

# Comparative Etymological Study of “Society”, “People”, “Nation” in Persian and English

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## Abstract

Etymology is diachronic study of words origin in which words changes can be traced. It illustrates change process in any aspects of a word, such as phonetic, morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. Linguists reconstruct proto-languages with following changes occurred in languages, and in this way so many other things in the history become clear. What is focused in the present paper as the first step of data analysis is an etymological study of three words – society, nation, people – in English, and their equivalents in Persian. In the second step, a comparative study is done to see if the change processes are the same in the mentioned languages. And at last a sociolinguistic conclusion is presented.

**Keywords:** Sociolinguistics, Etymology, Language changes

## 1. Introduction

Etymology is the study of the origin of words. It can help scholars and researchers realize language changes, which may be phonetical, morphological, syntactic, semantical, or pragmatical, so it requires an understanding of the parts of words, their pronunciation and grammar components. It can be said that some understanding of phonology, morphology, and semantic is needed. Many words end up in one language after traveling through several languages. It explores the history and development of individual words, the origins of a language's lexical items. Etymology is also a diachronic process. In other words, etymology is a function of a language's change over time and it accounts for the history of borrowing. Words of a language are representations of culture, needs, cognition, and even environmental factors of the society using that language, so etymological studies of words can clarify cultural and ideological beliefs behind them. Beliefs and also life characteristics of a race are shown in type of words and the way of using that words (Alkhasveisi, 1385). Etymological studies of a language can show a perspective of foretime of that society.

Every facet of a word – like sound, form, and meaning - changes over time. We can classify meaning changes into types: abstract to concrete, general to specific, temporal to locative, and vice versa. We can also consider the origin of a meaning change or the influence of other languages. And sometimes semantic loans occur when a language uses a preexisting word or phrase to cover a borrowed meaning. Another important matter worth mentioning in semantic is its fuzziness. Not only the relationship between the meaning of a word and its form is generally opaque, but also semantic relationship between words whose meaning is known, and even between word roots and words driven from those same roots through word formation, is approximate and variable. It should be kept in mind that semantic change is not as systematic as sound-change, however we can still classify it.

To do etymological work, historical documentation and phonological similarity are the two main ways to help the researchers. Etymology relies heavily on phonology to justify successive forms of words because it needs laws to justify how phonemes move into one another or even disappear altogether. This in turn even allows the reconstruction of bygone pronunciations and unattested word roots. It also builds on morphology to explain how people evolve the words they need from the ones they have and semantics, because meanings shift no less than phonemes.

There are varieties of theories proposed about the relation between language and culture; Chomsky (1965) studied language on its sake and apart from environmental and social factors. On the other hand structural linguists believe that the world is created through language. There are other scholars, like Muhlhausler (2003), who believe that there is a close relation between language and environment, meaning that world builds language and language builds world. So language changes significantly shows changes of human ideologies and culture of a society.

There are some important factors involved in language changes; internal factors like semantic adjunction, semantic elevation, semantic degeneration, social – political matters, and war. To measure semantic change, one has to evaluate the semantics of a lexical item at a given point.

To do so, semantic similarity measures in vector spaces or geometrical spaces may be used to compare the item with its own occurrences at later points. This method has been applied in Sagi et al. (2009), where semantic density was calculated as the average angle between vectors in a semantic space. The variability of that density was observed for the same lexical item at different points in time. Results mostly include broadening and narrowing

cases. The same method yielded results on the difference between nominal and verbal types of change, showing that verbs were more likely to change than nouns (Sagi, 2010).

Vicinity of lands causes human relations and so words incorporation of languages. Also economical and social relations between near and far countries are good reasons for words incorporation. Transfer of scientific issues is another affective factor in word change and borrowings (Taheri, 1389: 9-10).

Semantic changes deal with life and culture of each society more than any other aspects of that society. These changes are context – free but it does not mean that they cannot be linguistically defined (Arlato, 1373: 223). Words are the most changeable domain of Language and language variations affect them so much more than other parts.

