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Ossetic verb – Iranian origin and contact influence

1. Introduction

Ossetic language

Ossetic is surrounded by Caucasian languages belonging to different language families: North-West Caucasian languages (Kabardian, Adyghe), Nakh branch of North-East Caucasian languages (Chechen, Ingush), South Caucasian languages (mostly Georgian, but also Mingrelian and Svan) and Turkic languages (Karachay-Balkar).

According to the generally accepted believe, Ossetic has been heavily influenced by neighbouring languages of the Caucasus, though it has retained its basic lexical stock and morphology of its Iranian origins (Abaev 1964). Under the ‘heavy influence’ by the Caucasian languages the Ossetonologists consider the development of ejective consonants in modern Ossetic, the loss of old Indo-European inflectional paradigms and the development of agglutinative case systems, the loss of gender, the replacement of old prepositions with postpositions (the latter can be inflected for case) (Abaev 1970).

Some of the named features give rise to doubts. E.g. all other modern Iranian also lost old inflectional paradigms and developed agglutinative case systems. Most of modern Iranian languages lost gender (e.g. Yaghnobi, the descendent of Soghdian, also lost gender). Many other modern Iranian languages also have postpositions (namely, East Iranian and Pamir: Pashto, Shughni, Rushani, Yazgulami, Wakhi, Ishashimi, Yaghnobi; West Iranian Tat, Gilani, Mazenderani (Mazurova 2012); Talysh etc.).

From modern studies of areal influence to Ossetic one can mention Ershler 2009 (possession), Tomelleri 2010 (aspect), Arkhangelskiy and Belyaev 2011 (spatial system), Mazurova 2012 (spatial system).

Abaev notes (1970) that the influence of the Caucasian languages to Ossetic spread only to Ossetic phonetics and NP and didn’t affect the Ossetic verb.

The purpose of my paper is to find out whether there are any Caucasian features within the Ossetic verbal system or not.

2. Ossetic verb - general information

Ossetic is a nominative-accusative language. The word order is free, the usual word order is SOV. Predicate usually agrees with the subject in person and number, the direct object depending on animacy and partly on definiteness is marked either by the nominative or by the genitive. Ossetic verb usually has a person/number paradigm. It has a developed system of moods (five moods: Indicative, Conjunctive, Counterfactive, Optative and Imperative). The Ossetic moods are formed from a present or past stem of the verb by the person/number markers. Past stem is used only in Past Indicative and in Counterfactive mood; all other moods use present stem. Only Indicative has different tense forms: Present, Past and Future.

Table 1. Present from the verb *kæŋən* ‘to do’

	SG	PL
1	<i>kæŋ-ən</i>	<i>kæŋ-æm</i>
2	<i>kæŋ-əš</i>	<i>kæŋ-ut</i>
3	<i>kæŋ-ə</i>	<i>kæŋ-əns</i>

Table 2. Future from the verb *kænan* ‘to do’

	SG	PL
1	<i>kæn-zəncæn</i>	<i>kæn-zəštæm</i>
2	<i>kæn-zənæ</i>	<i>kæn-zəštut</i>
3	<i>kæn-zæn,</i> <i>kæn-zæni(š)</i>	<i>kæn-zəštə</i>

Table 3. Past from the transitive verb *kænan* ‘to do’ and intransitive verb *særan* ‘to live’
(-t- is transitive marker)

	<i>kænan</i> ‘to do’		<i>særan</i> ‘to live’	
	SG	PL	SG	PL
1	<i>kod-t-on</i>	<i>kod-t-am</i>	<i>sard-tæn</i>	<i>sard-əštæm</i>
2	<i>kod-t-aj</i>	<i>kod-t-at</i>	<i>sard-tæ</i>	<i>sard-əštut</i>
3	<i>kod-t-a</i>	<i>kod-t-oj</i>	<i>sard-ø, sard-i(š)</i>	<i>sard-əštə</i>

Table 4. Imperative, Conjunctive and Optative from the verb *kænan* ‘to do’

	Imperative		Conjunctive		Optative	
	SG	PL	SG	PL	SG	PL
1		<i>kæn-æm</i>	<i>kæn-on</i>	<i>kæn-æm</i>	<i>kæn-in</i>	<i>kæn-ikkam</i>
2	<i>kæn-ø</i>	<i>kæn-ut</i>	<i>kæn-aj</i>	<i>kæn-at</i>	<i>kæn-iš</i>	<i>kæn-ikkat</i>
3	<i>kæn-æd</i>	<i>kæn-ænt</i>	<i>kæn-a</i>	<i>kæn-oj</i>	<i>kæn-id</i>	<i>kæn-ikkaj</i>

