

Rulings On Speaking Languages Other Than Arabic

By Dr. 'Abd Al-Rahmaan Aal 'Uthmaan

Praise be to Allaah the Lord of the Worlds, and peace and blessings be upon the noblest of the Prophets and Messengers. Allaah has blessed us with a great language which is the language of the Final Messenger (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) and the Noble Book, the like of which was never revealed before and after which no Book will be revealed, for it is the last of the divine Books.

In gratitude for this blessing, we should preserve this language and feel proud of it. We should teach it to the next generation and fill their hearts with love for it and the desire to maintain it. One aspect of our pride in it is that we should always use it as a means of communication and not resort to using other languages unnecessarily. This is counted as loyalty towards this language. This is also one of the things that will preserve the ummah and its character which distinguishes it from others.

This is also one of the things that have an effect on a person's heart, soul and psyche. Abu'l-'Abbaas Ibn Taymiyah (may Allaah have mercy on him) stated this when he said: Know that getting used to the [Arabic] language clearly has an immense effect on a person's mind, character and religious commitment. It also has the effect of resembling the early generations of this ummah, the Sahaabah and Taabi'een. Imitating them increases one's wisdom, religious commitment and good manners. (*al-Iqtidaa'*, 1/470).

This is because speaking the language of a people is a kind of imitation of them, and the effect that imitating someone has on a person is no secret.

(Also, the Arabic language is part of the religion, and knowing Arabic is obligatory, because understanding the Qur'aan and Sunnah is obligatory. They cannot be understood without knowing Arabic, and whatever is essential for fulfilling an obligation is also obligatory).

There are aspects of this obligation which are *farid 'ayn* (individual obligation) and others which are *farid kifaayah* (communal obligation – if some people fulfil this obligation, the rest of the community will not be held accountable, otherwise all will be to blame). This idea was transmitted by Abu Bakr ibn Abi Shaybah from 'Umar ibn Zayd. He said: 'Umar wrote to Abu Moosa (may Allaah be pleased with him) and said: "...Learn and understand Arabic well, and read the Qur'aan in Arabic, for it is Arabic."

According to another report narrated from 'Umar (may Allaah be pleased with him), he said: "Learn Arabic, for it is part of your religion, and learn how the estate of a deceased person is to be shared out, for they are part of your religion." What 'Umar (may Allaah be pleased with him) enjoined, understanding Arabic and understanding sharee'ah, sums up what is needed, because the religion combines words and actions. Understanding Arabic is the way to understand texts and reports, and to understand the Sunnah is to understand the practical implications. (Comment by Shaykh al-Islam in *al-Iqtidaa'*, 1/1-470)

Hence we know that this is a shar'i matter on which a number of shar'i rulings are based. Speaking in languages other than Arabic falls into two categories, each of which may be further divided into two kinds, as follows:

1 – Usage of single words, such as people's names, months or machines, etc. These are of two kinds:

(i) Those which are still foreign, i.e., they have not become mixed with Arabic or been

adapted and become like part of the language. These are of two kinds:

- (a) Words whose meaning is not known:

Harb al-Karmaani (may Allaah have mercy on him) said:

“(Chapter on naming the months in Farsi): I said to Ahmad: The Persians have days and months which they call by names which we do not know (i.e., we do not know their meanings). He disliked that intensely.”

It was also narrated that Mujaahid regarded it as makrooh to say *Aadharmah* or *Dhi Maah* (the names of some months in Farsi). I [the narrator] said, What if this is a man's name by which he is called? He [Mujaahid] disliked that. He [the narrator] said: I once asked Ishaq about dating letters with the months of the Persians such as *Aadharmah* or *Dhi Maah*. He said, if there is nothing in these names which is objectionable, then I hope there is nothing wrong with that. Ibn al-Mubaarak used to dislike the idea of swearing oaths by “Eezad” he said, I cannot be sure that these are not connected to the names of things that were worshipped. And the same applies to Persian names. He said, I asked Ishaq another time. What if a man learns the Roman and Persian months? He said: Every name from their speech which is known (to have an acceptable meaning) is fine. (Quoted from *al-Iqtidaa'*, 1/461-462)

Abu'l-Abbaas Ibn Taymiyah (may Allaah have mercy on him) explained Imaam Ahmad's view of these names as being makrooh by saying that a name whose meaning is unknown may have a haraam meaning, so a Muslim should not say anything whose meaning he does not know. (See *al-Iqtidaa'*, 1/462).

