



By most accounts, Urdu dictionaries first appeared in the form of short, bilingual versified glossaries for young learners during the time of the Delhi sultanate (13th–16th c. CE). During the Mughal period, Urdu vocabulary increasingly found inclusion in Persian dictionaries compiled in India. European colonialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries produced explosion of interest among Orientalists in Urdu and other Indian languages, and the centuries witnessed an unprecedented number of bilingual dictionaries, including Urdu-English ones. In the present lesson, we'll look at an entry in one such dictionary, John T. Platts' *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English* (1884), commonly called "Platts." With the ascent of Urdu as a language of governance under colonialism, the period also witnessed the compilation of the first extensive monolingual dictionaries in Urdu. We'll look at an entry in the first complete monolingual Urdu dictionary, *Farhang-e Aṣāfiyah* (1898–1908), which is still widely used and admired today. By all accounts the most comprehensive and detailed dictionary of Urdu is *Urdu Lughat*. Modeled on the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Urdu Lughat* has been in production for the better part of five decades in Pakistan. The final volume of the dictionary was printed several years ago. Recently, the entire project has been digitized and put online. In what follows, we'll closely study at an entry found in the online version.

One major shortcoming in most Urdu dictionaries is that they primarily contain lists of synonyms or single-word glosses, not specific definitions.

John T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English* (1884)

The dictionary by John T. Platts is arguably the most comprehensive and authoritative English-Urdu dictionary compiled to date. When it comes to Urdu word usage prior to the twentieth century, no English-Urdu dictionary can compete with it. It is old and in some respects outdated, of course. But remains the primary resource for serious students of Urdu who work between the two languages.

Here is Platts' entry for the word عدل.

A عدل 'adl (inf. n. of عدل 'to act equitably,' &c.), s.m. Equity, justice, rectitude:—'adl karnā, v.n. To do justice, to act equitably, to decide according to equity and rectitude; to judge (between), to decide:—'adl-gustarī, s.f. The dispensing, or the administration, of justice.



As you can see, the entry contains a wealth of information about the word. Let's dissect it to understand what we can learn from it. First, the letter that appears at the beginning of it:

A

Entries in Platts' dictionary begin with a letter or letters that identify the etymological origins of entry words. In the present entry, "A" indicates that our word is borrowed from Arabic. An "E," "P," or "S," would indicate English, Persian, or Sanskrit, respectively. Next, the entry word:

عدل 'adl

Here we are given the Urdu spelling and a standard pronunciation. Sometimes, Platts also notes colloquial [which it calls vulgar (vulg.)] pronunciations. (In the late-19th century, the word "vulgar" had not quite lost its less-offensive sense, "of the people; of the masses.")

(inf. n. of عدل 'to act equitably,' &c.), s.m. –

Next we are given etymological information about the word in parentheses. Here, we are told that this is an infinitive noun (that is, a verbal noun) from the verb عدل , which is then glossed. We also learn the number and gender of the word (singular and masculine or s.m. for short).

Equity, justice, rectitude:—

Next we are given English synonyms. Note that in this case, there is just one group. If a word has different senses, they will typically be divided by a semicolon. If a word carries different meanings, they are often divided by dashes, and into further groupings by sense. Moving along:

'adl karnā, v.n. To do justice, to act equitably, to decide according to equity and rectitude; to judge (between), to decide:—'adl-gustarī, s.f. The dispensing, or the administration, of justice.

Finally, we have examples of common uses of the term, along with synonyms and parts of speech. This is particularly useful for developing a sophisticated understanding of the ways in which a word is used.

Sayyid Aḥmad Dihlavī, *Farhang-e Aṣāfiyāh*, 3:265–66.

Here is the entry for the same word in one of Urdu’s most celebrated and authoritative dictionaries.

عَدْل (ع) اسم مذکر: — (۱) برابری . نصف مساوات (۲) نظیر . مانند ربنا . (۳) نیاؤ . انصاف . معدلت . داد . دادگستری +

Note that Sayyid Aḥmad provides us with much of the same information as Platts and even seems to follow his punctuation style (e.g., the colon followed by the dash, “—:”). Let’s break down the entry.

عَدْل

First we have our entry word, fully vocalized with diacritical marks to specify pronunciation.

(ع)

Next we have some basic etymological information in parentheses. The ع indicates that this is an Arabic word.

—: اسم مذکر

Next comes the part of speech and gender of the noun. The word اسم means “noun.” All nouns in Urdu are either masculine (مذکر) [muzakkar] or feminine (مؤنث) [muannas]. Here we learn that عدل is a masculine noun.