Table 5. Counterfactive from the transitive *kænan* ‘to do’ and intransitive *særan* ‘to live’
(-t- is the transitive marker)

	<i>kænan</i> ‘to do’		<i>særan</i> ‘to live’	
	SG	PL	SG	PL
1	<i>kod-t-ain</i>	<i>kod-t-aikkam</i>	<i>sard-ain</i>	<i>sard-aikkam</i>
2	<i>kod-t-aiš</i>	<i>kod-t-aikkat</i>	<i>sard-aiš</i>	<i>sard-aikkat</i>
3	<i>kod-t-aid</i>	<i>kod-t-aikkaj</i>	<i>sard-aid</i>	<i>sard-aikkaj</i>

The Past Indicative flexion is the same as Conjunctive flexion (the exception is 1PL). Counterfactive flexion differs from Optative only by an additional *-a-*. Future Indicative has the dedicated suffix *zən/zæn/zə* and the flexion which in plural is the same as Present Indicative from the verb *wævan* ‘to be’. Imperative flexion of 1PL is the same as Conjunctive and Present Indicative flexion. Imperative 2PL is the same as Present Indicative. Imperative 3SG and 3PL have dedicated flexion.

Note that the flexion of Present Indicative, Imperative, Conjunctive and Optative originate to the Old Iranian flexion. Past Indicative, Future Indicative and Counterfactive flexion originate to personal forms of the auxiliary *wævan* ‘to be’ (see Abaev 1949; Takazov 1992; Cheung 2002). In Past Indicative and Counterfactive, Ossetic verb has the special transitivity suffix *-t-*.

2. Atypical for modern Iranian features

Morphological Optative, morphological transitivity, productive aspectual-locative-deictic preverbs, verbal category of impersonality, dedicated 3 person Imperative, delayed Imperative, dedicated reported speech markers (*dam* and *žæygæ*)

2.1. Morphological Optative

While most of Old Iranian and Middle Iranian languages had Optative mood, it is absent in most of modern Iranian. Very few Iranian preserved Optative as a separate mood (Optative formed from another indirect mood with a particle was excluded from my examination): Ossetic, Talysh

(West Iranian, spoken in Azerbaijan and North Western Iran), some Balochi dialects (West Iranian, spoken in the South East Iran).

Note that the Caucasus is fairly rich in volitional moods (Daniel, Lander 2011). Optative is widespread in the Caucasus and is attested even in the Turkic languages - Karachay-Balkar and Kumyk (optatives are on the whole atypical of Turkic languages) (Dobrushina 2009; 2011). Ossetic Optative flexion originates to Old Iranian verbal flexion. However, apparently, Ossetic preserved Optative because of the areal influence.

2.2. Transitivity

Ossetic has a transitive marker *-t-* in the Past and Counterfactive. Tables 3 and 5.

The origin of *-t-*. The Past Indicative: past participle + Conjunctive forms of the auxiliary *wævən* 'to be' (Table 6). Counterfactive: past participle + Optative forms of the auxiliary *wævən* 'to be', Table 7. The transitive marker appeared because of the assimilation of *dw* (the end of past participle + the beginning of the auxiliary) to *dd* (Abaev 1949: 565).

Morphological transitivity is not attested in any other modern Iranian language and from extinct Iranian one can mention only the Khotanese language (Eastern Iranian, distant relative of Ossetic). The Khotanese language has different paradigms in the past for transitive and intransitive verbs (however, no special morphological marker for transitivity).

The Caucasus with the prevailing ergative system also does not have morphological markers for transitivity.

Table 6. Conjunctive of the verb *wævən* 'to be'

	SG	PL
1	<i>won</i>	<i>wæm</i>
2	<i>waj</i>	<i>wat</i>
3	<i>wa</i>	<i>woj</i>

Table 7. Optative of the verb *wævən* 'to be'

	SG	PL
1	<i>wain</i>	<i>waikkam</i>
2	<i>waiš</i>	<i>waikkat</i>
3	<i>waid</i>	<i>waikkøj</i>

2.3. Preverbs

According to the standard grammars the productive verbal prefixes are the following: *a-*, *ær-*, *ærba-*, *ba-*, *nə-*, *ra-*, *š-*, *fæ-*. Ossetic preverbs functions (aspect, direction + deixis): 1. aspect; 2. they specify the direction of the action; 3. they point out the position of the observer in relation to the moving subject

Table 8. Preverbs and preverb verbs from the verb *sæwæn* ‘to go’ (Abaev 1964: 77)

