A New Look at Altaic

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The goal of the enormous etymological compendium recently completed by Sergei Starostin and his collaborators is to convince its readers of the existence and validity of the Altaic language family. These three thick tomes represent by far the most ambitious work of this kind to date and are unlikely to be surpassed anytime soon, at least in terms of volume. In the conception of the authors, Altaic comprises not only the conventionally recognized Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic groups, but Korean and Japanese as well. The introduction contains five chapters which introduce the comparative phonology of Altaic, a section on comparative morphology, and the classification and dating of Proto-Altaic. Four further sections provide articles on the structure and conventions of the dictionary, a bibliography, and abbreviations. The bulk of the work (pp. 267–1556) is a comparative dictionary arranged alphabetically according to the authors' Proto-Altaic reconstructions. The entire third volume is devoted to indices of individual languages as well as reconstructions.

Altaic comparative studies have a long and controversial history. The basic phonological correspondences among Turkic, Mongolian, and Tungusic were worked out by G. Ramstedt (1957) and Nicholas Poppe (1960). Subsequently their work was subjected to prolonged criticism from several scholars, among whom Gerhard Doerfer (2004) was one of the most insistent. The chief criticism has been that the majority of the cognates proposed by Ramstedt and Poppe can be considered loanwords, onomatopoeia, or chance resemblances. The conclusion of such criticism has been that Altaic is no more than an areal of *Sprachbund* phenomenon and cannot be considered a valid genetic grouping. Although this negative criticism has been very influential, leading almost to a consensus that no Altaic language family exists, supporters of the Ramstedt-Poppe theory have by no means disappeared. Starostin and his colleagues must be added to the list of those who defend the validity of the Altaic theory. Even among the supporters of Altaic as a valid linguistic family there is considerable disagreement about whether Japanese and Korean should be included in the family. The classic treatments of Ramstedt and Poppe cautiously included Korean in their foundational works but excluded Japanese. Starostin and his co-authors strongly support the inclusion of both Korean and Japanese in their genealogical scheme.

The authors of the *Etymological Dictionary of the Altaic Languages* (EDAL) consider Altaic a language family of great time-depth, extending back to the fifth millennium B.C., older than Indo-European by at least a thousand years. They view Altaic as consisting of three principal groups: Turko-Mongolian, Manchu-Tungusic, and Korean-Japanese. Apparently this view is based on lexicostatistical considerations (pp. 230–34). This conceptualization of Altaic subgrouping strongly affects the entire framework of this dictionary. Whereas most earlier Altaicists based their comparative work on the core groups of Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic, Starostin and his colleagues integrate Korean and Japanese into

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their reconstruction at the most basic level. This idea leads to a number of radical proposals concerning phonology.

The authors of EDAL, following a theory of the nostraticist, V. M. Illič-Svityč (1963, 1965), posit a three-way distinction for stops and affricates at the Proto-Altaic (PA) level. For example, the following correspondences are found for dental and velar stops.

PA	Turkic	Mongolic	Tungusic	Korean	Japanese
*t′	*t	*t	*t	*t	*t
*t	*d	*d	*d	*t	*t
*d	*j	*d	*d	*t	*t
*k′	*k	*k	*x	*k	*k
*k	*g	*k	*k	*k	*k
*g	*g	*g	*g	*k	*k

Earlier Altaicists recognized only a two-way distinction for stops and affricates, *t and *d in the case of dentals and *k and *g in the case of velars. There can be little doubt that Illič-Svityč was influenced by his ideas concerning Nostratic, a super-family that includes Altaic, Uralic, and Indo-European among several other language groups—Afro-Asiatic, Kartvelian, and Dravidian. Note, first of all, however, that Korean and Japanese show no evidence for a three-way (or even a two-way) distinction. Moreover, the nature of the distinction is different in the two cases.

