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Between Afghanistan and the Caucasus: Historical Linguistic Connections and Cultural Parallels between Pashto and Ossetic

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Abstract

Pashto, spoken mainly in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Ossetic, spoken in the Central Caucasus, have historically related linguistic traditions, although their speakers live more than two thousand kilometres apart and in distinct sociolinguistic and cultural settings. This article explores the linguistic connections between the two languages, the ways in which they have developed separately, and selected cultural practices that provide opportunities for comparison. It adopts a qualitative comparative approach, combining original interview data collected through telephone interviews with five adult Pashto speakers in Afghanistan and published linguistic, historical and ethnographic scholarship on Pashto and Ossetic. The interviews provide first-hand insights into Pashto vocabulary, language identity, Pashtunwali and marriage practices, particularly walwar and badal. Zyar's (2001, pp. 8–12) discussion provides a historical point of reference for examining Pashto and Ossetic as distinct languages with related linguistic traditions. The linguistic comparison draws on specialist scholarship to examine inherited features, lexical correspondences and grammatical differences. The cultural discussion considers marriage arrangements, family relationships, customary values and oral traditions, treating similarities as comparative observations rather than evidence of a shared cultural origin. The article contributes original interview material from Afghanistan to the discussion and identifies areas for further comparative research with Ossetic speakers. Its educational contribution is an analysis of how comparative language material may support evidence-based inquiry, intercultural understanding and reflection on the aims of language education. These educational applications are proposed implications rather than findings from a classroom intervention.

Keywords: Pashto; Ossetic; Iranian languages; comparative linguistics; qualitative research; Pashtunwali; walwar; badal; cultural identity; oral traditions. Language education; intercultural understanding; educational philosophy; curriculum.

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Introduction

Terminological clarification. In this article, *Iranian* (also termed *Iranic*) is used exclusively as a historical-linguistic classification within the broader Indo-Iranian branch of Indo-European. It is not a designation of nationality, political affiliation or ownership by the modern state of Iran, and its use does not express praise for any country. Pashto and Ossetic are discussed as distinct languages with their own historical development; they are not presented as varieties of Persian or as languages descended from Persian. The geographical expression *Caucasus* does not imply that all languages spoken there belong to this linguistic branch.

References to Old Persian inscriptions concern surviving written evidence for one language in the wider group. They do not establish Persian as the ancestor of Pashto or Ossetic, and the date of a language's earliest surviving written attestation should not be equated with the age of that language. Linguistic relatedness is distinguished throughout this article from modern national borders, political claims and cultural identity.

Zyar (2001, pp. 8–11) provides a useful Pashto-language account of this historical classification. He uses *Aryanian* (*Āryāni*), alongside *Iranian*, for the related linguistic group and discusses Old Persian, Avestan, Median, Parthian and Saka as distinct historical languages. His discussion separates western and eastern developments rather than treating Persian as the source of every language in the group. In this account, Persian belongs to the western grouping, whereas Pashto and Ossetic are discussed in relation to eastern or north-eastern linguistic developments.

Zyar (2001, pp. 9, 12) also explicitly refers to Ossetic in the Caucasus, including its Nart tradition, in his discussion of Saka linguistic and cultural legacies. These passages provide a basis for introducing Pashto, Persian and Ossetic as historically related but distinct languages. Here, *Iranian/Iranic* and Zyar's *Āryāni* terminology refer to a historical-linguistic grouping, while *Persian* names a particular language and *Caucasus* names a geographical region. The terminology does not establish ownership by a modern state, and this article does not extend Ossetic's classification to all languages of the Caucasus.

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The Iranian languages form a large family whose modern members are spoken across a wide geographical area, extending from the Caucasus in the west to the eastern regions of Central Asia and beyond. Among the earliest written records of Iranian languages are Old Persian inscriptions dating from around the sixth century BCE. “Two members of this family, Pashto and Ossetic, are the subject of this article. Pashto is the language of the Pashtuns and is spoken in Afghanistan, Pakistan and, by a much smaller number of people, in Iran. Ossetic is spoken in the Central Caucasus, mainly in North Ossetia–Alania in the Russian Federation and in the South Ossetian region of Georgia” (Morgenstierne, 1983; Thordarson, 2009). The two communities live more than two thousand kilometres apart. The sources consulted for this study do not establish direct historical contact between the two communities or demonstrate that such contact explains the linguistic similarities discussed here.

