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“Frog” in Persian and *-š- > -/- Change in Western New Iranian

Abstract

The paper focuses on the discussion and interpretations of the terms denoting “frog (toad)” in Western New Iranian. It attempts particularly to clarify the origin of an obscure lexeme in Classical Persian commenting in this regard on some issues of the Iranian historical phonology.

Keywords: Iranian Zoonyms, Iranian Etymology, Iranian Historical Phonology

Frogs (toads)¹ and amphibians in general, as well as insects, reptiles, etc. were considered in ancient Iran noxious animals, *khrafstars*, creatures belonging to the Lower World. This led to the euphemistic replacement of the original name(s) of frog in Iranian with new terms, mostly imitative, descriptive, or sometimes adaptations of other zoonyms having similar perception in folk imagination. The same situation is observed among the Indo-European languages as a whole: there are no common Indo-European terms for frog or toad, most of the reconstructed protoforms being characteristic of separate families only – Germanic, Slavonic, etc.

The earliest name of “frog (toad)” in Iranian is attested in Avesta as *vazaya-/ā-*, likely to have come from OIran. **wazaga-*, a formation with the suffix *-(a)ga-*² and probably the onomatopoeic root **waz-* “(to make) noise, buzz, whiz” (hardly **waz-* “to move, etc.”).³ This old lexeme has survived in MPers. (Pahlavi)

¹ Although in scientific taxonomy frogs and toads are considered different species (frogs are predominantly aquatic or semiaquatic animals having smooth, moist skins, while toads are terrestrial ones with dry, warty skins), in the folk taxonomy these two groups of amphibians are closely associated with each other and even conceived as the same. The difference between frogs and toads seems to be generally vague in Iranian: only in rare cases toad is specified by a special term, like in Talishi, where it is named as *babazōkla*, literally meaning “(a creature with) protruding, bulging eyes”.

² J. Wackernagel, *Altindische Grammatik*, Göttingen 1954, pp. 544–545, § 390.

³ This same base, with its voiceless variant (*fV/s-*), features in some West Iranian dialects also as an ideophone meaning “copulation of domestic birds” (cf. *vaza kārde* in Talishi, and *fis kirin* in Kurdish).

as *vazaγ*, NPers. *vazaγ*, *bazay* (also in *jol-bazay* “moss”, lit. “frog’s rug/rag”), Khwarezian *wγz /way(a)z/* (with metathesis), and in many New Iranian dialects as *azuzγo/wuzzəga* (Yidgha-Munji),⁴ *vazax/zavax* (in Talishi), *vizax* (Khunsari), *varzay* (Semnani, with intrusive *-r-*), *vaza* (Abyane‘i), *vezak* (Gazi), *vizaq* (Kurdish), *vezgag* (in Tajrish), *mazze* (Sivandi), *gozgā* (Southern Tati), etc. Possibly here belongs also *baža* “moss” (with the loss of the first part of a compound like **jol-baža*) in Abuzeydabadi.⁵ Armenian has preserved an interesting proper name with this lexeme, evidently of apotropaic character: *Vazgēn*, from Mİran. **vazag-ēn* “little/small frog”.⁶

In Middle Iranian, along with Sogd. *čγz-/čayz/* and *γwk/γōk/*, survived in Yaghnobi and Classical Persian in the same forms, there is also Pahl. *vak* “frog”, amply represented in different phonetical garbs in Western dialects: *vak*, *bak*, *bāxa*, *bāya* (in *qōr-bāya*⁷) (in NPers.), *vak*, *vay*, *bāk*, *vakkū* (in Semnani), *bak* (Luri), *gok*, *vok*, *vak* (Gabri), *gak*, *kor-bak* (lit. “blind frog” in Minabi), *gawk* (Bashagardi), *gok* (Kermani Pers.), *baq(a)* (Zaza), *bakey*, *bok*, *bakrīt*, *bakrīk* (Lari), *baq* (Kurd.), *šū-būk* (lit. “night frog” in Lahijan), etc. – all going back to an onomatopoeic base **bak-/*wak-* “(to make) noise, sound, buzz, whir” (not from OIran. **wak-* “to say, speak”).

