

Languages as a Key to Understanding Afghanistan's Cultures

By Walter N. Hakala

The 2004 constitution of Afghanistan stipulates that two Indo-Iranian languages—Pashto and Dari (the official Afghan term for the language known elsewhere as Farsi, Persian, and Tajiki)—shall be recognized as the “two official languages of the state,” while in those “areas where the majority of the people speak in any one of Uzbeki, Turkmani, Pachaie, Nuristani, Baluchi, or Pamiri languages,” these languages “shall be the third official languages.” This secondary official status for the minority languages is in keeping with the stated intent of the statute to “foster and develop all language of Afghanistan,” permitting “all current languages” to be used in press and mass media.¹ Afghan linguistic diversity means that a substantial proportion of the Afghan population must develop at least some command over multiple languages.

One way of conceptualizing Afghan multilingualism is to imagine individuals acquiring additional means of expression throughout their lives as they encounter new social situations. Afghans often use multiple languages, but they do so in what appears to be an “uneven” way. One’s mother tongue might, for example, be a dialect of Baluchi (a language spoken in southern Afghanistan, appearing relatively recently in written form), though that person may only be comfortable reading a newspaper in Dari, which, as noted earlier, is one of the two official languages of Afghanistan. This hypothetical individual would find singing a lullaby in Dari to be as unfamiliar—if not as uncomfortable—as it would be to prepare an essay on import regulatory policies in Baluchi, for example. This is not to say that this individual is incapable of speaking in both Baluchi and Dari, but rather that his or her experience in using these languages may be limited to discussing on specific topics or social situations with little to no overlap. Therefore, an individual must develop familiarity with various language combinations, both to perform the various social functions (e.g., singing lullabies or discussing import regulations) that they encounter in daily life and to communicate with the diverse populations of language users in Afghanistan.

Though a large majority of the Afghan population is conversant in either Pashto or Dari, the question of whether a single language can claim to be spoken by a majority of the population remains difficult to quantify. However, it is clear that Pashtuns form the largest minority within Afghanistan, comprising perhaps between 40 and 50 percent of the total population.² Most Pashtuns speak Pashto, and some also speak Dari, but many non-Pashtuns do not speak Pashto, and many more speak Dari.³ Persian/Dari retains a certain degree of cachet as a prestige dialect among most Afghans (and in South and Central Asia more broadly), and historically, it also serves as a cosmopolitan language and medium of literature and statecraft.⁴ However, its privileged status among the literate urban population has become increasingly challenged by English and, to a more limited extent, Urdu, the national language of Pakistan.⁵ In the 1980s and ‘90s, at least three million Afghans—mostly Pashtun—fled to Pakistan, where a substantial number spent several years being exposed to Hindi- and Urdu-language media, especially Bollywood films and songs, and being educated in Urdu-language schools, both of which contributed to the decline of Dari, even among urban Pashtuns.⁶

To even speak of a language like Dari or Uzbeki as a single entity belies the highly varying nature of these languages as used by individual speakers. Pashto, for example, is characterized by significant regional differences

