

Fridrik THORDARSON

## PREVERBS IN OSSETIC

*Some reflections*

### I. The Ossetic preverb has a double function:

1) It determines in some way the meaning of the verb, focuses the attention on some point in the course of the action or process expressed by the verb. It can be used metaphorically and effect – to a large extent unpredictable – semantic specializations of the verbal meaning. Thus, e.g., Iron *a-* “out, away” may be used to express a transitory or diminutive action: *a-xordton* “I ate a little, had a bite to eat” (vs. *ba-xordton* “I ate”, the usual perfective preterite); *a-bad* “have a seat” (vs. *s-bad* “(please) sit down”, the usual perfective imperative). Iron *ni-* (D. *ni-*) “down” may add a connotation of expressivity to the verb; in Narty kaddžytæ (1946), p. 149, where a story of the death of Sirdon, the evil trickster of the Ossetes, is told, we find *ni-* used as a perfectivizer with *mælin* “to die” instead of the normal (Iron) *a-* (Digor *ra-*), apparently to give expression to a touch of roughness or malice: *Sirdon uim nimmardis* “S. died there (on the spot)”. (Cf. ABAEV 1964, pp. 77 ff.; AXVLEDIANI 1963, pp. 238-9, 243-4.)

2) The preverb has a grammatical function, distinguishing the perfective from the imperfective aspect. There is apparently some fluctuation in the choice of perfectivizing preverbs (local, individual, stylistic variation). In its aspectual function the preverb may, at least to some extent, lose its semantic content, appearing as an “empty” marker of aspect only. As a rule, however, the preverb adds some semantic element to the verb, although this element can be difficult to define or to paraphrase.

From the historical, as well as from the synchronic, point of view the aspectual (grammatical) function must be regarded as secondary, being derived from the function of determinacy (the semantic function).

II. Needless to say the existence of particles with directional-aspectual functions (aspect here being used in its widest sense) is a typological feature which belongs to Indo-European. Similar traits are found, e.g., in the Caucasian

languages. In Indo-European these particles seem on principle to have been independent of the verb, but in the individual languages the general tendency is towards a fixed place of the particle in relation to the verb. The same trend of development is shown by Georgian; in Old Georgian the preverb has to some extent retained its character of an independent adverbial in so far as the intercalation of certain lexical elements (conjunctions, pronouns) between the verb and its preverb is permitted. Svanetian still has semi-independent preverbs, with the possibility of intercalation. In the Veinakhian languages of the North Caucasus (Ingush-Chechen) adverbial particles may function as either postpositions with nouns (case-endings) or ad-verbs (preverbs, postverbs).

Typologically Ossetic and Georgian (Kartvelian; for lack of written documents the history of the other Caucasian languages is hard to follow, and lies anyhow outside the scope of these reflections) agree in so far as in both adverbial particles with directional functions have developed into aspectual verbal prefixes where the concrete meaning may, at least up to a point, recede into the background. In both languages the preverb at the same time determines the action or process locally and emphasizes its completion. The aspectual force (aspect again being used in its widest sense) is already inherent in the lexical meaning of the particle, its function being to fix the attention on some particular point inside the action (process). The development of spatial or directional determiners into markers of aspect, with a partial loss of the lexical content, is a common phenomenon in the history of Indo-European languages; it is sufficient to mention Latin, Germanic, Celtic, Slavic and Baltic. In all these language groups we have primarily to do with internal developments, as, i.a., appears from the fact that each group has organized its aspectual system in its own particular way; what is common is the aspectual force of the preverbs.

The aspectual function of the preverbs becomes clear in Georgian texts from the 11th century onwards, when the subjunctive is gradually ousted in its ancient future meaning and replaced by the perfectivized (prefixed) present (the distinction between a perfective (aorist) and an imperfective (present) future thus getting lost). This development can not be ascribed to interference from Alanic-Ossetic (Alanic in that case constituting a link between Slavic and Kartvelian), as contended by Abaev (1964a, pp. 90 ff.). For one thing, on this point Ossetic and Georgian differ considerably: In Ossetic the preverb does not give the present a future meaning (cf. ABAEV 1964, p. 45); whereas Ossetic has developed a distinct future form with the ability to distinguish between the perfective and the imperfective aspect, Georgian has lost this latter possibility. Both languages distinguish between the two aspects in the preterite: Oss. prefixed preterite roughly = Georg. aorist (where in the modern language a preverb is almost the rule), Oss. simple preterite approx. = Georg. imperfect (where

