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Research article

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A newly discovered Persian variety: the case of “Zoroastrian Persian”

To Rostom Schayegh

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Abstract: Using a corpus of contemporary Yazdi Zoroastrian oral literature, this article demonstrates that the Persian dialect found in many Zoroastrian songs is different from both Standard Persian and local (Yazdi) Persian. It is argued that Zoroastrian oral literature in New Persian preserves the features of a Persian dialect previously spoken or used by Zoroastrians. On the basis of phonological and morphosyntactic comparison, this article shows that it is likely that this variety of Persian was influenced by Gavruni, the traditional language of the Zoroastrians of Iran.

Keywords: Zoroastrianism, oral literature, poetry, New Persian dialectology, Gavruni

1 Introduction

a) There are currently around 30,000 Zoroastrians living in Iran. Many of them (between 8,000 and 15,000) live in Yazd and Kerman,¹ which are traditionally the two main Zoroastrian cities of Iran. Many, however, have emigrated to Tehran since the 19th century, and significant communities can be found in different cities, such as Shiraz, and, mostly since the 1970s, abroad. Iranian Zoroastrians in Yazd and Kerman spoke Gavruni, an Iranian language quite removed from Persian (there is no mutual intelligibility); nowadays, only Yazdi Zoroastrians speak Gavruni. Iranian Zoroastrian oral poetry and literature has not yet been thoroughly studied, and it has even been deemed non-existent in the past.² Yet it exists, and is both in Gavruni and in Persian.

b) To illustrate this literature, I present here a quatrain, sung by Morvârid-e Xosro and recorded by Kuroš Niknâm:³

araxčîn sar-e Rostem katun-on (bis)
rox-oš mâ gad-oš serv-e ravun-on
del-om mixâ ke didâr-oš vevina
xodâ dunâ ke çe parsax miyun-on

The hat on Rostam's head is of linen,
 His face is (like) the moon and his stature a slender cypress,

1 I have taken this number from this website: <http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/~dari/index.html>, accessed on the 22nd of August 2018, which is unfortunately no longer online.

2 “Every endeavour was used to obtain stories of true Gabri origin, but I fear that only samples of the common Persian stock were provided; and Gabri poetry, or verse, appears to be non-existent.” (Lorimer 1916: 425).

3 For contemporary varieties I systematically use <â> to indicate [ɒ]/[ɔ:] (usually transcribed by Iranists as <â> or <a>), <â> represents [a:] in contemporary varieties and transcribes the word-internal alef or word initial <ā> of Archaic and Classical Persian. I thank Agnes Korn for suggesting this transcription. <ğ> is used to transcribe the [ɣ] sound.

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My heart wants to see his apparition,
May God know how many parasangs are between (us).

c) Although it is clearly Persian (the vocabulary is entirely Persian, as are its syntax and verbal morphology), the language of this quatrain shows notable differences when compared with both Standard Persian and Yazdi Persian. By studying this text and many others, I hereby present the conclusion that a number of the Persian songs and poems traditionally sung and recited by the Zoroastrians of Yazd are dialectally different from Standard Persian (SP), Classical Persian (Cl. Pers.), and Yazdi Persian (YP).⁴ By Standard Persian is meant Standard Tehrāni Persian, the variety of Persian that most foreign learners learn, and that is used in most contemporary movies and songs. By Classical Persian is meant Persian as it was written between the 12th and 18th century by canonical authors in the Persianate world, such as Nizāmi Arūzi. Phylogenetically, one can consider them as two different varieties, and not the continuation of each other. They might thus have had separate specific contacts with various dialects of Persian, and influenced them differently.

I would also like to mention that, when they casually speak Persian, Gavrūni speakers speak either Yazdi or Standard Persian, with little to no influence from Gavrūni.

For simplicity, this variant of Persian will be called Zoroastrian Persian (ZP). It is unclear whether ZP was a separate dialect of Persian, strongly influenced by Gavrūni, or whether it was the literary register in which Persian poetry was traditionally composed. This article aims to systematically describe the specificities of ZP as realized in these songs and poems. To do so, I will compare it with different Persian varieties, sporadically also with Early New Persian (ENP), casting light on many features of Persian dialectology, as well as with Gavrūni (Gav.).⁵ The study will consider phonological, lexical, morphological and syntactic features found in the texts of our corpora.

The corpora contain songs in both Gavrūni and Persian, the proportion being roughly three quarters in Persian and one quarter in Gavrūni: among those in Persian, roughly three quarters are in a Persian dialect that deviates from the Standard. Most of the texts in SP are poems from the canonical Persian poets, mainly Hāfez (14th century). If we extend this to all Zoroastrian literary productions, including modern creations (outside of the corpora), the proportion of Standard Persian songs is much higher, since no song or poem in any other Persian dialect than SP is produced by the Zoroastrian community any longer.

