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A New Possible Etymology for the Classical Persian Particle *mar*

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Abstract: The etymology of the Classical Persian particle *mar*, which is traditionally believed to have an emphatic or restrictive sense, has long been an enigma to scholars of Iranian philology and Persian linguistics, esp. because there is no trace of it in the extant Middle Persian texts. Different etymologies have so far been proposed for *mar*, but it is often compared with the Early Judaeo-Persian preposition *azmar (i)* "for" and therefore believed to have originated from the word *mar* "number; account". The present paper reviews all previous studies and attempts to provide a new possible etymology, according to which *mar* is a focus marker derived through a grammaticalization process from the Bactrian word *μαρο [mar]* "here".

Keywords: Bactrian, Classical Persian, etymology, focus marker, grammaticalization

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Introduction

According to Persian dictionaries and grammars, the Classical Persian particle *mar* serves to emphasize the subject, and is also used before the accusative (Jones 1771: 19), dative or genitive either pleonastically or in a restrictive sense (e.g., Steingass 1892: 1205; Platts 1894: 52; Phillott 1919: 57, 322; see also Darmesteter 1883: I/132, footnote 1; Horn 1898: 109-110; Gray 1937: 305; Lazard 1963: 382, 449-450). Enju Širāzi in his *Farhang-e Jahāngiri*, which he composed in India at the beginning of the 17th century, considers *mar* a pleonastic word (*az kalamāt-e zāyede*) used for the beauty of speech (*az barāye hosn-e kalām*), which sometimes conveys a restrictive meaning (*efāde-ye maʾni-ye hasr niz konad*) (ed. Afifi: I/1146). The same is repeated in the Persian dictionary *Borhān-e Qāteʿ* compiled by Moḥammad-Ḥosayn b. Ḵalaf Tabrizi in India in the middle of the 17th century (ed. Moʾin:

IV/1979). The compiler of the *Farhang-e Nezām*, the first Persian etymological dictionary, considered *mar* a pleonastic (*zāyed*) word used for decoration (*zinat*) and emphasis (*taʾkid*) (Dāʿī al-ʾIslām 1939: V/95). Similar definitions are given in other Persian dictionaries and grammars to the present day (e.g., Eṣfahāni 1872: 29; Eṣfahāni 1890: 26; Homāyunfarroḵ 1960: 1048; Maškur 1961: 190; Šafiʿi 1964: 53; Nafisi 1976: V/3235-3236; Ḵatib-e Rahbar 1988: 374; Faršidvard 2003: 451).

The origin and etymology of the particle *mar* have long been a matter of controversy. An important point which needs clarification is that there is no trace of this particle in the extant Middle Persian texts, as rightly stated by Salemann (1895: 285) and Bahār (1976: I/401). Therefore, Ṣāḥebi's (2018: 21) attempt to detect the particle *mar* in the following passage from the *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag* (Chapter 1.12-13) should be rejected. The Middle Persian word *mar* in this passage simply means "account" and has nothing to do with the particle *mar*.

> *ud pas moγ-mardān ud dastwarān ī dēn any būd hēnd,* ***az ān mar*** *andōhōmand ud purr-pīm būd hēnd*
> "Thereafter, there were other magi and religious leaders (who) were sorrowful and full of pain **on that account**" (cf. Vahman 1986: 191; Agostini 2014: 59)

As shown above, the particle *mar* has long been confused with its homonym *mar* "number; account". For example, Rückert (1854: 262) equated the particle *mar* with the Sanskrit word *mā́trā* "measure". Morgenstierne (1929: 53) proposed the probability of a connection between the particle *mar* and the Avestan root *mar* "to remember" (from the Old Iranian root **hmar* "to remember; to count", from the Indo-European root **smer* "to remember"; Cheung 2007: 137). Gray (1937: 305) tried to connect the particle *mar* with such Greek words as *μέρος* "share, portion" and *μόρος* "fate, destiny" (from the Indo-European root **smer*, Beekes 2010: II/922, 933). He then suggested that the primary meaning of the particle *mar* was "portion"; "that it was used first with the dative, and was later extended to the accusative; and that finally, coming to be felt as a mere intensive particle, it was employed even with the nominative of demonstrative pronouns as an 'empty' word" (Gray 1937: 306). Similarly, Benveniste (1938: 460) saw in the particle *mar* a specialized and quasi-prepositional function of the word *mar* "account"[1]. Gray's and Benveniste's proposals seem plausible at first sight, especially when compared with Middle Persian *az bahr ī*, Classical Persian *az bahr i* "for" (from *bahr* "portion"), and Early Judaeo-Persian *azmar (i)* "for" (from *mar* "account").

The Early Judaeo-Persian preposition *azmar*, with or without the *eẓāfe* particle *i*, is sometimes used in the sense of "because of" (Gindin 2007:

[1] une fonction spécialisée et quasi prépositionnelle du mot *mar* "compte"

III/114). It can also mark both the indirect and the direct object (see also Paul 2013: 147, 158, 163*)*:

> *ʾ**zmr y**šmwʾl*
> "**for** Šəmuʾel" (Early Karaite Document 17; Paul 2013: 148)

> *ps rwʾ hst ky gwyy ky gnd bwd ʾ**zmr** ʾn zhwmt ʾw*
> "So you may say that it was stinking **because of** its stench" (Commentary to the Book of Ezekiel 134.15; Gindin 2007: III/114)

> (*n)[ʾm](ʾ) ... ʾ**zmr**t nbyštwm*
> "I wrote (**for**) you a letter" (Private Letter 5.9; Paul 2013: 163)

> *wby hly ʾ**zmr**š pʾ dš[t]*
> "and you abandon it in a plain" (Early Argument B 13; MacKenzie 1968: 256)

Furthermore, Early Judaeo-Persian *azmar* may be complemented by the postposition *rā* to form a circumposition marking both the indirect and the direct object (cf. Shaked 2003: 210; Lazard 2009: 172):

> *ʾ**zmr** mn šmwʾl **r**ʾ*
> "**for** me, Šəmuʾel" (Early Karaite Document 4; Paul 2013: 150)

> *ʾ**zmr** ʾyn mrdwmʾn **r**ʾ nbyʾ hmy gwydšʾn*
> "**to** these people, the prophet tells them" (Commentary to the Book of Ezekiel 184.5; Gindin 2007: III/113)

> *by dʾdwm ʾ**zmr** kwn ʾw**r**ʾ*
> "I gave his blood" (Commentary to the Book of Ezekiel 132.38-133.1; Gindin 2007: III/114)

Gignoux (2010: 24) regards *az mar ī* in Middle Persian legal documents as the equivalent of Early Judaeo-Persian compound preposition *azmar (i)* "for". However, Macuch (2008: 266) has convincingly shown that *az mar ī* in Middle Persian legal documents is not a compound preposition but, rather, it simply means "from the account of, from the share of":

> ***az mar ī** man*
> "**from** my **account/share**" (Berkeley, Document 139.8; cf. Gignoux 2010: 34)

> ***az mar ī** mādar ī Farroxzād*
> "**from the account/share of** Farroxzād's mother" (Berlin, Document 19.4-5; Weber 2008: 83)

Middle Persian *az bahr ī*, Classical Persian *az bahr i*, and Early Judaeo-Persian *azmar (i)* "for" are all necessary parts of the sentence and, therefore, cannot be omitted; whereas the Classical Persian particle *mar* can always be taken out of any sentence without making it ungrammatical. That is why Lazard (1963: 451) believes that *mar* does not have any function in the structure of the sentence; rather, it seems that it highlights the word it precedes.

As a matter of fact, Horn (1893: 217) was right when he doubted the etymological connection between the particle *mar* and its homonym *mar* "number; account". Nevertheless, this hypothetical connection or the connection between the particle *mar* and the Early Judaeo-Persian preposition *azmar (i)* "for" (from *mar* "account") is still being repeated in academic books and papers (e.g., Bossong 1985: 59; Moʾayyedi and Loṭfi 2013: 111; Ṣāḥebi 2018: 22; Parizāde 2020: 237-238). Worse than that is Bahār's (1976: I/401) attempt to trace the particle *mar* back to a mark of respect and reverence, similar to the word *mār* "Lord" in Syriac Christianity!

Before discussing my own proposal as to the etymology of the particle *mar*, let us have a look at some typical examples of the use of this particle in Classical Persian texts. As it can be seen in the following examples, *mar* is used before the subject (1), the direct object with the postposition *rā* (2, 3), the direct object without the postposition *rā* (4, 5, 6), and the indirect object (i.e., the dative) with the postposition *rā* (7, 8, 9). It can also appear before a word in the genitive case with the postposition *rā* (10, 11, 12), a word in the genitive case without the postposition *rā* (13), or any other word followed by the postposition *rā* in its original meaning, i.e., "for, for the sake of, because of" (14):

(1)

پس **مر آن جفت ابداعی** صورت ابداعی بوده است

*pas **mar ān juft-i ibdāʾī** sūrat-i ibdāʾī būda ast*

"Therefore, **that innovative couple** has been an innovative form" (*Jāmiʿ al-Ḥikmatayn*, ed. Corbin and Moʿin 1953: 83)

(2)

خدای عزّ و جلّ **مر آدم را** از آن گل بیافرید

*xudāy ʾazza va jalla **mar ādam rā** az ān gil biyāfarīd*

"God – may He be honoured and glorified – created **Adam** from that clay" (*Tarjome-ye Tafsir-e Ṭabari*, ed. Yaġmāʾi 1977: II/317)

(3)

به زلیفن کردن فرستیدیم **مر ترا مر ناگرویدگان را** به دوژخ

*bi zalīfan kardan firistīdīm **mar tu rā mar nāgiravīdagān rā** ba dūžax*

"We sent **you** to warn **the unbelievers** to Hell" (*Tafsir-e Qorʾān-e Pāk*, ed. Minovi 1969: 85)

(4)

جاحظ **مر این خبر** به بعضی از کتبهای خود یاد کند

*jāhiz **mar ēn xabar** bi baʾzī az kutubhā-yi xʷad yād kunad*

"Jāḥiẓ has mentioned **this report** in some of his books" (*Tārīḵnāme-ye Ṭabari*, ed. Rowšan 2001: IV/1098)

(5)

مر اندامش ایزد یکایک ستود

***mar andām-š** ēzad yakāyak sutūd*

"God extolled **his limbs** one by one" (*Garšāsb-Nāma*, ed. Yaġmāʾi 1938: 2)

(6)

مردی باشد بر ستوران تا **مر ایشان** از ددکان و درّندگان نگاه دارد

*mard-ē bāšad bar sutōrān tā **mar ēšān** az dadakān u darrandagān nigāh dārad*

"There is a man over the cattle to protect **them** from wild animals and predators" (*Vajh-e Din*, ed. Erāni 1924: 10)

(7)

بگوی یا محمد **مر جهودان را و ترسان را**

*bigōy yā Muhammad **mar juhūdān rā u tarsāʾān rā***

"Say, O Mohammad, **to the Jews and the Christians**" (*Tafsir-e Qorʾān-e Pāk*, ed. Minovi 1969: 104)

(8)

ساقیا **مر مرا** از آن می ده

*sāqiyā **mar ma-rā** az ān may dah*

"O wine-pourer! Give **me** from that wine!" (Abū Šakūr, in: Lazard 1982: II/80)

(9)

نزدیک آرند بهشت **مر پرهیزگاران را**

*nazdīk ārand bahišt **mar parhēzgārān rā***

"They will bring Paradise nigh **for the righteous**" (*Tarjome-ye Qorʾān-e Muze-ye Pārs*, ed. Ravāqi 1976: 96)

(10)

سبب بیرونی **مر گرمی را** سه گونه بود

*sabab-i bērōnī **mar garmī rā** si gōna buvad*

"The external causes **of heat** are of three types" (*Ṭabiʿiyyāt-e Dānešnāme-ye ʿAlāʾi*, ed. Meškāt 1952: 26)

(11)

ما **مر [این] دین را** مخالف نباشیم

*mā **mar [ēn] dēn rā** muxālif nabāšēm*

"We are not the opponents **of this religion**" (*Tāriḵ-e Balʿami*, ed. Bahār 1974: I/312)

(12)

ز ریگ ار فزون **مر شما را شمار**

*zi rēg ar fuzōn **mar šumā rā šumār***

"[even] if **your number** is more than the sand" (*Garšāsb-Nāma*, ed. Yaġmāʾi 1938: 88)

(13)

فلک محیط سطح **مر وی**

*falak-i muhīt-i sath-i **mar vay***

"The firmament surrounding **its** surface" (*Ḵān al-ʾIḵwān*, ed. Qavim 1959: 126)

(14)

من این کتاب **مر آنرا** ساختم که صقّال دلها بود

*man ēn kitāb **mar ān rā** sāxtam ki saqqāl-i dilhā buvad*

"I composed this book **for that [reason]** that it be a polisher of hearts" (*Kašf al-Maḥjūb*, ed. Žukovskij 1926: 5-6)

It is important to know that the particle *mar* is found abundantly in all Classical Persian texts from Transoxiana and the northeastern part of present-day Afghanistan, particularly in the works of Avicenna and Nāṣir-i Ḵusraw. It is much less attested in texts written in present-day Iran and the southern and western parts of present-day Afghanistan. Therefore, it seems proper to believe that *mar* had originally been a dialect peculiarity (cf. Lazard 1963: 382-383; Nātel-e Ḵānlari 1986: III/390; Maggi and Orsatti 2018: 41).

The particle *mar* is attested in some of the Judaeo-Persian translations of the Bible, e.g., in a manuscript preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale de France:

*wplyd krdyd **mr zmyn mn***
"and you defiled **my land**" (Jeremiah 2.7; Lagarde 1884: 64)

It is also attested in an Early New Persian manuscript in Syriac script discovered in Turfan. This manuscript is particularly valuable for the vocalization of the Persian words:

bzwᵘrg kwᵘnᵃδ xwδʾh ***mr drwyᵉšāʾn rāʾ***
"The Lord makes great **the poor**" (folio II, recto 3-4; Sims-Williams 2011: 357)

The particle *mar* might have also been used in the fragmented Early New Persian versification of the tale of *Bilawhar wa Būdīsaf* (Barlaam and Josaphat) in Manichaean script discovered in Turfan:

gw(f)[tyy] ***m[r mrʾ]***
"you said **to me**" (folio A, recto 2; Henning 1962: 94)

In addition to Early New Persian, the particle *mar* is attested once in a Sogdian text written in the city of Xumdān (i.e., 西安: Xī'ān) in China. Here *mar* seems to emphasize the following adverb:

rty ʾnyh tmyh ***mr zʾry*** *mrčh šw kʾmt rty Lʾ βyrt*
"And in another hell he yearns **pitifully** for his death, and does not get it" (folio XX, verso 1085-1086; Benveniste 1940: 51; cf. Gharib 1995: 215)

As it was said above, there is no trace of the Classical Persian particle *mar* in the extant Middle Persian texts, a fact that strengthens the probability of its being borrowed from a neighbouring language. Since the particle *mar* is abundant in all Classical Persian texts from Transoxiana and the northeastern part of present-day Afghanistan, the most appropriate candidate would be the Bactrian language, an Eastern Middle Iranian language spoken from about the 1st to the 9th century AD in a wide area in and around ancient Bactria in northern Afghanistan. The Bactrian language is the only Iranian language whose writing system is based on the Greek alphabet. It was one of the least-known Iranian languages until 1990's, when the unexpected discovery of a wealth of manuscripts in Afghanistan contributed significantly to our knowledge of this language. These manuscripts, written on leather, cloth, and even on wooden sticks, consist of legal documents, economic documents, letters, and Buddhist texts.

In my opinion, the Classical Persian particle *mar* is a focus marker[2] (cf. Lenepveu-Hotz 2018: 94-97) which ultimately goes back to the Bactrian locative adverb *μαρο [mar]*[3] "here", a well-attested word in Bactrian documents:

[2] Focus is an attention-getting mechanism which in spoken language is recognizable by, for example, putting stress on a word. It is, therefore, "dependent upon discourse structure but does not make up part of the structure itself" (Radetzky 2002: 103).

[3] In the Bactrian documents written in the Greek alphabet, virtually every word ends with a vowel letter, usually *-o* (Sims-Williams 2000: 24; Sims-Williams 2007: 40).

οτο αζο ***μαρο*** *λρογημο*
"and I am healthy **here**" (document bh 7; Sims-Williams 2007: 67)

αγαδο ***μαρο*** *ασο το χοηο πωστογο*
"a letter came **here** from your lordship" (document cd 3-4; Sims-Williams 2007: 75)

ταδο αβο χοβανανο ***μαρο*** *πισοαμαγο φοϸτιιο*
"then send the shepherds **here** into my presence" (document ba 13; Sims-Williams 2007: 53)

οτανο ***μαρο*** *αβο ρωβο αγαδινδηιο*
"and they have come **here** to (the city of) Rōb" (document cl 5; Sims-Williams 2007: 89)

Bactrian *μαρο [mar]* "here" goes back to Old Iranian **imaθra*[4], a combination of **ima* "this" and the suffix **-θra* which made locative adverbs[5]. The development of the Bactrian locative adverb *μαρο [mar]* into the Classical Persian focus marker *mar* can be easily compared with and explained by similar grammaticalization developments in other languages. The use of locative adverb as demonstrative, proximal or distal, is a well-known grammaticalization development attested in a number of languages from different language families (e.g., French, Hausa, Lingala, Ngbaka, Buang; see Heine and Kuteva 2002: 172-173, 294-295). On the other hand, the development from demonstrative to such grammatical items as definite article and focus marker is a common process in world languages (see, e.g., Diessel 1999: 155; Heine and Kuteva 2002: 109-112). It cannot, of course, be determined when exactly the development from locative adverb (*mar* "here") to proximal demonstrative (*mar* "this") and then to focus marker occurred in Classical Persian.

