



EASTERN IRANIAN LANGUAGES

EASTERN IRANIAN LANGUAGES, term used to refer to a group of Iranian languages most of which are or were spoken in lands to the east of the present state of Persia. In terms of both historical and typological linguistics, the distinction between Western and Eastern Iranian is generally regarded as the most fundamental division in Iranian dialectology. Each of these two major groups is sometimes subdivided along the opposite axis, giving a potential four-way distinction between South-Western, North-Western, South-Eastern, and North-Eastern Iranian. These conventional terms correspond only partially to the real geographical situation of the languages and their speakers. Thus Ossetic, an Eastern Iranian language, is spoken in the Caucasus, further west than many Western Iranian languages, while [Baluchi](#), a North-Western Iranian language, is spoken chiefly in Pakistan, in the south-eastern corner of the Iranophone area. However, the great majority of the Eastern Iranian languages have or had their main centers in areas to the east and north-east of Persia, in what are now Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China.

The term “Eastern Iranian” is of limited utility with reference to the Old Iranian period. Of the two attested Old Iranian languages, Old Persian is a typical representative of South-Western Iranian. Avestan geographically belongs to the eastern Iranian area (see [avestan geography](#)), but shows few if any of the distinctive characteristics of the later Eastern Iranian languages. (A



possible example is provided by the Av. third person plural verbal ending *-āire* < **-ārai*, which has its only precise cognates in the Eastern Iranian languages Khotanese, Chorasmian, and Yaghnobi.) One may suppose that at this stage the Iranian languages had only recently begun to diverge from one another, and that only the more peripheral languages had already developed markedly individual traits. Among such peripheral languages one would include Old Persian in the extreme south-west, which displays such unique developments as those of Indo-European **k* and **g(h)* to *θ* and *d* (as in *maθišta-* “greatest;” *adam* “I”) and of **kw* and **g(h)w* to *s* and *z* (as in *asa-* “horse;” *hazan-* “tongue”). At the opposite end of the Iranian world the languages of the nomadic Saka peoples of the Eurasian steppes show a different but equally distinctive development of **kw* and **g(h)w* to *š* and *ž* (cf. Khot. *aśś* [aša-], Wakhi *yaš* “horse;” Khot. *bišāa-* [βižā] “tongue,” etc.). In Avestan, however, as in the great majority of Iranian languages, **k* and **g(h)* become *s* and *z* (Av. *masišta-*, Parth. *masišt* “greatest;” Khot. *māsta-* “great;” Av. *azəm*, Parth. *az*, Sogd. *’zw*, Khot. *aysu* [azu], Pashto *ze* “I”) while **kw* and **g(h)w* become *sp* and *zb* (Av. *aspa-*, Sogd. *’sp-*, Orm. *yâsp* “horse;” Parth. *’zb’n*, Sogd. *’zβ’k*, Pashto *žeba*, Yazgh. *zveg* “tongue,” etc.). At least in respect to these features, Avestan may be regarded as representative of a central group within Old Iranian, in which the developments that later distinguish Eastern from Western Iranian had not yet taken place (Sims-Williams 1993, pp. 162-63; on the relationship between Khotanese and Wakhi, see P.O. Skjærvø in Schmitt, p. 375). Of the less well attested Old Iranian languages, the meager remains of ancient Scythian (Schmitt, pp. 92-3) have been claimed as Eastern Iranian.

By the Middle Iranian stage, when a larger number of distinct languages are attested, a classification into Western and Eastern Iranian becomes more meaningful. While Western Middle Iranian is represented by Middle Persian and Parthian, the chief Eastern Middle Iranian languages are Khotanese (with the closely related Tumshuqese), Sogdian, Chorasmian, and Bactrian, to which one may add the remnants of such languages as Sarmatian and Alanic (R. Bielmeier in Schmitt, pp. 236-45; cf. also Sims-Williams, *ibid.*, pp. 165-67), together with the “Parnian” stratum in Parthian (Sims-Williams, *ibid.*, p. 171) and reconstructed proto-forms of Eastern Iranian languages attested only in the modern period, e.g., “proto-Pashto.” It should be noted that, while the above division is universally accepted by specialists in Iranian dialectology, the dividing-line between Western and Eastern Iranian is in fact by no means clear-cut. The attested Middle Iranian languages seem rather to form a continuum from Middle Persian (South-Western) via Parthian (North-Western)



to Bactrian, Chorasmian, and Sogdian (North-Eastern), with the Saka languages (Khotanese and Tumshuqese) at the opposite end of the spectrum. Bactrian, in particular, seems to occupy an intermediate position between Western and Eastern Iranian, sharing almost as many features with Parthian as with Chorasmian and Sogdian (Sims-Williams in Schmitt, pp. 165-72).

