Secret Languages of Afghanistan and Their Speakers

Secret Languages of Afghanistan and Their Speakers

By

Jadwiga Pstrusińska

Translated into English by Agata Lenard
Edited by Agata Lenard and Ben Young

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS

PUBLISHING

To the memory of Bozay

Some questions may remain in limbo for many years before the necessary evidence can be gathered. Some questions may never be answered because the necessary evidence cannot be obtained. But even the discovery that the evidence is not available is a contribution, if only because it allows scientists to move on to new questions.

Steve Olson (2003: 167)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

The magic of sharing a language, of keeping secrets from strangers, and of having the power to conceal information by using encoded communications—all these are essential to the process of creating a secret language; but most often the immediate reason is the sense of threat to people or business interests. Sometimes secret codes come into being without any apparent reason, perhaps simply for the sheer pleasure of their creation and usage. It should be stressed, however, that secret languages play a significant role in the history of every nation; the evidence for this is overwhelming (Gardner 1972: 7–8). A great number of secret languages have been reported, and new ones are still coming into being while others, incessantly, and at various rates, are dying. Only some of them are known, and only very few are known with near-completeness. Many will never be known about at all. The level of difficulty we face in examining them has undoubtedly increased. Bruce Schneier, for example, writes:

> Cryptology presents a difficulty not found in normal academic disciplines: the need for the proper integration of cryptography and cryptanalysis. This arises out of the fact that in the absence of real communications requirements it is easy to propose a system that appears unbreakable. (Schneier 1994: xii)

The aim of the present work is above all to identify the secret languages of Afghanistan, at least to the extent that was possible after the end of the Soviet occupation, and to outline how they function. But the book does not exclusively concern itself with linguistic phenomena. It is impossible to deliberate on the nature of secret languages without understanding the lives of the people who speak them. The inseparability of language and society, while admittedly a constant factor which should not be forgotten in any research project, is of special importance in the present case (Deuchar 1987: 295). Hence, it is necessary to provide information concerning the lives and economic strategies of the groups who speak the secret languages in question. Although the overall picture has been created first and foremost from an ethnolinguistic and sociolinguistic perspective, it is in essence much more interdisciplinary. In reality, we are here dealing with a whole set of closely related branches of knowledge, and not simply considering language, social history and

culture (cf. Oranskiy 1983: 5–6). The specificity of these types of languages, the very fact of their existence, provides us with information that is valuable not only for linguists or philologists, but also for anthropologists, ethnologists, ethnographers, psychologists, and scholars of many other disciplines. Sometimes this information is important in terms of specialist educational programmes, or in relation to intelligence agencies, military history, and current world affairs. After all, wars and other military operations increase the need to pass encoded information. Above all, however, it is hoped that the present publication will enable greater understanding of Afghanistan's very complicated linguistic and cultural reality, and thus, to some extent, promote understanding of the linguistic characteristics of neighbouring countries as well.

   The subject and scope of this work stand in need of some clarification: first, as regards the time period; second, as regards the geographical area in question; and third, as regards our understanding of the term "secret language" itself, the synonym for which that is most often encountered in relevant writings is "argot."[1] Terminological problems will be discussed in due course. It is not, however, the aim of the present publication to provide a detailed description of the history of research into the secret languages of Afghanistan, nor of the other areas of Middle Asia[2] and the Middle East that will be mentioned in the text. The text itself is limited to providing only the most indispensable information; relevant publications concerning the research field have been listed in the bibliography at the end of the book. The exception is the description of the Polish contribution to research into the secret languages of Afghanistan, as well as the data which Polish researchers have managed, with a great deal of effort, to provide. Within this context, the author's own personal research is also set out. All this information has remained markedly under-disseminated up to now; as is so often emphasized, we possess only the scantiest information concerning the argots of Afghanistan (Oranskiy 1983: 33). In *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, the chapter on the country's languages lists only one argot and one sabir, underscoring the fact that material on the other Afghan argots has never been compiled (Kieffer 1983: 503, 504, 515).[3]

---

[1] The term has been used in works on the secret languages of Middle Asia. See e.g. A. Tietze, *Zum Argot der Anatolischen Abdal* (*Gruppe Teber*), Acta Orientalia Hungarica, vol. 36, fasc. 1–3, 1983.

[2] The work does not discuss the problems connected with the use of the terms "Middle Asia" and "Central Asia," which are used extremely inconsistently. Central Asia is treated here as part of Middle Asia.

[3] In the 1986 publication, in a chart showing the linguistic situation of Afghanistan, Kieffer also adds, following Rao, the languages of peripatetic groups of various

By the "present," this work refers to a time period considered rather broadly and without distinct boundaries. Most of the material comes from the period after World War II, but before the Afghan–Soviet war. The Soviet invasion and, to a lesser extent, the internal fighting that followed it, was an extremely important point both as regards the ethnolinguistic and the sociolinguistic situation in Afghanistan, and was accompanied by the biggest exodus of a population ever known to the world—something which caught up many speakers of the many languages spoken in the country. A dramatic element within these events was the activity of various guerrilla groups of mujahedin, as well as the later and rather draconian rule of the Taliban. The presence of U.S. and NATO forces has resulted in the Afghan resistance movement gaining intensity; there has been constant fighting between numerous groups of various origins, including the so-called Taliban and those referred to as Al-Qaeda. The Afghan–Pakistani border region has, as we know, gained special importance. Undoubtedly, Afghanistan's recent history has provided many reasons for the use of secret languages and encoded messages. The increase in frequency of use, the probability of new codes being devised, and the revival of old ones, are all very considerable. But the violent demographic changes of recent decades, and various other factors, have posed grave difficulties for the study of secret languages, with the result that for many of them we do not know whether we should say they "are spoken" or that they "were spoken." Conducting systematic field research in Afghanistan is at present extremely difficult. It is thus not certain whether some of the material we refer to here is potentially still functioning, is going out of use and being replaced by something new, or is already dead. The commentaries and comparisons discussed here concerning linguistic as well as social and cultural phenomena often go back into the distant past, even as far as a thousand years or more. In addition, as stressed by E. C. Bosworth, a well-known author on the secret languages of the Arabic Middle Ages, the relevant zone of comparison can be widened almost indefinitely, indeed almost up to our own times (Bosworth 1976 I: vii).

