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On the Classification of the "Peripheral" Mongolic Languages

The genealogy of the Mongolic languages, unlike other matters in Altaic linguistics, has never been the subject of fierce debate, perhaps because the languages were thought to be too similar to allow for a proper classification (see App. B). At any rate, it is safe to say that the Mongolic languages are not satisfactorily classified. Indeed, Robert Binnick, in the most recent publication concentrating on this subject, concludes that it is doubtful that a family tree of Mongolic languages can ever be drawn up, because the languages experienced periods of differentiation alternately with periods of assimilation due to the nomadic lifestyle in earlier centuries.

Nevertheless some broad classifications have been devised. The division into a "central" and a "peripheral" group makes sense, and it seems to be certain that the "central" group is of monogenetic origin. The three languages or dialect groups comprised in it, Khalkha-Inner Mongolian, Buriat, and Kalmyk-Oirat, can be assumed to go back to a common ancestor which is not the ancestor of any of the remaining Mongolic languages. This group can be defined by a small number of phonetic and morphological criteria, for which I refer to existing literature.[1]

The traditional East-West division can be used within the "central" group to separate "western" Kalmyk-Oirat from the other two dialect groups, but should not be extended to the entire family (e.g. Moghol should not be put in a "western" subgroup because of its geographical position to the west of most other languages).

The peripheral grouping has not been defined by means of linguistic criteria (apart from the shared absence of "central" characteristics), nor has it been subdivided.[2]

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[1] A convenient survey of previous classifications and a list of criteria is given in Binnick (1987). Although the division into a central and a peripheral group is generally plausible, not all arguments mentioned there in support of it are equally convincing.

[2] Binnick does not present an improved classification for the peripheral languages. Eastern Yugur, Bao'an, and Dongxiang are called "SW dialects" or "related dialects of Monguor"

Earlier classifications did mention Dagur, Monguor, and Moghol, each of which was recognized as a separate ("isolated" or "archaic"[3]) language. If the remaining peripheral languages of the Qinghai-Gansu region (henceforth: QG) were at all mentioned in earlier classifications, it was implicitly or explicitly assumed that they were closely related to Monguor rather than merely geographically adjacent.

Although all of the peripheral languages known at present had already been "discovered" by western scientists a century ago, there were probably not enough data for classifying these languages before the publication of the materials collected by the Sino-Soviet expeditions of the late 1950s.[4] Today, knowledge about the peripheral languages has increased considerably and a more accurate picture may be obtained of the historical relations between them. The six following languages are sufficiently well-known to be used here[5]: Dagur, Eastern Yugur (= Shera Yogur), Monguor (= Tu), Bao'an, Dongxiang (= Santa), and Moghol.[6]

As Binnick suggests, the absence of innovations common to all peripheral languages indicates that the peripheral group is not of a monogenetic nature. This is not surprising, since, in spite of the fact that the peripheral languages have in common that they all became detached from the "centre", one can discern at least three geographical regions, i.e. Manchuria (Dagur), Afghanistan (Moghol), and the Qinghai-Gansu region (remaining languages), which may never have been part of a single uninterrupted, linguistically homogeneous periphery.

(1987:191). No arguments are given for this supposed "relatedness", a provisional solution inherited from earlier classifications.

3   The term "archaic" is often applied to peripheral languages. Archaic features are rarely listed, apart from the preservation of Medieval Mongolian (MMo) *h-* in Dagur and QG (not in Moghol), and the preservation in Dagur, Monguor, and Moghol of MMo diphthongs (such as *au*) which were contracted elsewhere. When compared to MMo, the peripheral languages generally appear to be less archaic and more innovative than the central ones. Some claimed archaisms are false, e.g. the Monguor ablative *-ca* (Binnick 1987:191, Poppe 1955:200, Doerfer 1964:40, note 1) has developed from **-sa*, not **-ča* (Mgr *c* in native words is normally < CM **s*, not **č*).

4   The Russian publications, mainly by B. H. Todaeva, started to appear from the early 1960s onwards. Due to political circumstances, the Chinese scholars only started publishing in the 1980s.

5   Note that Shirongol, as used by Potanin, is merely a generic term for Monguor, Bao'an and Dongxiang. Potanin's Sanchuan closely resembles the Minhe dialect of Monguor.