In his survey of Pashto for the Encyclopaedia Iranica, “Georg Morgenstierne remarked that Pashto has preserved many Iranian morphological features and that, in this respect, only Ossetic can match it or even do better” (Morgenstierne, 1983, para. 71). This observation provides a valuable starting point for examining the two languages together. Both have preserved features of their Iranian linguistic heritage, although they have developed under very different external influences: Pashto has been in contact with Indo-Aryan languages, while Ossetic has developed in a multilingual Caucasian environment shaped by contact with Caucasian, Turkic and Georgian languages.

Taking Morgenstierne's observation as a starting point, this article goes beyond vocabulary to consider three main questions. First, what linguistic features do Pashto and Ossetic still share as members of the Iranian language family, and in what ways have they developed differently? Second, how can historical inheritance be distinguished from borrowing and accidental resemblance? Third, do the social and cultural practices of the two communities, particularly those concerning marriage, family life, hospitality and oral traditions, offer opportunities for meaningful and responsible comparison?

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The article also has a broader cultural purpose. Many readers in Afghanistan may know little about the Ossetians, while readers in the Caucasus may have limited knowledge of the Pashtuns. A comparison based on reliable academic sources and original interview material can help introduce these communities to one another. At the same time, we approach cultural similarities cautiously. Similar customs may develop independently, and communities that speak historically related languages do not necessarily share the same cultural practices or social organisation. For this reason, the article distinguishes historical-linguistic evidence from cultural observations and identifies the sources on which its arguments are based.

The next section explains the research methods and sources used in the study. The article then outlines the separate historical development of Pashto and Ossetic before examining their vocabulary and grammatical features. The cultural comparison considers language and identity, marriage, hospitality and customary norms, and oral traditions. Finally, the discussion and conclusion evaluate what the available linguistic, documentary and interview evidence allows us to establish and identify directions for further research involving speakers of both languages.

This comparative inquiry also has an educational and philosophical purpose. It considers how learners can encounter linguistic relatedness without confusing it with cultural sameness, and how teachers can discuss identity without reducing either community to a fixed set of traits. UNESCO’s guidance connects intercultural education with respect for learners’ cultural identities and opportunities for dialogue, while its multilingual education guidance recognises the educational importance of learners’ languages (UNESCO, 2006, 2025). These principles provide a context for the educational implications developed below; they do not constitute evidence that the activities proposed in this article have been tested in classrooms.

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Method and Sources

This study adopts a qualitative comparative approach, combining primary interview data with secondary documentary sources. The primary data consist of telephone interviews conducted with five adult Pashto speakers in Afghanistan, aged between 24 and 40. Participants were from Nangarhar, Laghman and Kunar provinces and voluntarily shared their knowledge and experiences.

The interviews explored Pashto vocabulary, language and cultural identity, Pashtunwali, and marriage-related customs, particularly *walwar* and *badal*. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. To protect participants' privacy, their identities are anonymised and they are referred to as P1–P5 throughout the article.

The primary interview material is considered alongside published linguistic, historical and ethnographic research on Pashto and Ossetic. These secondary sources provide the basis for examining the languages' historical development, linguistic features and cultural contexts. Since the study does not include interviews with Ossetic speakers, comparisons concerning Ossetic are based on published scholarship rather than newly collected field data.

The findings are interpreted cautiously. The five interviews offer specific contemporary perspectives and are not intended to represent all Pashto speakers or communities.

A Note on Transcription

Pashto forms are adapted from Morgenstierne (1983) in a simplified romanization: ā is a long vowel, ə a weak central vowel, x a voiceless velar fricative, š corresponds approximately to English sh, and ts and dz stand for the dental affricates. Ossetic forms use the authors’ simplified Romanisation, including *æ* and *y*. These correspond to *ä* and *i̱*, respectively, in the transcription used by Thordarson (2009); *y* represents the high central vowel described in that source. The symbols are transliteration conventions and should not be read as literal International Phonetic Alphabet values. Table 1 presents twelve proposed Pashto–Ossetic lexical comparisons associated with common Old Iranian antecedents. These comparisons illustrate how words inherited from an earlier linguistic

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source may develop differently over time. Their historical relationships should be understood through established linguistic evidence and sound correspondences, rather than through similarities in their modern forms alone.