Preverb	Meaning	Location of the observer
<i>a-səd</i>	he went out	the observer is inside
<i>ra-səd</i>		the observer is outside
<i>ba-səd</i>	he entered	the observer is outside
<i>ærba-səd</i>		the observer is inside
<i>ær-səd</i>	he descended, he arrived	observer is below
<i>nə-ssəd</i>		observer is above
<i>fæ-</i>	‘motion away from the speaker in any direction’	
<i>š-</i>	‘motion upwards’	

Table 9. Ossetic vs. Georgian preverb meanings (Tomelleri 2009: 248)

Meaning/Language	Ossetic	Georgian
‘(s)he went out’	<i>a-səd-(iš)</i>	<i>ga-vid-a</i>
‘(s)he came out’	<i>ra-səd-(iš)</i>	<i>gamo-vid-a</i>
‘(s)he went in’	<i>ba-səd-(iš)</i>	<i>še-vid-a</i>
‘(s)he came in’	<i>ærba-səd-(iš)</i>	<i>šemo-vid-a</i>
‘(s)he went across’	-	<i>gada-vid-a</i>
‘(s)he came across’	-	<i>gadmo-vid-a</i>
‘(s)he went down’	<i>ny-ssəd-(iš)</i>	<i>č’a-vid-a</i>
‘(s)he came down’	<i>ær-səd-(iš)</i>	<i>č’amo-vid-a</i>

‘The Ossetic preverb system is very similar to the Georgian one, above all in the case of the double function of preverbs, denoting not only the direction of the movement, but also the orientation toward or away from the deictic center, represented by the speaker (Tomelleri 2009: 248). The aspectual system, however, differs in some important features from the Kartvelian one and shows sometimes striking similarities to the Russian or the South Slavic systems’ (Tomelleri 2010: 88).

Note that among modern Iranian languages very few languages have a preverb system, similar to Ossetic one (aspect+direction+deixis). One can mention Pashto preverbs which are also productive and, besides aspect and direction of the motion, they point out the location of the observer. However, in general, the Ossetic locative-deictic semantics of the preverbs is atypical for Iranian languages, and it is plausible that it was formed because of the Caucasian (most likely Kartvelian) influence.

2.4. Verbal Impersonal

Ossetic has dedicated verbal Impersonal which is formed by a past participle of a verb + the special suffix *-æ* and the auxiliary *wævæn* ‘to be’ in 3SG; the auxiliary can have all tense and mood forms; the subject is obligatory removed and can not be expressed. E.g.:

- (1) *kædæm ba-cəd-æ-wa* *kʷəšt-mæ?*
 where PREF-go.PART.PST-IMPERS-be.CONJ.3SG work-ALL
 ‘Where shall I go to work?’ (lit. ‘Where **to go** to work?’) (ONC¹. Kajtov S. T. Osetinskaja melodia. Vladikavkaz: IR, 2006).

¹ Ossetic National Corpus, about 5 million tokens, www.corpus.ossetic-studies.org/en

In other Iranian, both in modern and extinct languages, there is no grammatical category of impersonality, the impersonal meaning is expressed only by 2SG, 3SG or 3PL verbal forms; the subject is omitted, however, it can be restored. Cf.:

- (2) *pə sarhad-āt-o ke aksar tor čāy də šudo sara*
 PREP border.F-PL-OBL POST mostly black tea PREP milk.PL.OBL.F POST
ckəl keži
 drink.INF become.PRS.3

‘In the border regions mostly they drink black tea with milk’² (Grunberg 1987: 190).

According to the grammars available, Caucasian languages geographically close to Ossetic also do not have dedicated verbal Impersonal (Northwest Caucasian or Abkhazo-Adyghean, South Caucasian or Kartvelian, and Nakh languages).

An interesting case is Ingush

‘In Ingush many sentences lack an overt S or (as seems to be much more frequent) A and the subject is generic or unspecified. Often these are comparable to French *on*, German *man*, or Russian subjectless verbs with third person plural morphology, meaning an unspecified or generic human agent, e.g. (21) in Chapter 11 (where there is no overt A with *koradead* ‘found’) or (85) in Chapter 20 (where *c’i tillaai* ‘named (him)’ has no overt A). The German and French pronouns and the Russian agreement identify a human referent, but the Ingush has no overt marking (the ergative A is simply lacking and this of course has no effect on the agreement or case assignment in the clause) and does not necessarily imply human agency as in (177), where something happened or was done to the second person but it is unknown whether it was done by humans:

- (177) *Fy dead hwuona?*
 what D.do.NW.D 2S.DAT
 What happened to you?

