

The evolution law of Chinese loanwords in the Horqin dialect from the perspective of language contact

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Abstract: Language contact serves as a driving force behind linguistic evolution, with borrowing being its most direct manifestation, reflecting the historical interaction and integration of different cultural communities. Contact between Chinese and Mongolian dates back as early as the 13th–14th centuries. With the deepening of cultural exchanges between China and Mongolia, linguist exploration of the Altaic language family has been continuously deepened, and loanwords between the two languages have increasingly attracted the attention of the academic circle. “The Khorchin subdialect, a major variety of the eastern Mongolian dialect group, has undergone prolonged and intensive contact with Chinese—particularly with Northeastern Mandarin—and has consequently absorbed and nativized a substantial number of Chinese loanwords”. Drawing on language contact theory and fieldwork data, this study offers an in-depth analysis of the motivations behind Chinese borrowing into Khorchin, the mechanisms of its nativization, and its structural impact on the dialectal system. The findings indicate that the influx of loanwords results from the combined influence of socioeconomic transformation, ethnic interaction, internal pressures for systemic economy, and language policies. At the level of linguistic adaptation, loanwords strictly conform to Khorchin’s phonological constraints, notably its vowel harmony rule; semantically, they undergo sense restructuring; and grammatically, they give rise to mixed formations of Chinese stems with Mongolian affixes. The pervasive presence of loanwords has not only reshaped the lexical stratum of the dialect but also triggered new sociopragmatic patterns, including code-switching and generational divergence. The study concludes that the Chinese loanwords in Khorchin represent a typical case of contact-induced language change, and their patterned evolution provides valuable empirical evidence for understanding both the openness and the stability of linguistic systems.

1. Internal Drivers of Chinese Borrowing in Khorchin

“Lexical borrowing is the most immediate expression of language contact, but borrowing is not a mere transfer of words, it is, in fact, a complex reaction on the level of the whole linguistic system”[2]. The mass influx of Chinese loanwords into the Khorchin subdialect is not a random linguistic event; it is an effect of the interaction between external socio-environmental factors and

internal linguistic processes. The driving forces may be divided into four broad categories: social transformation, interethnic interaction, intrinsic language dynamics, and practical communicative needs.

1.1 Socioeconomic Transformation as a Driver of Chinese Loanword Incorporation

The exchange of goods in the border markets started during the Yuan dynasty and led to the introduction of Chinese loanwords, and the massive migration of Han Chinese to the Northeast during the Qing dynasty further increased their use. At the same time, the Khorchin area slowly transformed its traditional pastoral economy into a mixed farming-pastoral one, and this transformation in local production patterns offered an opportunity for the introduction of Chinese borrowings. In the mid-to-late Qing dynasty, restrictions on land reclamation in the Mongol banners were lifted and large-scale land opening was carried out. Shandong and Hebei migrants migrated north along the Liao River valley to cultivate wasteland, and they brought new objects such as agricultural tools, crops and household utensils, as well as their Chinese names, which were quickly absorbed into the vernacular. Today, urbanisation, innovation in agriculture and industry, and the emergence of new media have further accelerated the process of lexical turnover; new words related to public transport services and online social networking have been constantly incorporated into the subdialect. The industrial transformations at various historical periods have continued to create lexical gaps in the native vocabulary, encouraging the originally pastoral-based Mongolian lexicon to continually borrow foreign words. The development of media has also changed the channels of loanword diffusion. While in the past words were transmitted through word of mouth and texts, the emergence of radio, television and short video platforms has resulted in their speedy diffusion, particularly among young people. New terms like WeChat, live streaming and online shopping have rapidly undergone phonetic nativization, thus greatly accelerating the loanword diffusion cycle.

1.2 Interethnic Interaction as the Foundation for Lexical Blending

The geographical closeness has led to a trend of mixed Han-Mongol settlements, which have created multi-layered interactions such as intermarriage, employment, trade and exchange of folk customs. The spread of Chinese loanwords has found its natural channels in cross-ethnic households: children growing up in bilingual settings learn Chinese vocabulary naturally and modify it to fit local phonological patterns. In business and bilingual workplaces, speakers are more likely to use terms that are more mutually intelligible so as to minimize the cost of communication. At the folk culture level, the Chinese festival names like Duanwu and Mid-Autumn flow into Mongolian and Mongolian-specific words like Nadam and Andai flow back, thus making lexical exchange an inseparable part of everyday life. Consequently, what started as borrowing is gradually transformed into permanent lexical elements and becomes widely accepted in their everyday application.

