From Turkish to Turkic with Lars Johanson


A quarter of a century after the publication of the collective volume on the Turkic Languages under the editorship of Lars Johanson and Éva Á. Csató (1998), the volume is now available in a second edition, which is both more detailed and more professionally edited than the first one. While the first edition contained 27 chapters by 18 different authors, the second edition has 30 chapters by 21 authors. Of the original authors four have passed away in the meantime, and some others have been replaced by new ones, with nine authors being present for the first time. Even so, some chapters are reprinted in an essentially unaltered form. Among them, there is the general introduction to the “Speakers of the Turkic languages” (Chapter 1) by Hendrik Boeschoten, which, unfortunately, is rather disorganized and, among other things, lacks the table of speaker numbers that was present in the first edition. Of course, as Boeschoten notes, “[t]he exact number of Turkic speaking people living around the world is difficult to estimate”, but it is always possible to give a rough estimate. After all, the size of the speaker populations of the various Turkic languages varies from one individual (possibly still for Manchurian Kirghiz) to 80–90 million (Turkish), and it is certainly possible to classify the languages into those spoken by dozens, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions, and tens of millions. It would also be interesting to list the traditional religions of the different Turkic-speaking ethnicities in table form, as they range from Sunni Islam (e.g. Turks of Turkey) and Shia Islam (e.g. Azerbaijanis) to Tibetan Buddhism (Yellow Uighur, Tyva), Shamanism (many Siberian Turkic groups), Orthodox Christianity (Gagauz
and others), “Karaism” (Karaim), and even Judaism (Krymchak). In some cases, religion is the principal diagnostic feature defining an ethnicity.

The new collective volume, which, like its predecessor, belongs to the Routledge Language Family Series, appeared only shortly after the publication of an individual volume on “Turkic” by Lars Johanson (2021) in Cambridge Language Surveys. Starting with his habilitation thesis, dealing with the verbal aspect of Turkish (Johanson 1971), Johanson has been systematically expanding his original scope from Turkish to Turkic, and both of the new volumes may be seen as monuments to his life-time endeavour and achievement. The volumes have much in common, including the new unified Romanized transcription for Turkic language data. The use of a uniform system of notation is certainly a reasonable innovation, but some of the graphic conventions it contains, like the hachek above the letters ⟨č⟩ and ⟨ǰ⟩ instead of ⟨c⟩ and ⟨j⟩ (for palatal affricates), appear totally unnecessary concessions to the earlier Turkological tradition. Some other new conventions, like the indication of vowel reduction (as in the Kipchak languages) by a dot under the basic letter, are technically challenging to apply. Johanson is also well known for his use of idiosyncratic terms, such as “copie” instead of “loanwords” or “borrowings”. Another term used in the new volumes is “actant” for what has also been known as “argument”. It remains a matter of opinion whether an inanimate noun functioning as the object of a transitive verb can be called “actant”, but it has to be admitted that Johanson has been able to raise an entire school of Turkologists who describe the Turkic languages using his terminology.

The Routledge volume continues with a “Historical Sketch” of the Turkic speaking peoples by Peter B. Golden (Chapter 2). Although very concise and virtually unaltered as compared with the first edition, this chapter gives a clear picture of the main developments, functioning as a summary of Golden’s monographic treatment of the topic (1992). However, one aspect that should perhaps be stressed more, as has also been demonstrated by the results of modern human genetics, is that the spread of the Turkic languages from their original homeland in what is today Mongolia and northern China, took place mainly by way of language shift, in the course of which the populations who had earlier spoken Iranian and Greek, as well as, in some locations, other languages, shifted over to Turkic, contributing at the same time to the internal diversification of the Turkic language family with different adstratal and substratal influences. Unfortunately, the volume contains no separate chapter dealing with the taxonomy of the Turkic languages. In this connection, the reader misses, in particular, a comprehensive discussion concerning the discovery of Khalaj and its position in the Turkic language family. A new feature compared with the first edition is, however, the distinction made between “East Old Turkic” (Chapter 8) and “West Old Turkic” (Chapter 9), as presented...
by Lars Johanson and László Károly, respectively. The concept of “West Old Turkic”, publicized by the monograph of András Róna-Tas and Árpád Berta (2011), is now widely used, but its underlying rational as compared with the older terms “Bulghar Turkic”, “Bulgharic”, or “Oghuric”, remains somewhat unclear.

