Book Reviews

Lexical Interaction between Mongolic and Tungusic in Transbaikalia


Khamnigan Mongol [KM] plays a very important role in Mongolic historical and comparative linguistics due to its very conservative nature (see Janhunen’s ground-breaking paper of 1992), by virtue of which it becomes immediately relevant for specialists conducting the same kind of research in the field of Tungusic studies, more concretely in the field of Ewenki dialectology. Mongolists benefit more than specialists of Tungusic in terms of discovery, since the many KM loanwords which can be found scattered across Ewenki territory tell the story of KM, with little historical insight on Ewenki itself. Nevertheless, there is much to be learnt for both sides regarding the general dynamics of their contact. Bayarma Khabtagaeva focuses on the interaction between KM and the Ewenki dialects spoken in Buryatia, namely, North-Baikal, Barguzin, Baunt, and Nercha. She has already contributed valuable studies about language contact between Mongolic and Tungusic speakers, paying special attention to the lexicon. Therefore, it seems that she is perfectly suitable for the task ahead.

The contents of the book are divided into three big blocks (see table of contents on pp. 7–9). The very brief preface with the protocollary acknowledgments (p. 11) is followed by the introduction (pp. 13–55), the list of Mongolic loanwords in the Ewenki dialects of Buryatia, and a discussion of the criteria used by Khabtagaeva to analyse them (pp. 143–198). The introduction contains standard information about the Mongolic and Tungusic languages,
their classification, dialects, current situation and a brief summary on previous scholarship. For non-specialists it may be very valuable to study the ethnographical data on pp. 26–35, as this can usually be found only in Russian publications.

In order to properly describe the history of KM loanwords in Ewenki dialects, Khabtagaeva must first explain the historical trajectory of each variety involved, so that we can pinpoint phonetic dissonances setting apart inherited material and borrowed material. This is done in very clear terms (pp. 37–55). The reader is advised to carefully study this information before the perusal of the data in the rest of the book.

In the section devoted to the presentation of the main diagnostic features distinguishing the various Ewenki dialects of Buryatia (pp. 37–45) it is not always adequate to mark the relationship of those dialects with the literary Ewenki language in terms of evolution from (“>”) or to (“<”). On p. 4, for instance, we find the following formulation: ‘Literary Ewenki huyukuun ‘small’ > *hulyukuun > Baunt Ewenki ulikǝǝn”, which would mean that Baunt Ewenki is in this case innovative against Literary Ewenki. This is, of course, incorrect. The genuine status of the initial *h in the literary language is unproblematic, but the same cannot be said of the variation -y- ~ -l- (see, i.a., Vasilevič 1948: 335). In this particular case, Baunt Ewenki uli+ retains an original sequence -li- = [-l’i-] (cf. Literary Ewen huli+ ‘child’ and Negidal hulay+ ‘dwarf’ in TMS II:338), through which, perhaps via *n’i- (although in theory this step is not obligatory), we arrive at the Literary Ewenki form huyu+. Admittedly, examples like this are very rare in Khabtagaeva’s book.

The main body of the book (pp. 57–142) is organized as a sort of etymological dictionary, where the bulk of the language data is arranged alphabetically. The material is mainly taken from TMS, H. Nugteren’s wonderful PhD thesis on the historical phonology of the various Mongolic languages spoken in the Qinghai-Gansu area (2011) and, when necessary, G. Doerfer’s Mongolo-Tungusica (see more details on pp. 14–16). More importantly, field-work notes of Barguzin Ewenki personally collected by Khabtagaeva as well as other materials hitherto unpublished, are also included.

The percentage of new data and etymologies suggested for the first time is very high, which will require careful inspection in the future. The number of comparisons for which there is some additional literature is small and in most cases it would be irrelevant for the purposes of the book. Notwithstanding this, it could have been of some use for non-specialists to at least mention briefly previous scholarship on certain items. For instance, although transparent and self-evident for specialists, Barguzin Ewenki adali ← Mongolic adali, both meaning ‘similar, identical’ (on p. 57), can be found in Russian, i.e., ádli, adál, etc. ‘as if, exactly, equally’, where the original Mongolic term has undergone
remarkable functional changes (adverb, conjunction), which might be of interest to typologists (Kara 1991).

