The Proto-Isum Language

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1 Preface

Proto-Isum is a reconstructed historical language from which the Delta Languages, Plateau Languages, and Lowland Languages are known to descend from with the Askar Group being considered highly likely as well in addition to other smaller groupings. There is no known or expected direct evidence of this proto-language in any form aside from what was inherited in daughter languages and loanwords into other languages present during its lifetime. Current estimates place its existence and spread during the later portion of the neolithic after the development of fired pottery; contact with it and its daughter languages brought into other languages several concepts that seem to be novel innovations or cultural relics from its speakers such as certain forms of companion planting, particular forms of kaolin vessels, and some stories that become more interculturally common with their spread.

On the whole, Proto-Isum had a modest inflectional morphology that was augmented by its syntax. Currently a matter of dispute is whether the language marked four or five nominal cases via bound suffixes. Some seemed to have been optional with simple placement in a phrase or subphrase being sufficient; however the ergative argument was always strongly marked. The expansion of that case in some daughter languages causes some of the current confusion over the number of cases asserted in reconstruction.

At present, we present our work to the best of our skills and the materials available. Should further evidence or more convincing arguments be made, we may revise this future editions, but for now it is our earnest hope that this reconstruction of our history will provide insights to learners and researchers in other fields.

2 Phonology

The present reconstruction of Proto-Isum presents a phonology with a rather balanced and fairly full set of phonemes. There are few gaps within its patterns, and points that might otherwise seem unusual seem to fit some kind of internal pattern. The realizations in the daughter languages is quite varied. In the documentation provided below, the phonemic elements are presented plainly while the Romanization used widely is in angle brackets.

2.1 Vowels

Proto-Isum features at least 5 vowel qualities with three at two lengths with no quality differences between long and short. It is notable that in multisyllabic words, at most one long vowel is present; unsurprisingly it is always realized as the stressed syllable. Long vowels seem to have been more resistant to synchronic changes. Some scholars contest the inclusion of /ɨ/ in the reconstruction, but we believe that this inclusion is sensible based on reflexes found in the Askar Group languages. When they are not considered in this equation, its exclusion seems sensible, but certain oddities in how the Askar Group presents vowel reflexes in stressed syllables demands its inclusion, in our opinion, for the most thorough analysis.

	Front	Central	Back
High	i, iː<i, ii>	ɨ* <y>	u, uː<u, uu>
Mid	ɛ<e>		ɔ<o>
Low		a, aː<a, aa>	

2.2 Consonants

	Labial	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar - Uvular
Plain	p <p>	t, t͡s<t, c>	t͡ʃ<q>	k, kʷ<k, kw>
Voiced	b <b>	d, d͡z<d, z>		g, gʷ<g, gw>
Aspirate	pʰ<ph>	tʰ, t͡sʰ<th, ch>	t͡ʃʰ<qh>	kʰ, kʷʰ<kh, khw>
Nasal	m <m>	n <n>	ɲ<ny>	
Fricative		s <s>	ʃ<x>	x, xʷ<h, hw>
Approximant		l <l>	j, ʎ<j, ly>	w, ʁ, ʁʷ<w, r, rw>

Proto-Isum is reconstructred as having a three types of stops at four points of articulation using two methods of release (full stop and affricate). The velar and uvular consonants present with both rounded and unrounded versions. The single rhotic /ʁ/ follows this pattern as well. Notably not present in this reconstruction is both /f/ and /d͡ʒ/, which seem to be holes in the otherwise strongly filled consonant space. Some scholars squabble over the inclusion of /ʎ/ prefering instead to split it among /l/, /j/, and /ɲ/ under various conditions. We have chosen against that since we feel it distills into daughter languages neatly despite being a comparatively rare phoneme both within the lexicon and also within expected discourse usage.

2.3 Syllable Structre

Reconstructions consistently agree on the syllable structure being `(C)V(m/n/p/t/k)` where coda stops were unreleased. The nucleus may be either short or long, but not a diphthong. Various aspects of this structure and how it interacts with perceived stress and prosody led to the wide varying realizations found in daughter languages.