There are so many works done synchronically and diachronically on language changes. Kiparsky (2008) argues that true universals require synchronic explanations, whereas typological generalisations require diachronic explanations. Issues under attention in etymological studies of words are mostly semantic changes. Sometimes it is seen that present meaning of a word is different from its original meaning. Present research tries to study this kind of change in 6 words in English and Persian diachronically.

## 2. Literature Review

- Safavi (1379: 6-191) studied semantic fields synchronically and introduced six diagrams for semantic changes.
- Safavi (1383) studied Persian vocabularies synchronically and also diachronically.
- Keshavarz (1371) focused on social role of personal pronouns.
- Mahmudzadeh (1383) paid attention to the relation between social changes. He argued that words can obtain totally different meanings after changes occurred in a society; for example after wars or evolutions.
- Bakhtiari (1383) studies the semantic fields synchronically and classified some change elements.
- Dokuhi (1379) analyzed 3024 loan words from English and after doing. Statistical surveys he reached the result that loan words in human sciences are in the third grade.
- Zolnur (1373) showed the effect of changes from Islamic Evolution in Iran on attitudinal changes occurred in semantic fields.

- Eslami (1375) followed the syntactic and lexical change path in Persian from Mashrute era until Islamic Revolution.
- Jam (1379) studied the reasons of obsolescence of Persian lexicon in press.
- Motamed Ali Khani (1379) focused on the effects of eight – year – war on Persian lexicon, and creation of new expressions in war areas.
- Carita Paradis (2011) tried to study the variation and change diachronically, and focused on difference between shift and change by taking advantage of metonymization and zone activation.
- Cook and Stevenson (2010) also used assessed cases from the historical linguistics literature. They detected changes in the semantic orientation of words (or polarity shifts) namely amelioration and pejoration. They then applied this methodology to detect possible un-assessed candidates. They used three English corpora as corpus slices, covering approximately a four century time-span.
- Volatility has also been assessed by Holz and Teresniak (2010), who adapted a measure from econometrics to quantify semantic change in a time sliced corpus. The volatility measure relied on the computation of the rank series for every co-occurrent term and on the coefficient of variation of all co-occurrent terms (Holz and Teresniak, 2010).

### 3. Research Methodology

In this research dictionaries of word's roots are used in both Persian and English languages. John Iyto and Arastekhu are used as English sources, while Dekhoda (1340), Pashang (1377), and Hasandust (1383) are used as Persian sources. At first each word root was founded, changes were followed to the present day and at last a comparative work was done between the roots and change process in mentioned languages.

### 4. Research Question

1. Are the present meanings of words similar to their roots' meanings?
2. If the meanings of the words and their roots are not the same, is the change process in Persian and English the same or no?

### 5. Data Analysis

In this part of research I start with finding words' origin and then a comparative study takes place.

#### 5.1 Words' Origin in Persian

**/mardom/** (people, eye pupil):

It was */martôm/* (people) in Pahlavi. Its origin is */martohm/* (man race, semen).

“Martohm” is composed of “mar” and “tohm”. “mar” is an Avestan and Ancient Hindi root, meaning “dying, death” (Pashang, 1377: 524). This meaning is mostly kept for “mar” in north east of Europe and west of Asia, where human is considered mortal. But its Indo – European origin is “mvnu” (human). Some scholars attribute “thinking” to “-mvnu” and consider human as “wise man” (Hasandust, 1383).

“tohm” comes from Ancient Iranian “-tuxman” which is from “-tank”, and “teuk” (semen, seed) is an Indo – European origin of “tnak”.

Avestan “taoxman” (semen) → Ancient Persian “taumā” (race, ethnic) → Sanskrit “tókman” (buds, clusters) → Middle Persian “tōhm” (semen, seed), “tōhmag” (semen, seed, family) → Pahlavi “martōm” (people).

**/Ejtema’/** (community, department, category):

“Ejtema” has an Arabic origin. “jam” (coming together, join, make group) is its origin which was came to Persian like many other loan words (Dehkhoda, 1344).

