

The World's Major Languages

Second Edition

Edited by
Bernard Comrie

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Contents

<i>List of Contributors</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xiii
Introduction	1
1 Indo-European Languages	23
<i>Philip Baldi</i>	
2 Germanic Languages	51
<i>John A. Hawkins</i>	
3 English	59
<i>Edward Finegan</i>	
4 German	86
<i>John A. Hawkins</i>	
5 Dutch	110
<i>Jan G. Kooij</i>	
6 Danish, Norwegian and Swedish	125
<i>Einar Haugen</i>	
7 Latin and the Italic Languages	145
<i>R.G.G. Coleman</i>	
8 Romance Languages	164
<i>John N. Green</i>	
9 French	171
<i>Linda R. Waugh and Monique Monville-Burston</i>	

10	Spanish <i>John N. Green</i>	197
11	Portuguese <i>Stephen Parkinson</i>	217
12	Italian <i>Nigel Vincent</i>	233
13	Rumanian <i>Graham Mallinson</i>	253
14	Slavonic Languages <i>Bernard Comrie</i>	269
15	Russian <i>Bernard Comrie</i>	274
16	Polish <i>Gerald Stone</i>	289
17	Czech and Slovak <i>David Short</i>	305
18	Serbo-Croat: Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Serbian <i>Greville Corbett and Wayles Browne</i>	330
19	Greek <i>Brian D. Joseph</i>	347
20	Indo-Aryan Languages <i>George Cardona and Silvia Luraghi</i>	373
21	Sanskrit <i>George Cardona and Silvia Luraghi</i>	380
22	Hindi-Urdu <i>Yamuna Kachru</i>	399
23	Bengali <i>M.H. Klaiman</i>	417
24	Iranian Languages <i>J.R. Payne and Behrooz Mahmoodi-Bakhtiari</i>	437
25	Persian <i>Gernot L. Windfuhr</i>	445
26	Pashto <i>D.N. MacKenzie</i>	460

27 Uralic Languages	477
<i>Robert Austerlitz</i>	
28 Hungarian	484
<i>Daniel Abondolo</i>	
29 Finnish	497
<i>Michael Branch</i>	
30 Turkish and the Turkic Languages	519
<i>Jaklin Kornfilt</i>	
31 Afroasiatic Languages	545
<i>Robert Hetzron</i>	
32 Semitic Languages	551
<i>Robert Hetzron and Alan S. Kaye</i>	
33 Arabic	560
<i>Alan S. Kaye</i>	
34 Hebrew	578
<i>Robert Hetzron and Alan S. Kaye</i>	
35 Amharic	594
<i>Grover Hudson</i>	
36 Hausa and the Chadic Languages	618
<i>Paul Newman</i>	
37 Tamil and the Dravidian Languages	635
<i>Sanford B. Steever</i>	
38 Tai Languages	653
<i>David Strecker</i>	
39 Thai	660
<i>Thomas John Hudak</i>	
40 Vietnamese	677
<i>Đình-Hoà Nguyễn</i>	

41 Sino-Tibetan Languages	693
<i>Scott DeLancey</i>	
42 Chinese	703
<i>Charles N. Li and Sandra A. Thompson</i>	
43 Burmese	724
<i>Julian K. Wheatley</i>	
44 Japanese	741
<i>Masayoshi Shibatani</i>	
45 Korean	765
<i>Nam-Kil Kim</i>	
46 Austronesian Languages	781
<i>Ross Clark</i>	
47 Malay-Indonesian	791
<i>Uri Tadmor</i>	
48 Javanese	819
<i>Michael P. Oakes</i>	
49 Tagalog	833
<i>Paul Schachter and Lawrence A. Reid</i>	
50 Niger-Kordofanian Languages	857
<i>Douglas Pulleyblank</i>	
51 Yoruba	866
<i>Douglas Pulleyblank and Olanike Ola Orié</i>	
52 Swahili and the Bantu Languages	883
<i>Benji Wald</i>	
<i>Language index</i>	903

