Annales Societatis Litterarum Humaniorum
Regiae Upsaliensis

Kungl. Humanistiska Vetenskaps-Samfundet i Uppsala

Årsbok 2019–2020

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http://www.khvsu.se/

Distribution: eddy.se ab
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Telefon: 0498-25 39 00

ISSN 0349-0416
ISBN 978-91-982405-6-6

Produktion: eddy.se ab, Visby 2021
Printed in Sweden by Norra Skåne Offset, Klippan 2021

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From Oral to Written: Selected Points of Divergence Between Oral and Written Wakhi Narratives[1]

By Jaroslava Obrtelová

Figure 1: Tajikistan and the Wakhi-speaking area. Source: © 2019 Google.

1. INTRODUCTION

Wakhi is one of the minority East Iranian "Pamir" languages, which are spoken in remote valleys of the Central Asian mountains. Wakhi, which according to Gulomaliev (2018: 47) has around 72,000 speakers, is spoken in the border areas of four countries – Tajikistan (around 24,000 speakers), Afghanistan (around 17,500), Pakistan (around 22,500) and China (around 8,000). The historical homeland of the Wakhis is the Wakhan Corridor, situated on the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

Wakhi is described as an endangered language. The level of endangerment is conditioned by various factors. In all countries where Wakhi

[1] The present article is a summary of the results presented in the doctoral dissertation *From Oral to Written: A Text-linguistic Study of Wakhi Narratives* available as a printed book as well as online together with the annotated text corpus at: http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-381858.

is spoken, it is a minority language existing in close contact with other languages. In Tajikistan, where this research was conducted, Tajik is the language of wider communication, that is, the language used in official communication, education and religion. Wakhi is spoken in the home setting and between Wakhis in informal situations. For this reason, and because the Wakhis are surrounded by other Pamir languages, young Wakhi speakers grow up in a bi-lingual or even multi-lingual setting. The influence of Tajik is, of course, considerable. During the Soviet era, the influence of Russian was also significant, and many Russian words have made their way into the Wakhi language. With the coming of TV and internet, these influences have become even stronger.

Until recently Wakhi was an unwritten language. However, its endangered status alarmed many Wakhi speakers, and to maintain it for future generations efforts were made to document and develop it by creating an alphabet and publishing written literature. Based on the Cyrillic script, the Wakhi alphabet was first used in 2012 in a book of Wakhi stories for children (Shaidoev 2012). Several publications have since followed, and Wakhi has become a language in the early stages of developing its own orthography and written literature. Given my long-term research interest in Wakhi, this new situation naturally made me curious about the linguistic impact of such a development. Will it, as the Wakhi speakers hope, contribute to the preservation and development of this endangered language? Or will the introduction of a written form instead facilitate the replacement of unique vernacular characteristics by forms adopted from the surrounding literary languages? The question is a complex one, but then so is the sociolinguistic situation of Wakhi.

This article summarizes the results of a text-linguistic study of Wakhi narratives that I undertook during my doctoral studies. The studied material consists of a large corpus of various genres of Wakhi oral and written narratives obtained between 2010 and 2018 among Wakhi speakers and writers in Tajikistan.[2] Instead of making a strictly binary distinction between oral and written, I positioned the stories along a continuum, with spontaneously told oral stories at one end and independently written, edited stories at the other end (*Figure 2*). The stories lying in between these two endpoints display various levels of "oral" and "written" characteristics. Even in written stories, direct speech exhibited characteristics very similar to those in spontaneous oral speech.

[2] During my doctoral studies, I was able to make several research trips to Tajikistan thanks to travel grants provided to me by the Royal Society of Humanities.

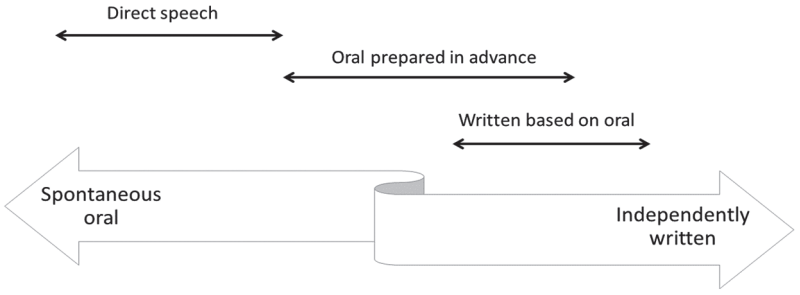

Figure 2: The Oral–Written Continuum

The study focused on the forms that ensure cohesion on the text and syntax levels. These forms were described and compared with regard to their discourse-pragmatic functions in oral and written Wakhi narratives. The default forms were identified and distinguished from the marked forms[3]. In this article, I discuss the main points of divergence that were found between the oral and written forms. Sections 2 and 3 discuss two issues where the oral and written default forms diverge, while Section 4 discusses evidentiality in Wakhi narratives and outlines a potential divergence between the oral and written versions of the language.

