A Modern Word Formation Process in Middle Persian: Abbreviated Forms

Leila Sharifi a*

* Azad University, Science & Research Branch, Tehran, Postcode:1469733678, Iran

Abstract

The present paper aims to investigate abbreviated forms in Middle Persian and will be demonstrated that abbreviation dates back to the past era. This article also cites abbreviated forms in Pahlavi scripts and Hozvreš abbreviations samples as well. The analysis presented in the article is based on Zipf’Law (1949) and Martinet’s Economy Principle (1962). They believed the Economy and Least Effort Principles, which govern the behavior of words. The widespread use of abbreviating dates back to some ancient languages, and is the natural result of economy, which governs the all dimensions of language.

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1. Introduction

In each language, the word formation process depends on the language features such as alphabet and writing which are the most important one among them. For instance, English has five vowels, two semi vowels and several diphthongs which approximately %20 of English words begin with them, that is one of each five words; but in Persian, only %10 of words begin with long vowel since short vowels does not have phonological representation in the language (except a few cases) so it seems, abbreviating can be more applicable in English than Persian and the words pronunciation is easier too.

No modern, comprehensive in-depth historical study of Middle Persian abbreviations exists, although some

* Corresponding author: Leila Sharifi

E-mail address: l_lsharifi@yahoo.com
researchers such as Shindel (2004) as a numismatist, Tafazoli(1997,1998) and Oryan (1999) as Iranian Old languages experts have pointed out the words in their research indirectly. Thus the present paper deals with in detail.

1.1 Economy and Least Effort Principles

The concept of ‘economy’ in linguistics can have lots of different values and meanings and can be considered and studied from many and diverse viewpoints. In order to determine its several readings, a lexical and etymological definition has been attached to the word economy which reveals a positive interpretation as a whole: ‘economy’ means ‘gain, thrift, less burden, saving’; it is defined as the rule for the good administration of a house, derived as it is from the Greek oikòs, which means ‘house’ and from nomòs, from nèmein, which means ‘to deliver, to distribute’. This notion concerning the good management of the resources in a house can be metaphorically transferred from a social to a linguistic level; in this sense, language as a whole shows a proper balance resulting from the right distribution of all internal and external forces that custom, linguistic change, contacts with different realities and other various elements import constantly, causing alterations and irregularities to the detriment of communication. Therefore, economy in language has a strong controlling function over the whole system, something which is carried out with the least possible cost in terms of energy (Vicentini, 2003).

In 1955 there appeared a publication that was to have a great bearing on the history of theoretical linguistics all over Europe. Economie des changements phoné-tiques (Martinet, 1955), compiled by André Martinet, provided a coherent definition of linguistic economy- the so-called ‘classical definition’- as the unstable balance between the needs of communication- which are always changing - and natural human inertia, two essential forces contributing to the optimization of the linguistic system. He stated that any change occurring within the system-which is never static is explained by means of the following dichotomy: a single act of communication requires, on the one hand, clearness and precision, which multiply conspicuous units, and, on the other hand, a remarkable organic inertia, which produces effort relaxation, less numerous, less specific and more frequently occurring units, whose result is a hasty and careless expression. While inertia is a permanent, immutable component, human’s communicative needs change constantly, so that the nature of this balance will be modified over time. However, linguistic behavior seems to be regulated by what Zipf who inspired much of Martinet’s works- called «the principle of least effort» (Zipf, 1949, pp. 5-8). In such a theory, the principle of economy plays an important balancing role: any uneconomical change, which would bring about an excessive cost in terms of efforts and constitute an obstacle to comprehension, will be automatically removed or avoided. George Kingsley Zipf tried to investigate speech as a natural phenomenon and discovered that an inclination to economy is a criterion regulating any aspect of human behavior, which is governed by this Principle of Least Effort, operating within linguistic evolution as well. In such a dynamic process as linguistic change, words are constantly being shortened, permuted, eliminated, borrowed and altered in meaning, but, thanks to the Principle of Least Effort, equilibrium with a maximum of economy is always preserved. Zipf emphasized the fundamental role played by a Principle of Least Effort: ‘the primary principle that governs our entire individual and collective behavior of all sorts, including the behavior of our language …’ (Zipf, 1949).

