

# The challenges of translating Hebrew into Persian



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*Mikhal Heffer*

Some language pairs are rare enough to present their own set of challenges. Consider an international project that includes a family of immigrants from Iran, a large construction company, teams of lawyers and a translation agency from Israel.

This is a story of an Iranian family that fled Khomeini's Iran. Some of its members immigrated to the United States

and some came to Israel and bought land in the center of the country. When the opportunity arose, the family decided to invest in a large real estate project on their land.

When the documents began to pile up, a somewhat problematic fact became clear: Some of the family members, especially the older ones, are not fluent in English and certainly not in Hebrew. All the documents related to the deal, therefore, had to be translated into Persian, as their signature was critical for the project, and legally valid only in a language they could read.

The construction company initially hired the services of a Persian-speaking lawyer. However, they were not happy with the result and hence they decided to look for a reliable translation agency. We responded to the challenge despite the fact that we hadn't done Hebrew to Persian before. A new language is an interesting adventure.

Thamar E. Gindin, a Hebrew-native linguist, scholar and lecturer on Iranian culture, was recruited for the mission. Gindin studied spoken and literary Persian at university, and speaks it with a perfect accent.

The documents to be translated were bank documents with specialized vocabulary, and it was "not easy to find the parallel terms in Persian," says Gindin. "In Israel you can find a Hebrew-Persian dictionary but they are usually concise or inexact. Even the term 'notarized translation' does not exist as a term in Persian, but only as a phrase." Gindin used a pivot language to look up terms. She consulted the economic dictionary from Ynet Economics (the largest internet business newspaper in Israel) from Hebrew to English, and after finding the appropriate term in English, he was assisted by a specialized economic Iranian dictionary. "I have learned Persian for many years, but of course it is not my mother tongue. Therefore, the document was edited by a professional editor who lived in Iran at the time, and is of course a native Persian speaker."

One of the complex challenges in the project was translating the names of the family members. When the Persian family names were recorded in the municipality in Hebrew, the local clerk copied the names inaccurately. "When they translated the names back into Persian, I could not use the correct spelling, but had to cling to the mistake so that the names would reflect the ones originally registered," says Gindin.

The project's notary invited Gindin to his office to sign a translator's

affidavit, and since the notary did not know Persian, the notary's confirmation was based on the translator's affidavit verifying the translation.

Gindin provided interpretation as well. "Even during the meetings themselves, we needed Persian interpretation because even though the family members lived for 30 years in the West, they still did not speak English or Hebrew," says one of the owners of the construction company.

This project included not only the translation, but additional coordination with the client, the printer, lawyers and notary. At the time of taking the construction loan, the family signed the documents in Hebrew and the lawyer of the transaction confirmed at the end of each document that the family received a notarized translated copy and understood its content.

### Language challenges

Ultimately, the project was successful in large part thanks to the linguist's competence. Overall, translating from English to Hebrew and Persian, or between the last two, is a challenging task. Here are a few things the translator needs to take into consideration.

◆ **History.** Both Hebrew and Persian are ancient languages, dating back more than two and a half millennia. Present-day Hebrew was revived from Biblical Hebrew (a language that was dormant for almost 2,000 years), and thus a native Hebrew speaker can understand most of the original-Hebrew Old Testament with very little adaptation. Persian, on the other hand, has been a living language for all these years (even at times when it was not documented), and as with English, the change from Old to Middle to New Persian renders these three stages of language mutually incomprehensible.

◆ **Length of sentences.** English, as the richest language in the world in terms of vocabulary, includes about a million words. English is a

cosmopolitan language and is open to a wide range of cultural influences, enabling it to adopt and adapt to new foreign words. English is more likely to use descriptive texts than most other languages, thanks to its rich vocabulary of subtle differences and depth.

Persian is also a rich language, and the Persians adore their language and love long sentences — sentences with few verbs and many long adverbial constructions that are often translated into Hebrew as independent sentences.

In contrast, Hebrew has less external influence, having not been in use for 2,000 years. Thus, it has a relatively limited vocabulary and tends to use short adverbial phrases. Hebrew is a concise language. This is somewhat characteristic of Israeli culture, which favors directness and getting straight to the point, with no time and patience to beat around the bush.

The translator therefore should have an intercultural understanding to convey the message in the form and style appropriate for each culture.

◆ **Suffixes and prefixes.** One of the reasons for the differences in the length of the language texts beyond vocabulary and writing style is that Semitic languages, such as Hebrew, usually use words with a root consisting of three letters, but add different prefixes and suffixes of one letter to indicate combinations, prepositions and so on. Thus, one word in Hebrew may be equivalent to four words in English. For example, the Hebrew word KShe'elech (כשאלך) is translated into English as "when I go." In Persian, this is vakhti ke raftam/vakhti ke mi ravam (وقتی که رفتم / وقتی که می روم).

◆ **Masculine and feminine.** Compared to some languages, there are not many masculine or feminine nouns in English. Persian, even more than English, lacks masculine-feminine noun distinctions. It does, of course, make gender distinctions by using words such as mother and father, or brother



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and sister, but "he" and "she" (u or vey for both) are one and the same, and distinct from "it" (ān).

In Hebrew there are separate forms for male and female. All nouns, not just people, have gender.

The challenge for the translator is to understand the context and the meaning in the source language and only then translate it by splitting the text into different genders if Hebrew is the target language.

◆ **Spelling.** Hebrew has letters that sound exactly the same, and people who learn the language can easily misspell a word. For example, Alef (א) and Ayin (ע) make the A sound, and Kaf (כ) and Kuf (ק) make a K sound.

Persian uses Arabic script, even though the language is not Semitic, and the speakers don't pronounce all the letters the same way Arabic-speakers do. This creates a situation where four different letters are pronounced

as z: dal zāl (ذ), re ze (ر), sād zād (ض) and te daste-dār (ظ); three different letters are pronounced as s: se se nokhte (ث), sin (س) and sād (ص). The letters qāf (ق) and ghein (غ) are pronounced like one another, but have three different pronunciations depending on the phonetic environment.

◆ **Language direction.** Hebrew and Persian are written from right to left. This affects the graphics of the text layout. The design format needs to be adapted. Text and graphics (for brochures, for example) may need to be moved from one side to the other. Websites require more time during development and localization because the programming and format is normally set to work in English.

◆ **Vocalization.** In Hebrew and Persian, vocalization is optional, and is rendered by diacritics. This is entirely different from the English language that uses letters to render vowels.

Experienced Hebrew and Persian speakers can recognize unvocalized words only by reading the context.

◆ **Definiteness.** Hebrew nouns have only two states: definite (marked by ha) and indefinite (unmarked). English has three possibilities in this category: a noun can be definite (the), indefinite (a) or unmarked. Persian has four degrees of definiteness: the unmarked form may be either definite or generic (the two extremes), and in some cases there is a distinction between specific and non-specific indefinite nouns: the specific ones are marked by a post-position rā when serving as direct object. In colloquial Persian, specificity is marked by the suffix -e.

The tasks and challenges mentioned in this article are by no means a comprehensive and all-inclusive list, but certainly rank among the top challenges a translator may face. [M]