When Sayyid Ahmad Khan was thirty years old, he published an account of the Urdu language, embedded in a handsome illustrated volume about the buildings, old and new, and the contemporary personalities of Delhi. A munisif in the judicial service of the East India Company, he had just returned to his native city after an absence of some seven years. The first edition of Āṣārū ʿ-Ṣanādīd (Traces of the Notables) has much in common with earlier Persian prototypes, more an album (muraqqaʿ), guidebook, gazetteer and biographical dictionary (tazkira) than historical narrative. Over the following five years, however, Sayyid Ahmad came in contact with members of the newly founded Archaeological Society of Delhi, Arthur Austin Roberts, the British commissioner of Delhi, and Edward Thomas, who encouraged him to recast the book as a more strictly “archaeological history.”1 In that second version, he included a short khātimah (appendix) devoted to Urdu, but eliminated the extensive discussions of contemporary poets and extracts of their poetry.2

1 Edward Thomas refers to “Syud Ahmad Khān’s excellent Archaeological History of Delhi” in The Chronicles of the Pathan Kings of Delhi (1871, 20).

2 Sayyid Āḥmad Khān, Āṣārū ʿ-Ṣanādīd (1847) and (1854). I have used copies in the British Library and, for the second edition, the New York Public Library. Christian W. Troll has written an exemplary account of the two versions (1972) which includes extensive bibliographical information. I am grateful to C.M. Naim for sharing with me his “Syed Ahmad and His Two Books Called ‘Asar-al-Sanadid,” forthcoming in Modern Asian Studies 2011 (vol. 45, no. 3). My present essay derives from a longer work in progress and a paper originally written at the suggestion of Vasudha Dalmia for a panel at the 18th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, Lund University, Sweden, July 2004. Jennifer Dubrow shared with me her work and a photocopy of the first edition of Āṣārū ʿ-Ṣanādīd, and Professor Asghar Abbas of Aligarh Muslim University very kindly sent me copies of facsimiles of the two editions, recently published by the Sir Syed Academy, Aligarh Muslim.
The two versions are substantially different in what they say about the language, especially when taken in the full context of the two works in which they appear. The first edition was above all a celebration of Delhi as a living culture, a gulshan-e jannat, (garden of paradise) (Āḥmad Khān 1847, ii); the second was an archaeological study concerned with the chronological layers in the city’s history of superseding regimes of power and authority. The brief accounts of Urdu partake of this distinction, an epistemological reordering that sets the stage for thinking about language and languages in a new way. The change in Sayyid Ahmad’s own prose in these two editions may also express this shift. Both discussions serve as documents of the times in which they were written, clues to the linguistic self-consciousness of the writer with respect to language, literature and language community.

In the first version of Āśārū’s-ṣanādíd, Sayyid Ahmad starts with the here and now: Urdu is identified as the language current “here,” the language that “everyone speaks.” Although Delhi is an ancient, imperial city, it had always been characterized by linguistic disunity. People spoke separate languages (bhākhā), first under Hindu rulers, then under the succession of Muslim dynasties. Under Muslim rule, bargaining (saudā sulaf), exchanging, buying and selling (lēnē dēnē, bēćnē bačānē) were all the more difficult because of the diversity of languages. Then under Akbar, Persian became so dominant that other languages could not develop. Only when Shāhjahān established his capital in Delhi and commanded people from all over the land to settle there did the languages begin to strike a bargain (again, saudā sulaf). Because it was the language of the court, associated with the royal bazaar, called the urdū, it was called Urdu and became virtually the language of all the Muslims of Hindustan. Then the great Urdu poets Mir and Saudā, who established the literary reputation of the language. Delhi was to Urdu what Shiraz was to Persian; it set the standard (sanād). Unfortunately people from other cities tend to make excessive use of Persian words and constructions. They undermine the urdūpan, the special character, of the language. No rules can be established to determine how much Persian one may use in Urdu. Such matters can only rely on the actual speech of the abl-e Zubān, the native speakers of the language, that is the people of Delhi (1847, 428).
Although this discussion dips into the past, what it is really about is the contemporary linguistic authority of Delhi. Urdu starts with the establishment of the most recent of Delhi’s cities, Shāhjahānābād, but it is a result of a bargaining process, *saudâ sulaf*, among speakers of different, unspecified languages. It is the literary achievement of two great poets in the late eighteenth century that has established the excellence of the language, comparable to what the great poets of Shiraz, such as Ḥāfiz and Sa’di, did for Persian. This discussion of Urdu, it may be noted, stands out in the first edition for its easy, idiomatic expression, as if focusing on the language led Sayyid Ahmad to abandon the heavy Persian rhetoric that characterizes most of the first edition. It was, in fact, not just the people of other cities who were capable of undermining *urdūpan* in order to display their learning and virtuosity in the tradition of Indian Persian.