Without going into all the details, I personally find Illič-Svityč's three-way distinction for Altaic highly debatable. Although both V. I. Cincius (1949) and Johannes Benzing (1955) reconstructed a contrast of *k and *x for Proto-Tungusic, when we examine words beginning with *k in the *Sravnitel'nyj Slovar' Tunguso-Man'čžirskix Jazykov* (TMS), we find that a disquieting number of these words have either a very restricted distribution, are loans from Mongolic, or are expressive or sound-symbolic in nature. It seems to me plausible that Proto-Altaic *k regularly became *x in Proto-Tungusic, leaving a distributional vacuum for a velar stop and that subsequently a *k was restored from various sources. Something similar happens in the history of Japanese: Proto-Japanese *p becomes h in Modern Japanese but initial p- still persists in many loanwords and onomatopoeia. Or we might look at Manchu where Proto-Tungusic *p becomes f; yet in Manchu there are still a significant number of words that have an initial p-; such words, it turns out, are almost all loanwords (chiefly from Chinese) or onomatopoeia. The possibility of isolated archaism can also not be excluded in some cases. If, indeed, Tungusic *k and *x do not reflect and original distinction in Proto-Tungusic, then we would have to eliminate Illič-Svityč's three-way contrast for velars.

The three-way distinction for dentals depends critically on the interpretation of certain features of modern Turkic languages, and turkologists by no means agree on Illič-Svityč's interpretation. In the case of labials it is difficult to see how the authors of EDAL justify a three-way distinction:

PA	Turkic	Mongolic	Tungusic	Korean	Japanese
*p′	*0, *j	*h, *j	*p	*p	*p
*p	*b	*b, *h	*p	*p	*p
*b	*b	*b, *h	*b	*p, *b	*p

How do we identify words with these proto-initials? Apparently, the key is that *p is reconstructed when Tungusic has *p and Turkic and Mongolic have *b. Whether such a reconstruction is justified or not depends on the actual etymologies proposed. When I look through

the section of EDAL that contains etymologies with Proto-Altaic *p, I find very few that are not open to serious question. Let us examine a few of these.

*pădà[1] (p. 1071): spread; a flag, standard. For Tungusic, EDAL gives Evenki hadarga 'name of a game (spreading rope between the fingers)', Manchu faida- 'to arrange in a row', and Orok pādda- 'to spread out (as an animal skin)'. Are these Tungusic forms really related to one another? The semantics, at best, seems strained. Manchu faida- has nothing to do with 'stretching' and is most likely a form based on Chinese 排 pái 'arrange in a row, line up'. The Tungusic forms are compared to Mongolian badara- 'to spread, expand, develop'. Note that the Mongolian verb is intransitive; a more likely Tungusic cognate is Manchu mada- 'expand, swell', Nanai mada- 'swell, rise (of dough)' (TMS 2.520). Old Turkic badruq means 'banner, flag'; here the idea presumably is that a flag is something stretched out or extended. This etymology is so filled with problems that it is best abandoned.

*pegò (~ p′, -e) (p. 1082): wart. This etymology is already found in Poppe (1960: 61). EDAL erroneously includes here Evenki hewum 'callus' and heŋte 'wart'. The relevant forms are Manchu fuhu, Ulchi pukte, Orok peukte, and Nanai pūkte; -kte is a very common Tungusic noun suffix, so that the Proto-Tungusic root should be *puu- ~ *peu. This root can be compared regularly to Mongolian egün (Khalkha üü, Dagur xueci). It is unclear why a Proto-Altaic *p should be required here, since it is a clear case where *p′ would be more appropriate. Despite an attempt to explain such a problem by an appeal to mysterious prosodic features (see p. 33), the comparison and reconstruction remain highly open to question.

*pójo ('p′) (p. 1103): child, young of animals. The relevant Tungusic words for 'child' are Evenki hute, Even hut, Ulchi pikte, Orochi xīlte, Nanai pikte. EDAL reconstructs *puj-kte from these forms. This seems plausible at first sight, but left out of account is the irregular plural of these words for 'child': Evenki huri-l, Even uru-l, Ulchi puru-l, Nanai puri-l (where -l is a common plural suffix). What I think we see here is an underlying root *pur(i) (*p′ur(i) in the EDAL system) 'child'. When the very common noun suffix -kte was added to this form, cluster simplification took place because Tungusic does not tolerate clusters of more than two consonants internally in words; hence *pur(i)kte became Evenki hute, Nanai pikte, etc. The Mongolian cognate (not given in EDAL) is ür-e (< *hüre, cf. Dagur xur) 'seed, fruit, offspring'.