And he said: “Anything whose meaning was unknown, Ahmad regarded it as makrooh.” (*al-Iqtidaa'*, 1/462; see also p.464).

- (b) Words whose meaning is known. These are of two kinds:

- Those which have forbidden meanings:

These – without a doubt – are not allowed, because words whose meanings are not known are not allowed. (*al-Iqtidaa'* 1/462; see also p. 464).

- Those that do not have a haraam meaning. These are of two kinds:

One: those which are spoken by necessity, such as the names of some manufactured goods or scientific terminology and the like, for which Arabic equivalents do not exist or which the listener will only understand in their foreign forms. (Al-Tabaraani narrated in *al-Kabeer* (6/218) that Salmaan (may Allaah be pleased with him) met a slave girl and told her in Farsi to pray...). So it is OK to speak these languages in this case, but one should strive to Arabize them in order to protect the Arabic language from shrinking and retreating.

Two: speaking them unnecessarily, which may take two forms:

- When this happens because a person admires and likes that foreign language, and prefers it. This is not right, and the one who does this is suffering from shortcomings and psychological defeat.

- Where this does not stem from admiration and love of the foreign language. It seems that this is of two types:

- (A) It happens infrequently or rarely. There is nothing wrong with this, in sha Allaah. Al-Bukhaari (may Allaah have mercy on him) said; “*Baab man takallama bi'l-Faarisiiyyah*

wa'l-Rataanah (Chapter on one who speaks Farsi or another foreign language)" (*al-Bukhaari ma'a al-Fath*, 6/183 – *al-rataanaah* (or *al-ritaanaah*) means speaking languages other than Arabic. See *al-Fath* 6/184). Under this heading he narrated three ahaadeeth:

The first hadeeth: The hadeeth of Jaabir (may Allaah be pleased with him) who said: "I said, 'O Messenger of Allaah, we have slaughtered an animal that belongs to us and ground a saa' [a measure of weight] of barley [i.e., we have prepared a meal], so come, you and a group of others.' The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) shouted, 'O people of al-Khandaq! Jaabir has made some *soor*, so come on!'" (Narrated by al-Bukhaari in *al-Jihaad, Man takallama bi'l-Faarisyyah wa'l-rataanah*, hadeeth no. 3070, 6/183. He also narrated it in two other places, hadeeth no. 4101 and 4102).

The point here is the word *soor*, which is a general word for food or for food to which one invites others. With a hamzah, the word (*su'r*) means leftovers.

Al-Haafiz said: "The former is what is meant here." (*al-Fath*, 6/184). He narrated from al-Tabari that this comes from Farsi. He was asked, Doesn't this means leftovers? He said, That was not leftovers; it was a Persian word referring to an invitation to a meal. (*al-Fath*, 6/184).

The second hadeeth: the hadeeth of Umm Khaalid bint Khaalid ibn Sa'eed, who said: "I came to the Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) with my father, wearing a yellow shirt. The Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said, '*Sanah, sanah.*'" (narrated by al-Bukhaari in *al-Jihaad, Man takallama bi'l-Faarisyyah wa'l-rataanah*, hadeeth no. 3071, 6/183. He also mentioned it in other places. See hadeeths no. 3874, 5823, 5845, 5993).

"Abd-Allaah [Abd-Allaah ibn al-Mubaarak (may Allaah have mercy on him), one of the narrators of this hadeeth] said: In Ethiopian it means *hasanah*, i.e. beautiful. The point here is that he said '*Sanah, sanah.*' According to some reports, he said, *Sanaah*, with a lengthened vowel sound. In both cases the ha' (h) may be omitted, and in some reports it appears with the final ha' omitted.

Umm Khaalid (may Allaah be pleased with her) was born in Ethiopia; she was with her father and she was a small child [on the occasion described in the hadeeth].

