



## The origin of the Persian =e copula and related questions. Reflections on the development of copulas in New Persian and Gavruni

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مثال هستی با نیستی روان و تن است  
روان حقیقت هستی و نیستی بدن است  
نه صرف هست هویدا نه صرف نیست پدید  
نمایش خوش از آمیزش دو مقترن است  
نه هست نیست شدستی نه نیست هست شود  
نه حق جهان نه جهان حق نه جای این سخن است  
مرا چه حد که بگویند آن من است و من او  
هر آنچه هست وی است و هر آنچه نیست من است  
نه عکس شخص و نه ظل و نه موج بحر و نه یم  
که ظل و شخص و یم و بحر جمله خویشتن است  
بگوش کس نرود این حدیث نغز نشاط  
بدل بگو، نه بهر دل، دلی که ممتحن است

Existence and nothingness are like unto body and soul:  
Nothingness is the body – the soul's truth of the Existing all.

Neither is it completely evident, nor is it not obvious,  
Of the mixed two binaries, it is the spectacle gorgeous.

'There is' does not become 'is not', nor 'there is not' becomes 'a thing'  
Not the truth of the world, nor the world of truth: talk of this here is unfitting.

It concerns me not when they say 'that is I' or 'I am He',  
Whatever exists, it is He, and whatever is not – 't is I.

No reflection of the self, no shadow; neither lake nor wave of sea,  
The shadow, the self, the lake, the sea are all parts of Me.

This fine speech of Neshat's no ear can rightly hear,  
But speak it to the heart: the tested one, so dear.

Neshat Esfahani (1759-1829)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Many of the words discussed in this article are found in the poem – it is, of course, not the reason why I chose it as an epigraph. When talking about copulas and the verb 'to be' we assume that there is a common understanding of what "being" means. Yet, the tried heart of the mystic comes to tell us that "to exist" might mean something else also

## ABSTRACT

In this article, various forms of both copulas and existential verbs in Middle and New Iranian are discussed. The main focus throughout is the origin, development and reflections connected to the Iranian copula paradigm in *\*b-*. This paradigm has evolved in various ways depending on the dialect and chronological stage, and it is argued that a form thereof is the origin of the Iranian New Persian 3SG copula *-e*, whose origin is presented in detail at the end of the study. To reach this conclusion, various forms of copulas and existential verbs in Early Judeo-Persian and other Early New Persian dialects, but also in another Iranian language (Gavruni), are analyzed

KEYWORDS: Persian studies, Iranian linguistics, Gavruni, historical morphology, morphosyntax

## 1. *Introduction*

While much has been published on copulas in Iranian languages, the fate of ‘to be’ and the copula in Persian are still mysterious to some extent. For instance, the origin of the spoken Iranian Persian 3SG copula *=e* has not yet been explained. It contrasts with the 3SG copula of Classical Persian and written Iranian Persian (*ast*)<sup>2</sup>, Tajiki (*ast/hay/ay*), and with that of Dari (*asta*). To study these copulas, and the verb ‘to be’ in modern Persian in general is no simple task, and this study tackles only some of the many problems connected to this question. It will lead me to consider the copula and the verb ‘to exist’ in another Iranian language, Gavruni. While this language is not closely related to Persian, and while it has undergone different

gether. In this study, names of famous and modern poets are not transcribed accurately, but according to the common usage. I thank Prof. Judith Josephson for kindly reading a previous version of this article, and providing me with very useful comments and corrections, the two anonymous reviewers for very useful suggestions and references. I also thank my father, Prof. Gilles Bernard, for his help with the organization of the ideas of this study, and my Gavruni informants who have helped me by providing me data and answering questions. I am solely responsible for any mistakes or misconceptions therein. All translations, unless indicated otherwise, are by me.

<sup>2</sup> An anonymous reviewer has written that it should be emphasized that the *=e* copula is colloquial Persian. I disagree with that point: even in official speeches of politicians, royal family members, etc. *=e* can be heard, and in no way it is colloquial in the sense that it should be viewed as “informal”. However, it is indeed not part of the written language.

processes in its formation of a new copula, the description of these processes is a necessary step in the understanding of the emergence of the colloquial Iranian New Persian =e copula. I will provide a full explanation for the arising of the Iranian Persian 3SG copula ending, but also of that of Dari, both seeming aberrant from a historical point of view. The story I present might seem dissipated over various points, but they are all important pieces to understand, both typologically and diachronically, the development of the copula in Persian. All the points discussed here are needed to understand the origin of the Dari and Iranian Persian copula.

I will first present the paradigm of the indicative present of the Old Iranian verb ‘to be’ (§ 2), and its evolution in Middle Persian (§ 3), the situation in Classical New Persian (§ 4), the negation and its connection to the copula (§ 5) then I will present the copula in some Early New Persian dialects (§ 6), and also in Gavruni, or Zoroastrian Dari, as a parallel example (§ 7), discuss the copula in modern Dari (§ 8), then provide a full explanation for the development of the current Iranian Persian copula endings (§ 9), before concluding (§ 10).

## 2. *The Old Iranian verb present tense indicative of ‘to be’*

This is the present indicative paradigm we can reconstruct for the verb ‘to be’ in Old Iranian, which is virtually identical to the Avestan one.

1SG	* <i>ǰbmi</i>
2SG	* <i>ǰhi</i>
3SG	* <i>ǰsti</i>
1PL	* <sup>(b)</sup> <i>mahi</i>
2PL	* <i>stā</i>
3PL	* <i>hānti</i>
1DU	* <i>usuabī</i>
3DU	* <i>stab</i>

Table 1. Old Iranian ‘to be’ in the indicative present tense.

Next to this there existed a verb *\*baṣ-/bū-* ‘to become’ (< PIIr. *\*b<sup>h</sup>au-/b<sup>h</sup>ū-*), with a regular conjugation (*\*baṣami*, *\*baṣahi*, etc.), which could already in Old Iranian be used as a virtual future form of the verb ‘to be’. For instance, in Yasna 33:10

*vīspā stōi hujītaiiō / yā zī āṇharō yāscā hōntī*  
*yāscā mazdā buuaintī [...]*

‘All the excellent pleasures to be / those indeed which have been (*āṇharō*), and those which are (*hōntī*), and those, O Mazda, which will be (*buuaintī*)’.

In Old Persian, the 1SG of ‘to be’ in the indicative present was spelled *amiy*, with one exception (Xerxes’ inscription in Persepolis: *ahmiy*). The other persons of the paradigm are: *ahay*, *astiy*, *ahmahay* and *ha<sup>n</sup>tiy*.

The negation of the verb ‘to be’ was simply expressed by the particle *\*nai̯t* (Avestan *nōit̯*) + the verbal form, e.g. *\*nai̯t ahmi* ‘I am not’ and *\*nai̯t asti* ‘he/she/it is not’, or by the same construction, with the *t*-less variant *\*nai̯* (typically found in Old Persian, e.g. *naiy āha* ‘there was not’). Besides, the Avestan infinitive of ‘to be’ was *stōi*; other interesting forms include *hqs* ‘being’ (present participle active of ‘to be’) < PIIr. *\*h<sub>2</sub>sa-nt-s*.

### 3. *The Middle Persian copula*

#### 3.1. *The Middle Persian copula paradigm*

At some point between Old Iranian and Middle Persian, this paradigm underwent analogical remodeling on the basis of the 3<sup>rd</sup> plural form (*\*hanti*). All the other persons took the *h-* of *\*hanti* and a termination identical to that of the other verbs (Ferrer-Losilla 2013: 451)<sup>3</sup> There are two reasons for this analogy: first, *\*hanti* was the only person

<sup>3</sup> “Podemos considerar que el verbo PM *h-* se había tematizado a partir de la 3<sup>a</sup> persona del plural [...] y que sólo la 3<sup>a</sup> sg. *ast* procede de la antigua forma atemática *\*asti*”.

of the verb ‘to be’ with a recognizable primary active ending, and second, the stem *h-* is found in various other tenses and moods of the verb ‘to be’ (and thus could, to some extent, be identified with it), such as the present participle and the subjunctive, encouraging this analogy to happen. The 3SG form *ast* did not undergo the analogy at that point, because it was both seen as a verbal form and as a marker of nominal predication (Josephson 2003: 80). Below is a table of the present indicative for of ‘to be’ in Pahlavi (aka non-Manichaean Middle Persian)<sup>4</sup> and Manichaean Middle Persian (MMP).

Pahlavi	MMP <sup>5</sup>
<i>hēm</i>	<i>hēm</i>
<i>hē</i>	<i>hē</i>
<i>ast</i>	<i>ast</i>
<i>hom</i>	<i>hom, hēm</i>
<i>hēd</i>	<i>hēd</i>
<i>hēnd</i> or <i>hand?</i>	<i>hēnd</i>

Table 2. ‘To be’ in Pahlavi and MMP.

In Pahlavi the paradigm is spelled as arameograms (spelled <HWE-> for all endings, except for the 3SG spelled <AYTY>). An exception is found in more recent manuscripts, which have 1SG <hm>, 3SG <’st> and 3PL <hnd>: Ferrer-Losilla (2013: 443) rightly warns us that a reading /ham/ and /hand/ for the 1SG and 3PL of these forms could be influenced by the correspondent modern Persian verbal endings. The 3SG negated form was spelled <LOYTY> in Pahlavi and <nyst> in Manichaean Middle Persian (MMP), in both cases it is to be read *nēst* which in turn derives from Old Persian *naī asti* (Ferrer-Losilla 2013: 443).

<sup>4</sup> Mostly Zoroastrian with some non-religious and Christian material, Pahlavi is written in a different alphabet from Manichaean Middle Persian. It is divided between a book script (Book Pahlavi) and what is called Inscriptional Pahlavi. Unlike Manichaean Middle Persian, Pahlavi frequently uses Arameograms (words written in Aramaic) to denote actual Iranian, Middle Persian words, as in the examples cited below.

<sup>5</sup> See FERRER-LOSILLA (2013: 443-447).

Importantly, *hēnd* does not go back to *\*hanti* (< PIE *\*h<sub>2</sub>-énti-*), but has also been remade and takes the *-ēnd* ending of all other verbs (cf. Ferrer-Losilla 2013: 451). As Ferrer-Losilla indicates (op. cit.), it is possible that the Pahlavi 3PL form was actually *\*/hand/* (thus a regular reflex of *\*hanti*). It is spelled <HWEnd>, that is, the <HWE-> arameogram + 3PL ending *-nd*. Skjærvø 1997: 166-168 interpreted it as <HWENd>, cf. however Jügel (2010: 33-35) who argues convincingly against this reading. In any case, it is impossible to tell if it was read /hēnd/ as in MMP or /hand/ (as probably in the later manuscripts which have <hnd>).

To sum up, two phenomena occurred one after the other: on the basis of the 3PL form *\*hand* < *\*hanti*, and, in my opinion, with the influence of a few other parts of the paradigm of ‘to be’ such as the present participle *\*hans*, a new paradigm was generalized: *\*h-* + verbal ending. In the course of this shift, the very form that was pivotal to it, *\*hand*, was replaced by *h-ēnd* (at least in MMP), that is, *h-* with the 3PL ending. The only form that resisted this process was the 3SG *ast*. A few examples of enclitic forms of the copula in Middle Persian, such as 2PL <-yt> in <GBRA-yt> ‘you are men’ are attested, always without the initial *h-* (Ferrer-Losilla 2013: 443), which was certainly dropped in this enclitic position.

In Middle Persian, the verb *\*baw-/bū-* ‘to become’ mentioned above (§ 2) is continued, spelled <bw-> or <b-> in MMP and with an arameogram <YHWWN> in Pahlavi (Ferrer-Losilla 2013: 460-462). It is functionally suppletive to the paradigm of ‘to be’, to the extent that the infinitive of the verb ‘to be’ in Middle Persian is *būdan*, the infinitive of *baw-* ‘to become’, which completely ousted the original infinitive (which one can speculate would have been *\*st-an*, if not an irregular infinitive *\*stāy*, cognate of Avestan *stōi* ‘to be’).

### 3.2. *The Middle Persian 3SG copula and its function*

A last point to take note of concerns the function and use of the 3SG copula in Middle Persian. The usage of 3SG copula *ast* is relatively rare in Middle Persian (Josephson 2003: 79 with references). Even languages which normally use copulas have categories where they can

dispense of them; Middle Persian, however, belongs to a category of languages which only uses copulas and existential verbs in subset of clauses (see Ferguson 1971: 115-117 for a description of the structure of both categories of language). In a major paper on the topic, Josephson (2003) demonstrates that, in Middle Persian, nominal sentences and sentences with *ast* differ in meaning. In nominal sentences, as there is no verb, no time is expressed by the clause (Josephson 2003: 81). Among the multiple examples cited by Josephson, one can cite the following:

- a. *az stāragān ī pad asmān fradom stārag tištar*  
 ‘Of the stars in the sky the foremost star is Tištar’  
 (Menog-i Xrad 87:5, transl. by Josephson 2003: 82)
- b. *artēštārān xwēškārīh dušmen zadan*  
 ‘The duty of warriors is to defeat the enemy’  
 (Menog-i Xrad 81:12, transl. by Josephson 2003: 82)

Literally, sentence a. reads as ‘of the stars in the sky, the foremost star Tištar’ and b. as ‘the duty of soldiers to hit the enemy’. One can note that, in some examples given by Josephson, there is expressed what we express in French by a *présent de vérité générale*, a ‘present tense of general truth’, what is called in English a “general statement”. Eternal truths, for which time and place are not relevant are mentioned in those nominal sentences, which is the case for examples a. and b., but also for some proverbs cited by Josephson, such as:

- c. *harwēn kas ošōmand*  
 ‘everyone is mortal’ (Josephson 2003: 81)

More systematically, Josephson demonstrates that nominal sentences in Middle Persian are characterizations:

- d. *ēn zan man zan tō a-padixšāyīhā dārē*  
 ‘This woman is my wife; you hold her without authority’  
 (Mādīgān-i Hazār Dādestān 12:13-14, transl. by Josephson 2003:82)

Literally ‘this woman my woman: you hold her without authority’. What Josephson (2003: 82) means by characterization is that, in these examples, «the subject and predicate are only partially equal». For instance, in d., her being the speaker’s wife is only one aspect of this woman, it is a characterization, not an existential identification; in a. it is only one characteristic, among others, of Tištar to be the foremost star, in b. it is only one characteristic, among others, of warriors’ duty to hit the enemy, in c. as we all know, everyone is mortal, but also so many more things. Sentences with *ast*, however, contain a full identification of the subject to its predicate:

- e. *mayān xwanirah \*kē pārag ī mayānag ast*  
 ‘In the middle is Xwanirah \*which is the middle part’  
 (Selections of Zadspram 3:35, transl. by Josephson 2003: 82)
- f. *ēd rāy čē tīr māh čahārom māh ī az sāl ast*  
 ‘This is why the month Tir is the fourth month of the year’  
 (Selections of Zadspram 3:7, transl. by Josephson 2003: 82)

All the examples provided by Josephson follow the same line: when the copula *ast* is present, the subject is identical to its predicate: Xwanirah is identical to the middle part, Tir is the fourth month of the year. Besides, in Middle Persian, most presentative statements also require *ast*:

- g. *ēn man ast pid ēn man ast mād ud ēn man ast brād ud ēn man ast nārīg*  
 ‘This is my father, this is my mother, this is my brother, this is my wife!’  
 (Bundahishn 34:9)

It needs to be noted that *ast* is also used to express existence:

- h. *Gannāg-Mēnōg ast*  
 ‘The evil spirit exists’  
 (Bundahishn 1:12, transl. by Josephson 2003: 85)

In many other examples cited by Josephson (2003: 84), existence or presence (what is usually translated as ‘there is’) is indicated by *ast*.