In all these aspects, a radical change takes place in the status of many Chinese-derived elements in the Khorchin subdialect: they shift their provisional, context-dependent adoptions to stable, established borrowings. They are no longer restricted to original commercial or administrative contexts; rather, they infiltrate everyday conversations, folk tales and even casual street greetings, becoming a natural and effortless element of oral expression of local people. In this way, lexical borrowing ceases to be simply a surface-level effect of language contact, it is entrenched within the reproduction of regional social relations, further entrenching the linguistic identity that forms the basis of the mutually constitutive Han-Mongol communities in these mixed-position settlements.

1.3 Internal Self-Regulation of the Linguistic System

“In the diachronic evolution of the Khorchin subdialect, its historical grounding in nomadic life gave rise to a corresponding lexical system and a highly intricate indigenous semantic network”[1]. However, with the rapid advancement of industrialization and the proliferation of new economic sectors in the contemporary era, the subdialect has come to lack adequate vocabulary for modern industries and emerging activities, resulting in notable "gaps" within its semantic fields. From the perspective of linguistic economy, directly borrowing Chinese words is more effective than creating new native words. At the same time, the relative paucity of classifiers in Mongolian has facilitated the large-scale incorporation of Chinese classifiers and abstract expressions, which serve to complement and enrich the Khorchin subdialect. Terms such as layer, item, portion, batch, time, set, grain, and strand, with their rich semantic differentiation and flexible syntactic positions, have provided readily usable grammatical resources for Khorchin. They have gradually permeated the numeral-noun collocation framework of the dialect, triggering moderate adjustments in the internal word order of classifier phrases and the marking of number categories.

Moreover, a considerable number of Chinese connectives, prepositional frame structures, and evaluative adverbs—such as anyway, after all, unexpectedly, and basically—have become conventionalized as routine components of discourse organization in Khorchin through frequent oral use. As a result, while the dialect retains its underlying phonological system and basic word order, its upper lexical-syntactic interface has come to exhibit a marked tendency toward Chinese-influenced patterns.

“Language contact in this case is not one way. Local Chinese has also borrowed Khorchin lexical items and thus native speakers are more open to Chinese borrowings”[3][5]. Several Khorchin words that have strong associations with pastoral livelihoods, natural landscapes, and interpersonal ethics have attained some level of stable borrowing in the local form of Chinese spoken in the area, and they are invaluable lexical additions to the description of the agro-pastoral ecotone. This reverse input has not only narrowed the cognitive gap between the local Chinese dialect and the subdialect but has also psychologically diminished the resistance of Mongolian speakers to forms derived by the Chinese. When speakers feel that their mother tongue words are also present in Chinese communicative situations, their identity and expressive confidence in a bilingual situation are boosted and they become more receptive to the natural assimilation of Chinese borrowings. As a result, there has been a lexical co-existence pattern between the Khorchin subdialect and the local Chinese dialect which is typified by complementarity and inter-embedding. This trend works on the macro-level pressure of lingua franca diffusion and at the same time addresses the referential needs specific to the local lifeworld, finally achieving a dynamic balance between linguistic economy and cultural adaptability. This process does not only indicate the overall processes of contact-induced language change but also offers dialectological data to comprehend the micro-ecology of multilingual coexistence in the agro-pastoral transitional zone of eastern Inner Mongolia.

1.4 Practical Communication as a Driver of Loanword Normalization

The promotion of the national common language serves as a key catalyst for the normalization of loanwords, constituting the most powerful external force behind the continued diffusion of Chinese-derived borrowings in the Khorchin subdialect. At the basic education level, the routine use of Chinese as the medium of instruction exposes younger speakers to high-frequency Chinese vocabulary from an early age, and they habitually embed these terms into Khorchin syntactic frames. In professional and social service domains—such as commercial transactions, healthcare, public transportation, and cultural tourism—the demand for accuracy, efficiency, and

standardization in information transmission is particularly high. In such real-world settings, technical terminologies codified in the national common language are naturally prioritized for their greater mutual intelligibility. Examples include medical terms like registration, emergency, CT scan, hospital deposit, and medical insurance reimbursement ratio; tourism-related expressions such as scenic area guide, shiming real-name reservation, and electronic ticketing; and logistics terms like scan-to-pick-up and insured compensation. Owing to their cross-dialectal and cross-linguistic intelligibility as well as operational convenience, these terms naturally take precedence in actual communication, gradually supplanting certain native expressions in Khorchin.

Whereas younger generations actively acquire these loanwords, middle-aged and elderly speakers exhibit a more conservative tendency in lexical choice, preferring traditional vocabulary related to pastoral production, seasonal phenology, and kinship terms. Nevertheless, through environmental exposure, they have passively adopted everyday neologisms such as mobile phone and medical insurance, and changes in usage habits across all age groups have contributed to the steady entrenchment of loanwords. For example, words that are commonly used on smartphone interfaces (WeChat, payment QR code, data plan, screenshot) and policy keywords often mentioned in TV news (poverty alleviation, rural revitalization, ecological environment) have been unconsciously stored in the visual and auditory memory of older speakers through exposure and peer retelling. While this age group does not actively use new borrowings like younger speakers, they still use such terms when needed- for example, when visiting doctors, buying things, or talking to family members outside the region - to fulfill daily necessities.