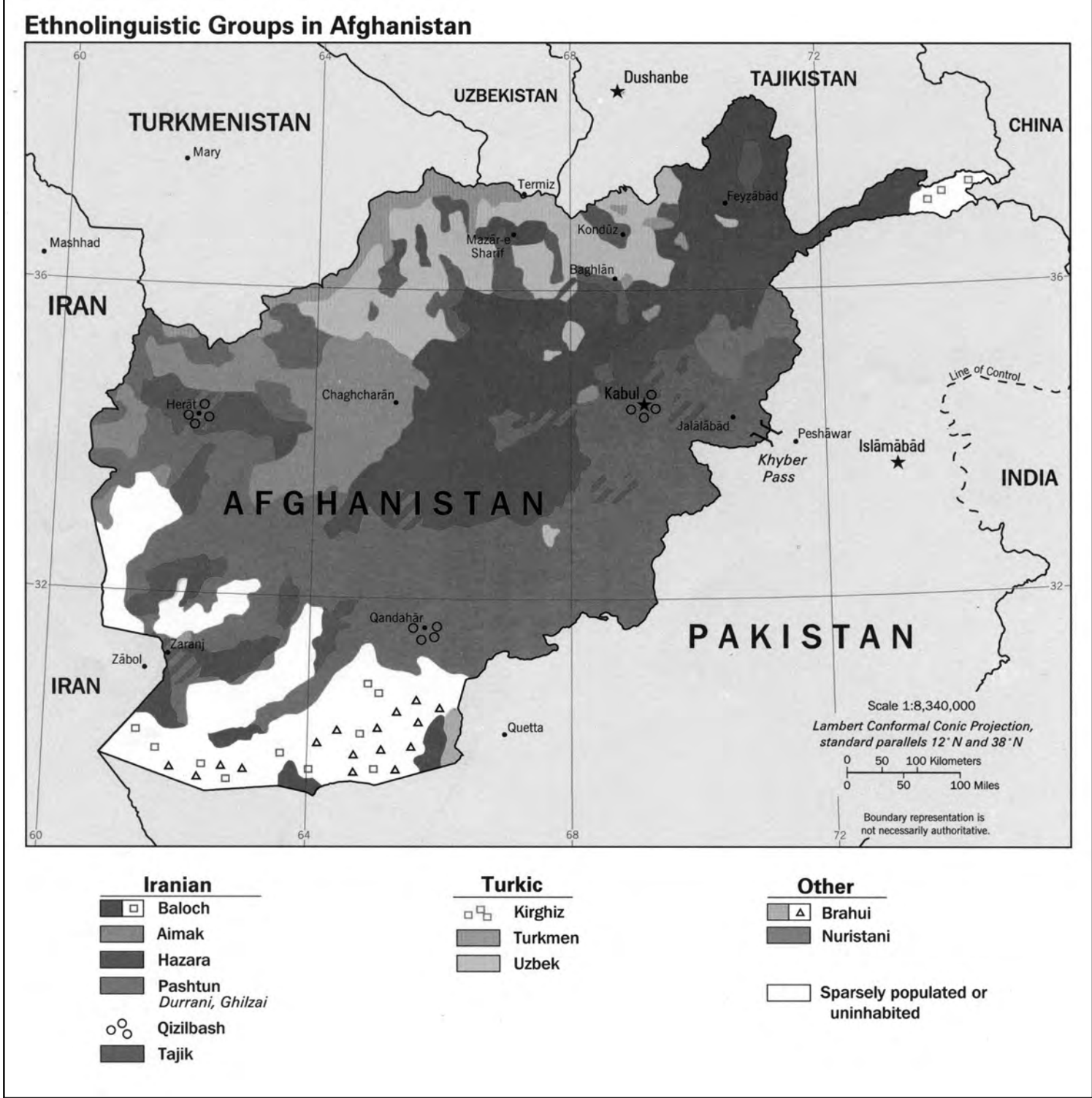
in dialect, most noticeably in the manner in which certain sounds are enunciated. The name of that language as recorded in the southeastern Afghan city of Qandahar is represented phonetically as *paş'to* (the *ş* pronounced as a *sh* with the tongue curled upward against the roof of the mouth); while in Peshawar, Pakistan, across the Sulaiman range that forms the international border, the language is typically pronounced *pux'to* (the *x* pronounced like the *ch* in the Scottish-English *loch*).

With regard to vocabulary, Afghan Pashto is influenced by its long historical interaction with Dari, while Pashto speakers who have resided in Pakistan tend to draw their vocabulary from Urdu and English. Communication among those familiar with the different dialects of Persian—the Afghan Dari and the Tajiki language of neighboring Tajikistan—is hindered not just by differences in vocabulary, but also by the completely different writing systems employed in both countries. Though the Afghans have retained the Perso-Arabic script for Dari, the former Soviet Republic of Tajikistan adopted a modified Cyrillic alphabet for Tajiki in 1940. Despite legislating in 1989 that the Tajiki language should once again be written in Arabic script, the Persian of Tajikistan continues to diverge from that of Iran and Afghanistan. This is the result of what now amounts to several generations of Tajik isolation from the broader Perso-Arabic literary world and the continued importance of Russian in Tajikistan as a Central Asian *lingua franca*.⁷ Similar disjunctures might be identified for Afghan speakers of Uzbeki and Turkmani with their neighbors in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

