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Andrew Shimunek

Languages of Ancient Southern Mongolia and North China

A Historical-Comparative Study of the Serbi
or Xianbei Branch of the Serbi-Mongolic Language Family,
with an Analysis of Northeastern Frontier Chinese
and Old Tibetan Phonology

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CHAPTER ONE: PREVIOUS THEORIES ON THE ORIGINS OF THE MONGOLIC LANGUAGES

Western theories on the origins of the Mongolic languages date back nearly three centuries to the precursors of the ‘Altaic’ theories (i.e. the ‘Tartar’, ‘Scythian’, and ‘Turanian’ theories).¹ Since the ‘Altaic’ divergence and convergence theories have been thoroughly disproven on scientific grounds,² I will not discuss them in detail in this book.

Outside the sphere of ‘Altaic’ divergence and convergence theories, a number of hypotheses have been put forth on the immediate origins of the Mongolic languages. The majority of these theories are methodologically flawed, with the notable exception of the ‘Ancient Mongol’ Theory and the

¹ For a history of the ‘Altaic’ theories, see de Rachewiltz & Rybatzki (2010: 348–355).

² For important studies disproving the various ‘Altaic’ theories, see Clauson (1956), Beckwith (2007a), Georg (2004a), Vovin (2005, 2009), and others. Probably the earliest critic was Abel-Rémusat, writing in the early 19th century, who seriously questioned the hypothesis which would later become known as the ‘Altaic’ theory:

“...La ressemblance de quelques expressions Turkes, Mongoles et Mandchoues entre elles, ne doit pas faire penser qu'il existe entre les trois langues une analogie essentielle et fondamentale. Il est au contraire facile de se convaincre qu'à l'exception d'un très-petit nombre de mots communs, et d'une légère conformité dans quelques règles grammaticales, il y a entre elles plus de différences qu'il n'y en a entre le russe, l'italien et l'allemand, et qu'ainsi, loin d'être des dialectes d'une même langue, elles sont au fond des idioms tout-à-fait distincts” (Abel-Rémusat 1820: 138).

According to Abel-Rémusat, the similarities between the Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic languages are not comparable to the differences between Indo-European languages like Russian, Italian, and German—‘dialects’ (i.e. daughter languages) of Proto-Indo-European. Instead, these languages are so vastly different from each other that they should be considered distinct, unrelated languages in their own right.

‘Para-Mongolic’ Theory. As will be demonstrated, a careful historical-comparative linguistic and philological study of the Serbi languages is necessary to elucidate the origins of the Mongolic languages. We must follow the scientific methods established for the historical-comparative study of languages, as done for Indo-European, Uralic, Semitic, Japanese-Koguryoic, and other language families, before a scientific understanding of the origins of the Mongolic and Serbi languages can be reached.

The Indo-European–Mongolic Hypothesis

After the various ‘Altaic’ theories, another early proposal on the ethnolinguistic origins of the Mongols is what may be termed the ‘Indo-European–Mongolic Hypothesis’, proposed by Edkins (1871), who states that “The special interest of the Mongolian type consists in the fact that it comes nearest of all the three Turanian branches to the Indo-European” (1871: 205). Edkins proposed what he believed to be “many remarkable resemblances in words between the Tartar languages and the Greek and Latin”, including the following, which I have arranged in table format for easy comparison.³

³ Edkins (1871: 208-209, 211). Note that Edkins’ ‘Tartar’ and ‘Turanian’ are synonyms denoting what was later traditionally termed ‘Altaic’, i.e. Mongolic, Turkic, and Tungusic, although the data he presents here is Mongolic.