One cannot but be convinced by Josephson's development: the nominal sentence in Middle Persian is concerned with characterization, the sentence with *ast* with equation, or presentation as existing or being there, so to say. Without *ast*, the sentence is limited to timeless, general characterizations, while *ast* «identifies the subject specifically» (Josephson 2003: 85). Josephson further demonstrates (2003: 85-88) that the copula *bawēd* (3SG of *baw-*, mentioned above) is used when characterization «comes into being as a contingency» (unlike the general truth of the nominal sentence), such as in the example i. below.

- i. *ud ka \*be uzmūd ēg gōhr paydāg bawēd*  
 'Having been tested, his substance has become manifest'  
 (Denkard VI:105, transl. by Josephson 2003: 87)

As Josephson writes, here we are dependent on having tested somebody's nature in order for it to become manifest. The copula *bawēd* thus implies a process. The table below sums up the situation of Middle Persian.

CONTEXT	COPULA USED
General truth, rules, statements	No copula
Existential identification 3SG	Copula <i>ast</i>
Characterization	No copula if timeless, <i>baw-</i> if contingent
Presentatives and exclamations "this is X"	Copula <i>ast</i>
Existence (X exists)	Copula <i>ast</i>
Existential identification (other persons)	<i>h-ēm, h-ē</i> , etc.

Table 3. Presence and absence of copula in Middle Persian.

#### 4. *Classical New Persian copula*

The situation of the copula in New Persian is quite different from that in Middle Persian. It is necessary to remind ourselves of the well-known but never enough repeated fact, that New Persian is not the

descendant of Middle Persian, but rather its sister language, both descending from intermediaries of sister languages of Old Persian. Whatever changes occurred in the prehistory of Middle Persian need not have occurred in that of New Persian, and vice versa. Besides, New Persian itself is rather a group of dialects, some which do not descend from the same ancestor as others, and it is in no way a unified standard language with languages that descend from its earliest form. This is true diachronically: contemporary Tehrani New Persian, for instance, does not directly descend from Classical Persian, as we will see below, and so on, and geographically: not all dialects, not even of Iran, go back to Classical New Persian – let alone Early New Persian, which is itself even less unified, because no standard variety was yet chosen. This was certainly the case for Middle Persian as well, and notable differences between the Zoroastrian and the Manichaean varieties thereof have been observed; nonetheless the language of the books and inscriptions is more standardized and unified, and we do not have access to the variety of Middle Persians that must have existed<sup>6</sup>. These points are very important in order to understand the developments that will follow.

#### 4.1. *The clitic copula in New Persian*

In this section I will limit myself to the description of the copula in Classical New Persian, the standard literary language that imposed itself as the main written language of the Persianate world after the Mongol era, that is, after the 13th century. In Classical Persian, there is no independent *h*- paradigm as can be found in Middle Persian. We know the *h*- paradigm (i.e., the set of copular forms beginning with *h*- used in Middle Persian) must have existed in the precedent stage of the language notably because of the clitic copula found throughout Classical Persian, and because of the form *hast*- (see § 4.2). Some forms with *h*-, or going back to the *h*-paradigm, are also found in some early Persian dialects (see § 6.1).

<sup>6</sup> It is a very complex and controversial topic, that goes much beyond the scope of the present article, however I believe, as did many scholars such as LAZARD (2003), that some Early Judeo-Persian varieties can be considered as Middle Persian dialects, rather than as New Persian ones. This could also be the case of some rather aberrant “Islamic” varieties as well.

Classical Persian clitic copula
= <i>am</i>
= <i>ī</i>
(=) <i>ast</i>
= <i>im</i>
= <i>ēd</i>
= <i>and</i>

Table 4. The copula in Classical Persian.

The same principle thus applies for Classical Persian as for Middle Persian: as mentioned above (§ 3.1) enclitic forms of the copula, also without *h*-, existed in Middle Persian as well. Nonetheless, they were rare in Middle Persian, and they are very common in New Persian, so much so that this clitic series is one of the primary ways to express identification and characterization. Generally, all persons are spelled as clitics but for the 3SG, which is alternatively spelled independently <ʔst> or as a clitic <-st>.

Although spelling conventions should not be overemphasized, they still say much about the ambiguous status of the 3SG copula *ast*, which existed both as a clitic and persisted as an independent morpheme. This can be observed in the variation in spelling between *ō ast* 'he/she is' (rather rare) and *ō=st* 'id.' (very common). The reason why the 3SG copula kept this status is obvious: it was never part of the *h*- paradigm, and there is no reason for which only a cliticized version thereof would subsist. According to Lenepveu-Hotz (2014: 265), *ast* has, together with *buwad*, the function of marking permanent and generic facts. In this, they are both comparable to the nominal sentence described by Josephson (2003). Lenepveu-Hotz (2014: 265) could find no strict difference as to the function of *ast* and *buwad*. She speculates (2014: 266) that the difference could actually be that *buwad* is used in an emphatic way.

Apart from the 3SG, the clitics of the copula are identical to the Classical Persian verbal endings, and it is only in the 3SG that one can formally differentiate between the copula (=ast, *ast*) and the verbal ending (-ad).

#### 4.2. On *hast-* ‘to be, to exist’

Besides the paradigm of the clitic copula (+ *ast*), a new verbal paradigm came to be, already in Early New Persian (ENP): *hast-*, which is conjugated regularly, apart from the 3SG: *hast-am*, *hast-ī*, *hast* (instead of \**hast-ad*), *hast-īm*, *hast-and*. It is a verb ‘to exist, to be’ and not a copula *stricto sensu*. However, its emergence is deeply connected to the copula *ast*. To understand how the paradigm of *hast-* came to be, we have to go back to the discussion by Josephson (2003) presented above (§ 3.2). What Josephson (2003: 90-92) observes for New Persian is that the copula *ast*, not only possesses all of the functions it occupied in Middle Persian, but is also used for the areas of characterization which were expressed by the nominal clause, while *buwad* and *bāšad* are used when «the validity of the identification is limited to a particular instance or circumstance [...]» (Josephson 2003: 91; cf. also Lenepveu-Hotz 2014: 266-267)<sup>7</sup>. We will not dwell on the function of *buw-* and *bāš-* which has been discussed in much detail by Lenepveu-Hotz (2014: 251-268). I will simply note the optative function of *buwad*, which, has not been observed by Lenepveu-Hotz. It is very rare, and certainly absent from her corpus<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, in a parallel way, nominal sentences which were common in Sogdian become less and less common after the 8th century (cf. BENKATO 2020: 177).

<sup>8</sup> A salient example I could find is in this poem by Rudaki (858-941), the first great Persian poet:

*Dīdār ba dīl furōxt, nafrōxt garān*  
*Būsah ba rawān furōšad=u hast arzān*  
*Ārē, ki čō ān māh buwad bāzargān*  
*Dīdār ba dīl furōšad=u būsah ba jān!*

She sold her sighting against one’s heart, ’t was not expensive!  
 She sells a kiss for the price of one’s soul, and that is cheap.

Yes! May the merchant be like this Moon Lady,  
 Who sells the seeing of her for a heart, and a kiss for one’s life.

What Rudaki means by *Ārē, ki čō ān māh buwad bāzargān* is: may the merchant (= may every merchant) sell as cheap as she does, as she only asks for life and heart in exchange for these precious gifts, her sight and her kiss. In Classical and Modern Persian, this should be expressed by *bāšad* (also *bi-bāšad* in Early and Classical Persian), and such a function is remarkable for *buwad*.

Josephson rightly notes (2003: 89, 92) that the nominal sentence (without *ast*) still exists, but only as a stylistic variant of the *ast*-sentence<sup>9</sup>. Still, there exists a number of words which warrant nominal sentences in Classical Persian (and, to some extent, in contemporary Iranian Persian as well), notably *bih* ‘better, best’. That is, “it is better” or “it is best [to]” will almost always be expressed by *bih* alone. Some examples: Khayyām: *az dars=i ‘ulūm, jumla bu=grīzī bih* ‘if you flee the lessons of science entirely, it [is] best’; Jāmī (1414-1492): *dar kēš=i ‘išq ‘afū zi qātil bih az qīšāš* ‘in the Creed of Love, forgiveness of the killer [is] better than the *lex talionis*’. The word *bih* fell out of use in contemporary Iranian Persian (replaced by *bihtar*, which does usually take a copula). Another such word is *kū* ‘where?’ which is used in nominal sentences in Classical Persian: as in Bidel Dehlavi’s *dar kārgāh=i taslīm kū ‘izzat* ‘where [belongs] honor in the workshop of surrendering?’, but also to this day in contemporary Iranian Persian: *kelid-am ku* ‘where [is] my key?’, *ketāb-et ku* ‘where [is] your book?’, as well as in Tajik: *бибиотун ку?* ‘where [is] the schoolma’am’ (Perry 2005: 125)<sup>10</sup>.

While Josephson does provide a sentence where *ast* seems to indicate existence, from a 10th century ENP text, I would argue that existentiality is the one domain which *ast* possessed in Middle Persian and lost in New Persian. Certainly, the Middle Persian model described by Josephson is more archaic, as it is closer to the Old Iranian, and even

<sup>9</sup> For instance, in a song sung by the famous singer Homeyra (b. 1945), *Darvišān*, one can hear *Amir ol-moḏminīn Ḥeydar, ke ū dāmād-e paygāmbār* lit. ‘the Commander of Believers Ḥaydar, who he the son-in-law of the Prophet’. This is poetic language, of course, but it is still syntactically permitted.

<sup>10</sup> PASTOR (forthcoming) has interpreted *ku* as an interrogative locative copula («copule interrogative locative»), and *kuš-* as a verb, while PERRY (2005: 125) views sentences with *ku* as copula-less sentences. LAZARD (2006: 112) considers *ku* to be a predicative adverb. I believe *ku* is certainly not a verb: it has two main forms, *ku* and *ku=š* (*ku=t* ‘where are you?’ might also be said, although not in Tehrani Persian; *ku=mun*, *ku=tun* will never be found or heard). The morpheme =š is not a verbal ending, but a pronominal one. This form *ku=š* is, by the way, somewhat connected to *hastes* ‘he/she/it is’ (see fn. 53). Now, *ku* does indeed function as a copula, in the bare definition of “copula”, so whether one views sentences with *ku* as nominal sentences or as sentences containing a copula *ku* is a matter of personal preference. However, since using the copula in sentences with *ku* in Persian is ungrammatical, I would agree in considering *ku* as a copula.

Indo-European pattern (Josephson 2003: 92). The copula *ast* was salient enough, in Middle Persian and pre-New-Persian, to fulfill the functions described above. Yet, once it became a general tool, removing the nominal sentence from its place, it lost the required salience it had in order to express existence. In other words, when *ast* is used to express equation and characterizations, a sentence such as *Gannāg-Mēnōg ast* would no longer mean ‘Gannag Menog exists’ but ‘Gannag Menog is’, idem for sentences where *ast* meant ‘there is’.

To fill this gap, a new form emerged: *hast*, which formally is due to the merging of the *h-* paradigm with the *ast* copula. This new form, and the paradigm which ensues (*hast-am*, etc.) is certainly provoked by the fact that the forms of the copula in Middle Persian had gradually become enclitic (cf. LENEVVEU-HOTZ 2023: 264)<sup>11</sup>. Such a diachronic development is interesting, and should question us more. The primary function of *hast* is to express existence or existence in a place, although it extended to other functions as well. The very word ‘existence’ in New Persian is *hastī*, thus *hast-* ‘exist’ and the *-ī* abstract noun suffix.

Let us quote extracts of a poem by Rudaki (858-941), to illustrate the dichotomy between *ast* and *hast*.

- a. *imrōz ba har ḥāl=ē, baydād buxārā=st*  
*kujā mīr=i xurāsān=ast, pērōzī ānjā=st*  
 ‘Today, in any case, Baghdad is Bukhara,  
 Wherever is the prince of Khurasan, victory is there!’

<sup>11</sup> More specifically, LENEVVEU-HOTZ (2023: 264) writes that the “formes toniques” (*hast-*) were built because the Middle Persian forms had become enclitic in New Persian. She adds that the new “formes toniques” of the copula can be used for emphasis and to avoid a hiatus caused by the vowel of the enclitic forms. I partly adhere to this scenario, although the hiatus avoidance explanation seems unnecessary to me. However, an important point to note here is that LENEVVEU-HOTZ does not seem to accept the fact that Middle Persian had enclitic forms (e.g. LENEVVEU-HOTZ 2023: 263 Table 7), although these did exist (cf. the discussion in FERRER-LOSILLA 2013; see § 4.1 above). One should, in my opinion, rather imagine a scenario where *hast* emerged only after *ast* became a clitic thus not because the other forms had become clitic, but because *ast* had become clitic. This would possibly have occurred in proto-New Persian, later than Sasanian Middle Persian. All evidence suggests that 3SG *ast* became enclitic only after all the other persons of the copula did.

- b. *may hast=u diram hast=u but=i lāla-ruxān hast*  
*γam nēst, w-agar hast, našīb=i dil=i a'dā=st*

‘There is wine and there are dirhams and there are lily-faced idols!

There is no sorrow, and if there is, it is the lot of the heart of the enemies!’

