



**Københavns Universitet**



## **Talking Class in Tehroon**

Elling, Rasmus Christian; Rezakhani, Khodadad

*Published in:*  
Middle East Report

*Publication date:*  
2016

*Document Version*  
Other version

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Elling, R. C., & Rezakhani, K. (2016). Talking Class in Tehroon. Middle East Report, 45, Winter 2015(277), 6-9.

# Talking Class in Tehroon

**Rasmus Christian Elling and Khodadad Rezakhani**

Persian, like any other language, is laced with references to class, both blatant and subtle. With idioms and metaphors, Iranians can identify and situate others, and thus themselves, within hierarchies of social status and privilege, both real and imagined. Some class-related terms can be traced back to medieval times, whereas others are of modern vintage, the linguistic legacy of television shows, pop songs, social media memes or street vernacular. Every day, it seems, an infectious set of phrases appears that make yesterday's seem embarrassingly antiquated.

Some phrases refer directly to occupation or rank, but many operate through gendered, geographic, ethnic or racialized codes or invoke lifestyle, physical appearance, patterns of consumption and behavior in public space. Some terms are self-evident in meaning and others idiosyncratic.

A class-related vocabulary, furthermore, was developed in the oppositional discourses of the 1960s and 1970s, adapted to the rhetoric of the 1979 revolution and then partially transferred into official language under the Islamic Republic. The post-revolutionary reconfiguration of social relations continues to play out in everyday speech. In today's Iran, as anywhere else, sarcasm and wordplay can be ways to express social critique or ways to reinforce inequality and domination. Every word opens a window for the study of power.

The handful of examples below illuminate the complexities at play. The list is by no means comprehensive and it tilts toward Tehran, or Tehroon, as the name of the capital (and, often, the long a sound in other words) is rendered in colloquial Persian. More research is needed to uncover the context-dependent roles of language in perpetuating class structures in Iranian society, but perhaps this brief glossary is a start.

## PLACE

**Bacheh** One can add the name of most of Tehran's neighborhoods to the term *bacheh*, "child," to connote class origins. *Bacheh-Elahiyeh* (a northern suburb) conjures the image of a spoiled rich kid, and *bacheh-Narmak* (an eastern district) a picture of someone from the working class. Certain areas are elevated to archetypes: *Bacheh-Javadiyeh* originally meant a native of a rough-and-tumble area in the far south of old Tehran. Javadiyeh is now part of central Tehran, and is the term is today applied to anyone considered uncouth, unsophisticated and/or criminal.

**Dahati** Literally "villager, country bumpkin," this word refers to someone perceived as being from a rural background, having poor or parochial taste in dress or furnishings, or being unexposed to "modern" comforts or fashions. An older term, **posht-kuhi** ("from behind the mountains"), probably originated from the location of the Lur tribes west of the Zagros range, as opposed to those living *pish-kuh*, "this side of the mountains"; **kolah-namadi**, "one who wears a felt hat" pointed to the headgear favored by villagers. Although archaic, these terms persist in various forms.

**Ghorbati** "Exiled, estranged." Whereas the term originally signified the Roma tribes, it has also been used to describe the internally displaced of the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988), many of whom fled from impoverished regions to major cities. The implication is that the *ghorbati* is unfamiliar with urban settings.

**Halabi-abadi** "From Tin City," a generalized notion referring to the makeshift nature of the shantytowns that sprang up around Tehran as a result of rapid migration during the boom years of the 1960s and 1970s. Despite a government policy of razing slums, the term continues to be used to describe the poorest classes and informal laborers. It is similar to the older term **zagheh-neshin**, "hut dweller," and to **hashiyeh-neshin**, "marginal dweller."

**Jonoob-shahri** "From the south of the city," together with **payin-shahri**, "downtown," refers to the historical poverty of the flatlands south of Tehran. As poor and lower middle-class neighborhoods are today dispersed over the western, eastern and central parts of Tehran, the term refers more to socioeconomic position than to geographic location.

Rasmus Christian Elling is an associate professor in the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies at the University of Copenhagen. Khodadad Rezakhani is Alexander von Humboldt Fellow at the Department of Iranian Studies of the Freie University of Berlin. They thank the dozens of people who responded to an unscientific survey on this subject in social media.

**Shahrestani** "Out-of-towner, provincial," meaning someone from outside Tehran. The word emphasizes the perceived cultural differences between natives of the capital and migrants from elsewhere, who are seen as less sophisticated or even simpleminded. It originates from the administrative division of the country into counties or *shahrestans*.

**Shomal-shahri** "From the north of the city," or **bala-shahri** ("uptowner"), are terms denoting those inhabiting the slopes of the Alborz Mountains in the north of the capital. This area is dotted with luxury apartment towers that have replaced the villas, large gardens and tree-lined boulevards that were the old markers of money. The term is also used to mock those with pretensions to wealth and education.