I aim to show here that these texts indicate that Zoroastrians used to speak a specific variety of Persian. Nowadays, Zoroastrians in Iran speak the Persian dialect of their hometown, and Standard Persian, but do not have a Persian dialect of their own.

d) Poetic creation in non-standard Persian among Zoroastrians has seemingly been dead since the end of the (Zoroastrian) bardic tradition, probably at the end of the 20th century, since all new Zoroastrian poetical production, as far as I am aware, has been done either in Gavrūni or in Standard Persian. That is, all the literary and linguistic features that Zoroastrian poets resorted to no longer seem accessible to contemporary Zoroastrian poets.

A part of the corpus used here was recorded by Kuroš Niknām from the 1990s onwards: it is a large corpus, mainly comprising interviews with Gavrūni speakers, in Gavrūni. I selected it because it offers a rather large range of texts from speakers of many Gavrūni dialects. Another part I recorded during my fieldwork in December 2015. These corpora pertain to the Zoroastrians of Yazd, and no recorded song or poem is available to us in Kermāni Gavrūni.

⁴ My sources for YP are informants from Yazd and different videos about or in YP, as no accurate and comprehensive description of the dialect has been published to this day, to my knowledge.

⁵ I will also mention Proto-Gavrūni, the reconstructed Gavrūni language preceding dialectalisation.

As of now, I have 16 recorded reciters (15 women and one man) among whom are eight major ones, namely those who provided more than three short songs or more than one long traditional text, or a long traditional song.

2 Phonology

2.1 Archaisms and apparent archaisms

a) ZP retains word-final *-a#*, unlike YP and SP *-a# > -e#*, but like Gav., for example: *banda* ‘slave’ (SP, YP *bande*), *burida* ‘cut (past tense)’ (SP, YP *boride*), *bača* ‘child’ (SP, YP *bačče*), *dāšta-im* ‘we have had’ (SP *dāšte-im*), etc. This is a very widespread feature of ZP, with very few exceptions (*tāze-ye* ‘fresh-EZ’ instead of *†tāza-ye*, for example), and it usually is the first element that makes ZP data stand out from other Persian texts. I will not consider a text that does not contain any *-a#* to be ZP; conversely a few non-ZP texts in my corpus also show this feature (but no other ZP features).

The retention of this feature is interesting, as it can hardly be ascribed to contact with other Persian varieties, since all known Persian dialects of the region show the sound change *-a# > -e#*. This change happened gradually between the 16th and 18th centuries:⁶ it concerns Standard Persian but not peripheral Persian varieties (such as Dari and Tajiki, and some Xorāsānian varieties), and does not occur in most Iranian languages. In Yazd, the Afghans keep the *-a#*, but their presence in Yazd is too recent (late 20th – early 21st century) to have had any influence on the current corpus. Contact with Gavruni could be a cause of this retention.

b) ZP occasionally retains *u* for SP, YP *o < Cl. Pers. ū*: *gul* ‘flower’ (SP, YP *gol*),⁷ *burida* ‘cut (past tense)’ < Cl. Pers. *burrida* (SP, YP *boride*), *murād* ‘wish’ < Cl. Pers. *murād* < Arabic *murād* (SP, YP *morād*, Gav. *mrōd*), *guftan* ‘to say’ (SP, YP *goftan*) < Cl. Pers. *guftan*.

The [u] variant is quite rare, and can only be found sporadically in the recordings of four reciters. The words *gol* ‘flower’ and *bolbol* ‘nightingale’ are very common in the texts, yet we find [gul] (from two different reciters: Morvārid-e Xosro and Bānu Rašid Tavakkol): Morvārid-e Xosro has [bulbol] and Piruza Nāmdār has [bulbōl]. The pronunciation [murōd] only occurs once in the corpus. Yet, as there is no reason to expect a secondary development of [o] to [u], and [u] being historically justified (cf. the opening of all ancient [u] into [o] in Iranian Persian), this pronunciation is surely an archaism. The same conclusion can be drawn as for *-a#*: this realization is retained by peripheral Persian varieties: the forms *gol* and *bolbol* can be loans from SP as they are literary *topoi*.⁸ *guftan* (instead of expected *guften* cf. 2.2.a) is found once, in a poem recited by La’l-e Rašid Navāyazdān.