From an historical point of view, prior to 1747 Afghanistan formed part of the neighbouring countries; it existed in various fragmentations and configurations depending on the period, and did not yet have its own state identity. For millennia it was a multilevel crossroads comprising many cultural influences, including linguistic ones, continuously interacting in a complicated mélange whose characteristics are difficult to discern from

---

origins spoken by Jats: *ādūrgarī*; *qazūlagī* or *magadī*, or *ġorbatī*, and the third one *magatibai* (with an annotation, "under research"). He lists them among the group "other" (Fr. *autres*), subgroup "diverse" (Fr. *divers*) (Kieffer 1986: 103).

the perspective of the present. It is not strange that, in discussing the secret languages of Afghanistan and their social functioning, we have to look constantly at data drawn from beyond the present administrative borders of the country.

From mediaeval sources we learn that various secret languages, quite similar to one another, had long been in use in the lands lying within the borders of present-day Afghanistan and its neighbours, which collectively comprised a region with close historical and cultural interconnections, even to the extent that it constituted a kind of historical and cultural unity. The anonymous tenth-century Arabic work *Hudūd al-'ālam* (The regions of the world), for instance, records that in Astarabad, a city in the Iranian province of Gorgan famous for its crafts, two languages are in use: the local variety of Persian (*fārsī*), and the Lutara language, also known as Zargari (*zargarī*) or "of goldsmiths."[4] It may be supposed, then, that the name "Lutara" referred to a professional secret language, probably a crafts one, since Astarabad was full of craftsmen. In mediaeval unilingual descriptive dictionaries, the term "Lutara" (*lwtr'*) is defined as a secret language between two persons, intended for concealing the sense of an utterance from others. It is probable that this was the argot used for communication by the *Hurufi* sect (AKh87: *hurūfī*) in the fifteenth century (Khromov 1987: 147). At present the name is sometimes transcribed as *lōterā'ī* or *lōter-e ğaberī*. The suggested etymology of the name is **lō-Tōrah*, that is "a language which is not the language of the Torah." Researchers have established that it incorporates a great deal of Hebrew and Aramaic lexical items (Paul 1999: 111).

Better known and much more important for our deliberations are other mediaeval sources from the Islamic world, for instance the fourteenth-century dictionary, كتاب ساسيان, known as *Kitāb-ī Sāsīān* (Oranskiy 1983: 38), or "The Book of Sasyans" (also in the versions of AT48: *kitāb-i sāsīān*, or CB76: *Kitāb-e Sāsiyān*), sometimes dated to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as, for example, by Melikian (2002: 187). This provides a list of argotic words of the Middle Asian Sasyans' association (AB76: *Sāsiyān*, AT48: *Sāsīān*), together with their Persian translations (Troitskaya 1948: 257; Bosworth 1976: 171). Part of the lexical material contained in it can be found in modern Afghanistan. Here we should mention two long poems written within the circles of Arabic culture in the Munaghat (*munāɣāt*) jargon, entitled *Qaṣīda sāsāniyya*, translated as "poems" in the Sasani jargon, or poems about the activities of the

---

[4] The term survived in Modern Persian as *zabān-e zargari*, "secret language," "jargon," "argot" (Rubinchik 1970: 760).

sons/children/descendants of Sasan (Arab-Pers. *banū Sāsān*). The first *qasida* was composed by a traveller and doctor named Abu Dulaf[5] in the second half of the tenth century,[6] and probably comes from western Iran. It is supposed that the author not only had contact with the speakers of the contemporary secret languages of the Middle East and Middle Asia, but also belonged to such a community himself. The second work, whose author was the poet Safi ad-Din al-Hilli, was also composed in the fourteenth century, probably in Iraq or at the court of the Turkmen emirs in Diyarbakir. It contains an exceptional amount of secret vocabulary. Both poems were published for the first time in Europe in the nineteenth century without a critical edition, and the following editions were full of incorrect readings and unclear excerpts. C. E. Bosworth tried to remedy the situation by publishing both poems with thorough linguistic and historical annotation, along with a translation and glossary consisting of 540 lexical elements (Bosworth 1976 I: x–xii, 81, 140). His valuable work also contains a certain amount of comparative material on a similar subject from western Europe, especially from the literature of France and Germany, as well as from Elizabethan England, since, as he aptly notes, comparisons in this field can be made with many societies and periods. Looking to the Islamic world, Bosworth made comparisons first of all with material from Persian-speaking Iran, which as we know at one time encompassed vast tracts of Afghanistan, and touched upon many more culturally diverse areas and peoples, such as the Berbers and the Egyptian Copts in North Africa. Indeed, it was not only the people called Banu Sasan who created their own languages for secret communication and to exclude strangers from their activities (although considerable space in the present work will be devoted to them), but also other esoteric groups who remained outside the ordinary current of social life (Bosworth 1976: x, xi).

---

[5] According to Bosworth and Abu Dulaf al-Khazraji.