The variations in usage preferences and adoption rates among the age groups have led to a generational gradient of language acquisition: younger speakers are typified by creative mixing, working-age adults by pragmatic selection, and the elderly by passive adaptation. The three patterns work simultaneously allowing Chinese-based loanwords to be disseminated alternately through different social networks and everyday interaction circles, supplementing each other in the process. Common vocabulary that is commonly used over time loses its foreign tag due to intergenerational transmission; it no longer is viewed by native speakers as a foreign or temporary replacement and is integrated into the natural range of local linguistic intuition. Such a path of lexical change, which has been influenced by the converging pressures of policy regulation, educational support, occupational intensification, and daily infiltration, has not only hastened the modern restructuring of the Khorchin lexical system but has also allowed the dialect to acquire a daily expressive system that is very similar to Putonghua, without losing its traditional foundations. Finally, this process makes sure that loanwords reach structural and psychological stabilization in the real-world communicative ecology.

2. Nativization and Evolution of Chinese Loanwords

After Chinese loanwords have been introduced into the subdialect, they are subject to adaptive restructuring according to the phonological rules, semantic conventions and grammatical patterns of Khorchin. “This restructuring works primarily on three levels; phonetic adjustment, semantic reconfiguration and grammatical adaptation”[4]. These changes are in no way unique cases of phoneme replacement or semantic fine-tuning but are an inseparable part of the process that loanwords have to undergo during linguistic transfer.

2.1 Phonological Nativization and Adaptation

The original Chinese sounds must be adapted to the Mongolian phonological system, primarily involving three types of modification: vowel restructuring, consonant substitution, and conformity to vowel harmony. First, most Chinese compound vowels are simplified into Mongolian long

vowels. For instance, the final /ou/ in steamed bun is rendered as the long vowel /u:/, resulting in the pronunciation /mantu:/. For Chinese nouns carrying the suffix /-zi/, the constraint of Mongolian lacking the /z/ phoneme triggers a systematic substitution: all syllables ending in /zi/ in Chinese loanwords are uniformly replaced with /s/. Thus, cabinet and box are pronounced as /gy:s/ and /ʃaŋs/ respectively, representing a hallmark phonological rule of the Khorchin subdialect. Second, alternating shifts occur between front and rear nasal sounds: the /n/ sound in Chinese characters is often rewritten as /ŋ/, as seen in beach, which merges into /ŋ/ and is pronounced /taŋ/. Third, the rhoticized finals characteristic of Northeastern Mandarin lose their retroflex articulation and are converted into long vowel endings; for example, toy/thing becomes /wanja:r/, retaining a dialectal imprint while aligning with native phonetic patterns. In addition, certain consonants in Chinese loanwords undergo phonological modification according to the consonant cluster rules of Khorchin. For instance, the Chinese retroflex initials /zh/, /ch/, and /sh/ are correspondingly adjusted to /dʒ/, /tʃ/, and /ʃ/ in Khorchin to ensure compatibility.

2.2 Semantic Restructuring and Nativization

Chinese loanwords, as part of the living context of the Khorchin region, experience three kinds of semantic change: expansion, narrowing and shift. Semantic broadening occurs in the expansion of referential range: for example, the Northeastern Mandarin word, which originally meant "to deceive", has taken on extra meanings such as "to tease" or "to joke" when used as a borrowed word. Semantic narrowing is more likely to be found in agricultural, sideline and everyday words. For example, which in Northeastern Mandarin denotes different kinds of shoulder bags and pockets, can only be used in Khorchin to refer to "pockets (of clothing)" and "trouser pockets". Semantic narrowing is an outstanding characteristic of nativization. The Chinese character, which originally means "rotten" or "decayed", has been adopted in local speech to mean "dirty" or "filthy", and is frequently used to describe untidy things in life. Similarly, literally "reward silver" has lost its monetary meaning and is now metaphorically used to denote "returns of social favor" or "interpersonal gain". Likewise, some loanwords also undergo parallel changes in affective evaluation. For example, the derogatory term has had its negative associations toned down in colloquial speech, turning into a neutral, playful term.

