

Of Teeth, Ribs, and Reproduction in Classical Persian

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Persian dictionaries explain the Classical Persian phrase, *az bun-i dandān* to mean both, “very unwillingly,” as well as “very willingly” (چترائی ۱۳۸۰؛ حیدری ۱۳۹۰؛ ایرانی ۱۳۹۱؛ see also ج ۲، انوری ۱۳۸۳). I will present a few examples of these contradictory meanings of the expression here. First, *az bun-i dandān* in the sense of “quite willingly.”

The poet, Qaṭrān of Tabrīz (d. 465/1073) writes (divan, p. 286):

همیشه دندان سودی بجنگشان اکنون به طوع چاکرشان گردد از بن دندان

The second hemistich, in which the phrase *ba ṭawʿ*, “willingly” modifies *az bun-i dandān* shows that the expression has to do with great inclination. Similarly, the expression *az bun-i dandān* must be taken to mean “eagerly” in the following quatrain cited by Khalīl of Sharwān, who compiled a collection of quatrains from the works of earlier poets in the 7th century A.H./13th century A.D. (خلیلی شروانی، فخره ۱۹۴۴):

چون زلف تو حال خود مشویش بکنم خاک درت از دیده منقش بکنم
جان از بن دندان بدهم، گر بدهی چندان شکر از لب که دهان خوش بکنم

The second verse: “I will eagerly (*az bun-i dandān*) give up my life in exchange for a sweet kiss with which you might favor me,” confirms that the expression was connected to eagerness sometime before the 13th century A.D.

Similar evidence from Classical Persian prose may be listed in which *az bun-i dandān* means “willingly.” For instance, the author of the *Marzbā Nāma* (composed between 607-622 A.H./1211-1225) writes (روایندی):
 (۱۳۵۵، ص ۸۶):

“... عقده این محنت از پای من به دندان برگشائی، تا چون خلاصی باشد از بن دندان خدمت تو همه عمر لازم دانم.”

Strangely enough, Classical Persian prose also records this expression in contexts that imply the opposite sense of “with great reluctance.” The great official and historian of the Ghaznavid period, Abu al-Faḍl-i Baihaqī (385-470 A. H./995-1078 A.D.) quotes the Ghaznavid king, Mas‘ūd I (r. 421-432 A.H./1030-1040 A.D.) to have said about an enemy prince: “The son of Kākū is very reluctantly [*az bun-i dandān*] being quiet” (۳۴۵ ص ۱۳۵۶، بیهقی). This different sense of the expression is confirmed by evidence from the works of commentators on the Qur‘ān, who tend to be careful in translating Arabic words and expressions into their closest Persian equivalents, because they don’t want to risk transmitting the text of the holy write inaccurately. For example, in his mystical commentary on the Qur‘ān (composed circa 520 A.H./1126 A.D.), Maibudī uses the expression *az bun-i dandān* to render the Arabic *karhan*, “unwillingly” (ص ۱۳۵۷، ج ۲، ص ۷۸۶ میبدی). By contrast, the Shi‘ite theologian, Abū al-Futūh-i Rāzī (470-552/1078-1158) in his great commentary that was composed in the first half of the 6th/12th century and is therefore, contemporary with Maibudī’s work, uses the same phrase in the opposite sense of “eagerly” (ص ۱۳۷۵، ج ۷، ص ۳۰۲ ابوالفتوح رازی). Thus, two contemporary commentators on the Qur‘ān, who belong to two different sects of Islam, use the same expression to express opposite ideas although both are careful not to mistranslate the text. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the expression *az bun-i dandān* had developed two contradictory senses as early as the 12th century A.D. in Iran (cf. ۱۳۵۳، حاکمی). But why would this be so, and what could have led to this development?

Polysemy is neither rare nor strange in itself (cf. Modern American *bad*, “bad,” and African American *bēd*, “good”). The words *uncouth* and *silly*, which in Old English had the meanings of “unknown” and “blessed” respectively, have changed to connote very different ideas in Modern English (Lerer 2007, p.143). Similarly, the Persian expression *az bun-i dandān* has developed contradictory meanings through a process of extension in lexis of one of its parts. The key to understanding what has happened to this expression is the change in the sense of the word *dandān*.

Scholars who have considered this phrase have tried to explain its polysemy in various ways (eg. ایرانی ۱۱۰-۱۰۹ ص ۱۳۹۰، حیدری ۵۶ ص ۱۳۹۱). I want to propose another possibility; namely, that the phrase *az bun-i dandān* may be rooted in an older expression, perhaps common to a number of Indo-European language, which may have expressed the ideas of “from the bottom of one’s heart, heartily, sincerely.”

