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The Formation of the Oirat Dialect

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The Oirat dialect is one of the oldest Mongolian dialects and reflects many interesting features of ancient Mongolian. Therefore, studying the Oirat dialect is an important way to examine the development of not only the dialect itself but also Middle, and even Modern, Mongolian. This paper focuses on the phonetic aspects of the Oirat dialect, clarifying differences and similarities between scattered Oirat peoples in Eurasia. Comparative studies like this one have been made possible by democratizaion.

Key words: Oirat dialect, ancient Mongolian, linguistic features

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1. A brief history of the Oirats

According to historians, the Oirats are a pastoral nomadic tribe of Mongolian origin whose ancestors cohabited with the Mongols proper at the steppe stripe of Inner Asia beginning in the 10th century (Dalai 2002: 33–34). Later, in the 12th and 13th centuries, the Oirats moved west, to the basin of the Yenisei river, the shores of Lake Baikal, near the Tagna mountain range, and the Khubsugul taiga region; they were thus called “oin irged” (forest people).

One of the earliest historical texts to mention the Oirat people is the *Secret History of the Mongols*, a 13th-century Mongolian chronicle. The *Secret History* tells how Oirats under Quduqa beki fought against Chinggis Khan and, in 1207, were defeated by Jochi, the eldest son of Chinggis. The Oirats fully submitted to Mongol rule after their ally Jamukha was destroyed¹⁾ and were depicted in the Persian “Jami al-Tawarikh” by Rashid al-Din, where it is said that Chinggis Khan gave the Oirat people to his son Jochi and had one of his daughters,

Checheygen, marry their chief, Quduqa beki (or his son)²⁾. The Oirats were thus amalgamated into the Mongol Empire, forming the four thousands of the western wings—the Dörben Oirats or four major Oirat tribes—Dzungar (Choros or Ölöt), Törüt, Dörbet, and Qoshut.

After the expulsion of the Yuan dynasty from China, the Oirats regained visibility as a loose alliance of the four major western Mongol tribes. The alliance grew, taking power in the remote region of the Altai Mountains and forming a separate ethnic group. Gradually, they spread eastward, annexing territories belonging to the eastern Mongols and hoping to reestablish unified nomadic rule under their banner.

There were notable Oirats in the Mongol Empire, such as Arghun Aqa and his son Nowruz (Boyle, ed. 1968: 337–338, 366, 370). In 1256, some Oirats under Bukha-Temur joined Hülegü's expedition to Iran and fought against the Ismailites (or Hashashins) and the Abbasids in Persia (Boyle, ed. 1968: 343, 349). The Ilkhan Hülegü and his successor Abaqa resettled them in Anatolia. They also took part in the Second Battle of Homs in 1281, where the Mongols were defeated (Amitai-Preiss 2004: 179–201). The majority of the Oirats who were left behind supported Arik Böke against Khubilai Khan. Khubilai defeated his younger brother, and the Oirats entered into the service of the victor. In 1295, more than 10,000 Oirats under Taryai Kuregen (son-in-law to the Borjigin family) fled Syria to the Mamluks because they were despised by both the Muslim Mongols and the local Turks. They were well received by the Egyptian Sultan Al-Adil Kitbuqa, who was of Oirat origin (Boyle, ed. 1968: 381). Ali Pasha, governor of Baghdad and head of an Oirat ruling family, killed Ilkhan Arpa Keun, resulting in the disintegration of Mongol Persia (Boyle, ed. 1968: 413–414). As the Oirats were near the Chagatai Khanate and the Golden Horde, they had strong ties with both, and many Mongol khans had Oirat wives.

As mentioned, the Oirats—namely the Choros, Törüts (Dörbets), and Qoshut—left the taiga region and gradually moved eastward to the Altai Mountains. They were joined by the minor tribes Khoid, Bayat, Mingat, Zakhachin, Baatud, Barga, Tümet, and Darqat. In 1670, Galdan Boshigt united the Oirats into the Khanate of Dzungaria and subjugated the Uighurs, Kyrgyzs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Kazakhs inhabiting the vast territories stretching from the Altai Mountains to Tian Shan and from Uvs Lake to Balkahsh. The Dzungaria was the last great nomadic empire in Asia.

The Qing (or Manchu) conquered China in the mid-17th century and sought to protect its northern border by continuing the divide-and-rule policy that their Ming predecessors had used successfully against the Mongols. The Manchu consolidated their rule over the eastern Mongols of Manchuria. Some scholars estimate that about 80% of the Dzungar population was destroyed by a combination of warfare and disease during the Qing conquest of Dzungaria between 1755 and 1757. With the Oirat depopulation that occurred under the Manchus, the Törüts and Dörbets moved toward the Volga river basin and the Qoshuts toward the Köke-Nuur and Tibet. However, most Oirats occupied and are still occupying the western part of modern Mongolia.