It should be noted that Gavruni undergoes the same sound change as Standard Iranian Persian, that is, **ū > o* (cf. Bernard 2016: 101). Therefore, contact with Gavruni cannot be a source of the preservation of *u*.

2.2 Innovations and variations

a) In ZP /a/ becomes /e/ in front of nasal consonants (usually realized in that context as [ɛ]), for example: *men* ‘I’ (SP, YP *man*) < Old Iranian **manā*, *golšen* ‘flowery garden’ (SP, YP *golšan*), *hemiša* ‘always’ < Cl. Pers. *hamēša* < Middle Pers. *hamēšag* (SP, YP *hamiše*; this is an example of both *a#* and of

6 De Dieu (1639) still has word-final *a*, but Angelo à S. Joseph (1684) has <-eh>.

7 In one song where [gul] is heard, Morvārid-e Xosro, recorded by Niknām, pronounces [gul] twice very distinctly in the same verse, but the word rhymes with [bulbol] ‘nightingale’ and [gol] (!): we thus have the rhyming pattern [gul]/[bulbol]/[gol]. I believe we should reconstruct this poem as having [gul] rhyme with *[bulbul] and *[gul], adding one more example of the retention of Cl. Pers. short *u*.

8 I thank Agnes Korn for this suggestion.

the $a > e_N$ sound change), *xarmen* ‘heap, harvest’ (SP, YP *xarman*), etc. This sound change is corroborated by all sources.

In Gavrūni (specifically, during the early Proto-Gavrūni stage), $*a$ in front of a nasal became ε (Bernard 2016: 71), which was extended to include $/a/$ in front of $/r/$. The latter development must be later, since this is not known by all dialects and seemingly knows more restrictions, thus 1) $*aN > \varepsilon N$ and 2) $*ar > \varepsilon r$.⁹ If the presence of the same sound change in both languages is not a coincidence, a hypothesis can be made, that the speakers of Gavrūni and ZP were so much in contact that the same sound change operated in both languages, or that we are seeing Gavrūni influence on ZP. In any case, this sound change is closely linked to the equivalent sound change in Gavrūni.

b) $/o/$ is sometimes realized as $[ɔ]$ in monosyllabic words, such as *do* ‘two’, realized as $[dɔ]$ (SP, YP *do*), and *to* ‘thou’ realized as $[tɔ]$ (SP, YP *to*). It is realized as such by a few sources, but never systematically. Rather than a regular sound change, it is possible that $o\#$ is pronounced slightly more open than in standard speech, and that $[ɔ]$ would be perceived as belonging to the phoneme $/ɔ/$. We have no trace of such a phenomenon in Gavrūni, but it is possible that this pronunciation can be found in local YP.¹⁰

c) Word-final $-h\#$ is dropped, for example in *mā* ‘moon’ (SP *māh*), *rā* ‘way’ (SP *rāh*), *delxā* ‘desired by the heart’ (SP *delxāh*), and *ku* ‘mountain’ (SP *kuh*). All sources show this. This sound change did not operate in Gavrūni until recently (only secondary $-h\#$ is dropped),¹¹ but it is so trivial that there need not be any specific influence to have caused it.

d) There is a tendency to defricativize the $/f/$ phoneme to $/p/$. In the texts there is, for example, *nap* ‘plant growth’ (SP, YP *naf*), *rapta* ‘he/she is gone’ (SP, YP *rafte*), *parzend-e men* ‘my child’ (SP *farzand-e man*), and so on. It is unclear whether there is free variation, or whether particular words in particular poems are pronounced as such (following the pronunciation of the original poet?). There are few instances of the same poem or song recited by more than one reciter in my corpus, and when we have examples of poems and songs recited by two different reciters, I have not found good examples of such a pronunciation where both reciters agree. Examples of $/f/ > [p]$ are, nevertheless, found with most reciters. ‘He/she is gone’, for instance, is always found in the form *rapta* ($/rapta/$ is found twice with two reciters, and $/rapt/$ ‘he/she went’ once with another reciter).¹²

In the case of $/f/ > [p]$, ZP and Gavrūni seem to agree or coincide to some extent, contrary to YP and SP: indeed, there is no $*f$ phoneme in Proto-Gavrūni, and all examples of $[f]$ in spoken Gavrūni are secondary (mostly borrowings from Persian). Morvārid-e Xosro, for instance, is from Šarpavo (Šarif-ābād), whose dialect is known for its absence of a phoneme $/f/$ (the country ‘France’ is there pronounced $[pransa]$), and she is one of the reciters that has the greatest number of $[p]$ realizations of $/f/$. Whether this is due to the reciter’s personal phonetic repertoire or whether it is a feature of ZP, is therefore difficult to assess. I would favor the latter, as Gavrūni speakers correctly pronounce $/f/$ when speaking SP or YP.

