



OSSETIC LANGUAGE I. HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION

According to the 1989 Soviet census, Ossetic is spoken by about 500,000 people; of these, about 330,000 live in North Ossetia and 125,000 in Georgia (ca. 64,000 in South Ossetia). These figures should, however, be regarded with some caution as a large part of the Ossetic population is bilingual, speaking at least one of the neighboring languages—Kabardian (Cherkes), Ingush (a Nakh, NE Caucasus language), or Karachay-Balkar (Turkic languages). Knowledge of Russian is also widespread, especially in towns, for Russian serves as a medium of administration and instruction and as a lingua franca for communication with the various neighboring peoples. Bilingualism goes far back and must have characterized the normal social situation from time immemorial all over the North Caucasus. Language shifts and the change of linguistic and tribal borders must therefore have been common.

Ossetic belongs to the eastern branch of the Iranian family of languages. The linguistic ancestors of the present-day Ossetes were Alan tribes who, according to Greek and Roman sources, emigrated from Central Asia to the lands north and east of the Black Sea about the beginning of the Christian era (see [ALANS](#), [ASII](#)). The Alans were, in their heyday in the early Middle Ages, a predominant people in the Northwest Caucasus, and their dialects were widespread in the area. The language was gradually ousted by Turkic and Cherkes immigrants from the west and north, and it is now limited to a relatively small region. There is some evidence that the present Ossetic-speaking area was formerly



inhabited by Nakh-speaking (Ingush-Chechen, NE Caucasus) tribes. The previous presence of the Alans in the Northwest Caucasus is borne out by a number of place names of Iranian origin in modern Turkish and Cherkas areas.

Ossetic, like its Alanic predecessor, has for millennia been separated from the sister languages of Central Asia, being spoken in non-Iranian surroundings. It has developed certain characteristic peculiarities, in part due to the influence of adjacent languages (Turkic, Caucasian). This applies to vocabulary as well as phonetic and grammatical structure. As regards lexical borrowing, the influence of Turkic languages seems to have been particularly strong.

Among the phonetic and grammatical features that may be ascribed to Caucasus or Turkish interference are the voiceless unaspirated glottalic stops, that is, stops accompanied by a closure of the vocal cords: *p'*, *t'*, *c'*, *č'*, *k'* (*q'*). The glottalics are mainly found in Caucasian loanwords, but also in a few indigenous words, especially after *s*: *xuisk'/xusk'* "dry" (< OIr. **huška-*). Unlike the Caucasian languages, the functional load of the glottalization is inessential in Ossetic; minimal pairs opposing *t'* and *t*, *d*, etc. are rare. In loanwords, the Russian voiceless stops and affricates are usually rendered by their glottalic counterparts, even if this practice is not shown by the orthography.

Grammatical features that may be ascribed to North Caucasian (or Turkic?) influence are: the extensive use of a gerundial form (converb) to mark syntactic subordination, the system of orientational preverbs, the development of an intricate case system, the compound verbs consisting of a noun plus an auxiliary that jointly behave as a syntactic unit, the loss of gender, the use of enclitic pronouns and adverbs for anticipating noun phrases. Some of these features are, of course, found in other Iranian languages. Vigesimal (base 20) counting (e.g., *fondz-issädz- i* "100," i.e., 5 x 20) is also to all appearances due to Caucasian influence.

In general, however, the Ossetic grammatical structure has been resistant to foreign influence. Especially the verb has roughly retained the character of Old Aryan. The verb is unipersonal, showing concord with only one actant of the clause. Ergativity (see [ERGATIVE CONSTRUCTION](#)), which is traditionally considered as common to the Caucasian languages, has not penetrated Ossetic, either syntactically or morphologically. The subject of the verb is almost invariably put in the nominative. Actually, Ossetic has gone through a stage of ergativity: the genitive continues to be used as the subject of the past tense of



transitive verbs. This historical stage is also still reflected in the use of the genitive case of the personal pronoun of the 1st and 2nd plural as the subject case. Like most other modern Iranian languages, Ossetic has abandoned the ergative system.

The basic core of the lexicon, words signifying elementary human experience, are mostly of Iranian origin. Turkish and Caucasian loanwords are, as a rule, denotations of social and natural phenomena peculiar to the Caucasus. It is noteworthy that quite a large number of plant names seem to be of Turkish origin.

Preliterary evidence. So far three medieval Alanic texts have been identified and published: (1) an inscription found on the Zelenchuk River in the Northwest Caucasus, dating from the 11th-12th century (see Zgusta); (2) a couple of verses in a manuscript of the *Theogony* of the Byzantine writer Ioannes Tzetzes (late 12th cent.; see Hunger, 1953); (3) the Yassic word list in a Hungarian document dating from 1422, containing some 40 words with Latin translations from the language of the Yass, descendants of Alan immigrants who together with Turkish Cumans fled from the Mongols about the middle of the 13th century (Németh, 1958; Bielmeier, 1989b; see [CODEX CUMANICUS](#)). In addition there exist two short lists of words from the 17th-18th centuries (Bielmeier, 1989a) and a few texts with a list of words and a short grammatical sketch in Julius von Klaproth's travelogue (II, appendix, pp. 176-224).

Literary language. The first Ossetic book to appear in print was a short catechism by the Archimandrite Gai, printed in Moscow in 1798; it was written in the Cyrillic script with some modifications (see Thordarson, 1989, pp. 457-58). At the beginning of the 19th century Ivane Ialğuzidze (1775-1830) published three Ossetic religious texts, translated from Georgian, and an abecedary; he used the Georgian (*xucuri* "ecclesiastical") script, with some adaptations and additional letters. His language was South Ossetic (Akhvlediani, 1960, pp. 80 ff.). About the middle of the 19th century, a writing system was created by the Russian scholar Andreas Johann Sjögren on the basis of the Russian script. This was in general use until the 1920s. In 1923 the Latin script was introduced; it was replaced in North Ossetia in 1938 by a new variant of the Russian alphabet. In 1939 the Georgian (*mxedruli* "secular") script, with a few additions, was adopted in South Ossetia. It was abandoned in 1954 in favor of the North Ossetic Cyrillic script ([TABLE 1](#)).



Table 1
OSSETIC WRITING SYSTEMS

1.	2.	3.	4.	1.	2.	3.	4.
А а	A a	Ⴀ	A a	Пъ пъ	Ph ph	Ⴁ	P' p'
Æ æ	Æ æ	Ⴂ	Ä ä	Р р	R r	Ⴃ	R r
Б б	B b	Ⴃ	B b	С с	S s	Ⴄ	S s
В в	V v	Ⴄ	V v	Т т	T t	Ⴅ	T t
Г г	G g	Ⴅ	G g	Тъ тъ	Th th	Ⴆ	T' t'
Гъ гъ	H h	Ⴆ	Ĝ ĝ	У у	U u	Ⴇ	U u
Д д	D d	Ⴇ	D d	Ф ф	F f	Ⴈ	F f
Дж дж	Dž dž	(Ⴈ)	Dž dž	Х х	H h	Ⴉ	X x
Дз дз	Dz dz	Ⴉ	Dz dz	Хъ хъ	Q q	Ⴊ	Q q
Е е	E e	Ⴊ	E e	Ц ц	C c	Ⴋ	C c
(Ё ё)				Цъ цъ	Ch ch	Ⴌ	C' c'
(Ж ж)		Ⴋ	Ž ž	Ч ч	Č č	Ⴍ	Č č
З з	Z z	Ⴌ	Z z	Чъ чъ	Čh čh	Ⴎ	Č' č'
И и	I i	Ⴍ	I i	(Ш ш)			(Š š)
Й й	J j	Ⴎ		(Щ щ)			
К к	K k	Ⴏ	K k	(Ъ)			
Къ къ	Kh kh	Ⴐ	K' k'	Ы ы	Y y	Ⴑ	
Л л	L l	Ⴑ	L l	(Ь)			
М м	M m	Ⴒ	M m	(Э э)			
Н н	N n	Ⴓ	N n	(Ю ю)			
О о	O o	Ⴔ	O o	(Я я)			
П п	P p	Ⴕ	P p				

TABLE 1. Ossetic Writing Tables: 1. The modern Ossetic alphabet based on the cyrillic alphabet of Russian (letters which occur only in Russian loanwords are in parentheses). 2 The Latin alphabet used in the 1920s and 1930s. 3. The Georgian script (mxedruli) as used in South Ossetia until 1954. 4. The transcription of Ossetic used in this entry.

