/quantitative experiment, we delve into the main issues to highlight the reasons behind the apparent features of Middle-Eastern Christianity. Language identity is further investigated as it has an important place in the heart of the Christian faith in Iran. Armenian development and changes in Iran is considered since it is the working language of the Armenian Church in Iran. On the other hand, our study shows that religions, such as the Sikhism, that maintains a rather balanced linguistic identity, have more potential to grow.

Introduction

Christianity is originated in the Middle-east and has been part of the lifestyle of millions of people in this region for thousands of years. However, when we look more precisely to the components of the Christian community in the region, we readily notice the strict ethnic and racial framework within which the Christian faith is defined. As Pappe (2005) states "With regard to the Middle East, this dichotomy goes along religious, sectarian, gender and geographical lines. Christians and Jews are regarded as more developed than Muslims… and within each category women as 'developing' rather than 'developed' - women's transition to the status of 'developed' being the ultimate proof of the process being completed." (p. 6). This shows that the Middle-East is composed of a mosaic of religious beliefs along the ethnic lines. Though Held and Cummings claim that "it should not be overlooked that a great many followers of Islam do not reside in the Middle East at all" (p. 1), we should take into account the fact that the middle eastern politics is still dominated by Islam as the sole source of all political decision makings in the Middle-East, and other religions, including but not limited to Christianity, do not have the space necessary to play a role in the political scene. Cragg (1991) investigates the Arab Christianity from the social perspective, and touches on the topics such as Arabism and the power it exerts on the Christian faith. Though we should be conscious that religion in iran and wider middle east has its own particular characteristics which cannot be easily interpolated from one country to another. In fact, in certain ways, the policies of the Persian empire (550–330 BC) molded post-exilic Judaism; the Persians facilitated the Jews for their peaceful return to Jerusalem which is something hard to imaginein today's middle east. This is how theologian Walter Brueggemann notes:

> Compared to the complicated and vexed story of Yahweh with the Egyptians,the Assyrians, and the Babylonians, the story of Yahweh with the Persians lacks drama. On the horizon of this testimony, the Persians are not recalcitrant vassals of Yahweh, need not be broken by Yahweh, and so need no Yahwistic recovery. In this modeling of nations as partners, Persia is the exemplar of a positive, responsive partner. (Brueggemann, 2012, p. 518)

In our study, we look at another example where the linguistic element of the Christian faith prevents its own development. Singh (2018) investigates how cognitive processing and language are related in the syntax. However, we look rather at the social side of interaction between language and cognitive processing in order to examine some of the changes in Armenian language spoken in Iran. Voskanian (2002) investigates the role of borrowing and loan words from Iranian languages in the development of the secret language of the gypsies in the near East, i.e. Lom. In our study, we also point out to the way Armenian in Iran has undergone a continuous change and its linguistic elements are further analyzed. On the other hand, we know that in Iran there is a wide ethnic diversity which makes it hard to define minority in the sole framework of religion. Indeed, the language plays an important role in the ethnic identity in Iran, which is further discussed in another city (Amanolahi, 2005). Sanasarian (1995) on the other hand puts more emphasis on the political limitations for the minorities in a powerful state. However, in our study, the state does not play a significant role in the way that Christianity has been adapted to the environment as we see

the situation for Iranian Christians in the long term, which is not affected by the current political system. Singh (2018) considers the language change in Iran and how it can be delimited in a concrete way. He proposes a model which shows that foreign languages vying for the same territory affect and change the way the aboriginal language is spoken. This shows how languages are their interaction play an important role in the overall society. Hassan (2007) investigates the minorities and their roles in Iran, evidencing a strong psychological ethnical presence of Armenian in the Iranian medias, and a rather absent of other faith followers' opinions in the Iranian media. However, the clear trend is that there is a strong evidence of a faster rate of growth of Baha'i faith and Sikhism in Iran and the wider Middle East.