[6] The oldest written European text known to us in a secret language is from the thirteenth century. It is a transcript of a German thieves' jargon. We also know of a French text from the fifteenth century and an English one from the sixteenth century (Polański 1999: 654). They are, however, transcripts written by people from outside the argot-speaking environment. The only exception in Europe is probably the seventeenth-century argot whose form was controlled by the highest class in the beggars' hierarchy (*les archisuppóts*), consisting of priests, scholars and the founders of the association. They transformed their secret language by replacing words which had become widely known with new ones, and also taught neophytes (Bartol 1976: 237). In this context the transcripts of oriental argots may be regarded as several centuries older.

We also know about many other secret codes used in this region which are not mentioned by Bosworth. For example, the Ali Illahi sect (AT48: *ālī ilāhī*), and the famous Assassins from the mountain fortress of Alamut (Pers. *Alamūt*) situated between Qazvin and Gilan, spoke languages that were not readily comprehensible and were thus at least to some extent secret—the latter sect speaking the so-called Alamuti (Pers. *alamūti*) language.[7] The argot of the Ali Illahi sect has been found written in the second part of *Kitāb-i Sāsīān* (Troitskaya 1948: 257). J. Hauziński writes that the Assassins were closely connected with the early development of craft guilds, which they tried to use as an instrument for organization and promotion (Hauziński 1988: 318–319, after Lewis 1937: 20–37).

The area covered by the occurrence of the secret languages described in the present work also requires definition. Some notes on the social and cultural environment are included in order to situate the argot speakers within the local, regional, and even Eurasian realities in which similar social strata lived. Since the state borders of Afghanistan are rather new and in many places are illusory, and many of the ethnic and secret languages discussed here can also be found in neighbouring countries (sometimes several of them), it is essential to look beyond Afghanistan in order to plot them. In many cases, speakers of the languages are groups not leading a settled way of life but travelling over vast areas, ignoring many of the borders that have been established in this region of Asia. It should be stressed that in the past, just as in the present, weak border controls meant that the Afghan state borders did not fulfil their basic role—the one exception being the northern border, formerly with the Soviet Union and now with the various countries which have come into being since its collapse. All of them were of a more or less theoretical character almost along their entire length, and this still remains the case. Even in the north there have been problems with, for example, Afghan groups of armed Islamists (Landau 2001: 193), and a relatively small number of refugees.

As a result of longstanding contacts with neighbouring countries whereby Afghan argots travelled easily outside Afghanistan, at least some of the secret languages of India and Iran, or of the region situated across the Amu Darya, were used in the area which coincides with present-day

---

[7] On the Alamuti dialect, see e.g. Maciuszak 1996: 88–90. I owe the suggestion that Alamuti was perceived as secret to B. Mękarska, PhD, who after her participation in the international conference (at the University of Edinburgh) where she was kind enough to read my paper on secret languages in absentia, gave me information received from a Gilan inhabitant who claimed to have heard it at home in his childhood.

Afghanistan. Thus, it is vital to allow our discussion to encompass the whole region and not only present-day Afghanistan, since the linguistic space occupied by modern Afghanistan has merged and overlapped with neighbouring areas since time immemorial. It is essential to study the data on the secret languages of the neighbouring areas and, where possible, beyond. In addition, such a broader perspective enables the secret languages of Afghanistan to be placed within the background of other codes of the same type in Middle Asia, and even in Eurasia. Readers interested in the secret languages of Iran may refer, for example, to the work of G. Melikian (2002).

The Middle Asian perspective is crucial given that many of the argots found in the region—formerly in the Soviet areas, today in post-Soviet or Russian ones—have found their way there precisely from Afghanistan. Members of some groups still retain the memory of their Afghan ancestors and are usually called "Afghans" (Taj. *afγon*, pl. *afγono*), or in some other fashion can trace their origins to Afghanistan (Oranskiy 1983: 23–24)— although they might have come from other areas, particularly from India, or from India via Iran. Their secret languages often provide vital information on the argots found in Afghanistan in the past, while some data also illuminate the present state of affairs.

Migrations on both sides of the Amu Darya have taken place for a very long time, but the most detailed information on the topic comes primarily from the eighteenth century. The Fergana Valley, into which various groups of different nations and tribes moved, was particularly attractive to settlers. With time, some began to lead a seminomadic life before later settling down. In the nineteenth century, both during the heyday of the Emirate of Bukhara (1800–1842) and in the later periods of social and political crisis (1842–1876), the migrating trend continued, but its intensity decreased and, to some extent, the direction of travel changed, with the newcomers positioning themselves mainly among the settled population. Some of the immigrants were recruits joining the local army. Their ethnic affiliations were usually described as Kohistani,[8] Tajik, or Galcha.[9] As one of the sources indicates, for example, in 1805 the numbers of soldiers listed under the names of Karategini,[10] Wakhi,[11]

---

[8] Coming from the so-called Kohistan, the region at the southern end of Nuristan and in north-western Pakistan.

[9] Originating from the Pamir region, also Afghan Pamir.

[10] The name for an inhabitant of the Karatag Valley in Tajikistan.

[11] An inhabitant of Wakhan, situated in the so-called Wakhan Corridor in north-eastern Afghanistan.