Khetägkatı K'osta (1859-1906), the national poet of Ossetia, is traditionally regarded as the “father” of Ossetic literature. His collection of poems, *Iron fändır* (Ossetic lyre), was written in the Iron dialect. In the 20th century, especially after the Revolution of 1917, an abundant literature evolved, almost entirely in Iron. The Ossetes also possess a rich folklore; of special importance is the oral Nart epic cycle, known all over the North Caucasus, but no doubt rooted in ancient Iranian epic poetry and mythology.



DIALECTS

Ossetic falls into two distinct dialects which are barely mutually intelligible: Iron (*Iron ävzag*, East Oss.) and Digor (*Diguron ävzag*, West Oss.; see [DIGOR](#) and [IRON](#)). There is some variation within each dialect; the idiom of the South Ossetes is a variant of Iron. The literary and administrative language is based on Iron. In all essentials Digor represents a more archaic stage of development; the relationship of the dialects can be described in the terms of a focal versus a marginal dialect. Innovations have arisen in the eastern areas around Vladikavkaz (Oss. *Dzävdžiqäü*), from there radiating to the west and south. Both dialects go back to a fairly homogeneous Alanic proto-dialect. One can only make a guess about previous dialectal differences. The language of the medieval documents, as far as their evidence goes, is closer to Digor than Iron, but this is no doubt due to the more archaic character of that dialect. In vocabulary the dialects differ to a considerable extent, but in the main the basic core vocabulary is the same. In their phonological and grammatical structure they are closely related, although the morphological material used in the inflections differs in some instances. These differences may reflect prehistoric dialectal divergences. The inflection of the verb “to be” (*uīn/un*), some personal endings of the verbs, and the demonstrative pronouns can be mentioned as examples. Case inflection has developed more slowly in Digor than in Iron. In the creation of a symmetric bi-dimensional system of orientational preverbs, Digor is less consistent than Iron. Unlike Iron, Digor retains vestiges of tmesis of the preverb and the verb. The exclusive use of the present optative to express repeated action in the past is another archaic feature of Digor, whereas in Iron the past optative is also used with this meaning. In a variant of Digor, the old decimal system of counting was in use until recently, while Ossetic has in general adopted the Caucasian vigesimal counting.

PHONOLOGY

1. The Iron dialect has the following vowel phonemes: *i, ĭ, e, ä, a, o, u*, a (or a), o, u. The vowels *i, e, a, o, u* are long (strong Russ. *sil'ye*), *ĭ ä* short (weak, Russ. *slabye*); *ĭ* is a high, central vowel, but with a considerable latitude according to the surroundings, having a back variant (IPA in the neighborhood of the velars).

The Digor vowel phonemes are as follows: *ī* (the long *i*), *i, e, ä, a, o, u*. In writing *ī* and *i* are not kept distinct (both written *i*).



Iron *i* corresponds to Digor *e*, and *u* corresponds to Digor *o* (e.g., *iu/ieu* “one,” *urs/uors* “white”). The Digor short vowels *i* and *u* have in Iron merged in *ɪ*. In Digor *e* is found as a sandhi vowel: *ä* + *ä* and *ä* + *i*, in which case it corresponds to Iron *e*. In indigenous Iron words, *e* is normal only as the result of vowel contraction: *me'mbal* (< *mä* + *ämbal*) “my comrade,” *festin* (Digor: *festun*) “arise” < *fä* + *istun*. The semivowels *j* and *w* are here treated as allophones of *i* and *u* respectively.

Diphthongs are: *ai*, *au*, *äi*, *iä*, *iu*, *ua* *uä*, *ui* (Iron only), *ui*.

The historical background of the vowels will be sketched in broad outlines in the following.

OIr. **ai*, **au* result in Digor *e*, *o* and Iron *i*, *u* respectively. Digor initial *e* is preceded by a prethetic *i* [*j*] [*y*?], initial *o* by *u* [*w*]: *iu/ieu* (< **aiwa-*) “one,” *urs/uors* (< **aurša-*) “white”

2. In principle Old Iranian final **ā*, short and long *i* and *u* have been lost. Initial and medial **ā* (*hā*) becomes *ä* in both dialects, unless there follow two consonants, when it becomes *a*: *däs* (< **dasa-*) “ten,” but *avd* (< **hafta*) “seven.” If there is a morpheme boundary between the two consonants, **ā* (*hā*) becomes *ä*: *käs-tär* (< **kasu-tara-*) “junior”; **ā* (*hā*) also becomes *ä* if it is followed by another syllable: *fäzdäg* (< **pazdaka-*) “smoke.” In words that had become monosyllabic in old (i.e., pre-dialectal) Ossetic, initial and medial **ā* (*hā*) become *o* if followed by a consonant cluster starting with *n*: *fondz* (< **panča-*) “five,” but *fändzäm* (< **pančama-*) “fifth.”

Old Iranian non-final *a* frequently becomes Digor *u*, Iron *ɪ*: Digor *mud*, Iron *mɪd* (< **madu-*) “honey,” Digor *cuppar*, Iron *çippar* (< **čaθwāra-*) “four” in the neighborhood of *u* (**w*): *u*-umlaut. OIr. *ā* > Digor *ī*, Iron *i* in the neighborhood of *i* (**y*): *innä* (beside *annä*) (< **anya-*) “another,” Digor *suğžärinä*, Iron *sığžärin* (gold) (< **suxta-* “burnt” + *zaranyā-* “gold”). OIr. *a* > Digor *ɪ*, Iron *ɪ* in the neighborhood of *n*: Digor *fınd-däs*, Iron *fınd-däs* (< **panča-dasa-*) “fifteen.” (following the author’s article in *Compendium*, p. 460)

Old Iranian initial and medial **ā* > *a*: Digor and Iron *max* (< **a(h)māxam-*) “we, us,” *art* (< **āθr-*) “fire,” except when a nasal follows, in which case **ā* > *on*, *om*: Digor and Iron *nom* (< **nāman-*) “name,” *don* (< **dānu-*) “water.” This narrowing of OIr. **ām/n*, which is common to both dialects, is evidently recent, dating from late medieval times (cf. *dan* “water,” *ban* “day” in the Yassic list of



words). OIr. **ā* seems to be shortened before *i* (**y*) in a number of words: Digor *mäiä*, Iron *mäi* (< **mā(h)yā*-) “moon, month,” but Digor *naiun*, Iron *naiin* “to bathe”; cf. Old Ind. *snāyate*, but Av. *snaiia*-. However, **āw* > *au*; cf. the equative suffix *-au* (< **-āwa*-).

3. Before certain suffixes and in compounds, *a* is shortened to *ä*. Thus before the plural ending *-t(ä)*: *marğ* “bird,” pl. *märğ-tä*, *don* “water, river,” pl. Digor *dänttä*, Iron *dättä*, *ävd-säron* (< *avd* “seven” + *sär* “head” + the adjectival suffix *-on*) “seven-headed.” Also occasionally before case endings: Iron *färs-ıl* “on the side,” adessive of *fars* “side.” This applies to both dialects. As this vowel shift cannot be explained within the framework of modern Ossetic phonology, it is tempting to assume that it was caused by a dynamic stress on the following syllable at some earlier phase in the development of the language. The syncope of medial vowels is also indicative of a previous prosodic system of free dynamic accent affecting the quantity of the vowel in a preceding syllable, which has been abandoned in the modern language, for instance *avg/avgä* (< **āpakā*-) “glass,” *čizg/kizgä* “girl” (< **kizakā*, Turk. *qız*) “girl,” the gerund in *-äg*, if from an oxytone instrumental of a verbal noun in *-aka*:- **-akā*.

4. While Old Iranian **a* and *ā* have in principle been kept as distinct phonemes *ä*, *a*, Old Iranian short and long *i* and *u* have merged in short *i* and *u* respectively—a stage that has been retained in Digor. In Iron medial *i* and *u* have further merged in *ı*: Digor *cirğ*, Iron *cırğ* (< **tigra*-) “sharp,” Digor *furt*, Iron *firt* (< **puθra*-) “son.” Initial Digor *u*- > Iron *uı* (diphthong): Digor *urdug*, Iron *uırdıg* “upright” (cf. OInd. *ūrdhva*-, Av. *ərədwa*-, *AirWb.*, col. 350). In Iron initial *ı* is lost: Digor *i bālas*, Iron *bālas* “the tree” (*i* is the definite article, see below).