In a., the clitic copula =*ast* shows what Josephson calls identification: Baghdad is Bukhara (metaphorically), wherever the prince/commander of Khurasan might be, that is the specific place where victory is. In b. *hast* just means ‘there exists/there is’ in the first *mišraʿ*, and could be translated, in a less impersonal manner, as ‘we have’: ‘we have wine, we have dirhams, we have lily-faced idols’ (literally ‘and idol of lily-faces’). In the second *mišraʿ*, *wagar hast* can only be translated as ‘and if there is’. Another early New Persian poet, Ayyūqī (11th century), says:

- c. *hamē guft agar jumlagī xās=u ʿām*  
*jahūdān ki hastand dar šabr=i šām*  
*abā kirdagār āšnāyī daband [...]*

‘He was saying, both noble and commoners,

If all the Jews who are in the province of the Levant

Were to acknowledge the Maker [...]

Here too, *hast-* clearly has the meaning of ‘exist, to be somewhere’: ‘if all the Jews who are in the Levant were to acknowledge the Creator’ (and recognize my prophethood, says the following *mišraʿ*). As said above, this is the primary and original function (I argue) of *hast-*, and still its main function in Tajiki Persian (Baizoyev & Hayward 2004: 34). Lazard (1963: 348) considers that *hast* is more emphatic than =*ast*, which is certainly true: it insists on the reality of facts. He cites, among others: *in šamsēr ki dārē ān hast guft ān hast* ‘[I learned that you were given a beautiful saber] is this the one you hold? He said: it is’ from the *Tārīx-i Tabarī*, a prose text. Thus *hast* is used for existence, for insistence on existence, and in general as a copula (Lazard 1963: 347). While I am unsure what Lazard’s opinion on the topic is, I do think that these characteristics of *hast-* are specific to it, as opposed to =*ast* which fulfills other roles in the grammar. By ENP, *hast-* could be used in any context =*ast* is, but the opposite was less and less possible.

However, there is an exception to this. Let us study a more recent example, which also displays both *hast* and *ast* in the same distich. It is by Neshat Esfahāni (1759-1829), poet and minister of foreign affairs under Shah Fath-Ali Shah Qajar.

- d. *marā ċi ĥadd ki bigūyand ān man ast=u man, ō*  
*har-ānċi hast way ast=u har-ānċi nēst man=ast*  
 ‘How does it concern me when they say <that is I, and I (am) He>  
 Whatever exists is Him and whatever exists not is I’

Here there is a contrast between (=)*ast* used as a presentative (*ān man ast* ‘that is I’) and *hast* as a present stem of a verb ‘to exist’. The contrast is bright in *har-ānċi hast* ‘whatever **exists**’ and *way ast* ‘is Him’. This *ast* could be interpreted as either functioning as a general truth indicator (for which there would be no copula in Middle Persian), or as an existential identification or a presentative (for which *ast* would also be used in Middle Persian). In the same example, the poet says *u man, ō* ‘and I (am) He’, where the copula is elliptic. In this context *\*ān man hast* would not be meaningful: it would mean ‘that, I exists’, while *ān man hastam* could work, although not as ideally as *ān man ast*. There is thus one function fulfilled by *ast* which *hast* cannot fulfill: the function of presentative statements of first and second singular and all three persons of the plural, that is: “X is me” can be said *X hastam* (or *X man-am*) or *man X ast*, but not *man X hast*. In that sense, *ast* is comparable to *buw-*, which – after Early New Persian – is normally never found in other persons than the 3SG.

A last example of contrast – albeit with the deverbal noun *hast* –, in prose, can be found in Maybudi (ed. Hekmat vol. 4 p. 24f.):

- e. *pīr=i tarīqat guft: muxallaṣ hama az ō bīnad, ‘arīf hama ba-ō bīnad, har*  
***hast** ki nām barand ‘arīyyat=*ē-st hast=i ĥaqīqī ō-st, dīgar tuḥmīyat=*ē***  
***ast** [...]*  
 “The Guide of the True Way said: the Pure see everything [as coming] from Him, the Mystic see everything through Him, every **existing** [thing] which is named **is** a loan, the true **existent** He **is**, the rest **is** an illusion [...]

In this prose example, one can see a similar distinction as in the poetic example above: *ast* is contrasted (possibly consciously) with *hast*, the first being used for identification or qualification, the second as a noun ‘existent’. To note, Maybudi also uses *hast* as well as *ast* in the *mihī est* construction (cf. § 4.4).

#### 4.3. On the origin of the verb *hast-* ‘to be, to exist’

Bopp considered the *hast-* paradigm to derive from the root *\*hišt-* ‘to stand’, with the form *hast* remade after *ast*, against an expected *\*histad* (followed by Müller 1899: 99; I could not find Bopp’s original statement). This opinion, with some variation, is held by MacKenzie (1984). He holds that the paradigm «*hastam*, etc., is a mixture of 5 parts MP /*\*istēm*, *\*istē*, *\*istēm*, *\*istēd*, *\*istēnd*/ and only 1 part /*ast*/, with the /*h-*/ borrowed from MP /*hēm*, *hē*/, etc.» (MacKenzie 1984: 55). The *-st-* should be regular from *išt*, comparable to the superlatives in *-ist* < *\*ištā-* and the stem *ēst-* ‘to stand’ (cf. MacKenzie 1984: 48)<sup>12</sup>. However, this hypothesis as presented by MacKenzie mostly serves the purpose of bringing weight to his supposition of a Middle Persian *\*ist-*, which he himself admits is unsupported by actual evidence (e.g. MacKenzie 1984: 53). The merging, of these two should thus have yielded an irregular paradigm, whose vocalism would have been from *\*ast* (I extrapolate, as MacKenzie remained vague on this topic); besides the fact that no independent evidence for *\*ist* comes in support of this. This would also go against the tendency of the 3SG to become regular, which we have seen and will see throughout the present article; the “creation” of a 3SG *hast* from *\*histad/hēstad* seems completely preposterous<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> In any case, this latter argument in order to account for the *-st-* sequence here is unnecessary. Forms going back to *\*i-st-*, with no RUKI effect, for the verb ‘to stand’ are to be found in many different Iranian languages. There is no phonetic reason behind this: these forms are remade, or re-suffixed, with *\*staH-* extracted from the unprefixated reflexes (cf. BERNARD 2025a: 80, with a discussion of a similar example in Old Steppe Iranian).

<sup>13</sup> I think that these scenarii, starting from BOPP, have been – consciously or unconsciously – influenced by the authors’ knowledge of the prehistory of French *être* ‘to be’, which verb is born of the convergence of Late Latin *essere* ‘to be’ and Latin *stāre* ‘to stand’.

In fact, no such complicated scenario is necessary: it is rather obvious that the paradigm of *hast-* specifically arose from the *\*h-am*, *\*h-ī*, etc. paradigm of pre-New-Persian (pre-NP), without the intervention of any other verb, in the way shown in the table below.

PRE-NEW-PERSIAN PARADIGM 1	PRE-NEW-PERSIAN PARADIGM 2		NEW PERSIAN PARADIGM 3
<i>*h-am</i>	<i>*h-am</i>	<i>*-am</i>	<i>hast-am</i>
<i>*h-ī<sup>14</sup></i>	<i>*h-ī</i> ↓	<i>*-ī</i>	<i>hast-ī</i>
<i>*ast</i>	<i>*h-ast</i>	<i>*-ast</i>	↑ <i>hast</i> ↓
<i>*h-ēm</i>	↑ <i>*h-ēm</i>	<i>*-ēm</i>	<i>hast-īm</i>
<i>*h-ēd</i>	<i>*h-ēd</i>	<i>*-ēd</i>	<i>hast-ēd</i>
<i>*h-and</i>	<i>*h-and</i>	<i>*-and</i>	<i>hast-and</i>

Table 5. The development and origin of *hast-* ‘to exist’.

My scenario is the following: while the older *\*h-am* paradigm only survived as a clitic, losing its *h-*, the new New Persian paradigm *hast-* slowly replaced it as an independent copula. In the beginning, at the earliest ENP stage or even before, it was used almost exclusively in contexts of existence, but, as the *ast* copula was – perhaps – perceived as having lost its *h-* as well, and thus belonging to the category of clitics, *hast-* started taking over all the functions of the older series.

#### 4.4. *On the mihi est construction*

Ancient Indo-European languages normally express possession through the *mibi est* construction, namely with a noun or pronoun in the genitive (or oblique, when they lost the genitive), a possessed noun in the nominative, and a reflex of the 3SG copula *\*h<sub>3</sub>esti*. This is the case

<sup>14</sup> The nature of the 2SG ending vowel in the earliest stages of New Persian is not certain, and it is not relevant to the present study.

in most ancient Iranian languages as well, for instance Sogdian in the Buddhist Sogdian example e. below (Benkato 2020: 175f.). There was simply no verb ‘to have’ in Proto-Indo-European, Proto-Iranian, or even Old Iranian: the verb which later was used as an auxiliary ‘to have’ in a number of Iranian languages, \**dār-*, originally meant ‘to hold’ (cf. Edel’man 1975). Yaghnobi, for instance, kept the *mihī est* construction, and did not develop a verb ‘to have’ (Edel’man 1975: 152; Benkato 2020: 180).

- e. *rty=by tw’ ynch ’sty ZY rync’kk z’k-t*  
 ‘Sir, you have a wife and small children’ (Benkato 2020: 175)

With the glossing as provided by Benkato (2020: 175):

*rty=by*      *tw’*      *ynch*   *’sty*      *ZY rync’kk*   *z’k-t*  
 CPL=sir.VOC   2SG.OBL   wife   there.is   and young   child-PL

Here we can see *tw’* (2SG oblique) and *’sty* (*asty* = Pers. *ast*) expressing possession. Early New Persian and Classical Persian also have this construction. While it is not the only construction in order to expression possession in ENP and Classical Persian, as the verb ‘to have’ is also used (on this topic, cf. Lenepveu-Hotz forthcoming), it is quite frequent in the texts. On the other hand, both contemporary Iranian Persian (including Standard Iranian Persian, both written and spoken), Dari and as far as I know, Tajiki, lost this construction. A study by Lenepveu-Hotz (forthcoming) based on a corpus of 15 prose texts stretching from ca. 980 to 2004 shows that the *mihī est* construction fell gradually out of use, being completely obsolete from the 18th century on.

As an example of this construction, “thou hast a wife” will commonly be said in both ENP and Cl. Pers. *tu=rā zan=ē-st*, with *ast* + the dative construction pronoun + *rā*. A typical example of this is provided by Omar Khayyām’s famous verse:

- f. *harčand ki rang=u rōy=i zibā-st ma=rā*  
 ‘Although I have a beautiful complexion and face’

Glossed:

*harčand ki rang=u rōy=i zibā-st ma=rā*  
 how.much that color=and face=EZ beautiful-COP.3SG 1SG=DAT

So, literally: ‘how much to me is beautiful complexion and face’<sup>15</sup>. This construction is also common in prose, as in the two examples below from Maybudi’s *Tafsir* of the Qur’ān (early 12th century), one positive and the other, negative.

- g. *wa ēšān rā-st dar ān bihišt zanān=i ādamī har mardē rā du zan wa ḥawrā bar ān ‘adad ki allāh dānad*  
 ‘And they have, in that paradise, human women, two to each man; and houri, the number of which Allah knows’  
 (*Kashful-Asrār*, ed. Hekmat vol. 1 p. 111)<sup>16</sup>

The beginning of the sentence might be clearer with a gloss:

*wa ēšān rā-’st dar ān bihišt zan-ān=i ādam-ī*  
 and 3PL DAT-COP.3SG in that paradise woman-PL=EZ human-ADJ  
 ‘And to them is, in that paradise, human women’

- h. *‘ālam=i taqwē rā bidāyat nēst*  
 ‘The world of piety has no beginning’  
 (*Kashful-Asrār*, ed. Hekmat vol. 8 p. 11)

Literally, ‘to the world of piety a beginning is not’. The question we can raise is naturally whether *mihī est* constructions exist with *hast* and how do they differ from those with *ast*. Although only an extensive survey can answer this question, and this is outside the scope of the present study, it seems that many examples of *mihī est* constructions with *hast* in New Persian refer to feelings (Asadi Tusi *ma=rā hast ḥišmat* ‘I have shame’) or memory (Asadi Tusi *ma=rā hast yād* ‘to me

<sup>15</sup> In the domain of prose, Maybudi (early 12th century), in his *Tafsīr*, systematically translates Arabic *lahu* ‘to him (is)’ as *ō rā ast*, with a full *ast*, and not *\*ō rā-st*.

<sup>16</sup> Amir Kabīr editions, Tehrān 1382 (2003/2004 AD).

exists the memory’ = ‘I remember’), but there are counterexamples, and this needs to be explored.

## 5. Na, nē and nēst in New Persian

In the following, I will provide a short description of the particles *na*, *nē* and of the function of the negated copula *nēst* in New Persian, and then discuss the origin specifically of *na*. The prohibitive preverb *ma-* will not be discussed, as it is very rarely used as a particle (cf. Lazard 1963: 441 for such uses).

### 5.1. Negation and copula

One should also not underestimate the importance of the negation in the processes described above (§ 4.3), including in the process described in Table 5. The former negation paradigm was *\*na-ham* ‘I am not’, etc., which is *na-am*, *na-ī*, etc. in documented New Persian, except for the 3SG *nēst* (and not *\*na ast*). Another negation paradigm which is also in Classical NP is *nē-*, *nēy-am* ~ *nīy-am*, *nē-yī* ~ *nī-yī*, etc. as in this *mišra*‘ by Farrokhi Sistani (11th century).

- a. *si būsah marā bar tū waḏīfa-st walīkin*  
*āgāh nēyī k-az pas=i har būsah kinārī=st*  
 ‘It is my duty to give you three kisses. Nonetheless,  
 You are not aware that after each kiss is a cuddle’

This can also be found in prose, such as in the following example from ‘Abdullah Anṣārī’s 12th sermon:

- b. *agar dar band=i xayr=i kasān nēyī, xwad rā banda=yi ēšān masāz*  
 ‘If you are not bound by people’s kindness, do not bind yourself in  
 service to them’

I will come back to this form of the negation in § 6.2.

Once the pre-NP paradigm 2 (Table 5) arises, and we have the form *h-ast* alongside *ast*, its clitic counterpart, *nēst* becomes the nega-

tion of both *ast* and *hast*. The negation of the other persons of the clitic paradigm is thus *na-am*, *na-ī*, etc., but the negation of *h-ast* is *nēst* as well. Originally, *nēst-* in the other persons, such as *nēstam* ‘I am not’, is specifically the negation of *hast*. One can quote this famous verse by Khayyam.