2. STORY-DEVELOPMENT TECHNIQUES

Wakhi oral and written narratives differ in how they signal new developments. In oral stories, the default way of marking any new development that moves the action forward is simply to use the development marker (DM)[4] *yan* ('then'). The most extensive use of the DM *yan* is observed in spontaneous oral narratives. Practically every new move in Wakhi oral narration, and every new sentence moving the action forward, can start with the DM *yan*. The use of full nouns is sporadic, and is usually, though not necessarily, limited to introducing a new participant. Highlighting a

[3] Lambrecht's (1994: 17) definition of markedness is as follows. "Given a pair of allosentences, one member is pragmatically unmarked if it serves two discourse functions while the other member serves only one of them. While the marked member is positively specified for some pragmatic features, the unmarked member is neutral with respect to this feature."

[4] Dooley & Levinsohn (2001: 48) define a development marker in functional terms as a particle used to "constrain the reader to move on to the next point".

significant new development is usually done with a temporal expression, often together with the DM (e.g. *yan i rwor* 'then one day').

In written narration, on the contrary, the DM *yan* is used only very sporadically, and when it occurs it has a highlighting function. On the Oral–Written continuum (*Figure 2*), the further to the right the story is located, away from the spontaneous oral end (except for direct speech[5]), the less the DM *yan* is used. New developments in written stories are typically signalled by the use of a full noun and/or a demonstrative. Major developments are signalled by temporal expressions, such as *i rwor* ('one day') or *saarək* ('the next day').

Thus, in oral Wakhi the default way of marking new developments is on "the linkage axis"[6] (i.e. using the DM – a "then" type of connective), whereas in written Wakhi new developments are marked by default on "the agent axis" (i.e. using specific forms of reference to participants, such as full nouns and demonstratives). The two development-marking techniques are illustrated in *Figure 3*, which is an excerpt from the oral and written versions of the story *Frog* (Obrtelová 2019: 292).

Oral – linkage axis (DM; pronoun)	**"Frog" story-line**	**Written – agent axis** (demonstrative; full noun)
DM *yan* he	gave an arrow to each of his three sons	**one day**, the king
DM *yan* they	shot the arrows, the arrows of two reached two pretty girls, the arrow of the third one reached a frog	those sons
DM *yan* the other two	laughed at the third one	those two brothers
DM *yan* he	said… "I will marry her"	that one
DM *yan* he put her in one place		**night came**, that frog turned into a beautiful girl, the lad was surprised…

Figure 3: Story-development techniques

[5] It must be noted that in direct speech, which is a deictically different environment than the narration, *yan* ('then') does not function as development marker but has a role of future "tense" marker.

[6] According to Levinsohn (2015: 101), "[d]evelopment on the **linkage** axis is typically marked by means of connectives" and "[d]evelopment on the **agent** axis is marked on references to participants".

The marking of new developments is related in some way to the forms of participant reference. It is evident from the above examples that participants (personages) in oral narratives are normally referred to by using pronouns, whereas in written narratives, more explicit forms are used, such as full nouns.

A specific feature of Wakhi oral narratives is the concept of taboo. In Wakhan, there are certain beings that should not be overtly mentioned. These are usually either supernatural beings such as angelic personages, fairies, and various sorts of demons, or wild animals that could bring harm to those who talk about them. In Wakhi oral stories, it is common for the first mention of such a participant to be made with only minimal coding, for example a pronoun or even a person-marking suffix on a verb, to avoid the use of the full noun. In the stories narrated among the Wakhis in Wakhan, the narrators and the audience share the same context and background knowledge. Therefore, such minimal coding is sufficient, and all Wakhis know when a supernatural participant has been introduced into a story. However, this becomes more problematic in written stories, which lack the direct contact between the narrator and the audience found in oral stories. The distance between the narrator and the audience (readers, in this case), and the lack of a shared immediate context (i.e. a place where such supernatural beings could cause harm), weaken or even completely eliminate the concept of taboo, and the communication becomes more explicit.

