

“Filling in the diachronic gaps: the view of Old Iranian from the present”

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Description

Research into the prehistory of Iranian languages is a field doubly blessed: (1) there is a fairly large corpus of Old Avestan dating back between the 1st and 2nd millennia BCE and a small corpus of Old Persian dating back as far as the 6th century BCE (Skjærvø, 2017, 471). Because of the corpora, much is known about Old Iranian, and Old Iranian has played an important role in the reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European (PIE). (2) The modern languages of the greater Iranian world are diverse and numerous, preserving features of PIE already lost in the extant Old Iranian texts (e.g., the retention of PIE laryngeals in New Iranian languages following Kümmel, 2014). Despite these archaisms, many of these languages have changed radically and independently along what Stilo (2008) has deemed the reduction and innovation axes. They have lost case and innovated it anew. They have lost gender in all but a few facets of the grammar and renovated it anew (Karim, 2021, ch2 and ch4). These radical transformations lead to the inevitable question: what would our picture of Old Iranian be without the extant Old Iranian texts, and to what extent does our reliance on Old Iranian bias our analysis of New Iranian languages? None of the New Iranian languages is the direct descendant of any of the Middle or Old Iranian languages except for New Persian (< Middle Persian < Old Persian following Korn, 2017, 609).

Additional issues affecting the historical analysis of Iranian languages are that Iranian populations were largely nomadic in their early history, and there has been massive borrowing between genetically related languages (Korn, 2017, 611). This situation invokes the analogy of the Rubik’s cube: As each group migrates to a new region, its contact languages change, and those languages undergo sprachbund-like shared changes, “mirror[ing] the multilingual situation of the vast majority of speakers of Ir. languages in past and present times” (Korn, 2017, 611). The existence of many phonological convergences due to borrowing suggests that Iranian historical linguists should prefer morphological innovation over regular sound change. Korn (2019, 268) uses morphological isoglosses to develop the current best understanding of the genealogy of Iranian, following Clackson’s (2007) assertion that “It is now generally agreed among linguists that the most certain sub-groups are constructed on the basis of unique shared morphological innovations.” This runs contrary to the typical methods of historical linguists that begin with sound change because of Neo-Grammarian regularity; “[s]ound change I, in so far as it takes place mechanically, takes place according to laws that admit no exception” (Zosthoff and Brugmann, 1878, apud Hock & Joseph, 1996). Recently work by Gholami has suggested that phonological changes cannot be dismissed a priori despite the difficulty in establishing cognacy. Additionally, it is hard to compare constructions across the Iranian languages because the pioneering work on many varieties was conducted by scholars with little to no linguistic training. The ultimate result is inconsistent and innovative terminology being used to refer to

well-understood linguistic concepts. For instance, there are at least four terms for definite articles: “definite” (Mackenzie, 1961; MacKenzie, 1966; Mahmoudveysi & Bailey, 2013; Mahmoudveysi, Bailey, Paul, & Haig, 2012; Opengîn, 2016, etc.), “demarcative” (McKinnon, 2011), “determinative” (Windfuhr, 2012), and “deictic” (Windfuhr, 1991) appear in the literature (Karim, 2021, 217); three terms for applicatives: “applicatives” (Karim & Salehi, 2022), “placeholder constructions” (Jügel, 2016), and “absolute prepositions” (Mackenzie, 1961); and there is idiosyncratic terminology for adjectives, possessives, etc.

These issues, migration and borrowing, combined with a lack of documentation and inconsistent terminology, make the study of the genealogical relationships between the New Iranian languages opaque. Originally, the Iranian languages were divided into four geographical distinctions Northwestern, Southwestern, Northeastern, and Southeastern (Schmitt, 1989). These designations were fraught from the beginning, with Northwestern languages like Balochi spoken in the far southeast of the greater Iranian world and Ossetian (NE) spoken in the far northwest. The geographic designation, long-recognized as inadequate, was most recently challenged by Korn, who proposes a Central Iranian core with Bactrian, Sogdian, and Parthian (traditionally NE, NE, and NW) along with the entire Northwestern group (Korn, 2016, 2019). The rest of the Iranian languages form peripheral groups that resist further subcategorization.

In this workshop, we do not make any prescriptions as to historical approaches. Comparative, socio-historical, and computational approaches are to be given equal consideration, as well as multidimensional analyses that combine multiple approaches. The goal of this workshop is to reexamine the validity of previous approaches and established methods as applied to the diachronic study of Iranian languages and, when necessary, to develop new approaches that address the difficulties presented by the unique socio-linguistic situation in the greater Iranian world.

Papers presented in this workshop will focus on:

- Establishing cognacy despite massive borrowing from genetically related languages
- The significance of isoglosses (phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic)
- Relation models within the Iranian family
- Waves of contact and migration across time and space in the Iranian world
- The reciprocal influence between Iranian and non-Iranian minority languages
- Innovative methods in historical reconstruction.

Languages represented:

This workshop favors submissions that feature data from and analyses of endangered, minoritized, and understudied languages or those spoken by displaced peoples. Submissions are welcome from all languages with a presence in the greater Iranian world regardless of their genealogy, i.e., papers on Iranian, Neo-Aramaic, Dravidian, Armenian, Turkic, etc. are welcome as long as the paper’s aims match the goals of the workshop.

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