- c. *čūn āqibat=i kār jahān nēstī=ast*  
*angār ki nēstī čō hastī xwaš bāš*  
 ‘Since the end of (all) the world’s affairs are nothingness  
 As if you did not exist (*nēst-ī*), while you exist, be happy!’

What Khayyam means is that, since death and destruction is the end of everything, while you still live, be as happy (and carefree) as if you did not exist. Basically: do not worry for a thing. I speculate – with the *caveat* that both forms do not have the same metric value –<sup>17</sup> that the form *nēstī* could not have been replaced by *na-ī* as it would have meant \*‘as if you are not’, and a predicate would be lacking (‘as if you are not’ what? – and something to the extent of ‘as if you are not alive’ *angār ki zinda na-ī* or the like would have been said). Obversely, when Firdawsi writes *hamē guft k-īn jāygāh=i man ast* ‘he was saying that «this is my rank»’, a sentence \**k-īn jāygāh=i man hast* would have been too ambiguous: “that «my rank exists»” could also have been understood, besides, again, metrical needs. I insist that, while *hast-* can be used as a copula (Lazard 1963: 347), and so can *nēst-*, the clitic series (including the 3SG *ast* which is sometimes spelled in full) cannot be used as an existential verb. This functional distinction remains in modern Persian, spoken and written.

This situation is very complex, and, in the diachrony of the language, a confusion and a simplification occurs. In the table below I present the two series, the clitic one and the *hast-* one, and their negated forms, and in the third column, the negation paradigm which became gradually the main one, for both copula series.

<sup>17</sup> This observation I owe to the reviewer. It is obvious that *na-ī* could not have been chosen here for metrical reasons, which is why my supposition remains speculative.

PERSON	CLITIC COPULA SERIES		HAST- PARADIGM		NEW NEG. PARADIGM
	AFF.	NEG.	AFF.	NEG.	
1SG	= <i>am</i>	<i>na-am</i>	<i>hast-am</i>	<i>nēst-am</i>	<i>nēst-am</i>
2SG	= <i>ī</i>	<i>na-ī</i>	<i>hast-ī</i>	<i>nēst-ī</i>	<i>nēst-ī</i>
3SG	(=) <i>ast</i>	<i>nēst</i>	<i>hast</i>	<i>nēst</i>	<i>nēst</i>
1PL	= <i>īm</i>	<i>na-īm</i>	<i>hast-īm</i>	<i>nēst-īm</i>	<i>nēst-īm</i>
2PL	= <i>ēd</i>	<i>na-ēd</i>	<i>hast-ēd</i>	<i>nēst-ēd</i>	<i>nēst-ēd</i>
3PL	= <i>and</i>	<i>na-and</i>	<i>hast-and</i>	<i>nēst-and</i>	<i>nēst-and</i>

Table 6. The copula, negated copula, *hast-* ‘to be’ and its negated form.

The fact that the negated 3SG form is identical for both series certainly played a role in the extension of function of the *hast-* series.

## 5.2. *No’ in Persian, Dari and Tajiki*

The Middle Persian negation particle is *nē*, as in Parthian and Sogdian, for instance. In Dari and Tajiki, the particle ‘no’ is *nē*, in Iranian Persian it is *na*, spelled <nh> in the Arabo-Persian script. The form *nē* does have a reflex in the Iranian Persian particle *ni* ‘it is not; there is not’ which exists in some dialects. The form *na* ‘no’ is also not attested in other varieties of Persian outside of Iran, yet it is the ENP and Classical Persian form, also found in ENP poetry from Afghanistan and Tajikistan. It is found in some Iranian languages in Iran, such as Gavruni *nā* < *na*, but these are most likely borrowings from Persian. Horn (1898-1901: 155) considers that NP *na* is from Old Iranian *na°* (cf. Vedic *ná*).

First things first: the negation particle spelled <nh> in Persian can theoretically correspond to either *na* as in modern Iranian Persian or to *nī*, the shortened version of *nē*, which is spelled <ny>, exactly as Persian <kh> ‘who’ corresponds to the shortened version of Persian *kē*, spelled <ky>, already in Rudaki (858-941)<sup>18</sup>. In fact, *kī* was even spelled <k> in some manuscripts: e.g. *bidān-kī* ‘know that’ spelled <bd’nk> (بدانك),

<sup>18</sup> JÜGEL (2013: 45-46) seems to consider the shortening of *kē* as a morphosyntactic phenomenon and restricts it to *ki* ‘that’: however, he does not take into account the fact that *kē* ‘who’ was also shortened to *ki*.

*ān-ki* ‘that which’ spelled <’nk> (آنک) in the Tafsīr-i Nasafī (cf. Joveini 1974). In the absence of vocalization, the form <nh> is not very informative<sup>19</sup>. Besides, in Early New Persian <nh> is much more common in verse than in prose, and it is usual for vowels of verse forms to be reduced. Nonetheless, some very early vocalized prose manuscripts such as Or 6573 (early 11th century) do display the form <n<sup>a</sup>h> (نہ), and we can thus be certain of its antiquity.

Old Iranian *na*<sup>o</sup> is not an independent particle that could have yielded NP *na*. In Early New Persian prose, *na* is mainly used in combination with verbs (Lazard 1963: 439), while *nē* is never used as a verbal negation particle (cf. Lazard 1963: 440). I argue that the very particle *na* in New Persian comes from the negation preverb *na-* combined with verbs in general and clitic copulas in particular. That is, *bad na=am* ‘I am not bad’ → *na bad=am* ‘I am not bad’, from which *na* was generalized as a particle. This phenomenon needs to be earlier than Early New Persian, so basically it needs to date back to Proto-New Persian, because *na* is already an independent particle in the earliest texts. The form *nē-yī* etc. with *nē* which is normally an independent particle not used in combination with verbs must logically be later and in imitation of *na-ī* etc. It is found in various dialects, such as Herati *nī-* (e.g. *balad nīy=om* ‘I do not know’). As to the Hazaragi 3sg *nīya*, Herati *nīye*, it will be treated specifically in § 9.

Let us note the form *nay-*, ex. *nayam*, *nayand* (cf. Lazard 1963: 346) to which we shall come back later (§ 6.2).

The negation form *nī* ‘it is not, there is not’ which we find in some dialects of Iran (e.g. Kāšān) but also in some regions of Afghanistan and Tajikistan under the form *nē* (see however the next paragraph for the Tajiki situation), does not come from *nēst*, but simply from *nē*.

<sup>19</sup> This practice can also be encountered in the Early Judeo-Persian Vat. Pers. 61 manuscript, where we find the variant spellings <nčy> and <nč>, for the same word *ānčī* ‘who, what, that, whoever, whatever’. BERNARD (2025b) silently interprets them as reflecting two different pronunciations (*ānčī* vs. *ānči*). Unless there is a particular reason to trigger one form and not the other, I think this is not evident, as it is a rather unified prose text written by only two hands. It is possible to conceive that the scribes were oscillating between one and the other spelling, but I would hold it in any case likely that they both reflect /ānči/, as short *i* was not systematically spelled in Vat. Pers. 61, but long *i* was.

Above (§ 3.2) I mentioned the function of the nominal sentence in Middle Persian. In Middle Persian, the sentence containing *nē* was simply the negated nominal sentence, while *nēst* was the negation of an affirmative sentence containing *ast*. This is how both forms could survive in various dialects.

- a. *harwēn kas ošōmand*  
 ‘everyone is mortal’ (Josephson 2003: 81)

Concretely, the negation of this sentence would ideally not have been *\*harwēn kas ošōmand nēst* but *\*harwēn kas ošōmand nē* ‘everyone is not mortal’, and this is the origin of *nē* as a copula ‘is not’. Its meaning ‘there is not’ comes from the fact that, in most dialects where it exists, it has completely replaced *nēst*, exactly like *nēst* has taken over *nē* in many other dialects. However, originally, they had two different functions<sup>20</sup>. This is still the case in spoken Dushanbe Tajiki, for instance. This state of facts reflects the more archaic situation where *nē* and *nēst* did not merge: *nēst* strictly means ‘is not here’ and refers to the location, while *nē* means ‘is not’ and refers to the identity. For instance *ручка нест* *ručka nēst* means ‘there is no pen’ while *ручка не* *ručka nē* means ‘it is not a pen’, *и ручка нест* *i ručka nēst* means ‘this pen is not here’ while *и, ручка не* *i, ručka nē*, means ‘this is not a pen’. This *nē* ‘is not’ can also be found, although it is rather rare, in Early New Persian.

In the table below I summarized what I have suggested in this section.

NEGATION OF THE COPULA		INDEPENDENT NEGATION PARTICLE
= <i>am</i> , = <i>ī</i> , etc.	<i>na-am</i> → ( <i>na ... am</i> ) →	<i>na</i>
(=) <i>ast</i> , <i>hast</i>		<i>nēst</i>
Nominal sentence	<i>nē</i>	<i>nē</i>

Table 7. The rise of various negation particles in New Persian.

<sup>20</sup> In the unnamed dialect of Huart’s “pehlevi-musulman” manuscript (HUART 1889: 267), *nē-* has even replaced *na-* as a verbal negation prefix, as in *nē-bū* ‘he was not’ (instead of *\*na-bū*).

To this table it should be added that in Persian poetry at least, *na hast* also marginally exists, alongside *nēst*, as a negation of *hast* specifically.

## 6. *The copula in Early New Persian dialects*

Not all Persian dialects underwent all the changes described above, and this is particularly visible in Early New Persian, which has a richer dialectal attestation than Classical Persian. I will now present the copula in dialects of Early New Persian where it differs from the Classical Persian situation.

### 6.1. *The Early Judeo-Persian copula*

Below is the paradigm of the copula in Early Judaeo-Persian, based on Paper (1967) and Paul (2013).

PERSON	JUDEO-PERSIAN FORM
1SG	<i>hm ~ hum</i>
2SG	<i>hy, -yy<sup>21</sup></i>
3SG	<i>hyst</i> (more rarely <i>hst</i> )
1PL	<i>hym</i>
2PL	<i>hyd</i>
3PL	<i>hnd ~ hynd</i>

Table 8. The copula in Early Judeo-Persian.

<sup>21</sup> PAUL (2013: 138). PAPER (1967) does not recognize a 2SG form of the copula, but there is <yy> in one of his examples, PAPER (1967: 228) <ytwy yʔfrydgʔr ʔymʔ> (bold mine) ‘and Thou art our creator’ (Isaiah 64:7). The spelling with double *yod* indicates, in my view, a pronunciation \*/tūyī/ (or \*/tūyē/). PAUL (2013: 138) also cites the «exceptional verbal form» <-ʔy> occurring in one text <nʔmdh ʔy> ‘thou hast not come’. It appears that the 2SG is the only form of the copula that is also found without an *h-* in some texts, but apparently only as a clitic. I do not know the reason for this.

The Early Judeo-Persian paradigm is particularly interesting as it shows how the *h-* of the 3PL took the whole paradigm over, in a way similar to Table 5, but with the complete obsolescence of the *h-*less paradigm. The form *hyst* with *-y-* is the most mysterious of the paradigm. To note, the variation between *hst* and *hyst* in Judeo-Persian is dialectal (cf. Lenepveu-Hotz 2014: 63-64). It would be conceivable to explain <hyst> as the result of a merging of the stem *h-* with *ēst-* ‘to stand’ (as did MacKenzie 1984 for the entire paradigm of *hast-*, see § 4.3). However, it is hard to believe that such a merging would have left no single trace elsewhere in the paradigm, and only apply to the 3SG, which, even worse, should have become *\*hēstad*, spelled *\*hystd*. Furthermore, the stem *ēst-* ‘to stand’ exists as a fully-fledged verb in Judaeo-Persian (Paul 2013: 110), rendering this hypothesis even less likely.

Rather, I believe that the 3SG forms <hst> and <hyst> can be explained as being the result of a convergence of *\*h-ad* and *\*h-id*, which are simply the expected regular 3SG endings of a verb *h-* in Judeo-Persian together with the nominal predicate copula *\*ast*<sup>22</sup>. Since <hyst> and <hst> occur often in the same text, e.g. the Judeo-Persian argument (McKenzie 1968, once even within the same line, cf. MacKenzie 1968: 258), it could be conceivable to read both <hst> and <hyst> as [hist]<sup>23</sup>. Its vowel would thus derive from the pre-Judeo-Persian *\*h-yd*. As a consequence of its mixed origin, continuing both the 3SG of ‘to be’ *\*h-yd* and the nominal predicate copula *\*ast*, *hyst* takes the role of both a verbal form and a marker of verbal predication. To cite Paul (2013: 138) «EJP *hest*, etc., covers both meanings of the copula (“he is”) and of the verb of existence (“there is”, “he exists”)». The table below sums up the present hypothesis, and the arrows indicate merging processes.

<sup>22</sup> It is unclear how the 3SG verbal ending <-yd> of Judeo-Persian should be read (cf. LENEPVEU-HOTZ 2014: 46-48). Paul 2013:118 reads it as [ed], his reason for doing so being the spelling alternation <-yd> ~ <-d>. LENEPVEU-HOTZ (2014: 46-48) provides good arguments for a pronunciation /id/, notably because of multiple vocalizations as <-y<sup>i</sup>d>. The form <-d> of the 3SG ending could be read either [ed], a reduced form of [i:d] or [e:d] (if one is to read the 3SG ending as such), or [ad], continuing, like the NP 3SG *-ad* (and perhaps influenced by it), the Old Iranian primary 3SG thematic ending *\*(a)ti*. As this debate does not relate to our present topic, I will adopt LENEPVEU-HOTZ’s interpretation in this article.

<sup>23</sup> In the Judeo-Persian argument, I counted 50 occurrences spelled as <hyst> and only 5 spelled as <hst>.

PERSON	JUDEO-PERSIAN VERB 'TO BE'	NOMINAL PREDICATE COPULA
1SG	<i>h-om, h-am</i>	
2SG	<i>h-ē</i>	
3SG	<i>*h-id</i> (<hyd>) → <i>hist</i> (<hyst>) ←	<i>*ast</i>
1PL	<i>h-īm</i>	
2PL	<i>h-ēd</i>	
3PL	<i>h-ēnd</i>	

Table 9. The origin of the Early Judeo-Persian copula.

