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STANDARD PERSIAN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TESTS FOR NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS

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This study examines Iran's national strategy for Persian language dissemination through standardized testing, focusing on the AMFA, AZFA, and particularly the SAMFA proficiency examinations. Situated within broader frameworks of language policy, corpus-based testing, and assessment theory, the paper explores the development, administration, and theoretical underpinnings of these tests. SAMFA, the most internationally recognized and academically aligned test, is analyzed in detail with reference to task design, linguistic content, and CEFR compatibility. Drawing on corpus linguistics (e.g., Peykareh), communicative competence models, and applied linguistic theory, the study reveals tensions between cultural authenticity and standardization. It highlights the structural and sociolinguistic particularities of Persian that complicate full alignment with Western testing frameworks such as the CEFR. Despite formal resemblance to international tests like IELTS, SAMFA remains a unique case of language assessment shaped by local norms, educational policy, and ideological imperatives. The findings contribute to the growing field of non-European language proficiency assessment and the challenges of global comparability in high-stakes language testing.

Keywords: Standard Persian Language Proficiency Test, Language Policy, Cefr, Samfa

Within the framework of its national language policy, the Islamic Republic of Iran places considerable emphasis on mother-tongue education, the purification of the Persian language from Arabic loanwords and expressions, the elimination of foreign terminology across various scientific fields, and the promotion and utilization of equivalent Persian terms. The Persian language component in the national university entrance examination carries a weighting coefficient of three—equivalent to that of

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subject-specific exams—underscoring the language’s central importance in higher education. A cornerstone of Iran’s strategic cultural agenda is its policy of language dissemination, particularly within the Middle East and surrounding regions. This policy is grounded in the principle that Persian should serve as the sole medium of instruction in educational institutions and the exclusive language of official state documentation².

Additionally, foreign nationals whose native language is not Persian are required to demonstrate a foundational proficiency in Persian to be eligible for enrollment in Iranian universities. This requirement excludes applicants from Afghanistan and Tajikistan, where Persian is the native or official language. To assess language competency among non-native speakers, several standardized Persian language proficiency tests are administered both domestically and internationally. These assessments are supervised by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which is responsible for ensuring that test content aligns with Islamic norms and avoids xenophobic or pro-Western sentiments.

Currently, three official examinations are recognized for evaluating Persian language proficiency among non-native speakers:

1. **AMFA** (Assessment of Persian Language Proficiency)
2. **AZFA** (Azmoon-e Zaban-e Farsi Baraye Ghair-e Farsizabanan – Persian Language Exam for Non-Native Speakers)
3. **SAMFA** (Sanjesh-e Estandardhaye Maharathaye Farsi – Persian Language Proficiency Standard Test)

Within the framework of this study, three official Persian language proficiency examinations will be examined, with particular emphasis on the SAMFA test, which is widely regarded as the most accurate, prestigious and internationally recognized assessment of Persian language competence.

1. AMFA (Assessment of Persian Language Proficiency)

The AMFA test is administered by Bonyad Saadi, a state-affiliated organization committed to promoting Persian language and culture across 80 affiliated centers worldwide. The examination is divided into two main types: the *academic* version, organized in collaboration with the National

² Akbar A., Iran’s soft power in the Middle East via promotion of the soft power, *Contemporary Politics*, 2023, p. 437.

Examination Center, and the *general language proficiency* version, conducted exclusively by Bonyad Saadi.

AMFA assesses the four fundamental language skills—listening, reading, writing, and speaking—within a total testing time of 185 minutes. The exam is scored out of 180 points and is valid for a period of three years. Although AMFA does not officially align with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the test developers suggest that its structure and scoring system are comparable to those of the IELTS examination³.

2. AZFA (Azmoon-e Zaban-e Farsi Baraye Ghair-e Farsizabanan)

Primarily intended for evaluating foreign students seeking admission to Iranian universities, the AZFA examination is administered at various academic institutions throughout Iran, with Imam Khomeini International University in Qazvin serving as the main examination center.

The test comprises two main sections: written and oral. Candidates must score a minimum of 60 out of 100 to qualify for university admission. The maximum obtainable score from the exam is 80 points, with an additional 20 points awarded upon successful completion of mandatory AZFA courses. These courses are offered in two formats: a short-term (9-month) and a long-term (15-month) program, both of which are also available in extended online formats. The AZFA exam is held twice annually.

3. SAMFA (Sanjesh-e Estandardhaye Maharathaye Farsi)

Among the three exams, SAMFA stands out as the most significant and internationally accepted assessment. It is the only Persian proficiency test that can be taken outside Iran and is officially recognized by all Iranian universities, institutions, and workplaces.