The Old Iranian diphthong **ai* results in Digor *e* and Iron *i*, and OIr. **au* in Digor *o* and Iron *u*: *iu/ieu* (< **aiwa*-) “one,” *urs/uors* (< **aurća*-) “white” (cf. Av. *aurušā*-, *AirWb.*, col. 190); Old Iranian initial and medial **r* becomes *är* if there follows another syllable: Iron and Digor *ärzät* (< **rzaqa*-) “ore,” (cf. Av. *ərəzata*-, *AirWb.*, col. 352); if no syllable follows, **r* > *ar*: *mard* (< **mṛta*) “dead.” Final **r* > *-är*: Digor *nauär*, Iron *nuar* (with contraction) < **snāwr*- “vein, sinew.”

5. The relative chronology of the sound changes sketched above needs elucidation, as does the influence of a prehistoric accentuation on the vowel quantity and quality.



6. The consonant phonemes of Iron can be set forth as follows:

Stops: voiced: b d dz dʒ, g gu

voiceless, aspirated: p t c č k ku q qu

voiceless, glottalized: p' t' c' č' k' k'u

Spirants: voiced: v z ǧ ǧu (h often before initial vowels)

voiceless: f s x xu

Nasals: m

Liquids: l r

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voiceless, aspirated: p t c k ku q qu

voiceless, glottalized: p' t' c' k' k'u

Spirants: voiced: v z ǧ ǧu

voiceless: f s x xu

Nasals: m n

Liquids: l r

7. The phonological status of the labiovelars is questionable. They have here (hesitantly) been interpreted as consonant velars (*k*, *x*, etc.), followed by u [w], although a monophonemic interpretation may be preferable (*k^w*, *x^w*, etc.).

OIr. **xwai* becomes Digor *xe*, Iron *xi*: *xid/xed* (<**xwaida*-) “sweat.” In Digor ancient **xw* is retained before *a*, *ä*, while in Iron the labialization is (virtually) lost: Digor *xuärün*, Iron *xärin* “to eat,” but > -o- before a consonant cluster: past participle Digor *xuard*, Iron *xord*, Digor *xuarz*, Iron *xorz* “good.”

The uvular stops *q* and *qu* have penetrated both dialects from neighboring languages. Old Iranian initial **g-* has become *ǧ-* in common Ossetic, which is



retained in Digor; in Iron it has become *q*:- Digor *ğarm*, Iron *qarm* (< **garma*-) “hot.” This development is recent (late 19th-early 20th century) in South Ossetic.

The phonological interpretation of the geminate stops raises problems; some scholars treat them as a fourth series of non-aspirated, non-glottalic, voiceless stops, variously written *bb*, *pp*, *pb*, *bp*, etc., but it seems most economical to interpret them as clusters on a par with other geminates.

8. OIr. **s* and **š*, and **z* and **ž*, have merged into one phoneme: *s* and *z* respectively; but the phonetic realization varies considerably in the local idioms. In South Ossetic a dental-alveolar pronunciation prevails, while in North Iron, and at least in Digor variants, a more palatal pronunciation is usual.

The Old Iranian affricates are represented as *c* and *dz*. In addition, *c* derives from **ti*/y, **θi*/y and **č*y (IE. **k*^wy): Iron *-inc*, Digor *-uncä*, (< **-anti*) 3rd plural ending (e.g., *cärinc/cäruncä* “they live”); Iron, Digor *äcäg* (< **haθyaka*-) “true”; *cäuiṇ/cäuun* (< IE. **k*^wyew-) “to go, come” (cf. Av. *š(ii)auu*-; *AirWb.*, col. 1714). Digor has only one affricate and one sibilant series, thus retaining the structure of common Old Ossetic. In Iron a secondary affricate series has arisen through the palatalization and later affricatization of the velar stops before front vowels: *č*, *dž* (*č*”), originally were allophones of the velar stops *k*, *k*’, *g*. This development is recent (18th century). Through paradigmatic pressure, the older pronunciation is retained as a variant: *lägi* beside *lädži*, gen. sg. of *läg* “man.” There is considerable local variation in the phonetic realization of both the sibilants and the affricates (dental-alveolar, alveolo-palatal pronunciation). In South Ossetic the old affricates were realized as *č* and *dž* until the 19th century (probably an archaism). In the modern pronunciation they have become palatal sibilants: *šärin* = *cärin* “to live,” except after *n* and when geminated, in which case the palatal affricate is retained: *žurinč* “they talk.” The secondary affricates are realized as *c*, *dz* (*c*”). In North Iron a palatal pronunciation of the sibilants predominates: *žonin* “I know” = *zonin*; the old affricates are here realized as dental sibilants. Thus the main variants of Iron tend towards a system of two sibilant and one affricate series, the same system as in Digor and the Alan proto-dialect.

9. OIr. **t*, *k*, *č* are retained as voiceless, aspirated stops/affricates. In intervocalic position and after voiced consonants, sonorization is the rule: Iron, Digor *zäronđ* (< **zarānt*-) “old,” *sudzṇ/sodzun* (< **sauəa*-) “to burn”



(trans., intr.).

Old Iranian initial **p* becomes *f*- (attested in Sarmatian documents from late antiquity): Iron, Digor *fad* (< **pāda*-) “foot.” In intervocalic position *p* > *b* > *v*: *äxsäv/äxsävä* (< **xšapan*-) “night,” but *b* is retained after *m*: *ämbid/ämbud* (< **ham-pūta*-) “rotten,” and also in words where a preceding vowel has been lost: Digor *-bäl*, the adessive suffix (Iron *-i*) (< **upári*-) “into”; Iron, Digor preverb *ba-* (< **upá*-) in *badin/badun* (< **upa-had*-) “to sit.” A secondary *p* (*pp*) has developed through the assimilation of a labial consonant (semi-vowel) and a preceding stop or spirant: *čippar/cuppar* (< **čaθwāra*-) “four.” Owing to lexical borrowing, *p* (*p'*) has become a common phoneme in the modern language.

Old Iranian initial **b*- is represented by *b*:- Iron, Digor *bon* (< **bānu*-) “day.” In intervocalic position and after voiced consonants (except *m*) **b* > *v*: *davın/davun* (< **dāb*-) “to steal,” *ävzär* “bad” (cf. Av. *zbar*- “to walk crookedly”; *AirWb.*, col. 1699), but *ämbarın* (< **ham-bār*-) “to understand.”

OIr. **d* is represented by *d*: *darğ* (< **darga*-) “long,” and *-g* by *ğ* except after *n*, when it remains as *g*: *marğ* (< **mṛga*-) “bird,” *cong* (< **čanga*-) “arm.” For the development of initial *g*-, see above.

OIr. **θ* > *t*: Iron, Digor *ärtä* (< **θrayah*-) “three,” *art* (< **āθr*-) “fire,” but *ard* (< **ṛta*- [**arta*-?]) “oath.”

OIr. **ri/y* results in *l*: *näl* (< **narya*-) “male.” In a few words *l* seems to represent IE. **l*: *läsäg* “salmon” (uncertain documentation, but hardly a Russian loanword *losos*; cf. Tokh.B. *laks*, Ger. *Lachs*, etc. — a Eurasian migratory word?).

10. Consonant clusters, as a rule, consist of two consonants only; clusters of three consonants are found where there is a morpheme boundary within the group. Clusters normally follow the pattern: spirant, nasal, liquid + stop, spirant, liquid. Clusters consisting of two stops seem to occur in loanwords only: *fätk'ui/fätk'u* “apple”; note, however, what was said above about geminate stops. As in other East Iranian languages, ancient **xt* and **ft* have been sonorized: *avd* (< **hafta*-) “seven” *liğd/liğd*, past participle of *lidzin/ledzun* “to run away”; cf. Av. *irinaxti*- (**raēk*-, *l* < **ri*- generalized; *AirWb.*, col. 1479; for details of the historical phonology, see Bielmeier, 1977, pp. 18-45; Thordarson, 1989, pp. 459-66, with bibliographical references).



