E - ISSN: 2953-8203
P - ISSN: 2953-819X

YEREVAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

JOURNAL OF

IRANIAN LINGUISTICS

Volume 2 - Issue 2 - 2025

JOURNAL OF IRANIAN LINGUISTICS

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Vardan Voskanian, Yerevan State University, Armenia

Volume 2 | issue 2

YEREVAN STATE UNIVERSITY PUBLISHING HOUSE

ASSOCCIATE EDITORS

Hakob Avchyan, Yerevan State University, Armenia
Artyom Tonoyan, Yerevan State University, Armenia

EDITORIAL BOARD

Chiara Barbati, University of Pisa, Italy
Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany
Jila Ghomeshi, University of Manitoba, Canada
Geoffrey Haig, University of Bamberg, Germany
Arsalan Kahnemuyipour, University of Toronto Mississauga, Canada
Simin Karimi, University of Arizona, USA
Paola Orsatti, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy
Ludwig Paul, Hamburg University, Germany
Mohammad Rasekh-Mahand, Bu-Ali Sina University, Iran
Hassan Rezai Baghbidi, Osaka University, Japan
Pollet Samvelian, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, France
Jaffer Sheyholislami, Carleton University, Canada

E - ISSN: 2953-8203
P - ISSN: 2953-819X

JOURNAL OF IRANIAN LINGUISTICS
VOLUME 2 | ISSUE 2

CONTENT

VARDAN VOSKANIAN

Foreword **4-5**

SHUAN OSMAN KARIM

Contact across the Iranian World: curious convergences between Kurdish and Balochi **6-41**

MUHAMMED OURANG, KHALSA AL-AGHBARI

Reduplication in Lāri and Jibbāli: A Structural and Semantic Study **42-65**

MORTAZA TAHERI-ARDALI, MANSOUR BOZORGMEHR, ERIK ANONBY

Mapping the Languages of Kohgiluyeh and Boyer Ahmad Province, Iran: Is This Region Uniformly Lori Speaking? **66-86**

VAHIDE TAJALLI, MEHRNOUSH SHAMSFARD, YALDA YARANDI, MAHTAB SARLAK, AREZOO HAGHBIN

The Nonverbal Element in Persian Verbal Multiword Expressions: A Corpus Annotation Approach **87-107**

MAJID TAME

An Examination of Two Proverbs in Khotanese and Their Equivalents in Certain New Western Iranian Languages **108-116**

YEREVAN STATE UNIVERSITY PUBLISHING HOUSE

JIL 2/2 (2025): 108-116

Journal of Iranian Linguistics

An Examination of Two Proverbs in Khotanese and Their Equivalents in Certain New Western Iranian Languages

Majid Tame

The Acadmey of Persian Language and Literature

doi.org/ 10.46991/jil/2025.02.05

Abstract: Khotanese is a Middle Eastern Iranian language that was spoken in Khotan, located in the Xinjiang area of Turkestan, China, until the late 10th and early 11th centuries AD. The remaining Khotanese documents primarily consist of translations of Buddhist Sanskrit literature. One of the most significant poetic compositions in the Khotanese language is known as the *Book of Zambasta*. Unlike numerous other Khotanese texts that serve as translations of Buddhist literature, this particular work stands alone as an independent composition, although it is inspired by Buddhist texts. In this book, while explaining and interpreting religious teachings, references to stories and proverbs are occasionally made, the equivalents of which can be found in other languages, including Indian and Iranian languages. In the second chapter of the *Book of Zambasta*, two sentences address the themes of futile effort and exertion, which should be considered a type of proverb or maxim. In certain New Western Iranian languages, two proverbs akin to these Khotanese expressions remain prevalent, albeit with variations in vocabulary or usage. In this concise article, I will refer to these two proverbs in Khotanese along with their equivalents in certain New Western Iranian languages.