A similar origin can be ascribed also to *zāya/zāqa* (in Delijan),⁸ *-zūq* (as a second part of *baza-zūq*, in Southern Tati, the first being a reflex of *vazaγ*), and *-zū(q)* (in *gīga-zū(q)*, in Kermani Pers., the initial component being a local variant of *vak*) – from **zāga-* (OIran. **zag-* “to make noise, sound”), cf. NPers. *zāy* “crow, magpie, raven”,⁹ or from **zāγ*, with acoustic element *z-* and onomatopoeic suffix *-āγ*,¹⁰ which is a parallel of *-āz* (*-āž*, *-āč*), a formant of the same nature, cf. NPers. *qalāz/ž*, *kalāž*, Gilaki *kalāč* “magpie”.¹¹ Semantically, the discussed forms denote a “noisy creature, the one who buzzes around”, like *qūrqūrōk* “frog” in Kurdish literally meaning the “one who makes noise”: *qūrqūr* “noise”, with *-ōk*, a suffix of *nomen agentis* (<**āka-*).

A quite isolated name for “frog” in Western New Iranian is Pers. *magal*, recorded also in the dialect of Xvāf as *megal*, which can be derived from **makaδ* (with *-l* < *-δ*) < **makata-* “swift mover”, a fitting epithet for an animal like frog; the base should be OIran. **mak-* “move swiftly”,¹² cf. Pers. *maxīdan* “jump; tremble”; also Khwarezmian *mkd /makaδ/* “gadfly”.¹³

⁴ G. Morgenstierne, *Indo-Iranian Frontier Languages*, vol. 2, Oslo 1938, p. 53.

⁵ G.S. Asatrian, *A Comparative Vocabulary of Central Iranian Dialects*, Tehran 2011, pp. 76–77.

⁶ The Mİran. Suffix *-ēn* (**-aina-*), forming primarily adjectives of substance, functions in a large number of proper names also as an hypocoristic formant. Cf. Arm. (≠Iran.) *Vrkēn*, *Gurgēn*, *Artēn*, etc.

⁷ This is usually seen as a Turkic loan-word.

⁸ G.S. Asatrian, *op. cit.*, p. 449.

⁹ J. Cheung, *Etymological Dictionary of the Iranian Verb*, Leiden 2007, p. 460.

¹⁰ M. Schwartz, *Cautes and Cautopates, the Mitraic Torchbearers*, “Mithraic Studies” 1971, vol. 2, p. 410.

¹¹ U. Schapka *Die persischen Vogelnamen*, Würzburg 1972, pp. 220–221.

¹² H.W. Bailey, *Dictionary of Khotan Saka*, Cambridge 1979, p. 339.

¹³ J. Benzing *Chwaresmischer Wortindex*, Wiesbaden 1983, p. 405.

Incidentally, the most interesting name for frog in West Iranian – in view of its origin – may be *kalāv(a)* [کلاو/کلاوه]¹⁴ in Persian, hitherto unexplained. Here also *kalāvū* [کلاوو] “sort of field-mouse whose rear legs are longer and stronger than the front ones (it jumps when moving, like a frog)”, with the suffix *-ū* (< MPers. *-ūk*). It explicitly derives from **kašápa-* (< OIran. **kasyapa-*, Av. *kasi-ia-pa-* “tortoise”, cf. Skt. *káśyapa-* ‘id.’), with *-l-* < **-š-* and lengthening of *-a-* in the second syllable under a false etymological correlation with *āb* “water”; cf. the regular *kašaf/v* “tortoise” in Persian and *kašavak* in Pahlavi. This is a unique case of **-š- > -l-* in this lexeme in Iranian, including Eastern dialects: Sogd. *kyšph /kišp-/*, Khwar. *ksb /kas(a)b/*, Pashto *kišəp*, Kurd. (Kurmanji) *ku šī*, Ashtiani *kašova*, Mazandarani (Tabari) *kabaz/kavaz*, Talishi *kāsə* (also *lōkapešta* = Pers. *lāk-pušt*), Luri *kīsal*, Gurani *kīsal*, Kurd. (Sorani) *kīsal*, Southern Tati *kasö*, *kasawa*, Zaza *kasa*, etc. From the same etymon Kurmanji reveals (along with *k’usī*) another form with a different meaning: *kawzāl* “crab, cancer”, from **kás(a)p* with subsantivising suffix *-āl*. This variegated posterity of a single protoform – with *-š-* (*-ž-*), or *-l-* (< **-š-*) as in *Kalāv(a)*; with *-s-* and unchanged root vowel (*-a-*, Tal. *-ā-* < *-a-*); and with different root vowels (*-ī-* or *-u-*) – can be explained either by **-sy- > -š-*;¹⁵ retaining of *-s-* in the **-sy-* cluster; or by the effect of the so-called *i-Umlaut*.¹⁶ کلاو/کلاوه