Darwazi,[12] Badakhshani,[13] Roshani,[14] Chatrari,[15] Ghundi,[16] and Irani amounted to nearly six thousand. There was also migration from Afghanistan of people searching for other kinds of occupation, in Persian called *mard-e kār* (unqualified workpeople). The chronicles say that among them there were not only newcomers from the Afghan areas of Balkh,[17] Shapurgan,[18] Maymana,[19] and Kohistan, but also from Iran and more distant Yemen. What is interesting for the present discussion is that in 1820–1840 there were special divisions of guards and state police consisting of Afghans, and also of Luli and Multani, as the Gypsies were called. At the same time the term "Afghan" was a synonym for the term "Hindustani," as evidenced in the Kokand sources. Slightly later, during the Russian–Bukharan war (1866–1868), people named Kabuli (Pers. *kābuli* "from Kabul," "Kabul inhabitant") were treated with suspicion and hostility, as a result of which four hundred people under the command of Eskander Khan Kabuli went over to the Russian side. The Russian victory over the Emirate of Bukhara resulted in the emergence of a new component in Central Asia in the period 1853–1876, namely the Russian-speaking population, which quickly mixed with the local one. In the Fergana Valley, for instance, Russians settled in the same places as the Middle Asian Jews and Hindus. This mélange also incorporated immigrants from Afghan areas, as well as groups who spoke specific argots brought from the southern bank of the Amu Darya. In the nineteenth century there were sometimes also migrations in other directions. People travelled from Central Asia, Northern Afghanistan, and India to Chinese Turkestan. Some expeditions were connected with trade and the practice of crafts, while others resulted from unstable political situations (Beisembiev 2000: 36–40).

It should be stressed that, according to researchers, Afghan or pseudo-Afghan groups speaking an argot are most often simply Afghan Gypsies,

---

[12] An inhabitant of the Darwaza region in northern Afghanistan.

[13] An inhabitant of the Badakhshan region in north-eastern Afghanistan.

[14] A name for speakers of the Roshani language (belonging to the so-called Pamiri languages of the so-called Iranian language group) living in Badakhshan.

[15] Relating to inhabitants of Chitral, a region in northern Pakistan.

[16] A name for a member of the *kunda* community, denoting a group of many families bearing the same surname and descending from a common ancestor. The *Kunda* usually encompasses a village or larger area. The term is used for the Tajiks from Badakhshan, also from Afghan Badakhshan, and the Hazaras living primarily in central Afghanistan (Gawęcki 1986: 15).

[17] Balkh, a city in northern Afghanistan.

[18] Most probably Sheberghan in northern Afghanistan is meant here.

[19] Maymana, a city in northern Afghanistan.

and this is an opinion which is also repeated in more recent works (Paul 1999: 111). It can be assumed that in many cases this is true. In time, genetic research carried out by molecular biologists will probably be able to provide more reliable data on the subject and resolve the academic dilemmas, and this will be relevant to linguistic deliberations as well. It is already known that Gypsies are not genetically homogeneous (Zaharova et al. 2000: 237–243); for example, the European group called Sinte Romani is biologically related to the inhabitants of the Hunza Valley in northern Pakistan—speakers of the Burushaski language, treated as a language of unknown origin. Other groups from Indian areas that have been examined have different characteristics for their Y chromosome (Wells 2001: 10247).[20] This case alone points to the fact that we should acknowledge the polygenesis of gypsy groups.[21] We should also acknowledge the name "gypsy" to be a specific *collectivum*, and not an ethnonym *sensu stricto*; consequently, in many cases, we should write it with a small letter, since we do not know which groups leading a gypsy way of life may really be entitled to the endoethnonym, or even exoethnonym Gypsy. Similar cases of confusing a *collectivum* with an ethnonym are fairly frequent (Pstrusińska 2003).

Considering the fact that Middle Asian argotic groups are perceived most often as Gypsy or gypsy-like, some of our deliberations will necessarily concern Western Europe, since Gypsies also reached such distant places. In the literature on Gypsies, the question is continually raised as to what extent the Gypsies are European people. The most common view holds that Gypsies emigrated from India. The genetic findings regarding the Sinte Romani confirm such a probability. In many academic studies, it is assumed that European Gypsies partly originated from branches which never entirely left Asia, and that some of their members therefore remained there (Fraser 2001: 17). It is possible that this happened also in the Afghan areas discussed in the present work. As is well known, the language of the European Gypsies, besides incorporating Indian elements, includes Persian and, among others, Caucasian lexemes

---

[20] It should be stressed that, according to genetic population research done in recent years, we should be aware that such ideas as (Pre-)Indoeuropean groups of people or languages are an ideological notion rather than a proven fact. The same can be said about the designation, (Pra)Indo-Iranian or Iranian, regarding a group of people or languages (Pstrusińska 2004, 2005).

[21] After all, polygenesis has been suggested by researchers in Romani studies for a long time. L. Mróz writes: "an obvious conclusion suggests itself that we deal with an enormously diverse quality hidden under the common name 'Gypsies'" (Mróz 2001: 11).

(Frédéric 1998, I: 178). Sources confirm that groups from the circles of Perso-Arabic culture and speaking secret languages traversed vast areas of Islamic and non-believers' lands alike, travelling both to the East and to the West (Bosworth 1976 I: 81). Taking all of this into account, we cannot avoid adopting a broad Eurasian perspective in the present discussion.