SAMFA was developed in 2017 (1396 in the Iranian calendar) by the National Organization of Educational Testing of Iran, in collaboration with the International Scientific Collaborations Center, the Office for Non-Iranian Students within the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, and academic experts from various universities.

³ Vakilifard, A., *Planning and Validating Persian Language Standard Test (On the Basis of Four Language Skills)*, 2020, p. 5.

The test is offered three times a year—in Khordad (May), Shahrivar (August), and Dey (January). Depending on applicant numbers, test centers may be established abroad⁴; past international locations include Erbil, Beirut, Damascus, Najaf, Tbilisi, and most recently, Yerevan (Armenia) in September 2024.

SAMFA is available in two formats:

- **University SAMFA (SAMFA-ye Daneshgahi):** Tailored for foreign students and adapted to their academic disciplines. The test content is divided into four fields—Engineering, Social Sciences, Humanities, and Medicine—with reading comprehension texts aligned with the candidate’s chosen specialization.
- **Public SAMFA (SAMFA-ye Omumi):** Designed for foreigners seeking employment in Iran who require a Persian language proficiency certificate.

Each SAMFA test includes four sections, corresponding to the four language skills. The first three sections are allocated a total of 60 minutes, while 15 minutes are dedicated to assessing speaking and oral expression. Each section is scored out of 60 points, for a total of 240 points. The listening and reading sections each contain 30 questions, and the writing section includes two essay topics to be completed over 180 minutes. A minimum score of 50 points per skill is required for university admission. The SAMFA test certificate is valid for two years and is issued in a bilingual format.

Due to certain features of Iran’s educational system, test materials are not publicly released to individuals or institutions outside the organizing committee. Consequently, limited data is available regarding the test structure or content. However, based on the analysis of materials published by field specialists and through direct experience, certain conclusions have been drawn.

Given the restricted availability of official test materials, this study employs a descriptive and document-based methodological approach supported by experiential data. The analysis draws on three primary sources:

1. **Published materials** produced by Iranian language-testing specialists, including preparatory guides, curriculum frameworks, and policy documents;

⁴ <https://sanjesh.org/fa-IR/sanjesh/4936/news/view/14591/10973> (Accessed 26.04.2025)

2. **Institutional documentation**, such as publicly available guidelines from universities and testing centers administering AMFA, AZFA, and SAMFA;
3. **First-hand experiential accounts**, including observations of test administration procedures, examiner instructions, and feedback from examinees who have completed one or more of the tests.

The evaluative criteria used to compare the tests include:

- **Test construct and skill coverage** (alignment with CEFR communicative competencies),
- **Format and item types**,
- **Scoring procedures and standardization**,
- **Reported reliability and validity indicators** (where available), and
- **Stakeholder perceptions** regarding difficulty, fairness, and practical applicability.

Although the dataset is necessarily limited due to the non-disclosure policies of the organizing committees, triangulating these sources enables a structured reconstruction of the tests' underlying design principles. The methodological aim is not to provide a definitive psychometric audit, but rather to establish a transparent, evidence-informed basis for comparative analysis within the constraints of accessible data.

Notably, during this study, a second-year master's student at the Department of Iranian Studies, Yerevan State University, participated in the SAMFA exam administered by the Islamic Republic of Iran Cultural Center in Yerevan on September 20, 2024. Her experience provided valuable insights into the structure and administration of the SAMFA exam.

To participate in the SAMFA examination, candidates are required to register in advance at the designated testing center. In the instance described here, registration was completed at the **Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) Cultural Center**, with a registration fee of **80 USD**.

Prior to the commencement of the exam, a digital code is transmitted from Iran to activate the **listening section** and enable the **printing of exam materials**, as SAMFA exams conducted abroad are administered in **paper-based format**.

The **first section** of the SAMFA examination evaluates *listening comprehension*. This section consists of a series of audio prompts, beginning at a slower pace and increasing in complexity and speed as the

test progresses. Candidates are given **60 minutes** to complete this section, which assesses key components of *auditory processing*—including comprehension of **temporal and spatial relationships, cause-and-effect reasoning**, and the recognition of **comparative structures**. These design elements align with **Bachman and Palmer’s (1996)**⁵ model of communicative language ability, particularly the cognitive strategies used in real-time understanding.

The **reading comprehension** section follows, also lasting one hour, and includes **four passages** selected from a range of topics and registers. This section measures **lexical access, textual interpretation**, and the **logical structuring of discourse**, emphasizing the integration of bottom-up and top-down processing in reading proficiency.

