

The Inter-Comparison of Manchu-Tungusic Languages

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Abstract: Manchu-Tungusic Languages, also called Tungusic Languages, refer to the languages spoken by Tungusic nations in East Siberia and Manchuria. Most languages in this language family belong to agglutinative languages. The typical word order is subject-object-verb. And they show complex systems of vowel harmony.

Most Tungusic languages are endangered now, threatened by the quick development and industrialization in Russia and China. Their long-term development is not optimistic. There are approximately 75,000 people who speak Tungusic languages as mother tongue.

There is a controversy about the typology of this language family. Some linguists consider Tungusic languages as a branch of Altaic languages, along with Mongolic languages and Turkic languages, sometimes even Koreanic and Japonic.

Most Manchu-Tungusic languages do not have written material for a long period of time. In the past centuries, Russian linguists invented writing systems for them based on the Cyrillic Alphabets or Latin Alphabets. Manchu language in this family has its own writing system, which came from the Mongolian script. Also, it has a transcription system based on Latin alphabets, which was invented by German linguist and diplomat Paul Georg von Möllendorff. In this essay, both International Phonetic Alphabets and Möllendorff transcription will be used as auxiliary system below.

1. Classification of Manchu-Tungusic Languages

There are two branches in this language family, the Northern Tungusic branch and the Southern Tungusic branch. There are great differences in morphology and etymology between the two branches. And there are two sub-branches in each of the two branches. Below are some examples in each sub-branch.

- Northern Tungusic branch
 - ◆ Northern Proper sub-branch
 - Evenki
 - Oroqen
 - Even
 - ◆ Transitional sub-branch
 - Udege
 - Oroch
- Southern Tungusic branch

- ◆ Manchu sub-branch
 - Manchu
 - Jurchen †
 - Xibe (Sometimes considered as dialect of Manchu)
- ◆ Nanai sub-branch
 - Nanai
 - Orok
 - Ulch

Languages in the transitional sub-branch exhibit great influence from the southern branch, such as [banixe] (thank you), from Nanai [banixa], instead of Udege [usasa]. And languages in the Manchu sub-branch show unique influence from other languages, including Mongolian language, Khitan language, and Chinese language.

2. Common Features

Manchu-Tungusic languages all belong to agglutinative languages, which means the main grammatical process is to add affixes to the stem, and most Manchu-Tungusic languages add suffixes behind the stem. Tungusic languages have complex morphological systems. Take Manchu language as an example, there is nominative case, accusative case, genitive case, dative-locative case, ablative case, and many cases indicating starting position, ending position, direction, and change in quality or form.

Besides this, vowel harmony is the common feature of Manchu-Tungusic languages. Vowel harmony refers to a kind of vowel assimilation. The vowels in a word must belong to a same group of vowels, thus “harmony”. Take Manchu as an example:

Stem of the verb	Future tense declension
taci- (study)	tacire
ara- (do)	arara
ojo- (kiss)	ojoro

Also, all the languages in this family show similar syntax pattern. All of them have a subject-object-verb structure in a sentence. And they are heavily head-final languages, which is similar to Japanese. The following sentences in Manchu can show this clearly:

Bi hoton-de gene-he

I-NOM town-LOC go-PAST

I went to the town.

Tere sarganjui jofohori-be je-ke

That girl-NOM orange-ACC eat-PAST

That girl ate an orange.

Also, converb is frequently used to illustrate the relationship between the subordinate verb and the finite verb.

Gasha deye-me bi

Bird-NOM fly-IMPERFECT.CONVERB be-IMPERFECT.PRES

The bird is flying.

I maksi-me ucu-me mute-mbi

He dance-IMPERFECT.CONVERB sing-IMPERFECT.CONVERB can-PRES

He can dance and sing.

Šanyan halu-be malanggū imenggi-de caru-fi uyan matan šatan ucu-fi obo-ho malanggū sinda-fi weile-mbi

White flour-ACC sesame oil-DAT fry-PERFECT.CONVERB syrup mix-PERFECT.CONVERB

washed sesame add-PERFECT.CONVERB make-PRES

Having fried white flour with sesame oil, mixed with syrup, and added with sesame, (you) make (sacima).