preverbs are infrequent). Cf. VOGT 1971. pp. 180 ff; DEETERS 1930, pp. 9 ff.; VEŠAP'IZE 1967 passim. On the other hand, Ossetic has nothing comparable to the Georgian perfect. Besides, for historical reasons it is questionable whether the Kartvelian peoples of the South Caucasus had by the 11th century (or earlier) established any bilingual contacts to speak of with the Alans of the North Caucasus; the South Ossetic settlements of Georgia date from post-Mongolian times. If linguistic interference shall be posited as the source of a feature so deeply rooted in the structure of a language as is the case with verbal aspect, it presupposes a long-standing bilingual community of considerable extent. In other respects Georgian hardly shows any traces of Alanic-Ossetic influence upon its structure; Alanic loanwords in Georgian are not numerous and mostly belong to dialectal and marginal vocabulary (ANDRONIK'AŠVILI 1966, English summary pp. 547 ff.).

As the aspectual function is, so to speak, inherent in the lexical meaning of the determining particle, there is no need to postulate linguistic interference as a direct cause in either language. It seems preferable to assume remote typological affinities and similar or parallel developments.

**III.** In its function as a directional determiner the preverb has a bidimensional deixis: At the same time it informs about the direction of the action or movement and the position of the observer (actor's field (I) vs. observer's field (II)); AXVLEDIANI 1963, pp. 237 ff.; ABAEV 1964, pp. 76 ff.; BENVENISTE 1959, pp. 93 ff.). Examples: *ær-c'id* "he came down, arrived" (the observer is below) vs. *nī-cc'id* "he went down" (the observer is above); – *ær arviston* (*a-* + *ærvitīn* "send") *uimæn činīg* "I sent him a book", *uīi ærbarvīsta* (*ærba-* + *ærvitīn*) *mænæn činīg* "he sent me a book", *ær dīn arviston* (*a-* + *ærvitīn*) *činīg* "I sent you a book", *dī mīn ærbarvīstai* (*ærba-* + *ærvitīn*) *činīg* "you sent me a book", *uīi dīn ærbarvīsta* (*ærba-* + *ærvitīn*) *činīg* "he sent you a book"; and the like.

This is obviously an Ossetic innovation, nothing parallel being found in Old Iranian. As the preverbal system of Georgian (Kartvelian) is quite analogous to that of Ossetic (for details cf. VOGT 1971, pp. 172; VEŠAP'IZE o.c.), it seems natural to regard the double deixis as an areal phenomenon where Ossetic is the borrowing language. It is noteworthy that the "hin/her" – (Georgian *mi/mo-*) opposition has not been carried through completely: In Digor the horizontal dimension "out, away" is indicated by *ra-* (< \**frā-*) only, which thus covers the functions of both *a-* and *ra-* in Iron: D. *ra-mardi* "he died" = I. *a-mardi*. The vertical dimension "upwards" is indicated by *s-* (*īs-*) only in both dialects, regardless of the position of the observer: (I.) *s-c'id* "he went, came up" = Georg. *amo-vida*, *avida*: on the other hand: *ær-c'id*, *nī-cc'id* "he came/went down" = Georg. *čamo-vida*, *ča-vida*; *ba-c'id*, *ærba-c'id* "he went/came in" = Georg. *še-vida*, *šemo-vida* (also = *mo-vida* "came"); *a-c'id*, *ra-c'id* "he

went/came out, went away” = Georg. *ga-vida*, *gamo-vida*, *ræ-* (< \**frǎ-*), which according to Benveniste (l.c.) is used with the denotation “upwards” (thus limiting the use of *s-* to the meaning “mouvement de bas en haut ... vu d’en bas”) is hardly found in this function. Normally it is found only in verbal compounds where the verb and the preverb have amalgamated to an unanalyzable lexical unit (cf. infra V): *rævdauin* “lull, console”, *rædiin* “make a mistake”, (D.) *rædæxsun* “climb”, etc. As a rule it neither determines nor perfectivizes the verb, a second preverb being needed for that purpose: *ba-/s-rædæxsun*, etc.