The source of the confusion is that the word *dandān*, in this expression is taken to have its old meaning of “teeth.” However, the Old Iranian word for tooth, based on the Indo-European **dont-* and **dnt-*, (cf. Avestan *dantan*, as well as *dātā* Bartholomae 1904, pp. 683, 728) has given us not only the word for “tooth”, but also the one for “rib”. Mo‘īn’s dictionary cites the word *dand* meaning both *dandéh* “rib”, and *dandān* “tooth”. In many areas of Iran both *dand* and *dandah* are still used in the sense of “tooth”. Thus, in the dialect of Khurāsān, *dandah shū* “tooth brush”, is still common (اکبری شالچی، ذیل دند). Perhaps because of the similarity of the arrangement of the teeth on the jawbone with the arrangement of the ribs upon the vertebral column, the word for “tooth” has extended its meaning to the “ribs.” We know that as late as the 10th century

A.D., the word most commonly used for the “rib” was *pahlū* (Avestan *parešu*, from Old Iranian **parthu*) as well as the phrase *ustuxān-i pahlū*, “the rib bone.” This is confirmed by the oldest medical text in Persian as well as by the Persian translation of al-Ṭabarī’s commentary on the Qur’an (see ج ۱، صص ۴۴-۴۵؛ طبری، ص ۵۰). However, this old usage gradually died out and *pahlū* came to mean “side.” Meanwhile, the old word for “tooth,” namely, *danda* gained the sense of “rib” by extension in lexis. It seems to me that if we take the word *dandān* in the phrase, *az bun-i dandān* to mean “ribs” instead of “teeth,” we can explain this problematic phrase as “from the bottom of one’s hear [lit. from the bottom of the ribcage]” (cf. New Persian, *az tah-i dil*, and *az šamīm-i qalb*, both meaning “from the bottom of the heart”).

What makes me think that this interpretation is not too wild is that the Indo-European worldview considered the chest to be the seat of strong emotions (cf. Onians 1951, pp.26-27, 30-33, 73, 117, 147-149, 168-171, 209 n.3). Thus, strong like or dislike could be expressed by reference to the chest area as the Latin expression *ab imo pectore*, “from the bottom of the chest (*pectus*)” demonstrates. In his commentary on Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* (iii.55), E. J. Kenny attributes the expression to Quintus Ennius (Lucretius 1971, p.83). However, the expression has been used by earlier authors such as Catulus (54-84 B.C.) and Virgil (Green 2005, pp.144-145; Virgil 1928, p.441).

If my conjecture that the Persian expression *az bun-i dandān* and the Latin expression *ab imo pectore* express the Indo-European association of strong emotions with the thoracic region is correct, then similar expressions should exist in other Indo-European literatures. However, that is a matter for Indo-Europeanists because it falls well outside my area of specialization. But there is an additional issue concerning the use of *dand* in the sense of “teeth” in Persian literature and folklore to which I would now like to turn.

There is a common curse or insult in New Persian that says: *dandat narm šavad* (or *dandet narm šé* in vernacular Persian). This curse is understood to mean “may your ribs be crushed.” For instance, Noland and Warren, in their essay on Persian insults, list it as *dāndet narm*, and translate it as “may your ribs get crushed” (Noland and Warren 1981, p.231). But as I pointed out before, the Persian word *dānd*, with the accent on the first syllable, does not mean “ribs,” it means “teeth.” In Classical Persian, the stress falls on the first syllable of the word *dānd*, “teeth.” By contrast, the modern word *dandéh* meaning “ribs”, stresses the second syllable. I believe that rather than wishing injury to the thoracic region of the person to whom it is addressed, the expression, *dāndet narm* lays a curse of castration upon the recipient.

The loss of teeth is symbolically connected with the loss of seed and progeny in the writings of the ancients (e.g. Pliny, xi.37, 168f; cf. also Onians, 1988, p.237 and especially note 5). Teeth, in other words, have symbolically been connected to sexuality and procreation (e.g. Thass-Thienemann, vol.1, pp.284-88). At least in Classical Persian, virtually every manual of dream interpretation connects the loss of teeth with loss of one’s children or other relatives. For instance, one of the earliest manuals of dream interpretation, probably composed before the 13th century A.D., lists the symbolic equivalence of individual teeth with specific relatives such as aunts, uncles etc. (افشار ۱۳۸۴، بخش ۱ صص ۲۱۸-۲۱۹؛ بخش ۲، ص ۱۵۰). But one of the most interesting examples of the symbolic equivalence of teeth and progeny is found in the Classical Persian *Qābūs Nāma* or *The Book of Qābūs* (composed between 457-475/1064-1082), which belongs to the genre of Mirrors for Princes. The following is my English translation of the story:

I have heard that [the Calif] Hārūn al-Rashīd had a dream in which he saw that all of his teeth fell out of his mouth together. In the morning a dream interpreter was brought [to him], and he asked him “what is the interpretation of this dream?” The interpreter responded “May the commander of the faithful have a long life, [the meaning of the dream is that] all of your kin will die before you such that none of your kin

remains.” Hārūn said: “Give him one hundred lashes for having uttered such a painful statement in my face. If all of my kin are to die before me, then what is the sense of my having lived at all?” A different dream interpreter was then brought and was told the same dream. The interpreter said, “This dream of the commander of the faithful indicates that his lordship will live longer than all of his relations.” Hārūn said, “The path of wisdom is the same. His interpretation is not different. But there is a great difference between [his way of] stating [it] and the other’s. Give this man one hundred gold pieces.” (قابوسنامه صص ۴۴، ۲۹۲).

It appears to me that given the existing textual and philological evidence, it is reasonable to understand that the word *dand* in the Classical Persian expression *az bun-i dandān*, “from the bottom of one’s heart [lit. chest]” should be taken to mean “ribs, chest” while the same word in the Modern Persian insult *dandet narm*, “may your teeth rot” should be understood to mean “teeth.” Interestingly enough, *dand* has maintained its older meaning in the modern insult and its more modern sense in the classical expression.

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