The **writing component** is divided into **two tasks**: a structured response and a free-form essay. The prompts vary according to the test-taker’s academic background, reflecting a **specific-purpose assessment** approach (Douglas, 2000)⁶. For example, a master’s student from **Yerevan State University (YSU)** was asked to write a 150-word response relevant to the field of psychology. In one structured task, students are presented with a set of **keywords**—e.g., *beginning, end, skill, enlightenment, science, despair*—and are required to integrate them into a **narrative composition** that reflects their Persian language learning journey. The second task is a **discursive essay** (250 words), prompting critical reflection and comparison—for instance, on the respective impacts of cinema and social networks on contemporary youth. These tasks engage **Canale and Swain’s (1980)**⁷ components of communicative competence, particularly grammatical and discourse competence.

After a brief break, candidates proceed to the **oral interview**, conducted individually and lasting **approximately 15 minutes**. The interview is recorded and forwarded to the **central evaluation committee in Tehran**. It includes a series of semi-structured questions addressing personal and social themes such as the **role of education, family influence, multicultural integration**, and **migration narratives**. These

⁵ Bachman, L. F., Palmer, A.S. *Language Testing in Practice*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 6.

⁶ Douglas D., *Assessing Languages for Specific Purposes*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 68.

⁷Canale M., Swain, M.. *Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing*. *Appl. Linguist.* 1 1980, p. 45.

topics are consistent with **task-based oral assessment practices**, where sociocultural appropriateness and fluency are prioritized over mere accuracy. Upon completion, candidates sign official documents and provide biometric verification (fingerprint). Exam results are sent electronically within four weeks.

The **SAMFA exam** draws on **Peykareh**, a large-scale Persian language corpus developed by the **Research Center for Intelligent Signal Processing (RCISP)**. Containing over **100 million words** and **35,058 texts**, Peykareh represents an authentic linguistic database that reflects contemporary Persian across multiple domains.

The corpus is classified into **five stylistic categories**—*Standard-formal*, *Standard-informal*, *Super-standard-formal*, *Super-standard-informal*, and *Sub-standard-informal*—and spans **24 registers**, including fields such as **science, humanities, education, and journalism**. Following **corpus linguistics principles** lexical items are selected according to frequency and distribution, with *low-frequency words* assigned to advanced levels (C1–C2), *mid-frequency* to intermediate (B1–B2), and *high-frequency vocabulary* to basic levels (A1–A2). This tiered structure is intended to support a **criterion-referenced interpretation of language ability**.

A central grammatical feature integrated into the SAMFA tasks is the **Izafet construction**, a syntactic phenomenon prevalent in Persian and related Indo-European languages like Pashto. Izafet, which connects determiners to head nouns, is a **functional syntactic device** that accounts for nearly **20% of lexical units** in Persian (based on Peykareh analysis). Despite its grammatical salience, it is **not overtly marked orthographically**, which introduces cognitive processing challenges in both reading and writing. The presence of this structure in test content highlights the SAMFA exam's intention to assess **deep grammatical competence** beyond surface-level fluency⁸.

While SAMFA borrows certain **structural elements** from internationally recognized language assessments such as **IELTS**, its full **alignment with the Common European Framework of Reference for**

⁸ Mamghani, H., Validity and Reliability Assessment of Ministry of Science, Research and Technology' s Examination with the Intention of Achieving to a Skill Based Persian Language Proficiency test. [in Persian], 2010, p. 6.

Languages (CEFR) remains contested⁹. This misalignment stems from significant **typological and grammatical differences** between Persian and Indo-European languages traditionally used to develop CEFR benchmarks.

According to **North (2007)**¹⁰ CEFR descriptors are grounded in communicative tasks, functional use, and sociolinguistic variables—all areas where **Persian diverges structurally and stylistically** from English or Romance languages. A content analysis of SAMFA in light of CEFR benchmarks reveals **partial convergence**, especially at intermediate levels. However, **discrepancies are evident** in grammatical domains such as **prepositions, postpositions, passive constructions, and subordinate clause patterns**, all of which behave differently in Persian and are not evenly distributed across test sections.

Additionally, Persian's dual register system—**formal and informal varieties within the standard language**—adds complexity. At advanced levels (B2–C1), SAMFA incorporates texts from **formal academic or professional domains** such as architecture, medicine, and the arts. Conversely, tasks at A1–B1 levels include **colloquial phrases and informal discourse structures** to promote pragmatic understanding. This reflects an **eclectic approach to register selection** that complicates norm-referenced calibration but enhances sociolinguistic authenticity.