Table 1. Mongol-Greek-Latin “resemblances” according to Edkins (1871)

Written Mongol	Greek	Latin
<i>nom</i> ‘sacred book’ [sic]	νόμος (<i>nómos</i>) ‘law’	
<i>sara</i> ‘moon’	σελήνη (<i>seléne</i>) ‘moon’	
<i>dalai</i> ‘sea’	θάλασσα (<i>tʰállassa</i>) ‘sea’	
<i>yar</i> ‘hand, arm’	χείρ (<i>kʰeír</i>) ‘hand, arm’	
<i>nege-</i> ‘to open’	ἀνοίγω (<i>anoígo</i>) ‘to open’	
<i>či</i> ‘thou’	σύ (sy) ‘you’	
<i>ere</i> ‘male’	ἄρρεν (<i>arrhen</i>) ‘male’	<i>vir</i> ‘man, male person’
<i>kümün</i> ‘human’		<i>homo</i> ‘man, human’
<i>ta</i> ‘ye’		<i>tu</i> ‘you’
<i>ebür</i> [!] ‘horn’ ⁴		<i>ebur</i> ‘ivory’

Although the majority of the comparanda proposed by Edkins are unwarranted for phonological or semantic reasons (i.e. ‘open’, ‘hand’, ‘sea’, ‘horn’, and ‘moon’), several of his comparisons are reasonable when additional evidence is taken into consideration:

- Middle English *were* ‘man’ < Old English *wer* < Common Germanic (cf. Gothic *wair*, Old High German *wer*, Old Norse *verr*) : Latin *vir* : Old Irish *fer*, Welsh *gŵr* : Lithuanian *vyras* : Sanskrit *vīrá* ‘man, hero’.⁵ Proto-Indo-European *w̥i-ro- ‘male, man’ (*AHD* 101).⁶ There may be some connection among this IE word, Old Turkic *är* ‘man, men, people’,⁷ and Middle Mongol *ere* ‘man, male’. Given the apparent western origins of the Türk people,⁸ one cannot rule out the possibility of an IE

⁴ Edkins quotes an erroneous Mongol form here. Attested Middle Mongol has *eber* [額別兒] ‘horn (角)’ as distinct from *ebür* [額不兒] ‘south part of a mountain range (嶺南)’. The Middle Mongol forms I cite here are from *HIIY*.

⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary* <www.oed.com> accessed September 5, 2012.

⁶ See also Pok. 1177-1178 *w̥iro-s ‘Mann’, i.e. *w̥ir-o-s.

⁷ The word is attested in 8th c. Old Turkic (*GOrkT* 325).

⁸ Beckwith (2011b).

dialect reflex of this word for ‘man, male’⁹ as the origin of the attested Old Turkic and Mongolic words.¹⁰

- Middle Mongol *nom* ‘law, dharma’ and later ‘book’ (not merely “sacred book” as Edkins glossed it) is a well-known Indo-European element in Old Uygur and Mongolic, ultimately from Greek.¹¹

In addition to connecting Written Mongol *či* “thou” and *ta* “ye” with Indo-European, quoting Greek *σύ* (*sý*) and Latin *tu*, Edkins also proposed a connection among the Turkic, Mongolic, Tungusic, and Indo-European first-person personal pronouns.¹² Based on this comparanda, he concluded that “It is probable... that at some distant epoch a strong Turanian influence was exerted specially upon the Greek and Latin sections of the Indo-European family...” (209). Beckwith (2006b, 2011a) has provided modern support for some of Edkins’ personal pronoun etymologies, but within the context of interfamily convergence.

There clearly has been some degree of convergence and borrowing among Serbi-Mongolic, Turkic, Tungusic, Uralic, and Indo-European at various points in the past, but they are demonstrably separate language families that do not descend from a common proto-language.

⁹ Note attested Scythian *wior [o̚top] ‘man’ (cf. Beckwith 2009: 70 n. 43).

¹⁰ For a list of possible Indo-European–Turkic lexical correspondences, see Jonathan North Washington, <wiki.firespeaker.org/Similarities_to_Turkic>, accessed December 31, 2012.

¹¹ See discussion below in the section ‘The Lexical Immunity Theory’.

¹² Edkins (1871: 211, 214-215).