

Studies in General and Oriental Linguistics

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AGGLUTINATION IN NORTHERN EURASIA IN PERSPECTIVE

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I

The following discussion is an attempt to combine information about the language types of Northern Eurasia with the distribution of the language families of that area. By keeping the typological matrix clearly distinct from genetic considerations but by applying a simple tenet of linguistic geography to the deployment of language-family types, it is hoped that a discussion of the possible prehistory of language-family types in Eurasia can be launched.

It is not my purpose here to prove or disprove that language family A is or is not related to language family B. Nor am I interested in the question of whether typological indices are or are not admissible in comparing language families for the purpose of establishing genetic affinity between them. My aim is to try to reconstruct the typological picture of Northern Eurasia at an earlier point in time and to extract a conclusion (concerning both types and language families) from that picture.

Needless to say, any such conclusion must remain tentative and subject to revision. It is felt, however, that the discussion need not necessarily remain infertile; too many large-scale and long-range comparisons of families have been made and are still being made without reference to the simple questions of space, time, and type. I therefore hope to be able to couch my own presentation in more realistic, down-to-earth terms.

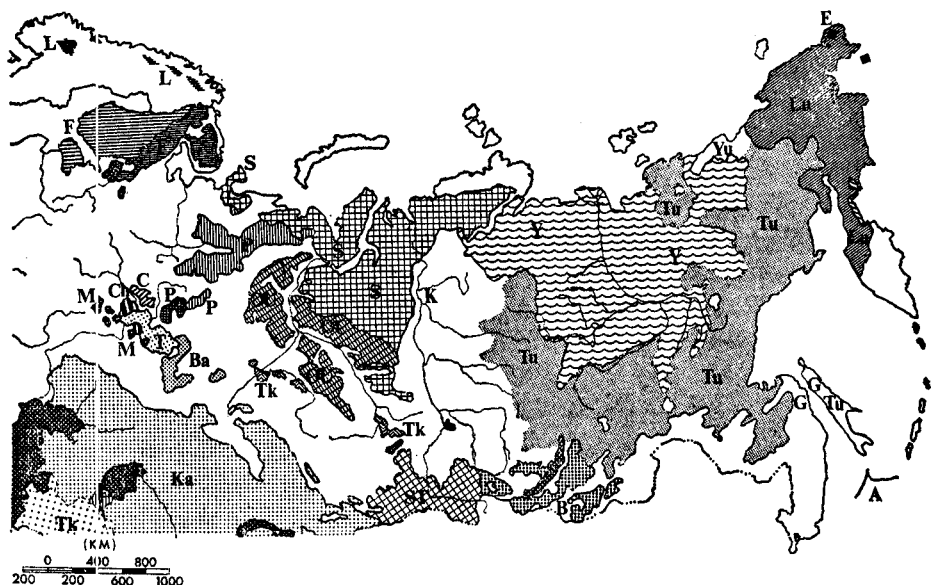
II

To ensure clarity and prudence, only well-established families (Uralic, Luorawetlan, Indo-European, Eskimo-Aleut) will be referred to. The important language isolates Ket (i.e., Yenisei-Ostyak), Yukagir, Gilyak, and Ainu will be treated on the same level as language families.

The Altaic family presents certain problems inasmuch as the coherence and interrelationship of Turkic, Mongol, and Tungus is not quite clear and the entire family, as such, is not as convincing as Indo-European, Uralic, or Luorawetlan. *Altaic* will nevertheless be used in its usual sense of that family which consists of Turkic (including Chuvash), Mongol, and (Manchu-) Tungus. Korean and Japanese will be considered language isolates.

One last terminological point. The term *agglutinating* will be used to denote lan-

guages which have most or all of the following morphological characteristics: suffixation (generally correlated with the absence of prefixation), a system of possessive suffixes in the noun which can generally be correlated with the person-marker system in the verb, a developed participial system, local cases in the noun, syntax in which the modifier precedes the head of the construction, the finite verb as cloture marker at the end of the sentence, sequences of comparatively many suffixes, noun-surrogates in postpositional function. The term also suggests, secondarily, the presence of vowel harmony, the absence of initial consonant clusters, and bisyllabic roots. These latter criteria are not given the same weight as those enumerated above. In a general sense, agglutinating languages are thought of as being more easily segmentable into stems (or roots) followed by a potentially long series of (first) derivational and (then) inflectional suffixes. This simple formula will be kept in mind in the use of the term *agglutinating* as used below.



SCHEMATIC MAP OF 20-TH CENTURY NORTHERN EURASIA

The location of languages and language groups is approximate. Russian is not indicated. The key to the abbreviations used follows.

ALTAIC

B = Buryat
 Ba = Bashkir
 Ch = Chuvash
 Ka = Kazakh
 ST = South-Siberian Turkic
 T = Tatar
 Tk = other Turkic
 Tu = Tungus
 Y = Yakut

URALIC

C = Cheremis
 F = Finnic
 L = Lapp
 M = Mordvinian
 P = Permian
 OU = Ob-Ugric
 S = Samoyed

OTHER

A = Ainu
 E = Eskimo
 G = Gilyak
 K = Ket
 Lu = Luorawetlan
 Yu = Yukagir

III

Typologically, the languages of Northern Eurasia present an almost but not completely contiguous picture. The map reveals the broad belt of agglutinating languages: Uralic, Altaic, Yukagir, and Gilyak (as well as Korean and Japanese—if we extend our notion of the area under discussion further to the South). This belt is interrupted by a non-agglutinating language (Ket) in the very heart of the South; it is flanked in the West by Indo-European and, in the East, by Eskimo, by Luorawetlan (Chukchi-Koryak-Kamchadal), and by Ainu, all of which are non-agglutinating.

The maps so painstakingly prepared for 17th-century Siberia by Dolgikh and his associates¹ reveal more or less the same picture: Yukagir spreads over a wider area, both toward the South and toward the West, thus almost making contact with Samoyed (a fact which helped promote the Uralic-Yukagir hypotheses of Bouda, Collinder, Tailleur² and others). We know that Yakut is a recent intruder in Siberia.

We may go further and assume that a certain indeterminate number of millenia ago the foci (proto-languages) from which the present-day agglutinating languages and their families have sprung were restricted to smaller and more compact areas. Thus, simply for the sake of tue argument, let us assume an *Urheimat* for Uralic near the confluence of the Rivers Kama and Volga, for Altaic somewhere to the East of the Uralic *Urheimat*, for Proto-Yukagir still further toward the East, and for Proto-Gilyak at a considerable distance to the east or southeast of the Yukagir *Urheimat*. Let us assume that this picture prevailed *n* millenia ago. We can leave open the questions as to whether these *Urheimaten* were contiguous or not; it does not matter.

The fact remains that, given this picture of the distribution of the proto-agglutinative group(s) for *n* millenia ago the question arises as to the relative position of the non-agglutinative groups. We can be fairly certain that Indo-European, regardless of its state of development at this particular point in time, was situated to the West of Uralic.³ If any of the Proto-Caucasian groups plays a role at all in this discussion, we can assume it to have been situated to the South or Southeast of Indo-European and hence to the South of Uralic. In the extreme East, Luorawetlan must certainly be placed beyond the easternmost boundary of Yukagir. Ainu, one would be led to think, judging from archaeological and prehistoric evidence, was already an insular language or, if continental, confined to the Okhotsk-Maritime area.

Ket thus remains the only non-agglutinative language in this reconstructed picture which is not liminal on the West-to-East axis. The question arises: is it more likely

¹ *История Сибири, т. II, Сибирь в составе феодальной России*. Ленинград, 1968.

² The most recent literature can be found in B. Collinder, "Hat das Uralische Verwandte?," *Acta Societatis Linguisticae Upsalensis*, Nova Series 1:4 (1965), pp. 109-180.

³ E.G. Pulleyblank (*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, April 1966) proposes a site for Proto-Indo-European much farther to the East, nearer to Proto-Chinese. This does not affect the main argument presented here.

that Ket was pushed to the South from the North by entering Uralic (Samoyed, Ob-Ugric) and Altaic (Tungus—and later Yakut?) groups or is it more likely that Ket was pushed northward by forces in China, Mongolia, or Central Asia? Or should we assume that Ket has always been spoken in the general area where it is spoken today (around Turukhansk), perhaps in a wider circle? Judging from the position of the congener languages (Kott, Arin, Assan), let us assume that the original Yeniseian (Ket-and-congeners) focus was in the mountainous area South of Turukhansk. Ket might thus be considered as the boundary between the agglutinating belt and the large zone to the South of that belt, albeit a small point along a long frontier. (In this area, Altaic languages have spread southward so that they are in touch with the surrounding non-agglutinating (Indo-European, Tibeto-Burman, and Chinese) areas. In the East, Korean occupies a similar position.)