## LIFESTYLE

**Asil** Someone "noble, authentic"—from a lineage of high social standing, often with the connotation of wealth. It can also be used to differentiate "original Tehranis" from perceived outsiders or newcomers.

**Ba-kelas** or **bi-kelas** Borrowed from English ("classy") or French, these antonyms carry the same connotations in Tehran as they do elsewhere.

**Farangi(-ma'ab)** "Wannabe) Westerners," and earlier, **fokoli** (from the French *faux col*, detachable collar), are dandies or mimics of the West presented by critical intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s as agents of cultural imperialism and polar opposites of Iranian authenticity.

**Geda-goshneh** "Hungry beggar," a general term describing the poor, but recently also describing someone, perhaps of newly acquired means, whose main concern or "hunger" is money.

**Jahel** Literally "ignorant," such a person is typically imagined as a strong, proud man from the lower classes with staunch traditional values. He is the antithesis of a *farangi*. **Dash-mashti**, "Brother Mashhadi" (someone who has performed the pilgrimage to Mashhad), has similar connotations. **Kolah-makhmali**, "one who wears a velvet hat," is a term derived from a particular type of bowler hat often worn by the tough but lovable *jahel* in the films of the 1950s and 1960s.

**Javad** Though it means "unsophisticated" in class-related slang, Javad is in fact a name. The root of its use as a derogatory term for the socially inept might be in the perceived predominance of that name in the lower classes; or perhaps it is a shortened form

of *bacheh-Javadiyeh*. Its emphasized form, **Javat**, points out the same meaning even more strongly, this time by devoicing the final labial, a common feature of Tehrani dialect. **Khazz** is a more recent synonym that also describes the process of something falling out of favor or fashion—without the Javad registering the fact.

**Lat** “Thug, ruffian.” An old term, still commonly used to identify someone of lower-class origin or perceived to exhibit “lower-class behavior,” including, possibly, criminal proclivities. It is rooted in an urban institution, a continuation of the vigilantes of the medieval period (*luti* and *javanmard*), who were known for their toughness, but also for their moral code, including defense of the honor and chastity of local girls. The line between a *lat* and a *jahel* is often blurred. **Lat-bazi**, “acting like a *lat*,” is used to denote disrespectful behavior and impolite language.

**Soosool** and **nonor** A “dandy,” someone, often upper-class, who places particular emphasis on personal appearance and generally avoids distasteful situations. The related **zhigul(i)** or “gigolo” is an adaptation of the French term, though with fewer sexual implications. The term was popular in the 1960s and 1970s and is used today mostly to describe someone with old-fashioned ideas of personal comportment. A **titish-mamani** (“princess,” “goody two-shoes”) is used for someone, often female, who is overly careful about appearance and acts in an exaggerated manner when coming into contact with anything unclean or uncomfortable.

## STUFF

**(Bacheh) mayeh-dar** “Wealthy (kid),” someone from a comfortable background, with *mayeh* (“means, essence”) being a byword for money and privilege.

**Galant-baz, oltima-savar** “Galant driver, Ultima rider.” These are references to car models associated with particular classes. Those driving a Mitsubishi Galant are deemed distinctly middle-class, while those riding in a Nissan Ultima sports car must be from the top 1 percent of society. Peykan cars, produced in Iran by Iran-Khodro, or Pride, from Kia Motors, are in turn seen as the vehicle of choice for the average Joe.

**Khar-pool** “(With a) donkey-load of money.” *Khar* signifies a huge volume of something, so a *khar-pool* is someone rich indeed. The term has been in use for decades and can be applied to both old money and the *nouveau riche*. A similar term is **koloft**, “thick,” describing someone who has a large financial cushion.

**Nadid-badid** “Never-seen-before,” someone who has never been exposed to the finer things in life and does not know what to do with them. It also indicates someone who uncritically embraces new commodities and fashions without knowing where they come from.

**Pa-pati** or **pa-berehneh** “Barefoot.” Poor. A less pejorative synonym is **tohi-dast** or **khali-dast** (“empty-handed”), which is also used in official discourse to praise the hard-working masses who may be “empty in hand but full of faith,” as the slogan goes. **Dast-be-dahan** (“hand-to-mouth”) is also used to describe those struggling to meet their needs.

**Tazeh-be-dowran-resideh** “*Novus homo*; recently made,” among several equivalents of the French *nouveau riche*, including the more formal **now-kiseh** (“new pocket”).

## JOBS

**Amaleh** “Worker.” A rough-and-ready man often employed in construction or a similar low-paying or hazardous occupation. Although it is an old word, its present-day connotation can be linked to the employment of migrants, particularly single men from the provinces, during Tehran’s 1980s and 1990s construction boom. The term is also associated with catcalling.

**Baqgal-chaqqal** Literally, “grocer poser.” The term for “grocer” does not carry any particular class connotation. But with such rhyming duplication, it can be used to characterize retailers in a derogatory way, implying a mere trader with less sophistication than the upper classes.