Below is an Early Judeo-Persian sentence (from Lazard 1995: 169) which contains multiple copulas. It is useful to look at it to get a better idea of how the Judeo-Persian copula functions (copulas in bold).

a. *hq 'n **hynd** ymn pdyš 'ystydh **hw**m wb'tyl 'n **hyst** kw tw pdyš 'stydh **hy***

'Truth **are** those things which I **am** arguing for, and error **is** that which thou **art** arguing for'

One can first observe the construction "truth are" instead of "truth is": the plural of the copula is agreeing with an absent object, \*'truth are [those things] which you argue...' This is unusual for Persian, which may even use a 3SG copula even when the subject of the copula is plural.

The same verb 'to be' built from *h-* + verbal ending is found in at least one poem by Bābā Tāher, an 11th century Iranian poet who composed in a local dialect (on Bābā Tāher in general and on his dates in particular, see Browne 1906: 259-261). This dialect (traditionally called *Fahlavīyāt*) is often viewed to be a form of Persianized Luri. In my view, it is clearly a Persic language (that is, belonging to the so-called "southwestern Iranian language branch"), and a relatively close kin of Persian. The corpus of Bābā Tāher is definitely remarkable, as it provides us with rare and precious dialectal data from a very early period. One finds the following verse among Bābā Tāher's recorded verses:

- b. *basī hand=u basī šand=u basī yand*  
 ‘Many are and many go and many come’

While I am uncertain how many more examples of the verb *h-* we can find in Persian literature outside of EJP, its presence in dialectal verse is proof that it was more common than usually assumed.

### 6.2. *The Tafsīr-i Nasafī, some Tajik dialects and the hay-copula*

Besides Judeo-Persian, another document brings a very important witness of the rich dialectal diversity of Early New Persian<sup>24</sup>, it is the so-called “Tafsīr-i Nasafī” (henceforth TN), which corresponds to the manuscript n. 34 of the catalog of manuscripts of the Library of the Province of Qods, called by Lazard (1963) “Tafsir de Machhad”. One should not confuse it with the *Qur’ān-i Quds*, a Quran with an inter-linear dialectal Persian translation analyzed and presented by Lazard (1995) and Filippone (2011). The “Tafsir de Machhad” was written by Najm ad-Dīn Abū Ḥafṣ al-Nasafī (1068-1142), a scholar from Nasaf (modern day Qarshi, in Uzbekistan). In the following, I will make some remarks, preliminary as a full study of the whole manuscript is needed, concerning the copula and the verbs of being in TN.

One of the most important points to recall here is that some forms of the copula found in TN are aberrant, yet also found in some Tajik dialects, which is not surprising given the origin of Nasafī. In the table below I list those forms mentioned by Lazard (1963: 122, 347), and those which I found myself in my survey of Joveini’s edition of TN (Joveini 1974). I also list the Tajik dialectal forms given by Rastorgueva (1956: 53). These are from northern dialects, spoken around Khujand, but for the sake of concision I will refer to them here as “Khujandi”. The Tajik dialect forms are obviously close to the TN because they both originate from the same region of the Persian-speaking world.

<sup>24</sup> This diversity did not die out so much with Classical Persian emerging as it simply ceased to be documented. The prestige of standard Classical Persian was so loud that nothing else could be heard (cf. LAZARD 2003: 95). So it is again the case today, with Tehran Persian drowning out all other varieties.

PERSON	TAFSĪR-I NASAFĪ		KHUJANDI	
	AFFIRMATION	NEGATION	AFFIRMATION	NEGATION
1SG	n.a.   -am	nayam ~ nh-ʔm	hayam	nestam
2SG	hyy   -yy	n.a.	hayi	nesti
3SG	hst   ʔst	ny   nyst	hay	ne   nest
1PL	n.a.	n.a.	hayim	nestim
2PL	hyyt   -yt	nyyt	hayit	nestit
3PL	hynd   -nd	nynd ~ nh-ʔnd	hayan	nestan

Table 10. The copula in TN and contemporary Khujandi.

Even in more southern regions of Tajikistan, a copula *ay* can be found. During my own fieldwork in Tajikistan (in August 2025), I noted the following paradigm for the copula in Fayzobod, a dialect spoken in Fayzobod, 50km east of Dushanbe, from a native speaker in his 60s named Zafar.

PERSON	FORM
1SG	<i>eyam</i>
2SG	<i>iyī</i>
3SG	<i>ay</i>
1PL	<i>iyīm</i>
2PL	<i>eyīd</i>
3PL	<i>and</i>

Table 11. Forms of the copula in the Fayzobodī Tajik dialect.

The speaker first gave me the form *eyand* for the 3PL, but then insisted that it does not exist, and that Fayzobodī has an (apparently irregular) 3PL *and* (with a distinctly pronounced final *-d*). In Fayzobodī, I could note that the existential verb ‘to be’ is *hast-* (e.g. *mardum uja hast* ‘there are people there’ = ‘people are living there’), like in all other dialects. I will produce an explanation of the origin of the Fayzobodī paradigm below as well.

To note, in TN, clitic forms of the copula exist, probably for all persons: *man-am xudāy* ‘I am God’ (cf. Lazard 1963: 1223), *girawīda-and* (var. *girawanda-and*) ‘they have believed’ (cf. Lazard 1963: 1223), *kasānē-and* ‘they are people (who...)’ (Q 2:8). It exists also in the nega-

tion: *wa na-and ēšān girawandagān ba-ḥaqīqat*, ‘and them, **they are not** believers in Truth’ (Q 2:8, translating *وَمَا هُمْ بِمُؤْمِنِينَ*). Another example of this copula is discussed in Lazard (1963: 347), and presented below.

- a. *wa duxtarān=i zanān=i šumā ki bayand dar kanār=i šumā*<sup>25</sup>  
‘And the daughters of your wives who **are** by your side’

The negation particle in TN is *nē* (as in *bā way gūyīt bā man nē* ‘speak with him, not with me’, commentary to Q 19:29). This is the original situation I postulated for the earliest stage of Persian, *na-* being initially strictly a verbal negation prefix. I will take the opportunity of citing the TN commentary of Q 2:22, *فَلَا تَجْعَلُوا لِلَّهِ أَنْدَادًا وَأَنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ*, ‘so do not make Allah rivals while you know [about his creating the earth and sky]’ in order to present some data concerning the use of copulas in this text.

- b. *pas mar xudāy rā šurakā wa nuzarā ma-kunīt wa šumā mē-dānīt ki xāliq=u rāziq way=ast*  
*but nē wa yakē=st* (/ *yakē ast?*) *ba-ḥaqīqat kasē rā bā way širkat nē*  
*pas ma'būd way=rā dārīt wa 'ibādat way=rā ārīt wa ba-rasūl=i way wa kitāb=i way bi-grawīt*<sup>26</sup>  
‘So do not make unto God associates and rivals and you know [calque of the Qur’ānic syntax = while you know] that the Creator and Sustainer **is** him (*way ast*),  
and not the idols, and [that] he is one: in truth **no one is** associated with him (*ba-ḥaqīqat kasē bā way širkat nē*)<sup>27</sup>,  
so hold him as being worthy of worship and worship him and believe in his messenger and his Book’

This relatively short text still gives us some noteworthy points to discuss. First, *ast* is used for full identification of the subject to the predicate (cf. § 3.2). Second, while the first *nē* could be interpreted as a particle ‘no’: ‘the Creator and Sustainer is him, the idols, no’ (which

<sup>25</sup> Translation of *Qur’ān* 4:23 *وَرَبَائِكُمُ اللَّاتِي فِي جُورِكُمْ wa-rabā?-ibukumu llātī fi ḥujūrikum* ‘and your step-daughters who are under your guardianship’.

<sup>26</sup> Joveini (1974: 8). پس مر خدای را شرکا و نظرا مکنتیت و شما میدانیت که خالق و رازق وی است بت نی، و یکی است به حقیقت کسی را باوی شرکت نی پس معبود ویرا داریت و عبادت ویرا آریت و به رسول وی و کتاب وی بگرویت

<sup>27</sup> It could also be that *ba-ḥaqīqat* refers to *yakē*: ‘that He truly is one’.



meaning when there is no copula. As is known, Semitic languages, among which Arabic, do not generally use a verb ‘to be’ and the Arabic verb *kāna* renders the notion of ‘existence’ or is used emphatically in the present tense, and can be considered as a past-tense verb ‘was’ in the past. This could be – although a more thorough study is needed – an interesting element pointing towards a difference between *hast* and =*ast* in the dialect of TN. In the commentary to Q 2:26 *hast* and =*ast* in the dialect of TN. In the commentary to Q 2:26 إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَسْتَحْيِي أَنْ يَضْرِبَ مَثَلًا مَا بَعُوضَةٌ فَمَا فَوْقَهَا (‘Indeed, Allāh is not timid to present an example - that of a mosquito or what is smaller than it’)<sup>30</sup>, Allah is called *hast kunanda* ‘the maker of existence’:

- d. *wa ċi jāy=i inkār ast ki āfrinanda=yi paša wa pīl way ast*  
*wa hast kunanda=yi kaṭīr wa qalīl way ast*  
*wa hast kunanda=yi magas wa ‘ankabūt way ast*  
 ‘And how can it be denied that that the creator of the mosquito and the elephant is Him (*way ast*),  
 and he is (*way ast*) the maker of existence (*hast kunanda*) of the much and the few,  
 and he is the maker of existence of the fly and the spider’

That *hast kunanda* means more or less ‘bringer into existence’ points towards a meaning ‘existence’ for *hast*. This expression is also found in Maybudi’s *Tafsīr*, for instance (ed. Hekmat vol. 1 p. 228; vol. 9, p. 15). However, for the other persons, *hast-* is not commonly used in TN, but instead the forms mentioned in Table 10 are used, such as in the sentence below, which is the commentary to Q 67:25 وَيَقُولُونَ مَتَى هَذَا الْوَعْدِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ‘and they say: when is this promise, if [only] you were truthful’.

- e. *wa mē-gūyand kay buwad īn ‘ahd, bi-gūyīt agar hayīt rāstgūyān*<sup>31</sup>  
 ‘And they say: when will this promise be, say, if you are truthful’

I could not find an occurrence of the 1SG (nor could Lazard 1963), or of the 1PL, but I have not surveyed the entire text. In comparison

<sup>30</sup> Translation of Saheeh International.

<sup>31</sup> ومی گویند کی بود این وعده بگوینت اگر هیبت راست گوینان

with the northern Tajik dialect forms (see Table 10), we can posit them to be *\*hayam* and *\*hayīm*.

An important point relative to the *hay-* vs. *h-* clitics, and to the copula in TN is that the 3PL ending in TN is not *-ynd* but *-nd*, so that there is no reason to read *hynd* as *h-* + *-ynd*, as we did for Judeo-Persian above (§ 6.1). One cannot claim with absolute certainty the *-y-* to be a hiatus consonant. Besides, there would be no reason to spell the 2SG as <hyy> if it were simply *h-* + 2SG (*-ī* or *-ē*), and the same argument also works for the 2PL.

First, let us look at the forms of the TN. I believe we should start with the negated forms. In TN, we find forms such *nayam*, *nayīt*, *nayand*: ‘I am not’, ‘you.PL are not’, ‘they are not’. We also have forms such as *na-am*, *na-ī*, *na-and*, as in Classical Persian. The *nay-* forms are certainly more authentic, and the *na-am* etc. series are remade, either after the more standard Persian forms or, more likely, simply on the model of other negative verbs. The *lectio difficilior* principle should be applied here. Besides, *a|a > aya* is a feature found in some dialects of the region to this day. For instance, in Pamir dialects of Persian, *āma-da am* ‘I have come’ is pronounced *āmadayam*. We can thus posit the following paradigm of negation for TN: *nayam*, *\*nayī*<sup>32</sup>, *nē* and *nēst*<sup>33</sup>, *\*nayīm*, *nayīt*, *nayand*. On the other hand, we originally had two series of copulas, one independent series *\*ham*, *\*hī*, *\*hast*, *\*hīm*, *\*hīt*, *\*hand* vs. an enclitic series *=am*, *=ī*, *=ast*, etc. The negated forms of either series yielded the negation paradigm (either through *\*na-ham > na-am > nayam* etc. or directly through *na-am > nayam*, etc.). On the basis of this second series, the first copula series would have been remodeled: *nayam* : *\*ham* → *\*nayam* : *hayam*. I summarize this in the table below. In view of this, I find it more likely that the forms *na-am*, etc. are synchronically simple negations of the enclitic series.

<sup>32</sup> As I have not surveyed the entire text, some of these forms might actually be attested. I write an asterisk in front of the forms which I have not seen.

<sup>33</sup> One could theoretically think that what is spelled <nyst> stands for /nayast/ <*\*na-ast*. This could explain the two different negation particles. I do not wish to speculate any further on this topic in the frame of the present article.

NEGATION	RECONSTRUCTED 1 <sup>ST</sup> SERIES OF COPULA	1 <sup>ST</sup> SERIES OF COPULA
<i>nayam</i> →	* <i>ham</i> →	* <i>hayam</i>
* <i>nayī</i> →	* <i>hī</i> →	<i>hayī</i>
<i>nē</i>   <i>nēst</i>	* <i>hast</i> →	<i>hast</i>
* <i>nayīm</i> →	* <i>hīm</i> →	* <i>hayīm</i>
<i>nayīt</i> →	* <i>hīt</i> →	<i>hayīt</i>
<i>nayand</i> →	* <i>hand</i> →	<i>hayand</i>

Table 12. The origin of the copula in TN.

As is apparent from this table, the only person of the negation series which did not have a form with *-y-* in the negated copula paradigm, the 3SG, is also the one person for which we are certain that no form this *-y-* existed in the copula paradigm. This seems to prove my point, that the *hay-* paradigm derives from the negation paradigm.

This theory would also apply to the Northern Tajik dialects mentioned above. However, in those dialects, the *nay-* negation paradigm would have been replaced by the *nest-* paradigm, which was perhaps the negation of the enclitic series of copulas, or rather, due to influence from other dialects. In those dialects, it is the 3SG *hay* ‘he/she is’, which is strange. I see only one possible explanation for it, namely: on the model of *nestam*, *nesti*, *nest* → *hayam*, *hayi*, *hay* would have been produced. This means that this change occurred after the creation of the *nest-* paradigm in these dialects.

