

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

1. HISTORY OF THE YAGHNOBI PEOPLE

The Yaghnobi, who have inhabited the high mountain valley of Yaghnob in west-central Tajikistan for centuries, speak a language that scholars believe is descended from the ancient Sogdian language.¹ The kingdom of Sogdiana existed from before the sixth century BCE until the Arab conquests of the eighth century CE. The Sogdian territory occupied what is now northern Tajikistan and southern Uzbekistan (Raspopova and Shishkina, 1999). From the fifth to the eighth centuries, the Sogdians were the main caravan merchants of the Silk Road, which passed through the Sogdian cities of Samarkand (their capital) and Bukhara (Vaissiere, 2004). The Sogdians also established extensive colonies in what is now western China. Their influence was so extensive that Sogdian, an East-Iranian language, was the lingua franca of Central Asia during the seventh century (Dien, 2007). The region to the south of Sogdiana, Ustrashana (also called Soroushna), was also populated by Sogdian-speaking people (Negmatov, 1999). Its capital, Bunjikat, was near present day Istravshan in northwest Tajikistan (Bosworth, 2005). The dialect of Sogdian spoken in Ustrashana in the eighth century has been

¹ Bielmeier (2006) cites the following scholars who have presented evidence that Yaghnobi is descended from one of the dialects of Sogdian: N. Sims-Williams, "Sogdian," in R. Schmitt, ed., *Compendium Linguarum Iranicarum*, Wiesbaden, 1989, pp. 173-92; I. M. Oranskij, *Die neuiranischen Sprachen der Sowjetunion* I-II, The Hague and Paris, 1975; Khromov, A. L. "Yagnobski yazyk" (Yaghnobi language), in *Osnovy iranskogo yazykoznanija, Novoiranskije yazyki: vostochnaya gruppa* (Essentials of Iranian linguistics, New Iranian languages: eastern group), Moskva, 1987, pp. 644-701.

identified through lexical and phonological similarities as the language from which modern Yaghnobi has descended.

After the Sogdians were defeated by Arab invaders at the battle of Mount Mugh in 722 CE, many of them fled Arab domination to live in the high mountain valleys (Whitfeld, 2005). According to Belyakov (2003) the village of Pskon in the Yaghnob valley became a de facto capital for the Sogdian refugees. It appears that the Sogdian refugees remained fairly isolated from outside authority and influence, although significant numbers were subject to forced conversion to Islam. Eventually all of the Yaghnobi adopted Islam, but they also retained Zoroastrian beliefs, which continue to be a part of their religious practice (Donovan, 2007).

In the 17th century a significant number of Yaghnobis migrated to the Varzob valley (Bielmeier, 2006), which is mainly populated by Tajiks and closer to the lowland population centers. A sizable Yaghnobi population remains there in half a dozen villages today. The Yaghnobis' land came under control of the tsar in 1870, but Russian authority was mainly in name only. Aside from tax collection, from which the Yaghnobis were exempted in 1895, there was little control exercised by the Russians, and the Yaghnobi remained isolated by the high mountains surrounding their homeland. The first scientific records of the Yaghnobi language were made in 1870 by the Russian scholar Alexander L. Kuhn and his Tajik companion and interpreter Mirza Mulla Abdurrakhman, from Samarkand.

In the 1920s, the Bolsheviks took control of Russian Turkestan, but because of the rugged terrain surrounding the Yaghnob valley they exercised no real control until 1930

when the first soviet was established in the village of Naumetkan in Yaghnob. In 1929 the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic was created. The Yaghnob valley was in the territory of the Tajik SSR and is about sixty miles from Dushanbe, which was designated the capital of the Tajik SSR. With the Soviet political apparatus developing at closer proximity to the Yaghnob valley, further attempts were made to sovietize the Yaghnobi, including the establishment of two largely unsuccessful collective farms in the 1930s. In spite of the increasing Soviet control over the Tajik SSR, the Yaghnobi continued to remain relatively isolated and autonomous because of the absence of roads through the high passes into the Yaghnob valley (Donovan, 2007).