For such examples it is difficult or impossible to know whether there is a null unspecified or generic A or there is no A at all and the verb is ambitransitive” (Nichols 2011: 668).

Another example:

- (27) *Muusaa viira*
 Musa v.be killed.WP
 Musa got killed. (*Musa* = O if there is a null A, otherwise S.) (Nichols 2011: 467)
 Musa - S? O?

2.5. Dedicated 3 person imperative forms

Standard Ossetic has dedicated forms for 3SG and 3PL imperative, cf. Table 4. Džavian and Ksanian Ossetic dialects (spoken in South Ossetia) for both 3SG and 3PL use one form identical to 3SG Imperative (Gershevitch 1991).

- (3) *abon Iræ š-kæn-æd xærinag æž žnon kod-t-on*
 today Ira PREF-do.PRS-IMP.3SG food I yesterday do.PST-TR-PST.1SG
 ‘Let Ira to cook food today, I cooked it yesterday’ (Vydrin 2011: 126).

The Ossetic 3SG imperative flexion originate to the Iranian imperative 3SG flexion *atu (Avestian -atu). 3PL flexion originate to Iranian imperative 3PL flexion *ntu (Isaev 1987: 617–618), cf. Avestian -ntū. (also see Gershevitch 1991).

² Interlinearization and translations are mine.

Most of Middle Iranian languages (the only one, which has, in Khotanese) and all modern Iranian languages do not have dedicated forms for 3 person Imperative. Usually a bare stem is used for 2SG Imperative and a form matching with 2PL Present Indicative is used for 2PL Imperative.

Turkic languages: have dedicated forms for 3SG Imperative (Karachay-Balkar: *-сын/-син/-сун/-сунн*), 3PL is derived from 3SG by a plural marker (Karachay-Balkar: *-ла/-ле*)

South Caucasian, North-West Caucasian and Nakh - no dedicated 3 person Imperative markers
European languages - full imperative paradigm is rare (Dobrushina 2008). Only Hungarian (but the flexion is not dedicated one) and it used to be in Estonian.

2.6. Delayed Imperative

The clitic *iw* and the standard Imperative, Cf.:

- (4) *šəvællæ-tt-æ kʷə ra-jqal wɔj,*
 child-PL-NOM when PREF-awake be.CONJ.PL
wæd sən iw ba-xær-ən kæ
 then 3PL.ENCL.DAT IMP.FUT PREF-eat.PRS-INF do.IMP.2SG
 ‘When the kids wake up, feed them’ (Vydrin 2011: 131).

According to the grammatical studies available, delayed Imperative is not attested in any other modern Iranian language. Delayed Imperative is a typological rare phenomenon - 15 % of languages (Gusev 2005), the actual number of languages with delayed Imperative is less (about 7-8 % - p.c. Gusev)

As far as one can judge from the studies of the Caucasian languages geographically close to Ossetic, they also do not have delayed Imperative.

2.7. Reported speech dedicated markers

The participle-converb form *žæygæ* (from the verb *žæyən* ‘to say’, about the participle-converb see Belyaev, Vydrin 2011) and the clitic *dam*

- (5) *æmæ mæ wərdəgæj ærba-lašt-oj gal-wærdon-ə*
 and 1SG.ENCL.GEN from.there PREF-take.PST-TR.3PL bull-cart-INESS
æmæ žæygæ sə xabar u žæygæ
 and CIT what news be.PRS.3SG CIT
æmæ dam dæ Mitjaj-æn rad-t-oj
 and CIT 2SG.ENCL.GEN Mitjaj-DAT give.PST-TR-3PL
 ‘They took me from there in a cart with oxen and I asked them what was going on (lit. “what is going on”) and they said that I was married to Mitjaj (lit. “they married you to Mitjaj”)
 (Oral text³. About the husband. 2.4.).

³ Oral texts collected in North Ossetia by me and my colleagues. About 50000 words, translated and interlinearized.
<http://ossetic-studies.org/ru/texts/iron>

(6) *æmæ ta jən dər aftæ ra-wadi, æž ən*
 and CONTR 3SG.ENCL.DAT FOC so PREF-occur.PST.3SG I 3SG.ENCL.DAT
žayt-on, æž dən mæ dolja dætt-ən, ardægæj
 say.PST-TR.1SG I 2SG.ENCL.DAT POSS.1SG part give.PRS-1SG from.there
vəpisat š-kæ, žæygæ, goræt-æj
 discharge PREF-do.IMP.2SG CIT town-ABL

‘Then again it turned out for her like this: I give her my part and she has to end the registration in the city (lit. “I give you my part and you end the city’s registration!”) (Oral text. Crook. 4.4.).