Iranian Languages

J.R. Payne

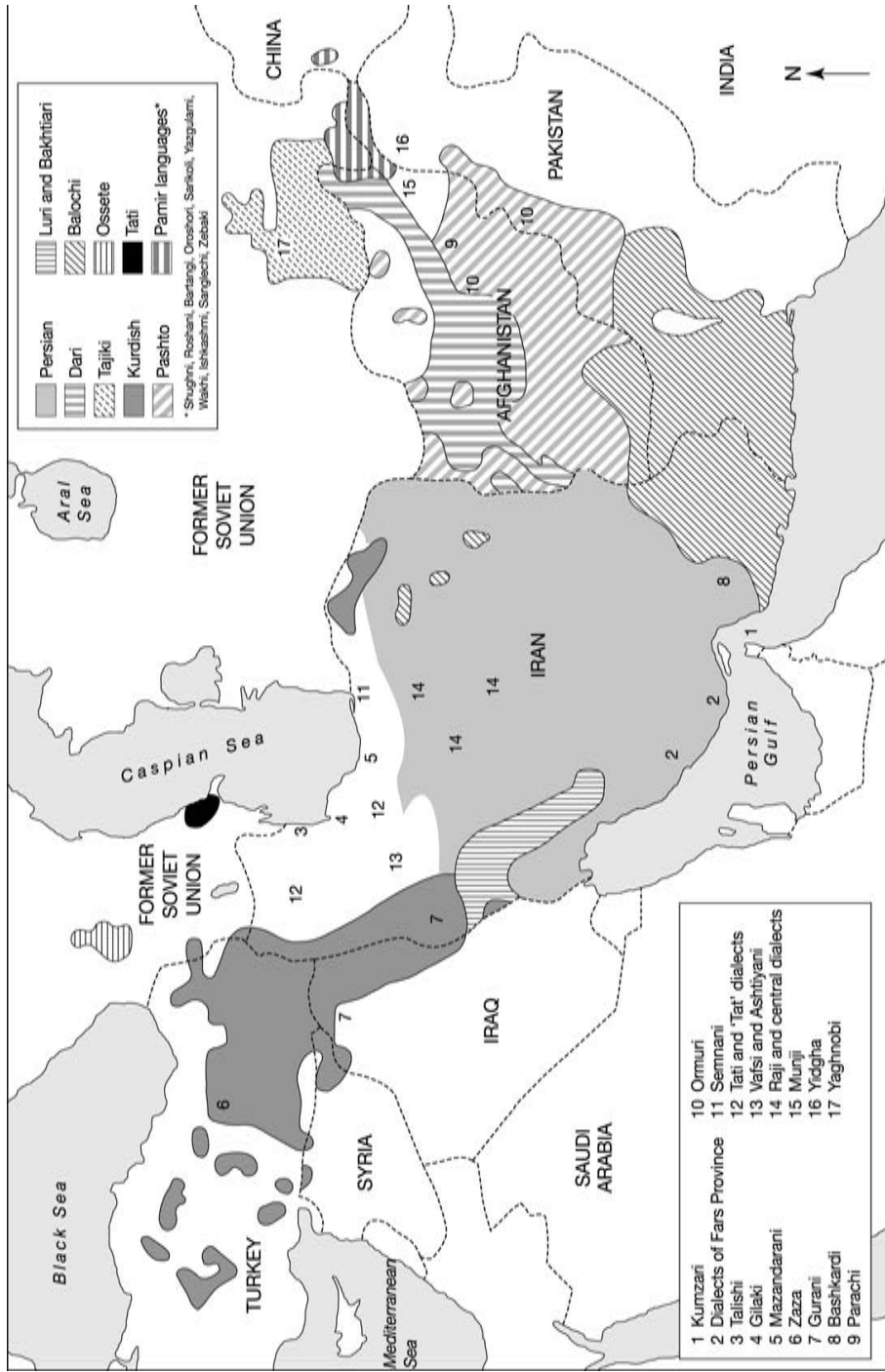
Revised by Behrooz Mahmoodi-Bakhtiari

1 Overview and Historical Background

Iranian Languages form a branch of the Indo-Iranian group of the Indo-European family, which are probably spoken by more than 80 million people in a wide area from Turkey (with Zaza, as the westernmost) to China (with Sarikoli, as the easternmost Iranian language), and mainly cover the whole of Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. The development of the Iranian languages may be studied within three major historical periods: Old Iranian (up to the fourth/third centuries BC), Middle Iranian (from the fourth/third centuries BC to the eighth/ninth centuries AD), and New Iranian.

