

The Thousand Accents' Island: Languages and Dialects in the Township of Semnan

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Abstract

This research aims to describe the distribution of speech forms in the township of Semnan. With this – to our knowledge – first detailed dialect survey of the region, we propose suggesting linguistic groupings of the local speech varieties, their boundaries, their relation to each other and to Mazandarani as well as an approximation of the number of speakers for each variety. In each of eleven reference points we interviewed knowledgeable informants, administered 30-40 questionnaires, collected material in the local speech variety and videotaped short stories or sentences, as well as two to four word lists with 220 words each. We transcribed these phonetically and with the help of WordSurv computer software compared them to each other as well as to Persian (Farsi) and Mazandarani. To determine the distribution of speech forms, we take into account the following criteria: previous research, the opinion of knowledgeable informants, the speakers' perception and lexicon- as well as phonostatic similarity. Our estimate of numbers of speakers is based on previous research, the estimate of knowledgeable informants as well as locals and on the National Census from 2006. We came to the conclusion that there are three languages spoken in the township of Semnan: Shahmirzadi, which is part of the Mazandarani group (ca. 6 000 speakers in the township of Semnan), Semnani (a continuum with approximately 30 000 speakers) and Sangesari (ca. 16 500 speakers).

Key words: language, accent, dialect, Semnan, linguistic grouping.