Diversity of transitive constructions in several Pamir languages

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This paper presents a study of argument marking in transitive constructions based on data from several Iranian Pamir languages: Shughni, Rushani, Sipanj and Basid Bartangi, and Ishkashimi. A feature of transitive constructions in these languages is that they can formally coincide with intransitive constructions. The data used in this study were collected in the field (Tajikistan, 2022-2026), mostly with a questionnaire designed for the BivalTyp database. In addition, we drew on data from corpus texts (Makarov et al. 2022) as well as specialised studies of the markers addressed in this study (Bossong 1985; Belyaev 2026; Chistiakova 2022; Chistiakova in prep.; Chistiakova & Verstraete in prep.).

BivalTyp (Say 2020) is a typological database designed to capture the encoding frames of predicates with two arguments. The database includes 130 contexts with meanings that can be transitive or intransitive in different languages. A transitive construction is defined as one used with verbs such as 'kill' and 'break' (see Hopper & Thompson 1980; Malchukov & Comrie 2015, among others); constructions in which two participants are encoded in the same way as with the verb 'kill' are analysed as transitive ones.

In modern Iranian languages, the ancient rich case system was often reduced to a two-term case system or completely lost (Stilo 2009: 702). In the Pamir languages examined in this study, the distinction between subjects and objects is expressed primarily through word order, which follows a more or less strict SOV pattern. However, our data reveal additional strategies for argument marking, although their distribution varies across the languages. In this study, we focus on two markers: the preposition *az* for dependent marking of O, and the 3sg subject enclitic *=i* for head marking of A and S_A.

The first marker *az* is used as an elative preposition in all the languages under study (1a). Bartangi (and to some extent Rushani) additionally exhibits differential object marking with the same marker *az*, obligatorily used for pronouns, noun phrases modified with demonstratives and for proper names (Belyaev 2024), resulting in the ambiguous status of the object (1b).

(1) Basid Bartangi

a. *Ahmed* ***az*** *čöd* *naxtūy-d*
Ahmed EL house go_out-PST
"Ahmed went out from the house"

b. *Ahmed* ***az*** *Abdullo* *zö-d*
Ahmed D.OBJ Abdullo kill-PST

“Ahmed killed Abdullo”

The second case-study investigates split intransitivity in head marking. In Pamiri languages, verbs in past tenses agree with the subject through second-position person-number enclitics. Shughni, Rushani, and Sipanj Bartangi stand out in demonstrating split intransitivity in one specific context with a 3sg subject in past tenses: while all person-number clitics are used similarly with both A and any S, the 3sg clitic *=i* is used with A (2a) and S_A (2b), thus uniting “active intransitive” and transitive contexts, but cannot be used with S_P.

(2) Shughni

a. *Šamil=**i*** *Azim* *zī-d*
Shamil=3SG Azim kill-PST
“Shamil killed Azim”

b. *Azim=**i*** *lodka=qati* *tar* *qoq-i* *firīp-t*
Azim=3SG boat=INS EQ dry-SUBST reach-PST
“Azim reached the bank in a boat”

The two problematic markers appear in different combinations across the languages (Table 1) and pose challenges in distinguishing transitive patterns from intransitive ones.

	Shughni	Rushani	Sipanj Bartangi	Basid Bartangi	Ishkashimi
az for definite direct object	–	occasionally	+	+	–
=i for A/S_A	+	+	+	–	occasionally

Table 1. Distribution of two markers across languages studied.

In the talk, we will also discuss the historical development of these markers and the geographical clines observed in the data.

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