This collection of articles is based on a selection of papers presented at a panel entitled “Iranian minority languages” which was held at the 30th German Congress of Orientalists at Freiburg i.Br. University in September 2007. For the present collection, the selected papers have been substantially enlarged and/or revised. Also included is an article whose authors could not attend the 2007 panel.

The title “Iranian minority languages” is here interpreted rather broadly to refer to Iranian minority languages and dialects spoken in Iran today, and to Iranian varieties which are, or were, spoken in other countries. (The term “Iranian varieties” will occasionally be used in this collection to include the notions of “language” and “dialect”.) In spite of the geographical distance between the languages encompassed by this term – reaching from Iraqi Kurdistan, Eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus via Iran and Afghanistan to the Pamir – most of them share a number of features. For instance, the absence of a standard language and/or orthography has important consequences for those who try to use the language for writing, teaching, etc. The investigation of the history of Iranian languages has shown that the influence of inter-regional or national languages is by no means limited to modern times. However, the speed and pervasiveness of such influence has markedly increased by their predominant or even exclusive use in schools and the media, and has reached more or less all speakers of Iranian languages today. Television is a crucial element in this process, as it disseminates the knowledge of national languages in their standard, rather than their local form, as e.g. in the case of Persian, where – by way of Iranian TV broadcasts – Tehrani Farsi has replaced Dari as an influential language in Afghanistan, and local varieties of Persian within Iran.

Some Iranian varieties (among them Pamir languages as well as various minority languages and dialects in Iran) qualify for the category of endangered languages in its narrow definition, as they are spoken by only a very small number of people today. However, many other Iranian languages and dialects such as Mazenderani, Balochi, or Sistani may be labelled “medium endangered”; while the number of their speakers is not yet particularly low at present, it seems questionable whether children will continue to use them – and if they do not, these languages could quite well be lost in one or two generations.

1 See http://webdoc.urz.uni-halle.de/dot2007/programm.php?ID=118
This makes it specifically important to collect data from minority languages and dialects, many of which are still imperfectly known, and to investigate them. The description of their grammatical structures is also important for both typological purposes, as Iranian varieties show many interesting features, and for the historical perspective, as the data of today may shed light on those points in the history of Iranian that are not reflected in the documents that have come down to us. Conversely, surviving texts from older stages and from extinct Iranian languages offer precious material for comparison, often helping to explain parallel patterns of contemporary languages.

For Iranologists the synchronic description of the languages and dialects is clearly the first task. The article by Farideh Okati, Abbas Ali Ahangar, and Carina Jahani about the variety of Sistani spoken in the Zabol region in Iran contributes to this: it investigates the pronunciation of the vowel which has been described as back and rounded (corresponding to classical New Persian /ū/). The authors show that this vowel is [ș] (with an allophone [ȟ] in certain environments) in Iranian Sistani.

Saloumeh Gholami’s article is a syntactic description: it studies case marking and agreement associated with the past stem of the verb in the Middle Iranian language Bactrian. The earlier texts show a case distinction of the nouns that is lost in the later ones (while usually preserving verbal agreement with the object), which has important consequences for the original ergative construction and the interpretation of the resulting patterns.

The same loss of case distinctions has also taken place in contemporary Sorani Kurdish. As Thomas Jügel demonstrates, the use of pronominal clitics has changed to regular marking of the agent in the past domain, independent of the presence of an overt agent. In combination with changes in the functions of the personal endings, this renders the pattern a nominative-accusative construction.

Bactrian and Sorani Kurdish thus illustrate the typologically remarkable variation of the broad range of peri-, semi-, and ex-ergative constructions within Iranian.

The pronominal clitics indexing ergative agents, objects, etc. in many Iranian languages have also generally been used to divide Western Iranian languages into two groups depending on whether their 3rd singular clitic goes back to *-hai or *-šai (originally variants of the same clitic). Agnes Korn’s article attempts to argue against this isogloss, also challenging the uniform derivation from the Old Iranian genitive/dative clitics. While some remarkable archaisms appear to be preserved in the Western Iranian pronominals, it seems questionable how much the various forms imply for a sub-grouping of Western Iranian.

The Pamir languages are another group of Iranian varieties which are more adequately described in areal rather than in genetic terms. Antje Wendtland surveys the isoglosses suggested for the subgrouping of these varieties, and those connecting some or several of them with other Eastern Iranian languages, and concludes that no isoglosses establish the Pamir languages as a genetic group, and that the division of Eastern Iranian into a Northern and a Southern branch does not appear to be well-founded either.

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Gunilla Gren-Eklund for welcoming this collection to an issue of *Orientalia Suecana*, and to Dr Christian Rammer for the Sistan maps. To the referees I am indebted for their critical reading of the papers and for offering valuable suggestions in their anonymous reviews. The greatest share of thanks is of course due to the authors for submitting their articles and for carefully working their way through many editorial comments. It is my hope that the present collection will contribute to our better knowledge of Iranian minority languages and stimulate further research in this field.

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