The third hadeeth: it was narrated from Abu Hurayrah (may Allaah be pleased with him) that al-Hasan ibn 'Ali took a date from the dates that had been given in charity, and put it in his mouth. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said to him in Farsi, "*Kikh, kikh!*" Do you not know that we do not eat what has been given in charity?" (al-Bukhaari, *al-Jihaad, Baab man takallama bi'l-Faarisyyah wa'l-rataanah*, hadeeth no. 3072; it is also mentioned in *al-Zakaah, Baab maa yudhkar fi'l-Sadaqah li'l-Nabi* (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him), hadeeth no. 1491, 3/354).

The words "*Kikh, kikh,*" are words which are said to deter a small child from taking something dirty. It was said that these words are Arabic, or that they are foreign; some said that they were words that had been adopted into Arabic. (See *al-Fath*, 3/355). What al-Bukhaari did [including it in the chapter on speaking Farsi and other foreign languages] indicates that he thought they were foreign words. And Allaah knows best.

Al-Haafiz said: al-Karmaani disputed whether these three words (in these three ahaadeeth) were foreign, because the first could have been one of the words that happen to be the same in both languages; the second could have come from the word 'hasanah', with the first syllable omitted to make it shorter; and the third may have been a kind of onomatopoeia. Ibn al-Muneer responded to the last point by saying: The reason for this is that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) was addressing the child in a way that she would understand; he was not speaking as one adult man to another. This is like speaking to a non-Arab in words of his language that he will understand. I say, hence the other reports may also be understood in a similar fashion. (*al-Fath*, 6/185)

This last point may not be valid, because all the people involved were Arabs.

It may be that the first and third examples were words that had been adopted into Arabic, and had become part of the day-to-day speech of the Arabs.

But in the second example – the hadeeth of Umm Khaalid – it may be the case that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) was speaking to this little girl in a pleasant and joking manner, because she had just come from Ethiopia and it is quite likely that she knew a few words of the Ethiopian language. And Allaah knows best.

Also relevant to this discussion is the report narrated by Ibn 'Asaakir in his *Taareekh (Mukhtasar Taareekh Dimashq, 10/297)*, which was quoted by al-Dhahabi with his isnaad (*al-Siyar, 4/103*), that 'Ali (may Allaah be pleased with him) said to al-Qaadi Shurayh – whose judgement concerning some matter had impressed him – “*qaaloon*”, which in (Byzantine) Greek means “Well done!” or “Excellent!”. Shurayh was not a Roman (a Byzantine), nor was he in the land of the Romans; he was from Kindah in the Yemen, and was the governor of Kufa (in 'Iraq) for sixty years.

Ibn Abi Shaybah narrated – and in the isnaad are some people who are unknown – that Abu Hurayrah (may Allaah be pleased with him) looked out over the market place and said, “*Suhtun wa daast*” (*Musannaf Ibn Abi Shaybah, 9/12*)

Ibn Abi Shaybah also narrated that Mundhir al-Thawri said: “A man asked Ibn al-Hanafiyyah about cheese. He said, ‘O slave girl, take this dirham and buy some *yaneer* with it.’ [in some modern editions it says *neezah*]. So she bought some *yaneer* and brought it to him.” (*al-Musanaaf, 9/12*. *Yaneer* means cheese).

Al-Qurtubi said – attributing it to al-Khateeb – that Abu 'Abd al-Malik, the freed slave of Umm Miskeen bint 'Aasim ibn 'Umar ibn al-Khattaab, said: “My mistress sent me to fetch Abu Hurayrah and he came with me. When he reached the door he said, ‘*Andar?*’ She said, ‘*Andaroon.*’” (*al-Jaami' li Ahkaam al-Qur'aan, 12/218*)

Al-Qurtubi said: it was mentioned that Ahmad ibn Saalih said: al-Daraawirdi was one of the people of Isfahaan who settled in Madeenah. He used to say to anyone who wanted to enter, *Andaroon*, so the people of Madeenah gave him the nickname of al-Daarawirdi. (*Al-Jaami' li Ahkaam al-Qur'aan, 12*; also mentioned by al-Dhahabi in *al-Siyar, 8/366/218*. *Andaroon* is a Farsi word meaning ‘come in’ etc.)