When dealing with large quantities of etymological data, as in the present case, I find it very practical to number the items, so that they can be conveniently referred to elsewhere. Of course, this is nothing but a matter of personal taste.

The third and last part of the book is reserved for the presentation of the criteria used in the analysis of the data. It is with them that Khabtagaeva has been able to establish the relative chronology of the KM loanwords in Ewenki dialects, as well as to estimate how they might be interpreted, so that we can improve our knowledge on the recent (pre)history of KM. These criteria can be divided into three types: phonological, morphological and lexical. Many of them are well known thanks to the efforts of specialists in the past, the most famous being, without any doubt, the late Nicholas Poppe (1897–1991), whose works have been extensively consulted by Khabtagaeva.

In the phonology domain we have the change of ö > u, preservation of vowels in the second syllable, secondary long vowels via loss of consonantal segments, vowel labialization, the representation of ti, di vs. ci, ji, etc. As is well-known, some of these details require special attention given their sometimes ambiguous nature. For example, the labialization of original -g- in Mongolic that can be observed in Ewenki (pp. 154–155) is not a phenomenon restricted to a single dialectal area of Ewenki and it is most certainly not the result of Mongolic influence or dialectal mixing. The phonetics behind it, which are basic and well understood, is too universal. This is a highly complex issue with a very long history which so far has received little attention. The excellent studies by Károly (2012) on Turkic or Rykin (2017) on Mongolic, both exhibiting a good balance between linguistics and philology, are perfect first steps towards a more comprehensive treatment of the issue in the traditional field of Altaic studies.

Especially interesting are the sections devoted to hybrid words (noun compounds half-Ewenki, half-Mongolian, pp. 189–190) and doublets (words that have been twice borrowed, pp. 196–198). Regrettably, the latter is a topic generally neglected in Tungusic and Mongolic linguistics. As shown by Khabtagaeva, the chronological difference between the first and second layer can be easily discerned by identifying properly the diagnostic features amply discussed in the previous sections, e.g., the loss of intervocalic -g- or the rounding of original e (plus automatic neo-harmonic vocalism), as in Barguzin Ewenki jogo ‘grandchild’ ~ jaa ‘nephew’, cf. Literary Mongolian jige ‘cousin’ in collocations like jige köbegün ‘grandson’, Buryat zee, Dagur jaa, etc. (p. 197; semantic specialization, being either the direct effect of Mongolic influence or a Tungusic innovation, is to be naturally expected).
The most important conclusion of Khabtagaeva’s book is that some form of archaic Khamnigan Mongol was in use across the Transbaikalian region and served as source for the oldest layer of Mongolic loanwords in some Ewenki dialects, especially Barguzin and Nercha. Thus, Mongolic loanwords in Barguzin Ewenki show retention of initial -h- and intervocalic -k-. Khabtagaeva argues convincingly that Dagur and Buryat played a minimal, close-to-zero role in the region. Most diagnostic features to be identified in the immense majority of the Mongolic loanwords present in Ewenki point clearly to KM.

The sound correspondence table set up at the beginning of the conclusions section (pp. 199–201), with Mongolic languages (Dagur, KM, and Buryat) on the one side, and the various Ewenki dialects used in Buryatia, on the other, has much value in it. From now on, we can consult it at all times when it is hard to decide about the nature and ultimate origin of those lexical items that are suspected of being loanwords.

The book is closed with the bibliography (pp. 203–214) and the index verborum of Literary Mongolian words (pp. 215–221). Given the nature of the data analysed in the body of the book, similar indices for Ewenki dialects and Khamnigan Mongol would have been greatly welcome.

The current scholarly standards in Tungusic historical and comparative linguistics are far from those found in Indo-European or Semitic studies (the situation in Mongolic is doubtlessly better). However, this unfortunate state of affairs is slowly but steadily being alleviated through the efforts of specialists like Khabtagaeva. Her monograph has a balanced presentation of data and analysis. More importantly, the conclusions have an immediate impact on our understanding of the phenomena discussed and, in the particular domain of etymology, we are offered reasonable solutions to long-standing problems. If the main goal of science is to solve problems, it can be safely concluded that this book has fully achieved its goal.

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References