When we look at the minorities in Iran, it is important to take attention to the linguistic component because the minorities are rather defined in Iran based on the language identity associated with them. That's why the investigation of the differences in the practice of Christianity in Iran and wider Middle East should include the linguistic parameter as the most deciding one. Singh (2018) shows how the auxiliary verbs form a cognitive image for the language user. In fact, he claims that the way auxiliary verb is used depends on the cognitive-language interplay, bringing a notion of language identity to the whole cognitive processing. Nercissians (2001) defines the patterns of language use by ethnic minorities in Tehran, associating the linguistic code with the minority sense of ethnic identity. Language should be regarded as a manifestation of the more inner processing which prepositions show such a rather complex inner spatial senses (Singh, 2018). Therefore, we should consider the possibility that language develops a specific lexicon for the inner thoughts, religion being one of the important aspects of that. Many also have challenged the idea that language decides in a great deal the way a minority lives through different historical periods. Berberian (2005) actually challenges the idea of language and ethnicity connection by placing the Armenian minority outside the overall perspective of Iranian identity, proposing a rather mosaic type of social identity for Iran. This however does not solve the main problem of the slow movement of Christianity in Iran and wider Middle East, hand in hand with the ethnic identity features. Singh (2018) looks through the semantic and symbolic functions that exert pressure on the way religious words are preserved. This shows that a more holistic approach to the religion and the way it is formed, considering the semantic-symbolic notions, is preferable. Van Gordor (2010) points out to the diversity of Iranian cultural scene while investigating the inter-relation between Christianity and Islam, the role of Christian community in Iran. However, the very important notion of linguistic element and its interaction with the way religion is handled in the society are not dealt with by Van Gordor. Singh (2018) examines the quality of cognate words in different language by proposing the mirroring effect model. His findings show that we should look at the language and its development in a more holistic way, including the way it may borrow words from other languages.

In fact, Middle-eastern Christian community has formed in a way that it is rather associated with a special ethnic group. A great example is the large Christian community in Iran which is of Armenian origin. This is an important characteristic of Christianity in the region, i.e. having ethnic base, which we will try to explain by the linguistic method. When it comes to the Armenian Orthodox church in Iran, the main religious ceremonies are conducted in Armenian while everyday conversation is in a mixture of Armenian and Persian; Armenian is spoken at home, and Persian at school and wider society. However, this duality of language use makes it easier to discover some more deep-rooted features of Iranian Christian community compared to the more mainstream Christian community abroad. In fact, knowing Armenian is the main identity of Christians in Iran, which makes the conversion harder for fellow Iranians of other ethnic and religious background.

Language Identity

In this study, we conducted two surveys, one from Orthodox church in Tehran,the other from Armenians in Armenia. Thereafter, we investigated the responses based on the open code qualitative analysis. We used a survey to obtain 12 main factors which affect both Armenians and Iranian Christians. I asked one other colleague to do the same analysis on the survey responses. The inter-rater agreement is 84%. We also needed to see if the construct validity still holds. For this end, we used AMOS 20 for confirmation of the factor analysis. Based on the results, we had to remove items which showed multicollinearity and also those that show insufficient loading (<0.6). After removing the mentioned items, we calculated the alpha reliabilities and the mean scores of the remaining items. 40 persons were responded with verbal data which ranged from one word responses to long paragraphs. Overall, the open coding was done after the axial coding.

Findings And Discussion

After performing the CFA, we ended with 5 items from the main 12 items. The 5 factor structures yielded a series of fit indices which supports the construct validity of the instrument ($x^2 = 1298.8$, df = 640, p\0.001, x^2/df = 2.16, TLI = 0.91, CFI = .95, RMSEA = 0.068). the overall Alpha reliabilities of the 5 factors is 0.94. alpha reliabilities of the factors are reported in table1. Based on the responses, we made the first coding which we show the main coding scheme as it is illustrated in the table1.

Table1. Coding of the survey of Iranian Christians

Factors	items A	items B	keywords	Standardized validity coefficient	Cronbach's alpha reliability	Mean(SD)
Social pressure	I feel that people expect me to be different.	I feel that I should carry the burden of my Armenian society.	Feeling Expectations Burden Differences society	0.7	0.87	5.06
identity	I have a sense of identity associated to my Armenian heritage.	I am an Armenian Christian and it is different to other branches of Christianity.	Heritage Association Sense of identity Christian branches	0.94	0.94	5.35
Low-profile	I do not like sharing my beliefs with others.	I do my own business and I do not like to get engaged politically.	Own life Non-engagement Politics beliefs	0.80	0.93	5.55
Valuable customs	We have many festivities and it is our duty to continue our ancestral customs.	I try to keep our customs as they are part of what I am.	Customs Values Festivity Duty Ancestral continuation	0.76	0.95	5.44
Language factor	I love my mother tongue and use it in my prayers.	I prefer talking in Armenian with my Christian friends, but with other Iranians I speak in Persian.	Armenian Persian Friends Preference	0.72	0.90	5.63

Just as it is shown in the table1, we conducted several circles of the open coding until we got to the main factors influencing the way Iranian Christians feel about their language and lifestyle. As we can clearly say from our survey result, the sense of identity and Armenian heritage are among the most important features for Christianity in Iran, which on its own is another evidence of the rather local and ethnic characteristic of the Christianity which is practiced in Iran. This reveals another important point which concerns the religion identity itself. One study also shows how Iranian students were developing identity conflict while acquiring Hausa which is a completely different

language (Singh, 2018). This shows that language works as a refuge where people normally turn throughout their lives.