Habeeb ibn Abi Thaabit said: We used to hear Abu Saalih (i.e., Abu Saalih the freed slave of Umm Haani') saying *Dazawzan*, which in Farsi means books. (Narrated by al-Nasaa'i in *al-Kubra, 2/252*).

These reports indicate that the Salaf sometimes used to speak a few words of languages other than Arabic. Abu'l-'Abbaas ibn Taymiyah (may Allaah have mercy on him) said: “It was narrated that a group of them used to say word after word in foreign languages.”

In summary, word after word is something which may be excusable. Usually they do that either because the person to whom they are speaking is a foreigner or is used to speaking a foreign language, and they want him to understand them. (*al-Iqtidaa', 1/468*)

1. Speaking foreign words frequently for no good reason should be avoided.

Al-Shaafa'i (may Allaah have mercy on him) said: “Allaah called those who seek His provision by buying and selling ‘*al-tujjaar*’ (merchants).” The Arabs always called them *tujjaar* then the Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) called them what Allaah has called them in the Arabic language. *Samaasirah* is a Persian word for merchants, and we do not like it when a man who knows Arabic calls a *taajir* (merchant) anything but a *taajir*. He should not speak Arabic then call something by a foreign name. This is because the language which Allaah chose is the Arabic language, in which He revealed His holy Book, and which He made the language of His

final Prophet, Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him). Hence we say: everyone who is able to learn Arabic should learn it, because it is the first language which they should be keen to learn, but we do not say that it is haraam to speak other languages.” (Transmitted in *al-Iqtidaa'*, 1/465).

Shaykh al-Islam [Ibn Taymiyah] (may Allaah have mercy on him) said: “Al-Shaafa'i regarded it as makrooh for anyone who knew Arabic to call things by anything other than their Arabic names, or to speak Arabic mixed with foreign words. What the imaams said is narrated from the Sahaabah and Taabi'een.” (Transmitted in *al-Iqtidaa'*, 1/465)

The second kind: of the first category:

Words that have been mixed with Arabic and introduced to the language so that they have become part of it. This is Arabization, which falls into two categories:

1. Words which the Arabs used before their language came into contact with other languages and was influenced by them.

These words are counted as coming under the same ruling as Arabic words, and there is nothing wrong with using them.

2. Words which have entered the language after it came into contact with other languages and was influenced by them. Most such cases have occurred in the last two centuries, when most of the Muslim world fell under the control of its enemies, in addition to the fact that the ummah started to adopt many things in the fields of culture, industry, etc., so the accompanying terminology in most cases remained in the form in which it first came. So people say these foreign words as readily as they speak Arabic words, without paying any attention to their origins. When they say them, they are not intending to speak a foreign language, whether they know the origins of these words or not.

In this case, the one who says these words is not counted as imitating foreigners or trying to be like them, so he is not to blame in any shar'i sense.

But there is another issue to which we must pay attention, which is that these alien words that have entered the language must be replaced with words coined from Arabic roots. We should also alert people to the origins of these words so that this will help in getting rid of them, because they are crowding out Arabic words and if they become too widespread they will corrupt and undermine the language, as is quite obvious.

Note: It is the habit of the Arabs, when they use a foreign word, to pronounce it in an Arabic fashion, without any effort to pronounce it as foreigners do or to soften their voice or change the accent. The principle they follow in this case is, “it is foreign so play with it” – as was stated by some of the earlier scholars of language. This is contrary to the practice of educated people who try too hard to pronounce such words with a foreign accent.