These examples are symptomatic of a general shortcoming of this dictionary: a failure first to explore the internal relationships within each subgroup before proposing questionable links based on superficial resemblances.

I believe Starostin and his colleagues are correct in reconstructing initial *l and *ŋ for Proto-Altaic. These initials are well preserved in the Tungusic family and there are no good reasons for considering them in any way peculiar or secondary simply because they are very rare or missing in Turkic and Mongolic. However, I do not agree with EDAL's ideas about the correspondences for these initials outside of Tungusic; but that is a topic for another time. I believe the reconstruction of *l′ and *z are unfounded and need to be rejected. For example, the comparison of Tungusic *seńe- 'raw' (based solely on Manchu senihun 'raw, half-cooked'), Mongolian *sine 'new' and Turkic *jaŋi/*jeŋi 'new' seems quite farfetched.

If the consonantal system devised by the authors of the present work seems poorly supported in many cases, the vowel system proposed for Proto-Altaic is even more radical and presents more problems. First of all, the authors propose that Proto-Altaic lacked vowel harmony, a prominent feature of Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic languages. Here the inclusion of Korean and Japanese as integral members of the Altaic family has obviously been

1. The EDAL transcriptions are somewhat simplified here, for typesetting convenience.

a deciding factor, since these languages at best have only vestiges of vowel harmony. The basic syllabic structure of Proto-Altaic is taken to be CVCV or, less frequently, CVCCV. The second vowel of such roots is considered to be unstable and not easily reconstructable. Nonetheless, it is precisely these second vowels that play a determining role in EDAL's fundamental vowel system. In the book's vocalic scheme there are five vowels (*i, *e, *u, *o, and *a) and three diphthongs (*i̯u, *i̯o, and *i̯a). Exactly how this system is arrived at is not explained. As in the case of the consonants, Tungusic is considered to have preserved the vowels of the first syllables best, except that the distinction of *u and *o is often confused in Tungusic, as it is in Mongolic and Korean as well. To get an idea of how the vocalism works, examine the following correspondences.

PA	Tungusic	Mongolic	Turkic	Japanese	Korean
*a-a	a	a	a	a	A
*a-e	a	a[i]	a,i	ə	A
*a-i	a	a[e]	e[a]	i	A [i]
*a-o	a	a[i,e]	o(ja,aj)	a	ă[o]
*a-u	a	a[U]	a	u	A[U]
*i̯o-a	U	a, U	ia, ja pa	ə[u]	U[jə)
*i̯o-e	U	i[e,ö]	e, a, Pa	ə[a]	i, (j)ə
*i̯o-i	U	i[e,ö]	ia, ja pa	i	U[ă]
*i̯o-o	i	ö[ü,U]	o[u]	ə[a]	i, j(ə)
*i̯o-u	ia(Si)	e[i,u]	u[o]	u	ă[u,jə]

The first set of correspondences given above are illustrative of single vowels. These formulae represent cases where Proto-Altaic CaCa, CaCe, CaCi, etc. are reconstructed. One can see at a glance how these forms are derived. The first vowel is taken from Tungusic and the second vowel seems generally taken from Japanese. But we must keep in mind that the Japanese vowels in question are the vowels of the *first* syllable and that the vowels in non-initial syllables are considered unstable. If the case of single vowels is somewhat intelligible, the diphthongs (like *i̯o-V shown above) really strain one's credulity. The range of possible reflexes surely goes beyond the bounds of what is normally accepted in comparative linguistics. One has to wonder if, given such a generous latitude in framing correspondences, the vowel systems of any two languages might not be made to seem related.

