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CURRENT PROBLEMS IN COMPARATIVE-HISTORICAL MONGOLIAN STUDIES

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Abstract

Mongolian studies and Altaic studies are intertwined and thus, issues in Mongolian studies often require taking into consideration similar phenomena in other Altaic languages. Research was conducted into adequacy of methodological approaches and methods used in Mongolian studies to determine the causes of long vowels appearance in Mongolic languages. Such causes could be regularities of linguistic development, influence from other languages, sociocultural phenomena. The paper is dedicated to a new methodological approach, Word Length Principle, which is a component of a more general systemic approach in determining causes and features of linguistic development, especially topical for agglutinative languages. This principle has been tested in studying the causes of appearance and development of long and reduced vowels in Mongolic languages. The list of the current issues of the contemporary Altaic studies includes highly controversial questions on genesis of commonality of the Altaic languages. There are two well-known point of view. According to the first of them, Altaic languages descend from a common ancestor language, according to the second one their commonality resulted from mutual interactions.

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1. Introduction

Comparative Mongolian studies, founded by distinguished scholars of the 20th century, such as Vladimirtsov (1929), Ramstedt (1935), Kotvich (1962) and others brought enormous results. A general picture of modern Mongolic languages was obtained, as were regularities of their past development. Achievements of Mongolian studies of the time resulted from wide application of comparative studies covering Mongolic, Turkic and Tungus-Manchurian languages. Comparative-historical Mongolian studies, having achieved significant success, further developed with considerations for general problems of Altaic studies, thus, comparative Mongolian studies contain numerous parallels to data from other Altaic languages. A demonstrative example of this is Ramstedt's Kalmyk-German Dictionary (Ramstedt, 1935), where Kalmyk words are provided with parallels from other Altaic languages. The results obtained by various researchers allowed establishing criteria of commonality of the Altaic group in phonetics, vocabulary, morphology and syntax. The foundations of these criteria are impeccable and are classical models for the Altaic community of languages. Thus, a new branch of Asian studies has been formed, Altaic studies, which is currently widely known even to the public beyond the scholar community. That is why many problems of Mongolian studies and Altaic studies are intertwined and thus, issues in Mongolian studies often require taking into consideration similar phenomena in other Altaic languages.

2. Problem Statement

In recent times, Mongolian and Altaic studies were generally enriched with new research, new results were obtained about languages and dialects previously understudied, while well-known languages of the group underwent more detailed study. Nevertheless, even today some problems arise that require conceptually new methodological approaches and new methods for solution; sometimes previously established provisions require significant correction, expansion and revision. At that, the main criteria of commonality of the Altaic languages and theoretic provisions of Mongolian studies retain their scientific validity. Thus, research is somewhat facilitated by the fact that many regularities in development of Mongolic and other Altaic languages are well-known. For instance, it is widely known that root morpheme in Altaic languages starts a word. Affixes follow the root. This fact served as a foundation for establishing a model of morphological word model, where the root morpheme appears as a train engine, while affixes appear as various carriages, which, according to traditional views, may be of infinite number and are of immutable nature. The model clearly illustrates the morphological structure of word. It is especially convenient in its visual clarity when used in education. However, despite its clarity and visual aspects, the model hides some significant details. For example, there may be multiple affixes. This is a correct conclusion. However, the idea of an infinite number of them shall be considered wrong. Affixes, which are considered immutable, undergo deep changes and various phono-morphological modifications. Mongolian and Altaic studies have discovered regularities in use of certain phonemes in various positions in a word. For example, a combination of vowels is impossible in the absolute beginning of a word. The word may start with a single vowel, or a single consonant. Some consonants are never used in the beginning of Mongolic words. Some other consonants and vowels are additionally differentiated in accordance with their use in various positions in a word. Many linguistic regularities of

Mongolic languages has been established by comparative analysis, interpolation and finding the nature of distributive relations. It had been justified, as back then, the ideas of systemic approach of the Prague Linguistic Circle that “linguistic changes often have the system as their object, aiming to strengthen and rebuild it” (Prague Linguistic Circle, 1967) were not yet widely known.