6   In the following, the QG languages will be abbreviated as follows: EYu, Mgr, Bao, Dgx.

The "Manchurian" and "Afghan" peripheries contain just one language each. It may be interesting to take a closer look at the QG periphery, where the four "Southern Mongolic" languages are spoken, in order to establish whether these constitute a monogenetic grouping and to determine the way they branched off.

Criteria

In order to measure the distance between languages a substantial set of shared features and contrasting features is required. Basically three types of arguments can be used to group two or more languages together. These are (in order of strength): common innovations; the shared retention of old features lost elsewhere; the shared loss of old features retained elsewhere. All three types may occur in the fields of phonology, morphology, lexicon, semantics, and syntax. Here the focus will be on phonological and morphological arguments.

Before presenting some arguments for a subdivision of the QG languages, a number of problems related to the classification criteria have to be mentioned.

As in the central group of Mongolic languages, there is a lack of phonetic developments which, apart from being regular ("sound laws"), are also specific enough to be used for classification purposes. Some of the phonetic developments that have been used so far are of such a general, unsurprising nature that they may well have occurred in several languages independently. For instance, the preservation of *k in closed vowel stems, used to distinguish the "western" from the "eastern" central languages, is also found in Dagur and Monguor without classificatory consequences. On the other hand many striking differences between Mongolic languages do not assist classification (see App. C). Even some of the more notable developments such as the loss of the vowel length distinction, the shift or loss of vowel harmony, and the "breaking" of *i* can hardly be used for classification purposes.[7]

Two other problems need to be mentioned. Firstly, features that are apparently shared by two languages may be due to a foreign influence both

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7   For example, phonemic vowel length was lost in Minhe Monguor, Dahejia Bao'an and Dongxiang, but was preserved in Huzhu Monguor and (partly) in Ñantoq Bao'an, indicating that loss of length occurred twice or perhaps three times independently.

have been exposed to, e.g. the introduction of retroflex and alveolo-palatal affricates in Mgr, Bao, and Dgx seems to be due to strong Chinese and/or Tibetan influence rather than to an internal development in each language, and can not be used in classification. Secondly, shared features caused by other shared features do not increase the weight of an argument, e.g. the QG languages share the loss of initial vowels in many words, development of initial consonant clusters, and preservation of final syllables, but these are all secondary to the common feature of word-final accent.

There are however a number of phonetic innovations which are irregular and unpredictable, and for that very reason often more reliable, since the possibility of common anomalies being due to independent developments coincidentally leading to the same result twice can be virtually excluded.

Less strong than common innovations are arguments related to the shared retention of pre-existing[8] sounds, sound sequences, phonemic oppositions, suffixes, grammatical phenomena, or lexemes that were lost elsewhere.

The weakest arguments are those based on the shared loss of pre-existing features. Especially in the lexicon one finds that the peripheral languages have replaced many words still in use in the central languages by loanwords from their respective neighbours.[9] Yet, the latter two categories of arguments are not without value, providing they can be collected in sufficient numbers.

Classification of the Qinghai-Gansu languages

In the following a working hypothesis will be presented for the genealogical subdivision of the QG languages. For each of the provisional subgroups a small selection of defining arguments will be given, mostly innovations which suggest an extended common history before the eventual split up into the present set of distinct languages.

Apart from the *Central* languages, this classification discerns *Dagur* and *Moghol* as one-member subgroups, as well as a *"Shirongol"* subgroup (comprising Mgr, Bao, and Dgx), and a one-member *Eastern Yugur* sub-

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[8] With the term 'pre-existing' is meant: actually attested in a MMo source or present in a sufficient number of languages to warrant CM reconstruction. See App. A.

[9] Therefore it is hardly meaningful that e.g. the CM word *ǯun 'summer' was lost in Bao, Dgx and Moghol, since it was replaced by words of Tibetan, Chinese and Iranian origin.

group. A provisional family tree is included at the end of this contribution (see App. D).[10]

1. The *Bao'an-Dongxiang* genetic unity is supported by:
- shared regular phonetic developments (usually also shared by Mgr, see 2.).
- shared phonetic anomalies: *kʋar 'two' < CM *kɔyar , *sel 'tail' < CM *seùl, *fùkè 'big' < CM *yèkè, *dawalag 'bladder' < CM *dabʋsag.
- shared morphological innovations: plural -la ; instrumental case -gʋala .
- shared semantic innovation: the use of CM *òèr – 'self' in the meaning 'I'.