Martinet certainly got inspiration from Zipf’s works, since there is evidence that the complete formulation of the term ‘economy’ appears in Martinet’s writings only after 1949: he speaks of a tendency towards economy as a composition of two contrary forces-effort limitation on the one hand and needs satisfaction (a new element which seems clearly inferred from Zipf) on the other- whereas, in his previous works, he had only spoken of a tendency towards economy of means or good economy of system energy (Vicentini, 2003,pp. 40).

Martinet described a primary mechanism of language change as coming from the interaction of two factors: ‘first, the requirements of communication, the need for the speaker to convey his message, and second, the principle of least effort, which makes him restrict his output of energy, both mental and physical, to the minimum compatible with achieving his ends.’ (Martinet,1962, pp.139).

2. Abbreviating in Middle Persian

In Middle Persian era, the Ashkanian and Sasanian coins are good examples of abbreviations use. All the coin legends are written in Pahlavi scripts. They normally cite the name of the ruling king, his official titles as well as the localization of the mint places. In Ashkanian empire era (250 BC-226 AD), the kings names was written on the coins; but approximately from the reign of BL_š I onwards (51-80 AD) short forms of the names cited. For example: VL /val/ instead of Valaxš (BL_š) (Tafazoli, 1998, pp.79). Schindel (2004) is a numismatic who has an article about Sasanian coinage. He points out some abbreviations on the coins which show the localization of the mint places. He
illustrates NWRA and believes it is an ideogram, while it is a word, means ‘fire’ and ‘light’ in Pahlavi. Usually Persian writing causes some ambiguities because -as mentioned before- short vowels do not have phonological representation in it.

An indication of the place of minting in abbreviated form is a common feature of many ancient coin series, e.g., the Parthian coinage or Roman issues from the mid-third century onwards. In Sasanian era, the name of the mint place was first added on gold coins of Špr I from Marv (Schindel, 2004, pp. 5, see also Alram and Gyselen 2003). The names of other places, mostly eastern, cities were occasionally placed on Sasanian coins until the reign of Ardašr II. It was only under Bahrām IV that the empire wide using of mint abbreviations was introduced, typically consisting of two or three letters. At the same time, the number of different mint strongly increases, reaching as many as 40 during the 6th and 7th centuries. During the reigns of Bahrām IV, Yazdgerd I and Yazdgerd II, some unsigned drachms were issued, but apart from those, all other Sasanian drachms bear mint signatures, as do many gold and copper issues. These mint signatures can stand for cities, provinces or regions of the Sasanian realm. As for the localization, various methods have been employed. Among the most important, and most often used, is the comparison of the abbreviations on the coins with the late Sasanian administrative bulla. No modern study of all known Sasanian mint signature exist, although most of the important ones are deals with in some detail by Schindel (2004).

As are shown below there is an abbreviation on the reverse side of a Sasanian coin.

The table below shows some most common Sasanian mint signatures and their localization in abbreviated form (Schindel, 2004, pp.6) (See Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transliteration</th>
<th>Pahlavi Form</th>
<th>The mint place (Province)</th>
<th>Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ŠY</td>
<td>Špr I</td>
<td>Šīrāz</td>
<td>Fārs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WH</td>
<td>Vēh-Antiok-Šāpur</td>
<td>Xūzestān</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WYH</td>
<td>Vēh-Kavād</td>
<td>Åsūristān</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YZ</td>
<td>Yazd</td>
<td>Fārs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For example, \(\text{yw}\) is composed of \(\text{/y/}\) and \(\text{/z/}\), which are two first letters of Yazd city in Pahlavi (The mint place).

