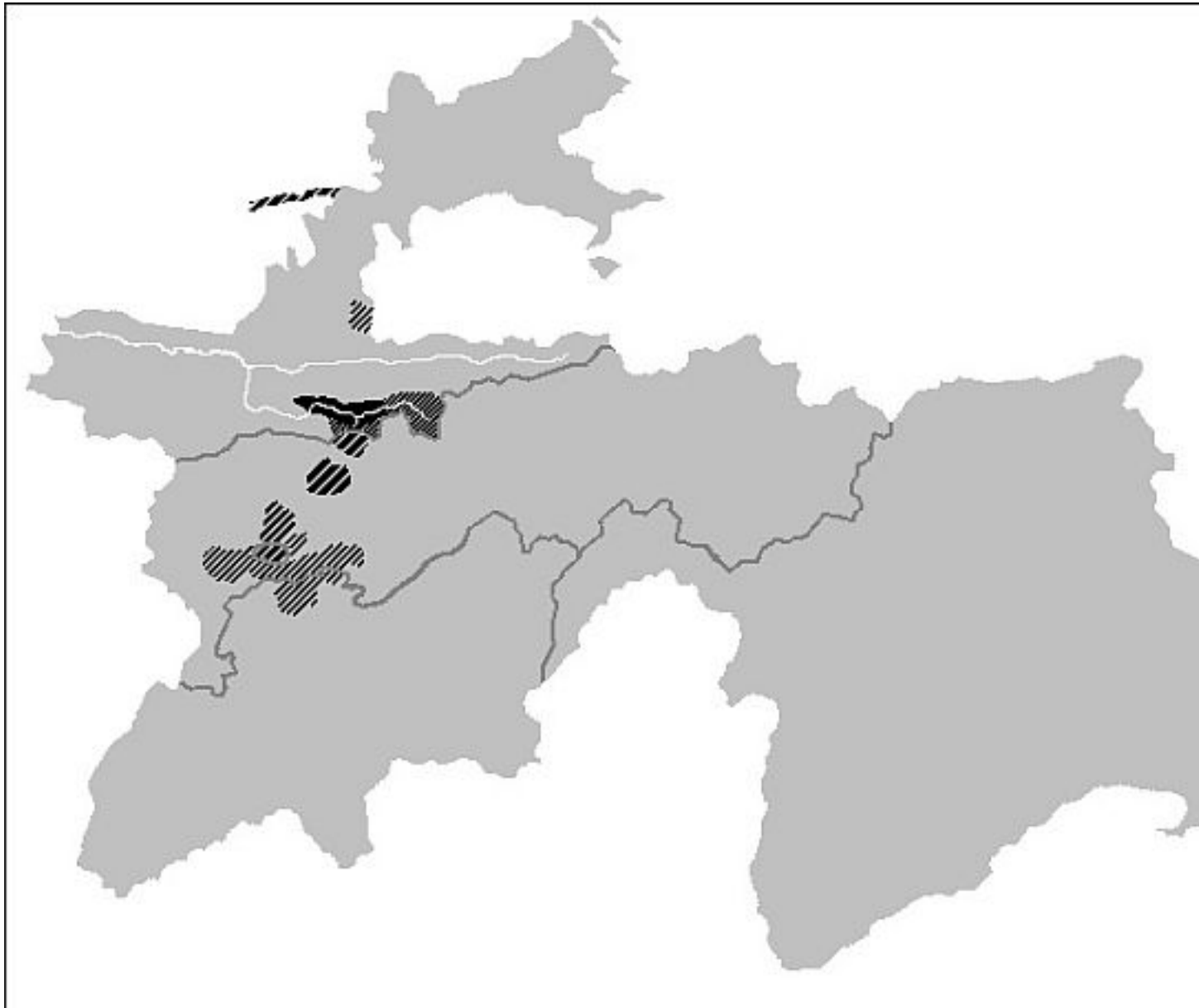

Award-winning Yaghnobi-Czech dictionary captures dying language

A Yaghnobi-Czech dictionary by [Mgr. Ľubomír Novák, Ph.D.](#), from the Institute of Comparative Linguistics at the CU Faculty of Arts, placed highly in the recent Dictionary of the Year 2014 awards, organised by the Czech Union of Interpreters and Translators (JTP). The book was awarded 3rd place in the main award, the Jury Prize for Translation Dictionaries and a certificate of merit. "Initially, all I had available were small Russian and Tajik glossaries appended to texts and grammatical aids," says the author, describing the hurdles he faced when compiling the dictionary.



Which language family does Yaghnobi belong to, who uses it and where does it occur?