Keywords: Khotanese; Zambasta; proverb; Iranian languages

Majid Tame
E-mail: majidtameh@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1049-6607
Received: 30.08.2025
Revised: 14.11.2025
Accepted: 30.11.2025

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

© Majid Tame, 2025

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Funding

This research did not receive any financial support

1. Introduction

Khotanese is classified as a Saka dialect and is regarded as a Middle Eastern Iranian language. Consequently, it shares a closer relationship with Middle and New Eastern Iranian languages rather than with Middle and New Western Iranian languages. The literary compositions in this language were primarily sourced from the Khotan of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region, located in Turkestan, China. Determining the exact period when the Khotanese Sakas settled in this region is challenging; nevertheless, it appears that the Khotanese language has been prevalent in this area since the third century AD (Emmerick 2009: 337). With the emergence and prevalence of the Muslim Turks in this region around the beginning of the 11th century, this language ceased to exist, and from this moment onward, there are no surviving remnants of this language (Ibid, 411). The corpus of texts that remain in Khotanese is considerably more extensive than that of numerous other Middle Iranian languages, with most of these texts being published by Bailey in a collection entitled 'Khotanese Texts'. Indeed, reliable and accurate translations are not available for all of these texts, and only a portion of them have been accurately edited and translated. Generally, these texts are categorized into two primary groups based on language: old and late, and into two principal groups based on style and method: literary and non-literary. The bulk of literary compositions are centered around the teachings of Buddha and the principles of the Mahayana school. Non-religious literary works cover a diverse array of topics. (Emmerick 1992: 4; Maggi 2009: 333, 404).

The *Book of Zambasta* represents the longest extant text in the Khotanese language. This literary piece is composed in Old Khotanese and consists of 24 chapters, some of which are incomplete, while one chapter has been completely lost. The probable timeframe for the composition of this book is approximately the mid-5th century AD. In contrast to other religious writings that serve as translations of Buddhist scriptures, this book is an original composition in Khotanese, composed with reference to Buddhist texts. This book serves as the primary reference for the meter used in Khotanese poetry. The manuscript of this document lacks a title; Bailey designated it as the *Book of Zambasta* because it references an individual named Zambasta, a Khotanese official, for whom the book was composed at his request (Emmerick 1990: 362; Maggi 2009: 348-350; Maggi and Martini 2014: 140-141, 157; Sims-Williams 2025: 15).

In both literary and educational writings, a prevalent approach to instructing and clarifying the content includes the use of similes and proverbs. Consequently, the use of similes and proverbs can be regarded as a defining feature of educational literature. In the field of rhetoric, an allegory

is regarded as an image or metaphor that conveys a message from the speaker, although the underlying intention may vary (Poornamdariyan 1988: 116). Furthermore, some allegories can communicate a tale, narrative, or proverb that holds a deeper significance hidden beneath its apparent meaning. The intent of recounting it is, in fact, to convey this this hidden meaning within the allegory (Shamisa 2002: 232). Allegory encompasses a wide range of interpretations and can include simile, metaphor, parable, proverb, and fable. Fundamentally, the main aim of allegory is to communicate an abstract and important idea or problem through a tangible and clear representation (Vafayi and Aqababayi 2013: 34). With respect to form and structure, parables can be classified into two categories: short and long. A short parable is generally expressed as a sentence, a verse, or a stanza, while a long parable is delivered in the form of a story or anecdote. In a short parable, the main topic or mental concept is first presented, succeeded by an objective and sensory depiction in the following sentence or verse, usually presented as a proverb (Mortezayi 2012: 34).

Proverbs, maxims, and idioms that are common across various cultures and nations play a crucial role in their language and literature, embodying the spiritual and moral traits, thoughts, ideas, customs, and practices of those cultures or nations. These proverbs have been developed and shared among various ethnic groups for millennia, gaining distinctive characteristics shaped by the ethnic and cultural features, customs, traditions, religions, and even the geographical and political contexts of each nation. Proverbs are generally concise expressions, but they successfully convey the intended meaning of the statement. A proverb can be generally described as follows: It is a brief, sometimes, poetic expression that incorporates a simile and imparts wisdom, having become well-known among the general public because of the fluidity of its wording, the lucidity of its message, and the gracefulness of its form. People often incorporate it into their conversations without any alterations (Zulfaqari 2007: 4). The main purpose of proverbs is to express intricate ideas in a concise and clear manner, as their straightforwardness and brevity enable them to summarize concepts that would otherwise require elaborate reasoning and justification for the audience to understand. Moreover, many proverbs trace their origins back to ancient times, thereby demonstrating the cultural continuity of a nation across its historical timeline. This continuity can be evidenced by proverbs and parables present in ancient texts that are still utilized in contemporary discourse.

Proverbs represent, on one hand, the distinct ideas and historical experiences of a specific people or nation, while on the other hand, they can emerge from the shared experiences of human societies. As a result, we

sometimes notice similar proverbs in different cultures. The proverbs that are comparable among different nations ought not to be regarded merely as adaptations; instead, they signify a type of unintentional coincidence. This indicates that they represent the shared experiences and concepts of various ethnic communities from distinct regions, which have been documented and communicated through language. In any event, sharing linguistic and cultural foundations may result in resemblances among the proverbs of groups that are part of the same language families. In this regard, we may refer to common origins or sources for these proverbs.

2. Discussion and review

In the *Book of Zambasta*, which was composed to explain the teachings of the Mahayana Buddhist sect, long parables are generally not presented as elaborate narratives or anecdotes. Rather, It is more common to employ short parables to clarify and explain Buddhist teachings. Instances of the short parables included in this book, which have been cited by scholars, include: "The Parable of the Elephant and the Dark House …" (Leumann 1933-1936: 24; Mirfakhrai 2005), and "This World Is a Mountain, and Our Actions the Shout" (Mirfakhrai 2007). The second chapter of the *Book of Zambasta* narrates the tale of a sorcerer named Bhadra, who attempts to deceive and surpass the Buddha through the use of magic; however, he ultimately fails and subsequently becomes a disciple of the Buddha. This chapter presents two statements about futile efforts that may be considered proverbs. The equivalents of these proverbs, though with slight differences, remain prevalent in certain New Western Iranian languages. In stanzas 15, 16, and 17 of this chapter, there are discussions about futile efforts, with stanza 16 notably containing two statements related to these futile efforts. Below, these three stanzas are provided along with their translation, which is based on the editing and translation of Emmerick (1968: 14-15) and Sims-Williams (2025: 32-33), albeit with slight modifications.

15 ttäte nä ttandrāma vicitra vrrata ttavaścaraṇa parāha
ku samu pharu karya u stāma [ne ju ye parśtä dukhyau jsa]

There are for them various such vows (vrata-), austerities (tapaścaraṇa-), restraints (śīlā-), in which there is much effort and exertion, [and yet one does not escape from sufferings].

16 kho ye siyato hvaittä bajsīha o ūtco maṃthäte kīśśa
kari ju vara rrūṇä ni byo[dä] [……..]

Just as when one pounds sand in a maortar or swirls water in a vessel, there is no oil (= butter) there at all …

17 ttrāmä ṣätä kūri parāhä biśśä karya stāma ttuśśīma cu ye ttarandari dukha tīndä [.....]

So this restraint is false when one makes sufferings for the body. All effort, exertion is empty …

The evidence provided above demonstrates that the Khotanese text utilizes two sentences to elucidate the concept of futile effort and exertion: *siyato hvaittä bajsīha* 'one who pounds sand in a mortar' and *ūtco maṃthäte kīśśa … rrūṇä ni byodä* 'one who swirls water in a vessel [to obtain butter], there is no oil (= butter)'. Considering the evidence of common proverbs in certain New Western Iranian languages that are similar to these two Khotanese sentences, we can view the proverbial expressions 'to pound sand in a mortar' and 'to make butter from water' as equivalents to these two Khotanese sentences.

As mentioned earlier, the *Book of Zambasta* is an independent literary work composed in the Khotanese language. Nevertheless, Sanskrit Buddhist literature was considered during its composition. Therefore, it is not unexpected that this Khotanese work includes proverbs and similes that are commonly found in Sanskrit. The proverbs referenced in stanza sixteen of the second chapter of the *Book of Zambasta* also have equivalents in Sanskrit. The proverb 'to make butter from water' is similarly present in Sanskrit as *jalamanthana*, which means 'churning the water'. It is acknowledged as *Jalamanthana-nyāya*, and this maxim can be translated broadly as 'churning the water does not yield butter'. Sims-Williams (2025: 57) proposes that the proverb 'to pound sand in a mortar' is similar to the Sanskrit maxim *sikatātaila-nyāya*, which means 'one cannot pound sand and get (sesame) oil'. Regardless of our viewpoint regarding the origins of these Khotanese proverbs, whether they stem from Sanskrit literature or not, the evidence found in certain New Western Iranian languages suggests that these concepts were indeed present among Iranian peoples. Therefore, it should not be presumed that they are simply adaptations from Indian culture.

3. Equivalents of Khotanese proverbs in certain New Western Iranian languages

As previously stated, both of the aforementioned Khotanese proverbs serve to convey the notion of futile exertion and effort. In Persian, however, the first proverb, 'to pound sand in a mortar', is used with a slight change to express the same notion of futile action and effort, taking the form of *âb dar hâvan kubidan* 'to pound water in a mortar'. It is important to note that, alongside

the expression *âb dar hâvan kubidan*, there are other phrases frequently used in Persian to express the idea of futile actions and efforts. These include *âb be rismân bastan* 'to tie water with a cord', and *âb be kolux bastan* 'to stop water with a lump of earth'. However, *âb dar hâvan kubidan* remains the most well-known proverb that expresses the concept of futile action and effort.[1] However, the second proverb, 'to make butter from water', has largely altered its usage in Persian. It is now utilized not to express the futility of effort or action, but rather to characterize a frugal and skilled individual who aims to gain from even the most minor things. Generally, this proverb refers to individuals who attain benefits and advantages in any circumstance through their intelligence and expertise. The following expressions serve as proof of the aforementioned two proverbs in Persian, as well as in several other New Western Iranian languages.

A) Equivalents of the proverb 'to pound sand in a mortar' in New Western Iranian languages

Persian: *âb dar hâvan kubidan* / *âb be hâvan kuftan* 'to pound water in a mortar', *âb dar hâvan sâyidan* 'to grind water in a mortar' (Azimi 2003: 3, 4).

Davâni: *ongori ow-i ke a-tu hovang hukoyen* 'As though water is pounded in a mortar' (Salami 1402: 403).

Qâ'eni: *ow hɛtu hava va mekuyɛde* 'One is pounding water in a mortar' (Meqdari 2012: 42).

Abuzeydâbâdi: *ow da rū yone-y-ä əkəri ho-w-äpəši* 'One pours water into the mortar and pounds (it)' (Razzaqi 2014: 124).

Gazi: *ow-â guye ru yâne de sef(t) keru* 'One wants to thicken water in the mortar' (Yazdani Gezi 2014: 19). The interpretation of this proverb

[1] It is important to highlight that within the folk literature of certain areas in Iran, a fabulous tale has been developed regarding 'to pound water in a mortar'. However, the meaning of this tale is not related to futile effort and exertion; rather, it aims to convey the psychological impact of negative inculcation on individuals. It is said that Plato and Aristotle had differing views on the purpose and effect of poisons, particularly the most lethal ones, leading each of them to attempt the formulation of a fatal poison. Plato formulated a lethal poison utilizing various substances, whereas Aristotle counteracted the effects of the poison by drinking milk and applying honey to his skin. Aristotle, without employing any particular substance, merely pounded water in a mortar for an extended period while feigning the making of poison. Conversely, Plato, who was unaware of the contents of the mortar, was perpetually anxious and fell ill after drinking the water that had been pounded in the mortar. Consequently, Aristotle proved that the effects of negative inculcation are significantly more perilous than any lethal poison (Beghaee 2002: 89; Darvishiyan and Khandan 2001: 445-446).

suggests that by pounding and stirring water in a mortar, it is impossible to produce a solid item.