Shindel (2004, pp. 6-7) does not have listed the abbreviations; he only has cited the mint signatures. He also has mentioned some comments on specific signatures:

**WH**: The common equation with Vēh-Ardašr, a portion of the city complex of Ctesiphon, is not correct, because, as long as the dies are not produced centrally for the entire empire, WH always shares the stylistic criteria of the
Xuzestān mints AW and AY, whereas it is totally different from the style of AS. Thus, the equation with Vēh-Antiok-Šāpūr can be considered to be certain on numismatics grounds.

**WYHC:** Also in this case, two different mints employed the same signature. Rare coins of Kavād I, known so far only from regnal year 17, as well as the Arab-Sasanian coins belong to the Fārs mint Vēh-Āz-Āmid-Kavād. The bulk of WYHC issues, however, have to be attributed to Vēh-Āz-Antiok- Xosrow, a part of Ctesiphon, since the common signature AS is replaced by WYHC in the 23rd regnal year of Xosrow I, and since WYHC is the only mint for some of the short-lived rulers after Xosrow II known to have reigned in Ctesiphon.

By Tafazoli (1997, p. 53) in Phlavi scripts, there are two symbols and which the transliteration and x2. They were used after Hozvāreš verbs instead of several verbal suffixes. The suffixes are:

1. Third-person singular or indicative present (-ēnd, ē)
2. Past participle (=past third-person singular) (-t, -d)
3. Second-person Singular or plural imperative (ø, - ē, - ēd)
4. Optative single third-person (ē)

In Pahlavi texts also there are some words (author has found 9 samples) which are abbreviated forms of Hozvāreš words. For example abbreviated forms of some Aramaic Hozvāreš words are inserted to Pahlavi scripts and were being used (See also Pahlavi-Pazand Glossary, Oryan, 1999, pp.31-236).

### Table 2. Borrowed Hozvāreš abbreviations in Pahlavi

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transliteration</th>
<th>Phonetic Transcription</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hg</td>
<td>Gandum</td>
<td>Wheat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KŚMg</td>
<td>Zayt</td>
<td>Olive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M-kgt’</td>
<td>dāng-gat</td>
<td>Bill of exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pg</td>
<td>Gāwars</td>
<td>Millet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRg</td>
<td>Šiftālūg</td>
<td>Peach/Drupe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Šg</td>
<td>jaw</td>
<td>Barley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMg</td>
<td>kunjīd</td>
<td>Sesame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tg</td>
<td>xurmā</td>
<td>Palm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PWN</td>
<td>pad</td>
<td>By/With/Adverb/Prefix</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Origin of one of the abbreviations:

1. Wheat:
   - Hg /gandum/ (Oryan, 1999, pp.72)
   - Sanskrit:/godhūma-/، Avestic: /gantuma-/، Old Persian: /gnwm/، Pāzand: /gandum/، gandum, gntūm/

### 3. Conclusion

† Hozvāreš is a Middle Persian word and it is the infinitive nominal of /uzvārtan/ in the meaning of “understanding”; therefore Hozvāreš means “to understand”. This term has also an idiomatic meaning which is used for the writing systems of Middle Iranian Languages: Hozvārešes are Aramaic words, which were written in domestic writing systems, and pronounced by the domestic equivalent.
Historical analysis has shed light on the role of the principle of economy within languages. Economy appears as the strategy to choose precise linguistic forms in order to amend defects and imperfections of the language. On the basis of least effort principle the innate tendency of human, wisely given him by nature, dictate that he does not spend more energy on any effort than necessary. Also all languages by using of abbreviating as a word formation process, can build new words. Another point is, in Middle Persian, abbreviating process is rule- governed; for the reason that the word formation pattern of all the abbreviations is based on spelling/alphabetical features and typically consists of two or three letters. Author believes that Statistical researches or word formation mechanisms of the abbreviations in family of languages even family of words can be further researches.

References

Primary sources:

Secondary Sources: