REMARKS ON THE PHONOLOGY OF THE MONGOUR LANGUAGE*

BY

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The investigation of the archaic Mongolian dialects does play an important role from the point of view of the comparative Mongolian studies and of the Mongolian linguistic history alike. We can divide the archaic dialects into three main groups: the Moghol of Afghanistan, the Daur and the dialects of the Kansu-Chinghai region in the Chinese People's Republic. The archaic dialects of the Kansu-Chinghai region are known to us from the various publications of Potanin, Volpert, Malov, Mannerheim, Rockhill, D'Ollone, Todoraeva, Chingeltei and up till now the most abundant material has been placed at our disposal by De Smedt and Mostaert, who together published the phonology, the grammar and the vocabulary of the Monguor of Sinjing. The Monguor language shows the most dialectal divergencies from the other Mongolian dialects. The special dialectal features of the Monguor are to be divided into two groups: to the first group do belong the preserved archaic Mongolian traits, to the second the special Monguor innovations.

A part of the special Monguor innovations leads us to suspect Tibetan influence. We know from the statements of Mostaert, Schröder and Unkrieg that this Tibetan influence is reflected in a great number of Tibetan loan-words in Monguor. But until now there no attempts have been made to clear up the circumstances of this Tibetan influence, and it has not been shown how this influence manifests itself exactly. It was also not known which Tibetan dialects can be taken into account, nor has the further problem of the period in which this influence made its effect on Monguor been discussed.

A work of mine, on which I am at present engaged deals with the Tibetan loan-words in Monguor, and in it I propose to discuss these questions.

Now allow me to say a few words, as an illustration of the whole problem, on the question of the initial consonant clusters in Monguor.

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It is well-known that in the present-day Mongour language initial consonant clusters are encountered, while this feature is totally unknown both in the history of the Mongolian language and in the overwhelming majority of the present-day dialects. This I take as good reason to suppose that we have to do in this case with Tibetan influence.

When we are examining the initial consonant clusters of Mongour, we find that the first element of the cluster can only be one of the following consonants: n, a, naso-oral ñ, r, s, palatalized ś and cerebral ı. Can we find such initial consonant clusters in Tibetan?

The earliest written form of the Tibetan language, the so-called Old Tibetan of the VIIth—Xth century, had eight prefixes, which were spelt before the initial consonant of the radical. This stage has been preserved in the Tibetan classical literary language, but most of the present-day Tibetan dialects have lost these prefixes, and have thus no initial consonant clusters. Only in a few archaic Tibetan dialects do we find the developments of the Old Tibetan prefix system. Now the question arises: can we explain the existence of the Mongour initial consonant clusters from an Tibetan dialect of this type?

For answering this question we have to start from the Tibetan loan-words of Mongour, because these loan-words have originated from the very Tibetan dialect or dialects which were in connection with Mongour, and thus played a significant role in the formation of the phonological structure of Mongour.

From the point of view of the initial consonant clusters we can divide the Tibetan loan-words of Mongour into three groups. These groups represent three stages of the history of the Old Tibetan prefixes in the Eastern Tibetan dialects.

The Tibetan loan-words belonging to the first group show that the Tibetan dialect from which they were borrowed preserved all Old Tibetan prefixes, while the central Tibetan dialects had lost them. Let us see a few examples: The Old Tibetan prefix d- is represented by r- in the Tibetan loan-words of Mongour, for instance: ronomsa 'monastery' corresponds to literary Tibetan dgom-pa, while the Lhasa dialect has gompa. The Old Tibetan prefix s- has been preserved unchanged for instance in sarma 'star', literary Tibetan skar-ma, while in the Lhasa dialect we find karma; or the prefix s- has changed into a palatalized ś before palatalized consonants, for instance sbevisu 'happiness', literary Tibetan skyid-po. In the Lhasa dialect we meet with the form kipö. The Old Tibetan prefix r- was preserved for instance in Mongour ronoma 'mare', literary Tibetan rgod-ma in place of which we find in the Lhasa dialect göma. In other cases the prefix r- is to be found as a cerebral ı in Mongour, for instance in soññ 'marrow' from literary Tibetan rkaññ, and also in this case the Lhasa dialect has no prefix, we find kang. The Old Tibetan prefix g- is to be found as a spirant s- for instance in the Mongour sockum