2. The *Monguor-Bao'an-Dongxiang* ("Shirongol") genetic unity is supported by:
- shared regular phonetic development: preservation of -l- before the element -sUn.
- shared phonetic anomalies: the unrounding of *ò as in *dèrbèn 'four' < CM *dòrbèn ; *tai= 'to put' < *tabi= < CM *talbi=.
- shared morphological innovations: the reduction of the number of genitive suffixes to one: *-ni ; the use of the suffix *-čin (perhaps from the nomen actoris suffix *-gči) as nomen usus.
- shared semantic innovation: the use of *kabar 'nose' in the meaning 'nasal mucus'.

3. There are some arguments for an *Eastern Yugur-Monguor* genetic unity:
- shared phonetic anomalies: e.g. *kɔɔr 'two' = CM *kɔyar , and *ʋngʋasʋn 'wool' = Bao-Dgx *nɔgɔsʋn .
- shared semantic innovation: the use of *èǯèn 'master' in the meaning 'self'.
However, many EYu-Mgr similarities may represent common QG features which were accidentally lost in Bao-Dgx rather than defining features for a EYu-Mgr unity. For example EYu-Mgr *gòòrè 'other' possibly from CM *òèrè .

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[10] The relationship between MMo and the various modern groups is not expressed in the family tree. Nor has an attempt been made to give approximate split-up dates.

4. Finally, features which can be found in all QG languages (and not elsewhere) may point at a monogenetic *Qinghai-Gansu* (or Southern Mongolic) subgroup:
    - shared phonetic anomalies: peculiar development of dentals followed by another dental as in EYu *ht^{h}a=*, Mgr *ç^{h}ita=*, Bao *hta=*, Dgx *sta=* 'to pull' from CM **tata=*; incidental cases such as **nɔɔr* 'sleep' < CM **nɔir* .
    - shared morphological innovations: the converbum finale *-la*.[11]

In spite of several innovations that separate them, it seems that Bao and Dgx are most closely related. Further it seems to be likely that these two languages and Mgr share a common ancestor within Mongolic. The position of EYu is least certain. Although similar to Mgr-Bao-Dgx (or to Mgr only) in a number of features, EYu is closer to the central group in other respects (such as the preservation of the nomen usus **-dag*).[12] It is difficult to decide whether EYu originally belonged to a monogenetic SM group including all QG languages, or that it forms a separate branch, in which case it has acquired some areal features also present in Mgr, Bao, Dgx, after the EYu speakers settled in the QG area.

In addition, there are some arguments for establishing the relations between the QG languages and the other two peripheries. These arguments, however, are less numerous and generally less convincing since they point in several directions. On the one hand there are characteristics that connect the QG languages and Moghol, e.g. word-final accent[13], the fact that cardinal numerals do not distinguish between attributive and enumerative forms, **kabar* 'nose' (**kamar* in central and Dagur). On the other hand there are features that connect QG and Dagur, e.g. the retention of **h-*, the formal

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[11] According to de Smedt & Mostaert the Mgr form is *-ra*, which agrees with the "central" forms (cf. Poppe 1955:279).

[12] Feature no. 13 in Binnick. In the issues under nos. 18 (existence of compound plurals), and 20 (oblique stems of demonstratives) EYu also agrees with the central languages. Furthermore, EYu has palatal and labial vowel harmony, both of which are productive, unlike elsewhere in QG. Such arguments, however, do nut suffice to classify EYu as a "central" language.

[13] In Dgx stress falls on the initial syllable according to Todaeva (1961:18). According to Liú (1981), Bökh (1985:80-81), and Nā (1988) the accent is normally on the final syllable. The latter opinion is supported by vowel reductions observed in the first syllable, e.g. *fku=* 'to die' < CM **hükü=*.

identicity of the genitive and accusative case endings (also nearly identical in Moghol).