e) Cl. Persian $\#b$ is sometimes realized as $[β]$ and sometimes as $[v]$, depending on the speaker: for example, *nešini ve kenār-e xarmen-e gol* ‘you sit on the side of a heap of flowers’ (Bānu Morvārid-e Xosro), cp. SP and YP *be*, Gav. *ba*, *bā*. Elsewhere $\beta\acute{a}$ ‘be’ 3sg subjunctive (SP *bād*) vs. *bād* (in the same

9 Note, nevertheless, in the poem in 1.b *serv* ‘cypress’ for SP, YP *sarv*, whereas Gav. regularly has *sārv*.

10 An anonymous reviewer suggested that this pronunciation is due to the singing techniques.

11 Primary $*h\# > y\#$ in Gav.

12 That these $/pt/$ clusters come from the preservation of Proto-Indo-Iranian $*p$ in front of $*t$, as observed in several Iranian dialects, cf. Hock (2006: 112–115), is doubtful (as it is not a feature of Persian) yet possible.

poem, but from a different reciter), *βenuši* ‘drink’ 2sg subjunctive (SP, YP *benuši*), *vevina* ‘see’ 3sg subjunctive (SP, YP *bevine*, Gav. *vevina*). Lazard (1963: 140) notes that, in some Early New Persian texts, “un *v* initial est conservé, au lieu de cl. *b*, dans: *vīn* [...]”: it is thus possible that *ve* is an archaism, and that *b* became *v* in the preverb *be-*. These pronunciations can be found with multiple reciters; note that no reciter has both [β] and [v]. In one recorded text with two different reciters, one has [β] where the other has [b], for the same word. It is possible that this phenomenon is due to reciters’ pronunciation difficulties.

Lazard (1963: 138–143) shows that there was, in ENP texts, a great amount of variation in the dialects between *b*, *p*, and *v*, sometimes due to archaisms, and sometimes due to innovation.¹³ There is also Lazard (1963: 162¹) who cites the word <wy r^awišny> *vē-ravišnī* ‘inconduite’ from a dialectal verse of Hāfez, where the *vē* element corresponds to Cl. Pers. *bē* ‘without’.¹⁴ It is thus possible that the data investigated here shows traces of that dialectal variation.

As Gav. preserves OIr. #*w* as [β] and then later [v], while Persian renders it as #*b-* or #*gu-* depending on the context (Hübschmann 1895: 144–166), there are quite a few Gav. #*v-* ~ Pers. #*b-* alternations (Gav. *vād*, *vođ*, Pers. *bād* ‘wind’). However, it seems questionable to me whether this would have had any influence on the aforementioned phenomenon. It is also unclear whether *vevina* belongs to this category (with a change *bina* > *vina*, or a preservation of the etymological #*v* as can be seen in Lazard (1963), and the change *be* > *ve*), or is not simply a Gav. word inserted for whatever reason.

f) YP preserves the distinction between /ǧ/ [ɣ] and /q/ [q], while in SP (Tehrāni), both sounds are allophones of one and the same phoneme. In ZP there is no /q/ or even [q]: all historical /q/ are rendered the same way as the phoneme /ɣ/ in ZP, for example *gorbun* ‘sacrifice’ < Cl. Pers. *qurbān* < Ar. قربان *qurbān*, *ǧad* ‘height, stature’ < Cl. Pers. *qad(d)* < Arabic قَدَّ *qadd*. This agrees with contemporary Gavruni, which renders Persian /q/ as /ɣ/ (except in some songs and stories). All our sources share this realization, which seems to indicate that historical /q/ and /ɣ/ merged into the phoneme /ɣ/, with the realization [x] before a voiceless consonant. A Gavruni influence can probably be observed here.

g) A number of reciters have [θ] for /s/ and some even [ð] for /z/, for example *bāθetāni* ‘ancient’ (SP *bās(e)tāni*), *be θar-ot* ‘on your head’, *berīðem* ‘I pour’ (SP *berizam*). There is a tendency in YP for *s* to become [θ] (SP *besyār* ‘a lot’ is realized *beθyār* in YP) but [z] to [ð] is not attested in YP.

One reciter has *θar-ot* ‘your head’ in a poem and clearly *sar-et* ‘idem’ in another, which raises the question as to whether *θar* is the ZP variant and *sar* a loan, as shown by the *-am -at/-et -aš/-eš* series of pronominal suffixes, cf. Section 3.1.a. Yet it is possible, after all, that she simply put more effort into the pronunciation of one word than the other.