Step by step we are learning more about the populations from the Indian subcontinent and the various directions in which they moved—for example, the Indian tradesmen and usurers who in past centuries travelled across Afghanistan, Central Asia, Iran, Caucasus, and even a significant part of Russia. These communities, spread over large areas, numbered sometimes tens of thousands of people (Levi 2000). And, in engaging in trade or moneylending, the ability to communicate in a secret language is extremely useful.[22] Unfortunately, in many cases it is difficult to establish the true ethnic affiliation of the groups in question, because they may identify strongly with the place they had left long ago, with the population among whom they lived in the present, or with the professional association to which they belonged. And it is not only professional identity which is important; religious identity and membership of sects, such as dervish brotherhoods, are also significant. Thus, we have ethnic–religious groups such as Jews or Hindus, ethnic–professional groups, and even ethnic–professional–caste ones such as the Afghan Haydaris.[23] When a given group in a certain area practises a specific profession, continually or frequently, the name of the profession or the term describing the activities of the group comes in time to play the role of the ethnonym (Oranskiy 1983: 26–27). Similarly, an adjective derived from a place of origin or residence also not infrequently functions as an ethnonym. A question arises whether in English such names should be written with a small or a capital letter. In the Polish version of the book it was decided to write the names of the argotic groups in question (apart from the names of sects or brotherhoods) with a capital letter, since, with time or in certain environments, most of the names come to function as an ethnonym, as its equivalent or as a substitute.[24] The same practice has been applied in the English version.

---

[22] Interesting cases in Eastern Europe are, for example, the so-called Ofens from Russia, or the Ochweśnicy from Biłgoraj in Poland. See e.g. pp. 99–100.

[23] See e.g. Jasiewicz 1983: 87; Penkala-Gawęcka 1988: 159.

[24] There are also cases when an ethnonym functions collectively to denote various ethnic groups who speak different languages but who resemble each other in economic strategies and/or way of life. Then it is written with a small letter; and so we can write both "balochi" and "Balochi," or "gypsy" and "Gypsy," depending on whether we are dealing with a collective term or the ethnonym (for more on the topic, see Pstrusińska 2003: 253–254).

Further difficulties with identification are caused by divisions into subgroups, and the use of the name of a subgroup as a proper ethnonym. This is a practice common among both local informants and researchers. Additionally, if we take into account that the same group is often called by different ethnonyms, and the same ethnonym is used for various ethnic groups by laymen, we uncover a whole medley of complications which are very often extremely difficult to untangle. Paradoxically, it can even happen that two different groups call each other by the same term. For example, the Parya group treats the Kawol group as Mazang (Pers.-Taj. *mazang*), and the Kawol group refers to the Parya group in the same way. Let us add that in many cases there are no strict criteria to distinguish a group at all (Oranskiy 1983: 26–27). Examples of such vagueness of identification are frequent. We may mention, for instance, the Baluj group found in Fergana and Tashkent, who called themselves Hindustani while at the same time considering themselves to be of the Baluj tribe. The locals called them Kara-Luli, Afghan-Luli, Industani-Luli, or Maimuni-Luli; the Afghans called them Jat, and the Hindus called them Paniraj (Oranskiy 1975: 3–4). In Afghanistan, the groups described as Jat were also called Jalali (AR79: *J̌alāli*), Jola (AR79: *J̌olā*),[25] Jogi (AR79: *J̌ōgi*), and Kawol (AR79: *Qawāl*) (Rao 1979: 141). As an example of how difficult it is to establish the origins of certain groups, we may refer to the community of the Abdals from Xinjiang, who speak a specific argot. Researchers have proposed as many as fourteen hypotheses for their origin! One of these links them with the ancestors of the Afghan Durrani dynasty (Ladstätter and Tietze 1994: 108). It is extremely common for the endoethnonyms and exoethnonyms of various groups, as well as other epithets, to be mistakenly used or even intentionally adopted by others, for instance to increase their prestige (Pohl 1997: 69); and Europe is by no means exempted from this trend.

The difficulties described above can easily lead to erroneous identification of groups that speak secret languages. As a result, in the absence of reliable data researchers often do not know which group they are dealing with. They know only the name or names under which the group appears in specialist literature, which is not necessarily reliable. The frequent inadequacy of terms used to refer to Gypsy and gypsy-like groups further means that in principle many of them should be written in inverted commas. However, we also do not know which names should be flagged up in this way with inverted commas. Further complications may arise in providing the names of the secret languages spoken in the present day by

---

[25] Literally "weaver," which in the Dari language denoted a poor man (Rao 1979: 141).

the groups discussed here, and all the more so if we take into consideration
the ones they spoke in the past.

In Iran it was extremely frequent that argotic groups of various origins
would be identified with Gypsies, who undertook intensive migration
towards the Middle East on their way from India to Europe. Considering
only the region of modern Iran, Gypsies are known under the following
names: Čegini, Čingāna, Foyuj, Harāmi, Jugi, Kowli, Lavand, Luli, Luri,
Pāpati, Qarāči, Qarbālband, Qerešmāl, Qorbati, Suzmāni, Zangi, Zot, and
so on (Baghbidi 2003: 124). The Gypsy and gypsy-like groups in Russian
and Soviet Central Asia were also given different names, not only Afghan
and Kawol. We find here Luli, Jugi, Jat, Mazang, Multani, Kara-Luli,
Afghan-Luli, Industani-Luli, Maimuni-Luli, Hindustani, Baluj, and so on.
In Afghanistan encounter the Jogi, Sheikh Mohammadi, Changar, Gola,
Sadu, Kawal, Mogat (Magat), Chalu, Kouli, Kutana, Luli, Musalli,
Mazang, and many others, most often local and regional names (Rao 1986:
258–260). Obviously, without detailed research and significantly more
data it is not certain whether all of the groups should be recognized as
Gypsies of Indian origins. Perhaps some are groups which can barely be
subsumed under the term "gypsy" written with a small letter, which here
rather describes a way of life. Given this complexity, some
misunderstandings about the coexistence of endo- and exoethnonyms may
thus appear. On the Indian Parya group in Soviet Central Asia, J. R. Payne
writes as follows:

> One of the characteristic activities of the Parya is the production of "nos,"
> a kind of chewing tobacco, which until recently they were permitted to sell
> openly at local bazaars, and it is this activity which leads to one of the
> names given to the Parya by the Tajik population: *afɣono-yi nosfuruš* "nos-
> selling Afghans," although they are also known as *afɣono-yi siɣorui* "dark-
> faced Afghans" or *laɣmoni* "people from Laghman (a province in Eastern
> Afghanistan)." (Payne 1997: 144)

There is a mention of bringing the Gypsies to Iran in "The Book of
Kings" (Pers. *Šāhnāme*), written by the Persian poet Ferdowsi in the
eleventh century. He writes that Bahram Gur, a king from the Sassanid
dynasty (d. 439), induced the Indian king Shangol to send him a thousand
Indian musicians, called Luri, and then sent them out to various places in
his country. Al Rur city, situated thirty parasangs[26] to the south-east of
Multan in Punjab in the area of present-day Pakistan, is believed to have
been the hometown of the Indian musicians (Pobożniak 1972: 6–7;

---

[26] Parasang: a distance measure equal to 4.82 km (Lee 1996: 604).

Baghbidi 2003: 123–124). Those Luri, as Pobożniak writes, are the ancestors of the Gypsies. Simultaneously, this also meant that the Indian musicians came to the Afghan areas. The term Luri, designating a Gypsy, has been used in Afghanistan up to the present. They are thought to have come from Iran in the fifth century, but it is not certain. It is possible that the event was connected with Bahram Gur, but if so only later (Pobożniak 1972: 7). Most probably, they reached Iran by crossing the lands of present-day Afghanistan and settled in the latter, not only because of the geographical setting but also because the areas were part of the Sassanid Empire. Thereby, most likely, the Indian musicians came to Afghanistan as well. There may be a connection between this event and the name of one of the Gypsy or gypsy-like groups—Multani—and the mediaeval name of the peripatetic Banu Sasan groups, or "the Sons/Children of Sasan," known for their use of secret languages. Lukonin (1969: 43) writes that Sasan kept troupes of dancers and singers at his court and provided for them, and this fact may also be the source of the name "Banu Sasan" which was so widespread afterwards, as well as other names of the same etymology.

We do not have equally extensive data on all the argots mentioned in the present work. In some cases, the information is relatively detailed and comprehensive; in others, we possess only a few lexemes, or merely a mention of the existence of a given argot. Even when we take into account the ethnic languages pressed into service as secret ones, there is a danger of mistakes where those languages themselves are little known or only very sparsely described. With inadequate data on a given ethnic language, and extremely limited information about the argot based on it, it is possible to entirely misidentify the material at our disposal. For various reasons, appropriate attention must be paid to research into special languages, including social dialects, if we want to attain a relatively comprehensive overview of the way people speak in the given area. We hope that the present work will go some considerable way to completing the linguistic picture of Afghanistan.

Attempts have been made to access all the available research relevant to the present work, although this is unfortunately rather limited. Authors writing about secret languages stress the limited availability of bibliographic references (Stępniak 1993). Melikian writes that "Generally speaking, the study of secret languages and professional slangs is altogether the least developed field of linguistics; Iranian linguistics being no exception" (Melikian 2002: 181). For obvious reasons, the bibliography on the secret languages of Middle Asia, found at the end of the book, is none too imposing in size; for similar reasons, a publication on the same

topic with respect to Afghanistan cannot be too voluminous either. It is essential to recognize that no text on the subject can aspire to cover the material exhaustively and provide a truly comprehensive, scientific description. This would require participant observation in each and every case, and living as a member of each argotic group under discussion, not for a short while but over a longer period. This is a methodological problem in research on secret languages, not only for Middle Asia but operative more generally.

Attempts have been made first of all to list the existing lexical material or selected examples from data on the functioning of secret languages, since this is the essence of argots. Wherever possible, observations have been made on the morphology and existing opinions about the origins of the vocabulary discussed. When it comes to presenting argotic material, the author follows I. M. Oranskiy who, in the second half of the twentieth century, published a number of works on Middle Asian argots (Oranskiy 1961, 1964, 1971, 1983). Words attested to in various forms of phonetic realization have been presented in tables in this book in one form. Verbs have been given in the present tense form; and where that form is not available, then the verb is presented in the past tense form, and in each case marked as such (cf. Oranskiy 1983: 36). Where necessary and/or possible, other varieties of the verb have been listed as well. Apart from a few cases, we know little about the real phonetic realization of Middle Asian or Afghan argotic vocabulary and its variants. In many cases we are dealing with unprofessional transcripts of heard material, not noted down by a linguist. Frequently, the accuracy of a transcript we possess cannot be ascertained. We do know, however, the most popular phonetic realizations of those words from the Afghan variety of the Persian language which are used as argot via a change in semantic value or by being used metaphorically. Thus, it would be of little value to attempt to introduce more precise phonological features into the argotic lexical material listed in the present work. When quoting, the notation, transcription, or transliteration used in the source is retained, apart from a few exceptions. We frequently find words in transcription, including names of argots, where we have no idea what language it was given in or what language the informant spoke.

Researchers lay emphasis on the problems with transcriptions of argotic material—I. M. Oranskiy, for example, stresses these difficulties, even though he worked in relatively favourable circumstances. Problems are frequently caused by the fact that the same informant gives variants of the phonetic realization of a given word. In addition, we are dealing here with a diversity of opposing dialectical influences on an argot, depending

on an informant's place of residence, the specificity of the set of the informant's bi- or multilingualism, their age, education, personality, the conditions in which the transcription took place, and many other factors. Allowances are made for possible mistakes made by researchers when undertaking transcripts, especially in the case of subtle differences between vowels. Under the circumstances, the description and analysis of a given argot give rise to many difficulties. It is not always easy to know whether we are dealing with two different argots or with two varieties of the same one (cf. Oranskiy 1983: 30). Besides argots *sensu stricto*, we also give selected examples of ethnic languages used in Afghanistan as secret ones. After all, there is no ethnic language in multilingual Afghanistan that cannot also be used as a secret one.