For Fayzobodi (see Table 11), we find an apparently strange *e*-vocalism of the copula, which turns to *i-* when preceded or followed by an *ī*, except, as far as I could hear, in the 2PL (e.g. *Šams eyam* ‘I am Shams’, *Tājik iyīm* ‘we are Tajik’)<sup>34</sup>. For unfortunate material reasons, I have been unable to complete my fieldwork on this dialect, and thus to document the negative copula in Fayzobodi. However, I suppose that it is, or has been at some point, \**neyam* < \**nē-am*, \**neyī* < \**nē-ī*, etc. This would explain perfectly the vocalism of all persons of the para-

<sup>34</sup> The form *iyīm*, like all other forms of the paradigm, was provided to me both independently and in an illustrative phrase.

digm but that of the 3SG. We would perhaps expect \**ey* as a 3SG. Now, a reasonable explanation for the 3SG form *ay* is obviously that there exists no diphthong *ey* in Fayzobodī; *eyam* for instance is syllabically *e|yam* (as I have been able to ascertain while working together with the speaker). A 3SG \**ey* (produced analogically as in the model described above) would thus automatically become *ay*<sup>35</sup>. Again, the form of the 3PL form *-and* remains a mystery to me (but further research is definitely needed on this dialect).

Now, why would negation have such a seminal effect on the copula system in these Transoxania and Fayzobodī dialects? The reason, in my view, is to be sought in the fact that, in those very dialects as in general Tajik, in the spoken language, the copula is usually avoided: *ин китоб* ‘this book’, meaning ‘this is a book’ (Baizoyev & Hayward 2004: 34). If the copula is lacking in common speech, the negative copula can never be absent: you need to say *ин китоб нест* or *ин китоб не* to say ‘this is not a book’. In my view, this is an archaism, continuing the Middle Persian situation to some extent (see § 3.2; § 4.2). This gives precedence to the negative copula over the affirmative copula, and explains the analogical power of the negated copula paradigm over the affirmative copula paradigm<sup>36</sup>. Obviously, *ин китоб нест* should originally be the negation of *ин китоб аст*, and *ин китоб не* that of *ин китоб*.

The present discussion would not be complete without mentioning the *hay-* forms found in Classical Persian poetry. These are known since the days of yore (cf. Lazard 1963: 347 with references), yet they are scanty, so we can cite most of them here, as found in Dehrodā (1946-1981, s.v. *هی*). Bold mine.

<sup>35</sup> I am uncertain how relevant this is to the question of the form of the 3SG, but the 3SG copula appears very frequently in the present perfect *būda-ast* construction (which construction, in Fayzobodī and in Tajiki in general, is not always a present perfect, but should rather be called a “perfectoid imperfect”, cf. NILSSON (2022) for a detailed description of its function, including in New Persian), for instance *panj minut buday* (< *buda-ay*?) ‘it has been five minutes’ (in the context the sentence meant ‘it has lasted five minutes’), *Fayzābād-da tawallud šidagi-ay* ‘he was born in Fayzobod’. One can imagine that *buda-ey* > *buda-y* > *bud-ay*, but this is speculative and unnecessary.

<sup>36</sup> I thank Prof. Gilles Bernard for guiding me towards this solution.

- f. Suzanī Samarqandī (d. 1166).  
*hayam ba-pilla=yi nēkī zi yak sipandān kam*  
*ba-pilla=yi badī andar hazār sipandānam*  
 ‘On the steps of Goodness, **I am** less than a grain of mustard,  
 On the steps of Evil, I am thousands grains of mustard’
- g. Rumi (1207-1273)  
*guft yā rabb gar tū=rā xāšān hayand*  
*ki mubārak da‘wat=u farrux payand*  
 ‘He said: ‘O Lord! If **there are** to you noblemen,  
 Who are auspicious to invite, and well-fated [...]’
- h. Hafez (1325-1390)  
*sāqī agar-at hawā=yi mā hay*  
*juz bāda mabād nazd=i mā, hay!*  
 ‘Cup-bearer, if you care about us<sup>37</sup>,  
 Let there be nothing but alcohol next to us, hey!’<sup>38</sup>

The example f. is by Suzanī Samarqandī, who was from the same region as Nasafī, and must probably have spoken a similar or identical dialect. This is simply an addition to the data we have about the early dialects of the region. A welcome addition, as I have not found a form *hayam* in TN. The examples g. and h., by two of the kings of Persian poetry, represent the *mibi est* construction (§ 4.4), and are functional subjunctives (preceded by *gar/agar* ‘if’) which could be rendered by *bāšand* (g.) and *bāšad* (h.) in contemporary Persian. The example g. *gar tū=rā xāšān hay-and* can be glossed as ‘if to thee noble.PL *hay*-3PL’ and the example h. *agar-at hawā=yi mā hay* as ‘if-thee air=EZ we *hay*’ (‘to have somebody’s air’ in Persian means ‘to care about somebody’).

Rather than associating these forms to those of the Transoxania dialects discussed in this section, I would suggest that they go back

<sup>37</sup> We may interpret this verse as containing the *mibi est* construction, as the 2SG clitic *-at* has the same function in the phrase as the construction with *tu=rā* ‘to you’, based on the independent 2SG pronoun + the *rā* element in its dative function. Literally this verse can be rendered as: ‘Cup-bearer, if to you is (*hay*) a care of us’.

<sup>38</sup> The fourth poem in Dehxodā is by a so-called Najībī, about whom I could find no information. I will refrain from citing it here, however the form in that *hayt* is <hy> 2SG, so it could simply be *h-i*, another remnant of the ancient root *h-* ‘to be’.

to the ancient optative of the verb ‘to be’, 3SG <hy>/<HWE> (cf. Ferrer-Losilla 2013: 77), with a shift in function. This optative form would perhaps have been realized /hay/ in Middle Persian, and this form would have been kept as such. Another possibility is that the 3SG *hē*, generalized to the other persons, would have yielded *\*hē-am* > *\*hyam*, *\*hē-and* > *\*hyand*, which regularly yielded *hayam*, *hayand* (etc.) in turn. The form *hay* of h. would not be explained thereby, so the mystery remains. Using the 3SG optative to explain the TN forms is difficult, as the 3SG in TN is *hast* / =*ast*, so that we would have to accept that this 3SG optative form disappeared after leveling the entire paradigm. It is, however, possible to use it to explain the Northern Tajik dialect forms as an alternative scenario to the one I suggested above.

### 7. *The copula in Gavrūni (Zoroastrian Dari)*

There are actually many more variants of the copula in Early New Persian dialects and close relatives (cf. Browne 1895 for some examples). These, however, should be treated in separate works, as this one is intricate enough, and as what interests us here is mostly copulas going back to Middle Persian *h-*. To reach the goal of the two next sessions, namely, explaining the formation of the copula in modern Afghanistan Persian (Dari) and Iranian Persian, I will discuss one more linguistic variety, which will serve as an example of the treatment of the development of copulas in Iranian languages. It is the Gavrūni language, in its Yazdi variant, which I will take as an example. Gavrūni, also called Zoroastrian Dari and Behdini, is the language of Zoroastrians, traditionally spoken in Yazd and Kermān, although it is no longer spoken in Kermān, and only maintains vivacity in Yazd and in the Yazdi community inside or outside of Yazd<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> GHOLAMI (2022) argues against the scholarly use of the term *Gavrūni*, citing concerns that some members of the Zoroastrian community perceive it as offensive. While her position reflects sensitivities within certain circles, it overlooks the fact that *Gavrūni* is the native autoethnonym used by speakers themselves. Indeed, in the language referred to, *Gavrūni* simply means ‘Zoroastrian’, and continues to be used self-referentially by many Zoroastrians in Yazd. GHOLAMI (2022: 51) criticizes scholars – including my-

### 7.1. Presentation of the data

The verb ‘to be/to become’ in Gavrūni is *bodvun* (dialectal variants *bodmun*, *bozvun*). I will only discuss the present stem of the verb ‘to be’, and the copula in Gavrūni. The situation in Gavrūni is different from that in Classical Persian, for multiple reasons, which I will discuss in the next paragraphs. All Gavrūni dialects but two (Malati, the prestige dialect of Yazd, and the Kermānī dialect) have the following present tense verbal endings: *-ε*, *-e*, *-a*, *-im*, *-it*, *-en*. For the sake of concision, I will concentrate on the majority forms and leave Malati and Kermānī examples mostly out of the discussion (although they do not differ very much). Below is a table of the copula paradigms in Gavrūni.

Person	Gavrūni verb ‘to be’	Enclitic verbal copula
1SG	<i>hε</i>	<i>=ε</i>
2SG	<i>he</i>	<i>=e</i>
3SG	<i>ha</i>	<i>=a</i>
1PL	<i>him</i>	<i>=im</i>
2PL	<i>hit</i>	<i>=it</i>
3PL	<i>hen</i>	<i>=en</i>

Table 13. The Gavrūni verb ‘to be’ and the copula in Gavrūni.

self – who cite the continued use of the term by «a group of Zoroastrians» who «still use the terms Gavr and Gavrī/Gavrūnī to refer to themselves and their language» as an argument to use this name. However, it appears that this usage is in fact widespread among native speakers. While efforts have been made in some intellectual circles to replace the term within the language itself, they have seen limited success. Her conclusion (2022: 68) that «[t]he fact that the pejorative term *Gavr* has been adopted by at least some members of the Zoroastrian community, does not allow scholars to consider this designation to be acceptable» is problematic – not only because Zoroastrians do not constitute a race, but also because the term in question is not a pejorative exonym adopted under duress, but a native, internally used designation. The widespread and continued self-referential use of *Gavrūni* argues for its scholarly legitimacy. Cases where genuinely pejorative terms have been reappropriated by communities are rare, and this is not a clear example of such a case. For comparison, the Haitian Creole term *nèg* (‘person, man, Black individual’) ultimately derives from French *nègre*, but the latter was neutral well into the 20th century and is thus not a valid counter-example.

Up to here, the situation seems similar to that of Classical Persian, with the major difference that the independent verb is *h-* and not *hast-*. Like in modern Persian, the enclitic series can indicate location (*mε Teyrun=ε* ‘I am in Tehran’ *por=om Teyrun=a* ‘my son is in Tehran’), but unlike in modern Persian, the independent series is generally avoided for this usage (i.e. *Teyrun ha* is less common to express location ‘he is in Tehran’ than *Teyrun=a*, although it will appear normally after a vowel)<sup>40</sup>. The negation of the paradigms of both series is: *na-hε*, *na-he*, *na-ha* or *na* (var. *nā*), *na-him*, *na-hit*, *na-hen*, which is very regular. However, identification and predication for the 3SG and 3PL inanimate necessitate a third series, which it is difficult to ascribe diachronically and synchronically to the verb ‘to be’, and which is *-on* or *-onε*, depending on the dialect<sup>41</sup>. Below I present a more complete table.

PERSON	GAVRUNI VERB ‘TO BE’		NOMINAL PREDICATE COPULA
1SG	<i>hε</i>	<i>=ε</i>	
2SG	<i>he</i>	<i>=e</i>	
3SG	<i>ha</i>	<i>=a</i>	<i>-on ~ -onε</i>
1PL	<i>him</i>	<i>=im</i>	
2PL	<i>hit</i>	<i>=it</i>	
3PL	<i>hen</i>	<i>=εn</i>	
3PL inanimate	<i>ha ~ hen</i>		<i>-on ~ -onε</i>

Table 14. The present tense of ‘to be’ and the copula in Gavruni.

This situation is remarkably similar to that of the predecessor of Early Judeo-Persian (§ 6.1, Table 9).

### 7.2. Functions of the Gavruni copulas

As explained above, the two series of Gavruni copulas do not overlap functionally. While Lorimer (1916: 462) initially did not believe these two series were functionally different, he later writes (1928: 315) that *ha* can be equated to modern Persian *hast*, while *on*

<sup>40</sup> See example h. below.

<sup>41</sup> Some dialects have free variations between both *-on* and *-onε*.

and *onε* can be equated to modern Persian *ast*<sup>42</sup>. This is not entirely accurate, but his intuition was good. The “nominal predicate” (*on*) copula expresses predication with adjectives (whether permanent or not, as in *sirat=i mo porog=e pačol=on*, ‘the face of this boy is dirty’, Firuzbaxš 1997: 101), definition and presentation (“this is my father”, “this is a book”). More importantly, it is used for identification. It can take the word-stress in emphasis, hence my classification as a suffix. Below, I will cite examples of both series, both from prose corpora and from verse corpora.

- a. *tars dver=i marg-onε*  
‘Fear is the brother of Death’<sup>43</sup> (from Mazdāpur 1995: 273)
- b. *Pōki ba rāh-e vā:ter*  
‘Purity is the best way’<sup>44</sup>
- c. *Greyne āxšiš ba čār to*  
‘The elements are four’
- d. *Kad=o bolo droz-onε*  
‘[Her] height (= Pers. قد و بالا) is tall’
- e. *Yaki rā dust dore čašāš siyāb-on*<sup>45</sup>  
‘I love someone, her eyes are black’
- f. *jun-om še=jun bašta-ne*  
‘My soul is bound to her soul’<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> IVANOW (1935: 84-85) discusses the *-on/-onε* copula, and is curious as to its origin. Ivanow’s discussion (1935: 85) of the copula “*onit*” of Gavruni deserves to be treated in a separate study. The 3SG copula spelled <yd> (-*īd*? -*ēd*? -*ayd*?) of the *Ṭabaqāt-i Anšārī* (IVANOW 1923: 354-356) is real, though (e.g. استاد بغدادیان اید *way ustād=i Baydādiyān* ‘*yd*’ he is the teacher of the Baghdadians’, cf. IVANOW 1923: 354), and also deserves attention; however I am afraid I cannot include it in the present study, together with many other unusual Iranian 3SG copulas.

<sup>43</sup> A common Iranian saying. Fear is akin to death.

<sup>44</sup> From a song, cf. BERNARD (2017: 16), example c. is from the same source, example d. is from BERNARD (2017: 24), e. is from BERNARD (2017: 13).

<sup>45</sup> I recorded another variant of this song with the pronunciation *siyāw-on*.

<sup>46</sup> From FIRUZBAXŠ (1997: 122).

In example f. *-ne* is from *-one* (corresponding to *-one* in the Malati dialect, where there is no phoneme /ε/) preceded by a vowel. To note, the copula *-on* is also found in the variety termed “Zoroastrian Persian”, which is the Persian register of Zoroastrian bards of the past (cf. Bernard 2020: 63). A telling example of the function of *-on* is found in one of the oldest recorded Zoroastrian texts in Gavruni, a translation of the Bible dating back to the 1840s or 1850s (cf. Bernard 2016: 129), cited in example g. below.