In *A House Divided*, Amrit Rai seized on a quotation from this passage to show that Sayyid Ahmad considered Urdu to be the language of “the Muslims of India,” a piece of evidence in his general argument that the differentiation of Urdu from Hindi emerged as a rearguard action on the part of the declining Mughal aristocracy. Read, however, in its full context, the passage as a whole suggests something quite different: the standard language, Sayyid Ahmad claims, should be set by the ordinary speech of the *ahl-e zubān* of Delhi. People of other cities have undermined the special character of Urdu, its *urdūpan*, by weighing it down with Persian vocabulary and constructions. It is not Muslims that have created Urdu, but the processes of exchange among numerous groups in a particular place. The phrase that Amrit Rai quoted, from a quotation in a secondary source, is “*gōyā hindustān kē musalmān ki yabi zubān thi.*” He translated this as, “That is to say, this was the language of the Muslims of India” (1984, 260). This is probably more emphatic than it needs to be. I would translate it as, “It was as if this was the particular language of the Muslims of Hindustan,” that is, that the language of Shāhjahanābād became popular among the Muslims of the Gangetic region, Hindustan. It is clear from the passage as a whole that Sayyid Ahmad, like Mir Amman Dihlavī and Inshā before him, is asserting the linguistic authority of Delhi, not of Muslims in general.

Sayyid Ahmad clearly drew upon Mir Amman’s discussion of the

---

6Alīf Husain Ḥālī (1901, 73) criticizes the first edition for its old style, overly colorful, exaggerated and complex language. See also Troll’s analysis of comparable passages in the two editions (1972, 117–39).

origins of Urdu in the preface to Bāgh-o-Babār, the text published in 1801 at Fort William College for the instruction of British officials. In addition to following a good deal of the general argument, he quotes it explicitly in recognition that different people have different ideas about what counts as good language: “Not that, in the words of Mīr Amman, anyone thinks ill of his (own) turban, gait or speech. If someone asks a peasant, and he calls it citified [shabrevald] and thinks his is better—well, the wise know which is best.” In contrast to the highly Persianized diction of most of the first edition of Āśāruʿ-Šanādīd, Sayyid Ahmad’s account of Urdu partakes of the earthy, playful language that characterizes Bāgh-o-Babār. The great difference is that Mir Amman goes on to attribute the perfection of Urdu to his Scottish patron, John Gilchrist, whereas Sayyid Ahmad mentions only Mir and Saudā.