Since the vocalic correspondences account only for vowels of the first syllable, we have an extraordinarily large number of possibilities for vocalic reconstruction. If taken literally, there are potentially forty vocalic configurations to explain vowels of the initial syllable; this seems an astounding number to propose for a comparative reconstruction. To give a better impression of the multiple possibilities of vowel derivation, let us look at the proposed origins for Proto-Mongolic *e: a-i, a-o, e-e, e-i, e-o, e-u, i-e, i̯a-e, i̯a-i, ia-o, i̯o-e, i̯o-i, i̯o-u. A number of these formulae can account for more than one Proto-Mongolic vowel: *i̯a-e can produce Proto-Mongolic i[a,e], but in fact reflexes in *a are as common as those in *i; moreover, one also finds relexes of *o (*ti̯age, p. 1429) and *ü (k'i̯āre, p. 799). All in all, it appears that EDAL's vocalic system does not stand up to close scrutiny.

Seemingly in an attempt to be original at all costs, Starostin and his colleagues often abandon more obvious and well-established etymologies in favor of weaker and more speculative ones. Here I should like to examine several such cases.

*bŭlu (-a, -o) 'cloud' (p. 382): Tung. *bol-, Turk. *bulut (*bulit). Here EDAL compares Tungusic words for 'autumn' with Turkic words for 'cloud'. The Tungusic words are found in all the languages of the group: Evenki bolo, Even boloni, Negidal bolo, Orochi bolo, Udehe bolo, Ulchi bolo, Orok bolo, Nanai bolo, Manchu bolori (TMS 1.93–94). EDAL (but not TMS) connects these words with two other roots: Evenki (dial.) bolgo 'air' and Evenki bolī- 'blow'. Proto-Turkic *bulut 'cloud' is based on such forms as Karakhalpak bulut, Turkish bulut, Uyghur bulut and Chuvash pĕlĕt. It is plausible, I suppose, that "autumn" could be thought of as the "cloudy season," but the authors give no arguments in favor of such an interpretation. In northern China and Mongolia, at least, the rainy season is in the summer, and autumn is a season of clear blue skies. In the case of Turkic, an earlier etymology connects *bulut to *bulga- 'to stir up, to make muddy': Turkish bulan- 'become cloudy or turbid', Uyghur bulγa- 'make turbid, make muddy, contaminate'; cf. Kazakh buldir 'hazy, unclear, dim'. Cincius (1979: 13f.) more convincingly links the Tungusic words for 'autumn' to Mongolian bol- 'become, ripen, mature' which must be connected to Early Turkic bol- 'become, be, occur'. Note that Turkish ol- 'be, become, happen', which is commonly linked to Proto-Turkic *bol- 'become', also means 'ripen, mature'; cf. also Turkish olgun 'ripe, mature'. The Mongolian cognate for Turkic *bulut is probably bulanggir 'disturbed lees or sediment in liquids'; see also Even būl- 'grow dim, fade' and Manchu buli butu 'unclear, muddled'.

*dē 'to lie' (p. 466): Tung. *dē, Mong. *dē-b-, Turk, *jat-, Jpn. *dàntə̀-r-. The authors connect Orochi dē 'bed' with Manchu dedu- 'lie down, go to bed', a connection made by TMS (1.227) which seems plausible, but the second syllable of the Manchu form is unexplained. The authors further connect these forms to Orochi deduxi 'flooring, planking' and its congeners (TMS 1.230), a connection not made by the editors of TMS. So what is the Tungusic root, *dē or *dedu-? All of the Mongolic forms cited point to a reconstruction of Proto-Mongolic *deb- (not *de-b); their basic meaning is 'spread out (as a rug or blanket)'. At best, the semantics of the Tungusic-Mongolic comparison are forced. For Turkic *jat-, there is a much better etymology than that given in EDAL. The original sense of Turkic *jat- was probably 'lie flat': cf. Turkish yat- 'lie down, go to bed, become flat'. The Turkic forms should be compared to Evenki napta-ma- 'lie flat', napta-rā- 'fall flat onto one's face'. Turkic *jat- is a perfectly regular development of a Proto-Altaic *napta- (> *japt- > *jat-). Mongolian nabtaγar 'low, hanging down, sunken' probably also belongs to this etymology.