2.4 Allophony

Every language has some variety in how underlying phonemes are realized when placed in different environments, and Proto-Isum was surely no different from that. Some of the synchronic changes that are expected to have existed are evidenced in some way in daughter languages. Please note, this is restricted to expected changes triggered by environment by the speakers of Proto-Isum and not changes witnessed in its various daughter languages.

2.4.1 Velarizing /n/

/n/ almost definitely presented as [ŋ] before velar stops and fricatives and at the end of words. However, change to /n/ seems unlikely before the uvular rhotics.

2.4.2 Intervocalic /w/

/w/ became [v] in all intervocalic word medial positions. No daughter languages present any convincing evidence that it remained a semivowel in this position.

2.4.3 Intervocalic Fortified /j/

Based on reflexes in most daughter languages, it seems highly likely that when /j/ followed a stressed vowel in word medial intervocalic positions, it was realized as [zj].

2.4.4 Interruptive Glottal Stop

While not present as a distinct phoneme, it is expected that the glottal stop, [ʔ], was inserted to break vowel-vowel sequences across word boundaries.

2.5 Final Notes on Romanization

The above sections enumerate everything that is needed for the Romanization; however some digraphs like <kh> and even <khw> could be confusing without disambiiguation. Intervocalic aspirate stops could be confused with clusters of coda stops and the velar fricative. For this reason, when [kx] or other clusters like this occur, the coda stop will be separated with and apostrophe <'>. Thus <akha> is [ak^{h}a] but <ak'ha> is [akxa].

2.6 Stress

Proto-Isum did not make use of contrastive stress, that is stress patterns to distinguish morphemes, but for multisyllabic words in particular stress was present. Many frequently used syntactic particles that were not affixed to main words, and probably many common use words, often acted as unstressed when juxtaposed with more lexically prominent words. Stress within a word was governed seemingly by a few simple rules:

- Monosyllabic words, in isolation, have no stress pattern
- Long vowels in multisyllabic words are always stressed
- If there are no long vowels, the syllable closeset to the end of a word before a consonant cluster not including fricatives or approximnats had stress
  - [**Example**]: `saktu` will have stress on the first syllable
- If there are no clusters, and the final syllable is open, stress is penultimate
  - [**Example**]: `iwa` will have stress on the first syllable
- Finally, if there are no clusters, and the final syllable is closed, stress is ultimate
  - [**Example**]: `lyagwyn` has stress on the final syllable
  - [**Example**]: `khakpet` has stress on the penultimate syllable
  - [**Example**]: `iixyt` has stress on the penultimate syllable

3 Grammatical Overview

This quick introduction aims to provide high level traits of Proto-Isum quickly without requiring the reader to search through other parts of the text. It will include no examples in the language itself, and exceptions to these large picture characteristics will only be presented here if the exception constitutes something that would be encountered frequently.

3.1 Ergative Alignment

Proto-Isum is a dominantly Ergative language. Namely, the subject of intransitive verbs and the object of transitive verbs receive the same marking, but subjects of transitive verbs are marked differently. This applies to all nouns, pronouns, and nominal phrases in the language in general.

3.1.1 Quirky Subjects

A small collection of verbs require their subject to be marked with a case that is not the Ergative or Absolutive; it is most often the Dative case used in this way. Almost all of these verbs also have specific usages for the normal ergative and absolutive cases, but often with restricted senses. Many of these verbs are 'mental actions' such as 'to like', 'to think about', or 'to remember'; many speakers thus culturally regard some of these rather laborious endeavors as more spontaneous. Causees in causative construction are often marked as Dative as well.

3.2 Word Order

Proto-Isum seems to have strongly preferred `SOV` word order, but free order was possible. Different orderings would have highlighted or diminished certain arguments to the verb. It seems the only mandatory rule, which some present day daughter languages and most of their predecessors enforced, was that the subject appeared before the object. While it isn't ungrammatical to reverse this order per se, doing so was so avoided that it effectively acts as a rule.

3.2.1 Verb Medial

Some reconstructions prefer `SVO` instead. Indeed, this structure was not uncommon, and it seems to have been prefered in certain environments like causatives.

3.3 Prepositional Preference

While Proto-Isum features some cases that cover prepositional phrases, the proto-language seems to have had some internal momentum towards prepositional usage while reducing some cases. The only daughter languages that strongly preserved case or innovated on it seem to have done so under pressure from languages outside of this family.

