



Search Committee for Postdoctoral Fellowship in Iranian Studies  
Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Institute of Iranian Studies  
University of Toronto

August 12, 2022

Dear Members of the Search Committee,

It is my pleasure to write on behalf of Dr. Shuan Karim, who is applying for The Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Postdoctoral Fellowship in Iranian Studies. I have known Shuan for five years. I served on his dissertation committee and some of his committees for pre-dissertation milestones. He also took three graduate courses with me. I have thus had ample opportunity to interact with him professionally. I give his application my highest recommendation for this position.

Shuan is an Iranianist, historical linguist, and morphologist who secondarily has a broad background in Indo-European languages. I expect him to develop into a leading scholar in the fields of Iranian linguistics and historical linguistics. His reputation in the first area is evidenced by his forthcoming invited contribution to the *Oxford Handbook of Kurdish Linguistics*. This kind of invitation is rare for someone who was still completing their dissertation at the time, but I am not surprised that he is already gaining attention, given his strong record of research presentations at the major conferences in field (e.g. Linguistic Society of America, International Conference on Historical Linguistics) as well as at important specialized meetings within the subarea of Iranian linguistics (e.g. International Conference on Iranian Linguistics, International Conference on Kurdish Linguistics). Shuan also has a growing publication record that includes two published peer-reviewed journal articles, two book chapters in press, and two papers under review. This is an excellent track record for someone at his career stage.

Shuan's research documenting and tracing the relationships among minority Iranian language communities is perhaps the most sophisticated historical linguistics work by a junior scholar that I have seen. His dissertation, a primarily historical and comparative study of noun morphology (i.e. different grammatical forms of nouns) in Iranian language varieties spoken by ethnic Kurds, is a tour-de-force examination of the topic. Here I focus on one chapter, a version of which will be published in the forthcoming volume *Advances in Iranian Linguistics II* and which also forms part of the monograph that Shuan plans to develop for publication during the postdoctoral fellowship period. The chapter illustrates how Shuan is able to bring fine-grained details of Iranian language data to bear on major questions about language change.

The chapter is a study of the NW Iranian language Zazaki (Eastern Turkey). Zazaki's set of noun forms is quite large (perhaps 192 forms of each noun) and exhibits fusional morphological expression, meaning that multiple grammatical meanings are 'fused' together and expressed by a single piece of the word's form (i.e. by a single morpheme). Both traits differentiate Zazaki from close relatives, which tend to have little noun morphology. Shuan traces how this state developed. A common 'narrative' in linguistics posits that fusional morphology arises from erosion of morphemes at word edge, which disrupts one-form-one-meaning relationships and leads speakers to reanalyze previously separate morphemes as a single, fusional one. This is part of an old story about the so-called 'typological cycle'



by which agglutinative languages (supposedly) become fusional ones over time, fusional into analytic, and analytic into agglutinative. The idea of a typological cycle has been challenged but little work has examined potential historical pathways for the development of fusionality *other* than phonetic erosion. In his chapter, Shuan argues convincingly that morphosyntactic competition is one such pathway.

Specifically, Shuan argues that the large paradigm and fusionality found in Zazaki nouns developed from a historical displacement of a definite article. His crucial observation is that across Western Iranian, ezafat and indefinite articles tend to be incompatible. He traces this incompatibility to some ezafat having developed from earlier definite articles. While some languages left the situation in this state, in pre-Zazaki a shift to indefinite articles being enclitic led this incompatibility to be reinterpreted as *competition* between indefinite articles and the (formerly definite article) ezafat for the same position. Interestingly, this led to a distal demonstrative being recruited as an ezafe (the ‘d-form’) in the context of indefinite nouns, producing a definiteness distinction morphosyntactically, expanding the size of the nominal paradigm, and increasing fusionality in morphological expression.

I find Shuan’s argument to be highly convincing and it constitutes an important new contribution to theories of morphological change. Previous work has apparently treated the d-form ezafat as something of a mystery and fallen back on a vague idea of language contact and borrowing to account for their form. Shuan is able to provide a more compelling account by carefully tracing a series of ancillary changes. His argument is a model for how to make progress in understanding language change and is fueled by his encyclopedic command of the details of Northwest Iranian languages (Kurdish, Gorani, Zazaki, Balochi, etc.) and their morphological development. While I have focused here on one chapter for reasons of space, Shuan’s work is characterized in general by careful arguments rooted in deep knowledge of Iranian languages and Iranian history.

While teaching is not a part of the postdoctoral position as far as I understand, I expect that Shuan would be enthusiastic about any opportunity to contribute to supervision/mentoring of undergraduate or graduate student research and would be an excellent mentor. I have witnessed him evolve over the years into a mature communicator in both teaching and writing. Shuan also has boundless enthusiasm for linguistics and Iranian languages and his students remark on how infectious his energy can be. All of these qualities made him a successful instructor at OSU (and now at the OSU-affiliated Metro Early College High School). On a more personal note, I also find Shuan to be a pleasure to interact with. In addition to being outgoing, perpetually cheerful, and genuinely really nice, he is an excellent colleague. I expect that he would be excited to help organize events and contribute to the social life of the Institute.

For all of these reasons, I give Shuan Karim’s application my very highest recommendation. I hope that you will give it your fullest consideration. If you would like any additional information, I can be reached by email ([sims.120@osu.edu](mailto:sims.120@osu.edu)) or phone (cell: +1 614-598-5366).

Sincerely,

Andrea D. Sims  
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