The Modern Eastern Iranian languages are even more numerous and varied. Most of them are classified as North-Eastern: Ossetic; Yaghnobi (which derives from a dialect closely related to Sogdian); the Shughni group (Shughni, Roshani, Khufi, Bartangi, Roshorvi, Sarikoli), with which Yaz-1ghulami (Sokolova 1967) and the now extinct Wanji (J. Payne in Schmitt, p. 420) are closely linked; Ishkashmi, Sanglichi, and Zebaki; Wakhi; Munji and Yidgha; and Pashto. According to Morgenstierne (1926, pp. 14-39; 1929; cf. also C. Kieffer in Schmitt, pp. 451ff.), Parachi and Ormuri occupy a special position as a “South-Eastern Iranian” group.

Typical features of Eastern Iranian. The Eastern Iranian languages are distinguished from the Western by both archaisms and innovations. A typical phonological archaism of Eastern Iranian is the widespread preservation of Old Iranian θ , as in Sogd. and Chor. *myθ*, Shughni *mēθ*, Yazgh. *miθ* (but Sanglichi *mēi*, Munji *mīχ*) “day” < **maiθā/ā-*; Sogd. *prθwty*, Shughni *θud-*, Wakhi *θət-* “burnt,” cf. O. Pers. *θav* “to burn.” Sometimes θ even develops to a stop as in Western Yagh. *mēt* (Eastern Yagh. *mēs*) “day;” Khot. *paṭhuta*, Sanglichi *təδ*, Zeb. *ted* (but Ishkashmi *sId*) “burnt;” Alanic *fourt*, Oss. D. *furt*, Wakhi *pitr* “son” < **puθra-*. Most Eastern Iranian languages (but not Sogdian, Yaghnobi, Yidgha-Munji or Parachi) have developed a dental affricate *c* (= *ts*), in some contexts *j* (= *dz*) or *s*, from the OIr. palatal *č*: cf. Khot. *tcahora*, Tumshuqese *tsahari*, Chor. *čfr*, Bactr. *sofaro* (unpublished), Oss. D. *cuppar*, Shughni *cavōr*, Ishkashmi *cIfur*, Wakhi *cəbʋr*, Pashto *calōr*, Orm. *cār* < **čaθwar-* “four.” Many of these languages preserve *č* in special contexts or have created a new *č*, e.g., by secondary palatalization of old *k*, resulting in contrast between *c* and *č* (sometimes also *č̣*). While the weakening of postvocalic *b*, *d*, *g* to *v*, *δ*, *γ* (sometimes with further changes, such as *v* > *w* or *δ* > *l*) is common throughout Iranian, the same changes in initial position are specific to Eastern Iranian. However, Parachi and Ormuri do not take part in this development, nor is it carried through consistently in all of the North-Eastern languages. (Some apparent inconsistencies may be due to reversal of a sound change. Thus, Yagh. *v-*, *d-*, *γ-* may derive from Sogd. *v-*, *δ-*, *γ-*, with a late change of *δ* to *d* analogous to that of *θ* to *t* in Western Yaghnobi.) Another



widespread but not quite universal North-Eastern Iranian development is the voicing of OIr. **ft*, **xt* to *vd*, *γd*: cf. Khot. *hauda*, Tumshuqese **hoda* (in the ordinal *hodama*-), Chor. *ʾβd*, Oss. *avd*, Shughni *ūvd*, Sanglichi *ōvδ*, Wakhi *ib*, Munji *ōvda*, Pashto *ōwə* < **hafta* “seven;” Khot. *dūta* (= *δūda*?), Tumshuqese *dūda*, Chor. *δγd* (= *δuyda*), Bactr. *logda*, Oss. I. *-diγd* (in *xodiγd* “sister-in-law”), Yazgh. *δoyd*, Sanglichi *wuδəγδ*, Wakhi *δəγd*, Yidgha *luydo* < **duxtā* (nom.) “daughter.” Sogdian has the partially voiced clusters *vt* and *γt* (e.g., *ʾβtʾ*, *δwγtʾ*), whence Yaghnobi reverts to *ft* and *xt*. The voicing did not take place in the South-Eastern languages (cf. Par. *hōt*, *dut*).

The Eastern Middle Iranian languages preserve OIr. final syllables to a large extent (cf. the forms of the word for “daughter” quoted above, and contrast Mid. Pers. and Parth. *duxt*). Many of the resulting final vowels survive in the modern Eastern Iranian languages. The accent has a distinctive function in several languages, e.g., Ossetic (Iron *xāʾdzar* “the house,” *xādzár* “a house”), Pashto (perfective *préyǎəm* to imperfective *preyǎəm* “I leave”) and Ormuri (*á sarai* “this man,” *a-sarái* “the man”).