3.4 Dispreference for Relative Clauses

Relative clauses were likely used by the speakers of the proto-language, but evidence seems to indicate that their usage was often avoided in favor of using adjectival nouns (like gerunds or participles) or modifiers through genetive constructions.

4 Nominal Suffixes

Proto-Isum used a handful of nominal suffixes to indicate mainly case, and more rarely number and disparagement. Any noun or pronoun could be marked for case. Human nouns and pronouns had mandatory plural marking. And all nouns, but never pronouns, could be marked with a pejorative suffix sort of meaning "crappy" or "stupid".

4.1 The Plural: `-mu`

Proto-Isum had a plural marker `-mu`; however, despite its wide spread usage in some daughter languages, plural marking was far less common in the past. Scholastic consensus consistently holds that plural marking has always been mandatory for the first and second person pronouns. Third person pronouns, being the same as the demonstrative pronouns, it would have remained mandatory for human references, but for others it seems unlikely given both plural marking in daughter languages and pronominal systems in them. Likewise, nouns that describe humans of any sort had mandatory plural marking. Some animals may have received plural marking, but it is far harder to discern if it was consistent.

Plural marking, when used was always most closely bound to the noun, coming before both case or disparagement suffixes.

4.2 The Ergative (`-ji/-ne`) and Absolutive Cases (`-∅`)

The Ergative and Absolutive cases are used to indicate the most common nominal arguments to verbs and in utterances in general. They play a role akin to the Nominative and Accusative in many world languages; however, what they mark is dependent on both the transitivity of the verb. The Absolutive case, which is unmarked, indicates the object of transitive verbs and the subject of intransitive verbs regardless of volition. The Ergative case, most often marked with the `-ji` suffix, indicates the subject of transitive verbs, and it has some other syntactic usages as well. The first and second personal pronouns along with a small collection of proper nouns, which seem sporadic in nature, are marked with the `-ne` suffix instead; this different suffix is not used for any extra syntactic roles, but its sound seems more conservative so it is thought it simply fossilized on these particular nominals before the particle as a whole shifted to `-ji`, or it could be the remnant of one dialect pushing on another. It is hard to discern fully.

4.2.1 Historical Relation to the Genetive

As will be read in a later section, the Genetive Case is marked with the `-nye` suffix. Given the similarity in sound both to the general and conservative Ergative suffixes and the tendency of Proto-Isum to "own" participle verbs in various situations, it feels overwhelmingly likely that the Ergative Case has it's origin in particular usages of the Genetive Case. This may have happened at a time also when an unattested Ablative suffix was fusing with the Genetive seeing how Ablative phrases often manifest with Ergative marking.

4.2.2 Ergative Subject

The Ergative Case has its most obvious use marking the subject of transitive verbs. Here, we provide a rather plain example: `diine raam nyawi` – **1SG.ERG food(ABS) eat** – *I'm eating food*

4.2.3 Instrumental Usage of the Ergative

The Ergative suffix is also used to mark nouns for instrumental usage. Most notably, this happens with the preposition xut which simply means *with* in cases of use but not for accompanyment; however the usage of that preposition seems to have not been mandatory. Often placing an ergative marked noun after the verb was enough.

4.2.4 Ablative Usage of the Ergatives

4.2.5 Ergative Marking for Adverbials

4.3 The Genetive: `-nye`

Genetive marking was used to show possesion by one noun over another, or to mark some other close relationship or association or origin. It is indicated with the `-nye` suffix on the possesee, whic always follows the noun or noun phrase being owned or modified. There is no notion of alienability in this way.

4.3.1 Agentive Usage of the Genetive with Passive Verbs

In Passive constructions, agents of the action can be optionally indicated by a noun marked for the Genetive Case following the verb. Since genetive ordering always has it following the possesum and, internal to the language, since it feels like the passivized verbal phrase is owned by the noun, grammatical pressures make promoting agents of the passive to before the verb or verb phrase feel ungrammatical.