During the years that intervened between the two editions of Āśāruʿ-Šanādīd, however, Sayyid Ahmad was increasingly drawn into European ideas, methods and social relations. When Arthur Austin Roberts, the Collector and Magistrate of Delhi, traveled to England, he took a copy of the first edition with him to present to the Royal Asiatic Society. He returned with the idea of enlisting Sayyid Ahmad to help him prepare an English translation. In the process of discussing the work, however, Sayyid Ahmad was persuaded that it needed substantial revision with respect to organization, chronology, and the accuracy of many of the details in the text. Although Sayyid Ahmad already had significant interactions with a number of British contemporaries, his association with the Archaeological Society of Delhi and some of its British members arose out of this project.9

The discussion of the language in the second edition (1854) of Āśāruʿ-Šanādīd is offered as an appendix (kh̤ātimah) to the three chapters (bāb), published originally in separate fascicles, which make up the body of the text.10 Throughout the work, due attention is paid to dates, provided according to Hindu, Muslim and Christian calendars. The appendix on Urdu serves as an introduction to the final section devoted to reproductions of inscriptions in Brahmi, Nagri, Kufic, Naskh, and Nastaliq scripts that Sayyid Ahmad and his collaborator, Maulānā Imām Baksh Šahbāʾī, carefully traced on the sites. According to Ḥālī, Sayyid Ahmad’s biographer, the task of copying the higher inscriptions of the Qutb Minar

---

9This is a translation of a direct quote from Bāgh-o-Babār. See Shackle and Snell (1990, 86); also, Mīr Amman Dihlavi (1994, xvi). All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

9Āḥmad Khān (1854, English preface) and Troll (1972, 139–43). On Roberts, see Buckland (1906, 160).

10See my translation in Appendix 2.
required him to be hoisted in a čẖīnkā, a sort of net made of rope, while his friend looked on in terror (1901, 72). The vigorous empiricism of this "enthusiastic antiquary," as Edward Thomas (1871, 20) called him, had totally transformed Ašāru’s-Ṣanādīd.

The appendix on the Urdu language in the 1854 edition consists of eleven numbered paragraphs, followed by brief literary examples of the various poetic forms discussed in the text. The first five paragraphs are historical, starting with an undifferentiated condition of linguistic unity: under Hindu rule the language of reading, writing and speech was Hindi. With the establishment of Muslim rule, the language of government became Persian, but the language of the subjects remained the same. Here Sayyid Ahmad provides a definite date, with Muslim, Christian and Hindu (Vikramjīt) equivalents. He then jumps forward three hundred years to the reign of Sikandar Lōdḥī, again with a definite date according to Muslim and Christian calendars, when Hindu Kayasthas, educated in Persian, took up official posts throughout the realm. Other Hindus then followed, also learning Persian. Although Hindus continued to speak Hindi and Muslims, Persian, the poet Amīr Khusrau had used “ḥāṣbā” in his Persian verse and written some minor works entirely in that language. Then came Shāhjahān —again there are dates—and the establishment of Shāhjahānābād, causing Persian-speaking Muslims and Hindi-speaking Hindus to create a new mixed language. Since this mixed language was associated with the army and the royal court, it came to be known as Urdu. Under the rule of Auranţzēb—again with a specific date according to two calendars—people started writing poetry in this language, though it was not very good. He says that Vālī was not the first, and only with Mir and Saudā did poetry reach a high level. Mir Amman, Sayyid Ahmad says, later achieved in Urdu prose what Mir had done for poetry. ‘Abdu’ll-Qādir and Raff‘u’d-Dīn translated the Qurān and other religious texts into Urdu. This concludes the historical sequence.

Sayyid Ahmad then goes on to discuss some of the features of Urdu literature. Most poetry, for example, follows Persian conventions in identifying the beloved as male, but rŏḳbī poetry is written as if by a woman. Finally, he defines three kinds of wordplay in verse: nisbatēn, pabēlī, and mukrī. He closes the discussion with a few examples of these verse forms: some riddles traditionally associated with Amīr Khusrau, a couplet in rŏḳbī, and three couplets by Mir.11