The differences in vocabulary in each of the argots here described form the basis for treating them as separate secret languages in the present work, regardless of the ethnic classification of their speakers, which is often very unclear. Variants of pronunciation were not taken into account. The names of secret languages listed in the present work come from existing publications. The source from which a name used in the text comes, and its form, are given when the name of a secret language appears for the first time in the book, and at the beginning of the chapter on the language. Sometimes there is only one version—it may have been Anglicized, for example, or found in German, Russian, or French. Where such a name does not already exist, it has been created by the author for practical reasons, applying the *per analogiam* method every time it is mentioned. The forms of names from quoted sources have been written in bracketed italics. However, we do not always have a transcript of such a form, nor are we able to quote from it with any justification. Nor do we always know whether it is the original form. These lacunae in the present work reflect the actual state of knowledge, and not neglect on the part of the author. Russian words are given in accordance with the so-called British Standard Romanization system for Russian used by Oxford University Press.

In conducting this type of research, the conclusions must remain to a degree hypothetical. Boswoth, that famous student of the argots of the mediaeval Arabic Islamic underworld, fully realized this, writing:

> However, at all points it will be well for the investigator to bear in mind the percipient warning of Enno Littmann […] that all examinations of Middle Eastern jargons stand on an extraordinarily shifting, uncertain ground, where surmise and conjecture are often the only ways to proceed, yet where such hypothesising can rarely be checked and subjected to watertight verification. Hence, I myself have, I fear, used such words and

phrases as "possibly," "probably," "it may be," "it could be," far more than I would normally like; in our present stage of defective knowledge, this is a necessary, if regrettable, caveat to many linguistic statements. (Bosworth 1976 I: xiii)

The author takes the liberty of believing that setting out a rough, partial picture is better than leaving the existing data in note form alone. The notes might never be made ready for printing, thus barring access to something that can broaden our knowledge about Afghanistan in an especially difficult subject area, and which does not deserve to be overlooked. It is important for a philologist, for instance, to complete the sociolinguistic and ethnolinguistic picture. But, as mentioned above, there are obvious benefits for other academic disciplines as well. These benefits could even be of a practical nature. This publication, therefore, and despite these caveats, may allow the reader to draw certain scientific conclusions of a more general nature.[27]

---

[27] It seems possible, for example, to compile a thesaurus of the Middle Asian argotic vocabulary known thus far.

CHAPTER ONE

ON THE DEFINITION AND NATURE
OF A SECRET LANGUAGE

Secret languages, or so-called argots, are a form of communication known almost everywhere. They are generally discussed in publications which deal with the languages of special groups. Defining the languages of special groups, and their divisions and positions with respect to social languages, has been a subject of interest for numerous researchers; it is thus impossible here to discuss all the works on this topic, or even only the most important ones. Despite this volume of enquiries, when we look more closely at the matter in question we find only chaos and an awkward lack of order. This problem was noticed by Stanisław Kania, among others, who wrestled with these issues for many years. This disorder does not only pertain to the Polish scientific literature on the subject of argots. The terminology itself is also ambiguous, and this of course increases the confusion in research findings. The Polish language does not possess standardized terminology for describing social languages. Diverse terms are used, such as *argot*, *socjolekt*, *gwary środowiskowo-zawodowe*, *slang*, *wiech*, *żargon*, and these are moreover used interchangeably. The word "żargon" in Polish is pejorative. It is often used with reference to the varieties of languages spoken by criminals. Professional terminology is described by the term "gwara." One of the proposed definitions, based on the so-called primary quality, singles out the secret variety of a language as one of the existing functional varieties. In this case, the linguistic means are subordinated first of all to the requirements of secrecy. Thus this category most often includes thieves' jargon, underclass slang, prison slang, resistance and partisan jargon, and so on (Kania 1972; Geremek 1980; Kania 1995: 7–9). Information on groups speaking a secret code can be found quite frequently in works on Eurasian nomads (Balland 1988), wandering Middle Asian theatrical groups (Rezvani 1962), and in works on Middle Asian crafts (Jasiewicz 1977, 1978, 1983; Wulff 1976). The claim that the idea of a secret language has negative connotations is not at all uncontroversial. After all, this type of encoded transfer of information is used fairly frequently by people performing positive social functions,

for instance for religious or therapeutic purposes, or among the agents of secret intelligence services.

The secret languages discussed in the present publication are found not only among professional jargons, criminal slangs, and—sporadically— youth groups, where the intention can be merely social play and fun. The role of Afghanistan's secret languages in religion or the healing arts is also mentioned here, in point of which they differ considerably in their function from the Middle Asian argots of ethnographic groups (Oranskiy 1983: 35). It bears repeating that under the right circumstances, any ethnic language can theoretically become a secret one, the prerequisite being that the speakers find themselves in an environment which does not understand the language in question. In such a situation, we encounter a language of a different nature—an ethnic one—performing the same function as a secret language considered *sensu stricto*; that is, being used to conceal information. At the same time, any argot based on a foreign ethnic language can be treated definitively as an ethnic language, albeit one that is unknown to us, even if the mere fact of its existence is the only information we possess about it.