2.3 Vocalic assimilations

Three words present a somewhat problematic vocalism in my corpus, relative to the phonological system of the dialect, namely: *kenar-aš* ‘on its side’ (< *kenār-aš*), *xāher-et* ‘thy sister’ (< *xāhar-et*) and *māder-et* ‘thy mother’ (< *mādar-et*).

In the first case, one would expect †*kenār-aš* (*kenār* ‘side’ is found in SP, YP and even in ZP, in other occurrences, and this *a* for *ā* < *ā* is not in a context where an ancient shortening could have happened, see Lazard (1963: 182–183)), in the second and third case †*xāhar-et* and †*mādar-et*.

I suggest an explanation to these unexpected forms: in tri-syllabic words, the *a/ā*-vowel of the penultimate syllable assimilates to that of the ultimate, hence *kenar-aš* and *xāher-et*, *māder-et* vs. *kenār*, *xāhar*, *mādar*.

¹³ For instance OIr. **p*, reflected as /b/ in Cl. Pers., became /v/ in some contexts, some instances of archaic /v/ were retained, and some Cl. Pers. /v/ were reflected as /b/ (e.g. *parbāz* ‘envol’ instead of *parvāz*, Lazard 1963: 140).

¹⁴ I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this reference to my attention.

3 Morphology

3.1 Nominal morphology

a) The singular possessive markers and pronominal suffixes (both belong to only one category) in ZP are 1sg *-om*, 2sg *-ot*, 3sg *-oš*, partially agreeing with Gav. (which has *-om*, *-od*, *-oš*) and disagreeing with both YP and SP (which have 1sg *-am*, 2sg *-at/-et*, 3sg *-aš/-eš*). I believe it is useful, for this study, to have a closer look at possessive markers and pronominal suffixes in Middle and New Persian dialects. Since it seems that, in many Iranian languages, verbal endings have influenced pronominal suffixes, it is relevant to include them as well.

Many Persian dialects have 1sg *-om*, 2sg *-i*, 3sg *-a(d)/-e* as verbal endings, for example ‘I do’ is realized as *mi-kon-am* in Standard (Tehrāni) Persian, but in Mašhadi it is *mo-kon-om* and in Kāboli *mē-kun-um*, YP *mo-kon-am*.¹⁵ In Early Judaeo-Persian the first person ending <wm> is found (Paul 2013: 118). Many other varieties have their first person verbal ending in *-om*. In contrast, the first singular verbal ending in ZP is consistently *-em*.

Manichean Middle Persian singular personal pronominal suffixes are *-wm*, *-wt*, *-yš*; Parthian has *-wd* for the second singular.¹⁶ Bartholomae (1906: 61) proposes that the vowel of the second singular pronoun is analogical to that of the first: with the Gav. and ZP series, one only needs to assume that analogy also worked for the third singular.

In ENP and Cl. Persian, the second and third singular pronominal suffixes are vocalized with *a*, and sometimes with *ī* (see, for example, Lazard 1963: 246), which corresponds to the current state in SP.

Other contemporary Persian varieties have *-om* as a 1sg possessive and pronominal suffix, but they usually also have *-om* as a 1sg verbal ending. Kāboli Dari is interesting, as it contrasts with ZP on this aspect: the 1sg verbal ending is *-um* and the 1sg possessive is *-em* (Glassman 1972: 60, 71).¹⁷

It seems that there is sometimes variation between the series *-om*, *-ot*, *-oš* and *-am*, *-at/-et*, *-aš/-eš*, and that this variation is often due to phrasal stress (the unstressed variant would then belong to the latter series).

ZP pronominal suffixes are different from those of most, if not all, New Persian dialects, and are closer to the Gavruni ones, although this is more probably due to Gavruni influence on the suffix vowel *-o-* than on them being directly taken from Gavruni.

The plural possessive markers of ZP are the same as those of SP: *-(e)mān*, *-(e)tān*, *-(e)šān* and different from those of Gavruni (*-mo*, *-do*, *-šo*).

b) The plural of nouns is formed as in SP, with *-hā*, *-ān* / *-un*.

3.2 Verbal and copula morphology

a) Presented here are the verbal endings found in the ZP texts I studied, compared to those of Gavruni (there are two variants: the one found in two specific dialects, and the other one, which is found in all other dialects) and of Yazdi Persian.

