

The Silk Road and Hybridized Languages in North-Western China

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The present-day languages and language situation of the Silk Road regions of Central Asia reflect the consequences of the former use of many different languages and the multilingual trading along these routes, as demonstrated by the existence today of a number of hybridized languages whose emergence may in part be attributable to the trading activities on the Silk Road. These languages have, until very recently, received little attention, if any, by linguistic scholars. It has been mainly through the large Language Atlases project mentioned in note 1 below that interest has become focused on them.

While there has been some marginal interest in such languages by scholars outside China (Li 1983; Field 1994), most Chinese scholars, aware of their existence, have paid little attention to them, largely because they regarded them as debased and corrupted forms of Chinese and therefore not deserving of closer attention (a view also shared by the few non-Chinese linguists who have studied them). There are a few exceptions to this rule among a number of Chinese scholars cited below, though they still share the largely erroneous opinions about the origin and nature of these languages. It has been mainly through the work of Mei Lee-Smith and the present writer relating to these languages in connection with the Atlas of Languages Intercultural Communication in the Pacific Area project that the real nature of such languages has become established.¹

The languages found in the Central Asian Silk Road region today are the Turkic languages Uighur in Xinjiang with its very close relatives Salar and Western (Yellow) Yugur in Gansu, as well as Kazakh, Kirghiz, Uzbek, Tatar and Tuva in Xinjiang; the Mon-

golic languages Oirat (the dominant language of the Dzungarian Empire, 1676-1757, in northern Xinjiang and still an important *lingua franca* there today), standard Mongolian in Inner Mongolia, Dagur in the Ili River Basin in Xinjiang, Eastern (Yellow) Yugur, Dongxiang (Santa), Monguor (Tu) and Bao'an in Gansu, with Bao'an having a separate smallish group of speakers in Qinghai; the Manchu-Tungusic languages Xibo (or Sibe) which is a dialect of Manchu, and Oroqen Evenki, both in western Xinjiang; Tibetan marginally in Gansu and mainly in the adjacent Qinghai; three Indo-European languages, i.e. Russian and the Iranian Pamir languages Wakhi and Sarikoli in eastern Xinjiang (called erroneously Tajik in Chinese sources). Finally, four hybrid languages have been identified and recognized for what they are, one in eastern Xinjiang, two in western Gansu and one just across the border from Gansu in Qinghai. However, there are indications that there are more such hybrid languages in Gansu near to where the other two have been found, and apparently closely related to them or variants of them.

The language called Hui by Field (1994) is one of these, obviously close to Tangwang (see below), though not identical with it. The name Hui is a somewhat unfortunate choice - it is the general name for the large Muslim minority in China whose members are very predominantly Chinese speaking, though some speak other languages. While Tangwang and probably the language dealt with in Field (1994) seem to be originally Chinese, they cannot be regarded as Chinese today, in spite of their phonological and lexical characteristics. Thus the grammatical structure of Tangwang is very different from that of Chinese.

The hybrid language in Xinjiang, known as Ejnu, is spoken by a widely scattered group of several thousand people living along the old Silk Route and extending from Kashghar to Yarkand and Khotan, and also eastwards beyond Aksu. The existence of these people who are referred to by their neighbors as Abdal - a name which they reject (it means "beggar", "mendicant [friar]") - and of their language was first reported by Grenard (1898) who concluded that they were descendants of Persian Shiites who came to Turkestan in the eighth century as forerunners of the penetration of Islam. They were followed by Sunni Muslim invaders who

oppressed them and reduced them to the lowest social level. Otto Ladestätter and Andreas Tietze (1994) review additional theories about the origin of Ejnu, without arriving at firm conclusions. Grenard also gave the first brief report on this language which he described correctly as originally Persian giving way grammatically to Turkic Uighur. Later, Chinese sources simply referred to it as an Uighur dialect.

It appears that with the seventeenth century cessation of trading on the continental Silk Road which had been dominated for centuries by Persian merchants, many of them left, but some stayed behind and intermarried with Uighur women. Having lost their livelihood with the end of the lucrative Silk Road trade, they joined the Ejnu people and became part of them. The latter are officially regarded as Uighurs, but they reject this notion and insist that they are of Persian descent. The Ejnu language is grammatically and phonologically Uighur, but nevertheless not intelligible to the Uighurs because its lexicon is very predominantly Persian-derived even though it is phonologically adapted to Uighur (Lee-Smith forthcoming [a]; Zhao and Haxim 1982). Loan words from Uighur are very few, though the languages share a number of words which happen to be original Persian (and Arabic through Persian) loan words in Uighur. Ejnu also contains loan words from other languages such as Mongolian and Manchu, as well as metaphorical expressions resulting from a change of the meaning of Arabic and other words. A proportion of Ejnu vocabulary is of unknown origin.