In the running text and comparative tables, Pashto lexical forms are identified as Pashto and set in italics; Ossetic forms are labelled separately. The English items in quotation marks are glosses, not alternative spellings of the source-language words. For example, Pashto *plār* (‘father’), *wror* (‘brother’), *nūm* (‘name’) and *špa* (‘night’) are Romanised Pashto forms. The symbols ā and ū indicate long vowels; ə represents a central vowel; x and š represent sounds commonly rendered kh and sh in less technical English spelling. The combinations ts and dz represent the dental affricates used in the source transcription. Greek-derived symbols appearing in reconstructed Old Iranian forms, including θ, belong to the historical notation and do not identify the words as Greek. The simplified scholarly Romanisation already used in the manuscript is retained so that the comparisons remain traceable to their cited sources. Cultural terms such as *walwar*, *badal*, *nang* and *melmastia* retain the spellings used in the supplied study.

Two Iranian Languages with Different Histories

Pashto

Morgenstierne (1983, para. 69) places Pashto in the north-eastern branch of Iranian. The demographic estimates in that survey are historical and are not presented here as current population figures. Classical Pashto has been recorded in writing since the sixteenth century (Morgenstierne, 1983, para. 6), and Morgenstierne argued that the modern dialects can be derived from a prototype not very different from that classical language. The historical geographical origins of Pashto remain less certain. Morgenstierne (1983, para. 70) suggested, with caution, that its original home may have been in Badakhshan, between the areas of the Munji language and of Sanglechi and Shughni, and that the Old Iranian ancestor of Pashto must have stood close to the language of the Avestan

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Gathas. He also stressed the early and deep influence of Indo-Aryan languages on Pashto (para. 71). We present these points as informed hypotheses, not as settled facts.

Ossetic

Thordarson (2009) describes Ossetic as an eastern Iranian language whose linguistic ancestors were Alan tribes. According to Greek and Roman sources they moved from Central Asia to the lands north and east of the Black Sea around the beginning of the Christian era. In the early Middle Ages the Alans were a leading people in the north-western Caucasus, but their language was gradually pushed back by Turkic and Circassian newcomers, and today Ossetic is spoken in a relatively small region. Kim (2003) likewise describes Ossetic as the only surviving descendant of the north-eastern Iranian dialects of the Scythians, Sarmatians and Alans.

“Ossetic has thus been separated from its Central Asian sister languages for a very long time and has been spoken among non-Iranian languages throughout” (Thordarson, 2009). It has two dialects. Iron is the basis of the literary and administrative language, while Digor is in most respects the more archaic of the two. Most speakers are bilingual, and Thordarson notes that bilingualism with neighbouring languages has probably been normal in the North Caucasus for a very long time.

What the Two Histories Have in Common

Neither source suggests a special or exclusive link between Pashto and Ossetic. Their shared features reflect the broader inheritance of the north-eastern Iranian family. Their paths then separated, and the outside influences that shaped them differ. As far as the sources show, neither language has written records from the Old or Middle Iranian periods, so both histories have been reconstructed by comparison with other Iranian languages. This limitation reinforces the importance of careful comparative methods in this field.

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Linguistic Comparison

Inherited Vocabulary

Table 1 presents twelve proposed Pashto–Ossetic lexical comparisons associated with common Old Iranian antecedents. These comparisons illustrate how words inherited from an earlier linguistic source may develop differently over time. Their historical relationships should be understood through established linguistic evidence and sound correspondences, rather than through similarities in their modern forms alone.

Table 1

Twelve Pashto and Ossetic Word Pairs Traced to Common Old Iranian Sources

Meaning	Pashto	Ossetic (Iron / Digor)	Old Iranian source	Comment
father	plār	fyd / fidæ	*pitar-†	Pashto kept p and turned t into l; Ossetic turned initial p into f.
mother	mor	mad / madæ	*mātar-†	The Pashto form reflects an oblique stem.
brother	wror	ærvad / ærvadæ	*brātar-	Ossetic also means “cousin, kinsman”.
sister	xor	xo / xuæræ	*xwahar-	Iron form from an old nominative, Digor from an oblique stem.
name	nūm	nom	*nāman-	The vowel before the nasal narrowed in both.
fire	or	art	*āθr-	Pashto assimilated the cluster; Ossetic kept both consonants, reversed.
night	špa	æxsæv / æxsævæ	*xšap- (Ossetic *xšapan-)	Pashto shortened early; Ossetic p became v between vowels.
three	dre	ærtæ	*θrayah	Pashto voiced the first consonant; Ossetic reversed the order.