---

11 Aside from the conventional use of Mir’s pen name in two of the couplets, Sayyid Ahmad does not identify the authors. See Rai’s discussion and selection of the riddles controversially attributed to Amīr Khusrau (1984, 140–45).
Sayyid Ahmad’s first edition had recognized a multiplicity of languages and language communities, the migrations over time of various groups both from within India and outside, and the absence of standardization. Political domination only played a role when Shāhjāhān established a new capital city, setting the conditions for increased mobility and exchange. In this account, Urdu emerged in the first instance out of commercial transactions and everyday conversation, *ṣuḥbat*, and it was the work of the great poets of the language that established the standard language and made it a model for a wider linguistic community beyond the city. Sayyid Ahmad’s own prose in this first version exemplified the literary and linguistic virtuosity and conversational elegance of this milieu. Above all, Urdu was celebrated as the spoken language of “everyone here” in Delhi, the contemporary language of a living culture.

The second version of Sayyid Ahmad’s account of Urdu is characterized by its methodical arrangement, unadorned prose style, concern with the chronology of historical stages, and the presentation of samples; it is also notable for the absence of enthusiasm, idiomatic language, and, most of all, an open sense of variation and flexibility that marked the earlier text. Presented in numbered paragraphs like an official document, each item in the series is enclosed in a separate compartment, first according to a notion of historical sequence, then according to particular literary features. This second discussion presumes an undifferentiated Hindi “*bhāṣā*” of the Hindus, on the one hand, and Persian “*zubān*” as the language of a foreign Muslim ruling class, on the other. Urdu is presented as a mixture of the two, but no claims are made for its linguistic dominance, let alone for its association with Delhi or, for that matter, Muslims. It is, instead, set apart as a residue of minor literary curiosities.

The difference between Sayyid Ahmad’s two brief accounts of Urdu is probably more interesting than the substance of each taken separately. What he has to say about language should probably be read alongside the major sections of the book devoted to descriptions of the forts, temples, mosques, palaces and tombs of Delhi’s past. One could imagine, and perhaps locate, for example, accounts of the site of the Qutb Minar and its adjoining mosque that are analogous to later debates about Hindi/Urdu/Hindustani: bits and pieces of “Hindu” culture, broken down and reassembled into a whole, new “Muslim” structure. Stones with their sculptured images become mosques; words with their “Indic” origins, sounds and syntax stitched into ghazals and *maśnawi*. This is the sort of thing that scholars of a previous generation like Louis Dumont, building on a long tradition of British colonial social anthropology, argued with respect to Hindu-like “caste” and ritual among Muslims in India; the elements
might be similar, but they were differently arranged into separate ideological structures. “Hindus and Muslims form two distinct societies from the point of view of ultimate values,” he concluded (1972, 257). But Sayyid Ahmad did not believe that. At least at this point in his life, the issue had not been drawn in these terms. He was not trying to make grand statements about all of India, India as a nation, or what it would mean to be a Muslim or to speak Urdu in a world constituted by such categories. His ideas of language and history were more modest than that, a matter of bargaining, *sauidà sulaf,* among multiple groups in what was still a fluid society. But by rearranging his study of Delhi’s monuments into a chronological account and demarcating Urdu as an object of study, with a history and an identifiable community of speakers, Sayyid Ahmad was one of those who raised the question how culture could be made to serve the purposes of inclusion and exclusion in a colonial society.