11. *Prosody*. The accent is a weak expiratory stress. Word accent is subordinate to phrase accent. The flow of speech is divided into prosodic groups, where a single syllable carries the main accent; a secondary accent may fall on other syllables in the group. As a rule, the first syllable of the group is stressed if the vowel is long; if it is short, the second syllable is stressed. In Iron, where an initial *i* is lost, the first syllable of the group is stressed, although the vowel is short. This happens when the definite article, still preserved in Digor, has been elided. Thus we get in Iron minimal pairs: *sīrx xādzar* “a red house,” the second syllable stressed, = Digor *surx xādzarä*, but Iron *sīrx xādzar* “a red house,” the first syllable stressed = Digor *i sūr xādzarä*. These prosodic features can hardly be old, and are probably to be ascribed to the influence of some Caucasian (East, South?) languages. Possible traces of a previous prosodic type, with a distinctive (free?) accent at the word level have been treated above (Phonology, 3).

MORPHOLOGY

1. *Noun phrase*. We distinguish between three basic parts of speech: nouns, verbs, and indeclinables.

There is no clear-cut distinction between substantives, adjectives, and adverbs. Pronouns and cardinal numerals can be singled out as separate subclasses on the basis of certain morphological and syntactic peculiarities. Lexical items that are classified as adverbs in other languages possess, to some extent, the inflectional properties of nouns: *nīr* “now,” *nīr-mä* (all.) “until now,” *nīr-i* (gen) *cardäi mälät xūždär u* “death is better than the present life.”

Some nominal bases tend to be used primarily or exclusively in one particular capacity; this has to be indicated in the lexicon. Thus, for instance, the suffix *-on* (<-**āna*-) is frequent in the formation of adjectives corresponding to Russ. *-sk*: *proletaron* = Russ. *proletarskii*.

As a rule, noun phrases are continuous. In most complex noun phrase types, the modifier precedes the noun it modifies. The suffixes that mark the syntactic function of the noun phrase occur only once, in most cases at the end of the phrase. A derivative affix can be added to a complex noun phrase (e.g., the possessive *-on*: *čippar-k'ax-on* “having four feet”). Concord in case and number between the members of the noun phrase is not morphologically marked. The modifier is as a rule put in the nominative (absolute case) or genitive. In the following clause: *mäguir zäron d xäxxon lädžik'ux-äi amad*



mäsɨg u “this is a tower built with hands of a poor old man from the mountains” (lit.: poor old mountaineer man’s [gen.] with-hands [abl.] built tower is).

2. *Modifiers*. Cases other than the nominative (though hardly the Iron comitative) may occur as modifiers—for instance, the material or partitive ablative; also the case-like prefixes *äd-* “with,” *änä-* “without.” In these instances the position of the modifier can be freer than that of the nominative or genitive: *birätɨ kadžɨn lägt-äi ämä iäxi ärvadält-äi amardta* “he killed many of the worthy men and of his own brothers” (lit.: many [gen. pl.] worthy of-men [abl. pl.] and his [gen. sg.] and of-brothers [abl. pl.] he-killed).

In association with the genitive of enclitic pronoun, the dative can be used as a modifier, expressing possession: *män-än mä xo* “my sister,” *adäm-än sä ku’ist* “the work of the people.” The word order can also here be comparatively free. Similar constructions are found in the neighboring Northwest Caucasian languages: Kabardian *ħa-m yə-pa-r* “the dog its nose” (dog-obl. 3rd poss. nose-absol.), that is, “the dog’s nose.”

3. *Word order*. The usual order of the noun phrase (i.e., modifier and head) occurs inverted as a stylistic device; thus traditional surnames follow the proper name, as do epithets: *Beduxa räsugd* “Beduxa the beautiful.” Compare also inverted bahuvrīhis: *zärdä-ruxs* “joyous” (“whose heart is bright”) beside *ruxs-zärdä*. This type of phrase is especially found in traditional epic style, and is evidently indicative of a previously more flexible word order.

4. *Inversion*. The head can be put in the genitive followed by the modifier: *mä fɨdi zäronɔ* “my old father.” This type of phrase has been explained as originating from the ancient relative (*ežāfa*) noun phrase structure (head + **ya-* + modifier), the relative **ya-* having been identified with the genitive ending by a syntactic re-interpretation (Bailey, 1946, pp. 205-6). In Digor a preclitic *i-* may precede the noun phrase as a marker of definiteness: *i duuä mugkag-än* “for the two families (clans).” In Iron, where unstressed initial *i* is lost, definiteness is marked by the shift of accent (cf. Phonology, 11, above).

The article derives from the old relative pronoun **ya-* (**ya(h)* > *i*). Ossetic has thus two types of noun phrases, where OIr. **ya-* is found: as a definite article and as a link connecting a head with a following modifier, an archaic feature that Ossetic shares with [Avestan](#) and [Chorasmian](#).



5. *Numerals in the phrase.* Cardinal numbers higher than “one” and some quantifying nouns take the genitive singular of the head: *däs bāxī* “ten horses.” If the noun phrase is used in an oblique case, the case marker is added to the last member in the singular: *k’ord läppu-imä* “with a group of boys” (com.). This construction probably reflects an old nominative plural in **-ah* that has been identified with the homonymous genitive *-i* (< **ah*).

6. *Comparison.* An intensifying or comparative suffix *-där* (< **-tara-*) can be added to a noun; the standard of comparison is put in the ablative: *mä xo lägdär u m’efsīmār-äi* “my sister is more manly than my brother.” A superlative can be expressed lexically, for instance, *äppä-t-äi stīrdär* “the greatest of all” (lit. greater than all).

7. *Gender.* There is no grammatical expression of gender, but natural sex can be expressed lexically: *näl* “male,” *sil/silä* “female” (cf. Av. *nar-* “man,” *strī-* “woman;” *AirWb.*, cols. 1047, 1609). The old declensional classes have also disappeared. Digor possesses two declensions, characterized by (1) *-ä* and (2) zero in the nominative singular. In Iron there is only one declension. The membership of either declension is without a semantic function: Digor *fidä* “father,” *madä* “mother” = Iron *fīd*, *mad*. The final *-ä* of the first declension is lost before the endings of oblique cases, except the allative and the adessive, and before the pluralizer *-t-*. The two declensions of Digor are presumably the result of a transfer of most (all?) nouns to the two thematic classes in **-a(h)*, and **-ā*. A vestige of this division is apparently preserved in Digor, while in Iron the two declensions have been conflated.

8. *Plurality.* The plural of nouns is expressed by the suffix *-t-*, nom. *-tā*. In Iron the *-ä* is lost before the oblique case endings, while in Digor the case inflection is treated according to the same rules as the *-ä* of the *ä*-declension. The pluralizer derives from an Indo-European suffix **tā-*, denoting collectivity, plurality, approximation. The same suffix is used as a pluralizer in Sogdian and modern Yaghnobi (Sims-Williams, p. 183; Bielmeier, 1989, p. 483). It is also attested in the Greek rendering of Scythian and Sarmatian ethnic names as early as the 5th century BCE (Massagétai, etc.; see Herodotus 1.201, 1.204). The original collective or amplifying meaning is still reflected in the use of *-tā*, *-tī/ti* with adverbs: *kuīd-tā* “how, in which manners,” *amī-tī*, *uīmī-tī* “here, there, in these, those parts,” *dälä-tī* “below.” It is also noteworthy that number agreement between a plural noun phrase as the subject and the verb is not mandatory. Therefore, we regard the pluralizer as a derivational rather than an inflectional morpheme, which is in agreement with its origin.



9. *Case system.* Modern grammarians assume nine morphological cases in Iron, namely the nominative (nom.), genitive (gen.), dative (dat.), inessive (iness.), allative (all.), ablative-instrumental (abl.), adessive (add.), equative (equ.), and comitative (com.). In Digor the comitative is lacking. In addition to these primary cases, Ossetic has a number of postpositions, the majority of which are nouns used metaphorically to express local and temporal meanings (secondary cases). Most postpositions are added to the genitive. There are also a few prepositions. Prepositions and postpositions can take markers of number and case: *bälas-ı sär-äi* “from the top of the tree” (*sär* “head”). Prepositions with case-like functions are, e.g., *äd-* “with” (< **hada-*), *änä-* (< **ana*), *däl-* “below” (< **adari-*), *uäl* “above” (< **awari-?* or **upari-?*), *fäs* “behind” (< **pasā*, cf. Av. *pasča-*; *AirWb.*, col. 882): *fäs-qus-t-äi* (abl.) “(from) behind the ears,” *änä-sımax-ba-fars-gä* (gerund) “without asking you,” (lit.: without-you-asking).