+برابری . نصف مساوات (۲) نظیر . مانند . ہمتا . (۳) نیاؤ . انصاف . معدلت . داد . دادگستری (۱)

Finally, we have our glosses. Note that, like Platts, *Farhang-e Aṣāfiyah* only lists synonyms for عدل and does not define it. But unlike Platts, *Farhang-e Aṣāfiyah* provides more insight into the semantic range of the word by distinguishing between and ranking three denotations. We can thus draw inferences about the primary and secondary (and tertiary) senses in which the word is used. The words in the first denotation—indicated by (۱)—suggest a sense of equal weight and equality. Those in the second—indicated by (۲)—all indicate a quality of resemblance. Finally, the words in the third group—indicated by (۳)—denote and connote senses related to justice. The + symbol at the end of the line marks the conclusion of the entry and is used throughout the book.

Unlike Platts, *Farhang-e Aṣāfiyah* lists related idioms and verbal phrases separately. Here follow the entries that succeed the entry for عدل.

عدل کرنا (ا) فعل متعدی:— انصاف کرنا . نیاؤ کرنا . ایمان اور دیانت کے ساتھ فیصلہ کرنا . تصفیہ کرنا +

The entry follows the same basic pattern as the one for عدل. Our entry phrase is no longer vocalized, since a fully vocalized عدل appeared just above it. Sayyid Aḥmad has also assumed that readers looking up words in dictionaries are familiar with the verb کرنا [karnā] (to do), since he does not vocalize it, either. (Why wouldn't he, after all, since it's one of the most common words in the language?) After the entry word, we find etymological information. Sayyid Aḥmad has deemed this phrase to be Urdu and indicated as much with an ۱ in parentheses. Next comes the part of speech. The word فعل [fel] means “verb,” and the word متعدی [mutaādī], which comes from a root meaning “to pass by or across,” is here used in the sense of “transitive.” Next comes a familiar series of glosses. This time, however, they are not separated into groups of denotations. Moving on.

عدل گُستر (ع + ف) اسم مذکر:— منصف . عادل . انصاف کرنے اور داد دینے والا +

Our next entry word is partially vocalized. It is followed by an indication that this is a compound of an Arabic (ع) and Persian (ف for Farsi) word. Next comes an indication that this is a masculine noun. Then come a series of glosses (عدل منصف and so on). Note that many of the glosses contain words that are related to the glosses given for the original noun عدل.

عدل گُستری (ع + ف) اسم مؤنث:— نصفت شعاری . انصاف . عدالت . معدلت +

The final entry in our series is for the abstract noun related to the previous entry. Here, we learn that this noun is feminine (مؤنث) [muannas]. We also see some of the same synonyms that we found under our original word. This is an indication that the present word is close in meaning to عدل. The difference, which is not indicated clearly here (but is implied by a word like نصفت شعاری) is that the present entry word is an abstract noun derived from an agentive one. We know this because it combines an agentive suffix گُستر [gustar] (-spreader) and a noun-forming suffix ی [ī]. A literal English gloss of this might be something like “justice-spreader-ness.” That is, the quality we associate with people who spread equity and justice.

Urdu Lughat. <http://udb.gov.pk/>

The final dictionary that we will examine is the product of decades of painstaking research and still under production. *Urdu Lughat* is Urdu's answer to the *Oxford English Dictionary* and it imitates many of its methods. It is hands-down the most complete, most useful tool for learning about Urdu words available to us. The online version is particularly useful, since it contains entry words, audio files to clarify pronunciation, glosses divided into denotative categories, examples of use, and etymological information. Fair warning, however, the laudable efforts to digitize this massive undertaking have not been perfect, and readers will likely find typos and formatting issues as the editors continue to iron out the kinks.

Here is the short form of the entry for our word, عدل, as seen in the online version of *Urdu Lughat* as of September 2022.



عَدْل (فت ع ، سک د) امد

۱. انصاف ، دار گُستری .

۲. برابری ، تسویہ ، درمیانی راہ اختیار کرنا .

۳. نظیر مانند ، ہمتا .

(فرہنگ آصفیہ ؛ مہذب اللغات) .

۴. اللہ تعالیٰ کا ایک نام .

اسناد ▼

Let's break it down. The fully vocalized entry word appears at the top right. In parentheses we find shortened forms of the names of the two diacritical marks used in the entry word to indicate its pronunciation. The editors have abbreviated the Arabic names for the marks: فتح [fath] for َ and سکون [sukūn] for ْ, and indicated their placement in the word (فت ع ، سک د). That is, فتح [fath] above ع and سکون on د (hence, *adl*).