On the whole, most of the “tortoise terms” in Western New Iranian are currently various phonetic adaptations of NPers. *lāk-pušt*, lit. “(animal having) a trough on its back”,¹⁷ or *kāsa-pušt* “(animal with) a bowl on its back”.¹⁸

Regarding Pers. *kalāv(a)*, a term denoting frog, it features, indeed, as a quite particular case in West Iranian. Until now, only two offspring of the same OIran. antecedent manifesting such a shift of meaning, i.e. “tortoise” → “frog”, were known – both in Eastern Iranian: Khotanese *khuyśaa-* meaning “tortoise” and “frog”, and Ossetic *xāfs(ā)* “frog, toad”. For the Ossetes tortoise, it is simply a frog with shield, *wārtjyn xāfs*, just like the Germans who call this animal *Schildkrote*, i.e. “toad with shield”.

Returning back to the **-š- > -l-* development in *kalāv(a)*, it is traced predominantly in Eastern Iranian, namely in Ishkashimi, Sariqoli, and Sanglechi. Cf. Sar. *γewl*, Sangl. *γōl* “ear” (< **gauša*); Sangl., Ishk. *mēl/!* “sheep; ram” (< **maiša-*); Ishk. *xol*, Sar. *xel*, Sangl. *xuāl* “six” (< **xšwaš-*); Ishk. *spəl*, Sangl. *əspəl* “louse” (< **spiša-*); Sar. *sūl* “lungs” (< **suš-i*); Ishk. (*w*)*uznul*, Sar. *zūnal*

¹⁴ The variants کلاو, کلاو, کلاو (‘A.-A. Dehxodā, *Loghat-nāme*, Tehran 1993, s. vv.) seem to be scribal errors, *tašhīfāt*.

¹⁵ P. Horn, *Neupersische Schriftsprache*, [in:] *Grundriss der Iranischen Philologie*, Bd. 1/2, eds. W. Geiger, E. Kuhn, Strassburg 1898–1901, p. 88, § 39b.

¹⁶ G.S. Asatrian, V.A. Livshits, *Origine du système consonantique de la langue kurde*, “Acta Kurdica” 1994, vol. 1, p. 100, fn. 4.

¹⁷ Pers. *lāk/lāvak* “trough, wooden vessel” is likely from **nāwaka-* (OIran. **nāw-*), with *l-* < **n-*.

¹⁸ Tal. *kāsə* is hardly from Pers. *kāsa-pušt* with the possible loss of the second component, for the secondary long *-ā-* here points to a short *-a-*, while historically long *-ā-* becomes *-ō-* in this word in Talishi (cf. Tal. *kōsa* “bowl”).

“daughter-in-law” (< **snušā-*), etc.¹⁹ Wakhi *kal* “armpit, bosom”, allegedly from OIran. **kaša-*, should be, rather, an early East Iranian borrowing.²⁰

Traditionally, **-š-* > *-l-* (along with **-δ-* > *-l-*) figures as a qualifying marker for defining Eastern Iranian lexical elements in West Iranian dialects, mostly in Classical Persian. It proved to be valid for such lexemes (clearly coined in Transoxiana), like Parth. *izγōl-* “to hear” (< **uz-gauša-*); Pers. *farγōl* “delay, procrastination; negligence; big coat, wrapper” (< **fra-gauša-*, cf. Parth. *fragōš-* “to put aside, neglect”); *xilm* “anger” (*xilm-nāk* “angry”) = *xašm/xišm* “id.” (< **aišma-*); *sul* “lungs”, cf. Pahl. *suš*, Pers. *šuš* (< **suš-i*); *γōl* “ear” (< **gauša-*) in the names of certain herbs (probably, “fleawort” and “ribwort”) resembling horse and donkey-ear, *aspa-γōl* (regular Pers. *aspa-γōš*) and *xar-γōl*, respectively (cf. also *γūl* “deaf” in Maz. and Semn.), etc.

