

Negotiating the terrain of Pamiri grammar: Hazards and Prospects

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Investigating the Pamir languages (a subgroup of Southeastern Iranian languages) presents a number of challenges: all of the dozen or so members of the subgroup are either endangered or vulnerable; most are poorly documented; and as they are spoken in the mountainous regions of southeastern Tajikistan and neighboring parts of Afghanistan, China and Pakistan, it is rather difficult to meet with communities of native speakers. Typologically, these languages are quite remarkable for the variety of ways in which they have individually surfaced from a shared phase of partial ergativity. We have undertaken a comparative investigation of their principles of verbal morphosyntax. In this work, we are building upon work by John Payne, who has identified several fundamental differences in the alignment systems of these languages, and in order to arrive at a fine-grained account of their verbal morphology, we have also begun assembling a relational database of Pamiri verbs; this database currently contains records on the inflection of over 800 verbs in Shughni, the best documented of the Pamir languages (and the most widely spoken, with approximately 75,000 speakers). Drawing on these two resources, we have begun using the DATR language to construct a computationally verifiable model of Pamiri verbal morphosyntax, in which general features of the subgroup are represented as defaults subject to language-specific overrides. By expanding the verb database and integrating new findings into the DATR model, we hope to arrive at a better understanding of the varied trajectories along which the Pamir languages are emerging from partial ergativity. We also expect that the resources developed for this project will contribute in practical ways to ongoing efforts to document the Pamir languages.