The origins and historical evolution of the Turkic languages are also discussed in several other chapters. Most importantly, Lars Johanson offers a slightly reworked version of his earlier text on the “History of Turkic” (Chapter 6), while András Róna-Tas discusses the “Reconstruction of Proto-Turkic and the genealogical (in the first edition: “genetic”) question” (Chapter 4). The chapter by Johanson is the only place in the volume where taxonomic issues are discussed in any detail, though still very briefly. Both Johanson and Róna-Tas seem to be ambivalent with regard to the “Altaic Hypothesis”, but Róna-Tas is more inclined to take a critical stand towards, at least, the “evidence” that has so far been presented in favour of this construction. Interestingly, with regard to the important taxonomic feature of rhotacism/zetacism, the two scholars take different positions, with Johanson favouring zetacism (\( \ast r' > z \)), while Róna-Tas is a rhotacist (\( \ast z > r \)). Neither of them apparently accepts the phonologically most trivial (and correct) solution (\( \ast s > z \) vs. \( r \)), as explicitly formulated by A. M. Shherbak (1970). As a new author, Martine Robbeets also presents her visions on Altaic, now renamed “Transeurasian” (Chapter 5). As in other recent contributions, she attempts to link the alleged common origin of the “Transeurasian” languages with the ancient agricultural societies in southwestern Manchuria some 8,000 to 5,000 years BP. In the absence of shared basic vocabulary items, her material evidence comes mainly from derivational suffixes, which, however, involve multiple problems because of their short form and diffuse functions, as well as easy borrowability between typologically similar languages. She goes clearly too far when she “reconstructs” even the sound system of “Proto-Transeurasian”. One is particularly suspicious of her vowel system, which comprises a single front vowel (\( \ast i \)) against as many as six back vowels, divided between four different levels of articulation.

Two other general chapters deal with the “Structure of Turkic” by Lars Johanson (Chapter 3) and the “Turkic writing systems” by András Róna-Tas (Chapter 7). The latter is a rather brief list, with no script samples, of the different writing systems used historically for Turkic languages, while the former is a panchronic generalization of the typological features of the Turkic language family, including the reconstructed protoforms, the historically attested ancient languages, and the modern diversity of Turkic idioms. The discussion is rather strongly biased towards Turkish (proper) and other mainstream Turkic languages, with the typologically more aberrant varieties, like Yakut, Yellow Uighur, or Salar, not to mention Chuvash, receiving less attention. The
terminological innovations of Johanson are most obvious in the section dealing with the verb(al)s, where many well-known categories appear under new names. For instance, the traditional tense-aspect forms are dealt with in terms of “terminality” and divided into “intraterminals” ( = progressive forms), “terminals” ( = preterite forms), and “postterminals” ( = perfect forms). Another set of new terms is that of “participant nominals” (traditionally known as participles in Turkology) and “action nominals” ( = infinitives). It has to be noted, however, that many of the chapters dealing with the individual Turkic languages in the volume are more traditionally oriented and do not necessarily apply the whole spectre of Johanson’s terms.

The bulk of the volume is filled by the chapters dealing with the individual Turkic languages. Apart from East and West Old Turkic, these comprise three other historical written languages: Middle Kipchak (Chapter 10) by Árpád Berta and Éva Á. Csató, Chaghatai (Chapter 11) by Hendrik Boeschoten, and Ottoman Turkish (Chapter 12) by Celia Kerslake. Among the modern languages, separate descriptions are offered on Turkish (Chapter 13) by Éva A. Csató and Lars Johanson, Gagauz (Chapter 16) by Astrid Menz, Azeri (Chapter 17) by Elisabetta Ragagnin, Turkmen (Chapter 18) by Birsel Karakoç, Noghai (Chapter 23) by Birsel Karakoç, Kirghiz (Chapter 24) by Birsel Karakoç and Kenjegül Kalieva, Uzbek (Chapter 25) by Hendrik Boeschoten, Uighur (Chapter 26) by Abdurishid Yakup, Yakut (Chapter 29) by Astrid Menz and Vladimir Monasteriev, and Chuvash (Chapter 30) by Klára Agyagási. Some idioms are, however, dealt with in groups. Thus, there are descriptions of Turkish dialects (Chapter 14) by Bernt Brendemoen, Turkic languages of Iran (Chapter 19) by Christiane Bulut, Tatar and Bashkir (Chapter 20) by Árpád Berta, West Kipchak languages (Chapter 21) by Árpád Berta and Éva A. Csató, Kazakh and Karakalpak (Chapter 22) by Aynur Abish, Yellow Uighur and Salar (Chapter 27) by Abdurishid Yakup, and South Siberian Turkic (Chapter 28) by Claus Schönig and Irina Nevskaya. An additional chapter deals with the Turkish language reform (Chapter 15) by Bernt Brendemoen.