The preservation of final vowels has important implications for the morphology of Eastern Iranian, which tends to be much more complex and conservative than that of Western Iranian. In particular, Khotanese, Sogdian, and Pashto have well-preserved case-systems, fairly strict rules of concord, and a variety of declensions. Several languages (Sogdian, Chorasmian, Ossetic, Pashto, Parachi; but also Western Iranian Sivandi) have special forms of nouns used after numerals in certain cases; some such forms derive from OIr. duals. A notable isogloss is provided by the second person pl. pronouns with prefixed *t*:- Bactr. *tō/ōmaxo* (unpublished), Shughni *tama*, Yazgh. *təmox*, Sanglichi *təmux* (cf. also Pashto *tāse*, Orm. *tōs*?). A triple system of deictic pronouns based on the stems **ayam/iyam/ima*- “this,” **aiša-/aita*- “this, that” (middle distant or near the person addressed) and **hā/āu/awa*- “that (yonder)” can be reconstructed on the basis of data in Sogdian, Shughni, Sanglichi-Ishkashmi, Wakhi, and Yidgha-Munji (Sims-Williams, 1994). Typical Eastern Iranian verbal forms include causatives and denominatives in **-āwaya*- (Khot. *-ev-*, Chor. *-ʾwy-*, Wakhi *-iv-*, Munji *-ōv-*, Pashto and Orm. *-aw-*, Par. *-ēw-*; contrast Western Iranian **-ānaya*-).

For the numerous vocabulary items attested exclusively in Eastern (as distinct from Western) Iranian a few examples must suffice:

**abi-ar*- “to find, obtain”: Sogd. *βyr*, Chor. *βyr-*, Man. Bactr. *ʾβyr-*, Oss. D. *yerun*,



Yagh. *vīr-*, Shughni *vir-*, Yazgh. *vir-*, Ishkashmi *avir-*.

**anda-* “blind” (OInd. *andhá-*, Av. *aṇda-*): Khot. *hana-*, Sogd. *ʿnt*, Munji *yāndəy*, Pashto *ṛ-ūnd*, Orm. *hōnd*.

**drawa-* “hair”: Khot. *drau-*, Sogd. *žw-*, Oss. D. *ārdo*, Yagh. *dirau*, Shughni *cīw*, Yazgh. *cu*, Orm. *drī*.

**gari-* “mountain” (OInd. *girí-*, Av. *gairi-*), often also “rock” or “pass” in the modern languages: Khot. *ggara-*, Sogd. *γr-*, Yagh. *γar*, Shughni *žīr*, Yazgh. *γar*, Wakhi *γar*, Munji *γār*, Pashto *γar*, Orm. *grī*, Par. *gir*.

**kapā/ā-* “fish”: Khot. *kavā-*, Sogd. *kp-*, Chor. *kb*, Scythian *Pantikápēs* “Fish-path” (place-name), Oss. *kāf*, Wakhi *kūp*, Munji *kop*, Pashto *kab*.

**kuta-*, *kutī-* “dog” (cf. Prakrit *kutta-*, *kuttī-*): Sogd. *ʿkwt-*, Chor. *ʿkt*, Oss. D. *kui*, I. *kīdz*, Yagh. *kut*, Shughni *kud*, Yazgh. *kwod*, Sanglichi *kud*.

**maiθā/ā-* “day”: see forms listed above.

Eastern Iranian as a group. The best evidence for the unity of Eastern Iranian is provided by shared innovations such as the voicing of *xt* to *γd*, or the use of **kapā/ā-* for “fish” in place of older **masyā/ā-* (cf. OInd. *mátsya-*, Av. *masiia-*, Parth. *m’sy’g*, Pers. *māhī*), since they can hardly have come about everywhere independently. Archaisms such as the preservation of *θ* or of **gari-* “mountain,” as opposed to the innovative use of **kaufa-* in this sense in Western Iranian, cf. Parth. *kwf*, Pers. *kūh*, etc. (also Av. *kaofa-*), are less significant in this respect. Within Eastern Iranian one can establish several sub-groups of languages which are particularly closely related to one another, e.g.: Alanic, Sarmatian and Ossetic; Khotanese and Tumshuqese; Sogdian and Yaghnobi; the Shughni group and Yazghulami. However, it does not seem possible to regard the Eastern Iranian group as a whole—even excluding Parachi and Ormuri—as a genetic grouping. Such a conception would imply the existence of an ancestral “proto-Eastern Iranian” intermediate between “common Iranian” and the attested Eastern Iranian languages; but if one reconstructs “proto-Eastern Iranian” in such a way as to account for all the features of the group, it proves to be identical to the “common Iranian” reconstructible as the ancestor of the whole Iranian family. It is therefore more plausible to conceive of Eastern Iranian as a “Sprachbund” or areal grouping of languages. In this case the members of the “Sprachbund” happen to be genetically related, but the special features which mark them out as a



group result rather from centuries of contiguity, during which innovations will have spread from one language of the group to another and neighboring languages will have supported each other in the retention of shared features.

The most pervasive external influence on Eastern Iranian has been that exerted by the neighboring Indian languages, as is most evident in the development of aspirates (Khotanese, Parachi,Ormuri) and retroflex consonants (Khotanese, Pashto, etc.). However, similar developments are found in Baluchi (North-Western Iranian), which is also spoken in close proximity to Indian. Indian loanwords are found already in most Eastern Middle Iranian languages (but also in Parthian) and increase in number in the modern period.

See also [ALANS](#); [AVESTAN LANGUAGE](#); [BACTRIAN LANGUAGE](#); [BARTANGI](#); [CHORASMIA III](#); [THE CHORASMIAN LANGUAGE](#); [DIALECTOLOGY](#).

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