Among the Old Iranian languages, two are known and attested, Avestan and Old Persian. However, the Middle Iranian languages (c. 300 BC–AD 950) are much more numerous; they are divided into two major groups, western and eastern. Modern Iranian languages fall into two major ‘eastern’ and ‘western’ groups, with ‘northern’ and ‘southern’ subgroups for each.

Within the Indo-European family, the Iranian languages are satem languages, e.g. Proto-Indo-European **k₁mtom* ‘hundred’, Avestan *satəm*, and show a very close relationship to the Indo-Aryan (and Dardic) branches. There are three common phonological developments which separate Iranian and Indo-Aryan from the rest of Indo-European: (1) the collapse of Proto-Indo-European **a, *e, *o, *h₁, *h₂* into *a*, and correspondingly of **ā, *ē, *ō, *h₁, *h₂* into *ā*, e.g. Proto-Indo-European **dekm̥* ‘ten’ > Avestan *dasa*, Sanskrit *dásā*, but Old Church Slavonic *desęty* Latin *decem*; (2) the development of Proto-Indo-European **ə* into *i*, e.g. Proto-Indo-European **pātē(r)* ‘father’ > Old Persian *pitā*, Sanskrit *pitā*, but Latin *pater*; (3) the development of Proto-Indo-European **s* into *š* or *ś* after **i, *u, *r, *k*, e.g. Proto-Indo-European **ueks* ‘grow’ > Old Persian and Avestan *vaxš-*, Sanskrit *vakṣ-* but German *wachs-*, English *wax*; Proto-Indo-European **sed-* ‘sit’ > Old Persian *ni-šad-*, Sanskrit *ni-šīd-* (with additional prefix), but Latin *sed-*, English *sit*. In addition, Iranian and Indo-Aryan inherit from Proto-Indo-European strikingly similar verbal conjugations and nominal declensions. Compare for example the following forms of the first person singular pronoun ‘I’: (a) nominative: Old Persian *adam*, Avestan *azəm*, Sanskrit *ahám*; (b) accusative: Old Persian *mām*, Avestan *mām*,



Map 24.1 Approximate Distribution of Iranian Languages.

Source: Map compiled by J. R. Payne.

Sanskrit *mām*; (c) genitive: Old Persian *manā*, Avestan *mana*, Sanskrit *māma*; (d) enclitic accusative: Old Persian *-mā*, Avestan *-mā*, Sanskrit *-mā*; (e) enclitic genitive: Old Persian *-maiṅ*, Avestan *-mōi*, Sanskrit *-mē*; (f) enclitic ablative: Old Persian *-ma*, Avestan *-maṅ*, Sanskrit *-māt*.

All Iranian languages of the Middle and Modern periods exhibit some common characteristics. The unmarked word order is typically verb-final, and the tense system is invariably based on two verb stems, present and past. Whereas the present stem continues the Old Iranian present, inherited directly from Indo-European, the past stem is based on a participial form of the verb ending in *-ta*. This participle had an active orientation for intransitive verbs, but was originally passive in the transitive paradigm, as in Old Persian *hamiçiyā hagmatā* (rebels (nom.) assembled (nom. m. pl.)) ‘the rebels assembled’, *ima tya manā kartam* (this what me (gen.) done (nom. nt. sg.)) ‘this is what was done by me’. The subsequent reanalysis of the passive participle as an active verb leads to ergative past tenses, preserved in a number of languages including Kurdish and Pashto, e.g. Kurdish (Kurmanji dialect) *ez ket-im* (I (abs.) fell (1 sg.)) ‘I fell’, but *min çîrok xwend* (I (obl.) story (abs.) read (3 sg.)) ‘I read a story’. The majority of the modern Iranian languages exhibit various stages in the decay of the past tense ergative system into a nominative one, as preserved in the tenses based on the present stem. Modern Persian is typical here of the final stage, with no traces of ergativity except the form of the first person singular pronoun *man* ‘I’ (< Old Persian genitive *manā*). In the following sections, the three stages of the development of Iranian languages will be briefly discussed.