IV

We can now apply one of the basic tenets of linguistic geography to the deployment of types as described in section III. The tenet is simply that while the marginal zones of a linguistic area are conservative, the central zone is innovating. This principle is not necessarily a law; in many instances, other and more powerful factors (which are generally extra-linguistic: cultural, political) can override it. The principle has been so often invoked with useful results that we can apply it here simply to pursue our argument. If the non-agglutinating marginal zones are conservative and the agglutinating central zone is innovating we emerge with *the hypothesis that the agglutinating type in Eurasia is innovating*, i.e., that it is the result of a more recent (and/or rapid?) change in type, from a non-agglutinating type to the agglutinating one.⁴

Regardless of whether the old idea that the agglutinating type is "primitive" is correct or incorrect, or whether it is still held or not, the notion that the agglutinating belt in Eurasia is more recent than the non-agglutinating languages which surround it suggests the question: are there indices or clues in the present-day agglutinating languages (in the belt) which would suggest that these languages were at one time not agglutinating?

Yes. We need only look at Wolfgang Steinitz's⁵ main contributions to the history and reconstruction of Finno-Ugric (Uralic) to find that the problems which vexed him most (vowel alternations in the root; reduced vowels and their role) are much less typical of the agglutinating type than of other (e.g., the Indo-European or "Caucasian") types. In other words, what Steinitz discovered was an ancient non-agglutinating layer in Uralic. Yukagir seems to lend itself to similar speculations which I have not

⁴ This is at variance with the idea held by some, explicitly or implicitly, and probably descended from the Schlegels and from Max Müller, that the agglutinating type is "primitive," i.e., that it is at a stage one or more steps behind those language types which lack the characteristics enumerated at the end of section II, above (as samples of typically agglutinating features).

⁵ *Geschichte des finnisch-ugrischen Volkalismus*, Stockholm, 1944.

pursued. I am not competent to speak about Proto-Altaic in this connection.

The difficulties in reconstructing Proto-Japanese (e.g., its complicated vowel system) may also suggest that Japanese may not always have been as agglutinating (in the sense indicated in section II) as it is now. This suggests that Japanese (and with it, Korean and Gilyak), languages which today lie at the periphery of the agglutinating belt, moved into their present-day loci relatively *recently*—if they are to be thought of as having participated in the general and over-all development sketched here for the “central” agglutinative zone as a whole. (The term *relatively* here means relative to *n* millennia, as assumed in section III.)

A train of thought similar to that presented here for the North-Eurasian agglutinating belt could be imagined in connection with Dravidian, in South India. Crowded into the southernmost area of the Indian subcontinent by Indo-Aryan and Munda, Dravidian (an “agglutinating” language family by the standards used here) is in a position not dissimilar to that of the larger and more complex northern belt, but the total picture is simpler, only because there are fewer factors (areal, linguistic, of mobility) involved. By analogy, Brahui (the northernmost and westernmost Dravidian language, now spoken in Pakistan and not in contact with any other Dravidian language) would be in the position of Japanese, Korean and Gilyak which, as we have seen, are situated at the extreme East of the main belt. There are good reasons for assuming that Brahui is a vestige of a southward migration of (Proto-) Dravidian. The analogy could therefore hardly be maintained for Japanese-Korean-Gilyak, unless we wish to introduce an entirely new set of questions.

Finally, we should remember that isoglosses are not lifeless boundaries. What is a marginal zone in one complex may be a core zone in another complex and conversely, a central and innovating area in one complex may be a conservative and liminal area in another. This again introduces reference to spheres beyond the confines of language. It would therefore be very useful to collate the thoughts presented here with comparable or parallel ideas or perhaps even achievements in cultural anthropology and archaeology. Since language is spoken by living, acting people we should not try to recapture its past without reference to man's total experience, even on a long historical axis.

V

I can only repeat that the broad outline sketched here should not be taken to be a well-substantiated theory but should be interpreted, rather, as an incentive to further thinking about the linguistic prehistory of Northern Eurasia, much as intuitive hints about internal reconstruction can lead to eventually sound and well-formed theories about earlier stages of a given language, even if such intuitive hints must eventually be abandoned.⁶

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⁶ It gives me pleasure to thank my colleagues Érica Ch. de García, Søren Egerod, and M. I. Herzog who have read and constructively commented on the pre-final version of this paper.