Indeed, the multilingual character of this society has engendered a great deal of confusion, not least among its own citizenry. Several examples of this, going from recent history to the 1839–42 First Anglo-Afghan War, will help demonstrate the multilingualism that is the hallmark of language use in Afghanistan. Lutz Rzehak, a scholar who has carried out extensive ethnographic fieldwork in the Nimroz Province of southern Afghanistan (bordering Pakistan to its south and Iran to its west), describes the linguistic situation established under Taliban rule in that province from 1995 to 2001. He reports that the new regime, which included many former refugees who had been educated in Pakistan, imposed Urdu along with Pashto as the primary languages of administration in the wake of their military success in the region. This occurred despite the local population’s historical lack of familiarity with Urdu, a language whose origins as a spoken language lay nearly 1,000 miles to the east in the region surrounding modern New Delhi, India. The first Taliban governor of the province, Hamidullah Niyazmand, had been educated in Pakistan and was said to be unable to speak Baluchi or Dari. According to Rzehak, local Baluchi and Dari speakers felt alienated from the Taliban administration, not least because of their difficulty in communicating with the new government.⁸ Non-Pashtuns have, in places, resisted learning Pashto because of its perceived political association with the Taliban. Thomas Barfield, a prominent scholar of Afghan anthropology and history, cites the example of triumphant Taliban commanders addressing “a crowd of uncomprehending Persian and Uzbek speakers in Pashto at the main mosque” in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i Sharif, following their short-lived successes in northern Afghanistan in May 1997.⁹

The minor languages of Afghanistan, in particular those of the northeastern mountain ranges, have long faced outside pressures. In describing

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Source: Perry-Castañeda Library, Map Collection, University of Texas Libraries, <http://bit.ly/OsWeJC>.

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his 1970 fieldwork in Afghanistan, Gérard Fussman, a veteran French linguist, historian, and archaeologist of South Asia, noted how these languages were coming under immense pressure from what he called “the great languages of civilization [Persian and Pashto],” changing not just the vocabularies of these languages but also introducing sounds into them that did not exist a few generations earlier. He attributes the causes of these linguistic changes to improved roads and the presence of transistor radios in every mountain village, so that “Persian, Pashto, Urdu, Hindi, English even, have begun to be understood by many of these mountain-dwellers formerly isolated from the so-called civilized world.” He narrates how, in the course of a short visit in 1970 to the predominantly Pashai village of Birkot (located in northern Nangarhar Province close to the eastern border with Pakistan), he was able to meet

a Chitrali (speaking Khovar), some Kams (speaking Kati), some Kohistanis (speaking Bashkarik), a Sawi, a Gujur shepherd, and especially Uzbek soldiers from the garrison, some Tajiks who usually live in Mazar-i Sharif, coming there as tourists, some Afghan officers (speaking Pashto), some Afghan visitors (speaking Pashto), one among whom having come from the valley of Wardak and the others from Bajaur. Everyone understood Pashto; several also understood Persian.¹⁰

Fussman noted that a number of distinctive Dardic and Kafiri languages had become extinct in the time between his visit and when the pioneering Norwegian linguist Georg Morgenstierne conducted his field research in the same region of northwestern Afghanistan in 1924. These pressures on less-spoken languages have only increased since the 1970s. To be fair, long before the American government came up against the linguistic diversity that is so emblematic of Afghan culture, the British Empire was confronted, almost a century before Morgenstierne, with similar challenges during the First Anglo-Afghan War.

Following early successes—easily defeating the Afghan army and installing a pliable puppet ruler on the throne—the British occupational forces committed a series of blunders that led to their ill-fated retreat from Kabul to Jalalabad in January 1842 after being promised a safe escort to India by the ousted ruler’s son, Muhammad Akbar Khan. Dr. William Brydon, believed to be the only Englishman to have escaped capture and to survive the disastrous retreat, recorded the events that led up to the crossing of the Khoord Kabul Pass, located fifteen miles from Kabul, on January 8, 1842. In his entry for the previous day, he writes:

We were tricked into encamping here, instead of at once pushing on through the [Khoord Kabul] pass by Akhbar Khan [sic, the aforementioned nominal leader of the Afghans whose forces served ostensibly as escorts for the retreating British], who sent to say that he must make arrangements with the chiefs to let us through, but in truth that he might have time to get the hills well manned before we entered the pass, and some of his horsemen who accompanied us are said to have called to the enemy in Persian to ‘spare,’ and in Pushtoo, which the hillmen speak and few Europeans understand, they exhorted them ‘to slay the Kaffirs [‘infidels’].¹¹

Leaving aside the matter of how Dr. Brydon was able to report the speech of the Akbar Khan’s Afghan “horsemen” (especially in light of his apparent inability to speak either Pashto or Persian!), it is difficult, on the basis of the written record, to establish whether any British figures involved in the first Anglo-Afghan campaign had any practical command over Pashto, a language to which they probably had little literary (or literate) exposure. What evidence does exist is fragmentary and often indicates no more than the ability to recognize particular terms and short pat phrases, and certainly nowhere does it appear that any of these persons could actively communicate in this language.