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Meaning	Pashto	Ossetic (Iron / Digor)	Old Iranian source	Comment
four	tsalor	cyppar / cuppar	*čaθwāra-	Pashto θw became lw; Ossetic developed a doubled p.
five	pindzə	fondz	*panča-	Pashto kept p; Ossetic has f and o before the cluster.
seven	owə	avd	*hafta	Ossetic has voiced d; Pashto lost the cluster.
ten	las	dæs	*dasa-	Pashto d became l; Ossetic kept d.

Note. Pashto forms are adapted from Morgenstierne (1983) and Ossetic forms from Thordarson (2009); the Old Iranian forms are those given in these sources. † = standard reconstruction not spelled out in either source.

Three observations can be drawn from the table. “First, the same Old Iranian sound often took different paths in the two languages. The Old Iranian word for “ten”, *dasa-, became las in Pashto, where the middle consonant turned into an l, but remained *dæs* in Ossetic” (Morgenstierne, 1983, para. 17; Thordarson, 2009). In “three” and “fire”, the consonant groups were treated differently: “Pashto assimilated or voiced the first consonant, while Ossetic kept both consonants but in reversed order, giving *ærtæ* and art. In “four”, Pashto changed θw into lw, with the w often lost, while Ossetic produced a doubled p” (Morgenstierne, 1983, para. 22; Thordarson, 2009).

Second, the table illustrates the historical formation of kinship vocabulary. Morgenstierne (1983, para. 31) explains that Pashto kinship nouns ending in -r go back either to an old accusative, as in *plār* “father”, or to some other oblique case, as in mor “mother”. Thordarson (2009) observes a similar situation in Ossetic: Iron xo “sister” comes from an old nominative, while Digor *xuæræ* comes from an oblique stem. The two languages therefore built their modern forms from different case forms of the same Old Iranian stems. This is a good example of shared material with independent outcomes. Third, semantic change can accompany phonological change. The inherited

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Ossetic word for “brother”, *ærvad*, means “brother, cousin, kinsman”, and Thordarson (2009) notes that a new word, *æfsymær* (meaning roughly “of the same womb”), was formed for a brother of the same mother. Pashto *wror* is given by Morgenstierne simply as “brother”. This provides a specific but informative example in which the history of a word also records something about how a society organises its kin.

Sound Developments

Some sound changes run in parallel. Morgenstierne (1983, para. 17) says that Pashto, like other north-eastern Iranian languages, has weakened old voiced stops to fricatives. “Ossetic shows a similar weakening between vowels: Old Iranian *b became v between vowels, and *g became ğ in most positions after the first sound of the word” (Thordarson, 2009). The cluster *ft was voiced in both languages, as in Pashto *tōd* “hot” (feminine *tawda*) and Ossetic *avd* “seven” (Morgenstierne, 1983, para. 19; Thordarson, 2009). Since Morgenstierne regards the stop-to-fricative change as typical of the north-eastern group as a whole, we do not interpret it as an exclusive relationship between these two languages.

Other differences are just as clear. Old Iranian initial *p stayed in Pashto (*plār*) but became f in Ossetic (*fyd*). Each language has also taken in sounds from its neighbours. Pashto has retroflex consonants, but Morgenstierne (1983, para. 6) restricts them to loanwords from Indo-Aryan. Ossetic has glottalized stops, which Thordarson (2009) attributes mainly to Caucasian and Turkic contact. Both cases exhibit a similar overall pattern: inherited features coexist with sounds introduced through language contact.

Grammar

Grammar shows more divergence than vocabulary (Table 2). Pashto kept the old distinction between masculine and feminine, and gender runs through its nouns, adjectives and verbs (Morgenstierne, 1983, para. 30). “Ossetic lost grammatical gender, and natural sex is shown by separate words” (Thordarson, 2009). The case systems also move in opposite directions. Pashto has

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a limited contrast between direct and oblique forms, supported by prepositions and postpositions. Ossetic, by contrast, has a rich system of nine cases in Iron. Belyaev (2010) shows that only four of these, nominative, genitive, ablative and inessive, can be traced back to Proto-Iranian, and that the others are later innovations that arose in contact with Georgian and later with Turkic and Vaynakh languages. Scholars disagree about the exact route by which the system developed. Kim (2003), for example, argues for an earlier reduction to a simpler system, but Belyaev's conclusion that most of the cases are recent is particularly relevant to the present analysis.