2.3 Grammatical Integration and Hybridization

Mongolian is grammatically characterized by SOV word order and a rich system of derivational and inflectional affixes. With the incorporation of Chinese loanwords, a hybrid morphological pattern of "Chinese root + Mongolian affix" has emerged. Verbal borrowings can take various tense-aspect suffixes: /-dʒɛ/ marks completed action, /-na/ marks future action, and /-səŋgui/ marks negation. For example, zhíbō (live broadcast) plus /-dʒɛ/ yields dʒi:bo:+dʒɛ, meaning "has finished live broadcasting." Nominal borrowings may be inflected with different case markers. Concurrently, the Chinese "numeral + classifier + noun" structure has gradually permeated the subdialect, compensating for the scarcity of native classifiers. Hybrid constructions such as one sheet of paper have emerged, and the two word-order patterns now operate in parallel, enriching the syntactic repertoire of Khorchin.

3. Bidirectional Influence of Chinese Loanwords on the Khorchin Subdialect

The long-term assimilation of Chinese vocabulary has, on the structural level, initiated systematic changes in phonological rules of the Khorchin subdialect, derivational patterns of word-formation and clause-linking mechanisms. On the practical level, it has led to the

differentiation of the register by age group, occupational field, and communicative context leading to a hierarchical distribution of frequency and functional load of loanwords. Along the axis of regional culture, Chinese-origin words pertaining to festivals, institutional practices and material artifacts bring along with them Han Chinese cognitive schemas that gradually permeate Mongolian traditional ecological ethics and kinship-based relational expressions. This interplay has subtly redefined local forms of telling time rhythms, spatial orientation and social roles, thus creating, at the lexical level, a new dialectal quality whereby several cultural identities are intertwined and co-existent. It is in these different angles that the current change of the Khorchin subdialect can be best seen.

3.1 Optimizing the Internal Structure of the Language

The most obvious effect is at the lexical level: a plethora of new words to describe contemporary phenomena and measure words of Chinese origin have filled lexical gaps, allowing the Khorchin subdialect to expand into different spheres of modern life. The subdialect has phonologically absorbed some Chinese phonemes and articulatory habits, thus increasing its phonotactic combinations, but these elements have been subject to nativizing modifications according to the rules of vowel harmony; meanwhile, there are cases when some native words have been phonetically adapted to the patterns of Chinese pronunciation. Grammatically, the formerly unitary word formation pattern has been broken with hybrid compounding becoming a common characteristic which has greatly increased the expressive flexibility of the Khorchin subdialect.

3.2 Expanding the Practical Functions of the Language in Real-World Use

The Khorchin subdialect has been able to adjust to completely new fields like the contemporary social interaction, government affairs, healthcare, and internet communication due to Chinese loanwords. At the same time, the stratification of language use by generation has become more visible: younger speakers often switch between codes with internet slang and Northeastern borrowings of Mandarin; middle-aged speakers are more likely to use traditional loanwords concerning food, clothing, and farming; and older speakers are more likely to use native Mongolian phrases. The combination of these three patterns of usage forms the present multilingual picture of the Khorchin subdialect. Through this bilingual mixed expression, barriers in communication between Han and Mongolian speakers have been reduced and there has been a gradual increase in regional communicative efficiency.

3.3 Carrying the Cultural Connotations of Ethnic Integration

Food, folk customs and kinship terms are some of the carriers of Han-Mongol cultural integration through various loanwords. Terms like tofu, mooncake and Dragon Boat Festival have brought their related food culture and celebration to pastoral regions. On the other hand, Chinese has borrowed back words like village and town from Mongolian, creating a reciprocal cultural flow. The Chinese loanwords in the Khorchin subdialect also reflect the historical traces of the "Crossing the Pass to the east" movement, the shift from nomadic herding to agriculture, and modernization, thus becoming linguistic evidence that records the history of regional development in the Khorchin region.

4. Conclusions

The Chinese loanwords of the Khorchin subdialect are the best examples of centuries of

interaction, communication and integration between Han and Mongolian people. The phenomenon of lexical borrowing has been aided by social transformation, interethnic interaction, internal linguistic dynamics, as well as practical communicative needs. By a series of successive nativizing changes on the phonological, semantic, and grammatical levels, vocabulary of Chinese origin has experienced a radical change in status, as foreign elements to native lexical units, constantly perfecting the structural framework of the Khorchin subdialect and increasing its ability to adjust to social conditions.

In the wider cultural context of the pluralistic but united Chinese nation, the Chinese loanwords are not only an objective result of language contact, but also a bright evidence of coexistence and enriching each other of different ethnic cultures. With the ongoing development of society, there will always be new words that will find their way into the Khorchin subdialect. Further studies on the tendencies of lexical change will need to be conducted over a long period of time to keep up with the current developments, and balance between preservation of local linguistic heritage and the natural laws of language change. These endeavors will help in preserving the resources of minority dialects in the long run and further entrench the pluralistic but integrated pattern of the Chinese nation.

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