Kermani: *âb tu juɢan kuftən* 'to pound water in a mortar' (Baghaee 2002: 89)

B) Equivalents of the proverb 'to make butter from water' in New Western Iranian languages

Persian: *az âb kare gereftan* 'to make butter from water'. Besides this idiomatic expression, another version of this proverb, *az âb roɢan gereftan* 'to make oil from water', is also prevalent in Persian. (Azimi 2003: 42). It is important to highlight that in the latter version of this Persian proverb, similar to Khotanese, the term 'oil' is used in place of 'butter'.

Targhi: *ov de kara a-gera* 'One makes butter from water' (Mohammadhosseini Targhi et al. 2023: 41).

Qâ'eni: *ɛz oʊ mɛskɛ megirɛde* 'One makes cream from water' (Meqdari 2012: 15).

4. Conclusion

Nevertheless, from an etymological standpoint, there are notable connections between Khotanese and Western Iranian languages regarding vocabulary, due to the conversion of the Khotan Sakas to Buddhism, there exists a reduced number of cultural themes in their remaining written works that are analogous and prevalent in the literature of Western Iranian languages. However, through a meticulous analysis and contemplation of the existing Khotanese texts, it is possible to discern common cultural and literary features. Within the current corpus of Khotanese literature, there are cultural and literary examples that are still employed by speakers of Iranian languages. This includes the allegories and proverbs present in Khotanese literature, which are still used in their original form or with modifications in New Iranian languages. The Khotanese proverb 'to pound sand in a mortar' and the Persian proverb 'to pound water in a mortar' both express the concept of a futile effort. Likewise, the Khotanese proverb 'to make butter from water' illustrates a futile exertion, while the Persian proverb *az âb kare gereftan* signifies cleverness and the ability to gain advantage from any situation. In the first proverb, the idea and significance of the Khotanese and Persian instances are identical, with the sole difference being the words 'sand' and 'water'. In the second proverb, although there is no significant difference in the meaning, the usage of the two varies; one signifies the futility of effort,

whereas the other indicates cleverness and profit-making. In any event, the key aspect regarding the two proverbs examined in Khotanese and New Western Iranian languages is their common origin. This common origin may arise from a shared cultural heritage among Iranian people, or it may be influenced by Indian culture and literature. Given that cultural interactions have been present between the Iranian and Indian people since ancient times, and Buddhism has also been prevalent among Iranians, it is probable that Indian culture has had an influence. Furthermore, given the extensive interactions between the cultures of Iranian people and other groups along the Silk Road, it is probable that these two Indian proverbs were introduced into Iranian languages through the literary and cultural exchanges that were prevalent along the Silk Road. However, it remains unclear when, how, and via which intermediaries Iranian people came to adopt these proverbs originating from Indian culture. In any case, additional examination of Khotanese texts, besides enhancing our comprehension of this language, can also offer more profound insights into the cultural and literary connections between the Khotan Sakas and the literary works of those who speak Western Iranian languages.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Azimi, S. (1382/2003), *Farhang-e Bist Hezâr Maṭal va Ḥekmat va ʻeṣṭelâḥ* [*A Dictionary of Twenty Thousand Proverbs, Wisdom, and Idioms*], Tehran: Moʼasse-ye Moṭâleʻât ʻeslâmi-ye Dânešgâh-e Tehran. In Persian.

Baghaee, N. (1381/2002), *Amṯâl-e Farsi dar Guyeš-e Kermân* [*Persian Proverbs in Dialect of Kerman*], second edition, Kerman: Kermanology Center. In Persian.

Darvishiyan, A.A. and Khandan, R. (1380/2001), *Farhang-e Afsânehâ-ye Mardom-e Iran* [*The Folk Legends of Iran*], vol. 8, Tehran: Ketâb va Farhang.

Emmerick, R. E. (1968), *The Book of Zambasta: A Khotanese Poem on Buddhism*, London: Oxford University Press.

Emmerick, R.E. (1990). "Book of Zambasta", *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshater, vol. IV, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 361-363.

Emmerick, R. E. (1992), *A Guide to the Literature of Khotan*, Second Edition, Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies.

Leumann, E. (1933-36), *Das nordarische (sakische) Lehrgedicht des Buddhismus: Text und Übersetzung (Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 20)*, ed. M. Leumann, Leipzig.