Appendix 1

زبان کا بیان

بفت کو کسی کوں کر اپنے اپنے کچھ انسان نہیں کیا ہے، بلکہ بختیاری کو کسی کا ترویج کیا ہے۔ بختیاروں کی مدد سے اثر انداز کیا ہے اور اس سے طرف کوہن ہیں۔ اس کے علاوہ بہت کچھ کیا ہے، جہاں کہ نام، ہمارے جوڑے کا نام بائیں سے بائیں سے ایک شخصیت میں ساتھی ایک بار بارہوں کے نام، ہمارے جوڑے کا نام بائیں سے بائیں سے ایک شخصیت میں ساتھی ایک بار بارہوں کے
جیسے کہ میں گفتگو کرتا ہوں، میں ہونے والے امرات کا ثبوت نہیں لینا چاہتا ہے لیکن ان کو سمجھنے کی ضرورت ہے۔ اس کے لئے میں ہیں جو ہمیشہ میں گفتگو کرتا ہوں۔
The language that is current here and that everyone now speaks is called Urdu. Urdu, in fact, is a Persian word that means bazaar, and Urdu comes from the *urdū* of Shāhjahān. Although Delhi is a very ancient city and was always the capital of all the kingdoms [*rājā prājā*] of the Hindus, people spoke separate languages [*bhākhā*] and these languages did not merge. When Muslims took over the administration of Hindustan, and Muslim people came into these cities, things got more difficult. With the coming of people speaking new languages, bargaining [*saudā sulaf*], buying and selling, became difficult. At first, there was discord in the government of the Muslims, sometimes the rule of one group, sometimes another: the Ghōrīs came, then the Lōdūs, then the Pathans, then the Mughals. And for this reason there was regular discord in language, and nobody could undertake to make reforms. When Akbar became king, a diverse kingdom was established and everyone stayed in a fixed abode. There was intellectual inquiry, but at this time the Persian language had such standing that people did not look elsewhere. When Shahābū’-d-Dīn Shāhjahān became king, he reorganized the realm, ordering that representatives of every country [*mulk*] attend and settle in Delhi. He built the fort and named it Shāhjahānābād. Then people from every country gathered. Their speech and ways of life were different. When matters came up among them, one word in one language, two words in another and three in another all combined and reached a bargain [*saudā sulaf*]. Gradually this language achieved some order and became a new language, and since it was current in the royal bazaars in particular, it was called Urdu. The royal aristocracy used it; and as it was becoming, so to speak, the particular language of the Muslims of Hindustan, it gradually came to be known as Urdu [*goyā hindīstān kē musalmān kī yahi zubān thi, bōō bōō khād is zubān bi kā urdū nām bō gayā*].12 From that time the language began to shine and was fashioned till the time that the eloquence of Mir and Saudā raised high its renown and everyone heard of it. Then the language became regular and brought forth a wondrous display [*raṅg dhaṅg*]. After them there were changes and transformations, and such a confluence [*mānjh*] that nothing could be better till Judgment Day [*qiyāmāt*]. Shāhjahānābād was to this language what Shiraz was to Persian, that is, the language of the people here set the standard [*sanad*] for all Urdu

12Translated in Rai (1984, 260) as: “That is to say, this was the language of the Muslims of India.” Note that elsewhere (ibid., 241–42) Rai quotes the passage from the 1854 ed.
speakers. Not that, in the words of Mir Amman, anyone thinks ill of his turban, gait or speech. If someone asks a peasant, and he calls it citified [shabrval] and thinks his is better—well, the wise know which is best.\footnote{As noted above, this is a direct, though unacknowledged quote from Bāgh-o-Babār. See Shackle and Snell (1990, 86) and Mir Amman Dihlavi (1994, xvi).}

Although Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit words are often used in this language, and among them there have been changes and transformations, at that time the people of other cities began writing in a way that mixed in many Persian words and Persian constructions. These things were not good for maintaining the particular style of Urdu [urdūpan]. It was apparent from these things that no rule could be established to limit Persian constructions and (decide) which words and languages ought not to be used. These matters would have to rely on the conversation [ṣūḥbat] of native-speakers [ahl-e zubān].
Appendix 2
Translation

(1) Under the rule of the Hindus, speaking, writing and reading here were in the Hindi language [bhāṣā]. In 587 AH, equivalent to 1191 CE and 1249 Vikramājīt, when the sultanate of the Muslims seized control here, the royal administration [daftar] became Persian, but the language of the subjects remained the same. Until 892 AH, equivalent to 1488 CE, Persian did not spread among the subjects beyond the royal administration. A little after that, in the era of Sulṭān Sikandar Lōdhī, Kayasthas, who were always occupied with domestic matters [umūr-e mulkī] and administrative arrangements, were the first among the Hindus to start to write and read Persian, and gradually other communities [qaum] began, and Persian writing and reading spread among the Hindus too.