Finally, lexical and idiomatic choices in the test, although grammatically correct, may **not align with frequent spoken usage**.

A brief comparison of SAMFA Levels and CEFR Levels can be seen in the chart below

SAMFA Level	Description (Based on SAMFA Tasks)	Approx. CEFR Equivalent
Level 1	Basic recognition of familiar words, simple phrases, highly controlled grammar; simple reading comprehension.	A1
Level 2	Ability to understand short texts, routine expressions, and basic communicative functions; limited writing ability.	A2
Level 3	Comprehension of straightforward texts; ability to	B1

⁹ Ghonsoli, B., Designing and validation of Persian language proficiency test. Foreign Language Research, 2010, p. 128.

SAMFA Level	Description (Based on SAMFA Tasks)	Approx. CEFR Equivalent
	write short, coherent paragraphs; basic oral interaction.	
Level 4	Understanding of more complex texts; coherent connected writing; functional command of grammar; moderate speaking fluency.	B2
Level 5	Comprehension of authentic academic texts; ability to produce extended written arguments; fluent and accurate spoken interaction.	C1
Level 6	Near-native comprehension of advanced academic and literary texts; sophisticated writing; highly fluent and culturally nuanced speaking.	C2

Regarding the content validity of the test, when the assessed parameters were classified according to the parameters and features obtained from the corpus, partial compliance with the CEFR criteria was observed. However, the two subcategories of the parameters POS (parts of speech) and Ezafe (ezafet), i.e. preposition and postposition, do not correspond proportionally with the parameters and features of the test specification. nor the categories of passive sentences in the reading and listening measures. One possible explanation for this could be the “formal” level of the standard variety of modern Persian. Both formal and informal styles exist in Standard Persian. It is noticeable in SAMFA that although the texts at levels B2 and C were mainly selected from academic, educational, lecture, art and architecture registers, which are essentially formal rather than informal, an attempt was made to include more active sentences from everyday registers in the texts at levels A1/A2 and B1/B2.

We also paid attention to the expressions and objects conventionally expressed by the Persian language, referring to the frequency or specificity of the use of corpus elements. It turned out that some correct answers are less typical of the language, although they were grammatically correct.

It is also essential to situate the discussion of Persian proficiency testing within broader scholarship on language assessment for non-Indo-European languages. Research on large-scale testing in languages such as Arabic, Turkish, Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, and Korean has highlighted recurring challenges in areas including script complexity, diglossia,

morphological density, and the balance between communicative and form-focused assessment. Studies in these contexts emphasize the importance of transparent construct definition, CEFR alignment procedures tailored to typologically distinct languages, and the need for validation frameworks that account for cultural and linguistic specificity. Integrating these perspectives not only provides a comparative foundation for understanding AMFA, AZFA, and SAMFA, but also demonstrates that the questions raised in the Iranian context—such as limited test disclosure, construct underrepresentation, and variability in speaking assessment—are reflective of global issues in testing non-European languages. By engaging with this broader body of literature, the study underscores its relevance to international debates in applied linguistics and language assessment.

The nature of the skills that would make it possible to fully comply with the CEFR standards has not yet been defined by the Iranian test developers. It is difficult to imagine clear, figuratively speaking indicators for Persian, and there is no defined adaptation toolkit and methodology. There are still no standard sources and manuals for teaching Persian to foreigners (unlike European languages), providing grammatical realities and the main vocabulary fund of Persian, nor is there a complete list of all the applied features of the language¹¹. Therefore, the language of the press is used to compile this test¹². The language of the press is diverse in terms of topics and there are certain terms and linguistic structures that are less used in literary, artistic or narrowly professional language. The press text is considered the standard language in Iran. One of the biggest problems of Iranian culture, which is endowed with great artistic features, is that even in the most official communication, in the press, etc., a rather free style is mainly used. For this reason, they cannot be measured and classified into any systematic pattern, which is possible for European languages or English. Basically, they are texts composed of complex subordinate clauses that well demonstrate the features and trends of modern Persian. It is no coincidence that these texts are the most suitable not only for testing knowledge of the Persian language, but are also applicable when teaching the language.

¹¹ Shagagi et. al., Standardization of international Persian language proficiency test, 2011, p. 93.

¹² Vakilifard. A., Planning and validating Persian language standard test (on the basis of four language skills), 2020, p. 12.

