

[Transeurasian verbal morphology in a comparative perspective:  
genealogy, contact, chance](#)

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Edited by Lars Johanson  
and Martine Robbeets

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# Introduction

Lars Johanson and Martine Robbeets

Although Europe and Asia are physically one great landmass commonly called Eurasia, a geographical boundary between the continents of Europe and Asia is drawn along the Ural Mountains to the Ural River and the Caspian Sea and the along the Caucasus Mountains to the Black Sea. As linguists, we are well aware of the fact that linguistic boundaries and geographical boundaries do not necessarily coincide. Stretching from the Pacific in the East to the Mediterranean and the Baltic in the West, the Transeurasian languages form a vast linguistic continuum that cross the borders between Europe and Asia. Breaking with the tradition to refer to these languages as “Altaic languages” we would like to propose the term “Transeurasian” in reference to this large group of geographically adjacent languages that share a significant amount of linguistic properties and include at most 5 linguistic families: Japanic, Koreanic, Tungusic, Mongolic, and Turkic.

Why consider the adoption of a new name when there is a longstanding alternative available in linguistic literature? First, it is to avoid confusion between the different uses of the term “Altaic”. Some scholars, for instance Doerfer, Benzing, Sinor, Róna-Tas, and Erdal, use the term in the traditional sense, as the collective name for the languages belonging to the Turkic, Mongolic, and Manchu-Tungusic language families and the peoples that speak them. For a number of other scholars, e.g. Ramstedt, Poppe, Tekin, Baskakov, and Aalto, Altaic includes Korean but excludes Japanese. The authors of the *Etymological dictionary of the Altaic languages*, Starostin, Dybo, Mudrak, and many other scholars, e.g. Lee Ki-Moon, Street, Miller, Menges, Vovin, Manaster Ramer, and Robbeets use “Altaic” in its largest sense, covering all five families. This expanded grouping came to be known also as “Macro-Altaic”, leading by back-formation to the designation “Micro-Altaic” in reference to Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic. We would like to reserve the term “Transeurasian” to the expanded, “Macro-Altaic” sense.

Second, defining “Transeurasian” as a group of geographically adjacent languages that share a significant amount of linguistic properties, we do not need to presuppose genealogical relationship. Most of the authors contributing to this volume would not unequivocally subscribe to the hypothesis that the Transeurasian languages are genealogically related. Scholars who do not wish to take position about the genealogical affinities of the languages concerned, can use the term “Transeurasian” in a more unrestrained way as “Altaic”, in which the suffix *-ic* implies affinity. Besides, the new term avoids the strong and counterproductive polarization in pro- and anti-Altaic camps.

Finally, it is not only the suffix *-ic*, but also the root *Altai* that bothers us. Both critics and supporters of a genealogical unity would agree that the term “Altaic” is historically

incorrect because the reference to the Altai mountains as a homeland does not keep pace with the developments in interdisciplinary research. In his monograph *Manchuria. An ethnic history*, Juha Janhunen situates the original speech communities of Turkic, Mongolic, Tungusic, Korean, and Japanese in a rather compact area comprising North Korea, Southern Manchuria and present day Southeastern Mongolia. Janhunen adds:

“If it only could be proven to be correct, the Altaic Hypothesis would fundamentally deepen our understanding of the prehistorical ethnic situation in Manchuria”.

One of the most disputed questions in Transeurasian linguistics as well as in historical linguistics worldwide is how to motivate the shared properties between the Transeurasian languages. Which similarities can be accounted for by a common ancestor, which by language contact, and which by sheer chance?

Most of the discussions has so far centered on the lexicon and the phonology as a guide to discriminating between cognates, copies, and mere look-alikes. Bound morphology, which could provide a more reliable answer, has received much less attention. It is known that bound morphological elements are likely to resist foreign influence more successfully and that they tend to pattern in paradigms with other elements. The highly synthetic verbal morphology of the Transeurasian languages, including naked verb roots and verbal categories that have survived the permanent reorganizations of the verbal systems, possesses a relatively high value for distinguishing between cognates and copies. The probability that shared properties can be accounted for by chance is seriously reduced by paradigmatic verb patterns and by congruence of phonological, lexical, and morpho-syntactic correspondences. Even scholars relatively skeptical about the genealogical relationship of the Transeurasian languages admit that shared verbal elements could help to sort out the different determinants of linguistic similarity. Therefore, it is our conviction that Transeurasian language studies should focus attention on verbal morphology as probably the best hope for success.

In September 2008, the two editors of this volume organized a Workshop on *Verbal morphology and the historical comparison of the Transeurasian languages* at the Johannes Gutenberg Universität Mainz in Germany. The contributors to this event were Bernard Comrie (Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig, and University of California Santa Barbara), Éva Csátó (University of Uppsala), Stig Eliasson (Mainz University), Marcel Erdal (Frankfurt University), Ilya Gruntov (Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow), Juha Janhunen (University of Helsinki-Helsingfors), Lars Johanson (Mainz University), Frederik Kortlandt (Leiden University), Andrej Malchukov (Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig), Irina Nevskaya (Frankfurt University and Russian Academy of Sciences, Novosibirsk), Hans Nugteren (Frankfurt University and Leiden University), Martine Robbeets (Mainz University), Claudia Römer (University of Vienna), András Róna-Tas (University of Szeged), and Marshall Unger (Ohio State University). In the course of the workshop it became clear to us that, although the presentations made at that meeting were diverse and wide-ranging, their thematic cohesion was so significant, and the progress they made was so exciting, that we needed to organize these efforts in a book.