Ethnic groups of Oirat origin such as the Bayats, Dörbets, Törüts, Öölets, Zakhachin, Mingats, Uriyangqai, Qotung, and others have spoken slightly separate dialects. The Oirats have been widely dispersed during their periods of turmoil, and yet most Bayats, Dörbets, Törüts, Öölets, Zakhachin, Mingyads, Uriyangqais, and Qotungs have inhabited the Uvs and

Qobdu aimags of Mongolia; these peoples can also be found in several regions of Russia, including Kalmykia, Astrakhan, Rostov, Volgograd, and Stavropol. The Torγuts and Dörbets established themselves in Kyrgyzia near Issykkul' Lake; the Torγuts, Öölets, Qoshuts, Dörbets, and Uriyangqais settled in Bortal, Bayan-Uul, Khovogsair, Ili, and Tarbagatai in the Xinjiang-Uighur regions of China; the Qoshuts and Torγuts settled in Haisy and in Henan in Köke-Nuur province and Subei in Gansu province. A handful of Oirats live in Inner Mongolia—in Alshaa, Eznei Gol, and Imin Gol in Kölonbuir.

The total number of people speaking the Oirat dialect is about 700,000. Approximately 300,000 of these live in Mongolia, 180,000 in Russia, and 220,000 in China.

2. Formation of the Oirat dialect

The Oirats were separated from the Mongols proper in the 12th and 13th centuries, and their languages became differentiated. Persian historian Rashid al-Din noted that the Oirats' vernacular was distinct even in Chinggis Khan's time. For this reason, some attributes of ancient Mongolian phonetics are observable in the Oirat dialect. Linguistic and phonetic studies of modern Oirats living in Mongolia, Kalmykia, Köke-Nuur, Amdo, Alshaa, and Xinjiang show that, due to historical upheavals and migrations, the Oirats prevented their vernacular from dissolving into neighboring Mongols' languages. Accordingly, Professor G. D. Sanzheev states that "although the Oirats migrated greatly during the last six or seven centuries, their language has not changed from what it was in the 13th century" (Sanzheev 1953: 7). Traces of the phonetic components of the Oirat dialect and its historical evolution, linguistic forms, and vocabulary during the 17th century can be found in documents written in "Clear Script," while characteristics of the modern Oirat dialect can be detected in various extant sub-dialects. According to Sanzheev, the 17th-century Oirat dialect has similarities to Middle Mongolian as well as to the modern Mogul and Dagur languages (Sanzheev 1953: 33).

3. Characteristic of Oirat dialect

Modern Oirat dialect has preserved ancient Mongolian characteristics in some ways and also evolved distinctively than other Mongolian dialects at the same time.

3.1 Ancient Mongolian characteristics in the Oirat dialect

a. The Ancient Mongolian front stop *k* changed to a liquid *x* in other Mongolian dialects and remains a front stop solely in the Oirat dialect.

Oir. ken (Ba, Dör, Ö, Tor, Ur, Zakh.) < MM, AM ken (SH, BT); Cf. Tod. ken;
CM *x*en (Kha.)

Oir. taka: (Ba, Dör, Ö, Tor, Ur, Zakh.) < MM taki'a: (Mu.) < takiya: (SH) <
taqiya: (L); Cf. Tod. taka:, CM ta^xi'a: (Kha.)

Oir. zoka:l (Ba, Dör, Ö, Tor, Ur, Zakh.) < AM joki'a:l < AM jokiya:l (Ph.)
< joqiya:l (Mu.); Cf. Tod. zokoa:l; CM dzox'o:l (Kha.)

b. The Ancient Mongolian front occlusive consonant *n* transformed into a velar nasalized *ŋ* in other Mongolian dialects; in the Oirat dialect, it preserved the front function.

- Oir. modān (Ba, Dör, Min, Ö, Tor, Ur, Zakh.) < modon < MM modun (SH) ~ AM modun (BT); Cf. Tod. modun; CM modö (Kha.)
 Oir. usān (Ba, Dör, Min, Ö, Tor, Ur, Zakh.) < MM usun (SH) ~ AM modun (Bur.); Cf. Tod. usun; CM usā (Kha.)
 Oir. dzü:n (Dör, Ur, Zakh.) < jü:n (Mu.) < jü'ü:n (Mu.) < jö'ü:n < je'ü:n (SH) < jegü:n (Bur.); Cf. Tod. jeü:n; CM dzü:ŋ (Kha.)

c. The Ancient Mongolian palatal *i* vowel was assimilated regressively by most Mongolian dialects; in the Oirat dialect, it remained without any assimilation in many cases.