During 1970 and 1971 the Soviet authorities forcibly deported the entire population of the Yaghnob valley to the cotton plantations in the area of Zafarabod on the northwest border between the Tajik and Uzbek SSRs. The deportation was both politically and economically motivated. The fact that the Yaghnobis' remote location had allowed them to effectively resist sovietization, coupled with the pressing economic need for laborers in the cotton fields, motivated the government to send armed soldiers to remove the Yaghnobi people from their mountain homes by force and fly them by helicopter to grow cotton in irrigated desert land. The population of the Yaghnob valley at that time numbered between three and four thousand. Due to the harsh desert climate with temperatures over 105 degrees Fahrenheit, inadequate housing, lack of sanitary drinking water, and exposure to tuberculosis, between 400 and 700 Yaghnobis died during their first year in Zafarabod (Donovan, 2007). During the first few years some of the Yaghnobi fled back to the Yaghnob valley, only to be deported again (Loy, 2006).

In 1990 the Dushanbe based Council of Ministers passed a resolution to reestablish all villages from which people had been deported (Bielmier, 2006). Tajikistan became an independent country in 1991. Since independence the government of Tajikistan has promoted national awareness of the country's Sogdian heritage as part of an effort to construct a national identity. Although the Yaghnobi are now permitted to return to live in the Yaghnob valley, only about three hundred have done so, since all of the homes have been destroyed and the valley is completely lacking any kind of infrastructure or economic base. About 6,500 Yaghnobis remain in Zafarabod, the largest Yaghnobi population center (Paul et al., 2005). In spite of the suffering and hardship they have experienced, they have retained much of their culture and continue to speak Yaghnobi as their first language.

2. STATUS OF THE YAGHNOBI LANGUAGE

The Yaghnobi language is classified as endangered in the *UNESCO Red Book of Endangered Languages*² (2003). However, a survey conducted during 2003 and 2004 (Paul et al., 2005) indicated that the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Yaghnobi language is strong.

The *UNESCO Red Book* gives only a brief summary of the criteria used for determining the language status. This is the entire entry on Yaghnobi:

- Children speakers: very few
- Mean age of youngest speakers: 10-?

² Another UNESCO publication, *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing* (2001), does not list Yaghnobi as an endangered language.

- Distribution by sex: even;
- Total number of speakers, members of the ethnic group: 2,000 -
- Degree of speakers' competence: medium or less, to good
- Published and unpublished material (of the language): Khromov, A.L. 1972, *The Yaghnobi Language* (in Russian), Moscow.
- Competent scholar(s) and institution(s): c/- V.I. Belikov, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow.

It is difficult to assess the accuracy of the UNESCO classification of the Yaghnobi language since the researchers do not give sources or dates for the data they used. Sources from the first half of the twentieth century, however, do list a similar number of Yaghnobi speakers.

- 1913: Junker (1930) reported that there were approximately 2,200 native speakers in 21 villages.
- 1926: According to the government census the number of Yaghnobi was 1,800.
- 1960s: Khromov reported 2,400 Yaghnobi speakers; 1500 living in 22 villages in the Yaghnob valley and 900 living outside the valley.

Several aspects of the language situation described in the brief UNESCO entry are quite different from those described by Paul, et al. Most significantly, the latter reported that there are approximately 13,500 mother-tongue Yaghnobi speakers and that the overwhelming majority of children are learning Yaghnobi as a first language.

The map in Figure 1.1 shows the areas of Tajikistan with sizable Yaghnobi populations. According to Paul et al. (2005), the Yaghnobi population for each region is:

- Yagnobi river valley (traditional homeland): 322
- Zafarabod area (largest population center): 6,549
- Upper Varzob river valley: 1,288
- Lower Varzob river valley: 1,111
- Southern Tajikistan: 700
- Dushanbe (capital of Tajikistan): 3,500

Figure 1.1. Map of Yagnobi communities



Base map © United Nations Development Programme, Tajikistan.