However, it does not seem in all the cases in West Iranian, including *kalāv(a)*, this phonetic trait can be adduced as a diagnostic factor pointing to the East Iranian provenance of the given word. For instance, *māl* “sheep, ewe” in Kermanshahi Kurdish and Laki coming definitely from OIran. **maiša-* (*mī(h)* in Kurmanji Kurd.); or Pers. *kal(k)* “armpit, bosom” – decidedly from OIran. **kaša-* (vs. regular *kaš*); or, finally, how do we explain the initial *l-* in *lōr/lūr* “curdle, sort of cheese, filtered yoghurt; ghee” in Classical Persian, Kermani Pers., Kurmanji, and Luri, widely attested also in the Armenian dialects as *lori* “sort of salty cheese” (vs. *šōr* “curdle”)? It must be, of course, from **-š-* in a supposedly MIran. antecedent **šōr* “salt(y)” (cf. Pahl. *sōr* “salty”, *sōrak* “salt (land)”, Parth. *šōr* “salt desert”, *šōrēn* “salty”, Gabri *sūr*, Luri *sūr*, Baluchi *sōr*, Brahui (< Baluchi) *sōr*, Zaza *sōl*, Tal. *sü(süya)* (“salty”), etc.).²¹

Therefore, it is necessary to assume that merely **-š-* > *-l-* change – not strengthened by an additional marker (say, fricative *-γ-* from OIran. **-g-*, like in *γōl*) – is not yet a substantial argument in favour of the Eastern origin of a West Iranian lexeme displaying such a peculiarity. Moreover, unlike **-δ-* > *-l-* having a large sway in the realm of the Eastern Iranian language continuum, **-š-* > *-l-* appears to be a limited phenomenon covering only three small idioms in the Pamir mountains.²²

Probably, we are dealing here with an occasional phenomenon effecting **-š-* in certain phonetic environments in West Iranian. It is not even an areal feature, as the region where **-š-* > *-l-* is active, stands geographically in a quite distant area

¹⁹ J.I. Édel'man, *Sravnitel'naya grammatika vostočnoiranskix yazykov*, Moscow 1986, p. 107; J. Cheung, *The Linguistic and Geographic Position of Pashto within the East Iranian Language Group: I. A Phonological and Lexical Analysis, Iranian Languages and Literatures of Central Asia from the 18th Century to the Present*, eds. M. de Chiara, E. Grassi, Paris 2015, p. 39.

²⁰ I.M. Steblin-Kamenskij, *Étimologičeskij slovar' vaxanskogo yazyka*, St. Petersburg 1999, p. 204.

²¹ This word has apparently no Iranian background. As W.B. Henning (*Two Manichaean Magical Texts, with an Excursus on the Parthian Ending -ēndēh*), “Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies” 1947, vol. 12, no. 1, p. 55) suggests, it can belong to a substrate language of the Dravidian origin and go back to a protoform **suwar* (cf. also T. Burrow, M.B. Emeneau, *A Dravidian Etymological Dictionary*, Oxford 1984, p. 171, № 2201b).

²² On the status of *-l-* < **-š-* in Khotanese, see R.E. Emmerick, *The Consonant Phonemes of Khotanese*, [in:] *Monumentum G. Morgenstierne I*, “Acta Iranica”, 21, Leiden 1981, pp. 206–207, § 7.4.

from Iran. The mechanisms of the transition of the voiceless sibilant *-š- in Iranian to -l- has been described by G. Morgenstierne.²³ “In E. Ir., and among W.Ir. languages in Kurdish, – he says, – there is a tendency to sonorize intervocalic *-š-, and the resulting *-ž- is subject to further changes [...] Probably the back articulation of Ir. *-š- weakened its resistance against the influence of the surrounding vowels. The resulting *-ž- [...] was an unstable sound, which in N.Psht. changes into *g* (Ghilzai also *γ*), in Roshani into *u*, and in Sgl. and Sar. into *l*, *l*.”

In any case, it must be admitted that -l- < *-š-, as an irregular and sporadic phonetic incident, cannot be a decisive marker – at least not for every instance – for the definition of the East Iranian lexical elements in West Iranian.

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²³ G. Morgenstierne, *op. cit.*, p. 53.