The nominative (indefinite case, absolute) is as a rule derived from the Old Iranian nominative; nouns like *zäronđ* (< **zarānt-*) “old,” *bärzond* (< **brzānt-*) “high,” and *art* (< **āθr-*) “fire” are most likely based on a thematization of an old oblique case form. Note Digor *xuärä* (< **xwahar-*, obl.-) “sister,” but Iron *xo* (< **xwahā*, nom.). The nominative functions as the subject of both transitive and intransitive verbs as a modifier in complex noun phrases. In competition with the ablative, it is used as a predicative complement. It can express local and temporal meanings; in isolation it can have a naming and a vocative function. In the latter function a few nouns may add the particle *-ai* (e.g., *us-ai* “oh woman”).

The genitive functions as a nominal modifier: *mä fıđı xädzar* “my father’s house,” *Dzugatı Iosif* “Joseph of the Dzugatä clan.” If the direct object and the subject of a transitive verb both refer to animate things, the object can be put in the genitive, especially if it refers to a definite thing; personal pronouns and proper names always stand in the genitive when they are used as direct objects. With a few affective verbs the genitive marks the experiencer; the verb appears in the 3rd singular: *fändı mä, uırnı mä* “I want, I believe.” The ending *-ı/i* seems to go back to the old athematic genitive suffix **-ah* (< **-as*; **-ahya* would probably have become **-äi*).

The dative signifies the abstract notion towards somebody or something, the purpose or result of a process. With three-place verbs it marks the indirect object: *acı cıniğ dın dädton* “I shall give you this book;” *nä bäzzın cızg-än* “I am no good as a girl” (*bäzzın* “I am fit for”); *ämä mın us-än cäuı* “and she will



become my wife, is coming to me as a wife” (predicative use). The ending *-än* is homonymous with the suffix *-än* of a verbal noun that signifies purpose, suitability: *bad-än* “a seat” (*bad-ın* “to sit,” *ba-cäu-än* “entrance,” *ba-cäu-ın* “go into”). Historically, the dative ending and the verbal noun in *-än* are probably identical, going back to Old Iranian nouns in **-ana-*.

Ossetic possesses three local cases: inessive, allative, and adessive, all indicating both “where” and “whither,” contrasting with the ablative in the meaning “from where.” The inessive stands as the unmarked locative case, expressing in general a point in time or place: *uıçı xädzar-ı* “in that house,” *açı rästädz-ı* “at this time.” The ending *-ı/-i* goes no doubt back to the OIr. loc. **-yā*.

The allative (*locativus exterior*) signifies direction towards, and rest at, or by, a place: *xädzar-mä açıdı* “he went home, to the house.” With three-place verbs it is commutable with the dative: *ämä sın zağta cuanon-t-äm* “and he said to them the hunters.” In Iron the allative suffix is *-mä* in the singular, *-m* in the plural, Digor *-mä* in both singular and plural.

The adessive expresses the notion on, along the surface of, according to: *däs saxat-ıl* “at ten o’clock,” *arast is sä fäd-ıl* “he set out after them (on their footsteps).” The ending is Iron *-ı* and Digor *-bäl*. In Iron a final velar is not affricatized before this case ending (but gen. *lädz-ı*, “the man’s,” com. *lädz-imä* “with the man”); at the time when the palatalization/affricatization took place, the Iron ending was still pronounced as *-uı* (diphthong), still recorded in the texts of Ialğuzidze (see Akhvlediani, 1960).

Unlike the inessive, which derives, as already mentioned, from the Old Iranian locative, the allative and adessive are relatively late additions to the case system. Their endings go back to old postpositions that were originally added to the nominative. This is borne out by the Digor *ä*-declension, where *-mä*, *-bäl* is added to the nominative, not to the stem, as occurs with the other case endings. Adessive *-ıl/bäl* goes no doubt back to **upári-*. The origin of allative *-mä* is not quite clear, but a derivation from **hama-* (instr. **hamā?*) is a plausible suggestion.

As a local case, the ablative expresses the starting point of an action in place and time: *kalak-äi xädzar-mä är-çıdı* “he came home from the town.” Its function as the standard of comparison also expresses the ablative notion, as well as its partitive use: *avd ärvad-äi kästär* “the youngest of the seven brothers.” In its instrumental meaning, it expresses the circumstances



accompanying the verbal process or action. Here belongs its use as a predicative complement: *am badınc ast-äi* “they sit here eight (in number).” This undoubtedly reflects a similar use of the Old Iranian instrumental. The ending is *-äi* in both dialects, in Iron *-iä* after vowels. It seems to go back to either the genitive-ablative of the *ā*-stems (**āyāh-*) or an instrumental in **-ayā* or a conflation of both.

The equative expresses how an action proceeds: *fatau ataxti* “he flew like an arrow,” Iron-*au xorz nä dzurın* “I do not speak Ossetic well.” The ending *-au* goes back to the nominative singular masculine of an adjective in **-āwan-*, which also functions as an adverb in Sogdian and Khototanesse.

The Iron comitative denotes the second participant in the action: Iron *us-imä cārın* “I live with an Ossetic woman.” The ending goes back to **-iu-mä*, the allative of *iu* “one.” Its recent character is evident, as it is absent in Digor, where the comitative meaning is expressed by the postposition *xäccä* (cf. Av. *hamčā-* “united”[?]; *Air.Wb.*, col. 1778): *mä furtt-i xäccä* “with my sons,” or by the preposition *äd-* (< **hada-*): *äd-don xädzarä-mä ra-cudi* “she went home with (the) water.” The formation of the Iron comitative is typologically reminiscent of the Georgian expression *mas-tan ert-ad* “with him” (dat. + the adess. *-tan* + adverbial case of *erti* “one”).

We can thus reconstruct a previous stage of development with four morphological cases, namely nominative, genitive, locative, and ablative-instrumental. With the exception of the comitative, the system is identical in both dialects and must therefore be presumed for the proto-dialect. To this system secondary cases have been added at various stages. In all instances the morphological material used is of Iron origin.

When two or more noun phrases stand paratactically, the syntactic marker appears after the last one: *mä mad ämä mä fıd-ı xädzar* “the house of my mother and father.”

10. Numerals. Vigesimal counting (i.e., base 20) prevails in both dialects: *ıssädz/ınsäi* “twenty,” *fondz-ıssädz-ı* “one hundred,” *cıppar ämä ärt-ıssädz-ı* “sixty-four” (lit. 4 + 3 x 20). The old decimal counting was in use in local Digor idioms until recently, and has in modern times been introduced into the official language. The Caucasian background of the vigesimal counting is probable, although similar systems are found in other East Iranian languages (e.g., Pamir). Ordinal numerals are formed by the ending *-äm* (Iron) and -



äimag (Digor): *avdäm/avd-äimag* “seventh,” or by *-ag:fıccag/fıccag* “first” (*fındz/fındzä* “nose”). This numeral has evidently replaced an older **(f)ratama-*, which seems to be attested in Hellenized Scythian-Sarmatian proper names (e.g., Radamophourtos “the first son”). The modern word is typologically reminiscent of Georgian *p’irveli* “first” (*p’iri* “mouth”); parallels are also found in other Caucasian languages.

11. *Pronouns.* The personal pronouns of the first and second person singular are based on the opposition between the nominative and the genitive: nom. *äz* (Iron, Digor), *dı/du* “I,” “you” (sg.), gen. *män, дәu* (Iron, Digor). The endings of the other cases are added to the genitive: dat. *män-än, дәu-än*; abl. *män-äi, дәu-äi*. The inflection of the plural is based on the old genitive that serves both as a nominative and genitive: *max* (< **a(h)māxam*), *şımax/sumax* (< **yuşmāxam-* or **şmāxam-*). When the pronoun is used as the direct object, the genitive ending of the nominal declension is added: *max-ı* etc. As a third person pronoun, the demonstrative pronoun *uıı/ie* (*ieiä*) “that” is used. Three series of enclitic personal pronouns refer to the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person singular and plural: gen. sg. *mä, дә, äi, iä/äi, ä*, pl. *nä, uä, sä* (Iron, Digor). They are placed after the first prosodic unit of the clause, except the genitive when it is used as a possessive pronoun. Both the enclitic pronoun and enclitic adverb can anticipate a following noun phrase: *nä näm* (us, encl.) *cäuişmaxmä* (us) “he is not coming to us.”