¹⁵ All these forms go back to either Cl. Pers. *mē-kun-am*, or to its variant *mē-kun-um* (with assimilation to the labial feature of the *-m*, maybe phonetically [me:kun'om]). In the case of Mašhadi and YP, the vowel of the *mē-* preverb underwent an assimilation to that of the verbal stem (and sometimes of the 1sg ending: Mašhadi *mo-g-om* ‘I say’ probably goes back to **mi-g-om* < **mi-guy-om*: we should thus probably speak of phonetic assimilation, rather than of analogy).

¹⁶ See Sims-Williams (1981: 172).

¹⁷ For the Kāboli forms, one has to assume analogy of the vocalism of the 2nd and 3rd possessive and pronominal endings, that leveled that of the 1st.

Table 1: Verbal endings in ZP, Gav. and YP

Person	ZP verbal endings	Malati & Kermāni Gav. endings	Other Gav. dial. endings	YP endings
1sg	-em	-ε	-ε	-am
2sg	-i	-i	-e	-i
3sg	-a	-a	-a	-e
1pl	-im	-im	-im	-em
2pl	N/A	-i(t)	-i(t)	-et
3pl	-end	-en	-en	-and

In some ENP texts, the first singular verbal ending is vocalized as *-īm* (Lazard 1963: 265), which would correspond to ZP *-em* (Cl. Pers. *ī* > ZP *e*). It is thus possible, but in my opinion unlikely, that the ZP first singular ending does not derive from *-am* with the sound change discussed in 1.2.a but is a retained archaism. The same could be assumed for *-end*, a form which does not appear in ENP or in Cl. Persian, but which is found in Early Judaeo-Persian (see Paul 2013: 118–119). A definitive conclusion cannot be reached in either case.

b) Verbs can undergo syncope in the third singular of the *mi*-indicative, where *mi*-CVCd > *mi*-CV. Cl. Pers. *mē-zanad* ‘he/she hits’ > ZP *miza*, Cl. Pers. *mē-x^wāhad* ‘he/she wants’ > ZP *mixā*. This syncope is not systematic, but examples occur in more than one song, and from more than one reciter. *Mi*- is not found in YP (which has *me*- or *mo*-), therefore this reduction cannot be attributed to YP. Very interestingly, one instance of *miza* is found in a verse that requires a supplementary syllable (where the missing syllable is added elsewhere in the verse); its authenticity and antiquity is thus assured, as †*mi-zana(d)* would have fit the versification better.

c) The 3sg copula of my corpus is *-on*, agreeing with Gavrūni but disagreeing with all known Persian dialects. We have, for example, *araxčīn sar-e Rostem katun-on* (bis) / *rox-oš mā gad-oš sarv-e ravun-on* ‘the hat on Rostam’s head is (made of) linen / his face is (like the) moon and his height is (like) a stretched-out cypress’. A 3sg copula containing *-n* can be found in many Iranian languages, but it seems safer to suppose that Gav. is the direct source of this “loan”. The integration of this grammatical element to the grammar of ZP is interesting. Once more, it is impossible to determine with certainty whether this element was really integrated in spoken ZP speech, or whether it is a poetic artifice. In some texts, *-a* is also found as a copula (cf. spoken SP *-e*), e.g. *men bo-koš in javun-a men pir ast-em* ‘kill me (instead), he/she is young, I am old’ (Piruza Nāmdār from Taft).¹⁸

d) Some general literary traits are represented: *na-yāy-em* ‘I do not come’ instead of †*ne-mi-āy* or †*ne-mi-ā-yem* that is, some indicative presents lacking *mi*-, and the verb ‘to come’ being *āy*, as in Cl. Pers. (*āy*-), and not *ā*, as in SP.

e) In the quatrain presented in 1.b. there is a form *xodā dunā*, which I interpret as a 3sg. precative ‘may God know’ < Cl. Pers. *dānād*.¹⁹ This precative, although it remained in poetry, disappeared from Persian prose after the 14th century (Lenepveu-Hotz 2014: 201, 304). I cannot explain the loss of final *-d* here. It is nevertheless possible, although less likely, that it is otherwise an example of the ENP and Cl. Persian *-ā* suffix described by Lazard (1963: 451–454), in which case the meaning could be precative, or simply affirmative, God knows.

¹⁸ One may wonder whether the choice of *-a* in this sentence is due to influence from the form *ast-em* ‘I am’ in the same sentence.

¹⁹ On which see Lenepveu-Hotz (2014: 202–203).

All other aspects of verbal morphology seem to agree with SP, but are sometimes different from YP. In all cases, except for the copula, ZP verbal morphology is profoundly different from that of Gavruni.