It is clear, however, that a good many British figures involved with Afghan affairs in the nineteenth century did take up the study of Persian, struggled with it, and used it regularly and quite eloquently.¹² These men were part of a well-established tradition of Persian education in South Asia, one in which the British would continue to take part for some time to come. Knowledge of Persian was viewed by the British in the first half of the nineteenth century as valuable for any political career in the Indian Civil Service. It also continued to be important as a military language—though its role in this, as in politics, would decline as Urdu came to occupy a more prominent role in governance of north India—a means by which to command a diverse collection of “native” (i.e., Indian) and Afghan soldiers.¹³ Afghans, however, challenged the ability of the British to make sense of their actual situation in Kabul through their tendency to code-switch, or shift in and out of the Persian/Dari language, which certain British officers had mastered, and into their “own” languages—languages to which the British had little to no access.¹⁴ This ability of the Afghans to switch from language to language, or equally likely, to mix portions of languages together, quite clearly frustrated the British and likely gave cause to the characterization, expressed in many British accounts of that period, of Afghans as incapable of speaking truthfully.

The volatile political situation in Afghanistan since the late 1970s continues to curtail easy access to many regions of the country for foreign, and

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even Afghan, educators and scholars. Despite excellent recent scholarly work on the region and laudable efforts to expand university-level language programs for Afghan languages, the US population seems to be rapidly losing what little interest it may once have had in the fate of the Afghan people.¹⁵ Very few terms, be they historically Afghan or recently coined by US service personnel, have entered the speech of the American public to my knowledge.¹⁶ This is one of many reasons why the two centuries of British colonial rule in South Asia—a period in which the English language was enriched by thousands of so-called Anglo-Indian terms—is dissimilar to the experience of Americans as part of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).¹⁷ Many soldiers are now equipped with Voxtec Phraselators (known colloquially as “pointie-talkies”), a device described by its manufacturer as “the most powerful one-way, handheld, speech-to-speech translation system available.”¹⁸ Significantly, these devices translate only from English to the target language (Dari, Pashto, and Urdu are listed as supported languages) but cannot assist with interpretation from those languages into English.¹⁹ Though new technological developments may help solve this and other barriers in communication, significant obstacles will no doubt remain in understanding Afghanistan’s complicated linguistic situation. ■

NOTES

1. Quoted in Senzil Nawid, “Language Policy in Afghanistan: Linguistic Diversity and National Unity,” *Language Policy and Language Conflict in Afghanistan and Its Neighbors: The Changing Politics of Language Choice*, ed. Harold F. Schiffman, *Brill’s Studies in South and Southwest Asian Languages* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 49–50. It is unclear how the state is able to determine those areas in which “a majority of the people speak” these tertiary languages and how it would support these languages should they not correspond with existing administrative units. How a language is deemed “current” is another uncertainty: e.g., could this apply to liturgical or historically non-Afghan languages (e.g., Arabic or Urdu) or to particular scripts (e.g., Pashto in the Roman script, Tajik in Cyrillic)?
2. On the difficulties enumerating Pashtuns in Afghanistan, see Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi, introduction to *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 24.
3. M. Alam Miran, *Some Linguistic Difficulties Facing Dari Speakers Learning Pashto* (New York: Afghanistan Council of the Asia Society, 1974) and “Sociolinguistic Factors in Afghanistan,” *Afghanistan Journal* 4, no. 3 (1977): 124.
4. M. Jamil Hanifi describes a meeting in the summer of 1970 with the former king of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah (r. 1933–73), in which he had been instructed not to “speak in Pashtu with his majesty because [his majesty] was ‘tired’ that afternoon.” Despite the monarch’s claim of Pashtun ethnicity, Hanifi informs us that he was more comfortable speaking Persian and French. See “Vending Distorted Afghanistan through Patriotic ‘Anthropology,’” *Critique of Anthropology* 31, no. 3 (2011): 265.
5. An early description of English loanwords in Pashto appears in Herbert Penzl, “Western Loanwords in Modern Pashto,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 81, no. 1 (1961): 43–52. On loanwords and the more broad influence of Persian and Urdu on the languages of Afghanistan and Pakistan, see Elena Bashir, “Indo-Iranian Frontier Languages,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, last modified November 15, 2006, accessed April 24, 2012, <http://bit.ly/LC7SYa>.
6. On the Persianization of urban Pashtun elites, see Fredrik Barth, “Pathan Identity and Its Maintenance,” *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), 129. On the decline in Afghan bilingualism, see David B. Edwards, *Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 301. For a broader discussion of Pashto language policies in neighboring Pakistan, see Tariq Rahman, “The Pashto Language and Identity-Formation in Pakistan,” *Contemporary South Asia* 4, no. 2 (1995): 151–70. Caution is required in consulting Jadwiga Pstrusińska, “On the Sociolinguistic Epilogue of the War in Afghanistan (1989),” *Contacts Between Cultures: Eastern Asia: Literature and Humanities*, ed. Bernard Hung-Kay Luk (Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1992). Claims that the “the first priority of the [Soviet-backed Afghan communist regimes of the 1980s] was to rid Afghanistan of Pashtun (Afghan!) people” are to be taken with a grain of salt. On language policies in Afghanistan during the Communist period, see also Sauri P. Bhattacharya, “Soviet Nationality Policy in Afghanistan,” *Asian Affairs* 15, no. 2 (1984): 125–37.

