

A first detailed language map of Gilan Province, Iran

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On the southern shores of the Caspian Sea – the world’s largest lake – lies Iran’s fourth smallest province, Gilan. With a population of just over 2.5 million people (ISC 2016), Gilan’s 52 cities and 2500 villages are spread across the fertile plains bordering the Sea, and extend into the forested valleys of the Alborz Mountain range that rims the inland borders of the province.

In this paper, I introduce the language situation in Gilan Province and review the attempts that have been made to map linguistic diversity in this province. I then describe the process of collecting language distribution data for the *Atlas of the Languages of Iran* (ALI) research programme and the creation of the first province-wide language distribution map based on a settlement-level data set. Since the beginnings of recorded history, Gilan has been home to diverse ethnicities living alongside one another. The vernacular languages of the province have historically been the Iranian languages Gilaki, Taleshi, and Tati. Islands of immigrant language communities established over the past few centuries, and still spoken in some areas today, are the additional Iranian languages Northern Kurdish, Laki, and Lori. Azarbaijani Turkic, originally limited to cities in the northern districts, has gained ground over the past centuries as well. These groups have long shared Persian as a lingua franca, and Persian has recently emerged as the dominant mother tongue in most parts of Gilan Province (Lecoq 1989, Stilo 2018). Initial representations of the language situation in Gilan came about through maps of ethnic diversity, which is commonly used as a proxy – albeit imperfect – for linguistic diversity. Important ethnic maps were those of the *Atlas Narodov Mira* (Bruk & Apenchenko 1964), the CIA (1982), and the *TAVO* atlas (Orywal 1986). Bazin et al. (1982) produced the first and only language map of Gilan Province in particular, but it shows language areas in a very general way. Orywal (1988), Izady (2006-2022) and Hourcade (2013) show the languages of Gilan in the context of Iran as a whole, but are likewise lacking in detail. Despite all these valuable attempts at understanding and representing the language situation in Gilan Province, its diversity has yet to be explored in a systematic or thorough way. Along with the general nature of the existing maps, the location and geographic extent of individual language communities varies greatly among them. All of the maps are missing at least one of the languages that has been reported from the literature, and none of the maps takes into account the sizable new generations of mother-tongue Persian speakers who now are found throughout the province.

In order to provide a first, fine-grained picture of language distribution in Gilan, I carried out research with residents from each of the province’s districts between 2018 and 2022. I gathered information on the language communities found in each village of Gilan Province through existing literature, contact with local authorities and highly mobile residents, and interviews with community members. This comprehensive data set on language distribution in Gilan is now being prepared as a first detailed, interactive language distribution map of Gilan Province. Going forward, this language distribution data will be used to help plan for collection of linguistic data – both questionnaire data and documentation of oral texts – from sites across the province.

Keywords: linguistic geography, language mapping, language documentation, languages of the Middle East, Iranian languages

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