*dĕkà 'to burn' (p. 469): Tung. *deg-ǯe-gi-, Turk, *jak-, Jpn. *dák-, Kor. *thà-. Several errors occur in this etymology. The Proto-Tungusic form should be *ǯeg-de-gi- and not *deg-ǯe-gi-. Manchu deiji- (from earlier deji-) is anomalous. The Manchu development most likely was *ǯeg-de-gi- to *ǯegdī to *ǯe(g)ǯi- and finally by a dissimulatory process to deji- (note that Proto-Tungusic *ǯ becomes Orok d regularly). Despite what the authors say, Turkic *jak- 'burn (transitive)' is certainly to be related to Turkic *jan- 'burn (intransitive)'. This is virtually the unanimous opinion of Turkologists (Räsänen 1969: 18, Levickaja 1989: 82, Kormušin 1978: 41–43). As Levickaja points out, both *jak- and *jan- are derived from a common root *ja- 'burn'; here *n is a medio-passive suffix (Gabain 1950: 81, Nadeljaev 1969: 659). Gabain considers the Old Turkic suffix -k/q to be an intensive form (1950: 82); Kormušin (1978: 42) speaks of an intensive-causative suffix. The Turkic root *ja- 'burn (unspecified for voice)' corresponds in every detail to Manchu da- 'burn (intransitive)', allowing us to reconstruct a Proto-Altaic root *da- 'burn'.

*dōre- 'to go, walk, approach' (p. 482): Tung. *dūrē-, Mong. *dürbe-, Turkic *jori-/*jüri-, Jpn. *dər-. Here two different Altaic etymologies have been conflated. Manchu ǯura- 'set out

on a journey' belongs with Early Turkic jor- ~ jori- 'go, walk'; the correct Mongolian forms are ǯorči- 'walk, go' and ǯori- 'move in the direction of'. Even ǯürenǯid- 'bring home a new wife' is an isolated dialectal form that is probably unrelated. At any rate, neither Manchu ǯura- nor Even ǯürenǯid- can be derived from Proto-Tungusic *dūre-. The comparison of Evenki dūrē- and Nanai duere-, both meaning 'walk', with Early Turkic jürü- ~ jüri- is an old one (Ramstedt 1957: 52). Whether Mongolian dürbe- 'be frightened, be panic stricken, run or flee in panic' is related is questionable.

*ǰāgi 'fat' (p. 597): Tung. *iag-ǯakta, Mong. *eγükü, *öγekü, Turk. *jāg. The relation of the isolated Ulchi form jakǯakta 'fat, grease' to the Turkic form is unclear. There is a much better etymology for the Turkic forms. The Tuvan correspondence to Proto-Turkic *jāg is čag 'fat, grease'; in Tuvan čag- is also a verbal root meaning 'smear, make dirty, stain' (Levickaja 1989: 58). The Tuvan forms perhaps point to a more primitive meaning of the root *jāg: 'grease, greasy dirt, filth'. Compare Mongolian daγ 'grease, filth, grime, daγtu- 'become greasy, stained'. These forms can further be compared with Dagur dakt- 'be covered with greasy spots'. The Mongolic forms are to be connected with Nanai lakto- 'to adhere, to become stuck to, become soiled (of clothing)'; cf. Ulchi lakta- 'become stuck in mud' (TMS 1.495). From all the above forms we can reconstruct a Proto-Altaic *lag(> *dag > *jag) whose fundamental meaning was 'sticky, adhering', whence 'sticky substance, grease, something dirty adhering to a garment'. The semantic connection between 'sticky' and 'dirt, grease' is common; cf. Chinese 膩 nì 'greasy, sticky, dirt'. Fat is sticky and easily adheres to other things like clothing.