Paul et. al. (2005) conducted extensive interviews in a number of Yagnobi villages over a two year period. Table 1.1 summarizes the results of their interviews and observations for three key population centers:

1. The Yagnob valley, which is the most isolated location, as well as being the original homeland and cultural center for the Yagnobi people.
2. Zumand village, one of the more isolated, yet populous (population 655), villages in the upper Varzob valley.
3. The Zafarabod region, which is by far the major population center.

Table 1.1. Language situation in three Yaghnobi villages

	Yaghnob valley	Zumand	Zafarabod
Ethnic identity	Self identity based on speaking Yaghnobi and having Sogdian ancestry. Being Yaghnobi is considered good.		
Tajik proficiency (scale of 1 - 5)	Women: 2+ Men: 3+	Women: 2+ Men: 3+	All: 3 - 4
Contact with Tajik	All: Currently low, medium-high in the past	Women: Low Men: Medium-high	All with occupations outside the home: High Others: Low
Domains of use	Yaghnobi for all domains	Tajik for official domains, Yaghnobi for informal domains.	
Attitudes to Yaghnobi literature	Positive	Positive	Positive, with preference for audio-visual media

These results show that the Yaghnobi communities are maintaining a strong positive sense of self identity, contact with the majority (Tajik) community remains fairly low, and very few people are fully fluent in Tajik. Most importantly, Tajik is only being used in domains where it is required for communication with non-Yaghnobi speakers.

Paul et al. (2005) also assessed the status of the Yaghnobi language according to eleven factors known to affect language shift (Grenoble and Whaley, 1998). These factors are shown in Table 1.2 and are marked positive if they indicate linguistic vitality and negative if they indicate language shift. The authors conclude that since seven indicators are positive, three mixed, and only one negative, the vitality of the language is strong.

Table 1.2. Assessment of sociolinguistic factors affecting language shift

Demography: positive	The total population of 13,500 is well above 3,000, the typical critical level for Asia (Grimes 1986), and they tend to live in homogenous villages or homogenous neighborhoods in villages with both Tajik and Yaghnobi.
Sociology: positive	Both parents in most families are Yaghnobi speakers and are transmitting the language to their children.

Linguistics: mixed	Tajik is easy for Yaghnobis to learn since it has the same basic word order as Yaghnobi (subject, object, verb) and a large shared vocabulary.
Psychology: positive	Contentment and commitment to existing social networks among Yaghnobis is high, although the younger generation in some of the communities is more willing to form associations with Tajiks than the older generation.
History: positive	Yaghnobi people take pride in their Sogdian heritage. The injustice of the Soviet forced migrations in the '70s has left them feeling united in the just cause of seeking reparation from the outside world.
Politics: positive	The government has given official recognition to the Yaghnobi language and allows Yaghnobi literacy to be taught to Yaghnobi children in grades one through four.
Geography: positive	The isolation produced by the rugged mountains surrounding the Yaghnob valley and the upper Varzob discourage in-migration and limit contact with Tajiks.
Education and literacy: mixed	Although classes about the Yaghnobi language have been taught in elementary schools, the classes were taught in Tajik. On the other hand, literacy in Tajik is easily transferred to Yaghnobi since both languages use the same orthography.
Religion: negative	The vast majority follow Sunni Islam which is the same religion as the majority population. In addition, surveys show a consensus that Tajik and Persian are the appropriate languages for religious literature.
Economics: neutral	Economic pressures have not produced significant migration to Tajik speaking communities. Rural communities practicing subsistence farming only need to know rudimentary Tajik to sell their surplus in neighboring Tajik communities.
Media: positive	Radio and/or television are available in most Yaghnobi communities. Frequent, positive references are made to the Yaghnobi. Although the majority of programming is in Tajik and Russian, Yaghnobi songs and poems are heard with some regularity.