- g. *o xda rowšnāxi oš-did ke xubon*  
 ‘And God saw the light, that it **is** good’
- h. *oš did ser kič-e ha*  
 ‘She saw that **he is** at the end of the street’<sup>47</sup>
- i. *yogaš na ge vešim de=nešunte*  
 ‘Its location **does not exist** [anymore] to go show thee’<sup>48</sup>

If we go back to the terminology discussed in § 3.2, *-on/-one* is used for partial characterization, where Middle Persian would use a nominal sentence, such as in example a., where fear is the brother of death – but it is also much more and cannot be equated to just that. Example a. can also be seen as a general truth, in which case a nominal sentence would also be found in Middle Persian. If we take example b. *Pōki ha rāh-e vā:ter* does not carry the same meaning as a sentence *\*Pōki rāh-e vā:ter-on*: the latter would equate purity with “the better way”, as if, reverting the order, it were in English “the better way is purity”. The phrase as it stands means ‘[out of all the/both ways] purity is the better way’, which is existential identification, for which the copula *ast* would be used in Middle Persian. In example c. I doubt that an alternative sentence with *-on* would even be possible. It is also an example of existential identification. Examples d., e., f. and g. are also characterizations, while examples h. is a locative usage of the verb, and i. an existential. To finish the table, if we take

<sup>47</sup> From LORIMER (1928: 310-312).

<sup>48</sup> From BERNARD (2015 fieldwork recordings).

the sentence *vov=i sar-čašma pək=o xaš-on* (Firuzbaxš 1997: 110, my transcription) ‘the water of the source is pure and good’ and make it into a sentence *vov=i sar-čašma pək=o xaš ha*, it would simply mean: ‘there is a pure and good source water’, again, underlining the existential function of *ha*.

Two more examples, provided by Firuzbaxš (1997: 103) also underline the difference between both copulas: *mo gole jvun-on* ‘this flower is beautiful’ vs. *bar=i bə v ha* ‘the door of the garden is open’. The door being open is a state of existence, like the presence in the street (example h.), it is not a characterization: the door is not characterized in any way by its being open. A very important thing to keep in mind is that the negation of both copulas is *naha*, that is, *-on/-one* is only positive/affirmative. In Lorimer (1928: 310) we find the sentence *xudā buzurg ha* ‘God is great’. I am uncertain if this usage of *ha* is due to the age of the text. Rather, as it is in the Kermānī dialect, it is possible that it is influenced by a Persian *xodā bozorg hast* (although less idiomatic than *xodā bozorg=e*). In modern Yazdi Gavrūni, this would be said *xəḏ mas-on*, as my informants have confirmed.

When somebody knocks on a Zoroastrian door (or rather, uses the *halqe* to announce their presence) in Yazd, the person inside will traditionally say *ki ha*: ‘who is there?’. A form *ki-on* would mean ‘who is he/she?’ One can also think of sentences such as *num-ot ki-on* ‘who is thy name?’ (= ‘what is thy name’). A sentence *\*num-ot ki ha* would be ungrammatical. As to the presentative function, only *-on/-one* assumes this role: *mo ktov-on* ‘this is a book’, vs. *mo ktov ha* ‘this book exists’.

What about existential identification, sentences which contain a full identification of the subject to its predicate, and contain a copula *ast* (§ 3.2)? The situation is more complicated. When asked to translate ‘this city about which I am talking to you is Tehran’, speakers of some dialects such as Alyavoi say *mo šāre ge dərə be-de-veḡe Tebrun=a* with an =a copula, while a speaker of Mobrakai said *mo šāhre ge dərə be-de-veḡe num-oš Tebrun-on* ‘the city about which I am talking to you, its name is Tehran’. I am uncertain if the *-on* is due to the introduction of the word *num* ‘name’. I asked one of my informants,

and he confirmed that this was a dialectal variation. When asked to translate “the first prophet of the world is Saint Zarathushtra”, an Alyavoi speaker said *avalin peyyambar-e dunyo ašu Zartošt-on*. This needs to be tested on a wider scale and with more examples, however, given the general tendency of the *-on* copula to “take over”, I would personally believe that existential identification was originally with *ha/=a*, and that the *-on* copula to express existential identification is a newer usage. The *ha* verb is more and more relegated to an existential and locational usage, and this seems to mirror the divergence in function between *bast* and *=e* in contemporary Iranian Persian (on which see § 9). The difference between *ha* and *-on* is thus not, as Lorimer (1928: 315) wrote, that which exists between Persian *bast* and *ast*, but rather that which exists – albeit not exactly – between Persian *bast* and *=e*. To my knowledge, there is no continuation in Gavruni of the *mihī est* construction.

### 7.3. A (pre-)history of the Gavruni copula

To sum up the previous section, *ha* mostly expresses existence and existential characterization, for which Middle Persian used the copula *ast*, and it also has a locational function (“he/she is in Yazd”), which, in contemporary Persian, is expressed either by *bast* or by *=e*. The copula *-on* is used for general truth, statements, existential identification (perhaps secondarily), characterization, presentative sentences. In simple terms, *mo porog ha* means ‘this boy exists’ or ‘this boy is [here/there]’ while *mo porog-on* means ‘this is a boy’. To be fair, ‘to exist’ is a verbal function in and of itself and, as insofar it expresses existence, *ha* should not be considered a copula (e.g. Korn 2011: 53). For the purpose of this study, I have sometimes considered it together with the copula and the verb ‘to be’, but in this specific function, it technically is not a copula. Both *ha* and *-on* function with either 3SG animate or inanimate subjects and 3PL inanimate subjects. Their functions are summed up in the Table 15 below.

CONTEXT	COPULA USED
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	MIDDLE PERSIAN	GAVRUNI
General truth, rules, statements	No copula	-on/-onε
Existential identification 3SG	Copula <i>ast</i>	<i>ha/=a</i> or -on/-onε
Characterization	No copula if timeless, <i>baw-</i> if contingent	-on/-onε
Presentatives and exclamations “this is X”	Copula <i>ast</i>	-on/-onε
Existence (X exists)	Copula <i>ast</i>	<i>ha/=a</i>
Existential identification (other persons)	<i>h-ēm, h-ē, etc.</i>	<i>h-ε, h-e, etc.</i>

Table 15. Use of the copula in Middle Persian and Gavruni.

It will be interesting, and relevant to the general discussion, to discern the origin of both the *ha* and the *-on* copula.

The Gavruni paradigm of ‘to be’ in the present tense is simply constituted of the present tense verbal endings added to the *h-* stem, including the 3SG. In Gavruni, there is thus no trace of a reflex of a 3SG *\*asti*, which should have become †*ašt*. At some point, it was simply eliminated and replaced by the 3SG *-a* < *\*-at*. This elimination was brutal, so to say, as not even a trace of the 3SG negation particle *nēst* remains: instead we find *naha* and *na*. The particle *nēst* should have yielded Gavruni *\*nešt* or *\*ništ*.

The origin of the *ha* copula is thus synchronically self-evident. As to its function, I believe it is a continuation of the function of *ast* in Middle Persian, although perhaps not for presentative sentences (see below). The origin of *-on/-onε* is not as obvious. I will first refer one and all to Agnes Korn’s seminal paper (Korn 2011) which sheds a light on the diachronic development of copulas, and to Benkato’s (2020) article, which is typologically interesting as well. Korn (2011: 54) notes that, in some Iranian languages, pronouns can be used in copular function. «These fall into two groups: pronouns which are used as copula forms and continue to be used as pronouns, and forms that have abandoned their pronominal function entirely» (2011: 54-55). To the first group belongs, for instance, Sogdian, with its demonstrative pronoun (‘) *xw* which may be used as a 3SG copula, and

the same applies to Yaghnobi =*x* (cf. Korn 2011: 55f.; Benkato 2020: 173f.). Benkato (2020: 184f.) also suggests that the copulas Yaghnobi *xast* and Sogdian *xy* also derive from the same demonstrative pronoun + *asti*, the ancient Iranian copula. I present an example of the copula in Yaghnobi below, to illustrate this.

- (a) *ax ċi man se sol-i mayda=x*  
 ‘He is three years younger than me’ (from Benkato 2020: 182)

«As has long been recognized, this =*x* derives from the demonstrative pronoun *ax*, which in Yaghnobi functions as both the 3SG. DIR pronoun and the distal demonstrative pronoun» (Benkato 2020: 182). This *ax* in turn derives from the Old Iranian demonstrative pronoun \**hau-/aua-* (cf. Korn 2011: 56, with references to the literature). In Wakhi, even the verb ‘to be, to exist’ *tey* (present) / *tu* (past) derives from a pronoun (cf. Korn 2011: 56, with references to the literature). In general, these demonstratives turned copulas are limited to the 3SG, with some exceptions. The reason is obvious, as demonstrative pronouns, whether they be distal or proximal, usually designate a third object/person. For the same reason, there is often a great semantic fluidity between demonstrative and personal pronouns (Iranian Persian *un* ‘he/she’ ~ ‘that’, Gavruni *in* ‘he/she’ < pre-Proto-Gavruni \**ēn* ‘this’, or from Classical Persian *īn* ‘this’, etc.).

Beyond Iranian languages, the same process occurred famously in Chinese (是 *shi*). Benkato (2020: 186; already in gist in Korn 2011: 62-63) even supposes, with an excellent argumentation, that the process described above for Sogdian was reinforced by Chinese influence.

The astute reader sees already since quite some time where I am going. There is every reason to think that the Gavruni *-on/-one* 3SG copula derives from a demonstrative pronoun. Its becoming clitic is no issue, as there exist many parallels for that (see example a. above, or Korn 2011 in general). More specifically, I think that *-one* is simply the grammaticalized semi-distal deictic *one*. The etymology of the demonstrative *one* is, in my view, the *-o-* element, referring to an absent or distant subject in Gavruni + *ne* ‘now’. This could be similar to French *ici là* ‘specifically here’, if one takes *là* in its secondary meaning ‘now’.

In this case, *-on* needs to derive from Proto-Gavruni *\*ān* ‘that’ (perhaps ultimately from Persian *ān*). A more economic solution, that does not require two different etymologies, would be to derive *-on* from *ān* and *-onε* from *-on* + durative particle *e-*. However, we would phonetically expect *-one*, with an /e/, and I believe that the solution to derive *-onε* from the demonstrative *onε* to be more straightforward.

How did this situation arise, how did this distribution form itself? one might ask. If one looks at Table 15 and if one accepts my proposition that existential identification is originally done with the copula *ha*, it appears that *-on/-onε* is mostly found where, in Middle Persian, there was no copula. The main exception being presentative and exclamative sentences. However, these are also found as copula-less constructions in multiple Persian varieties. This is the *ин китоб* ‘this is a book’ construction referred to above (§ 6.2) which I also reconstruct for TN and Northern Tajik dialects. It is conceivable that, while *naba* was the negation of *ha*, the form *na/nā* (which nowadays is a variant of *naba*, but shares the same function) was that of the nominal sentence, exactly like what I suggested for *nē* vs. *nēst* (§ 5.2). It is remarkable that we find yet another Iranian language with both traces of nominal sentences and two different negation particles.

This is to say, in the ancestor language of Gavruni (which is certainly not Old, Middle or New Persian, for the sake of clarity), sentences expressing a general truth, timeless statements, sentences of characterization and presentative sentences did not use any type of copula. ‘This is a book’ was simply *\*ktov onε* (or *\*dapter onε*) ‘that a book’, exactly like in spoken Tajik *ин китоб*. Similarly, ‘he saw that it was good’ was *\*oš-did ge xub on* ‘he saw that that good’<sup>49</sup>. This is simply how *-on* and *-onε* were grammaticalized and became copula suffixes.

<sup>49</sup> The word *xub* in that Bible translation is certainly a borrowing from Persian, or an archaism at the time of the translation, as the normal Gavruni word is, depending on the dialect, *xəb* or *xib*. Perhaps also it notes *\*/xyb/*, the otherwise unattested intermediary form between *\*xūb* and *xib*. The word *xub* is, in the modern speech, less natural than Gavruni *xas̄*.

## 8. The verb ‘to be’ in Dari

There are many dialects of Dari, as many, I would say, as there are villages in Afghanistan. However, in the group of dialects which forms the bulk of the speakers, the 3SG copula is *asta* as in *xūb asta* ‘it is good’, *maqbul asta* ‘he/she is beautiful’, or, in Aryana Saeed’s famous pop song *بچه کابل* (written and sang in the learned contemporary Kabuli dialect):

- a. *dar bām=e dil nišasta xušbutar az gul asta*  
*dar in*<sup>50</sup> *rōzā=yi tārik ū nūr-e Kābul asta*  
 ‘He sits on the roof of [my] heart, he **is** better smelling than a rose  
 In these gloomy days, he **is** the light of Kabul’<sup>51</sup>

The 3SG verbal ending in Dari is *-a* (< *-ad*). We know the original paradigm of ‘to be’ to have been *astom*, *astī*, *ast*, *astīm* (or *astēm* depending on the dialect), *astēn*, *astan*, with a thus irregular 3SG *ast* (as in the literary language). What happened thus is a leveling of the paradigm of *ast-*, which became *ast-a* with the *-a* 3SG ending<sup>52</sup>. The result of this leveling is the removal, or rather, the regularization of the only Dari irregular verb as to its person endings. The only part of speech where I regularly heard, no matter the dialect, the form *-as*, in the expression *sayī-s* ‘it is correct’ (literary Persian *ṣaḥīḥ-ast*) and in questions: *ī bača-s*, *nē?* ‘Is it a boy?’

The same occurred with the negation paradigm, *nēst-*, which originally was *nēstom*, *nēstī*, *nēst*, *nēstīm* (or *nēstēm*), *nēstēn*, *nēstan*. It was leveled, together with *ast-*, which yields the current paradigm of the negation, with *nēsta* ‘he/she/it is not, he/she/it is not there’. While both a copula =*a* (treated in § 9) and a verb *hast-* ‘to exist’ do exist in Dari – not even in all dialects – they are both rare, and in general, one can say that in Dari, unlike in Iranian Persian, the verb ‘to be’ serves as both a copula

<sup>50</sup> Poetic form of Dari *ī* ‘this, these’.

<sup>51</sup> In the same song we can hear the less common copula =*a*, *waqī mī-bīnom-eš hālem bihtar=a* ‘when I see him, my state is better’. This copula will be treated in § 9.