From a synchronic point of view, these gaps in the bidimensional scheme should be treated as neutralizations of the “*hin/her*”- opposition; historically they reflect a more ancient stage of development where the symmetrical relations of the present-day system had not arisen. As is to be expected, in this matter Digor is more archaic than Iron.

IV. As far as the function of the preverbs is concerned, there undeniably exist certain similarities between Ossetic and the Slavic languages. Again the idea of an areal phenomenon immediately suggests itself (ABAEV 1964a; SCHMIDT 1970; cf. also AXVLEDIANI 1960, pp. 179 ff.). It is not likely that a feature so fundamental to the structure of the language can be ascribed to linguistic interference from Russian during the eastward expansion of the latter in post-mediaeval times (which would, by the way, rule out Ossetic as a link connecting Slavic and Kartvelian, cf. what is said above (II) about the chronology of aspectual preverbs in Georgian); as a matter of fact, Russian-Ossetic bilingualism is a recent phenomenon.

The fundamentals of the Slavic aspectual system belong to Common Slavic. A Slavo-Iranian “Sprachbund”, if it is admitted as an explanation in this connection, must accordingly be dated to high antiquity, most probably the period of Sarmatian supremacy in South Russia (approximately 200 B.C.-A.D. 200), and have stretched across a vast area, encompassing Sarmato-Alanic dialects beyond the immediate or direct precursors of modern Ossetic. Language contacts between the Slavic and the Iranian tribes of ancient South Russia undoubtedly existed, but it remains controversial how far these contacts have been instrumental in bringing about structural remodelling of the languages concerned. Iranian loanwords found in the Slavic languages are few (cf. KIPARSKY 1975, pp. 59 ff.; TRUBAČEV 1967, pp. 3 ff.), and mostly restricted to “Kulturwörter”, which indicates commercial rather than real bilingual relations. Neither are Slavic loanwords in Ossetic numerous (or were until recently); the Ossetic word denoting “snow” has been borrowed from Slavic at early times: I. *mit* / D. *met* < Slav. \*(*o*)*met-* “heap, snowdrift”, cf. Russian *metel’* “snowstorm” etc. (ABAEV 1958-73, II, pp. 124; 1965, p. 31 & passim); a word of the same derivation has passed into Rumanian (*omát*, *omete*), and it is tempting to

consider it a migratory word, rather than a testimony of a Slavic-Alanic bilingual community. The lexical influence exerted by Iranian upon the Finno-Ugrian languages is far more profound, as is that of Turkic upon Russian. But, after all, vocabulary is the part of language most open to foreign influence.

It is perhaps not insignificant to point out that as regards its verbal inflection Ossetic is an extremely archaic Iranian language and has been fairly resistant to interference from neighbour languages.

According to MEILLET & BENVENISTE 1931, p. 144, in Old Persian the preverb lends the verb aspectual force, besides functioning as a directional determiner. The same is maintained by REICHEL (1909, p. 302) with regard to Avestan. Aspectual functions of the Avestan preverbs are rejected by ZBAVITEL (1956), but without conclusive evidence; cf. also ABAEV 1964a. As we are honouring the memory of a great Pashto scholar, it is not inappropriate to mention that in Pashto a verbal prefix is used to give the verb the perfective aspect; the question of historical connections between Ossetic and Pashto in this matter can not be settled here.

On the whole, the history and the function of the preverbs in the Iranian languages is only imperfectly investigated and still need elucidation. As long as this is the situation, it would certainly be premature to make definite statements on the role played by linguistic interference in the constitution of the aspectual system of Ossetic.

