

Interlinear texts

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Interlinear texts can be helpful tools as you learn to read Dari, or any other language. This is a brief guide to what interlinear texts are, and to some ways that you can use them effectively in your language learning. In brief, an interlinear text is like a literate native speaker, who can correct your pronunciations and define unfamiliar words for you as you read the text.

1 What is an interlinear text?

An interlinear text is divided into lines, with one line usually corresponding to one sentence. The pronunciation and meaning are shown for each word. Here's a one-line interlinear text as an example.

(1) ahmad az ma ʊzr-xʌ-ji me-kun-a
Ahmad from 1S pardon-want-NOM CONT-do-3S

The top line shows the pronunciation of the words. In this text the prefixes and suffixes are separated with hyphens. (You don't pronounce the hyphens.) The second line has the *gloss*. A gloss is a simple, single-word translation—complications are discussed below!

Having the pronunciation is particularly useful when you are reading a text written in the Dari alphabet. In reading a Dari sentence, if you're not pronouncing it correctly, then you don't understand the grammar or meaning of the sentence! This is particularly true of words joined together with the unwritten *ezafa* marker (e.g., «سيب سرخ» [seb-ε surx]), and of the various pronunciations and meanings of «ی». A mature reader looks at the words on the page and constructs a sentence that makes sense. There is an interplay between the various possible pronunciations of the word, on the one hand, and your knowledge of the grammar of a sentence, on the other.¹ The most straightforward way to check that you understand a sentence—aside from its making sense to you—is to make sure that you are pronouncing it correctly.

Some glosses are just one word. In the example above, [ahmad] is just the name 'Ahmad,' and [az] means 'from.' When a word is broken up with hyphens, then the first part of the pronunciation corresponds to the first part of the gloss, the second part of the pronunciation corresponds to the second part of the gloss, and so forth. In the last word of the example above, [me] is glossed by 'CONT,' [kun] is glossed by 'do,' and [a] is glossed by '3s.' The use of abbreviations—a necessary evil in interlinear texts—is discussed in the next section. An interlinear text should always be accompanied by a list of the abbreviations used.

1.1 Abbreviations

Interlinear texts use abbreviations. In the example above, 1S is an abbreviation for 'first person, singular'—which in English is either 'I' or 'me.' There is also CONT—short for *continuous*—to represent the [me] prefix, which always goes along with continuous actions. And there is 3S for third singular—the ending of the verb showing that the subject is a 'he,' 'she,' or an 'it.' We need some kind of labels for these bits of the word, because there are just no equivalents in English.

¹You already do this in English. When you read, 'I will read a book,' your knowledge of English grammar tells you that 'read' is [rid] and not [red], even though both are possible pronunciations of the written word 'read.'

Nobody appreciates abbreviations at first. There is a learning curve. But there is also a payoff: you don't want to see 'I/me' in every other line of text instead of just 1s, much less 'he/she/it/him/her' instead of just 3s!

1.2 Breaking words apart

Interlinear texts can show the internal structure of words, which can help you to learn about how words are formed in Dari, which in turn will help you to figure out the meanings of new words. In the example above, the word [uzrxλji] could have been glossed simply as 'forgiveness.' But that would obscure the internal structure of the word. It is made up of three parts. [uzr] means 'pardon,' and it can occur as a word on its own. [xλ] is the present tense stem of the word [xλstan] 'to want.'² The present tense stems of verbs are regularly used to create compound words.³ When [uzr] and [xλ] are put together, you get the compound word 'forgiveness-asker.' Finally, the suffix [ji] turns 'forgiveness-asker' into 'forgiveness-asking.' NOM is short for 'nominalizer'—not the easiest word, but better than 'suffix-that-turns-a-word-into-an-abstract-noun.' Then when the verb [kadan] 'to do' is added to [uzrxλji], it becomes a verb meaning 'to ask forgiveness.'

Of course, reasonable people can disagree about whether 'pardon-want-NOM' is really a more helpful gloss than just 'forgiveness.' But the advantages of the former should be apparent: if you know the word [uzr] and can recognize the stem [xλ], then you can guess the meaning of [uzrxλji] without having to look it up in the dictionary. Many, *many* Dari words are formed on this very pattern.