The story-development techniques and participant-reference forms together make up just one example of how the transition of Wakhi, which until recently was an exclusively oral language, into a written language with a published literature changes the native narration patterns.

3. TEMPORAL CLAUSES

Another domain where an essential difference can be found between oral and written narration is adverbial subordinate clauses. I will illustrate this with the most frequent type, namely temporal clauses. In the studied Wakhi oral narratives, the default position of a subordinate temporal clause is pre-nuclear (before the main clause). In discourse-pragmatic terms, this type of temporal clause represents background information and serves as a point of departure for what follows, as illustrated in Example 1 below (Obrtelová 2019: 266):

(1)

{yaw	***ki***	məliq	wʉdrətk}	TEMP	yəmiš	kʉ	təm	cə	wṣ̌ʉkən	larzənəṣ̌
he	**when**	rifle	take.PF		these	all	here	from	fear	shaking

'When he took the rifle, they were all shaking with fear.'

This form of temporal clause is identified as the default in the spontaneously told oral narratives and in direct speech. In written narratives, however, as well as in oral narratives prepared in advance – that is, in narratives situated towards the right end of the Oral–Written continuum (*Figure 2*) – post-nuclear temporal clauses occur more frequently than pre-nuclear ones; see Example 2 below (Obrtelová 2019: 266):

(2)

xila	yomani	dinən	***ki***	{yəm	Ruxšona	kulo	rəwəzd}	TEMP
a lot	each other	hit	**when**	this	Rukhshona	hat	fly	

'They [had] fought each other a lot when (suddenly) Rukhshona's hat flew off.'

In discourse-pragmatic terms, this type of post-nuclear temporal subordinate clause is foregrounded; i.e. it moves the narration forward. As noted by Levinsohn (2015: 149), cross-linguistically, post-nuclear subordinate clauses tend to introduce a piece of "brand new information".

What we observe here is an essential divergence between oral and written narratives in their default forms. Not only does the default position change (pre-nuclear in oral and post-nuclear in written) but the discourse-pragmatic functions of the two types of temporal clauses also differ (background in oral and foreground in written). This indicates that the transition from oral to written also involves structural changes within sentences.

Looking for an explanation of such a phenomenon in the context of areal linguistics, we find that this is not an uncommon development. A transition from originally left-branching (pre-nuclear) structures to the borrowed right-branching (post-nuclear) structures has been described for other languages in the area as well, for example for Kalasha (Bashir 1988). In the cases of both Kalasha and Wakhi, the structure was borrowed from a more dominant literary language – Persian/Tajik.

4. EVIDENTIALITY

An important aspect that has to be taken into account in the study of Wakhi narratives is evidentiality, that is, the distinction between eye-witnessed and all other non-witnessed forms of narratives. This essential distinction is realized in the use of verb forms. Contrary to previous descriptions of the Wakhi verb system, which traditionally explained it as tense-based, in this study I approach Wakhi verbs from the perspective of deictic centre. This is because the tense-based classification of Wakhi verbs was rather confusing and could not unambiguously explain certain uses of Wakhi verb forms, for example when the forms traditionally labelled as a present-future tense were used to refer to present, future and past events. When studying Wakhi on a discourse level, it became clear that that what matters in choosing a verb form is not the position of the event on the time-line, but its relation to the deictic centre (the 'here and now' of the speaker). Bearing this in mind, I describe Wakhi as having:

- a past tense, which is exclusively used for eye-witnessed events grounded in the deictic centre;
- a non-tense, which is a verb form used to refer to events not witnessed by the speaker (and thus, not based in the deictic centre);
- and the aspect-based forms perfect and pluperfect, which express resultativity and anteriority with regard to another event (whether or not grounded in the deictic centre).[7]

Wakhi stories are narrated either as eye-witnessed (in the past tense) or as non-witnessed (in the non-tense). The choice of verb forms reflects the narrator's relation to the narrated story rather than objective facts or the location of events on the time-line. On the Fiction–True Story continuum (*Figure 4*), the distinction between fiction and non-witnessed truth generally has less coding than the distinction between eye-witnessed truth and non-witnessed truth.