<sup>52</sup> Regularly, the 3SG form should have, at least in some dialects, become *as*. This *as*, however, was leveled paradigm-internally already to *ast*. The same occurred with the negation paradigm. Naturally, whenever we find the 3SG form with the 3SG ending, we hear *as* and not \**ast*.

and as a verb ‘to be, to exist’. While some nominal sentences are permitted in Dari, presentative sentences of the type *ин китоб* discussed above are not. ‘This is a book’ will be, in most dialects, *ī (yak) kitāb asta*. The verb *ast-* generally requires a preposition to indicate a localization (*da Kābul=as, da Kābul asta*). The form *as*, as far as I noticed, is strictly enclitic, unlike *asta*. Glassman (1972: 24-26) only knows the form *as*. It probably reflects the speech of Kabul at the time. Times have changed.

ENDINGS	ORIGINAL PARADIGM	NEW PARADIGM
-om	<i>ast-om</i>	<i>astom</i>
-ī	<i>ast-ī</i>	<i>astī</i>
-a	→ <i>as(t)</i>	→ <i>asta</i>
-ēm	<i>ast-ēm</i>	<i>astēm</i>
-ēn	<i>ast-ēn</i>	<i>astēn</i>
-and	<i>ast-an</i>	<i>astan</i>

Table 16. The leveling of the verb ‘to be’ in Dari.

### 9. *The verb ‘to be’ in contemporary Iranian Persian, and the =e copula*<sup>53</sup>

To express existence, contemporary Iranian Persian uses the verb *bast*. To some extent, the 3SG *bast* is comparable to the usage and function of *ba* in Gavrūni. To some extent only, because it is permitted to use it as a copula, that is, to express qualification, a general truth, a statement, etc. Yet, this use is secondary, and usually avoided. To discuss an example mentioned above: to say ‘God is great’<sup>54</sup>,

<sup>53</sup> Many more issues will not be discussed here, than will be discussed. Among which the contentious Tehrani form *hasteš*, synonymous of *bast* (on which see PASTOR, forthcoming). As Neshat Esfahani said: «Not the truth of the world, nor the world of truth: talk of this here is unfitting».

<sup>54</sup> This expression means ‘God can do all things, do not despair’ and is not connected with the Arabic phrase *Allāhu akbar*, which means ‘God is greater’ (and not ‘God is the greatest’ or ‘God is great’ as it sometimes is translated). In Iran, *Allāhu akbar* (usually an expression of surprise, despair, shock) is always said in pure Arabic (albeit in a Persian garb), and never translated.

*xodâ*<sup>55</sup> *bozorg hast* is permitted, but it is generally unidiomatic, and the 3SG copula proper will rather be used. An exception to this, when, namely, *hast* can and will be used with a copular function, is for emphasis, whether contrastive or otherwise: *xodâ bozorg hast, ammâ*, or *xodâ bozorg ke hast, ammâ...* ‘God is [definitely] great, but...’, ‘God is [definitely] great indeed, but...’ *In pesar kučulu hast, ammâ xeyli bâhuš=e* ‘this boy is small, but he is very smart’.

In colloquial Iranian Persian, the standard copula is =*e*, as in the example provided above: *bâhuš=e* ‘he is smart’. Its origin has not yet been discussed in the scholarly literature. In general, it can be said that it is barely mentioned by linguists of Persian, and, when it is, it is discarded as a depraved *ast* (e.g. Browne 1895: 781 “*ast* is shortened to *a, ê*”). Indeed, in the literary language =*ast* and *ast* are found to systematically correspond to colloquial =*e*. For clarity: the origin of colloquial Iranian New Persian =*e* 3SG is completely unrelated to that of Tajiki *hay* and *ay* discussed above (§ 6.2).

To note, *ast* does survive, to some extent, in contemporary Iranian Persian. In the speech of some, =*e* will not be found after a vowel and =*s* (< =*ast*) will be used instead. For instance, *taqsir-e orupâ=s* ‘it’s Europe’s fault’. Yet, even this is limited: after an *-i*, this =*s* will never be encountered in the spoken speech. In spoken contemporary Iranian Persian, we will hear *in lebâs âbi=ye* ‘this clothing is blue’ and never, I insist, never \**in lebâs âbi=s*. After *-u*, both clitics are permitted: *in ye hâpu=s* ‘this is a (cute) pet’ vs. *in ye hâpu=e*. Both are common. Never will one encounter, apart from the speech of some people who want to sound important and very respectable, *xodâ bozorg=as(t)* (and some of these people will even add the final *-t*, although it is probably gone from the spoken language since a few centuries). Here, there are some sociolinguistic questions at play which go beyond the scope of this study.

No matter what handbooks will say, these forms do not exist in the wild. Thus, =*ast* does not exist, only =(a)*s* does. It is found either after *-â*, where it is more common than =*e*, or after *-u*, where it is as

<sup>55</sup> I transcribe contemporary Iranian Persian /ɒ/ as <â>, while in other varieties and earlier texts, I follow the traditional transcription with <ā>. This is because the length distinction is no longer relevant, and because we know the exact phonetic realization of this sound in the contemporary variety.

common as =e, and never after -i. *Pedaret injā=s* ‘your father is here’ will sound more natural than *pedaret injā=e*, although both are permitted and will be heard. As to the other two vowels, -o and -e: after -o, =s is very rare. E.g. *in barā-ye to=s* ‘this is for you’ is unusual to say the least, and we will hear *in barā-ye to=e* rather. After -e, the situation is reversed: =e will never appear. Not only that, but it is replaced by -as, and it is not just e=s as for the other vowels. E.g. *in ye madresas* ‘this is a school’, and not \**in ye madrese=s*, or \**in ye madrese=e*. Diachronically, it is rather that -a, followed by =s, did not undergo the sound law -a > -e, so in fact, we can say that =as does not exist in contemporary Iranian Persian, but only =s does. The phonetic reason for this distribution is that, -āe will consist in two vowels next to each other, phonetically it will be [ʊʔe], which is unnecessarily heavy in the Persian phonological system. For -u, -u=e will permit a glide to appear, so [u<sup>w</sup>e] (I put the -w- in superscript because it is slight).

This distribution in mind, we can say that there exists in contemporary Iranian Persian a morpheme =e with an allomorph =s, with a largely phonetic distribution. That they are allomorphs and not allophones is obvious from the fact that there is otherwise no context in which /e/ would become /s/ and vice-versa. The very fact that =ast was kept as =s in some contexts – and never as =as, unlike in Dari – is enough to prove that =e is not the reflex of =ast, as has been held until now. To note, the form =e ~ =a (=a is the 3SG copula before the change of -a > -e, and synchronically, it exists in some dialects which did not undergo this change) is a few hundred years old, maybe more (cf. Browne 1895: 781 ff.).

Wherefrom does =e come? The answer is already foreshadowed in the previous sections. In the previous section (§ 8), we saw how the 3SG form *ast* took the 3SG ending of all other verbs in Dari, becoming *asta*. Two sections ago (§ 7), we saw how Gavruni replaced an unattested reflex of *ast* by a regular paradigm based on the verb *h-*, and how it grammaticalized a demonstrative pronoun as a copula. In § 6 we saw a reconstruction of the pre-Early Judeo-Persian paradigm, which was functionally similar to the Gavruni *h-* paradigm, with a 3SG form \**h-id*, containing the 3SG verbal ending added to *h-*. We also saw that this form was influenced by the copula *ast*, yielding *hyst*. Old Iranian

athematic verbs underwent a process of thematization in the present and imperfect, which ended in Middle Persian and Parthian verbs all being thematized but for *ast* (cf. Ferrer-Losilla 2015: 103, 103 fn. 19). What we are witnessing here is the continuation of this process, leading to the thematization of *ast*, the last survivor of the process, in a group of New Iranian languages.

We thus have to reconstruct a *\*b-* paradigm for the ancestor dialect of contemporary Iranian Persian as well. This paradigm is attested in various dialects, in Judeo-Persian, and is required to explain the form *hast-* (cf. § 4.3, Table 5). This *b-* paradigm underwent the same replacement of 3SG *ast* by *\*b-a* (< *\*b-ad*) as had occurred in Gavruni. Unlike in Gavruni, this paradigm was soon only enclitic (or perhaps first suffixal, then enclitic), and because of this, like in Gavruni, the /h/ was lost. Thus, *\*buzurg-ham* ‘I am big’ and *\*buzurg-ha* ‘he/she is big’ became *buzurg=am* and *buzurg=e*, and remained as such to this day. The origin of the copula =*e* in Persian is thus a form *\*b-a*, containing the 3SG, built on the stem *\*b-* ‘to be’ with the addition of the 3SG verbal ending *-a*. At the same time, the form *ast* was not completely lost, and it remained used in positions where phonotactics did not permit the clitic =*e*.

This development, once again, is old. Forms with =*a* are found in many pieces of dialectal poetry. It is also found in Hazaragi, a dialect spoken in Afghanistan by the Hazara people. It is also found in Herati, a dialect spoken near the Iran-Afghanistan border, on the Afghan side (and, due to recent migrations, also on the Iranian side). I believe this =*a/e* copula needs to be treated as an isogloss, grouping Hazaragi, Herati, Iranian Persian together, against Dari, Tajiki, Early Judeo-Persian, etc.<sup>56</sup> It is naturally possible that two dialects innovated similarly – and, as I have shown, we find an almost identical inno-

<sup>56</sup> So does the Neyshaburi dialect (from Nishapur, to the west of Mashhad). I possess a recording of a Classical Persian poem by Hafez rendered in the Neyshaburi dialect by a speaker of it (dating back to 2024). The poem is *ay nasīm=i saḥar ārāmgah=i yār kuḵā-st* ‘O morning breeze, where is the resting place of the Companion?’ Rendered in Neyshaburi it becomes: *i nasīm-e saḥar ārāmgah=e yār koḵye*. The word for ‘where’ is *kuḵi* (as in Hazaragi), but with the =*e* copula, ‘where is’, it turns to *koḵye* (and not to *\*koḵi=ye* as one could have expected). The 1PL form *mā kuḵā=i* in the poem is rendered as *mā koḵīm*. The Neyshaburi dialect is particularly interesting because of its vocalism (partly archaic, partly innovated), and to my knowledge it has not quite received the attention it should have by linguists.

vation in at least one other Iranian language even – but it is an uneconomical solution. There are other features that, in my view, group together phylogenetically Iranian Persian and Hazaragi, although this discussion is outside the scope of the present study.

We can find =a also in some other dialects of Afghanistan, including in Kābuli (see fn. 51); however, I believe this is mostly due to the overwhelming recent influence of Iranian Persian on Dari. In Afghan dialects besides Hazaragi and Herati, =a is relatively limited, and seems to be rather new. In general, I also think we can consider the =a copula as separating, phylogenetically, spoken contemporary Iranian Persian from Classical Persian. This can be seen as a supplementary argument supporting the idea that spoken contemporary Iranian Persian does not derive *recto itinere* from the literary Classical Persian language such as recorded by, for instance, the 13th - 15th century canon literature.

The 3SG negation in standard Iranian Persian is *nis* ~ *nist* (< *nēst*). It is the negative form of both *hast* and =e. I discussed the origin of the dialectal variant *ni* above (§ 5.2). In some dialects, including Herati and Hazaragi, a new form was created, influenced by the 3SG copula. It is the form *nīya*, which is also the negative form of both *hast* and =a (e.g. Hazaragi *gap nīya* ‘no problem’, literally ‘there is no word [to say]’ and Hazaragi *xūb nīya* ‘it is not good’). Formally, it can be understood as *nē* ‘no’ + -a 3SG ending. It could also perhaps be viewed as *nē* ‘no’ + =a 3SG copula. In my view, the first solution is more tempting, but at the end of the day, they both are secondary to the process of creation of the 3SG copula =a<sup>57</sup>. Another solution to explain these negation forms consists in departing from the Middle Persian forms *nē h-am*, *nē h-ē*, *nēst*, etc. Let us imagine that, for instance, *nē h-am* had become *\*nē-am* > *nīyam* (and *\*nē-om* > *nīyom*), *nē h-ē* > *nīyē*, etc. Then, the 3SG would have also been leveled after these other forms, yielding *\*nē-ad* > *nīya*, exactly like *ast* was replaced by *\*h-ad* in the ancestor variety of contemporary Iranian Persian. This is the opposite of what

<sup>57</sup> We can imagine that, originally, there was *\*nēst* as a negation of *hast*, and *\*nē*, a negation of *\*h-a* (originally a negation of the nominal sentence), which later became (> *\*nē-a*) > *nīya* and then took over *\*nēst*.

happened in most other varieties of Persian, including contemporary Iranian Persian, which all generalized the 3SG form *nēst* and built a whole paradigm around it. As to the development of the *nēst*-paradigm, it precedes chronologically the separation of Tat from Persian (cf. Lenepveu-Hotz 2023: 264-265). This separation is dated back to around the 16th century by Lenepveu-Hotz (2023: 267).

### 10. Conclusion

I discussed many particular points, and an exhaustive conclusion will not be fruitful for the present study, so I propose a reflection instead. Throughout this study, we observed how multiple languages leveled verbs for ‘to be’, copulas, how they remade verbs, how they remade copulas. A constant conclusion has been that the various varieties of Persian behaved differently from each other in their historical developments, in regard to the copula and the verb ‘to be’.

What needs to be done is understanding every system, every paradigm, for itself, within its own wider dialectal system, before comparing it to other varieties. For instance, the comparison of the contemporary Iranian Persian 3SG copula *=e* to the literary form *ast* has led scholars to believe, erroneously, that *=e* is a “deformed” *ast*. This is also true for every other variety I have discussed here. Another conclusion, based on the reconstruction of the state of facts of various dialects studied here, is that in the ancestor variety of multiple New Persian dialects, but also in that of Gavruni, another Iranian language, presentative sentences, among others, were nominal sentences. This is different from the Middle Persian situation. It can be said that dialects almost always derive from proto-dialects hidden in the dark, and that comparison between attested stages is not always enough (if not always not enough) to understand the processes at hand.

This study is an attempt at looking at questions relative to ‘to be’ and the copula in Persian dialects. Such studies are rare: Ferrer-Losilla has provided us with many high quality studies of the Middle Persian verb, and Lenepveu-Hotz has also written masterful works, filled with

valuable insights, on the New Persian verb, but so much remains to be done. As I have hinted at above, I have only chosen a select number of dialects, and other, unrelated, copulas can be found in Early New Persian, and New Persian dialects in general. These remain to be studied and analyzed. I hope my attempt will encourage scholars of the field to look more in detail at some aspects of the verb which are still understudied, especially from a diachronic perspective.

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