(from a passage describing how to make sacima, a traditional Manchu dessert)

3. Lexicon Comparison

English meaning	Manchu language	Nanai language	Udege language	Evenki language
I	ᡩᡠ /bɪ/	ми /mi/	би /bi/	би /bi/
sky	ᡠᡳᡤᡠᡵᡠᡨᡠ /ap.q ^h a/	боа /bo.a/	буа /bu.a/	няңня /raŋŋa/
water	ᡠᡳᡵᡠᡨᡠ /mu.k ^h ə/	муэ /mu.ə/	ули /u.li/	мӯ /mu:/
head	ᡠᡳᡵᡠᡨᡠ /u.tʃu/	дили /di.li/	дили /di.li/	дыл /dil/
one	ᡠᡳᡵᡠᡨᡠ /ə.mu/	эмуң /ə.mun/	эмус'э /ə.mu.s ^ʔ ə/	умун /u.mun/

We can easily find out that the basic vocabulary does not show a great variation among these four branches. Though some words exhibit great difference, we can conclude that they must have genetic relationship. Note that Nanai language, Udege language, and Evenki language always share cognates for a concept, whereas Manchu has distinctive word stem. This might be due to the historical factor that Manchu was heavily influenced by Mongolian language and Chinese language.

4. Nouns

Nouns in Manchu-Tungusic languages have two categories: number and case. Number indicates whether the noun is singular or plural, while case indicates the relationship of the noun with the action.

Most Tungusic languages have singular and plural forms for each noun. The plural is often formed by adding a suffix after the stem, while sometimes the suffix can be irregular, along with drop or assimilation of final consonant, such as орон-орон (deer.SG-deer.PL) in Evenki language. Nouns representing people always have different rules of plural form.

Manchu language, however, does not show number in nouns. Only some words for people have this number category. For example: niyalma (person)- niyalma-sa (people), gucu(friend)- gucu-se (friends). However, some linguists consider this to be another category- collective nouns.

In terms of grammatical cases, Tungusic languages all have complex systems for cases. More than 10 cases are identified in Evenki languages, representing various relationships such as direction, possession, resemblance, and instrumental. Accusative case even has three suffixes for indefinite noun, definite noun, and reflexive definite (one's own).

Southern Tungusic languages have less complex systems. Nanai language has seven cases, and Manchu language has only 5 commonly used ones. From morphological view, Southern branch is more analytic than the Northern branch.

Also, Northern Tungusic languages differentiate between alienable and inalienable nouns.

Inalienable refers to some special types of relationships between the possessee and the possessor, including kinship, social relationship, body parts, part-whole relationship, mental states, possession that originates from the possessor, and attributes of the possessor. For example, father, boss, one's own arm, voice, fear, and name are typically inalienable.

In terms of Evenki language, alienable possessee is in the possessed case, while inalienable possessee is marked by personal indices, a group of suffixes added after the stem.

However, many Southern Tungusic languages, especially Manchu language, do not make distinction between this feature of alienability.

5. Verbs

In Tungusic languages, verbs reflect the tense, mood, voice, and aspect of the action. Converbs are frequently used to indicate the relationship between actions. And verbs can form adjectives and nouns by adding suffixes. The following examples of Manchu language can illustrate how it works:

Je-fu!

Eat-IMPERATIVE

Eat!

In most cases imperative is formed by adding nothing after the verb stem, but as shown above, some imperatives are formed by adding an irregular suffix. Most irregular imperatives are found in one-syllable verb stems. Möllendorff listed a table of irregular verbs in his book, *A Manchu Grammar with Analyzed Texts*.

Bi je-kebi.

I-NOM eat-PERFECTIVE

I have eaten

Perfective indicates that the action has been finished and its result remains. This aspect is similar to English "have done".

Afirika-i tala-de inu niohe bi-o?

African-GEN savannah-LOC also wolf exist-PRES.INTERROGATIVE

Are there also wolves in African savannahs?

In Tungusic languages, interrogative marker is usually a suffix added after the verb stem.

Bi tere jergi helmefin-be tuwarakū.

I-NOM that kind film-ACC watch-PRES.NEG

I do not watch that kind of films.

Also, negation marker is added after the verb stem. This negation marker comes from the word for not, "akū".

Amca-nji-mbi

Catch up-COME.IMPERFECT

Come to catch up (something or someone)

Affixes are also used to show the tendency of the action, such as come to do or go to do.

Except Manchu language, verbs reflect the number and person of their subject in other Tungusic languages. And interestingly, in sentences containing a negation marker, the negation marker reflects the number and person instead of the original verb, which is similar to English sentences. The following Evenki sentences are good examples:

Сурудем.

Leave-1st.SG.PRES

I leave.

Эсим тылдерэ.

Don't-1st.SG understand.PRES

I do not understand.

6. Conclusion

In terms of language typology, Manchu-Tungusic languages are typical agglutinative languages. Nouns reflect their number and grammatical function performed in the sentence. Verbs reflect the tense, aspect, mood, and voice of the action.

There are two main branches of Tungusic languages with each branch divided into two sub-branches. Northern branch typically has more complex morphology than the Southern branch. In terms of lexicon, Southern Tungusic languages, especially Manchu, are also more heavily influenced by other languages including Chinese and Mongolian. This might be traced back to the early history of Manchu people, who have lived with Chinese and Mongolians in Southern Manchuria for hundreds of years.

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