4.4 The Dative: `-wyk`

The Dative Case was marked with the `-wyk` suffix, and it was used to indicate motion towards something or note indirect objects. Promoting a Dative noun to the subject role via passivization of the verb was ungrammatical. Some daughter languages would innovate a genetive use out of the dative, but this seems to not be present in the Proto-language.

4.4.1 Quirky Subjects

A collection of particular verbs expected Dative marked nouns as their subject; when these ones have direct objects they are always in the absolutive case. Many of these verbs have to do with mental activities like thinking or feeling affection. Culturally, this seems to have lead some people to feel that aspects of these things were more spontaneous to the human mind than meditated, which gave rise to a few idioms and collocations which manifest in certain ways in the daughter languages

4.4.2 Absence of Benefactive Usage

Very notably, Proto-Isum did not make use of the Dative to indicate those who benefitted from an action or state, at least directly. Giving food or affection surely benefits the person, but this was not something overtly indicated by the Dative Case. The Proto-language and almost all of its daughter languages up to the present day use subordination of some kind for benefactive indicators. Those that presently do grammatically use the Dative in a benefactive sense seem to have innovated it through contact with neighboring languages that do.

4.5 The Locative: `-ba`

4.6 The Oblique: `-min`

No clue, quirky subjects I guess too

5 Pronouns

Personal pronouns were rather simple, with the third person pronouns normally being the proximate demonstrative pronouns, though very distant non-moving or conceptual things could be refered to by the other demonstratives. As with the rest of the language, only humans are marked for plurality. This means that multiple people noted via pronoun could be marked plural, but multiple trees or rocks would not ever be plural marked either on the noun or pronouns refering to them. The following sections layout what the pronouns are, though there are few wrinkles in this arena.

5.1 First and Second Person Personal Pronouns

N.B.: John this section and its table will need to be much more fleshed out for case suffix interactions. Return to this soon!!

	Singular	Plural
First	dii	diimu
Second	awa	awamu

In this section, we only list the First and Second personal pronouns since the 3rd is the same as the demonstratives, and notes on its use will come in that section. These two pronouns are notably the only ones reconstructed as having mandatory plural marking with `-mu`. Vestiges of this appear in all daughter languages, even ones that did not extend this plural marker much beyond the space present in the proto-language here. It's notably where some of the irregularity in daughter languages can find its source.

6 Human Body Terms

This section provides reconstructions for various Proto-Isum anatomical terms. These terms were frequently utilized to describe other things in the language, so we're introducing them early in hopes of easing the reader into a gentler time understanding the language. Of note, Proto-Isum seems to have had a weak distinction between the hand-arm and foot-leg pairs, though it is thought terms like palm could be used to clarify hand or foot when needed explicitly; other evidence suggests a 'big'-'little' contrast for arm or leg and hand or foot respectively.

6.1 General Body Parts

This section will cover general body parts, looking at the whole body. Further sections will focus on terms specific to the face, hand, and others.

- **Head** – `Qhympu`
- **Neck** – `Unle`
- **Shoulder** – `Lekry`
- **Chest** – `Dirwak`
- **Belly** – `Khaama`
- **Back** – `Naga`
- **Arm / Hand** – `Thuu`
- **Leg / Foot** – `Beni`
- **Knee / Elbow** – `Sawak` (**N.B.:** also seems to mean a *bend, crook* in many cases)
- **Finger (Toe)** – `Zu`
- **Bum** – `Rop`

In the case of `Zu` meaning *toe* it seems that the term was more specific to fingers, and in context could be *toe*; however, in isolation it is expected that `Zu Benina`, that is exactly *finger of the foot*.

6.2 The Face

The terms for facial anatomy show some polysemy with non-anatomic elements, but there are not interesting collisions in meaning like seen in the more general anatomy such as 'hand-arm'.

- **Face** – `Hebu`
- **Ajo** – `Eye`
- **Lyek** – `Ear`
- **Nose** – `Nunu`
- **Mouth** – `Nyaam`
- **Lips** – `Marwa`
- **Chin** – `Ipu`
- **Cheek** – `Ek`
- **Hair** – `Xaa`

6.2.1 Inside the Mouth

Cover things like teeth, tongue, etc

6.2.2 The Eye in Focus

Cover things like white (kaolin), iris, pupil, eyelid...