*kōme (~ -o) 'mat carpet' (p. 717): Tung. *kuma-lān, Mong. köm, Turk. *kōm, Jpn. *kə́mé. In this case again, two etymologies are confused. As Cincius (1984: 100) has shown, Mongolian *köm 'rawhide, depilated skin' belongs with Early Turkic *kön 'cured skin', Turkish gön 'leather', Uyghur kön 'id.', etc. Furthermore, the Mongolian and Turkic forms are certainly related to Proto-Tungusic *xū- 'scrape the inner side of a hide'; cf. Evenki ū-, Even ū-, Nanai xue- (TMS 2.242). Both the Mongolian and Turkic forms are clearly verbal nouns from an old verbal root *kö- 'prepare hides, curry leather'.

*ńi̯ōle (~ i) 'green, vegetable' (p. 1015): Tung. *ńoli, Mong. 8ǯöl(ü)ge, Turk. *jāl̮-ɨl. This etymology is very confused. First of all, contrary to what the authors say, the Tungusic forms are all related to Proto-Tungusic *ńo 'green/blue'. Manchu niolmon 'moss' (as well as niolmonggi 'moss growing on rocks in water') has a direct link to such Turkic forms as Bashkir jušqın, Tatar jušqın 'moss' (Levitskaja 1989: 232). These words in turn belong to a large word-family based on a common Altaic root *ńo- 'green, vegetable': Manchu nioro- 'turn green', Nanai ńō-gǯon 'green/blue', Mongolian noγoγan 'green', noγoγa 'vegetable, green plant'. Mongolian ǯölge is unrelated to this word-family. Turkic forms like Old Turkic jašıl, Turkish ješil, Uyghur yešil, Kazakh ǯasıl, all meaning 'green' are not related to either the Tungusic or Mongolic forms cited by the authors; they go rather with such Tungusic forms as Evenki ńalikin 'moist, green (of wood, i.e., not dried out), Ulchi ńālun 'moist, damp, raw, undessicated', Nanai ńālon 'fresh, moist, uncooked'. For Turkic, compare Early Turkic jaš 'green, young', Turkish yaš 'wet, damp, fresh'. Mongolian nilq-a (< *ńalka) 'newborn, tender' probably also belongs in this etymological family (TMS 1.636).

One could go on almost indefinitely taking issue with the etymologies in this dictionary. It is unfortunate in many ways that a work such as this should appear at a time when the basic issue of whether Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic are genetically related has still to be resolved to the complete satisfaction of the academic world, especially in view of the authors' iconoclastic attitude toward most of their predecessors' work. One observes time and time again the authors' rejection of earlier well-founded etymologies in favor of farfetched, highly

speculative alternatives. The decision to integrate Japanese and Korean into their system, in the last analysis, was undoubtedly a mistake. It would be far wiser, in my view, to work on establishing the bona fides of a core Altaic grouping of Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic before bringing in languages which, even if they are related, present so many problems of interpretation as to make their inclusion at the outset an obstacle to the further development of the Altaic theory. To proceed initially without Japanese and Korean will, in the long run, make possible a more plausible scenario for their inclusion in the future. I am almost totally ignorant of Korean, but what little I know of Japanese suggests that there may be a distant link between it and Altaic.

An incredible amount of work has gone into this massive dictionary. It seems to be part of a larger project of megalo-comparison whose aim is ultimately to reduce the number of language families in the world to a much smaller number than is now normally accepted. The Altaic theory has the misfortune to be caught now between a group of detractors on one side and, on the other, proponents of grandiose but largely unconvincing schemes to reduce the number of linguistic genetic groups to a minimum. I am personally confident that in the end the Altaic comparisons of Ramstedt and Poppe will be largely vindicated. In the three volumes at hand Starostin and his collaborators have covered an immense amount of material, and here and there they have almost inevitably proposed some new and intriguing comparisons. I have already found a number of new comparisons that merit further study, but in the end I cannot escape the feeling that EDAL is overambitious and too iconoclastic to play a really positive role in the final solution of the Altaic problem.

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