V. A distinction must be made between preverbs which are productive as spatial determiners and aspectual markers in the modern language, i.e. constitute its preverbal and aspectual system, and instances where the verbal stem and an ancient preverb have amalgamated into one unanalyzable lexical unit; in the latter case the preverb has neither a determining nor an aspectual function, and the verb acquires perfective aspect only through the addition of one of the productive (“living”) preverbs. We thus get the unanalyzable verbs *nivændin* “wind” (with perfectivizing preverbs *a-*, *ba-* etc.), *n(i)uazin* “to drink” (*ba-* etc.), *fælivin* “cheat” (*a-* etc.). According to ABAEV (1964a, p. 96) this indicates that the aspectual function of the preverb is a late (i.e., apparently not Old Iranian) development. But that is hardly correct as the preverbs most likely tend to lose their aspectual force (loss of markedness; a similar weakening of the force of verbal prefixes is well-known from the history of Vulgar Latin and the Romance languages). As appears from the above examples the same directional particle may be found both as a mummified “dead” preverb and as a living productive one: *fæ-*, *ni-*.

In both Iron and Digor the presence of the preverb *ni/ni-* entails gemination of the initial consonant of the verbal stem; in Digor but apparently not in Iron the same applies to *fæ-*: *niuuazin/niuuazun* “leave”, D. *fækkæsun* “look

at”, *fætoxun* “fight”, *fællezun* “run away” (I. *fækæsin*, *fætuxin*, *fæližin*). When the verb and the preverb have amalgamated to a lexical unit gemination is not found.

*fæ-*, *ni/ni-* both end in a weak (short) vowel. Now consonant gemination is frequently accompanied by vowel weakening ( $a > \text{æ}$ ) in the preceding syllable (examples in ABAEV 1964, p. 9. 5), quite a normal phonetic phenomenon as it seems. This is undoubtedly a separate Ossetic development, probably due to some prosodic peculiarities at an earlier stage in the history of the language. I therefore suggest that Digor *fæ-* + gemination and common Ossetic *ni/ni-* + gemination is an entirely internal Ossetic development, to be treated with other instances of the feature weak vowel + gemination (but note, however, that *ær-* in spite of its weak vowel does not involve gemination). The rule that applies in this case must be of a later date than the uni-verbation of *fæ-* and *ni/ni-* in such cases as (D.) *fælevun*, *nivændun*. The only thing that needs explanation is the lack of gemination after *fæ-* in Iron; possibly, or even probably, it is due to paradigmatic pressure.

For semantic reasons it is hard to believe that *ni/ni-* is derived from *\*niš-*, or owes its existence to a mixture of *\*ni-* and *\*niš-* (BAILEY in JRAS 1961, p. 54; review of BENVENISTE 1959). The distribution of *ni/ni-* + gemination and *ni/ni-* without gemination does not support any such view.

Neither does the double treatment of consonants after *fæ-* in Digor prove the coexistence of *\*pa-* and *\*pati-* in Pre-Ossetic. Obviously *fæ-* in all instances derives from one and the same source. I see no reason to challenge Benveniste’s claim (o.c., pp. 98 ff.) that this source is *\*pa-*, not *\*pati-*. In the same way *ni/ni-* obviously goes back to ancient *\*ni-*<sup>1</sup>.

**VI.** The Iranian etymologies of the preverbs, both the “dead” and the “living” ones, are mostly clear. All can be traced back to directional particles the majority of which function as preverbs in Old Iranian. There has been no borrowing from adjacent languages. All preverbs function as preverbs only;

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. FISHER’s contention (KZ 91/1977, p. 229) that the aspectual use of *fæ-* is a “Russianism” should not be considered, cf. what is said above about bilingual contacts between the Ossetes and the Russians, *fæ-* expresses the indefinite direction of movement, thus standing apart from the other preverbs: *fæ-l̥ydi* “he ran away” (from the speaker or observer) vs., e.g., *a-l̥ydi* “he ran out (from here)”. In that respect it closely resembles the Georgian indefinite preverb *da-* (originally “down”): *da-prinavs* “il vole par-ci par-là” vs. *mo-prinavs* “il vole vers moi (toi)”, *mi-prinavs* “il vole vers lui” (VOGT 1971, p. 174 ff.). Like *da-*, *fæ-* may have an intensive force: *fæ-xæcid* “he snatched” (*xæcin* “hold, keep...”). Finally, both preverbs are frequent as “empty” aspectual markers. But, of course, *fæ-* does not turn the present into a future (Georg. *vc’er* “I write”, *da-vc’er* “I will write”). For details v. VOGT. I.c., and ABAEV 1964, pp. 77 ff.