**/Melat/** (people, nation, council):

It is a Hebrew – Arabic word meaning “way , ritual” at first. But a semantic shift occurred through the time which changed its meaning to “people, nation, council”. (Hasandust, 1383).

## 5.2 Words’ Origin in English

**People** (humans, persons in general):

It comes from Anglo-Fr. *people*, O.Fr. *peupel*, from L. *populus* "people," of unknown origin, possibly from Etruscan. Replaced native folk. Meaning "body of persons comprising a community" first recorded late 13c. In Anglo-French; meaning "common people, masses" (as distinguished from the nobility) first recorded c.1300 in Anglo-French. The verb is late 15c. (intrans.), c.1500 (trans.). The word was adopted after c.1920 by Communist totalitarian states to give a spurious sense of populism to their governments (Online Etymology Dictionary).

**Society** (group, association of people):

It was first used in 1530s, "friendly association with others," from Old French “societe” from Latin “societatem” (nom. *societas*), from “socius” (companion). The meaning "group of people living together in an ordered community" is from 1630s. And sense of "fashionable people and their doings" is first recorded 1823 (Online Etymology Dictionary).

**Nation** (people of a country):

c.1300, from Old French “nacion”, from Latin “nationem” (nom. *natio*) (nation, stock, race). Its literature meaning is "that which has been born," from “natus” pp. of “nasci” (be born) from (Old Latin “gnasci”. Political sense has gradually taken over from racial meaning "large group of people with common ancestry." Older sense preserved in application to North American Indian peoples (1640s). Nation-building first attested 1907 (implied in nation-builder). (Online Etymology Dictionary).

### 5.3 Comparative Analysis

#### **/mardom/, people →**

As it is said in previous part, we can consider /mardom/ having two concepts of [human] and [semen] in itself, which can be summed up as [generation continuum].

It is obvious that at its original form, /mardom/ was a complex word, notionally and morphologically. But today it is a simple word with the concept of [people]. It means that throughout time, semantic and morphological changes occurred and this word was affected. The semantic changes gave this word a sense of sociality, while at first it had a sort of biological sense.

“People” went through phonetic and orthographic changes. It keeps the concept of [humans, people] from its origin uses.

#### **/mellat/, nation →**

/mellat/ had a kind of religious notion (ritual) at its original form which gave its place to a political notion.

“Nation” faced a semantic change as well as its Persian equivalent. It loosed its notion of [bearing, fertility] and gained the political concept of [people of a country].

#### **/ejtema’/, society →**

The original form and meaning of [ejtema’] is not changed at all, as its Persian equivalent, “society” hasn’t changed much. The only change in this word is phonetically.

## **6. Conclusion**

According to data analysis of this research, the first question can be answered in this way that original meanings are changed in some of the words and are the same in the others. But the numbers of words which are changed are more than those without any changes. About coordination and alignment of change process, which was asked in second research question, I should say that it is not totally the same in Persian and English. Some evidence of sameness in the process of change is seen, but to answer precisely more historical and geographical studies are needed.

Due to the mentioned points, I can represent the research result in two dimensions. First, words under study went through phonetic, morphological, orthographic, and semantic changes which are signs of language dynamism. As human is not a static entity, and change is one of the major features of him/her, language, as a tool in hands of human, changes too. Each human as a member of a society affects the society and also its culture. Human changes are aligned with social and cultural changes. Considering triangle of human – society – culture, I can say that they have influence on one another, and change of one vertices ends in changing of the others, in other words, changes in human, culture, and society are not separated. Second, language classifications are not universal. Different languages have different classifications and also different changes. And that is because of linguistic relativity.

Varieties of changes and language classifications can be explained due to varieties of ideologies and vice versa.

On the other hand in this paper I realized that culture is an abstract notion, and changes in abstract entities are not as clear and recognizable as changes in concrete ones. We can only see the abstract changes in their effects on concrete entities. This issue is so wide spread that has many cases to work on. This research was a sociolinguistic study of 6 words which I hope to expand it in other works, and also other fields.

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