Table 2

Selected Grammatical Features of Pashto and Ossetic

Feature	Pashto	Ossetic
Grammatical gender	Kept: masculine and feminine.	Lost; natural sex shown by separate words.
Case	Direct and oblique forms, with prepositions and postpositions.	Nine cases in Iron, eight in Digor; only four traced to Proto-Iranian.
Plural	Several endings, depending on gender and noun class.	One suffix, -tæ, from an old collective suffix.
Past of transitive verbs	Agent-marked pattern, reinforced by Indo-Aryan contact.	Earlier ergative stage, now largely given up.
Verb	Personal endings; present and past stems.	Agrees with one argument; present and past stems; archaic character.
Counting	Twenties used in some dialects.	Counting in twenties, attributed to Caucasian influence.
Main outside influence	Indo-Aryan.	Caucasian, Turkic, Georgian; later Russian.

Note. Based on Morgenstierne (1983), Thordarson (2009) and Belyaev (2010).

"The past tense of transitive verbs is a particularly interesting case. In Pashto the agent is marked in the past, a pattern Morgenstierne" (1983, paras. 59–60) describes as carried through more strictly

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than in other Iranian languages. He suggests that it rests on inherited Iranian tendencies that were reinforced by contact with Indo-Aryan languages. Ossetic once had a similar pattern but has largely abandoned it: “The subject of the verb is almost invariably put in the nominative” (Thordarson, 2009). Thordarson (2009) also identifies surviving traces, including the use of the genitive as the subject of the past tense of transitive verbs. Here the two languages show one inherited tendency with two different outcomes.

Numeral systems illustrate the need for interpretive caution. Ossetic counts in twenties, and Thordarson (2009) attributes this to Caucasian influence, although he notes that similar systems occur in other eastern Iranian languages. “Pashto uses a system of twenties in some dialects” (Morgenstierne, 1983, para. 47). A reader might be tempted to call this a shared feature, but the two systems may well have arisen separately. The resemblance is real, and the explanation is not given by either source.

Telling Inheritance from Borrowing and Chance

The comparison demonstrates why an insufficiently controlled approach could be misleading. When a Pashto word and an Ossetic word sound alike, there are at least four possible explanations. They may be cognates, inherited from the same ancestor. Comparable forms may have been borrowed from a third language with which both languages came into contact. They may be similar by chance. Or the resemblance may lie in meaning or use and not in form. The core vocabulary examined here falls into the first group. In cultural vocabulary, however, borrowing is far more likely. Thordarson (2009) notes that Ossetic borrowed Christian terms from Georgian and Muslim terms from Arabic and Persian through its Caucasian neighbours, and Morgenstierne (1983, para. 6) records that Arabic words in Pashto keep learned sounds not found in native words. A term for a religious marriage contract found in both languages, for example, would be a loan from Arabic and not evidence of shared inheritance. For this reason we have not built any claims on cultural vocabulary in this article.

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Cultural Comparison

The sources used in this section differ in character from those employed in the preceding linguistic analysis. They are ethnographic, legal-historical and literary, they are uneven in coverage, and they do not always speak to the same questions in both communities. The discussion identifies these evidential gaps where they arise. Because Pashtun and Ossetian societies are both varied, we describe published findings and not “the” Pashtun or “the” Ossetian custom.

Language and Identity

For Pashtuns, the word for the language has a second meaning. Morgenstierne (1983, para. 4) notes that *Paxto* names not only the language but also a code of honour, and he quotes a saying that a Pashtun is defined less by speaking Pashto than by living by it. He describes the Pashtun sense of national unity as unusually strong among Iranian-speaking peoples, in spite of the many tribes and clans. This is an interpretation advanced in 1983; it is treated here as a historical scholarly perspective rather than as a finding established by the present study.

