



Working toward a comprehensive grammar of Shughni are (from left to right) Greg Stump, Andrew Hippisley, Amanda Barie, Shoxnazar Mirzoev, Muqbilsho Alamshoev, Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby, and Gulnoro Mirzovafoeva.

Grammar School for Scholars

UK linguists work to save an endangered language

By David Wheeler

When a language dies, we lose more than just words. We also lose stories, poems, songs, and history. An entire cultural panorama—a unique way of seeing the world—vanishes.

In the Pamir Mountains of eastern Tajikistan—bordering Afghanistan in Central Asia—speakers of a language called Shughni wonder if their native language and culture have a chance for long-term survival. Young people are slowly, unconsciously, replacing Shughni words with their nearest linguistic equivalents in Russian or Tajik—the predominant languages of commerce, education and the media. Another danger is

under-documentation. Little is known about Shughni, even among language scholars, in part because Shughni is not a written language.

But a new chapter in the story of the Shughni language began last summer. A team of UK faculty, led by linguistics professor Greg Stump, hosted three Shughni-speaking language scholars from Khorog, Tajikistan, for a month-long workshop in the William T. Young Library. This workshop, funded by UK's College of Arts and Sciences, the English Department and the Linguistics Program, laid the groundwork for a long-term international collaboration.

Their goal is to produce a comprehensive grammar of Shughni—the first of its kind. The grammar will not only provide linguists worldwide with the data and analysis for further study of the language, but will also allow speakers of other languages to learn Shughni more easily. Because Shughni is not a written language, the researchers represent it by means of a system of transcription based on the Roman alphabet.

“At present, there is no English-language dictionary or grammar of Shughni,” notes Stump, who came to UK in 1983 after earning a Ph.D. in linguistics at Ohio State University. “Our work will fill that void.” In the longer term, the linguists say, they also hope that through their collaboration they will foster a change in Shughni's status—from “endangered” to “stable.”



The Nuts and Bolts of Shughni

Since the summer workshop, the Shughni project has gained the attention of a documentary filmmaker, the U.S. State Department, and Public Radio International, which featured the project on its program *The World*. In addition to Stump, the UK linguistics team includes professors Andrew Hippius (like Stump, a member of the English department faculty), Mark Lauersdorf and Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby (Department of Modern and Classical Languages), as well as student researchers Amanda

Barie, Darya Bukhtoyarova, James Mastin, and Dustin Zerrer.

Rouhier-Willoughby was instrumental in the genesis of this project. As the campus coordinator for the State Department's Junior Faculty Development Program, she typically arranges for scholars from parts of the former USSR to come to UK to audit classes in their field and to work with specialists in their discipline. "I was Gulnoro Mirzovafoeva's advisor on her first trip here, in 2007," Rouhier-Willoughby explains. "On her application form, it said she was a native speaker of Shughni, so I hooked her up with Greg to work in his grammatical analysis class. The rest, as they say, is history," she says, smiling.

Mirzovafoeva, who teaches English, grammar and discourse analysis at Khorog State University, near the Afghanistan border, returned to UK for this summer's workshop. She was accompanied by two of her colleagues at Khorog

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Investigating the Science of Language

If you've ever wondered how a slim chance and a fat chance can be the same, but a wise man and a wise guy are opposites, or how a house can burn up as it burns down, you've entered the realm of the linguist. "Our territory is the phenomenon of language," says Greg Stump, an English professor who directs the linguistics program at UK. "We work to figure out why languages are the way they are, how all languages are alike, and how they differ from one another."

Stump gives an example, and when he talks about linguistics, he gets as excited as a kid with a new bike. "In English you can say, 'He didn't know who hit him.' In that case the 'he' and the 'him' can refer to the same person, or 'he', 'who', and 'him' can refer to three different people—the non-knower, the hitter, and the hittee. Yet if you say, 'He hit him,' 'he' and 'him' can't refer to the same person. Now why is that? Is that a peculiar fact about English grammar, or is that a fact about language everywhere?" It turns out, says Stump, answering his own question, that every language is like English in this syntactic structure and meaning.

"But," Stump continues, "take a statement like 'I wonder who that saw him.' It's obviously not grammatical in English, but in some other languages, sentences of this kind are perfectly fine. These similarities and differences are scientific facts that linguists try to explain."