Maggi, M. (2009), "Khotanese Literature", in: *A History of Persian Literature*: *The Literature of Pre-Islamic Iran:* ed. R. E. Emmerick and M. Macuch, London: I. B. Tauris, pp. 330-417.

Maggi, M. and Martini, G. (2014), "Annotations on the Book of Zambasta, III: Chapter 18 No More", *Scripta: An International Journal of Codicology and Palaeography* 7, pp. 139-158.

Meqdari, S. et al. (1391/2012). *Za'ferun Meṭqâl*: *Żarbolmaṭalhâ-ye Qâ'eni* [*Qa'eni Proverbs*], Qa'en: Akbarzade. In Persian.

Mirfakhrai, M. (1384/2005), "Tamṯil-e Pil va Xâne-ye Târik va Xerad-e Hameâgâh dar Še'ri be Zabân-e Xotani" ["The Parable of the Elephant and the Dark House and Omniscient Wisdom in a Poem in Khotanese Language"], *Nâme-ye Pârsi*, vol. 10, pp. 3-12. In Persian.

Mirfakhrai, M. (1386/2007), "In Jahân Kuh ast-o Fe'l-e Mâ Nedâ / Su-ye Mâ Aỷad Nedâhâ râ Sedâ" ["This World Is the Mountain, and Our Actions the Shout / the Echo of the Shouts Come back to Us"], *Farhang*, vol. 63-64, pp. 691-697. In Persian.

Mohammadhosseini Targhi, M. et al. (1402/2023). *Farhang-e Zabânzad-hâ-ye Targhi* [*Dictionary of Targhi Sayings*], Tehran: The Academy of Persian Language and Literature. In Persian.

Mortezayi, J. (1390/2012), "Tamṯil: Taṣvir yâ Ṣan'at-e Badi'i?" ["Allegory: Image or a Figurative Device?"], *Matnshenâsi-ye Adab-e Fârsi*, vol. 3(4), pp. 29-38. In Persian.

Poornamdariyan, T. (1367/1988). *Ramz va Dâstânhâ-ye Ramzi dar Adab-e Fârsi* [*Code and Secret Stories in Persian Literature*], Tehran: Elmi va Farhangi. In Persian.

Razzaqi, S.T. (1393/2014). *Frahang-e Amṯâl, Kenâyât va Eṣṭelâhât dar Guyeš-e Abuzeyedâbâdi* [*A Dictionary of Proverbs, Expressions, and Idioms in the Abuzeydabadi Dialect*], Tehran: Manshoor-Samir. In Persian.

Salami, A. (1402/2024). *Farhag-e Sine be Sine (Adabiyât-e Šafâhi-ye Mardom-e Davân)* [*Davâni Folk Literature*], Tehran: The Academy of Persian Language and Literature. In Persian.

Shamisa, S. (1381/2002). *Bayân* [*Rhetoric*], Tehran: Ferdows (in Persian).

Sims-Williams, N. (2025). *An Old Khotanese Reader: The Tale of Bhadra*, with contributions by J.A. Silk, Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag.

Vafayi, A. and Aqababayi, S. (1392/2013), "Barresi-ye Kârkerd-e Tamṯil dar Âṯâr-e Adabi-ye Ta'limi" ["The Study of Function of Allegory in the Didactic Literary Works"], *Pažuhešnāme-ye Adabiyāt-e Ta'limi*, no. 18, pp, 23-46. In Persian.

Yazdani Gazi, M.A. (1393/2014). *Eṣṭelâhât va Kenâyât va Ẓarbolmatal-hâ dar Zabân-e Gazi* [*Idioms, Expressions, and Proverbs in Gazi Language*], Isfahan: Kankash. In Persian.

Zulfaqari, H. (1386/2007). "Tafâvot-e Ẓarbol-maṯal bâ Barxi Gunehā-ye Zabâni va Adabi-ye Mošâbeh" ["The Difference between Proverbs and Some Similar Linguistic and Literary Forms"], *Najvâ-ye Farhang* 2(4), pp. 3-5. In Persian.