The second category: phrases and sentences, as opposed to individual words. These are of two types:

1. Those which are used by necessity. There is nothing wrong with this, such as when speaking to someone who does not know Arabic. But efforts should be made to spread the Arabic language and support it by all possible means so that it will be the language of communication between the Arabs and others as it was during the times when Muslims were powerful and had the upper hand.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allaah have mercy on him) said: “Hence when the early Muslims went to live in Syria and Egypt, where the people spoke (Byzantine) Greek, and Iraq and Khurasaan, where the people spoke Farsi, and the Maghrib (North Africa), where the

people spoke Berber, they taught the people to speak Arabic, until it became the prevalent language among the peoples of these regions, Muslims and kaafirs alike. This is how it was in Khurasaan in the past.” (*al-Iqtidaa’*, 1/469-470)

Then they [the people of Khurasaan] took the matter of language too lightly, and they got used to speaking to one another in Farsi, until it became prevalent among them and Arabic was forsaken by many of them. Undoubtedly this is makrooh. The proper way is to get used to speaking Arabic, so that children can learn it in school and in the home, thus the symbol of Islam will prevail and the people of Islam will prevail. This makes it easy for the people of Islam to understand the meanings of the Qur’aan and Sunnah and the words of the Salaf, unlike those who get used to another language then when they want to move to Arabic, it becomes difficult.

2. Those for which there is no need. This falls into two categories:

- (a) Cases where the motive is love and admiration. This should not be done, whether it is a lot or a little, lest the one who does it should fall into a kind of academic hypocrisy. It is like imitating and resembling them. This usually happens a lot among those who are suffering from psychological defeat, especially at times when the ummah is weak and in a state of retreat. Strong nations try to impose their culture on weak and defeated nations, and this happens at the expense of the language.

The language of a region is usually the language of the nation which is dominating it. When the Muslims were dominating other nations, the Arabic language was the language of communication in many countries whose origins were foreign. (Ibn Khaldoon – may Allaah have mercy on him – makes some useful comments on this topic. See *al-Muqaddimah*, p. 379).

Ibn Hazam (may Allaah have mercy on him) said: “The language declines, in part or in full, when a nation is defeated or when others invade its homeland, or when its people move from their homeland and mix with others. A nation’s language, knowledge and history are supported when that nation is strong and its people are dynamic and have free time. But when a nation is destroyed and overwhelmed by its enemies, the people become preoccupied with fear, needs, humiliation and serving their enemies, so they have no time for original thought. This is probably the reason why their language disappears, why they forget their origins and history and the knowledge they had established. We can witness this in real life, and it is only common sense. (*al-Ahkaam*, 1/31)

(b) Cases where the motive is not love or admiration. These are of two types:

- (i) Where people have gotten used to it or done it a lot. This is also not right, because “the Arabic language is the symbol of Islam and its people. Languages are among the greatest symbols of nations, by which they are distinguished.” (Shaykh al-Islam in *al-Iqtidaa’*, 1/463).

Ibn Abi Shaybah narrated that ‘Umar (may Allaah be pleased with him) said: “No man learns Farsi but he becomes evil (*khautha*) [this is how it appears in some editions; the word may be *khautha*, i.e., he becomes treacherous], and no man becomes evil but his chivalry is compromised.” (*al-Musannaf*, 9/11).

It was narrated that Sa’d ibn Abi Waqqaas (may Allaah be pleased with him) heard some people speaking Farsi. He said: “What is this Magianism (Zoroastrianism) after *Haneefiyyah* (pure monotheism)?” (*al-Musannaf*, 9/11)

It was narrated that ‘Ataa’ said: “Do not learn the languages of the non-Arabs and do not enter upon them in their churches, for the Divine wrath is descending upon them.” (*al-Musannaf*, 9/11).

Shaykh al-Islam ibn Taymiyyah (may Allaah have mercy on him) said: “Getting used

to speaking a language other than Arabic, which is the symbol of Islam and the language of the Qur'aan, so that this becomes the habit of the region and its people, or the members of a household, or a man and his friend, or the people of the marketplace, or the governors, or the rulers, or the scholars – undoubtedly this is makrooh, because it is an imitation of the foreigners, which is makrooh as stated above.” (*al-Iqtidaa'*, 1/469)

- (ii) When this happens rarely. This is better than the first case, but it should still be avoided.

And Allaah knows best. May Allaah bless our Prophet Muhammad and his family and companions.

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See also: [[The Status of the Arabic Language in Islâm by Shaykh ul-Islâm ibn Taymiyyah](#)] [[Learning Arabic in an obligation \(Fard\) on EVERY Muslim](#)]