they never occur as independent adverbials nor as local affixes with nouns (postpositions, case-endings). Up to a point, the preverb has retained its independence of the verb: In Digor, which as a rule is the more archaic of the two dialects, enclitic pronouns may be intercalated between the verb and the preverb: *ra-mæ-maræ* “kill me” (imperative). In both dialects the deperfectivizing particle *cæi*<sup>2</sup> is placed between the verb and the preverb: *ba-cæi-cidi* “he was going in”. With compound verbs, which consist of a noun and the verbs *uīn* “be” and *kænīn* “do” (other verbs occasionally occur), the preverb is placed before the noun (though the inverted order is possible): *næ dæ ferox kodton* “I did not forget you” (*fæ-* + *rox kænīn* “forget”). The ability to insert enclitic personal pronouns after the preverb has possibly been reinforced by the contact with languages with a multipersonal verbal inflection (Cirkassian, Kartvelian); historically, however, it is an archaism.

In Grundriss (1903, p. 82) MILLER derives *ba-* “in(to)” from an ancient *\*upa-*, and this seems still the best explanation. In intervocalic position and after *m* ancient *-p-* has been sonorized at an early time and become *-b-*, which is still preserved after *m* and in words where a preceding vowel has been lost; otherwise it becomes *-v-*: *æxsæv* “night” < *\*šāpan-*, but *æmbid* “rotten” < *\*ham-pūta-*; – Digor *-bæl* (adessive ending or postposition > Iron *-il*) < *\*upari*, *badīn* “to sit” < *\*upa-had-*, *bas* “soup” < *\*upa-āsa-*. This etymology has been challenged by BENVENISTE (1959, p. 98), who suggests identification with the Digor particle *ba* “then, but”; the cognates of this particle in Avestan (*bā*, *baṭ*, *bē*, *bōit*) and other Iranian languages (v. ABAEV 1958-73, <sup>1</sup>*ba*) are emphatic particles, without directional or aspectual value; the same applies to the other Indo-European languages where it is found (POKORNY p. 113). Lithuanian *be-*, if it belongs here (cf. VAILLANT in Rev.ét.slaves 23, p. 251), gives the verb a durative aspect, which is exactly the opposite of the function of the Ossetic preverb *ba-*. As an “empty” preverb *ba-* is a common perfectivizer: *bakodton* “I did” (*kænīn*), *bambærston* “I understood” (*æmbarīn*), *baxordton* “I ate” (*xærīn*), *banoston* “I drank” (*n(i)uazīn*), *bauarston* “I loved” (*uarzīn*), *baxudtæn* “I laughed” (*xudīn*), *bafarston* “I asked” (*færšīn*), *baurcædton* “I stopped” (tr., *uromīn*), *baunaffæ kodton* “I decided” (*unaffæ k.*), *baxatīr kæn!* “I apologize, I am sorry” (imper., *xatīr k.*), and many others. It is hard to see how an emphatic

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<sup>2</sup> The particle *cæi*, which neutralizes the aspectual force of the preverb, is identified by ABAEV (with some hesitation; 1958-73, v. *cæj*) with the exclamatory particle or interjection *cæi* “now then! come!”. This device for de-perfectivizing verbs can, of course, not be equated with the Slavic iteratives. There is no historical connection between Ossetic and Slavic in this matter. (S. now the explanation of *cæi* given by R. BIELMEIER in Acta Iranica. vol. 21, p. 31. – Additional remark.)

particle like *ba* has become a marker of perfective aspect, and as the derivation of *ba-* from ancient *\*upa-* is phonetically possible (cf. MORGENSTIERNE in JA 1961, p. 242; review of BENVENISTE 1959), it seems far-fetched to look for its origins outside of the class of Old Iranian local determiners.