**Bazaari** The connotation, similar to *nouveau riche*, is of a wealthy person with poor taste in fashion and goods, or bad manners resulting from having wealth but no education. It appears to have roots in the same disdain held for the mercantile classes in medieval Europe.

**Besaz-befroosh** A “builder-and-seller,” such a person relies on business acumen and crony networks. Some members of the middle class jumped on the bandwagon of post-war construction in Tehran. Much of the housing was poorly designed and built, and yet sold at high prices, creating a new class of compradors.

**Hammal** “Coolie, porter,” an old slang term originally denoting those whose carried goods on their backs. Present-day use varies and can convey meanings ranging from “poor” to “uneducated,” or someone who does not follow social conventions. In the latter sense, for example, it could be a well-to-do person who flaunts

his cash. It can also be an insult thrown at someone who elbows others in a crowded area.

**Kolfat** Literally, “maid,” but also used to describe someone with an undesirable occupation or who is deemed unrefined, generally a woman.

## POLITICS

**Agha-zadeh** “Progeny of an *agha*.” Since the 1990s, this word has been a reference to the privileged sons of high-ranking politicians, many of whom are clergymen, usually addressed as *agha* (“sir”). It should be noted that some of the more renowned *agha-zadeh* are, in fact, children of non-clerical families with political and economic clout.

**Asib-pazir** “Weak,” a term popularized by certain politicians to designate those “left behind” by the economic redevelopment and general progress after the Iran-Iraq war.

**Kookh-neshin** “Tent dweller” is a rhyming antonym of **kakh-neshin**, “palace dweller.” In a famous speech, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini said, “Our revolution was one of tent dwellers, not palace dwellers.” The word *kookh*, rare in colloquial Persian before that speech, originally designated Arab Bedouin tents in the early Islamic period.

**Lompan** “Miscreant, ragamuffin.” The term entered public discourse through socialist groups that had adopted it from Marx’s *lumpenproletariat*. Today, it connotes violent, uneducated but ideologically indoctrinated thugs, who can be of a higher socio-economic status than what was originally meant. In that sense, it is used by certain more liberal segments of society as a synonym for other words—*hezbollahi* (“of God’s Party”), *khodsar* (“autonomous”), *goruh-e feshar* (“the pressure group”)—all terms that are indicative of sociopolitical milieu rather than economic class.

**Moraffah** “Comfortable, wealthy.” Along with the standard compound *moraffah-e bi-dard*, “painlessly affluent” or simply *bi-dard* (“painless”), this term was popular among intellectuals to designate the upper classes before the revolution. In the 1980s and 1990s, it came to designate the post-revolutionary *nouveaux riches*. Many saw this new wealth as directly linked to effortless profiteering in the wartime black-market economy, to the detriment of the poor.

**Mostaz’af** “Downtrodden, oppressed.” Resembling the “oppressed masses” of Marxist thought, this

word—like **zahmat-kesh** (“toiler, proletarian”)—was originally used by socialist groups prior to 1979 and then appropriated by revolutionary ideologists to denote the marginalized segments of society that were supposed to take power after the Shah’s downfall. A Bonyad-e Mostaz’afan (Foundation of the Downtrodden) was established to manage and redistribute assets confiscated from the royal family and millionaire industrialists. It is now one of the biggest conglomerates of commercial enterprise in the Middle East and yet *mostaz’af* is still used officially in its revolutionary sense. **Mostakber** (“arrogant oppressor”), is used in official terminology, sometimes in the sense of “capitalist” and thus as the opposite of *mostaz’af*.

**Sandis-khor** “Sandis drinker,” from the name of a Capri Sun juice concentrate sold in Iran. As the authorities tend to hand out cold drinks during pro-regime rallies, this name is given to regime supporters—some of them perceived to be from the lower classes and thus lured by the promise of free refreshment.

**Taghooti** “Idol worshipper.” Originally a theological and literary term for devotees of the pre-Islamic Arabian goddess al-Lat, the word *taghooti* was used by the intellectual fathers of the revolution to signify the rich classes in Pahlavi Iran. Conveying the idea that the wealthy worshipped Mammon rather than God, the word was incorporated into official discourse in the Islamic Republic, particularly to demonize monarchists and perceived reactionaries. As such, it has also been used in legal proceedings.

## RACISM

**Afghani** Iran has received Afghan refugees and immigrants for half a century, and particularly after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Commonly, these Afghans have been employed in construction and menial labor, often toiling under horrible conditions for the lowest wages. Some Iranians accuse Afghans of engaging in criminal activity, including murder, in some places leading to demands for expulsion of Afghan laborers based on hearsay and rumors. Afghans are subject to many kinds of everyday discrimination.

**Johood** As in many other places, in Iran Jews are historically associated with wealth. The racist stereotype of a Jewish “miser” thrives—with its undertones of hidden plenty, conspiracy and hyper-caution. As opposed to *yahudi*, which is slightly more polite, and *kalimi*, the official term for the Jews, *johood* can also be used for non-Jews to indicate stinginess or irrational fear of injury or illness. ■