This final *-ο*, at least in some instances, has no phonetic value (Sims-Williams 1989: 348).

[4] For the phonological development of **θr* to *r*, the loss of initial **i-*, and the loss of final **-a* in Bactrian, see Gholami 2014: 52, 58, 61.

[5] Cf. the Sanskrit suffix *-tra* and the Avestan suffix *-θra* with the same function (Whitney 1879: 358; Jackson 1892: I/201). Old Iranian **imaθra* is also reflected in Khotanese *mara* "here" (Bailey 1979: 324; Sims-Williams 2000: 203; Sims-Williams 2007: 231) and Sogdian *mrδ [marθ]* (Gershevitch 1954: 67; Gharib 1995: 216). Bactrian *μαρο [mar]* "here" from Old Iranian **imaθra* is comparable with Bactrian *μαλο [mal]* "here" from Old Iranian **imada* (Sims-Williams 2000: 202; Sims-Williams 2007: 230; Gholami 2014: 58), the latter Old Iranian form is also reflected in Sogdian *[maδ]*, written in a variety of forms: *ʾmδ*, *ʾmδʾ*, *mδ*, *mδh*, *mδy*, *mdy*, *mδyy* (Gharib 1995: 34, 210, 211). There is no clear distinction between the function of *μαρο* and *μαλο* in Bactrian (Gholami 2014: 160).

It seems that the Parāchi preposition *ma*, like the Classical Persian focus marker *mar*, has developed similarly, but independently, from the Bactrian locative adverb *μαρο [mar]*. The Parāchi preposition *ma* is not only used in a local and temporal sense, but is also used before the specific direct object and the dative with "to give" and "to say": ***ma*** *dur* "**at** the river"; ***ma*** *dōwās* "**at** 12 o'clock", ***ma bālō*** *dhōṛ-um* "I saw **the boy**", ***ma puš-ē*** *ǰaṛī* "he said **to his son**" (cf. Morgenstierne 1929: 52; Morgenstierne 1985: 524; Efimov 1999b: 263; Kieffer 2009: 699). A similar grammaticalization development is seen in the Logar dialect of the Ormuṛi language, where the specific direct object is sometimes preceded by *ku*: *towa* ***ku-tsimi-m*** *roxšawok* "The sun blinded **my eyes**", ***ku kitāb*** *bu awīm* "I am reading **the book**" (Efimov 2011: 127; cf. Morgenstierne 1929: 343; Efimov 1999a: 284). This *ku*, like the Sogdian preposition *(ə)kū*[6] "to, towards", ultimately goes back to the Old Iranian locative adverb **ku* "where"[7] (see also Sims-Williams 1986: 118; Yoshida 2009: 293).

In conclusion, the Classical Persian particle *mar* is an optional focus marker which highlights the word it precedes. It ultimately goes back to the Bactrian locative adverb *μαρο [mar]* "here" which, as a result of grammaticalization, developed into a demonstrative and then a focus marker. Therefore, it has no etymological connection with its homonym *mar* "number; account", nor with the Early Judaeo-Persian preposition *azmar (i)* "for". Grammaticalization of locative adverbs is a common process in world languages. It can also be seen in the two Iranian languages of Parāchi and Ormuṛi, where a locative adverb has developed into a marker of the specific direct object. In Classical Persian the function of marking the specific direct object was already assigned to the postposition *rā*[8]; therefore, the Bactrian locative adverb *μαρο [mar]* which appeared as a loanword in the Persian dialects of Transoxiana and the northeastern part of present-day Afghanistan, assumed the function of a focus marker.

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[6] Variously spelt as *ʾkʾw, ʾkw, kʾw, kw, kww, qw* (Gharib 1995: 31, 33, 187, 199, 202).

[7] Cf. Old Avestan *kū* "where?", *kudā* "whither?", *kuθrā* "where?", Young Avestan *kuua* "where?", *kuθra* "where?", *kudaţ* "wherefrom?" (see also Sanskrit *ku-* in Mayrhofer 1956: I/217).

[8] From Middle Persian *rāy* (MacKenzie 1986: 71), from Old Persian *rādiy/rādī* "for the sake of" (Kent 1953: 205; Schmitt 2014: 236).

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