It appears that the following explanation may be given for the origin and existence of the hybrid Ejnu language: with the intermarriage of the Persian-speaking Ejnu (made up of both the first immigrants and the Silk Road traders who stayed behind) with Uighur women, their offspring learned Uighur fully from their mothers. However, their fathers (who had maintained a strong feeling of ethnic identity which they handed down to their offspring and which has continued to the present day) taught their children the words from their original Persian language as a symbol of their ethnic identity. Their offspring then learned these words with the phonology of the Uighur which had become their phonological base and which was the standard pronunciation of all

Ejnu in subsequent generations. It should be added that all Ejnus, including the children of Ejnu-Ejnu marriages, have a complete mastery of Uighur as the 'outside' language, though they continue to use Ejnu as their 'inside' language within the Ejnu communities.

Uighur is a Turkic language of the East Turkic (or Uighur) group, with the Turkic languages belonging to the Altaic stock of languages. Uighur is, in its sound-structure, characterized by a low level of consonant assimilation and a special type of vowel assimilation in which *a* and *e* change to *i*. Like all Turkic and Altaic languages, it has a complex morphology with both nouns and especially verbs, while verbal nouns and so-called converbs (a special type of gerundial forms) abound. These last two verb forms play an important role in Altaic languages (i.e., Turkic, Mongolian etc.) in which they indicate concepts that the Indo-European languages express through dependent clauses or through clauses linked by connecting words, e.g., relative clauses such as "the man who came", "the man whom I saw", and chained clauses such as "I came, sat down, ate, and got up when he entered." Uighur which has a large number of loan words from Persian and through it from Arabic, is the dominant local language of Xinjiang.

Persian, in particular New (or Modern) Persian, is an Indo-European language of the Iranian family, and more specifically Western Iranian. In contrast to Old and Middle Persian and other Iranian languages, it has a fairly simple morphology and no gender distinction. It has a large number of loan words from Arabic.

It should be pointed out that the Ejnu language phenomenon is quite different from that of Ottoman Turkish with its heavy Arabic and Persian-derived vocabulary element, and from Korean and Japanese with its heavy Chinese-derived (for Japanese also English-derived) vocabulary element. In these three languages, the original grammatical and phonological structures have been maintained, but a foreign lexical element was introduced which in part replaced original lexical items. In Ejnu, however, the original (Persian) grammatical and phonological structure has been replaced by foreign structures, while much of the original (Persian) vocabulary has been maintained, though in the guise of a foreign phonological structure.

Moving east to the Gansu region, it may be noted that the small Mongolian languages Monguor, Bao'an and Dongxiang show a strong Chinese lexical influence, possibly attributable to Chinese trading activities on the Silk Route going through their territory. Tibetan grammatical influence is also noticeable in them, especially in verbal forms and in manners of expression, apparently attributable to the nearness of Tibetan and its use as a *lingua franca*.

The Mongolian languages also belong to the Altaic stock. They share the same grammatical type with Turkic languages as outlined above for Uighur, but with some typical differences. Lexically, they differ strongly from Turkic languages, but there are mutual loan words. In their sound structure, there are general similarities and also differences between them.

Of the three Mongolian languages mentioned, Monguor and Bao'an are closely related, and they share some of the structural features which are not to be found in other Mongolian languages. (The Bao'an regard themselves as belonging to the Monguor - or Tu - national minority). One of these is the presence of a singular-restricted plural-plural distinction for nouns with the help of special suffixes which are in part Mongolian, in part borrowed from Chinese and a Turkic language, probably Uighur-Salar. Another feature shared by Bao'an and Monguor is the indication of only two persons, speaker and other, in certain verb forms - a feature that is due to Tibetan influence. Another typical Tibetan feature shared by these two languages is the distinction, by special verb forms, of subjective and objective statements, i.e., statements reflecting only the speaker's own opinion, and statements referring to generally known and accepted facts.

