

Structure and semantics of Ossetic preverbs

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Ossetic is one of the few Indo-European languages which during nearly two thousand years have developed in close contact with the Caucasian languages. During this period a lot of new features emerged in the Ossetic language as a result of the areal contact with languages possessing quite different grammatical structure. As other researchers pointed out (Abaev 1949, Ahvlediani 1963, Isaev 1987, 1966, Thordarson 2009, Belyaev 2010, Vydrin 2014), one can find many features in Ossetic, unusual for an Iranian language, but every time the question arises: which contact language or language family those phenomena come from.

The Ossetic system of preverbs is unique among the Eastern Iranian languages where lexicalized old Iranian preverbs prevail whereas deictic and locative preverbs are very common in the neighboring Caucasian languages. Thus, modern Ossetic features a completely new and highly productive system that plays an important role in expressing locative, deictic and aspectual meanings. This system is interesting from the typological standpoint as it represents the result of interaction between internal trends of language development and areal influence: there are no borrowed prefixes in Ossetic, the system is the result of PAT structural replication in terms of (Matras&Sakel 2007). The aim of the study is to compare the Ossetic preverb system with those of the languages of other families indigenous to the Caucasus — Kartvelian (Georgian), Nakh-Dagestan (Ingush) and Abkhaz-Adyghe (Adyghe). General structure of the preverb systems, grammatical characteristics of the preverbs and their semantics are compared.

The study of the meaning of Ossetic preverbs is based on the data elicited from informants with the help of spatial questionnaires and on the data from the Ossetic National Corpus.

The comparative study of the structure of the Ossetic preverb system reveals that it differs from that of Adyghe both in structure and in semantics. (The study of the Adyghe preverb system is based on the fieldwork data, see Mazurova 2009). The Ingush system (Nichols 2011) seems quite different structurally from the Ossetic but shows some similarity of the meaning expressed by preverbs. The Georgian system (Aronson 1990, Rostovcev-Popel 2012, Tomelleri 2009) shows most similarities with the Ossetic: the structure and the semantics of the two sets are quite close, although not identical. However, further analysis of the spatial and aspectual meaning of the preverbs shows considerable differences (see Tomelleri 2010 for in-depth analysis of the aspectual features of Ossetic and Georgian). I claim that the Ossetic preverb system has emerged under the strong influence of the South Caucasian (Kartvelian) languages, but have developed according to its own inner tendencies not copying the pattern but developing new concepts.

In Ossetic preverbs, the deictic component is crucial for the metaphorical transfer and development of meaning. It determines spatial and aspectual extensions of the meaning of preverbs as well as a few of their grammatical properties (possibility/impossibility to use a conative particle). The spatial component, in turn, is important for combinability with verbs of certain semantics (Levitskaja 2004, 2007).

As Ossetic preverbs have retained definite spatial meaning, the Ossetic language data is important for the grammar of space because it provides interesting typological material regarding extension of deictic and orientational meanings to aspectuality. The Ossetic language data may contribute a lot to the aspectual typology as an example of a productive preverb system based upon the spatial concepts that differ from those of the Slavic languages.

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