Stump is a man clearly in love with his chosen area of study and has made an international reputation in his development of a theory of morphology. "Greg is a world figure in the field of morphology, that part of linguistics that deals

with the structure of words," says Greville Corbett, a professor in the Department of Linguistic and International Studies at the University of Surrey in England. "His 2001 book *Inflectional Morphology* is a masterly achievement."

Linguists, like all scientists, are specialists, but what exactly linguists spend their time doing is a mystery to a lot of people, Stump admits. He recalls an encounter with a seatmate on a flight Stump took to a language conference.

"He asked me what I did for a living, and when I said I was a linguist, I got the most dreaded question a linguist can get: 'Oh, how many languages do you speak?' I didn't know what to say, so I said, '27,'" Stump laughs, his bushy eyebrows jumping up like startled caterpillars. "I don't recall if there was any further discussion."

When asked why someone should study linguistics, he says, "Gee, that's an easy one. One reason is, it gives insights into workings of the human mind. We don't often have very direct access to what the mind does, but linguists live in this domain of study." Linguistics is also a basis for studying human history, he points out. "When you compare English with other languages, you find striking similarities that tell us the languages must have descended from a common ancestor."

When Stump came to UK in 1983, there were six faculty members in the linguistics program. Thanks in part to his efforts over the years, there are now 12.

"I'm really pleased about the stellar hires we've been able to make in the past few years," Stump says. "Rusty Barrett, a sociolinguist from the University of Texas at Austin,

Andrew Hippiusley, an expert in Russian morphology from the University of Surrey, and Mingzhen Bao, a perceptual phonetician from the University of Florida. These impressive young scholars fit in well with our already-strong linguistics faculty."—*JW*



Greg Stump, director of the linguistics program, whose book *Inflectional Morphology* has been called "a masterly achievement"

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State—Muqbilsho Alamshoev and Shoxnazar Mirzoev. Besides teaching language and linguistics at Khorog State, both men are affiliated with Tajikistan’s Academy of Sciences.

At the workshop’s daily two-hour group meetings, the participants discussed a range of issues in the analysis of Shughni grammar, including patterns of pronunciation, word formation and sentence structure; the objective was to identify aspects of Shughni grammar that had never been analyzed systematically. These discussions often took place in three languages. “Our discussions typically became very animated,” says Stump, “with analyses and ideas being translated from Shughni to Russian to English and maybe back again. Muqbilsho and Shoxnazar, who are older and speak a more traditional variety of the language, would sometimes disagree strongly with Gulnoro, who speaks the more innovative variety that young people use.”

Now, Stump and Hippiisley, sitting in Stump’s office—every available surface heaped with papers and books that evince different projects in various states of becoming—take some time to reflect on the immensity of the project. “Just think how exhausting it would be to try to fully characterize English grammar,” Stump says. “It would be a long, complex job, and Shughni is no different. The more we worked on it, the more we realized that there’s a lot going on in the grammar of this language.”

But several important linguistic discoveries have already been made and chronicled, some of which were explicated in a paper on Shughni verb inflection co-authored by Stump and Hippiisley. Stump presented the paper at the University of Surrey in Guildford, England, in September. Verb inflection is the change of form by which some words indicate certain grammatical relationships, in number, case, gender, or tense.

Hippiisley says that Shughni also offers an interesting prepositional system, which can be easily seen in connection with a ubiquitous part of Shughni

life—the mountains. “The prepositions of directions don’t just say ‘go away from’ and ‘go out of,’ but ‘to move up a vertical plane’ or ‘move down a vertical plane,’” he explains, adding directional cues with his index finger.

“This system based on situational proximity is unlike any we’ve ever seen before,” Stump adds.

In addition to Hippiisley and Stump’s collaboration, Rouhier-Willoughby is working with Mirzoev on Shughni’s lexical semantics—the study of how and what the words of a language denote.

“The Threat to Shughni Is Real”

When the opportunity arose to work with the UK team, the Shughni scholars were elated. “There’s a great amount of knowledge among all of the linguists involved,” Alamshoev says through an interpreter.

During the workshops, all three Shughni scholars described the urgency of the project. The government of Tajikistan, a former Soviet republic, supports the preservation of Shughni among its 60,000 speakers, but much more work needs to be done. “The situation now is that both Tajik and Russian are influencing Shughni quite dramatically,” says Alamshoev in his booming voice. “As a result, the language may disappear and we’ll lose part of ourselves.”

“The threat to Shughni exists,” says Mirzoev pointedly, “and it would be extremely sad if it were lost.” ■