Emphatic-reflexive pronouns are derived from the genitive of the enclitic pronoun by adding *-xädäg/xuädäg* (< **hwataka-*), nom., *-xi(c)/xe(c)* (< **xwai, *xwähya*, gen.), the obl. cases: *mä-xädäg*, nom., *mä-xic*, gen., *mä-xic-äi*, abl. “I myself,” etc.

The demonstrative pronouns distinguish between two degrees of proximity. In both dialects *a-* “this” refers to a near object; in Iron *u-* (< **awa-* or **hau-*, or a conflation of both?) “that” is used in reference to a distant object, and in Digor nom. *ie*, obl. cases *uo-* (< **ayam-*, gen. **awähya?*) is used for the same purpose. When used as modifiers, the demonstrative pronouns are followed by the particle *ci/ci*: *ac-ı läg* “this man.” In fixed phrases the particle is lacking: *a-bon* “today.” It is worth noting that in the neighboring languages a system of three-term demonstrative pronoun is the rule. As triple deixis is common in East Iranian languages, it is reasonable to assume that the different lexical elements used by the dialects to express the remote deixis reflect an older three-term system.



The interrogative-relative pronoun distinguishes between animates and inanimate objects: *čī/ka* “who,” *ci/ci* “what” (< *čid-). Digor *ka* may go back to **kā* (**ā* > *a*, instead of *ä* in a monosyllable; cf. *ma* < **mā*- “not”); Iron *či* seems to be identical with Digor gen. *ke* (< **kai* < **kahya*?), in which case Iron gen. *kāi* is an innovation. The inflection is based on the stem *kā-/cā-*. It is remarkable that the order of the case and plural endings is inverted, the case ending preceding the pluralizer: Digor dat. pl. *kām-än-ti*, *cām-än-ti*. In the Iron comitative, the order is optional: *kā-imä-ti* = *kā-t-imä* “with whom? (pl.).” In the dat., iness. abl. -*m-* (< **hm-* < **sm-*) is inserted before the case ending (cf. Av. loc. *kahmi*, abl. *kahmat*). This -*m-* is partly found in the demonstrative pronoun in the same cases, in Iron only in the sg. *am/am-i* “here,” *uim/uomi* “there,” but Iron *adon-i*, Digor *anä-mi* “in these places.” The interrogative-relative pronoun can be made indefinite by the addition of suffixes or prefixes: *či-dār* “somebody,” *či-dār-ittār* “whoever,” *is-či/ies-ke* “anybody.” A number of adverbs are derived from the interrogative-relative pronoun (*kuid/ kud* “how,” etc.).

12. *Verbs*. The structure of the verbal inflection is in principle the same in both dialects, but the morphological material used, and its historical background, partly differs.

The verb possesses morphological markers of person and number, tense, mood, and transitivity versus intransitivity. Aspect is mainly expressed by preverbs, but also in part by the lexical meaning of the verb. The inflection is based on two stems: the present and the past. From the present stem are formed the present indicative (ind.), subjunctive (subj.), optative (opt.), imperative (imper.), future (fut.), besides verbal nouns, pres. participle (part.) -*äg* (< **aka-*), future participle -*inäg/uinäg* (< ?), and the infinitive -*in/un* (< **una-*). The verbal nouns can be inflected for number and case but share properties of the finite verb, for instance, transitivity. A gerund in -*gä* (> **akā*, OIr. instr.?) is formed from the present stem, which marks the circumstances concomitant with the action expressed by the finite verb. A verbal noun in -*än* (homonymous with the dative ending; see above, Morphology, 9) denotes fitness, destination: *zīn zon-än uidi* “it was hard to understand.” A verbal noun in -*ag/agä* (< **ākā-*) denotes a permanent quality: *nuaz-ag* “drunkard,” but part. *nuaz-äg* “drinking” (*nuazin* “to drink”).

From the past stem in -*t* (< **ta-*) are formed the past indicative, the optative, and the past participle; as a rule the participle is identical with the past stem. In the past tense transitivity is expressed morphologically, while in the present there is no morphological distinction between transitive and intransitive



verbs. A pair of verbs, one transitive and the other intransitive, can be derived from the same root, in which case the intransitive verb is characterized by a short vowel and the transitive verb by a long vowel: *quışin/iğusun* (< *wi-guš-) “to be rumored, audible,” but *qusin/iğosun* (< *wi-gauš-) “to hear.” The latter verbs reflect Old Iranian causative in *-aya-.

Intransitive verbs can be formed by the suffix -s- (< *-sa- < IE. *-sk'e/o-). As a rule the stem vowel is short: *tāf-s-in* “to become warm,” *tav-in* “to make warm.” Intransitivity (passive) can be expressed by the past participle and the verb *cāuın* “to go” (e.g., *arazın* “to make,” *aräst cāuı* “to be made”). The agent is either absent or expressed lexically: *xādzar amad cāuı kusdžiti kuxäi* “the house was built by (the hands of) the workers.” An impersonal form can be formed by the past participle, in part by adding a final -ä: *nä räğau nın fä-tard-ä u* “our herd (horses) are being driven away.”

Causative verbs are formed by the verb *känın/känun* “to do” and the infinitive of the main verb. The verb gets a perfective aspect by the addition of a preverb to the infinitive. The agent of the main verb appears as the object of the verb phrase: *avd äfsimäri är-badın kodtoi Äxsärtädži* “the seven brothers made Äxsärtäg sit down.” The auxiliary and the main verb appear as a lexical unity.

Verbal composition is a productive way of creating new verbs. A verbal compound consists of a noun and an auxiliary verb, mainly *känın* (trans.) and *uın* (intr.). Such compounds behave as lexical and syntactic units. The noun can be inflected for number and case. The preverb can be placed either before the auxiliary or the compound as a whole: *ra-arfä ın kodta* “he thanked him” or *arfä-tä ıl ba-kodta* “he thanked for that” (*arfäkänın* “to thank”).

The structure of the verbal inflection, unlike that of the noun (which has developed some original features), is highly archaic. The verb has retained the Old Iranian unipersonal inflection, showing grammatical agreement with one nominal argument only (the subject). The distinction between past and present stems and between the past intransitive and transitive inflection is inherited from early Middle Iranian. The modal system (ind., subj., opt., imper.) is archaic. The formatives of the moods are transformations of the Old Iranian suffixes, although their history is only partly clear. An Ossetic innovation is the formation of the future by means of *čānah- “to wish” and the verb “to be”: Iron -dzın-, -dzän-, Digor -dzän-, -dzin-: *cār-dzın-än/cār-dzän-än* (< *čar-čānah-ah-) “I will live.” The use of periphrases containing lexical elements denoting “wish” to express futurity is a common Iron phenomenon.



The conjugational plethora of Old Iranian has been eliminated. In the present day, all verbs are inflected in the same way except the verb “to be.” The expression of person and number is of the fusional type, much in the same way as in Old Iranian. The historical background of the personal endings raises problems. The comparatively great difference between the dialects is especially noteworthy.

The forms of the verb “to be” derive from various sources: (1) ancient *ah-* < **as-*, (2) *bū-* < **bhū-*, (3) *st-* < **stā-* “to stand,” (4) demonstrative pronoun (3rd sg.): pres. ind. Iron sg. *dän, dä, u, is*, pl. *stäm, stut, stī*, Digor sg. *dän, dä, äi, ie(s)*, pl. *an, aitä, äncä*. The *d-* of the 1st and 2nd sg. (common to both dialects) is enigmatic. The old forms *-än, -ä-* (< **ahmi-*, **ahi-*) are found in the future and the intransitive past (*cardt-än, cardt-ä* from *cārīn* “to live”). The inflection of the past—Iron *uīdtän, uīdtä, uīd(i), uīdistäm, uīdistut, uīdistī*—is based on *ud-* (< **būta-*). The same root seems also to be represented in the subj. *uon*, etc., and the opt. *uain*, etc. (or *uin*, etc.), in the imper. *u, uäd*, etc., in the pres. part. *uaväg*, fut. *-uinag*; these forms, however, need historical elucidation. In Digor the past is based on the stem *ad* (< **hāta-*, **ah-*): *adtän* “was,” etc.; but *ad-* is also found in Iron past opt. *fä-c-ad-ain* (beside *fä-uīd-ain*; *-c-* is inserted to prevent hiatus).