3. Research Questions

Nowadays, Mongolian and Altaic studies face new challenges, whose solution would require new methodological approaches, taking into consideration interactions between the language system and its structural elements in dynamics of their functioning at the speech level. Thus, an essential link in the search for new objective solutions for problems of historic Mongolian studies is formed by new scientifically valid methodologies. For the long time, a relevant and controversial theory in Mongolian studies in Russian and abroad alike was the vowel length theory, which aimed at explaining the causes for appearance and development of long vowels. Eminent scholars Vladimirtsov, Ramstedt and Kotvich formulated the Vowel Length Theory back in the first half of the 20th century. So-called length complexes form the foundation of the theory. There are about a dozen of such complexes. Most comprehensively they were presented in a well-known work of Vladimirtsov: $V + \gamma \sim g \sim y + V$, $V + w + V$ complex, $V + \dot{n} + V$ combination, semi-long vowel V , $V+w$ complex, short vowel V , some diphthongs, various combinations. The principal one is the $V + C + V$ complex (Vladimirtsov, 1929). The complexes established by the scientists are impeccable and are classical models for long vowel formation. The main cause for formation of long vowels had been deemed elision of intervocal consonant C in the $V + C + B$ complex. Other causes include lengthening of short vowels and influence of secondary lexical stress. However, subsequent researchers started finding quite a few contradictions in the vowel length theory. The most controversial part of the theory leading to widespread polemic was the causes of vowel lengthening in Mongolic languages. There were attempts to find them in interactions between sounds, in special qualities of certain sounds, in evolutionary peculiarities of vowels and consonants, suprasegmental influence (such as secondary lexical stress, that scholars assumed to fall on the second vowel of the length complex). This resulted in appearance of new versions and variants, whose main provisions are reflected in the following, often polemical, works: (Doerfer, 1964, 1968, 1970; Hattori, 1961; Murayama, 1970; Poppe, 1962, 1967; Weiers, 1976; Street, 1962) and others. However, analysis of these hypotheses has shown that they do not reflect the real causes of long vowel formation. A number of scholars support the hypothesis of Sh. Loovsanvandan. According to it, formation of the long vowels in Mongolic languages happened under the influence of secondary lexical stress, which supposedly fell onto the second vowel V in the $V + C + V$ length complex. Search for causes of formation of long vowels in Mongolic languages gave rise to other versions and variants, including interpretation of the *udan* length symbol in Clear Script, spontaneous formation of long vowels, etc. The very idea of secondary lexical stress influencing the lengthening of vowels is nothing new. Vladimirtsov (1929) assumed that the secondary lexical stress existed in the Ancient Mongolian language. He wrote: “In ancient Mongolian dialects there was a special secondary stress that fell on the vowels corresponding to long vowels in Khalkha-Mongolian and other modern dialects” (Vladimirtsov, 1929, p. 198).

4. Purpose of the Study

However, research shows that assertions of that secondary lexical stress that had previously existed and then mysteriously disappeared are unconvincing. Analysis of materials related to quality of the secondary lexical stress and nature of its functioning witnesses to existence of such stress in Mongolic languages of the past being unlikely, as lexical stress cannot be selective depending on its location of manifestation. According to traditional views, this stress appeared only in words with length complexes and always fell on the second vowel of the complex. There are other contradictions, in particular, there are many length complexes that did not result in formation of long vowels. They were modified or preserved. A question arises: where were the secondary lexical stress in these cases and why did it not result in formation of long vowels out of the complex. Existence of secondary lexical stress in Mongolic languages does not find sufficient scientific confirmation. It seems that allowable causes within the limits of interactions between sounds within the word were exhausted. In such cases, comparative historical research usually used unknown lexical stress as a decisive factor serving as the cause of linguistic change.

This method is exactly what was used in Mongolian studies. In this case, it seems appropriate to quote Martinet (1965): “Stress is seen as a blind force that nothing can stand against and that mercilessly destroys morphological and lexical differences that were unfortunate enough to be based upon unstressed vowels” (p. 28). That is why a goal was set to determine the true cause for long vowel appearance in Mongolic languages.

5. Research Methods

In this regard, research was conducted into adequacy of methodological approaches and methods used in Mongolian studies to determine the causes of long vowels appearance in Mongolic languages. Such causes could be regularities of linguistic development, influence from other languages, sociocultural phenomena. The research has shown that the main cause influencing appearance of long vowels may be breaking of lexical regulatory standards, in particular, changing temporal duration of words, which determined practicality of studying all the structural components participating in changing the sound envelope of words within the linguistic system. This methodological approach has been named the Word Length Principle. It is obvious that a word has its beginning and end, signaling the start and end of the word as a lexical unit. However, it is important to take into account that in any given language a word has a certain range of temporal duration. When the word length goes outside the normative range for a given language, the link between the beginning and the end of the word becomes weaker or breaks. It is easy to see in experimental recordings, as well as by simple observation of stability of the vowel harmony in the end of a multisyllable Mongolic word. In this case, word length is counted not in vowels and consonant phonemes forming the sounding form of the word, but in syllables as minimal articulatory units. They may differ in their structural type. The following four types of syllables are characteristic of Mongolic languages. A syllable may consist of one mandatory central vocal element V, a vowel which is a syllabic element, as well as a combination of the central vocal element with consonant elements: VC, CV, CVC. The central vocal element consists of only a single vowel, while the consonant, non-syllabic element may

consist of one, two or three consonant phonemes. Traditional Mongolian studies made no connections between the linguistic changes and word length. It is understandable, as many provisions of comparative historical Mongolian studies and some methodological approach are in need of improvement and revision. However, studies of mutations in Mongolic languages give reasons to the idea that transgressions related to word length had been the cause for appearance of long vowels. Methodological approach of the Word Length Principle allowed finding the causes that led to appearance of both long and reduced vowels in Mongolic languages. In this case, it is the lexical system of the language and its main unit, word. In any given language, a word has its own phonetic envelope; correspondingly, there are harmonic combinations of sounds following a tradition of the given language, and specific parameters: temporal duration, suprasegmental influences, articulatory features characteristic of beginning or ending of the word, differentiation for vowel harmony. At that, lexical systems of Mongolic languages and other Altaic languages do not have special ways of word formation by bringing together simple words with the help of special connecting elements, like it is the case for linking o and e in Russian, or linking s in German.