2 Old Iranian Languages

The oldest attested forms of Iranian are Old Persian, known from the cuneiform inscriptions of the Achaemenid emperors, in particular Darius the Great (521–486 BC) and Xerxes (486–465 BC), and Avestan, the language of the *Avesta*, a collection of sacred Zoroastrian texts. The oldest parts of the *Avesta*, the Gathas or songs attributed to the prophet Zoroaster himself, reflect a slightly more archaic stage of development than the Old Persian inscriptions, and must therefore be dated to the sixth century BC or earlier, although the first manuscripts are from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries AD.

Genetically, Old Persian can be clearly associated with the South-West Iranian group, the Achaemenid empire being centred on the province of Fârs in the south-west of modern Iran, and must be considered a direct precursor of forms of Middle and Modern Persian. The position of Avestan is, however, complex and disputed, although the Gathas represent some clear east Iranian characteristics, notably a tendency to voice clusters which appear as *-ft-* and *-xt-* in West Iranian. However, it is clear that Avestan shows none of the features characteristic of South-West Iranian.

From archaeological and textual evidence, it can be deduced that Iranian languages at the time of the Achaemenid empire had a wider geographical distribution than at present, extending from the steppes of southern Russia in the west to areas of Chinese Turkestan (Xinjiang) in the east. Although Old Persian and Avestan are the main linguistic sources from this period, some proper names and toponyms, provide some information about Median, the language of the province of Media centred on Ecbatana (modern Hamadan in north-west Iran), and about the language of the Scythian and Sarmatian tribes of the south Russian steppes. The Median language, which belongs

genetically to the North-West group, was originally the language of the Median empire (eighth to sixth centuries BC), and some of its influence can be seen in the Old Persian inscriptions.

3 Middle Iranian Languages

Middle Iranian is the phase in the development of the Iranian languages that roughly coincides with late antiquity and the early Islamic period. It represents a larger number of languages, as well as providing a wealth of materials. It is during this stage that classification of the Iranian languages into Western and Eastern groups becomes more meaningful, as a larger number of distinct languages are attested during this period. Western Middle Iranian is represented by Middle Persian and Parthian, and the major Eastern Middle Iranian languages are Khotanese and Tumshuqese, Sogdian, Khwarezmian, and Bactrian.

Middle Persian (or Pahlavi), is the best-known literary language among the Middle Iranian. It belongs to the South-West group, and is almost the direct descendant of Old Persian and the precursor of Modern Persian. Although the earliest documents, inscriptions on coins, date from the second century BC, the main corpus illustrates the language of the Sassanid empire (third to seventh centuries AD), centred on the province of Fars (ancient Persis), but by the time of the Arab conquest (seventh/eighth centuries AD) extending over a wide area of present-day Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia. It includes both secular and Zoroastrian documents written in the Pahlavi script, which is based on the Aramaic and does not show short vowels. The term *Pahlavi* itself is the adjective from the noun *Pahlav* < *Parθava* 'Parthia'. Middle Persian is also represented by a large corpus of Manichean texts found in Turfan, Chinese Turkestan (Xinjiang), and dating mainly to the eighth and ninth centuries AD, although the earliest documents go as far back as the time of Mani (AD 216–74), the founder of the religion. These latter are written mostly in the Manichean script, another derivative of Aramaic, but are also found in Sogdian and Runic Turkic forms.

On the other hand, Parthian belongs to the North-West group. It is more sparsely documented than Middle Persian, but was the language of the province of Parthia which flourished at the time of the Arsacid dynasty (third century BC) to the south-east of the Caspian Sea. It is known through Parthian versions of Sassanid inscriptions and Manichean texts, as well as through minor documents from the first century BC and ostraca from ancient Nisa, located near Ashgabat in Turkmenistan.