Dongxiang (or Santa) does not display the singular-restricted plural-plural marking with nouns which is present in Monguor and Bao'an. The singular has no suffix, and the plural is indicated by a suffix borrowed from a Turkic language (probably Salar). It also lacks the distinction between subjective and objective statements, and its grammatical features follow the general Mongolian pattern. However, its phonology and especially its lexicon show a strong influence of Chinese.

The Turkic Salar is grammatically very close to Uighur, but differs from it in some important features of its sound system.

One of the two hybrid languages mentioned above for the Gansu region is Hezhou, a creolized language spoken by a relatively small speech community in the Autonomous Region of Linxia. It is also used as a *lingua franca* of trade in the Dongxiang, Salar and the eastern section of the Bao'an territories, and also to the west in the adjacent Tibetan parts. Its basic structural characteristics are Turkic (Salar or Uighur), but its lexicon is very largely Chinese-based (Lee-Smith forthcoming [b], Ma 1984). The tones of the originally Chinese lexical items are perturbed and seem to be non-semantic; what seem to be tone-sandhi are un-Chinese. Apparently, the speakers of Hezhou, who were probably of Turkic origin, were unsuccessfully trying to imitate the tones of Chinese vocabulary items which they adopted. The thought patterns underlying the syntactic and structural features of Hezhou are Turkic as can be seen from word order and the mirroring of Turkic nominal and verbal suffixal grammar in the language. Six cases, marked largely by Uighur-type suffixes, with some formal influence from Tibetan and Chinese, are present. The personal pronouns are Chinese-based, but take the Hezhou case-suffixes. The absence of verbal suffixation in the Chinese elements in Hezhou is made up for by the appearance of Chinese-looking elements used as suffixes added to verbs; but they are divorced from their Chinese meanings and functions. They denote typically Turkic grammatical functions, such as those of converbs (gerund-type verb forms) and verbal nouns, and of tense, intention, necessitative, negative, etc. marking. The mirroring of the highly complex Altaic Uighur grammatical features is only rudimentary, much more so than that of Altaic Dongxiang features in Tangwang (see below).

Apparently, Hezhou developed as a simplified trade and intercommunication language between speakers of an originally Turkic (Salar and/or Uighur) language and speakers of Chinese at the western end of the Chinese involvement in the trade on the Silk Road. The Turkic speakers must have tried to acquire as much as possible of the Chinese vocabulary, while maintaining many of the grammatical principles of their language, expressing them partly through Turkic elements, and partly through Chinese-looking syllables and elements stripped of any Chinese meanings and/or functions and used as suffixes.

Another creolized hybrid language is found in the same general region of Gansu. This is Tangwang which has about 20,000 speakers in the north-eastern corner of the Dongxiang Autonomous County (Yibulahaimo 1985). It constitutes a combination of lexical elements and phonological characteristics of a form of Mandarin Chinese and quite elaborate grammatical features of the small Mongolic language of Dongxiang (Santa) (Lee-Smith forthcoming [c]). The language has four tones (two of them in the process of merging). The numerous grammatical elements in the language have Dongxiang functions, including those which are formally Chinese, but are toneless in these functions. However, the large number of loan words from non-tonal languages in Tangwang (from Arabic, Persian, Dongxiang) have been given tones.

The grammatical patterning of Tangwang in Dongxiang is much more elaborate than the rather rudimentary patterning of Hezhou in Turkic, especially in its verb structure. There are four cases, three of them marked by Dongxiang case suffixes, and one by a Turkic case suffix. The pronominal system follows Dongxiang, but the personal pronominal bases are derived from Chinese. They take the Tangwang case suffixes. In the verb, a basic (active) and causative (or passive) voice exist; there are four aspects marked by suffixes, with two of them formally Chinese, but functionally Dongxiang. Verbal nouns are formed by suffixes which look Chinese, but follow Dongxiang in their functions. The language has six converbs marked by Dongxiang-based suffixes, with the functions of these converbs being the same in Tangwang and Dongxiang. The word order in Tangwang generally follows the Dongxiang subject-object-verb pattern.