The Ossetic “reported speech” is characterized by the following features:

- a. No tense-mood agreement, almost no paraphrases. Cf. to English indirect speech where tense agreement is obligatory
- b. the way of expressing coreference with the speaker is the same as in the direct speech: deictic pronouns are reserved. Cf. to English *John said: I’m ill* vs. *John said the he is ill*
- c. the temporal and spatial reference is the same in the direct and indirect speech (words like *here* or *yesterday*)
- d. Ossetic indirect speech can express imperatives, interrogatives, vocatives and exclamatives. In other languages usually it can not.

The only feature which distinguishes Ossetic direct speech from reported speech is the obligatory use of the enclitic *dam* or the word *žæygæ* in reported speech. The enclitic *dam* is a dedicated marker of the reported speech. The verbal form *žæygæ* has grammaticalized to a dedicated reported speech marker: it can be used together with speech verbs e.g. *žæyən* ‘to say’ (desemantization), its syntactic position in the sentence seems to be marked (usually at the end or in the beginning of the clause; however, there can be exceptions, cf. (6); a separate study is needed).

(7) *Didinæ žæy-ə, žæygæ, dam, mæ-xi a-mar-dzənæn, wæddær*
 Didinæ say.PRS-3SG CIT CIT POSS.1SG-RFL.GEN PREF-kill.PRS-FUT.1SG but
Gwədzæ-jə dzəmbə-t-æm mæ-xi nə rat-dzənæn
 Gudza-GEN claw-PL-ALL POSS.1SG-RFL.GEN NEG give.PRS-FUT.1SG
 ‘Didina says that she would rather kill herself than to give herself to the Gudza’s claws’ (lit. Didina says: I will kill myself but I won’t give myself to the Gudza’s claws) (Ahvlediani 1969: 376).

The Ossetic indirect speech is very close to direct speech and, perhaps, it is not correct to call it ‘indirect’ or ‘reported speech’.

Most if not all other modern Iranian languages have the reported speech of the Ossetic type (features a-d). However, they do not have dedicated reported speech marker. Usually, in ‘indirect speech’ other Iranian languages use a conjunction, the main function of which is to mark subordinates (cf. Persian conjunction *ke*).

Note that many if not all Caucasian languages have a ‘true’ reported speech (mood-tense agreement, paraphrases, no deictic pronouns, spatial and time adverb differ from those used in direct speech; imperatives, interrogatives, vocatives and exclamatives are not possible in reported speech). However, as a marker of reported speech the Caucasian languages usually use a grammaticalized form from the verb ‘to say’ (Daniel, Lander 2011; also see Ershova 2013 for Kabardian). Also cf. Russian particle *mol*.

The Ossetic reported speech markers could appear under the influence of other Caucasian and Russian reported speech markers.

3. Conclusion

a. Caucasian features in Ossetic:

Morphological Optative, deictic-locative preverbs (South Caucasian, Russian), dedicated 3 person Imperative (Turkic), reported speech markers (Caucasus + Russian)

b. Neither Iranian nor Caucasian features:

verbal Impersonal, morphological transitivity, delayed Imperative

c. Other possible features - separate study is needed:

Ossetic: a lot of modal and passive constructions of the type <a verbal derivaten + auxiliary>, imperfective-conative particle *sæj* which inserts between the verb and the prefix (tmesis, see Ahvlediani 1963), morphological future marker (suffix *zæn/zæn/zə*).

Ossetic morphological future marker (suffix *zæn/zæn/zə*),

Most of modern Iranian languages do not have future tense morphological marker or do not have future tense at all (Balochi - only non-past/past contrast). Those of Iranian which have future tense, usually form it by the auxiliary 'to want' (e.g. Persian) or by particles (e.g. Zazaki, Kurdish).

Abbreviations

ABL — ablative; ALL — allative; CONJ — conjunctive; CONTR — contrastive; D — gender agreement marker; gender class; DAT — dative; ENCL — enclitic; F — feminine; FOC — focus; FUT — future; GEN — genitive; IMP — imperative; IMPERS — impersonal; INESS — inessive; INF — infinitive; NEG — negation; NOM — nominative; NW — nonwitnessed tense; OBL — oblique; PART — participle; PL — plural; POSS — possessive; POST — postposition; PREF — prefix; PREP — preposition; PRS — present; PST — past; RFL — reflexive; SG — singular; TR — transitive; V — gender agreement marker; gender class; WP — witnessed past tense

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