

Report on

L'ubomír Novák Problem of Archaism and Innovation in the Eastern Iranian Languages, Diss. 2013

Novák's thesis claims in the first instance to be devoted to the classification of the Eastern Iranian languages, but in fact it concentrates on the relationship of Sogdian and Yagnobi – the question arises whether the detailed study has been placed in the appropriate framework. The third part of the thesis is a lexical study.

The thesis establishes a close interrelationship between Yagnobi and the Pamir languages and follows a trend to regard the minority languages of Tajikistan as belonging together. He states the case for this rather weakly, referring on p. 1 to 'historically non-documented areal contacts'. He may also be following Antja Wendtland who, in recent articles, has routinely done the same. I would like to test the likelihood of this thesis by presenting arguments of the contrary and then examining Novák's thesis to see if he has taken account of these or if he has presented better arguments for his interpretation.

The first argument is geography. Northern and Northeastern Tajikistan is very mountainous, meaning that contacts exist between valleys and larger areas but communication is slow and communities can stay amongst their own people. Referring back to what we know about the Middle Iranian period the Yagnobi valley is clearly on the eastern edge of Sogdiana which is essentially the Zerafshan valley and various extensions. The orientation is towards the west, towards Panjikent, Samarkand and Bukhara and towards the northwest, Ferghana etc.. The language of the south of what is presently Tajikistan was Bactrian which was essentially the language of the Upper Amu Darya and therefore also the language of northern Afghanistan with, on the eastern side, access to the Pamirs. On the face of it, we would therefore not expect the Pamir languages and Yagnobi to show much affinity beyond certain common Eastern Iranian features. We can 'test' this in the sense that Bactrian and Sogdian are not very closely related. But this all depends on the position of the languages of the Pamirs which are indeed not all that close to Bactrian either and seem rather to represent Iranian languages of which the Middle Iranian predecessors are simply not attested. However, this does not increase the likelihood of a closer relationship of the Pamir languages to Yagnobi either. On the other hand, one of the Pamir languages, Wakhi, is close to Khotanese. There is, of course, the possibility that the present geographical distribution of these languages is not the same as that of the Middle Iranian predecessors. The frequent wars (Arabic invasion, Mongolian invasion etc.) can have forced people to move from accessible to less accessible areas.

Novák rightly points out that the relationship between Yagnobi and Sogdian is a complex one. He points to differences in the accent in both languages, with corresponding differences in morphology. He points to the important morphological features of the differences in the formation of the imperfect in both languages and refers to the ending -or in Yagnobi which is not attested in Sogdian. It seems to me on the one hand that Novák has chosen to ignore some of the literature dealing with this already and that he has not followed this through because the ending -or is present in Khwarezmian, a language to the Northwest of Sogdian and which shares a whole series of interesting features with Sogdian (as well as having significant differences, note the article in Khwarezmian which agrees with Bactrian against Sogdian). He mentions this fact but I think it would have been worth exploring this more (i.e. where does -or come from, why does Sogdian just have -ant?, s. p. 148), because it would have allowed Novák to point to a greater range of variety in Middle Iranian that he explores just by referring to Sogdian alone and to show language processes in particular. This would also have brought Novák to taking a closer look at more secondary literature than he has done. This is not to say that the result of the thesis might necessarily have been different, but it would have given the thesis greater scope and made the results more convincing. Novák's presentation of four stages in the development of the accent and word-stress in Sogdian is valid, as is his location of the division between Sogdian and Yagnobi after stage 2, but he neglects to follow the development in Yagnobi from then on. This is important because though Yagnobi retains many syllables lost in Sogdian it has lost or reduced most of the final syllables in the same way as the Sogdian heavy stems.

Novák challenges the established classification of Eastern Iranian on the basis of isoglosses. Is this an adequate basis? Phonology and morphology should play a greater role. This issue is partly a problem of misnaming: At least some of the isoglosses chosen by him do in fact demonstrate phonological developments and distinctive lines. However, by concentrating on the individual items of vocabulary rather than on the sound laws themselves Novák neglects to demonstrate the extent to which the sound-law is present and does not protect his analysis from the possibility that the 'isogloss' is in fact the result of borrowing which can tell us about areal phenomena but not about the underlying genetic relationships. The problem remains that Novák does not support his remarks by more inclusive reference to phonology and morphology. One of the 'isoglosses' chosen on p. 215, the word for 'eye' also clearly illustrates the main difficulty, because Sogdian, attested over nearly a millennium, shows nearly all the stages *čašm*, *čamm*, *čem* that Novák uses to characterise the individual modern spoken Pamir languages. Clearly, we can then identify archaic and less archaic languages there but when we add the fact that Tajik, the supraregional language for the Pamirs as well as for the Yagnob valley, can have exercised a certain influence on recognizably common items of vocabulary (s. p. 88-90 for the shared vocalic system), the diagnostic value of this 'isogloss' becomes very difficult to maintain. In any case, the thesis demonstrates that some of the present-day bilingual linguistic situation in Tajikistan could also be considered with reference to the situation between border and central dialects in Sogdiana when Sogdian was still spoken. The thesis demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the material and a great deal of hard work coupled with a carefully drawn and balanced conclusions in a dialogue with the scientific literature (though this dialogue is not always sufficiently indicated, this is something he can easily rectify). His interesting results will allow a valuable discussion.

Questions for the candidate

What role does geography play?

Why compare Yagnobi with Pamir languages?

Why is it possible to compare Sogdian and Yagnobi and what are the limits of this comparison (in terms of attested materials, range of attestation, literary and spoken language, language registers, etc.)

How is an isogloss defined?

What is the diagnostic value of the various forms of the word *čašm* in Sogdian, Yagnobi and the Pamir languages, bearing in mind the range of variants seen in Sogdian and the relative stability of the forms in the individual Pamir languages?

How can agglutination be defined?

Discuss the -or ending in Yagnobi (s. p. 148 n. 250; how does this distribution come about, what does the same ending in the same use in Khwarezmian tell us, is it a parallel or inherited development?)