Sogdian is perhaps the most important member of the middle North-East group, as it was the lingua franca of an extensive area centred on Samarqand and the silk route to China. There are some letters left from the fourth century AD in the Sogdian script, as well as some secular documents dating to the eighth century AD from Mt Mugh in the Zeravshan (Zarafshan) area of Tajikistan, beside a number of Buddhist texts of the same period. The modern descendant of Sogdian is Yaghnobi, spoken by a small group in Tajikistan.

Another important representative of Middle North-East Iranian is Khwarezmian, located in a region centred on modern Khiva, and attested in documents and inscriptions in a type of Aramaic script dating mainly to the third to eighth centuries AD. Later fragments of Khwarezmian have survived in Islamic texts of the eleventh to fourteenth centuries AD.

Finally, to the South-East group belong Saka languages (Khotanese and Tumshuqese), the languages of eastern Scythian tribes from Khotan (Xinjiang), and Bactrian, the language of the Kushan kingdom of Bactria, which has an intermediate position between Western and Eastern Iranian. The former is known through an extensive corpus of Buddhist texts in the Brahmi script, and dating primarily to the fifth to tenth centuries AD, while the latter is represented mainly by an inscription of twenty-five lines in a variant of the Greek script, found at the temple of Surkh Kotal in northern Afghanistan.

4 New Iranian Languages

The New Iranian languages are those used mainly after the emergence of Islam in the Iranian region. Like their Middle and Old ancestors, the New Iranian languages fall within two major Eastern and Western groups, a distinction which is the most fundamental division in Iranian dialectology.

The distinction of the Eastern and Western Iranian languages lies in the basic geographical distribution of the main speakers of these languages, on the east or the west of the Kavir and Lut deserts in Iran. The languages spoken inside today's Iran (like Balochi, Zaza, Persian, Kurdish and Gorani) are regarded as the Western Iranian languages, and the languages spoken towards the east in Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Western China (like Yaghnobi, Shughni and Wakhi) are Eastern languages.

This geographical distinction, although convincing and easy at first sight, is also misleading, as such conventional terms do not always correspond to the present real geographical situation of the languages. The Tajiki and Dari dialects of Persian, for example, are Western, although geographically to the east. Ossetian, on the other hand, which belongs to the North-East group, is spoken in the Caucasus, which represents the north-west of the present Iranian language area.

However, some clear phonological features characterise the basic division between East and West Iranian. These features are:

- 1 West Iranian preserves *b*, *d*, *g*, but these are mainly converted in East Iranian into the corresponding voiced fricatives β (*v*, *w*), δ , γ , e.g. Old Persian *brātar* 'brother', Modern Persian *barādar*, Balochi *brās*, but Sogdian *βr't*, Yaghnobi *virōt*; Avestan *dasa* 'ten', Modern Persian *dah*, Bakhtiari *deh*, Zaza *dās*, but Sogdian *δs*', Shughni *δīs*; Old Persian *gauša* 'ear', Modern Persian *gūš*, Gurani *goš*, Kurdish *goh*, but Sogdian *γwš*, Ossetian *γos*, Bartangi *γu*.
- 2 West Iranian preserves *č*, but this is mainly converted into *c* in East Iranian, e.g. Middle Persian *čahār* 'four', Balochi *čār*, but Khwarezmian *cf'r/cβ'r*, Shughni *cavōr*.
- 3 The consonantal clusters *-ft-* and *-xt-* are preserved in West Iranian, but converted into the voiced counterparts *-vd-* and *-γd-* in East Iranian; equally, originally voiced clusters of this type tend to be preserved in East Iranian but devoiced in West Iranian, e.g. **hafta* 'seven' > Middle Persian *haft*, Kurdish *häft*, but Khwarezmian *'βd*, Ossetian *avd*, Yazgulami *uvd*; **duγdar* 'daughter' > Modern Persian *doxtar*, Gilaki *duxtə*, but Avestan *dugədā*, Khwarezmian *δγd*, Wakhi *δəγd*.

