

“Ossetic historical grammar and the dialectology of early Iranian” Abstract for the general public

Although Iranian linguistics has made remarkable progress over the past generation, the relationships among the ancient, medieval, and modern Iranian languages continue to be hotly debated. This is particularly the case for Ossetic (also known as Ossetian), spoken mainly in the central Caucasus, and its ancestors, the varieties collectively known as Scythian, Sarmatian, and Alanic which were spoken in antiquity and the early medieval period on the steppes to the north of the Black Sea. Despite being attested only from the end of the 18th century, Ossetic has long played an outsized role in Iranian studies due to its longstanding isolation, and is frequently held to preserve numerous archaisms of Proto-Iranian or even Proto-Indo-Iranian date. As one of the larger “minor” Modern Iranian languages, with over half a million speakers, Ossetic is extensively documented in grammars, dictionaries, and an online corpus, and its synchronic grammar has received much attention in recent years. In contrast, research on Ossetic historical grammar has been modest: aside from a monograph on the development of the vowel system and a study of personal names, only a handful of papers have appeared over the last 25 years.

This project aims to apply the principles of historical-comparative linguistics to elucidate the historical grammar of Ossetic, and thereby cast light on the relations between Ossetic and the other Iranian languages and the dialectology of early Iranian in general. Three principal tasks are envisioned. The first is to establish a relative chronology of sound changes from Proto-Iranian through intermediate stages down to Proto-Ossetic and the modern dialects Iron and Digor, taking into account the evidence of ancient Scythian and Sarmatian place and personal names and the few surviving records of medieval Alanic. Through comparison with other Iranian languages, above all Sogdian and its modern (near-)descendant Yaghnobi, this will enable us to arrive at a more precise timeline for the early diversification of Iranian and a clearer picture of the geographical diffusion of phonological innovations, such as stress shift, elision of vowels, and palatalization of consonants.

The second task is to investigate the evolution of Ossetic morphology from Proto-Iranian, i.e. the inflection and derivation of nouns, pronouns, numerals, and verbs. The third and final component is a reexamination of the inherited vocabulary from the viewpoint of the latest research on Iranian and Indo-European word formation. This will allow us to distinguish far more precisely than hitherto possible between archaic and innovative features and, within the latter, among features also found in other languages and likely reflecting parallel development, those reflecting changes shared with neighboring languages, and those specific to Ossetic.

The results of this project will be published in a series of scholarly articles in leading international journals of Iranian and Indo-European linguistics, as well as a full-length monograph. Based on preliminary research, it appears that the dialects ancestral to Ossetic occupied a peripheral position at the northern edge of the Iranian world already in the 1st millennium BC, but remained in contact with the varieties spoken to the east in Central Asia, in particular those underlying Sogdian, and finally lost all contact with the rest of the family only in medieval times. It follows that, although Ossetic does retain interesting archaisms from Proto-Iranian which have been lost elsewhere, one should refrain from automatically assigning great antiquity to features attested only there. These findings will be of interest not only to specialists in Iranian and Indo-European linguistics, but also to historians and archaeologists of the ancient and medieval Iranian world and the Eurasian steppes.