The intransitive past is derived from the past participle and the present stem of the verb “to be”: *çīdtän/cudtän* “I was going.” The transitive past is also based on the past participle, but otherwise its forms require explanation: sg. *kodton, kodtai, kodta* (Iron, Digor), pl. *kodtam, kodtat, kodtoi/kodtan, kodtaitä, kodtoncä*. The personal endings coincide with subjunctive endings, except in the 1st pl. *-am/an*, vs. subj. *-äm/än*; but, for both semantic and formal reasons, a derivation of the past from the subjunctive is hardly thinkable.

The present subjunctive Iron, Digor *kānon*, etc. seems to go back to the Old Iranian thematic (?) subjunctive, but the transformations that have taken place are obscure.

An optative is derived from both the present and the past. The optative is formed in the same way by both transitive and intransitive verbs. The optative forms contain an *-i-* that probably goes back to the old optative suffix **-ī-*, but otherwise the formation is obscure. An infix *-kk-* that appears in the Iron plural forms (pres. *kāni-kk-am*, past *kodta-i-kkam*) but has no counterpart in Digor is enigmatic.

The present indicative is semantically the unmarked tense and mood. The



subjunctive has a prospective meaning, with or without the notion of will. The optative denotes desirability and possibility or supposition. In conditional clauses the optative has a dissociative meaning, being used for hypothetical conditions, while the subjunctive denotes real conditions. To some extent the two moods are interchangeable, particularly in expressions of doubt. An archaism is the use in Digor of the optative present to signify recurrent action in the past; in Iron the optative past is used to express this meaning.

The Iranian derivation of the imperative second and third person (sg. *kän/känä*, Iron., Digor *känäd*, pl. *känut/kän(e)tä*, *känänt/känäntä*) is clear enough.

A final *-ä* that is added in some Digor verbal forms (e.g., pres. ind. 2nd and 3rd pl.: *kän-et-ä*, *kän-unc-ä*) has not been satisfactorily explained.

The preverbs have a double function. Primarily they mark a local-directional meaning; through metaphorical uses they may change the meaning of the simple verb. They also function as perfectivizers, giving the verb a perfective aspect, more or less losing their concrete semantic content. In their local-directional meaning, the preverbs express the orientation of the action or movement from the speaker's or observer's point of view. Thus the preverb *a-* or *ra-* marks the notion "out, away" according to the location of the speaker (observer).

In Iron the following preverbs are used, exemplified by *cäuiṇ* "to go, come": *a-çidi* "he went out" (the speaker is inside), *ra-çidi* "he came out" (the speaker in outside); *ba-çidi* "he entered," *ärba-çidi* "he came in," *är-çidi* "he came down, arrived;" *ni-ccidi* (gemination of *c-* after a short vowel) "he went down." The preverb *s-* "up" covers both dimensions: *s-çidi* "he went, came up." In Digor, *ra-* also expresses both dimensions: *ra-cud* "he went, came out." The preverb *fä-* mostly denotes perfectivity (*fequiston* "I heard"), but as a marker of motion it expresses movement away from the speaker, without informing about the direction.

The Iranian etymologies of the preverbs are clear: *a-* (< **ā-*), *ra-* (< **frā-*), *ba-* (< **upá-*), *är-* (< **awar-*), *ni/ni-* (< **ni-*), (*i*)*s/s-* (< **us-*), *fä-* (< **pa-* [rather than **pati-*]). In Digor an enclitic pronoun can be inserted between the preverb and the verb: *ra-iä-marä* "kill him!"

A particle *-cäi-* (probably from the gen. of the inanim. interrog.-rel. pron.) can



be inserted between the preverb and verb as a deperfectivizer: *ra-cäi-çidi* “he was on the way out.”

The bi-dimensional, orientational function of the preverb is no doubt a recent innovation. This appears clearly from the gaps in the dimensional system that are particularly conspicuous in Digor, indicating that it has been carried through only imperfectly. The orientational meaning of the preverb has its typological counterparts in both the Northwest and, especially, South Caucasian languages (cf. the Georg. *mo-/mi* opposition: Oss. [Iron] *ba-çidi* = Georg. *še-vida*, *ärba-çidi* = *šemo-vida* “he entered/he came in,” respectively).

SYNTAX

The order of the members in complex noun phrases, as stated above (Morphology, 1, 3-4) is primarily of the pre-modifying type. The order of the verb and its nominal arguments is flexible, but the sequence subject-object-verb may be regarded the unmarked order. Adverbials normally precede the verb.

Clause subordination is primarily carried out by relative pronouns or conjunctive adverbs in association with finite verbs. As a rule, the subordinate clause precedes the main clause. In most subordinate clauses the relatives are placed immediately before the verb, with which they constitute a prosodic unit. A demonstrative adverb or pronoun in the main clause corresponds with the relative of the subordinate clause: *mä cästäi nirmä kuḍ uḍton, aftä sä nal uḍin* “as I saw them previously with my eyes, thus I do not see them any more”—lit. “my with-eyes (abl.) until-now (all.) as I-saw, thus them no-more I-see.”

The gerund in *-gä*, is frequently used in the ablative: Iron *-gä-iä*, Digor *-gä-i* (with vowel apocope due to dissimilation) denotes an action or event concomitant with the action expressed by the finite verb of the clause. The implied agent of the gerund can be co-referent with the subject or some other noun phrase of the clause, or it may be used absolutely (*gerundium pendens*).

Examples: *kaf-gä-iä Äxsarbeg fästä-mä ra-kast* “Äxsarbeg looked back while dancing” (the agent of the ger. is co-referent with the subj. of the finite verb); *c’iu, am dälä-mä čizg ämä läppu lidz-gä nä fedtai?* “bird, did not you see a girl and a boy running here downwards?” (lit. bird here downwards [all.] girl and boy [nom.] running [ger.] not you-saw? [here the agent is co-referent with the



obj.]); *uälä-bäl k'umäl cäğd-gä-i k'umäl-gor, ba-cäu-gä-i k'umäl nä lävardta* “in the upper-world, while filtering small-beer, and somebody coming to ask for small-beer, she did not give (him) small-beer” (lit. in-upper-world [adess.] small-beer [nom.] beating [ger.-abl.] small-beer-seeker, coming [ger.-abl.] small-beer not she-gave); in this example, the gerund *cäğd-gä-i* refers to the subject inherent in the finite verb *lävardta*, while *k'umäl-gor ba-cäu-gä-i* stands as an absolute construction (from a *Bäx fäldisin* “Horse consecration” sermon, traditionally delivered at the funeral of chieftains; text in Digor).

The gerund of the verb *zäğin/zäğun* “to say” (*zäğ-gä* [-gä-iä/i]) functions as a citation particle, embedding reported speech or thought, for instance, in narrative texts, when a proper name occurs for the first time: *cardis ämä uıdisiu läğ Toredze zäğ-gä iä nom* “once there lived a man called Toredze.” The ger. *zäğ-gä* is also used to mark cause or purpose: *läppu, midä-mä ba-xiz-on zäğ-gä, kuıd zağta, aftä iu zdäxt, fä-kodta Satana-mä* “when the boy was about to enter (lit.: saying I shall enter), he turned round to Satana” (lit.: boy to-inside [all.] I-shall-enter [subj.] saying [ger.], as he-said, thus one turn he-did to-Satana [all.]; from a Nart epic text).

LEXIS

As already mentioned, the Ossetic core vocabulary derives in large measure from Iranian sources. Loanwords such as *k'ax* “foot,” *k'ux/k'ox* “hand,” *dzix/dzux*, *c'ux* “mouth,” were probably borrowed as expressive words that have ousted the Iranian words *fad*, *arm*, *kom* respectively; the latter group of words is used in compounds, in metaphoric expressions, and in fixed idioms. There exist numerous lexical and idiomatic calques, due to a long-standing influence of neighbor languages.