The relation of the meaning of the parts to the meaning of the whole may not always be obvious, so be creative and try to figure it out. If you can't come up with anything that makes sense, you have the option to look the word up the dictionary, if you're familiar with written Dari. The Haim dictionary, for instance, has a separate entry for عذرخواهی.

1.3 Written Dari

The example above is for spoken Dari, but you can also have an interlinear text with written Dari, which is perhaps the situation in which an interlinear text is most helpful. This is a little harder to read because you have to read it right-to-left. (If you think about it for a moment, you'll see that with an interlinear text you'd either have to read the Dari left-to-right or the English right-to-left.)

(2)

	می‌کند.	عذرخواهی	من	از	احمد
	me-kun-ad	uzr-xwλh -i	man	az	ahmad
	CONT-do-3S	pardon-want-NOM	1s	from	Ahmad

This is the same as the previous example, except that the pronunciations are changed a bit to reflect the pronunciation of formal (or written) Dari.

When you're working with an interlinear text in written Dari, do your best to focus on the Dari text (i.e., the top line), using the pronunciation line and the gloss line as references.

2 Questions you should be asking

2.1 What is the relationship between an interlinear text and a translation?

An interlinear text is *not* a translation. The point of a translation is to tell you what a text says. In the example above, a good translation is, "Ahmad is asking me for forgiveness." If your goal is to understand what a text says, using an interlinear text is a pretty bad way to go about that. On the other hand, if you want to understand the grammar of a sentence, a translation is a pretty bad way to go about *that*. For instance, in the English translation of our example sentence, the grammatical

²As in [ma me-xλ-jum bazar burum] 'I want to go to the bazaar.'

³This is everywhere. For instance, [magaskuʃ] 'fly-swatter,' the [kuʃ] part is the present tense stem of [kuʃtan] 'to kill.'

role of just about every word is different.⁴ The interlinear version is more helpful for understanding Dari on its own terms.

When you read, it can be helpful to create weird Dari-English pseudo-translations like, ‘Ahmad is forgiveness-asking of me.’ That can help you to understand the Dari grammar better. As you can imagine, though, such gobbledygook is more helpful when you come up with it, and less helpful when somebody else comes up with it.

2.2 Should I trust the glosses?

In brief: no. People who write dictionaries happily spend pages and pages describing a single word. Dictionaries are therefore always the superior resource for understanding all the possible meanings of a word. A gloss is really a different beast.

The three constraints in creating a gloss are clarity, consistency, and brevity. Any gloss is a compromise between these competing demands. ‘Pardon’ is a decent gloss for [ʊzr], but it does obscure the fact that [ʊzr] can also mean ‘excuse’ or even ‘pretext.’ You need to go to a dictionary for that level of detail. (Sometimes the multiple meanings *have* to be shown in a gloss: there’s no getting around the fact that [xʌndan] can mean both ‘to read’ and ‘to sing.’)

In fact, both glosses and lengthy dictionary definitions are *both* compromises, which only approximate a native speaker’s knowledge. That knowledge did not come from reading dictionaries, of course, but through the experience of having heard a word thousands of times in dozens of different contexts. The best way to learn the meaning of a word is to approximate that experience by exposing yourself to a lot of spoken and written language. The end result might well be that when you hear [ʊzr] you think ‘pardon,’ but with echoes of all the other times you’ve heard the word, knowing tacitly that the meaning branches out metaphorically in the direction of ‘excuse’ or ‘pretext.’ It’s something to aim for in your language learning, anyway.

3 Conclusion

Interlinear texts are helpful tools for language learning, because they get you over two of the bigger obstacles in reading Dari: checking your pronunciation (which reflects your understanding of the sentence), and saving you the trouble of looking up the meanings of all of the new words. There is however a steep learning curve, particularly with the abbreviations. Interlinear texts don’t do all the work for you: they don’t provide a translation of the sentence, and they don’t display all the grammatical relations. (There may be explanations accompanying the interlinear text to help with those things, though.) You need to use your knowledge of Dari grammar to figure that out.

⁴In the English, *me* is the object of the verb, whereas in Dari [az ma] is a preposition phrase. In the English the verb is *ask* and the forgiveness comes in the prepositional phrase *for forgiveness*. In Dari we get an abstract noun ‘forgiveness-asking’ placed into a compound verb construction. The only thing that’s the same in the two languages is that *Ahmad* is the subject.