Yaghnobi is an Eastern Iranian language related to Pashto, one of the two official languages of Afghanistan. The language it is closest to, however, is Sogdian, the language of the Sogdiana region in ancient times, and which in the past served as a *lingua franca* along the Silk Road.

Historically the language was centred on the valley of the Yaghnob River in north-western Tajikistan. However, over the centuries speakers of the language settled in the surrounding regions, bringing the language with them. The most important communities were located in the west of Tajikistan, to where they were forcibly deported in the 1970s. While the total number of current speakers cannot be established with certainty, it is estimated at between eight and thirteen thousand.



Is there therefore some hope that Yaghnobi might

survive, or is it gradually dying out?

I am of the opinion that it will have ceased to exist within a hundred years – and I am generally considered to be an optimist. It does not, at the present time, fulfil the prerequisites for a more enduring existence. It does not, primarily, have a written form; if it does need to be written down, then Tajik orthography is used.

Preservation of the language is also complicated by the fact that no schools exist in the Yaghnob valley, and Yaghnobi is not taught outside the region. Parents therefore only teach their children Yaghnobi as a second language so that they can communicate better within their own community. Of key importance is knowledge of Tajik and Russian, which are used when communicating with the authorities and foreigners. Yaghnobi can now only fulfil its function in the Yaghnob valley, where it is capable of precisely describing real-life aspects of the local microregion and features of the agricultural way of life that has supported the inhabitants for centuries. Nonetheless, even here there is considerable pressure from the official language, leading to the creation of a local dialect of Tajik; this dialect is only slightly influenced by Yaghnob from a lexical and grammatical point of view.

So there is no standard form of Yaghnobi?

No. Yaghnobi will most likely disappear before it reaches this stage. The codification of the language could theoretically be aided by the translation of the Koran into Yaghnobi; in the past the translation of a book of such significance has played a substantial role in efforts to unify the languages of other cultures. However, the Yaghnobis themselves have no interest in doing this. A further necessary condition for the codification of Yaghnobi is the establishment of a script that would form the basis for a standard written language. The current options for this are Cyrillic, Arabic and Latin scripts. I personally favoured the last of these three options when compiling the Yaghnobi dictionary.

How was the dictionary itself created?

With difficulty. The fundamental problem was that, initially, all I had available were small Russian and Tajik glossaries appended to texts and grammatical aids, some written in Latin script, some in Cyrillic. Neither of these scripts, however, have suitable diacritics for the recording of Yaghnobi, so I had to unify the varying forms of transliteration into a standardised form. As for the texts themselves, in some cases I was unable to determine which sound a particular character corresponded to. While I was able to infer pronunciation using the etymological principle, I was still faced with the constant problem of loanwords from other languages, the pronunciation of which varies amongst individual Yaghnobis.

I did not, however, base my work solely on textual sources, but expanded the Yaghnobi-Czech dictionary to include numerous other phrases that I recorded during my stay in Tajikistan, where I could speak to Yaghnobi people and compare the sound of the language with its written form and learn neologisms not covered by existing literature.

However, even when making the final transliteration of these expressions into Czech Latin script, the lack of suitable diacritical marks was an unavoidable problem. I therefore utilised some Greek and Arabic letters to help clarify some matters.

jaghnóbsko-český slovník LUBOMÍR NOVÁK



Who is the dictionary aimed at?

First and foremost at scholars of Iranian studies. This may sound curious, as it has so far been published only in Czech. It may also be of interest to linguists as it documents the current state of the language and its contact with Tajik. It demonstrates the extent to which two distantly-related Iranian languages influence one another and how one cedes ground to the other. More broadly it will be of interest to ethnographers and historians.

Has your study of the Yagnobi language brought any new findings for research into its origin and development?

After seven years of systematic study, in my dissertation I was able to refute the traditional claim that Yagnobi is a non-literary dialect of Sogdian. On the contrary, my conclusion that both languages must have separated sometime around the turn of the Common Era, if not earlier, was accepted. The relationship between the two languages is therefore not as close as originally thought.

Are you currently working on any other projects in Eastern Iranian linguistics?

Apart from my ongoing work on an etymological dictionary of Yagnobi, I am also currently attempting to formulate a better description of the grammatical rules of the language. In the future I would like to study the relationship between two other, possibly closely related, Eastern Iranian languages, Bactrian and Munji, one of which is a dead language, and the other nearly dead. I have also started writing a book on the Iranian languages that is aimed at the wider public, providing a basic description of the individual languages, their grammar and development for anyone who is interested in the Iranian languages and Indo-European linguistics. It should be finished this year.

By: Martin Linhart (CU Faculty of Arts)

Image: Martin Linhart (CU Faculty of Arts)

12. 4. 2014