Kinship terms are mostly Iranian. The noun *ärvad/ärvadä* (< Ir. **brātar-*) means “brother, cousin, kinsman,” no doubt an archaism. A new noun has been formed to signify a consanguineous brother: *ävsimär/änsuvär* (< **(h)ām-suvär*) “co-uterinus, of the same womb” (*šivär/suvär*).

Patronymics in *-on* (< **āna-*) seem to have been in use previously, and have in modern times been re-introduced individually. Today family affiliation is signified by adding the genitive plural of the clan's name to the personal name, for instance, *AbaitiVaso*, “Vaso of the Abaitä clan” (Abaev, 1962).

Most proper names in modern usage belong to the onomasticon of the



Caucasian peoples. Some of the heroic names of the Nart epic cycle are of Iranian origin (e.g., *Äxsärtäg* < **xšaθraka*–; cf. Av. *xšaθra*– “power,” *AirWb.*, col. 542). There are also many names that are of uncertain derivation. *Nart*, the name of the mythological race of the Narts, derives most likely from **narθra*– “manhood” (**nar*– “man, warrior;” cf. Av. *nar*– “man,” *AirWb.*, col. 1047).

The great number of Iranian words referring to traditional culture testifies to social continuity and coherence in the Alan-Ossetic tribes. A number of Christian terms have been borrowed from Georgian, but there exist apparently traces of old pagan terms that have been used to express Christian notions. Muslim terms have been introduced from Arabic-Persian through the medium of Caucasian neighbor languages. Azeri Turkish (see [Azarbaijan viii](#)), which previously functioned widely as a lingua franca in the Northeast Caucasus, has been a link connecting the Ossetes with the other North Caucasian peoples, as well as with the Islamic nations of the south. Moreover, a great number of cultural words have entered Ossetic through Azeri as a direct or indirect source. Numerous Russian words, mainly technical and political terms, have been borrowed in modern times.

TEXT SAMPLES

A. Iron

Dzerassä-Räsuğd

“Dzerassä the Beautiful”

Äxsärtäg dendžiz-ı bın Donbettiri xädzar-mä b-aftid.

Äxsärtäg sea’s (gen.) bottom (nom.) *Donbettiri*’s house (all.) he-arrived.

Xädzar ta axäm xädzar uıd, ämä iä k’ul-tä – ärgäu, iä bın –

House but such house it-was and its walls mother-of-pearl, its floor

c’äx avg, iä sär – säuuon st’alı. Xädzar-ı badınc avd äfsimär-ı,

blue glass, its roof morning-star. In-house (iness.) they-sit seven brother’s (gen.sg.)

sä uäle – sä dıuuä xoi-ı, am-äi ai räsuğd-där-tä.

their above their two sister’s (gen.sg.), from-this (abl.sg.) this more beautiful (pl.).

Sä säri xil sığzärin-au ärttivi.



Their head's hair like-gold (equ.) shines

Farn uä xädzar-ı ämä uä raisom xorz! – zağta Äxsärtäg,
Peace your in-house (iness.) and morning good, he-said Äxsärtäg,

xädzar-mä kuı ba-xıztı, uäd.
to-house (all.) when he-came in, then.

Xorz dā xai uäd! Zäğgä, ıın zağtoi uıdon dār ämä
Good your share shall-be (imper.) saying (ger.) to-him (dat.) they-said they too
an

s-ıstād-ıstı, avd äfsımār-ı ämä sä dıuuä xoi-ı, ämä
they-arose seven brother's (gen. sg.) and their two sister's (gen. sg.), and

badın kodtoi Äxsärtädž-ı: är-badt-ıstı sä-xuıdtäg dār avd
to-sit-down (inf.) they-made Äxsärtäg (gen.): they sat.down they-themselves too
seven

äfsımār-ı, ärtä-ıä Äxsärtägän ıä uällag fars, cıppar-äı ta
brother's (gen.sg.) as-3 (abl.) for-Äxsärtäg (dat.) his upper side, as-four (abl.)
but

dällag fars. Čısil kuı a-badt-ıstı, uäd äfsımār-tä ba-kast-ıstı
lower side. Little when they-sat, then the-brothers (nom. pl.) looked

Äxsärtäg-mä ämä ıın zağtoi:
to-Äxsärtäg (all.) and to-him (dat.) they-said:

Dä xuızän uazäg nām nā cäu-gä 'r-kodta, nā dār nām

Your similar guest to-us (all.) not coming he-did, not either to-us

cäu-gä 'kändzän ämä dıl ba-cın känın qäu-ı, fälä
coming (ger.) will-do, and on-you (adess.) joy to-do it-must (3rd sg.), but

mast-ıl stām.
on-trouble (adess.) we-are.

Translation.

Äxsärtäg came to Donbettır's house at the bottom of the sea. The house was



such a house that its walls were nacreous, its floor blue glass, its ceiling the morning star. In the house sat seven brothers, above them their two sisters, the one more beautiful than the other. The hair on their head shone like gold.

“Peace in your house and good morning,” said Äxsärtäg when he came into the house.

“Good be your fate,” they said to him and stood up, the seven brothers; and the seven brothers and their two sisters made Äxsärtäg sit down, and the seven brothers sat down apart, three above Äxsärtäg four below him. When they had sat for a while, they looked to Äxsärtäg and said to him:

“No guest like you has come to us, nor will ever come to us, and indeed we should welcome you, but we are in trouble.” (*Nartı kaddžitā*, Dzäudžiqäü, 1946, p. 8)

B. Digor

Uruzmäg äma ie ’nānom läquān

“Uruzmäg and his Nameless Son”

Nart adtāncā, äma sä-bäl xucau ästong anz is-kodta.

Narts they-were, and on-them (adess.) God famine year he-made.

Nart-i muggag-äi Äxsärtäggati Uruzmäg balc-i randä ’i äma fä-

The Narts’ of-clan (abl.) of-Äxsärtäggatä (gen.) Uruzmäg on-journey went-away and was

c-äi ärtä-duuä anz-i, uädta är-cud-äi ä xädzarä-mä. Ärba-

three-two year’s (gen.sg.), then he-went his-to-home (all.).

cud-äi nixas-mä är-festäg äi ’ma zağta:

He-went to the assembly-place (all.), pedestrian he-became, and said:

Uä bon xuarz! – äma iimä Nart-i adam-äi ba ä sär dār ne-ke

Your day good! and to-him (all.) Narts’s (gen.) of-people (abl.) but his head nobody

ra-qel kodta, uoi tuxx-än äma sä tog nä kusta, sä zärdä roxs nä

standing he-made, their hardly and their blood not worked, their heart glad not



adt-äi, istong anz sä-bäl is-kodta. Uruzmäg där fästä-mä ä
was, famine year on-them (adess.) became. Uruzmäg too again (all.) his

bäx-bäl ra-badt-äi äma ä xädzarä-mä är-cud-äi. Medä-mä ba-
on-horse (adess.) he-sat-down and his to-house (all.) went. To-inside (all.)

cud-äi äma k'ela-bäl äxe zust gälst är-kodta, 'ma k'ela ä
he-went and on-chair (adess.) himself angry thrown he-made, and chair his

bun-i ra-sast-äi. Satana ii-mä dzorui:
below (iness.) it-broke-down. Satana she-speaks to-him (all.):

– Ci kän-is.? Me 'rcäun-i bon-äi aci bon-i ualängä dä uotä
What you-do? My-arrival's from-day (abl.) this day's (gen.) till so

mästgun-äi ku ne-käd fä-uuidton.
angry (abl.) yet never I-saw.

Translation.

There were the Narts (in the days of the Narts), and God caused a famine among them. Uruzmäg of the Äxsärtäggatä clan of the Narts set out on a journey abroad and was away for two-three years, then he came home. He went to the assembly place, dismounted and said: “Good morning,” but none of the Nart men stood up for him, because their blood was almost frozen (did hardly work), their heart was not joyous, they had suffered a famine. Uruzmäg mounted his horse again and went home. He entered and threw himself angry on a chair, and the chair broke down under him.

Satana said to him: “What is wrong? Since the day when I came to you till this day I never saw you so angry.” (*Nartä, Iron gerioikon epos I: činig*, Moscow, 1990, p. 128)

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D. = Digor. When the oblique stroke is used between two dialect forms, the Iron form is placed before, the Digor form after the stroke. When nothing else is said, Iron is meant.

Turk. = Turkic

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