RELIGION: RETURNING TO THE ESSENTIAL CORE

From our analysis, we can go on to claim that religion, even the most universal one, becomes a rather limited ethnic faith which requires the special heritage linearity. The Christianity, which is a universal religion, just as Islam, can experience this return to the core in special circumstances and situations. From our study, the feeling that Iranian Christians are associated with the Armenian identity is made clear and this shows how religions can change their identity themselves to cope with situations where they are minority. In fact, we conducted a small scale survey from Armenians from Armenia to see if they also consider the ethnic criteria as important. The scheme of the coding is illustrated in the table2.

Table2. Coding of the survey of Armenian from Armenia

code	Extract of the working A	Extract of the working B	keywords	Standardized validity coefficient	Cronbach's alpha reliability	Mean(SD)
Religion quality	I am proud of my religion, which brings peace in my heart.	My religion is something inner to me, but I love all the prayers that I perform in the church.	Religion Inner Prayer Peace rituals	0.80	0.98	6.3
progress	I feel that I am not such a good Christian and I love to get better.	I like to attend church more often, even though it's hard to arrange things for that.	Progress Attending church Getting better Future	0.83	0.89	6.7
devotion	So many problems to overcome for a better future. I prefer having a deeper religious belief than any other thing.	I see myself as someone who likes to give more to the poor as it is my duty in life as a good Christian.	Deeper belief Duty Helping Altruism Good Christian	0.76	0.84	6.45
Unity	I see myself as part of the wider Christian community in the whole world.	I like to connect to other brothers/sisters to see how they live and react in the society.	Connecting Socializing Community Wider community Reaction part	0.90	0.89	6.38
Bible	I love reading Bible to feel closer to	Important thing is to read much more about my religion.	Bible God	0.89	0.95	6.31

	Lord.	I want to have God's words in what I do.	Feeling Importance knowledge			

Our survey shows that the majority sees their religion as Christianity and the ethnicity was not an important factor to them. In fact, it is like the ethnicity dissolves in the much bigger unit which is the religion itself. Another point is the importance of language which definitely points out to the way language plays a role in the religious context. Armenians from Armenia did not give the same prominence that Iranian Christians gave. This clearly shows how the rising competition between languages brings about a sense of language identity as well. This is a decisive factor when we consider the evolution of Armenian through its history in Iran. Armenian language has two major branches, the western and eastern Armenian. The majority of Armenians today speak the eastern variety, including in Iran. Despite the passage of time, eastern Armenian is still a very lively language and it is used in everyday life by Iranian Christians. In fact, the changes in Armenian have been much less than changes in Kurdish, showing how the religion and language identity play a role in this. However, in phonetic there are some differences between Armenian spoken in Iran and Armenia. This shows how the language is less resilient in the phonetic dimension compared to grammar and lexicon. Overall, we can classify the main differences in Armenian in Iran and Armenia as it is illustrated in Table3.

Table3. Differences between Armenian in Iran and Armenia

Main categories	Percentage of differences
vocabulary	20
Grammar	5
Phonetics	35

Here, we see how the phonetics has been influenced more than any other categories. This also makes sense since we see how other languages change in their phonetics when they begin speaking in other parts of the world, like English in England versus Australia. However, the grammar is the least influenced by the place and it shows that it forms a sense of identity. In fact, having a similar grammar makes the lecture sessions in church easier and many other issues are avoided by having the same grammar. Therefore, it is clearly a language specific quality which is to keep the grammar rather intact when the language is disperses around a specific area. Therefore, formula1 is what we can state about the geographic expansion of the language which is written below.

Formula1:

$$language\ expansion \cong \pm language\ lexicon \pm language\ phonetics + constant\ grammar$$

Just as the above mentioned formula, language reacts in a special way that it is hard to say exactly the outcome. However, the approximate result clearly shows how the lexicon and phonetics are rather free to change and borrow from other local languages, while grammar remains resistant to big changes.