Each of these Eastern and Western languages has its own subgroups, dividing them into Northern and Southern classes. Each of these classes has some specific distinctive features.

4.1 New West Iranian Languages

Geographically, the New West Iranian languages and dialects may be divided into eight subgroups: the Central dialects, Caspian dialects, North-Western dialects, South-Western dialects, South-Eastern dialects, Kurdish languages and dialects, Zaza-Gorani languages, and the different dialects of Baluchi.

In historical and typological terms, the New West Iranian languages are divided into two Northern and Southern subgroups. North-Western Iranian dialects are those dating back to the languages spoken in the northern and north-western parts of the Iranian plateau. North-Western Iranian languages, to which most of the West languages belong, are now found in Kurdistan and Azarbaijan in north-west of Iran, as well as around the Caspian Sea and central Iran, together with Baluchi in the southeast of Iran. Needless to say, this change of location is mostly due to the migration of these people from their original places.

There are some phonological characteristics which separate the South-West and North-West groups. In the North-Western languages, we may notice:

- 1 Preserving the Old Iranian *z*, as opposed to the change of *z* into *d* in the South-Western languages, such as NW *zumâ* or *zâmâ* ‘bridegroom, son-in-law’ vs SW *dâmâd*. Other examples are Avestan *zân-* ‘know’, Parthian *z’n-*, Gurani *zân-*, Kurdish *zan-*, but Old Persian *dân-*, Modern Persian *dân-* and Tati *dan-*.
- 2 Preserving the Old Iranian *s*, as opposed to the change of *s* into *θ* or *h* in the SW languages (such as the Old Persian word *θata-* ‘hundred’ vs the Median **sata-*).
- 3 The change of the OIran. *-θr* into *-hr* and, later on, *r*; as opposed to the change of *-θr* into *-s* in the SW, like the NW *pur* and the SW *pus(ar)* ‘son’.
- 4 Maintenance of the cluster *-sp* as in NW *asp* ‘horse’ (OP *asa-*).
- 5 Change of the initial cluster *dv-* into *b-* (and *d-* in SW), such as NW *bar* vs SW *dar* ‘door’ from the OIran. **dvara-*. The Parthian is *br*, Zaza *bâr*, but Middle Persian and Modern Persian *dar*.
- 6 Preserving the OIran. initial *v-* (vs the transition of *b < v* in the SW) such as NW *vid* vs SW *bid* ‘willow’.
- 7 Change of the intervocalic OIran. **-č-* into *-j-*, such as *rij* (present stem of the verb) for the OIran. **raičaya-* > ‘to pour’.
- 8 Later changes *ǰ > NW ǰ-ž-* SW *z-*, and *dv-* > NW *b-*, SW *d-*, also clearly differentiate the groups, e.g. Parthian *ǰn* ‘woman’, Zaza *ǰan*, but Middle Persian *zan*, and Modern Persian *zan*.
- 9 Change of the OIran. **-xt-* into *-t-*, such as *sut-* ‘burned’, from the OIran. **suxta-*.

Beside these phonological features, many of the NW Iranian languages are also syntactically different from the SW in the sense that they have preserved the split ergativity of the Middle Western Iranian languages. Persian and most of the SW languages are now nominative-accusative languages.

North-West Iranian languages are very numerous, but the major ones may be named as follows: Kurdish (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and some parts of the Caucasus); Taleshi (Iran, Azerbaijan); Balochi (Iran, Pakistan Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and the Persian Gulf); Gilaki (Iran); Mazandarani (Iran); Zaza (Turkey); Gurani (Iran, Iraq); Bashkardi (Iran); Parachi (Afghanistan); Ormuri (Afghanistan, Pakistan); Semnani and related dialects (Iran); ‘Tat’ dialects, centred on Tabriz, Zanjan, Qazvin and Saveh (Iran); Vafsi and

Ashtiyani (Iran); dialects of central Iran, centred on Kashan, Esfahan, Yazd, Kerman and the Dashte-Kavir (Iran).