For Ossetians the relation between language and identity looks different. Ossetic has two dialects that are barely mutually intelligible, most speakers also use another language, and the modern literary language rests on Iron. Kosta Khetagurov (1859–1906), traditionally regarded as the father of Ossetic literature, wrote in Iron, “and the abundant literature of the twentieth century is almost entirely in Iron as well” (Thordarson, 2009). Here we have two different pictures of how a language can carry identity, one through a moral code and the other through literary standardisation and bilingual daily life. The interviews conducted for this study provide additional insight into the relationship between Pashto language and Pashtun identity. Participants explained that following Pashtunwali remains important for maintaining Pashtun identity in both rural and urban communities. They emphasised that living in a city does not necessarily mean abandoning traditional values. Rather, differences can be seen in lifestyle and the way cultural practices are expressed. For example, rural weddings may take place in village settings, while urban weddings

may be organised in hotels or modern venues. These observations reflect the experiences of the five interviewees rather than all Pashtun communities.

Marriage

Marriage is an area in which the available sources provide substantial information about both Pashtun and Ossetian communities. Among Pashtuns, *walwar* refers to a negotiated payment made by the groom's family to the bride's family as part of marriage arrangements. It should be distinguished from mahr, the Islamic marital dower owed to the bride herself. A news report from 2003 describes "*walwar* payments large enough to make marriage financially difficult for some men" (Najibullah, 2003). The same report discusses *badal*, an exchange marriage arrangement between families that may provide an alternative to the payment of *walwar*. In a peer-reviewed study of the Durrani Pashtuns of Afghan Turkestan, Lindisfarne-Tapper (1981) analysed marriage through two modes: symmetrical direct exchange, which reflects Durrani ideals of equality and contributes to the construction of Durrani ethnic identity, and asymmetrical bride price. Her study demonstrates that marriage arrangements carry social and cultural meanings beyond their financial aspects.

For Ossetians, Daueva (2013) examines the ethnography of traditional marriage during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Her study addresses conflicts associated with bride price and dowry, matchmaking procedures, and marriage by abduction. She also considers changes in wedding rituals associated with the growth of commodity-money relations. In another study, Daueva (2019) investigates the property-related aspects of marriage, including the size of the bride price (kalym), the contents of the dowry, and women's property rights within the traditional extended family. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in North Ossetia in 2022–2023 and among the Ossetian diaspora in Turkey in 2015, Daueva (2024) further argues that the spread of bride abduction has contributed to the gradual loss of traditional wedding rituals. Gazdanova and Bogomaz (2021), taking a different approach, examine Ossetian wedding rituals through Instagram,

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treating the platform as a digital source that illustrates how contemporary weddings are documented and shared.

The telephone interviews conducted for the present study provide additional first-hand information about Pashtun marriage practices in Nangarhar, Laghman and Kunar. Participants described *walwar* as a negotiated payment from the groom's family to the bride's family. The amounts mentioned in their personal experiences ranged from approximately AFN 250,000 to AFN 300,000. However, the amount is not fixed and these figures should not be interpreted as a national average. Participants also described *badal* as an exchange marriage arrangement between two families. In the accounts collected, this arrangement generally replaced the *walwar* payment, although jewellery and other wedding-related expenses could still be negotiated. Participants emphasised that such arrangements vary according to family circumstances and local practices.

Considered together, the sources reveal several areas of comparison, including financial arrangements between families, the role of matchmaking and intermediaries, and the social meanings attached to marriage practices. They also highlight important differences. For example, the sources consulted describe marriage by abduction as a recognised and widely discussed practice in the Ossetian context, whereas the sources reviewed for this study do not establish an equivalent practice among Pashtuns. Similarly, the available literature provides more detailed descriptions of matchmaking among Ossetians than among Pashtuns. Rather than filling this gap with general assumptions, further research should investigate Pashtun matchmaking practices through additional fieldwork. The comparison therefore reveals both shared social concerns surrounding marriage and distinct historical and cultural practices in the two communities.

Hospitality, Honour and Customary Norms

Coulson et al. (2014) describe the Pashtun code, Pashtunwali, as resting on an implicit exchange with three tenets: honour (*nang*), revenge (*badal*) and hospitality (*melmastia*), none of which they see as economically driven. The article was written to explore tourism development, and its

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evidence comes from military personnel, intelligence operatives, journalists and aid workers, so it largely represents external perspectives and should be interpreted with this limitation in mind. The authors present it as the first study to explore a code of hospitality through the lens of social exchange theory.