The conclusion of Paul et al. is that since seven indicators are positive, three mixed, and only one negative, the ethnolinguistic vitality of the language is strong. However, two of the factors they evaluated as positive, education and the economy, need to be reevaluated. Education is now a more negative factor, since the government is not

providing funding for printing Yaghnobi text books or hiring Yaghnobi teachers. As a result, Yaghnobi classes were no longer being taught as of the school year of 2006.

The economy could actually be a negative factor. In the mountainous areas of Yaghnob and the upper Varzob, the main agricultural activity is raising livestock. In Zafarabod it is mainly cultivation of cotton and vegetable crops. In these regions it makes sense that the economy is a neutral factor. However, in the lower Varzob and Dushanbe much of the economy is dependant on employment in the nation's capital, Dushanbe. In addition, seasonal work in Russia accounts for a major percentage of cash income. According to the Tajik government, 600,000 Tajiks are employed in seasonal work in Russia (RFE/RL, 2007), although unofficial estimates are double this number. Since the male population of Tajikistan between 15 and 64 years of age is approximately 2.145 million (CIA, 2007), 1.2 million migrant workers constitute about half of the male working population. If the same proportion of Yaghnobi men were going to Russia as in the overall population, this would have a negative impact on the language situation, since it further breaks down the isolation of the Yaghnobi community and increases contact with majority languages.

In spite of these revisions to the assessment of sociolinguistic factors, this conclusion that the ethnolinguistic vitality of Yaghnobi is strong concurs with our observations made during the three months spent living in Dughoba, in the upper Varzob. However, it was apparent that the form of language passed on from parents to their children contains more borrowed Tajik words and sometimes borrowed Tajik grammatical constructions.

The Yaghnobi language as it is spoken now, and even as it was spoken in the mid-1900s (Andreev, 1957), has been heavily influenced by Tajik. The Yaghnobi data analyzed for this thesis bears this out. Out of a spoken corpus of 7,585 words, containing 1,020 distinct words and affixes, 360 are identical with Tajik words. An additional 80 words are phonetically very similar to Tajik words, which results in a total of 480 words, or 47% of the lexicon, that appear to be borrowed. The majority of the borrowed words are nouns, while the verbs, pronouns, prepositions, and the basic grammatical structure remain significantly different from Tajik, although these categories have also been affected to some degree. This kind of "dilution" of the language does not qualify a language as being in danger of disappearing, but the language is in danger of losing more and more of its distinctiveness. If this trend continues, Yaghnobi will one day become mutually intelligible with Tajik and yet another aspect of the cultural distinctiveness of the Yaghnobi people will be lost.

3. SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY OF THIS STUDY

The purpose of this thesis is to describe the morphosyntax of the Yaghnobi language from the level of the morpheme to the level of the simple clause. This paper is written from functional-typological and synchronic perspectives. This means that this grammar description is organized primarily by categories of language function which have been identified as typologically universal.³ Each category is described in terms of the language structures (i.e. grammar) that are used to accomplish these functions. This

³ Typologists use the term *universal* to mean that a particular language property is represented by a statistically significant sampling of the world's languages, but not necessarily every language.

description gives only a synchronic description of the contemporary use of the language. An investigation into the historical development of the language needs to be done but will require further research.

This description is based on data provided by six first-language Yaghnobi speakers. The majority of the data was transcribed by the author of this paper, although some of the texts were transcribed by Yaghnobi professor Dr. Saiffidin Mirzozoda. The data that was analyzed for this paper consists of 720 elicited sentences and 560 sentences of narrative texts. The elicited sentences were provided by three consultants ranging in age from twenty to forty-five. The texts were provided by four consultants who ranged from middle-aged to elderly.