Words of long temporal duration were untypical for Mongolic and other Altaic languages. Naturally, formation of complex words by compounding was untypical as well, unlike in Indo-European languages. For comparison, here are several illustrative examples. In Russian: *chelovekonnavistnichestvo* – 10 syllables, *vysokoproduktivnyi* – 9 syllables, *munitsipalizirovat* – 8 syllables. In German: *Kooperationsbeziehungen* – 9 syllables, *Weltgesundheitsorganisation* – 10 syllables, *Zusammengehorigkeitsgefuhl* – 9 syllables.

Cf. in Mongolian: *gazarluulah* – 4 syllables, *nogoruulah* – 4 syllables, *hyatadchiluulah* – 5 syllables, *huranguyluulah* – 5 syllables, *oroldlogoguy* – 5 syllables. 4. In Kalmyk: *temdglgdhshlm* – 6 syllables, *temdglghmn* – 5 syllables, *halshrulgdh* – 4 syllables, *kodlmshchnrtvidn* – 6 syllables. Compound words in Mongolic languages are implemented as word combinations. These coupled words (twin words) and collocations may be divided into several subgroups, in some cases there are fusions similar to Kalmyk *sanaldh* «sigh» <*sanā* *aldahu*, *nuruzdg* «mirror» < *nuruzdeg*. At that, new lexical units harmoniously blend into the prescriptive aspect of Mongolic word (Bitkeev, 2009).

6. Findings

The Word Length Principle allowed additionally determining why in certain cases length complexes did not result in formation of long vowels. Such cases were previously deemed “exceptions” due to a “lagged phonetic evolution” (Vladimirtsov, 1929). In Russian and foreign Mongolian studies it is common to assume that unclear vowels of non-first syllable are a result of their unstressed position. However, according to the Word Length Principle, the unclear vowels are a result of an alternative development in the vowel subsystem due to resolution of the word length problem. The Word Length Principle is based upon regular standard word length typical for a given language, in this case for Mongolic languages where using words of no more than six syllables is typical. In ancient times, Mongolian words were shorter and had at most three or four syllables, which is indirectly evident from separate writing of some case affixes and their indifference to vowel harmony. When Mongolian speech had become faster and more mobile, various clitics, grammatical words, numerals, pronouns started to be

pronounced merged with the word stem, becoming affixes. The number of affixes increased and the words became longer. A crisis of vocabulary system arose, as the number of syllables in a word increased, threatening to go beyond the standard limits for word length. This issue required some kind of resolution. An adequate reaction on behalf of the language system (especially vocabulary) was word reduction (Bitkeev, 2015)

“This process followed two alternative directions. One of them is reduction of short vowels in the non-first syllable position. At that, the reduction was twofold; it was either complete or incomplete. In the first variant, the word at once shortened by a syllable, while in the second one the number of syllable kept the same, but the word acquired a form and flexibility necessary for articulation. Another direction in word reduction was related to the complete reduction of consonants in intervocalic position in a length complex. The reduction process ended with formation of long vowels and shortening of the word by one or two syllables. These two linguistic processes could happen simultaneously on the same word. However, if short vowels reduced in non-first syllables, then the length complexes became modified and persisted without formation of a long vowel.

7. Conclusion

The word reduction process helped the language to find a way to resolve the contradiction that corresponded to articulation norms and functioning condition of the system. At that, the word reduction process facilitated resolution of two phenomena of opposite directions, namely, formation of long vowels and reduction of short vowel in non-first syllables; these two phenomena have completely different explanations in Russian and foreign Mongolian studies. The research has shown that word length is an essential aspect of the language system, at least in its lexical subsystem.

Other current issues in studies of Mongolic and Altaic languages may be successfully resolved only by using modern methodological approaches oriented towards studying the linguistic phenomena in the language system and its structural components in functional dynamic of speech activity and with considerations for influence of social and ethno-cultural factors, including foreign ones. The list of the current issues of the contemporary Altaic studies includes highly controversial questions on genesis of commonality of the Altaic languages. There are two well-known point of view. According to the first of them, Altaic languages descend from a common ancestor language, according to the second one their commonality resulted from mutual interactions. Highly fraught debates on the issue were reflected in polemic papers noted above, as well as in publications of Shcherbak (2005). It is practical to apply the Word Length Principle to resolve this issue as well.

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