4 Vocabulary

a) The lexicon of these texts is a mix between that of high register Persian poetry, and a more popular, rural vocabulary. There is variation in the style depending on the text. There are not many indubitably Gav. words in the corpora. It is naturally possible to consider, for example, *hemiša* as a loan from Gav. *hemiša*,²⁰ but it is also the expected ZP form, according to the sound laws mentioned in 2.1.a and 2.2.a.

In one verse of a song there is a word pronounced as [sɒb]. Since the verse appears to contain names of fruits, it is possible that this word means ‘apple’. It is, in fact, very similar, to the early Proto-Gavruni reconstructed form for ‘apple’: **sāb*, Gav. *sow*, *sūv*²¹ (vs. Cl. Pers. *sēb*, *sēw*, SP *sib*). I believe that this word was integrated (to ZP, or to this song in particular) at a time when it was still pronounced so by the Gavruni speakers. This possibly indicates that “contact” between ZP and Gavruni already occurred in the Proto-Gavruni period.

b) There are also, in less understood songs or passages, a few words which are difficult to understand. For example we have, repeated twice in a chorus, a word that I clearly hear as [persterse], but I have no interpretation for this word. Neither my informant nor his father (Pedrām and Kuroš Niknām) were able to help with the explanation of these words.

5 Syntax

a) Since all our texts are by definition poetic, and thus potentially present different syntax to that of spoken speech, it is difficult to say much about the syntax of ZP. I will nevertheless present two peculiar constructions:

1) *xeyât burida do bend-o dâde men* ‘(the) tailor cut out two ribbons and gave (them) (to) me’ (Bānu Morvārid-e Xosro), even if *dâde* ‘(has) given’ would stand for *dâd be* ‘(has) given to’ with a slightly heard [b] (or [v], cf. 2.2.e), the absence of the direct object would still be quite surprising in SP. Such a construction would certainly also be peculiar in Gavruni.

2) *xod-em sahrâ del-am dar xâna-ye to* ‘I myself (am in) the desert (but) my heart (is) in your house’ (Bānu Vāmen), a variation on the *Leili-o Majnun* theme. It is surprising to find no locative preposition in the first part of the sentence, and no verb or copula whatsoever. In SP, for example, one would say *xod-am (dar) sahrâ-m (copula) delam (râ) dar xâne-ye to-st (copula)*. The absence of both a preposition and copula is nevertheless certainly due to metrical reasons.

Both types of constructions, and others, might belong to the poetic style of the bards of yore.

b) Like in Cl. Persian, it is possible for the person marker (of the object) to be suffixed to the verb instead of to the other components of the sentence: *mobâarak bâd-etân in jašn-e nowruz* ‘may this feast of Nowrouz be blessed (*mobâarak*) to you (plural) (-*etân*)’. In spoken SP and YP, we expect *mobâarak-etân bâd*. Since *bâd* (‘be’ 3sg. subjunctive) is literary, this is maybe an artifice of the learned speech, cf.

²⁰ The pronunciation of ZP *e* in front of *N* can be close to [ɛ], but I transcribe it as <e> because there is no /ɛ/ phoneme in ZP.

²¹ The forms are quoted per Ivanow (1939: 140).

Hāfez ساقیا آمدنِ عید مبارک بادت *sāqī-ā āmadan-ī ayd mubārak bād-at* ‘O Cup-bearer, blessed the coming of the festival be to thee’.²²

c) I could only find two cases of the *-rā* clitic (added in SP to the definite direct object) in all the texts, and both cases occur in the same song: they are *marā* and *torā*. Since *marā* is a Cl. Persian form, used mostly in poetry, and the expected ZP form would be †*men rā*, we cannot consider it as authentic. In any case, the use of *rā* seems very rare in my corpus. Its use is becoming less and less rare in contemporary Gavruni, but there are reasons to think Gavruni did not have an inherited *rā* particle/suffix, and borrowed it from Persian. It is traditionally found in Kermāni Gav., which is more influenced by Persian: Gav. does not have noun inflexion, but can suffix the object of a phrase with *-e* for emphasis (Ivanow 1935: 59).

6 Conclusion

As can be seen in the table below, Zoroastrian Persian shares at least four features with Classical Persian (five if we include ENP), at least six with Gavruni, and only three with Yazdi Persian. Out of the features shared with Yazdi Persian, two are trivial (2sg. verbal ending *-i*, dropping of word-final *-h*) and occur in multiple varieties.