Lee-Smith (forthcoming [c]) regards it as very likely that Tangwang was originally a Mandarin Chinese dialect whose speakers found themselves in the area where they had close contact with Dongxiang Mongolian speakers. A likely reason for this was that they were Chinese traders on the western end of the Chinese section of the Silk Road who – like the Persian traders in western Xinjiang mentioned above when discussing Ejnu – stayed behind in that area after the cessation of the continental Silk Road trade in the seventeenth century and intermarried with the Dongxiang. Other or additional reasons such as their having been exiled, or their escape from

famine, may also be plausible. In any event, intermarriage led to gradual, though incomplete, change in the structure of the language spoken by their children from Chinese to Dongxiang, while their fathers (and mothers in mixed marriages where the mother was Tangwang) tenaciously preserved their original Chinese vocabulary with their tones to maintain a sense of cultural identity. In this, they clearly had enough control over their offsprings' speech habits to achieve and perpetuate the same results with them. This picture resembles the fate of the original Persian language of the Ejnu (see above), and the outcomes are also comparable. It is finally worth mentioning that the Tangwang do not speak Dongxiang (their structural donor language) but know Tibetan, whereas the Ejnu are all fluent in Uighur, which is their structural donor language.

There is another hybrid language in the Tibetan Qinghai region, a short distance to the west of the Tangwang and Hezhou language areas. This is Wutun, spoken by about 2,000 persons in two villages situated on the left bank of the Rongwo River. Wutun represents a hybrid of toneless and formally and semantically strongly changed Chinese vocabulary, an essentially Bao'an Mongolian structure which shows a strong Tibetan influence (with its quite complex structure and containing a number of markers of unknown origin) as well as Bao'an markers which reflect semantic and functional changes, and other markers, which appear to be artificially created. The personal pronoun system is largely Tibetan (Lee-Smith and Wurm, forthcoming). Though this language is also quite close to those at the western end of the Chinese section of the Silk Road, it does not seem likely that its emergence can be directly attributed to the Silk Road trade, as is the case with the Ejnu, Hezhou and Tangwang hybrid languages mentioned above. According to Lee-Smith and Wurm (forthcoming), the historical documents indicate that the Wutun lived in their present area as early as 1585. Part of their ancestors appear to have been Muslim Chinese speakers from the Nanjing area (Chen Nanxiong 1988) who may originally have migrated from Nanjing to Sichuan where they failed to settle, and later migrated north to the Wutun area, perhaps with people from Sichuan who may not have been Chinese. They converted to Lamaism and sought association with the Lamaist Bao'an Mongolians in Qinghai, perhaps as a protection against oppression by the

Tibetans. Inter-marriage arising from this situation may have resulted in a large number of Wutun women marrying Bao'an men, with these women acquiring a knowledge of Bao'an with many novel grammatical creations and distortions and then passing on this language to their offspring among whom it eventually stabilized. At the same time, their Bao'an husbands may have learned some of their wives' Chinese vocabulary in a rudimentary, distorted and toneless form, with this becoming the standard. Tibetan, as the local *lingua franca*, influenced Wutun strongly. As far as the Chinese element in Wutun is concerned, it does not seem to have been regarded by the original Wutuns as a symbol of their cultural and ethnic identity. In any case, the Wutun do not know Chinese today, though all of them speak Tibetan as their second language and regard themselves as Tibetans.

It should be noted that the Bao'an speakers consist of two groups, the (smaller) one in Qinghai who are Lamaists, and a larger one to the east of them in Gansu who are Muslims. They speak different dialects of the Bao'an language. The origins and backgrounds of these two groups of Bao'an speakers have been controversial. The most plausible explanation of their existence appears to be that they were Monguors who originally lived in the environs of Bao'ancheng in Qinghai where the present Lamaist Bao'an speakers still live today. A small group then stayed on in that region, remained Lamaists and preserved their Monguor ethnic identity, whereas the greater part of them left about a century ago and went eastward to the Linxia part of Gansu (perhaps to escape Tibetan pressure), settling in the Islamic section there where they became Muslims (Beffa and Hamayon 1983:136).

Notes

1. Under the auspices of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and the Department of Linguistics of the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (The Australian National University), as well as under those of the International Union of Academics in Brussels, and under the auspices and patronage of the International Council of Philosophy and Humanistic Studies of UNESCO, and with the generous support of UNESCO, a long-term project aiming at the production of large language atlases on the basis of a wide international cooperation of experts, has been established under my directorship. It has already

achieved the publication of several large language atlases, such as *The Language Atlas of the Pacific Area* and *The Language Atlas of China*. At present, work toward the production of a monumental *Atlas of Languages for Intercultural Communication in the Pacific Hemisphere* which covers most of Asia and most of the Americas is in the finishing stages. More than 280 maps have already been produced, as well as 1,623 pages of text, constituting two massive volumes.

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