The best-known SW Iranian languages are Persian (Iran, Persian Gulf) with its Dari and Tajiki variants; Luri and Bakhtiari (western Iran); Kumzari (Persian Gulf); non-Persian dialects of Fars province, centred on Shiraz, Kazerun, Sivand and Lar (Iran); Judeo-Tati (in the Republic of Azerbaijan).

Among all these languages, Persian is no doubt the best-attested language. The official language of Iran, it developed as early as in the ninth century, and is a continuation of Middle Persian. However, it is now remarkably simpler in terms of formal grammar. Many inflectional systems such as gender distinction, noun inflection, adjectival agreement, and some irregularities in verbal conjugation have disappeared. Possession is shown by a suffix called *ezafeh*, and tense, mood, voice and negative are likewise indicated by a series of affixes. See also Chapter 25.

4.2 New East Iranian Languages

The modern Eastern Iranian languages are numerous and varied, with two major sub-groups: Northern and Southern, and most of the Eastern languages belong to the North-Eastern subgroup.

The subdivision of the Eastern Iranian group into South-East and North-East Iranian is based on both phonological and morphological features. The morphological features characterising the North-East group are:

- 1 In the North-East group, the development of a plural marker in *-t* form is found. Examples of this marker are Sogdian *'wt'k* 'place', plural *'wt'kt*, Yaghnobi *pōda* 'foot', plural *pōdō-t* and Ossetian *sər* 'head', plural *sər-tə*.
- 2 The South-East group, on the other hand, shows a variety of voiced continuants in place of intervocalic *-š-*, e.g. Yaghnobi *γuš* 'ear', but Shughni *γiŷ*, Munji *γūy*, as well as a tendency to develop retroflex consonants (though these are lacking in the Shughni-Roshani subgroup of Pamir languages). Within the South-East group, Shughni, Roshani, Bartangi, Oroshori and Sarikoli (and more distantly Yazgulami) form a genetic subgroup, as do Ishkashmi, Zebaki and Sanglechi, and Munji and Yidgha. Munji and Yidgha share with Pashto the development of *d > l*.

Among the Eastern Iranian languages, Ossetian (Georgia) and Yaghnobi (Tajikistan) are the major North-Eastern ones; and the rest, containing the 'Shughni' group which consists of Shughni, Roshani, Khufi, Bartangi, Roshorvi (in Tajikistan and to a lesser extent in Afghanistan) and Sarikoli (in China), Ishkashmi (in Afghanistan and Tajikistan); Sanglechi (Afghanistan); Zebaki (Afghanistan); Wakhi (Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, China); Munji (Afghanistan); Yidgha (Afghanistan and Pakistan), and Pashto (in Afghanistan), are South-Eastern languages.

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The fullest and most detailed general survey available is Rastorgueva (1979–), planned in five volumes. Three have appeared so far: 1 *Drevneiranskie jazyki* on Old Iranian (1979), 2 *Sredneiranskie jazyki* on Middle Iranian (1981), 3 *Novoiranskie jazyki: zapadnaja grupa, prikaspjiskie jazyki* on the

South-West Iranian and Caspian languages (1982). Spuler (1958) is the only comprehensive handbook in a language other than Russian, although Payne (1981) gives a short survey of linguistic properties of Iranian languages of the former Soviet Union. Oranskij (1963) includes annotated specimens of many of the languages and a useful map. Schmitt's (1989) edited volume is an extremely useful survey of the three stages of the Iranian languages, with detailed bibliographies at the end of each chapter. Among bibliographical resources, MacKenzie (1969) is a short survey of Iranian studies and full basic bibliography; while Sims-Williams (1998) may also be used a general overview of the field. Oranskij (1975) is a very thorough bibliographical guide to the Iranian languages of Tajikistan; Redard (1970) is also comprehensive survey of the study of minor Iranian languages, with full bibliography. But for those interested in the New Eastern Iranian languages, Morgenstierne's publications are the best references. Linguistic articles in *Encyclopedia Iranica* provide more detailed information about the dialects, all with extensive bibliographies.

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