Table 2: Summary of ZP features presented in this study

ZP features	Found in Cl. Pers.	Found in Gav.	Found in YP	Reference
<i>aN > eN</i>	No	Yes	No	2.2.a
<i>a#</i> is preserved	Yes	Yes	No	2.1.a
ancient <i>ū</i> is preserved as such	Yes	No	Not regularly	2.1.b
<i>h#</i> drops	No	No	Yes (colloquial?)	2.2.c
[p] can stand for /f/	No	Yes	No	2.2.d
/b/ realized as [β], [v]	Dialectally, in ENP	No	No	2.2.e
/s/ > [θ] ; /z/ > [ð]	No	No	Yes for /s/ > [θ]	2.2.g
<i>-om</i> series pron. suffix	No	Yes	No	3.1.a
2sg <i>-i</i> verbal ending	Yes	No (except two dial.)	Yes	3.2.a
verbal apocope 3sg	No	No	No	3.2.b
<i>-on</i> as 3sg copula	No	Yes	No	3.2.c
<i>rā</i> is very rare	No	Yes	No	5.c

It thus appears that ZP is dialectally separate from SP, YP and Cl. Pers., and that it shares very few relevant isoglosses with YP. From the greater amount of features it has in common with Gavruni, it is also clear that there has been intensive language contact between ZP and Gavruni, or that Gavruni is the substratum of ZP. For instance, it could be that the poets and bards spoke Gavruni, but composed in Persian. That version of Persian was then strongly influenced by Gavruni.

It is further possible that the ZP of different Zoroastrian villages displays small differences, but this needs further investigation.

It appears that the regularity of the sound laws presented in the Section 2, in my opinion, contradicts the hypothesis that ZP is only SP pronounced by (Gav.-speaking) Zoroastrians. For example, ZP *xarmen* ‘heap, harvest’ is neither identical to Gav. *xermen* nor to SP *xarman*, *xerman*; ZP preserved *ā* (except in front of nasals), e.g. ZP, SP *xodā* vs. Gav. *xdu*, *xđo*. If it were SP spoken by Gavruni-speakers, why would only some limited aspects of morphology have been influenced by Gavruni, and not the others? ZP morphology is mostly similar to that of SP, but knows its own developments, such as syncope (3.2.b), unknown to Gavruni. Unfortunately, due to the fact that no other variety of Persian

²² Hāfez, *Divan*, ghazal 18 (edition Sāye 1993: 96).

than YP and SP is spoken by Yazdi Zoroastrians nowadays, a definitive conclusion on the nature of ZP and on the relations between it and other Iranian dialects is probably impossible to reach.

After having examined successively the different features of Zoroastrian Persian presented in this article, it seems evident that the ZP texts contain Gav. influence, as is shown by 2.1.a, 2.2.a, 2.2.d, probably 2.2.f, perhaps 3.1.a, 3.2.c, and 5.c: Gav. has clearly influenced ZP in the domains of phonology, morphology and possibly also syntax. One of the most prominent features, in my opinion, of ZP is the preservation of word final *-a#*, as the shift from *-a#* to *-e#* is quite pervasive in Iran, where even different languages went through the same shift.

No clear and definite YP influence can be seen: in many ways, ZP is closer to SP than to YP, for example in the verbal endings.²³

I believe two hypotheses can be made regarding the formation of ZP, based on the state of affairs presented above. The first hypothesis would be that the majority of Zoroastrians in Yazd were Gavruni speakers, but, as Zoroastrian newcomers would keep arriving from different parts of Iran, as is documented both by direct oral and written testimony, a number of them were not immediately able to speak Gavruni, and retained their own Persian dialect(s) for some time. This Persian dialect (or this mixture of Persian dialects), was probably already different from Standard Persian, and was consequently profoundly influenced by Gavruni, and it possibly became the main Persian variety spoken by Zoroastrians. It was then used by Zoroastrian poets for literary works.

A second hypothesis would be that ZP was uniquely a literary language, the language in which Zoroastrian bards composed their lyrics and poems. Since they did not have much contact with non-Zoroastrian Persian speakers, ZP was strongly influenced by Gavruni, its substratum, and became crystallized in this state. This situation would be supported by the fact that the lexicon is quasi-exclusively Persian, while the phonetics and morphology are more influenced by Gavruni. This is more typical of a substratum-type contact.²⁴

Although I personally favour the second one, the two abovementioned hypotheses could both be valid at different times. Their being right depends on the absolute dating of these songs and texts, and the history of the oral poetic tradition of the Zoroastrians of Iran. Unfortunately, it is still very difficult to give a historical setting to this tradition, apart from that it is now moribund. I hope nevertheless to have provided a useful description of the specific linguistic features of those texts, which had never been studied or received any scholarly attention to this day.

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²³ It is of course difficult to assert this with full authority, as a comprehensive description of YP is still lacking.

²⁴ I thank Stefan Norbruis for having kindly pointed this out to me.

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