After that, we find information about the part of speech. The word اسم [ism] (noun) has here been abbreviated to ا and has been combined with the first two letters in مذکر [muzakkar] (masculine) to form امذ (noun, masculine). Online users can then click on the icon of the loudspeaker to hear the word read aloud.

Next we have a series of glosses and denotations divided into four discrete sections. There is a typo in section one. The word should be داد گستری (دار not). Section two introduces several synonyms and glosses having to do with equality and "taking the middle path." Section three is taken directly from *Farhang-e Aṣāfiyah* (and cited as such). Section four introduces the gloss "A name of God on High," which is neither found in *Platts* nor *Farhang-e Aṣāfiyah*.

Online visitors can then click on اسناد [asnād] (lit. "warrants" or "licenses") at the bottom of the entry for examples drawn from literature that substantiate the denotations. Sometimes, if examples cannot be found, a source will be listed in their place (as has been done here under denotation three). This indicates that the editors acknowledge the denotation and glosses as authoritative based on their presence in an earlier dictionary, but have not themselves been able to verify it using examples. The lists of examples include citations from early Deccani Urdu texts written in the fifteenth century to the Modern Standard Urdu of the present. Some denotations may be supported by as many as a dozen examples. Let's just look at just the examples used to substantiate the second denotation. Here it is in its expanded form.

۲. برابری ، تسویہ ، درمیانی راہ اختیار کرنا .

عدل سے چند منکوحات میں برابری کرنا مراد ہے .

(۱۸۹۵ ، چراغ علی ، رسائل چراغ علی ، ۴ : ۲۴۳) .

انبیاء کی بعثت کی یہ غرض و غایت کہ لوگ شریعت کی میزان کے مطابق عدل اور توازن کو قائم رکھیں .

(۱۹۳۲ ، سیرۃ النبئ ، ۴ : ۲۰۵) .

اُسے اب ایک ایسے اشتراکی عدل کے ساتھ تقسیم کیا گیا ہے .

(۱۹۸۷ ، اک محشر خیال ، ۵۳) .

Each example is followed by a citation in parentheses. Let’s look at the first one. The denotation we’ve been given is:

۲. برابری ، تسویہ ، درمیانی راہ اختیار کرنا .

That is, “equality, setting in equal order, to adopt the middle path.” These are decent glosses, but still do not advance a definition that describes the word using generic and specific terms. Also note that the three glosses include three different kinds of words or phrases: a stative, abstract noun (*barābarī*); an active verbal noun (*tasviyah*); and a verbal phrase (*dar-miyānī rāh ikhtiyār karnā*).

The first example is as follows:

عدل سے چند منکوحات میں برابری کرنا مراد ہے .

That is, “By عدل is intended equal treatment among several married women (wives).” The example is useful in many ways, but does not clearly illustrate the broader sense of the meanings or glosses above. In fact, it seems to offer a much more specific gloss of the term for the particular context in which the author was writing.

After the example, we have the bibliographical citation:

(۱۸۹۵ ، چراغ علی ، رسائل چراغ علی ، ۴ : ۲۴۳) .

This tells us the date (1895), author (Chirāgh ‘Alī), source text (*Rasā’il-e Chirāgh ‘Alī*) (*The Treatises or Essays of Chirāgh ‘Alī*), and the volume and page number (4:243). What we do not find here is information about the publisher or edition that has been used.

Looking over the remaining examples, we find that the examples for this denotation range from 1895 to 1987. This might suggest that the second denotation given here is a relatively recent and modern one. However, although the compilers attempt to trace early examples of each word, it is not always clear that the earliest evidence for a denotation is in fact the earliest usage in Urdu. Still, as long as we agree with the lexicographers that the denotation is supported by the evidence adduced, we can say with certainty a particular denotation has been used since at least the date of the earliest text. This is useful not only for thinking about how the meanings of words have changed over time, but

also for reminding ourselves that denotations that seem obvious or permanent may, in fact, have arisen in very particular historical contexts that are not as far in the past as we might imagine.

Next Steps

One of the challenges of using a monolingual dictionary, particularly for students early in their journey with Urdu, is that one must know the meanings of the synonyms to understand the meaning of the entry word. One way to meet challenge is to use monolingual and bilingual dictionaries in tandem. Hence, when looking up words in the *Farhang-e Aṣafiyah* or *Urdu Lughat*, you might keep a copy of *Platts* handy. And instead of looking up the word in question in *Platts* first, try looking it up in one of the monolingual Urdu dictionaries, then using *Platts* to help you navigate the Urdu glosses, synonyms, and definitions. You are much more likely to gain a deeper appreciation for the meaning of words that way.