Though it is not required, the narrator's stance is often supported by additional elements that can strengthen or weaken the evidentiality. These can, for example, be introductory or closing formulae (e.g. the introductory formulae typical of fairy-tales, which signal the fictional character of the story to be told), or explicit mentioning of the source or of the absence of a source. A special and frequently used device for strengthening evidential-

[7] For a full discussion about approaching the Wakhi verb system from a deictic-centre perspective, see Obrtelová 2019a: 53–68, and Obrtelová 2019b.

ity in Wakhi is "evidential direct speech".[8] After the introductory formula, which grounds the story in the actual deictic centre (the "here and now" of the narrator) and refers to the source of the story (e.g. "so-and-so told me this story"), the entire story is then shifted to another deictic centre and is told as an eye-witnessed story, i.e. in the 1st person and using the past tense. This strategy is used when the narrator is confident that the story is true and should be believed, for example when reporting a true story about a close relative. This strategy is not used in fictional stories.

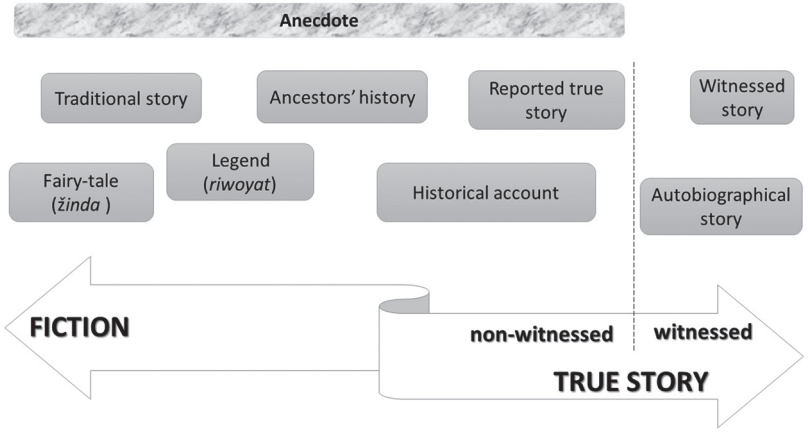

Figure 4: The Fiction–True Story Continuum

With regard to Wakhi oral and written narratives, contrary to my expectation no substantial difference between the two forms was found in expressing evidentiality and the narrator's relation to the story. Even evidential direct speech was used in the written narratives in a similar way as in the oral ones, that is, with total deictic shift after an introductory formula stating the source of the story. In some cases, instead of using the introductory formula, a story mentions the source in the title (e.g. "About a fairy – a story from my brother's life"), after which the entire story is told as an eye-witness account. In my corpus, I have not found any written story that uses evidential direct speech without mentioning the actual source.

It can thus be said, with regard to evidentiality, that at the current stage of Wakhi's development as a language, the introduction of written literature does not seem to have had any significant impact on the language

[8] Mushin (2001: 114) defines evidential direct speech as a strategy which "exploits the total deictic shift function of direct speech representation to completely efface the presence of the reteller, reconstructing narrative information as a purported verbatim rendition of what the previous teller said".

forms. This does not, however, mean that the current deictic centre-based verb system will not be replaced in a perhaps not-too-distant future by a tense-based system, as used in the major literary languages in the neighbourhood. The influence of Tajik, the language of wider communication, certainly cannot be ignored.

Although no major differences were found between oral and written Wakhi narratives, some substantial differences were found when comparing the authentic Wakhi genres with ones adopted from other literary languages. In true stories, local legends and traditional stories, the deictic centre-based verb system is used consistently. However, in fairy-tales, which are normally accessible to Wakhis through the literature of other languages, the use of the verb forms is less consistent, and often the deictic centre-based and tense-based systems are used together. Differences were also observed when comparing the narration of speakers extensively exposed to other languages (mostly Tajik and Russian) with others who were less exposed.

5. CONCLUSION

Introducing a new domain of language use – such as written literature – is generally perceived as a positive development for the preservation of an endangered language. However, will it be able to reverse the language shift that has already taken place and stabilize the language's position on the scale of endangerment? As discussed in this article, this question involves a combination of factors. Tajik, the language of wider communication in the area, plays a central role in Wakhi's development. On the assumption that future Wakhi writers will tend to be more educated than average, and thus will be more exposed to literary Tajik, the introduction of written Wakhi literature can be expected to have an impact on the native Wakhi forms, and as a result could contribute to language endangerment. Furthermore, the emergence of new genres of written Wakhi that are not limited to simple narratives serving as entertainment, but that will have educational or informational functions, for example, will put the viability of Wakhi's specific linguistic features to the test. One thing is clear, however: preserving and developing a language without also erasing many of its native specificities requires more than just an alphabet and literature.