Features shared by all peripheral languages are rare and apparently never the result of a common innovation, e.g. the distinction between inclusive and exclusive forms for the first person plural is a case of shared retention.

The evaluation of recently published additional materials can not only shed light on the internal and external relations of the peripheral Mongolic languages, but may ultimately contribute to the construction of a Mongolic family tree.

APPENDIX

A. *Common Mongolic phonology*

The term Common Mongolic (CM) is used here for the ancestral language that can be reconstructed by means of the medieval and modern Mongolic languages, leaving aside what could be conjectured on the basis of non-Mongolic data (from Turkic, Manchu-Tungus, and Iranian languages) and literary Mongolian orthography.

	(Flat) High	Low	(Rounded) High	Low
Closed:	*i*	*ė*	*ü*	*ȯ*
Open:	*i̇*	*a*	*ʊ*	*ɔ*

Labial	Apical	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Glottal
	t	*č*	*k*	*[q]*	
b	*d*	*ǯ*	*g*	*[ɢ]*	
	s	*(š)*			
m	*n*		*ŋ*		
	l/r	*y*			*h*

B. *Lexical homogeneity*. Many words are quite similar in all Mongolic languages:

	'nose' *kamar ~ *kabar	'eye' *nidùn	'ear' *čikɨn	'heart' *ǯùrkèn	'four' * dòrbèn
Khalkha	xamar	nüd(en)	čix(en)	dzürx(en)	dörvön
Buriat	xamar	nyüden	šexe(n)	zürxe(n)	dürben
Kalmyk	xamr	nüdn	čikn	zürkn	dörvn
Dagur	xamėr	nid	čikʸ	ǯurɣʷ	durbʷ
Medieval Mongolian	qabar	nidün	čikin	ǯürüken	dörben
Eastern Yugur	χwaːr	nùtùn	čʰqʰèn	čürɣen	törβen
Monguor (Hùzhù)	xavar	nutu	çʰikė	çirkė	teːren
Monguor (Mínhé)	qʰapar	nutu	çʰiki	çurki	terpaŋ
Bao'an (Dàhéjiā)	χor	nétuŋ	çʰiχaŋ	çirkė	teraŋ
Dongxiang	qʰawa	nutuŋ	çʰiqʰiŋ	çuɣė	çieroŋ
Moghol	qabar	nudun	čiqɨn	ǯùrkà	dùrboːn

C. Phonetic diversity

The different accentuation between the central languages and Dagur (initial stress) on the one hand and the QG languages and Moghol on the other (final stress) causes widely divergent forms of the same etymon. Such differences, however, do not contribute to classification.

Dagur (Qiqihar)	Bao'an (Dahejia)	CM	
ėms=	musi=	*ėmùs=	'to dress'
bės	se	*bùsė	'belt'
ir=	rè=	*irè=	'to come'
šaur	ʂpar ~ par	*sɨbar	'mud'
gaɣė	qai	*gakaɨ	'pig'

D. *Provisional Mongolic family tree*
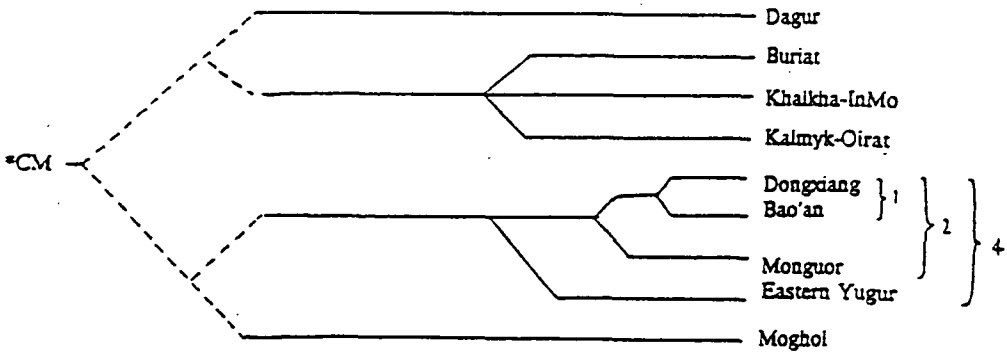
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