(2) There were no alterations or changes in Hindi up to the era of Bābar and Jahāṅgīr, but Muslims continued to use Persian in their conversation and Hindus continued to use bhāṣā. Still in the time of the Khilji rulers, that is, in the thirteenth century CE, Amīr Khusrau began to use words in bhāṣā in his Persian language and recited some riddles and conundrums [pābēlīyān, mukriyān, nisbastān] in a language that included mostly words in bhāṣā. Most likely the joining [milāp] of the language bhāṣā started from that time, but it could not be said that there was a separate language [zubān]. At the time that Shāhjahān Bādshāh settled in the city of Shāhjahānābād in 1058 AH, equivalent to 1648 CE, and people gathered from every land [mulk], the Persian language [zubān] and the Hindi language [bhāṣā] got very mixed and because of the abundant usage of some Persian words and mostly words in bhāṣā, there were alterations and changes. As a result of the combination of these two languages in the royal army and imperial court [urdū-e muʿallā], a new language was created, and for this reason called the language of urdū, then from much usage the word language was omitted, and people started to call the language Urdu. Gradually the language achieved culture [tābzi] and regularity [ārāstāg] to the point that in approximately 1100 AH, equivalent to 1688 CE, that is, in the era of Aurāṅgzēb ʿAlāmghir, poetic composition started up. Although it is widely believed that Valī was the first to compose poetry in this language, it is clear from Valī’s own verses that even before him there were those who composed poems in this language because he makes fun of the language of other poets in his verses; but the poetry of that time was dull and utterly sloppy (nībāyat sust bandish). Then day by day it improved to the point that Mir and Saudā brought it to perfection.

(3) The language of Mir was so clear and cultured and the fine expres-
sions in his verses were so effortless that everyone till this day praises him. Saudā’s language is also very fine and the sharpness of his subjects surpasses Mir, but his language does not reach Mir’s language.

(4) Among the writers of Urdu prose, Mir Amman, who wrote Bāgb-o-Babār, has achieved superiority; in fact, Mir Amman’s perfection in prose writing is like Mir’s in poetry.

(5) Maulvi ‘Abdu’l-Qādir Şāhīb and Maulvi Rafi’u’d-Dīn Şāhīb did the first Urdu translations from Arabic. Maulvi ‘Abdu’l-Qādir Şāhīb’s translation of the Qurān [kalām Allāh] was a great authorization of the Urdu lexicon, and Maulvi Rafi’u’d-Dīn Şāhīb’s was a great certification [umda dastavēz] of its grammar [tārkīb naḥvī].

(6) Poetry in the Urdu language follows the manner of Persian poetry in which a young man writes verse as if in praise of a beautiful boy.

(7) In the Hindi language the system is for poetry to be in the language of a woman in loving relationship to a man, and occasionally poetry in the Urdu language is written in the same way and people call it rekhī. Probably about 1220 AH, equivalent to 1805 CE, Inshā’al-Lāh Khān popularized [spread (rīvāf)] this [form].

(8) All Urdu verse is written according to Persian forms and genres, except the prosody [vazn] of riddles and conundrums [mukri and pahēlī] is otherwise and the language is what one usually encounters in bẖāsẖā.

(9) Nisbatēn, as is well known, are utterances in which two, three or more things are described in which something does not seem to fit, and the other person is asked to find the one thing that can be put together with the rest.

(10) In a pahēlī, the qualities, features of something are described and someone is asked to identify that thing. The great value of a riddle is that the name of the thing itself comes out in the description of the qualities and features and still the other person does not get it.

(11) In a mukri, a woman says something that means one thing to her beloved and something else to another person, so that a lover’s words can be disguised.

Works Cited