If we think of its coverage, the biggest problem of the volume is perhaps exactly the fact that several taxonomically and typologically important languages are not granted an individual description. Yellow Uighur and Salar, for instance, are two Turkic languages with totally separate origins with the only common thing that they have ended up being spoken in the Gansu-Qinghai region, where the dominant regional language has been Amdo Tibetan. Each of them is described in the volume at a very superficial level on only two pages of text, and no mention is made of such an important areal feature as the category of perspective (egophoricity). Similarly, the idea of placing the “South Siberian Turkic” languages, that is, Altai Turkic, Yenisei Turkic, and Sayan Turkic, under a common heading is only justifiable on a geographical basis.
The decision of dividing Yenisei Turkic into “Abakan Turkic” (= Yenisei Kirghiz or Khakas) and Chulym Turkic is also questionable. In a more taxonomically oriented framework, Yenisei Turkic with all of its derivatives (Khakas, Chulym, Kondoma Shor, Manchurian Kirghiz, and Yellow Uighur) could have been dealt with in one panchronic chapter, while Sayan Turkic (with both Steppe Sayan Turkic and Taiga Sayan Turkic) would have filled another chapter. Alternatively, major modern languages such as Khakas and Tyva would have deserved separate treatments.

As far as the technical side of the editorial work is concerned, it has to be noted that some of the problems of the first edition have not been corrected in the new edition. For instance, the list of tables at the beginning of the volume lacks any informative value, since the names of most tables do not contain reference to the underlying language. Looking at the numerous tables with names like “Vowels”, “Consonants”, “Possessive suffixes”, or “Case suffixes”, the reader can only decipher their meaning by referring to the chapter number and going back to the corresponding chapter title in the general list of contents. This is obviously a miss for which the copy editor is to blame in the first place. In other respects, the volume follows the house style of Routledge, as used for this particular series. Over the years, however, the house style has changed, for the first edition was still printed in a larger font size and with broader margins, making it more pleasant for the eye than the new edition and other recent volumes in the series. Of course, this problem does not exist for those who prefer to use the electronic version of the book. As it is, the volume is visually rather tightly packed with information, and reading it requires some concentration of the reader. A typologically oriented linguist might have wished to have some of the sentence examples to be quoted in interlinear glossing, though it must be said that interlinear glossing, though fashionable, is not always the most reader-friendly way of representing language data.

In general, the new volume edited by Johanson and Csató is a worthy member of the Routledge Language Family Series. Making an up-to-date handbook of Turkic languages is no easy task, especially as there exists a great predecessor in the Fundamenta Philologiae Turcicae (Deny et al. eds. 1959). In some respects it has turned out to be impossible to surpass this first monumental summary of the field. Fundamenta is particularly strong on comparative and diachronic information. As systematically organized collections of synchronic grammatical descriptions, the more recent volumes edited by È. R. Tenishev et al. (1997) in Russian and Ahmet B. Ercilasun (2007) in Turkish also have their strong sides. Certainly, Turkology has developed rapidly in recent decades, as the field has become increasingly closely integrated with the theories of general linguistics, and in comparison with its predecessors, the volume edited by Johanson and Csató is definitely more “modern” in every respect. Even so, it is
always a challenge to edit a collective volume with a large number of authors, and the result is inevitably uneven, especially as some chapters reproduced from the first edition have not been brought fully up to date. Fortunately, the reader may conveniently use the Routledge edition together with the individual Cambridge volume of Johanson, which, for the very reason that it is written by a single author, offers a more consistent and internally more coherent picture of the complexity of the Turkic language family. It may take again several decades until a comparably comprehensive synthesis of Turkology is attempted by any major Turkologist.

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