In specialist publications, the term "argot" is very often used in a sense that encompasses secret languages. But even here we do not find the systematic criteria called for by researchers with regards the lines of demarcation between an argot and a secret language, or a description of the relationship between them. The term "argot," although often denoting a secret language, is not inherently pejorative; hence this term is generally compatible with many of the cases that will be discussed in the present work. This is an additional reason why it is used here as a synonym for a secret language. Podvalnaya writes that the Russian term *argo* (from Fr. *argot*) not only means a separate language of some limited professional or social group, but also frequently refers to a means of communication by underclass individuals which is widespread in the criminal world, e.g. the thieves' argot; meanwhile, the term "jargon," according to Podvalnaya, is connected to the age of the people speaking it (e.g. youth jargon), social rank (e.g. the jargon of nineteenth-century courtiers), interests (e.g. philatelists' jargon), profession (e.g. the jargon of computer programmers), etc. (Podvalnaya 1996: 76). Danuta Bartol discusses the broadening of the semantic range of the term "argot," which may be used to refer to all the social varieties of the standard language; an attempt to outline the history of the term "argot" can also be found in Bartol's paper (1976: 233–238), which notes that Casiani turned our attention to the fact that people from higher or lower classes living in a certain isolation from

society have always felt the need to possess a special language which is comprehensible only to the initiated.

Stanisław Grabias, in considering various points of view on this matter, stresses such features of the social varieties of language as professionalism, secrecy, and emotionalism, and he quotes, for example, Francois's opinion that all argots are secret (esoteric) languages, and that their secrecy is their fundamental characteristic. The level of secrecy among argots is not equal in each case, however, and therefore the relative incomprehensibility of information as a rule differs. There is a gradation: from a purely secret language, to one that is slightly tinged with secret vocabulary (Grabias 1974: 22–23). Authors also emphasize that the secrecy may be intended or may happen accidentally, for instance as a result of speaking a highly professional language (Ułaszyn 1915: 462–467). The extent to which those who wish to identify with a group are compelled to speak a secret language also differs (Satkiewicz 1994: 13). The boundaries between social varieties of a language, and between their geographic occurrences, are generally vague. A secret vocabulary develops as a result of a specific necessity in life (Kania 1995: 7–9). It is obvious that a significant portion of words develop in a jargon as a distortion of an existing spoken language. However, researchers are unanimous that in many cases we can only make more-or-less hypothetical assumptions in interpreting secret linguistic material and its origins (Bosworth 1976 I: XIII). Obviously, in the present discussion we are not in a position to discuss the specifics of the idiolect unique to each speaker of a given secret code. The author of this text has no doubt either that, since the dawn of history, and to a greater or lesser degree, every language has had the nature of a hologram, as Peter Høeg has excellently put it.[1]

Much thought has been given to the question of whether an argot is a constructed language. Although a certain artificiality is visible in the use of argots, strong reservations have been voiced. After all, such languages are based on the grammar of a natural language, and the term "constructed" is properly reserved for communication codes of the Esperanto type. It frequently happens that what has been artificially constructed is perceived as inferior to that which develops naturally; yet scientific terminology is also constructed, while at the same being perceived both positively and negatively (Gajda 1990: 5). Scientific language does not, however, have territorial varieties, and is more stable (Kania 1995: 10). In Soviet literature, we find, among others, the term *uslovnyy yazyk*, "a conventional language," and linguistic lexicons include entries such as: "cryptology," "cryptography," "cryptolalia,"

---

[1] "Die Sprache ist ein Hologramm" (in Høeg 1994).

"cryptogram," and "cryptotype" (Akhmanova 1969: 210). There are no such terms in Polish-language encyclopaedias or dictionaries of linguistic terminology (Gołąb et al. 1968, Polański 1999).

Undoubtedly, an argot is a social language, not an ethnic one, even though an ethnic language can be used as a secret one. The term "secret" does not refer to the form, but describes the function. As is widely known, people often change their speech, whether consciously or unconsciously, for example to speak in a more prestigious or socially acceptable way (see O'Grady 1989: 192). In the case of argots the reason for the change is different, specifically being to conceal the meaning of an utterance. The existence of argots is explained first of all by social factors, by reference to the way of life or the profession—past or present—of the people who speak them. A secret language, or argot (the terms, as mentioned above, are here used synonymously), is both a professional tool and a weapon which helps ensure security. Argotic groups are very often not indigenous, and not infrequently persecuted (Oranskiy 1983: 31–32). In the case of argots, including those spoken in Afghanistan, it is essential to use an ethnomethodological approach in attempting to understand the phenomenon and to conduct research on speakers' perspectives as regards their use of secret languages, among other things, in order to reconstruct their social realities (cf. Heller 1988: 14).

Since an argot is an underground language used to conceal the secrets of an argotic group, the process of collecting argotic material is fraught with difficulties pertaining exactly to its special character—this is something that is stressed by almost every researcher on the topic. The problems are particularly acute where researchers are faced with linguistic and cultural realities very dissimilar to their own, or where there are additional impediments to research, such as the condition of war that has prevailed for almost a quarter of a century in Afghanistan. Groups who speak secret languages are unwilling to share their linguistic knowledge with strangers, and will be utterly untouched by protestations that the material is desired for an academic publication. Giving up this kind of information would run against the most basic interests of the group that speaks such a language, especially if the language is still fulfilling its function. Revealing information may even be dangerous to an informant; and collecting data may be dangerous for a researcher. We might add that a secret language can often be perceived as threatening to a non-speaker. It frequently happens that the use of a secret code is accompanied by a certain binding system of behaviour, e.g. in criminal groups (Pałosz 1994).

As a rule, there is no possibility of field participant observation of any adequate duration; and it is impossible to arrange paid lessons in a secret