Sikhism growth and balanced language identity

When it comes to the Sikhism situation, we see a rather different picture which shows that the language identity is not mentioned to be the reason behind its attraction in the Middle East despite having the same difficult environmental circumstances in the Middle East, even way harsher ones compared to the Christian faith. Here, language does play a significant role as Sikhism does not have a sacred language identity and uses Persian, Arabic, English and many other languages to vehicle its message to the community. This balanced language identity helps it to grow under different conditions and to attract people from other ethnicities. The comparison between the Sikhism and the Christian faith clearly shows how language plays an extremely important role in the formation and continuation of religions despite the differences in geography and ethnicity. Jaspal and Coyle(2010) conduct an evaluative comparison between modern Punjabi, a language which is initially described as the 'mother tongue' for

Sikhs, and 'the language of the Guru Granth Sahib'. They claim that "although much of the existing literature depicts the 'mother tongue' as a vital aspect of identity, 'an aspect of the soul, if not the soul itself made manifest', here this language does not appear to take precedence over that of holy scripture" (Jaspal & Coyle, 2010). This shows that Sikhism goes beyond the language barriers to convey its message of peace and unity, attracting many youths in Iran and the Middle East. In order to understand the way Sikh followers identify themselves with a specific ethnic identity, we provided 100 Sikh participants of equal gender representation with a survey regarding their sense and understanding of the religion. The scheme of the coding is illustrated in the table4.

Table4. Coding of the survey of Sikh faith participants

code	Extract of the working A	Extract of the working B	keywords	Standardized validity coefficient	Cronbach's alpha reliability	Mean(SD)
Gender equality	I feel so proud to be a female follower of Sikhism because women need the same right as men.	I am glad to be part of a community where there is equality among everyone.	Gender Equality Community Women Rights	0.84	0.99	6.7
Better life	I feel so glad to be close to follow my religion as it makes me a better person.	Sikhism empowers its followers and brings a permanent light into their hearts.	Empowering Light Life Happiness	0.80	0.86	6.1
Devotion	I care about my religion and feel responsible to implement it in all aspects of my life.	I do not see any issue wearing turbans as it is a sign of my devotion to Sikhism.	Devotion Responsibility Turban Love	0.73	0.83	6.08
Freedom of choice	The freedom to choose and practice religion is at the foundation of my religion.	I do not feel obliged but pleased to follow my values.	Freedom Obligation Community Values Religion	0.89	0.85	6.38
Inner peace	When I read a passage from Guru Granth Sahib, it brings me the gift of peace and tranquility.	When I go to Gurdwara, I feel suspended in an ocean of tranquility.	Peace Gurdwara Guru Success Emotion	0.85	0.92	6.21

As it is shown in the table4, the responses brings a clear insight to the way Sikhs feel about their religion, far away in Iran. Tranquility, better life and gender equality are some of the main points of interest to them, which shows that language and ethnic identity plays a much lesser role for the small but vibrant Sikh community in Iran and Middle East.

Conclusion and Discussion

Our study shows that the Christian faith could not develop in the Middle-East because of the ethno-racial aspect that it has acquired throughout its old history. In fact, religions get back to their core essential when the overall situation for their growth is not provided. This can be seen in almost all of the local religions for whom the propagation seems almost impossible. On the other, language does accelerate the return to the core by connecting the race and language in a much deeper way. This makes it even harder for the outside world to connect to the same values that the religion claims to protect in its institutions. Armenian language in Iran plays that special linguistic barrier which prevents other fellow citizens to approach the Christian faith, creating a small ethno-linguistic environment for the followers. Furthermore, wherever the Christianity is the minority religion the influence of language dramatically declines. This can be seen in countries with the same language but different religions. Therefore, language is an important component of both religion formation and restriction. In fact, in our study, we conclude that the religion interacts with the language in order to adapt to new situations whenever it is threatened by religions surrounding it. Phinney, Romero, Nava & Huang (2001) investigate the role of language, parents and peers in ethnic identity, concluding that ethnic language proficiency, and in-group peer interaction predicted ethnic identity. This is in line with the findings of our study where the influence of language in the development of religiousness is highlighted. Furthermore, Armenian language usage in Iran showed how the grammar component plays that essential role of unity among the Christian faith followers in the Middle-East. The most constant component of language change is its core grammar while phonetics and lexicon get influenced heavily by the new environment and other languages. The situation of Armenians in Iran, though, cannot be considered as a complete prototype for the whole region. Al-Khatib (2001) examines the language situation of the Armenians in Jordan, where they constitute a small new minority for the last 100 years. He investigates the language shift in Armenian and points out to the fact that Armenian is found to be used in very restricted situation and by a very small number of people. This shows that the old historic Armenian community in Iran has created a more robust language identity to cling to, compared to the more newly formed Armenian community in Jordan. However, still the ethnic identity of Christianity in Jordan confirms our findings that the Christianity in the Middle East, being a minority, follows a strict ethnic path. Sikhism is also a great example of how the balanced language identity helps a religion to grow and have followers from diverse ethnic backgrounds. As our study showed, the Sikhism in Iran does not put an ethnic and language barrier to the followers. It is this lack of a language identity which helps Sikhism to survive and prosper.