The preverb *ær-* “down” was left unexplained by MILLER (1903, p. 81). Abaev’s derivation from Avestan *aθra* “here” (1949, p. 27) does not carry conviction; to all appearances *aθra* should have resulted in *\*ært(æ)*, where, however, the final *-t* might have been lost in a proclitic particle before an initial consonant; from a semantic point of view, it is difficult to understand how an adverb of this denotation has evolved into a directional particle meaning “down”. BENVENISTE (o.c., p. 97) has – hesitantly – suggested a connection with Shughni *ar* “to, at”, and further with Avestan *arəm* etc. “properly”, an etymology which is accepted by MORGENSTIERNE (1974, p. 15).

When used with verbs of movement *ær-* means “down” (observer is below); it also frequently adds the denotation “to reach, to arrive at a place” to the verb; hence Miller’s translation (l.c.) “an, zu, her”: *ær-cæuīn* “ankommen”, *ær-tæxīn* “zufliegen”, *ær-bīrīn* “heran-kriechen”, *ær-saiīn* “anlocken”, etc. With *ba-* *ær-* forms the only compound preverb in Ossetic: *ærba-* “in here” (movement in the direction of the observer).

An Avestan *avar* “down (here)” is found in Yasna 29,11 (Nyberg 1932, pp. 237ff. (255ff.)):

*kudā ašəm vohuča manō, xšaθrəmcā aṭ mā mašā*  
*yūžəm mazdā frāxšnənē mazōi magāi.ā paitī.zānatā*  
*ahurā nū nā avarē šhmā rātōiš yūšmāvatqm*

„Wo sind die Wahrhaftigkeit, der gute Gedanke und die Herrschermacht? Erkennet doch ihr mich zusammen mit dem Menschen in Umsicht für die große Gabe als den Euren an, o Kundiger!

*O Lebensherr, nun herab zu uns* auf Grund der durch uns vollzogenen Beschenkung von curesgleichen!”

(Humbach’s translation), *avarē* was previously taken to mean “help” (synonymous with *avah*) and the passage translated accordingly; “O A., nun werde uns (den Rindern) Hilfe” (Bartholomae), an interpretation that is retained by Duchesne-Guillemin in his translation of the Gāthā (1948, p. 197): “Seigneur, à notre aide maintenant”. But Nyberg’s translation is an obvious improvement: “O Ahura, viens à nous...”.

The existence of Indic *avar* “down here” beside the more usual *avas* is attested by RV 1.133.6: *avarmaha indra dādṛhi śrudhī naḥ...* « Fais éclater les



grands (démons, en sorte qu'ils aillent) en bas, ô Indra, écoute nous..." (RENOU 1969, p. 48); further perhaps by *avaṭa* "a hole" if from *\*avar-ta-* (EMENEAU 1966, p. 128).

In Parthian and Middle Persian *awar* is used as an imperative adverb "come here": *'wr pyš hamwc'g 'y 'stwdn'm* "Come before the teacher of praised name" (MP; BRUNNER 1977, p. 178); it may take the plural *-ēd*: *'wryd* "come" (Pt.); in Parthian the adverbial function is preserved beside the imperative one: *kd 'wr 'w mrg 'gd hym* "when I came hither to Marw" (BRUNNER o.c., p. 179). Cf. also NYBERG 1974, p. 36; GHILAIN 1939, p. 47.

An ancient *\*awar* may also be reflected by Ossetic *uæl*, *uæla* "on, upon, on the top of", if we, in spite of some semantic misgivings, accept Benveniste's (1959, p. 32) derivation from *\*awari* (probably an ancient locative). In that case *\*áwar* and *\*awári* must have coexisted.

There are no semantic obstacles to the equation of Ossetic *ær-* and Old and Middle Iranian *\*awar*. In all instances it is the question of a movement downwards or/and in the direction of the observer: common to both *ær-* and *awar* is the coalescence of the two directional notions "down here" and "hither". In Western Middle Iranian *awar* functions as a verb, and that is actually the case in the Avestan passage; in Ossetic *ær-* (as the other preverbs) needs the support of a verb. To be sure, the expected result of ancient *\*áwar* is *\*æuær* (*\*awár* would probably have yielded *\*uar*). But the assumption of a shortening or contraction of *\*awar* > *ær-* should raise no difficulties and is easily explicable from the proclitic position of the directional particle. At least this solution is preferable to the semantically implausible etymologies of Abaev and Benveniste.

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