For Ossetians, Tsaliev (2022) examines the traditional legal culture and lists among its customs the veneration of elders, hospitality and respect for women, and also deals with blood feud, all within a system of customary law in which breaking the norms carried responsibility. Both communities are therefore described in the literature as having customary codes that regulated hospitality, honour and conflict. This is a useful functional parallel, but it does not establish a historical relationship between the two customary codes. Many societies with kin-based social organisation and a tradition of customary law have developed similar rules. The sources reviewed for this study also did not identify a Pashtun source on respect for elders that is as direct as Tsaliev's for Ossetians, so this aspect of the comparison remains open to further investigation.

Oral Tradition

The best-known Ossetian oral tradition is the Nart epic cycle. Thordarson (2009) describes it as known across the North Caucasus but "no doubt rooted in ancient Iranian epic and mythology." The evidence he gives is partly linguistic: some heroic names, such as Æxsærtæg, have Iranian origins, and the name Nart itself most likely comes from an Iranian word for manhood. The Pashto tradition examined here represents a different literary genre. Majrouh (2003) collected landays, two-line verses of nine and thirteen syllables, that Pashtun women improvise and sing, for example while fetching water and at weddings. Their themes include war and honour, shame and love. The collection reflects one poet's selection and one period, so it cannot stand for all of Pashto oral literature.

A heroic cycle and a short lyric couplet are not the same genre, and we do not claim that they are. The available evidence indicates that both traditions are closely tied to social occasions and both

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carry collective memory and values. The comparison is one of function and not of content, and any claim of a shared origin would require substantially more evidence than is available in the present study.

Religion and Historical Layers

Religion is considered here only insofar as it informs language and vocabulary. Thordarson (2009) reports that Christian terms in Ossetic were largely borrowed from Georgian, that Muslim terms came in through Caucasian neighbours, and that traces of old pagan terms were used to express Christian ideas. These layers show how older practice and later religion interact in vocabulary. We do not present either community as religiously uniform, and the literature reviewed does not support such a view of either.

Discussion

Three themes emerge from the comparison. First, the lexical comparisons examined in this study suggest that Pashto and Ossetic retain a number of words with common Iranian origins, although the historical relationship of each proposed pair requires careful evaluation. Pashto and Ossetic share a set of basic words derived from common Old Iranian sources and follow regular sound correspondences. Kinship terms, numerals and words for natural phenomena are well represented, which fits Thordarson's (2009) remark that Ossetic words for elementary human experience are mostly Iranian. The second concerns divergence. The grammatical systems of the two languages diverge in several respects, and the sources tie much of this to contact: Indo-Aryan for Pashto, and Caucasian, Turkic and Georgian for Ossetic. The third concerns culture. Marriage payments, intermediaries, hospitality codes and oral poetry offer useful ground for comparison, but these resemblances are functional parallels rather than proof of a common cultural origin.

The sources suggest that the points at which the linguistic and the cultural evidence come closest are few and specific. Kinship vocabulary is one. The history of *ærvad* and the creation of a separate term for a brother of the same mother is a case in which language records social organisation. The

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Iranian origin of some Nart names is another, since it links an oral tradition to the Iranian linguistic past. Beyond these, the two kinds of evidence should remain analytically distinct. A similarity between a Pashtun and an Ossetian custom may tell us something about how people in comparable social conditions solve similar problems, and it may tell us nothing about a shared past.

A last point concerns the cultural-awareness aim. A comparison of this kind can support informed mutual understanding between readers from the two communities, for example through a short shared word list, a map of the languages' histories, or a guide to terms for marriage and hospitality. Its value for this purpose depends on accuracy, which requires a clearly delimited scope and cautious interpretation.

Educational and Philosophical Implications

Language, Identity and the Aims of Education

The comparison raises a philosophical question about the purpose of language education: should learners merely recognise correspondences between forms, or should they also examine how linguistic knowledge is established? The approach proposed here combines both aims. Learners can compare the Pashto and Ossetic forms in Table 1 while asking what would justify an inference of shared inheritance. Resemblance becomes the beginning of inquiry rather than its conclusion. An educational use of the material would therefore distinguish evidence, interpretation and uncertainty, enabling students to explain why a plausible comparison may still require further verification.

A second concern is the relationship between cultural recognition and essentialism. Acknowledging Pashto or Ossetic as a source of knowledge does not require presenting either speech community as internally uniform. The interview findings describe five participants' experiences; they do not authorise statements about what every Pashtun believes or how every family arranges a marriage. Similarly, published accounts of Ossetian traditions concern particular historical and social settings. Teaching should preserve these limits. This position is consistent with UNESCO's (2006) emphasis

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on intercultural understanding and respect for cultural identities, while the specific classroom applications below are proposals derived from the present comparison.