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7. Brian Spooner, "Persian, Farsi, Dari, Tajiki: Language Names and Language Policies," *Language Policy and Language Conflict in Afghanistan and Its Neighbors: The Changing Politics of Language Choice*, ed. Harold F. Schiffman, *Brill's Studies in South and Southwest Asian Languages* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 97–99. See also John R. Perry, "Comparative Perspectives on Language Planning in Iran and Tajikistan," *Language and Society in the Middle East and North Africa: Studies in Variation and Identity*, ed. Yasir Suleiman (London: Curzon, 1999).
8. Lutz Rzehak, "Remembering the Taliban," *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, eds. Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).
9. Thomas J. Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 260.
10. Gérard Fussman, *Atlas linguistique des parlers dardes et kafirs (Linguistic Atlas of Dardic and Kafir Dialects)* (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient; Dépositaire: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1972), 5–6.
11. William Brydon, "Appendix: Copy of William Brydon's Account from Memory, and Memoranda made on Arrival at Jellalabad, of the Retreat from Cabool in 1842," *Reminiscences of Forty-Three Years in India: Including the Cabul Disasters, Captivities in Afghanistan and the Punjaub, and a Narrative of the Mutinies in Rajputana*, ed. William Edwards (London: John Murray, 1875), 307.
12. See, for example, the biographies and selected verses of European poets of Persian and Urdu compiled in Ram Babu Saksena, *European & Indo-European Poets of Urdu & Persian* (Lucknow: Newul Kishore Press, 1941).
13. The most essential essay on this topic remains Bernard S. Cohn, "The Command of Language and the Language of Command," *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985).
14. There existed no formal pedagogical material or curricula available to the British for the acquisition of Pashto as they entered Afghanistan in 1839. For a discussion of early Pashto grammars and lexicographical works prepared in European languages, see Tariq Rahman, *Language, Ideology and Power: Language Learning Among the Muslims of Pakistan and North India* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 361.
15. A new edited volume promises to be of immense value in understanding the region. See *Under the Drones: Modern Lives in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Borderlands*, eds. Shahzad Bashir and Robert D. Crews (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); see also, for example, the list of Pashto language programs in US universities maintained by Sean Mann, "Pashto University Language Programs," *The Afghanistan Analyst*, accessed April 24, 2012, <http://bit.ly/Mc3yqc>.
16. Some of the terms that have been coined, e.g., *ManJams* (loose pajama pants worn by [especially Pashtun] males, alternative spelling: *man-jams*), are portmanteaus, combining South Asian terms already known from the British colonial period together with Americanisms. The particular use of this term as it appears in a 2010 blog entry in the *Military Times* online edition, beyond its apparent intent to emasculate Afghan men, demonstrates the current popularity of CamelCase or medial capitals—the capitalization of the second term in a joined compound word—a typographic feature that has become increasingly common in the computing age. See [Rob Curtis, "ManJams—Afghanistan GearPorn X," *Military Times*, last modified March 24, 2010, accessed April 28, 2012, <http://militarytimes.com/blogs/gearscout/?s=manjams>. Compare with "The Attack of the Man-Jams," *Iraqistan*, last modified April 3, 2004, accessed April 28, 2012, <http://iraq.otspecial.org/?p=15>.
17. See, for example, the vocabulary with which Lady Florentia Sale's *Journal* is prefaced: *A Journal of the Disasters in Afghanistan 1841–2*, vol. 1 (Paris: Baudry's European Library, 1843), ix–xvi. Although many of these terms would appear in later dictionaries of "Anglo-Indian" English, she likely became acquainted with many, if not most, of the terms she lists from her earlier experiences in India and interactions with Indian subordinates while residing in British India and Afghanistan.
18. Voxtec International Inc., "Phraselator P2: The Ultimate Mobile Translation System," accessed April 28, 2012, <http://www.voxtec.com/phraselator/>.
19. *Ibid.*, <http://bit.ly/KKeBvd>.

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