Title of dissertation

Obrtelová, Jaroslava. *From Oral to Written. A Text-linguistic Study of Wakhi Narratives* (Studia Iranica Upsaliensia 35). 333 pp. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2019. ISBN 978-91-513-0664-3.

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SAMMANFATTNING

Från muntligt till skriftligt: Utvalda skillnader mellan muntliga och skriftliga berättelser på wakhi

Wakhi är ett östiranskt pamirspråk i minoritetsställning som talas i gränsområdena mellan fyra länder: Tadzjikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan och Kina. Språket är nära omgärdat av andra språk och påverkas av starkt utvecklade majoritetsspråk vilka används i officiell kommunikation, media, religion och utbildning. I Tadzjikistan, där min forskning genomfördes, är det gängse språket för kommunikation tadzjikiska, och under

lång tid var wakhi endast ett talat språk. Under de senaste åren har dock wakhi-talare gjort stora ansträngningar för att bevara och utveckla sitt modersmål. I Tadzjikistan har dessa aktiviteter lett till skapandet av ett alfabet och publicerandet av ett antal skrivna verk på wakhi.

Denna nya situation för wakhi väckte min nyfikenhet kring den språkliga påverkan av en sådan utveckling på språket. Föreliggande artikel sammanfattar resultaten av en textlingvistisk studie av berättelser på wakhi som utfördes som en del av mina doktorandstudier. Studien fokuserade på de språkliga medel som är sammanhangsskapande på text- och syntaxnivå. Dessa grepp beskrivs och jämförs med avseende på deras diskurs-pragmatiska funktioner i muntliga och skriftliga berättelser på wakhi. Studien baserades på en stor korpus av muntliga och skriftliga berättelser som samlats bland wakhi-talare och -författare i Tadzjikistan.

Artikeln diskuterar tre sorters skillnader mellan muntliga och skriftliga berättelser på wakhi. På textnivå finns det en stor skillnad i den standardform som används för att **markera nya utvecklingar**. I muntliga wakhi-berättelser signaleras normalt nya utvecklingar genom en typ av ”sedan”-konstruktion och med minimal hänvisning till berättelsens karaktärer (vanligtvis är personliga pronomen tillräckliga). Tvärt emot detta är nya utvecklingar i skriftliga berättelser vanligtvis markerade genom användandet av specifika sätt för att referera till karaktärerna (såsom fullständiga substantiv och demonstrativa pronomen). En följd av denna förändring är försvagandet och till och med bortfallet av tabu (en ovilja att uttryckligen nämna vissa övernaturliga personligheter vid namn) i skriftlig wakhi, till skillnad från talad wakhi där företeelsen är vanligt förekommande.

På meningsnivå finns en väsentlig skillnad när det kommer till **tidsbisatser**. Muntliga berättelser på wakhi tenderar att ha dessa bisatser framförställda huvudsatsen, vilket i diskurspragmatiska termer innebär att de förmedlar bakgrundsinformation. Å andra sidan tenderar tidsbisatserna i skriftliga berättelser att vara efterställda huvudsatsen och dessa förmedlar å sin sida förgrundsinformation; de för med andra ord handlingen framåt. Denna avvikelse, som troligen är ett resultat av språkkontakt, indikerar att övergången från muntligt till skriftligt språk också innebär strukturella förändringar.

Den tredje punkten som behandlas är **evidentialitet**. På wakhi görs en betydande skillnad mellan bevittnade och icke-bevittnade berättelser. Denna skillnad återspeglas främst i verbformerna, vilka påverkas med avseende på deras förhållande till det deiktiska centrumet, snarare än på grundval av tempus, som i tadzjikiska. När det kommer till evidentialitet finns det ingen större skillnad mellan det muntliga och skriftliga språket.

Men väsentliga skillnader kan ses mellan de autentiska wakhi-genrerna (t.ex. sanna berättelser, lokala sägner) och genrer som antagits från andra språk med en tradition av skriftlig litteratur (t.ex. sagor). Vidare kan en liknande tendens ses med avseende på hur mycket berättarna kommit i kontakt med tadzjikiska.

Eftersom framtida wakhi-författare troligen kommer att vara mer utbildade än genomsnittet och följaktligen kommer att vara mer i kontakt med litterär tadzjikiska är det möjligt att uppkomsten av en skriftlig wakhi-litteratur kommer att ha en inverkan på de utmärkande lingvistiska dragen i den traditionella wakhi-litteraturen, vilket i slutändan kan bidra till att göra språket än mer utrotningshotat.

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