ՊԱՐՄԻՑ ԼԵԶՎԻ ՍՏԱՆԴԱՐՏ ԹԵՍԹԵՐ ՈՉ ԼԵԶՎԱԿԻՐՆԵՐԻ ՀԱՍԱՐ Նունիկ Դարբինյան¹³

Իրանի Իսլամական Հանրապետությունը իր լեզվական քաղաքականության շրջանակում մեծ կարևորություն է տալիս մայրենիով կրթությանը, պարսից լեզուն արաբական բառերից և արտահայտություններից մաքրելու գործընթացին, գիտության տարբեր ճյուղերում օտար տերմինաբանությունից ձերբազատմանը և համարժեք պարսկերեն բառերի ու տերմինների մշակման ու կիրառմանը: Սույն ուսումնասիրության շրջանակում կանդիդատանք երեք պաշտոնական թեսթերին AMFA, AZFA, SAMFA-ին՝ շեշտը դնելով երրորդ թեսթի SAMFA -ի վրա քանի որ Իրանում և Իրանից դուրս ամենահեղինակավոր և ընդունված թեսթն է:

Սույն թեսթերի մշակումը հիմնված է՝ լեզվական քաղաքականության, կորպուսի վրա հիմնված թեստավորման և գնահատման տեսության վրա և սույն հոդվածի շրջանակում ուսումնասիրվում է այս թեստերի մշակումը, կառավարումը և տեսական հիմքերը: SAMFA-ն՝ միջազգայնորեն ամենաճանաչված և ակադեմիական առումով հաստատված թեստը, մանրամասն վերլուծվում է՝ հիմնվելով առաջադրանքների ձևավորման, լեզվական բովանդակության և CEFR համատեղելիության վրա: Հիմնվելով կորպուսի լեզվաբանության հաղորդակցական կոմպետենտության մոդելների և կիրառական լեզվաբանական տեսության վրա՝ ուսումնասիրությունը բացահայտում է մշակութային համատեղելիության և ստանդարտացման միջև լարվածությունը: Այն ընդգծում է պարսկերենի կառուցվածքային և սոցիալ-լեզվաբանական առանձնահատկությունները, որոնք բարդացնում են արևմտյան թեստավորման շրջանակների, ինչպիսին է CEFR-ը, հետ լիարժեք համապատասխանեցումը: Չնայած IELTS-ի նման միջազգային թեստերի հետ ձևական նմանությանը, SAMFA-ն մնում է տեղական նորմերով, կրթական քաղաքականությամբ և գաղափարախոսական հրամայականներով ձևավորված լեզվի գնահատման եզակի դեպք: Արդյունքները նպաստում են ոչ եվրոպական լեզվի իմացության գնահատման աճող ոլորտին և

¹³ Նունիկ Դարբինյանը ԵՊՀ արևելագիտության ֆակուլտետի իրանագիտության ամբիոնի դոցենտ է, ք. գ. թ., էլ. փոստ՝ noonik.darbinyan@ysu.am, ORCID 0009-0003-5186-874X:

բարձր շիսկային լեզվական թեստավորման գործալ համեմատելիության մարտահրավերներին:

Բանալի բառեր: Պարսից լեզվի ստանդարդ թեստեր, ՄԱՄՖԱ, լեզվական քաղաքականություն, CEFR

СТАНДАРТНЫЕ ТЕСТЫ НА ВЛАДЕНИЕ ПЕРСИДСКИМ ЯЗЫКОМ ДЛЯ НЕНОСИТЕЛЕЙ ЯЗЫКА

Нуник Дарбинян¹⁴

В этом исследовании рассматривается национальная стратегия Ирана по распространению персидского языка посредством стандартизированного тестирования, уделяя особое внимание экзаменам на владение языком AMFA, AZFA и, в частности, экзаменам на владение языком SAMFA. В более широких рамках языковой политики, корпусного тестирования и теории оценки, в статье исследуются разработка, администрирование и теоретические основы этих тестов. SAMFA, наиболее признанный на международном уровне и академически согласованный тест, подробно анализируется с учетом разработки заданий, лингвистического содержания и совместимости с CEFR. Опираясь на корпусную лингвистику (например, Peukareh), модели коммуникативной компетентности и прикладную лингвистическую теорию, исследование выявляет противоречия между культурной аутентичностью и стандартизацией. В нем подчеркиваются структурные и социолингвистические особенности персидского языка, которые усложняют полное соответствие западным системам тестирования, таким как CEFR. Несмотря на формальное сходство с международными тестами, такими как IELTS, SAMFA остается уникальным случаем оценки языка, сформированным местными нормами, образовательной политикой и идеологическими императивами. Результаты вносят вклад в растущую область оценки владения неевропейскими языками и проблемы глобальной сопоставимости в высокоуровневом языковом тестировании.

Ключевые слова: стандартный тест на владение персидским языком, языковая политика, CEFR, SAMFA

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