Comparative Inquiry in Language Teaching

One possible teaching sequence would begin with the twelve lexical comparisons already presented in Table 1. Students could identify each language, read the English gloss and compare the proposed sound correspondences. They could then distinguish an observed similarity from a historical explanation and use the cited scholarship to evaluate that explanation. Assessment could ask students to justify one comparison and identify a limitation in another. The educational objective would be the quality of the reasoning rather than the number of apparently similar words collected.

The cultural sections support a complementary interpretive activity. Students could compare how an interview account and a published ethnographic study describe marriage arrangements, hospitality or oral tradition. For each claim, they could identify the speaker or author, the time and place discussed, and the evidence available. They could also state which conclusions the material does not support. Such an activity would make the difference between linguistic inheritance and functional cultural resemblance explicit, instead of allowing one to stand as proof of the other.

Multilingual Access and Curriculum Design

Romanised forms can help English-medium readers access an unfamiliar linguistic comparison, but the use of Latin letters should not be treated as a replacement for the languages’ own writing systems. Teachers could present the source-language forms alongside the Romanisation and English gloss when reliable orthographic materials are available. Students should be told which transcription conventions are being used and where dialectal variation may affect pronunciation. This proposal is situated within UNESCO’s (2025) wider recognition of multilingualism in education; it is not evidence that this particular transcription or activity improves learning outcomes.

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A curriculum based on this material should retain distinct learning aims: understanding linguistic relationships, evaluating sources and interpreting cultural accounts responsibly. It should also allow learners to question the categories used in the comparison. For example, students could examine why Ossetic is classified as an Iranian language despite being spoken in a region where Russian is widely used, or why shared Iranian ancestry does not establish direct historical contact between Pashtun and Ossetian communities. These questions connect the linguistic subject matter to educational philosophy by asking how knowledge, recognition and responsible judgement should guide the selection and teaching of content.

Boundaries of the Educational Interpretation

The study provides comparative linguistic and cultural material from which educational possibilities can be developed; it does not evaluate a teaching intervention. No classroom observation, student learning assessment or teacher interview is added to the original dataset. The proposed activities, curriculum principles and philosophical interpretation should therefore be understood as analytical implications. Future research could examine their suitability through collaborative work with teachers and speakers of both languages, with appropriate consent, institutional procedures and clearly defined educational outcomes.

Limitations and Next Steps

This study has several limitations. First, the primary interview data are based on five adult Pashto speakers from Nangarhar, Laghman and Kunar provinces in Afghanistan. Although their accounts provide valuable first-hand insights into language, cultural identity and marriage practices, the small sample cannot represent the full diversity of Pashto-speaking communities.

Second, the study does not include interviews with Ossetic speakers. Therefore, the comparison of Ossetic linguistic and cultural features relies on published academic sources rather than newly collected interview data.

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Future research could expand the number and geographical diversity of Pashto-speaking participants and include interviews with Ossetic speakers. Such research would allow a more balanced comparison of contemporary language use, cultural identity, traditions and historical connections between the two communities.

Conclusion

Pashto and Ossetic are two Iranian languages with markedly different historical trajectories. A small, well-documented core of vocabulary still shows their common ancestry, and several features of their grammar show how much each language changed under the influence of its neighbours. The cultural comparison is less certain, but it is worth making, provided that it remains an inquiry into similarities and differences rather than a claim of cultural identity. Morgenstierne's observation about conservatism gives a reason to bring the two languages together. We hope this article offers a careful first step and a clear plan for the next one.

For educational theory and philosophy, the comparison illustrates how recognition of a learner's language can be combined with disciplined interpretation of evidence and respect for cultural difference. Its proposed contribution is a basis for teaching comparative inquiry and intercultural understanding, while reserving claims about educational effectiveness for future research.

Declarations

Ethics. Five adult Pashto speakers participated voluntarily in telephone interviews for this study. Participants agreed to contribute their information and permitted the use of their names. However, to protect their privacy, the authors chose to anonymise their identities and refer to them as P1–P5 throughout the article. No formal institutional ethics approval is claimed.

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Data availability.

The interview data generated during this study are not publicly available in order to protect the privacy of the participants. Anonymised information may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to participant consent and applicable privacy considerations.

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Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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