The chapters in this volume are organized thematically, although some chapters contribute to more than one area. The first part situates the present volume in linguistic literature. The second part raises methodological issues relating to genealogical, contact, and chance explanations. The third part compares verbal morphology between the Transeurasian languages. The fourth part focusses on converbs in the Turkic and the Mongolic languages. And finally, the fifth part discusses wider linguistic connections in Eurasia.

In chapter 1, *The high and low spirits of Transeurasian language studies*, Lars Johanson situates the present volume in linguistic literature. He provides a survey of the comparative study of Transeurasian languages from a Turcologist's point of view, discussing the ups and downs in the debates about genealogical affiliation. Finally, he points to the study of verbal morphology, in particular the markers of actionality and diathesis, as a highly promising domain of comparative research.

Investigating the significance of non-genealogical factors such as language contact and chance, the chapters 2, 3 and 4 deal with caveats in comparing verbal morphology across languages.

In chapter 2, *The role of verbal morphology in establishing genealogical relations among languages*, Bernard Comrie finds some problematic examples from so-called "mixed languages", where verb morphology fails to offer clear evidence in favor of genealogical relatedness. An important factor in the application of this issue to the Transeurasian genealogical question is the need of paradigmatic evidence in the sense of tightly structured sets of cognate morphemes.

In chapter 3, *Morphological embedding of Turkic verbal bases in Hungarian*, András Róna-Tas warns about the possible infiltration of loan verbs in cognate vocabulary. He illustrates his argument with the embedding of West Old Turkic verbs into the Hungarian verbal system under influence of extensive language contact. With respect to the Transeurasian languages, this underlines the need of criteria to eliminate copied verbs from the genealogical evidence.

In chapter 4, *Chance resemblances or true correspondences? On identifying the language of an 'unintelligible' Scandinavian runic inscription*, Stig Eliasson addresses a problem of language identification in older epigraphy. Excluding chance similarity through the accumulation of systematic and mutually cohering similarities at all linguistic levels, he finds that Basque stands out as the most probable language in which the inscription he deals with is written. Applied to the Transeurasian languages, this chapter requires congruence of phonological, lexical and morpho-syntactic features in order to reduce the probability that the shared properties are due to chance.

With attention to the methodological issues raised in the previous section, chapters 5 and 6 focus on the similarities between verbal morphology in the Transeurasian languages, from a formal and structural perspective, respectively.

In chapter 5, *Transeurasian: Can verbal morphology end the controversy?*, Martine Robbeets provides etymologies for verb roots and diathetic suffixes in support of the affiliation of the Transeurasian languages. The category of diathesis to which the suffixes belong and the congruence of phonological, lexical and morpho-syntactic correspondences lead her to factor out chance and language contact as a possible reason for the shared properties.

In chapter 6, *Inclusive and exclusive in Altaic languages*, Irina Nevskaya describes specialized language means rendering inclusive and exclusive semantics in Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic. The way in which most Siberian Turkic languages and Turkmen build augmented inclusive forms from minimal inclusions coincides with the structural patterns for deriving inclusions from exclusives in the Tungusic and Mongolic languages. The author points to language contact or genealogical retention as two alternative explanations for the closeness of these structural patterns.

Chapters 7 and 8 compare converbial constructions in Mongolic and Turkic languages.

In chapter 7, *On the origin of the narrative converb in Eastern and Western Yugur*, Hans Nugteren finds an instance of convergent verbal morphology through language contact. He derives the common narrative converb suffix in Eastern Yugur (Mongolic) and Western Yugur (Turkic) from formally unrelated ancestral suffixes that gradually developed towards the similar forms they display today.

In chapter 8, *Gerunds in the Old Turkic and Mongol versions of "The Hungry Tigress"*, Claudia Römer examines the way converbs are used in Old Turkic and Classical Mongolian to render the same functions. With respect to clause combining, direct speech, and postverbal constructions, she finds that both languages have similar but not identical means of using gerunds.

Chapters 9 and 10 address wider linguistic connections in Eurasia from a genealogical and typological perspective, respectively.

Having demonstrated the probability of an Indo-Uralic proto-language elsewhere, Frederik Kortlandt finds, in chapter 9, *Indo-Uralic and Altaic revisited*, that the reconstructed morphemes can be identified in the Transeurasian languages as well. He proposes cognates for the personal, interrogative and demonstrative pronouns, a plural suffix, case suffixes and deverbal nominals.

In chapter 10, *Enclitic zero verbs in some Eurasian languages*, Juha Janhunen deals with verbs that have a meaning and/or a function but no material manifestation. He illustrates the phenomenon of zero verbs by examples from a selection of Eurasian languages most of which represent the Ural-Altaic language type. He argues that the relative rarity of zero verbs and their lack of material representation makes them particularly resistant to borrowing.

The editors would like to acknowledge the help they have received in the preparation of this volume. The main share of financial support came from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. A generous allowance for research costs in addition to the research fellowship granted by the Foundation to Martine Robbeets first made it possible to organize the above-mentioned workshop, where the initial drafts of papers were read and discussed. When the idea of publishing the articles in one book took shape, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation provided further funding for the publication of this volume. Additional financial support for the organization of the workshop came from the internal "Forschungsförderungsprogramm" of the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. We are also grateful to the SFB Sonderforschungsbereich (295) on cultural and linguistic contacts for supplying "woman power" for the organization. Our colleagues at the Seminar für Orientkunde and the Institut für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Sprachwissenschaft in

Mainz spent much time and energy to make the workshop really “work”. Special thanks are due to Julia Bertram, Dorothé Winterling and Julian Rentsch.

This book is dedicated to the memory of Eugene Helinski (1950-2007) and Árpád Berta (1951-2008) who had accepted the invitation to take part in our workshop, but sadly passed away. We treasure their memory.

Zürich and Leuven, September 2009