References

Al-Khatib, M.A. (2001). Language shift among the Armenians of Jordan. The International Journal of the Sociology of Language 154, 153177.

Amanolahi, S. (2005). A note on ethnicity and ethnic groups in Iran. Iran & the Caucasus, 9(1), 37-41.

Berberian, H. (2005). Traversing boundaries and selves: Iranian-Armenian identities during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution. Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East 25 (2): 219-96.

Brueggemann, W. (2012). Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy Revisited. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* vol. 74: 28-38.

Cragg, K. (1991). The Arab Christian: a history in the Middle East, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press.

Hassan, H. D. (2007). Iran: Ethnic and Religious Minorities.

Held, C., C. & Cummings, J., T. (2006). "Peoples and Cultures of the Middle East." *The Contemporary Middle East*, edited by Karl Yambert. Boulder: Westview Press.

Jaspal, R. & Coyle, A. (2010b). 'My language, my people': language and ethnic identity among British-born South Asians. South Asian Diaspora 2(2): 201–218.

Nercissians, E. (2001). Bilingualism and Diglossia: Patterns of Language Use by Ethnic Minorities in Tehran. Int'l. J. Soc. Lang. 148 (2001), 59-70.

Pappe, I. (2005) The Modern Middle East. London: Routledge.

Phinney, J. S., Romero, I., Nava, M., & Huang, D. (2001). The role of language, parents, and peers in ethnic identity among adolescents in immigrant families. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 30, 135–153.

Sanasarian, E. (1995). State dominance and communal perseverance: The Armenian diaspora in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979-1989. Diaspora 4 (3), 243-265.

Singh, R. (2018). Derivational Grammar Model and Basket Verb: A Novel Approach to the Inflectional Phrase in the Generative Grammar and Cognitive Processing. *English Linguistics Research,* Vol.7, No.2.

Singh, R. (2018). Auxiliary Verbs in Serbo-Croatian, French, Persian, Spanish and English: A Cognitive-Semantic Approach to the Auxiliary Verb Usage and Passive Voice. *English Linguistics Research,* Vol.7, No.3.

Singh, R. (2018). A Cognitive Approach to the Semantics in the Sacred Context: Semantic and Symbolic Function of Sacred Words. *English Linguistics Research,* Vol.7, No.3.

Singh, R. (2018). Norwegian and Persian spatial prepositions: a novel comparative and syntactic approach to the spatial prepositions*. KAAV international journal of English, literature, and linguistics*, vol.5/ page no.1-8.

Singh, R. (2018). Language change and directionality: A novel model for language change in Persian and Iranian languages from the sociolinguistic perspective. *KAAV International journal of English, Literature, and linguistics,* vol.5/page no.1-8.

Singh, R. (2018). Error Analysis of Persian Learners of Hausa Language: Cognitive Approach to Errors. *Journal of Literature, Languages and Linguistics,* vol.45/page no.10-15.

Singh, R. (2018). Mirroring Effects and the Water Code: A Cognitive-Semantic Approach to Natural Morphology in the Religious-Cultural Context. *Journal of Literature, Languages and Linguistics,* vol.46/page no.37-41.

Van Gordor, A., C. (2010). Christianity in Persia and the Status of Non-Muslims in Iran. MD: Lexington Books.

Voskanian, V. (2002). The Iranian Loan-Words in Lomavren, The Secret Language of the Armenian Gypsies. Iran & the Caucasus. Vol. 6, No. 1/2 (2002), 169-180.