Alexandra Ioannisiani, Sviatoslav Kaverin

Argument-marking in Tregami and Zemiaki against the Nuristani Kalasha background

In the highly multilingual Kunar–Pech area, the Nuristani languages underwent convergence with the Hindukush Indo-Aryan languages following the centuries of small-scale reciprocal interactions of the scattered pastoralist communities forming an interconnected constellation of Western Peristan (Liljegren 2022, 2023). Set in its core, “Ashkun” (SW-Nur cluster) and “Nuristani Kalasha” (SE-Nur cluster) evolved separately, although their “Kalasha” ethnocultural identity (Klimburg 1999) is shared with the speakers of the outlying Tregami and Zemiaki, as well as with the famous IA Kalasha of Lower Chitral. Now nearly abandoned (Tegethoff & Kaverin 2023:439-441), Zemiaki diverged from Nuristani Kalasha less than Tregami which demonstrates exclusive features (Degener 2022:80-83) developed in a peculiar contact environment (Strand 2000). The genetic relations of these "satellite" and “clustered” idioms are yet to be traced.

This paper aims to contribute to the study of these lesser-known Nuristani language varieties by describing such seminal features of their grammar as case marking and alignment systems. [Kreidl 2024] explains the Nuristani system of split-ergativity (excluding Prasun) as tense-driven, which differs from the aspect-driven system common to Indo-Aryan. The other distinct feature of Nuristani languages is the use of the oblique case to mark the ergative agent in the past tenses instead of utilizing a specialized ergative marker. That said, Zemiaki data fits well into the Nuristani system:

(1) Zemiaki (Grünberg 1971)

Aké	tanú	koi	xalás	**c-am**
1SG.DIR	REFL	work	finish	**do-1SG.PRS**

‘I am finishing my work.’

(2) Zemiaki (Grünberg 1971)

Salim=a	yau	**pači-ṭi**
Salim=OBL	bread.DIR	**bake-3SG.PST**

‘Salim baked the bread.’

(3) Zemiaki (Grünberg 1971)

Ũ	tu	ám-ba	déš-kanà	**nà-wẽtú-ṭiš**
1SG.OBL	2SG.DIR	1PL-GEN	village=LOC	**NEG-see-2SG.PST**

‘I haven't seen you in our village.’

(4) Zemiaki (Grünberg 1971)

Ake	dus	**á-ṭim**
1SG.DIR	yesterday	**come-1SG.PST**

‘I came here yesterday.’

Tregami data, on the other hand, differs drastically. As mentioned in [Degener 2022], Tregami uses a specialized ergative marker ***-pə***, but the past transitive verb agrees with the subject, not the object, as seen in (6):

(5) Tregami (Degener 2022)

ǰũt	šãletr	atə	**go**
leopard.DIR	stable	inside	**go.PST.3SG.M**

‘The leopard went inside the stable.’

(6) Tregami (Degener 2022)

laušeki-pə	ṣumi	jago-sə-kane	**žũ-s**
fox-ERG	all.six	child-POSS.3-PL	**eat.PST-3SG**

‘The fox ate all her six children.’

Although the conclusion above was made based on the limited Tregami data available at the time, our newly elicited data confirms it:

(7) Tregami (elicitation)

Age	žara	koi	**ke-g-am**
1SG.DIR	1SG.POSS	work	**do-PRS-1SG**

‘I am doing my work.’

(8) Tregami (elicitation)

Že-pə	kalem-i	yu	xatt	**lik-e-m**
1SG-ERG	pen-INST	a	letter	**write-PST-1SG**

‘I wrote a letter with a pen.’

In the talk, we will provide a detailed description of case and alignment systems in these two crucially understudied Nuristani languages based on elicited (Ioannisiani & Kaverin 2026) and previously unpublished field materials (Grünberg 1963; Kaverin 2023, 2025). We will also compare our data to (i) Nuristani Kalasha and (ii) geographically close Dardic (HKIA) languages, attempting to explain the current state of the Tregami system.

References

Degener, Almuth. 2022. The Wolf and the Kids in the Devozi dialect of Tregami // The Nuristani languages in synchrony and diachrony. Wiesbaden. P. 79–112.

Grünberg, Alexander. 1963. Field research materials: Zemiaki. Manuscript. (in Russian)

Grünberg, Alexander. 1971. On the dialectology of the Dardic languages: Grangali and Zemiaki // Indijskaja i Iranskaja Filologija. Voprosy Dialektologii. Moscow. P. 3–29. (in Russian)

Ioannisiani, Alexandra & Sviatoslav Kaverin. 2026. Field research materials: Gambiri online sessions 2025/2026. Manuscript. (in English)

Kaverin, Sviatoslav. 2023. Field research materials: Nuristan, Kunar, Nangarhar, Kabul. Manuscript. (in Russian)

Kaverin, Sviatoslav. 2025. Field research materials: Nuristan, Kunar, Kapisa, Kabul. Manuscript. (in Russian)

Klimburg, Max. 1999. The Kafirs of the Hindu Kush: Art and Society of the Waigal and Ashkun Kafirs. 2 vols. Stuttgart. 431+825 pp.

Kreidl, Julian. 2024. Split-ergativity in Nuristani Languages // IULC Working Papers. Vol. 21, no. 1. https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/iulcwp/article/view/37799

Liljegren, Henrik. 2022. Nuristani in its areal and typological context // International Journal of Diachronic Linguistics and Linguistic Reconstruction. № 19. P. 201–265.

Liljegren, Henrik. 2023. The languages of Peristan through the lens of areal typology // Roots of Peristan: The pre-Islamic cultures of the Hindukush / Karakorum. Part I. Roma. P. 91–431.

Strand, Richard. The tregâmi. 2000. https://nuristan.info/Nuristani/Tregami/tregami.html

Tegethoff, Robert. & Sviatoslav Kaverin. 2023. Documenting Grangali // Roots of Peristan: The pre-Islamic cultures of the Hindukush/Karakorum. P. 433–452.