Case marking from Old Iranian to Ossetic:
A comparative and typological approach

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Among modern Iranian languages, Ossetic stands out for its rich array of nominal cases: eight in the more conservative Digor dialect and nine in Iron, on which the standard language is based (see Fig. 1). The evolution of this case system from that of Old Iranian has long been debated, with some scholars claiming that the dialects ancestral to Ossetic passed through a two-way opposition of the type found in many other Iranian languages (Testen 1996:371–2, Kim 2003:45–6, Kulikov 2009:445–6). An opposing view holds that the extent of syncretism was more limited, and that pre-Ossetic inherited as many as four cases (Cheung 2008, Thordarson 2009:169–70, Belyaev 2010:302–4).

This paper reeexamines the problem in light of recent advances in Ossetic historical phonology and comparison with Sogdian, Khotanese, and other Middle Iranian languages. It is demonstrated that although reflexes of up to five of the eight Old Iranian cases may be identified in the language, there is no compelling argument against the reconstruction of a pre-Ossetic stage contrasting just two cases (DIR *-Ø vs. OBL *-*i*) in lexical nouns and three in pronouns (e.g. DIR *ka* 'who', OBL *ke*, OBL2 *kæm*). Most of the secondary cases arose from postpositional phrases, as is crosslinguistically common, but other grammaticalization paths have played a role, including a postposed pronoun and pattern copying of a lexically restricted denominal suffix (see Fig. 2). An additional strength of the proposed model is that it provides a plausible explanation for the rise of and restrictions on suspended affixation in coordinated noun phrases, which have been examined in theoretical frameworks (Erschler 2012, 2018; Belyaev 2014:39–44, 2021:257–61) but never before considered from a diachronic perspective.

The evolution of the Ossetic case system is also typologically significant in that it refutes the claim that counterexamples to the supposedly unidirectional cycle of change from agglutinative to fusional morphology (Schleicher 1859) must be due to contact (Igartua 2015). Although linguistic contacts have characterized all periods of Ossetic, the shift from cumulative to separative exponence of case and number resulted from generalization of the Old Iranian collective suffix *-*tā*- as the plural marker for all nouns, an isogloss shared with Sogdian and Yaghnobi. Neither this change, nor reduction and subsequent expansion of the case inventory need be ascribed to the effects of nonnative language acquisition.

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	Digor			Iron	
	SINGULAR	PLURAL	NUMERATIVE	SINGULAR	PLURAL
NOMINATIVE	*bæx*	*bæx-tæ*	*bæx-i*	*bæx*	*bæx-tæ*
GENITIVE	*bæx-i*	*bæx-t-i*	*bæx-e-j*	*bæx-y*	*bæx-t-y*
DATIVE	*bæx-æn*	*bæx-t-æn*	*bæx-e-mæn*	*bæx-æn*	*bæx-t-æn*
ALLATIVE	*bæx-mæ*	*bæx-tæ-mæ*	*bæx-e-mæ*	*bæx-mæ*	*bæx-tæ-m*
ABLATIVE	*bæx-æj*	*bæx-t-æj*	*bæx-e-mæj*	*bæx-æj*	*bæx-t-æj*
INESSIVE	*bæx-i*	*bæx-t-i*	*bæx-e-mi*	*bæx-y*	*bæx-t-y*
ADESSIVE	*bæx-bæl*	*bæx-tæ-bæl*	*bæx-e-bæl*	*bæx-yl*	*bæx-t-yl*
EQUATIVE	*bæx-aw*	*bæx-t-aw*	*bæx-ej-aw*	*bæx-aw*	*bæx-t-aw*
COMITATIVE	—	—	—	*bæx-imæ*	*bæx-t-imæ*

Table 1. Paradigm of *bæx* 'horse' in Digor and Iron Ossetic

GENITIVE	Proto-Oss. *-*i*	Old Iranian *a*-stem *-*ahya*, *ā*-stem *-*ayā(h)*
DATIVE	Proto-Oss. *-*æn*	postposed *anu* 'along' or *ana* 'upon'
ALLATIVE	Proto-Oss. *-*me*	postposed pronoun *ahmāi* 'to this one'
ABLATIVE	Proto-Oss. *-*æjæ*	??
INESSIVE	Proto-Oss. *-*i*	see GENITIVE; prononimal LOCATIVE in *-*hm-i*
ADESSIVE	Proto-Oss. *-*bæl*	postposed *upari* 'upon, over'
EQUATIVE	Proto-Oss. *-*aw*	*mā-*, *θwā-want-* 'like me, you.SG'
COMITATIVE	Iron *-imæ*	postposed *iw-mæ* 'in(to) one'

Table 2. Ossetic case markers and their sources