- Oir. džilawtšī (Ba, Dör, Min, Ö, Tor, Ur, Zakh.) < AM jilabči (Mo.); Cf. džalavtšī (Kha.)
 Oir. tšida- (Ba, Dör, Ö, Tor, Ur, Zakh.) < MM čida (SH) ~ AM čidal (Bur.); Cf. Tod. čida-; CM tšadā-
 Oir. inag (Ba, Dör, Ö, Tor, Ur, Zakh.) < MM inay (Mu.) ~ AM inay (Mo.); Cf. Tod. inaq; CM janag (Kha.)
 Oir. kimdā (Ba, Dör, Ö, Tor, Ur, Zakh.) < AM kimda (Mo.); Cf. Tod. kimda; CM ɣamdā (Kha.)
 Oir. miŋgā (Ba, Dör, Ö, Tor, Ur, Zakh.) < MM miñfan (Mu.) < mingya (Bur.); Cf. Tod. mingya; CM m'aŋyā (Kha.)
 Oir. džirgāl (Ba, Dör, Ö, Tor, Ur, Zakh.) < MM jiryal (SH) ~ AM jiryal (Bur.); Cf. Tod. jiryal; CM dž'aryal (Kha.)

d. In the *oɣa:*, *öge:* complex that appeared at the beginning of Ancient Mongolian words, the fricatives *ɣ/g* were gradually weakened in Middle Mongolian and came to function only as separators between preceding and following vowels, turning into the weak aspiration ('); consequently, the following vowel assimilated into the preceding one as *o'o:*, *ö'ö:*. However, the Oirat dialect does not always exhibit such assimilation; therefore, some similarities to the Dagur language can be found.

- Oir. toa: (Ba, Dör, Ö, Tor, Ur, Zakh.) < MM to'a: (SH) < AM toɣa: (Sub.); Cf. Tod. to'a: CM to: (Kha.)
 Oir. xoa: (Ba, Dör, Ö, Tor, Ur, Zakh.) < MM ɣo'a: (SH) < ɣowa: (Mu.) < ɣoua: (Bur.); Cf. Tod. ɣoa: CM ɣo: (Kha.)
 Oir. böe:r (Ba, Dör, Ö, Tor, Ur, Zakh.) < MM bö'e:re (SH) < AM böge:re (Bur.); Cf. Tod. böe:r CM bö:r (Kha.)

3.2 Specific evolution of the Oirat dialect

a. The *uɣa:*, *üge:* complex that appeared in non-initial syllables of Ancient Mongolian words became *u'a:* > *o'a:* > *a'a:* > *a:* // *ü'e:* > *ö'e:* > *e'e:* > *e:* ~ *ä:* in the Oirat dialect,

whereas in other Mongolian dialects it has evolved one step further as *u'a:* > *o'a:* > *a'a:* > *a:* > *o:* // *ü'e:* > *ö'e:* *ö'ö:* > *ö:*, a regressive assimilation of *a:*, *e:*.

Oir. oda: (Ö) < MM odo: (Mu.) < AM oduya: / edüge: (Mo.); Cf. Tod. odoa:

CM odo: (Kha.)

Oir. dola:n (Ba, Dör, Min, Ur.) < MM dola'a:n (IM) < dolo'a:n (SH) <

dolu'a:n < AM doluya:n (BT); Cf. Tod. doloa:n; CM dolo:n (Kha.)

Oir. jora:l (Dör, Ur.) < yora'a:l < yoro'a:l < yoru'a:l < (y)iru'a:l < AM iruya:r

(Bur.); Cf. Tod. yoroa:l; CM yoro:l (Kha.)

Oir. jörä:l (Zakh.) < yöre'e:l < yörö'e:l < yörü'e:l < (y)irü'e:l < AM irüge:l /

irüge:r (Bur.); Cf. Tod. irüe:r; CM. yörö:l (Kha.)

Oir. körä: (Dör, Zakh, Kho.) < MM köre'e: < kirö'e: < kirü'e: (SH) < AM

kirüge: (Mo.); Cf. Tod. köröe: CM *χörö:* (Kha.)

Oir. nögä: (Zakh, Kho.) < MM nög'e: < nögö'e: (SH) < nögü'e: < AM

nögüge: (BT); Cf. Tod. nökö'e: CM nögö: (Kha.)

b. The final diphthongs in Ancient Mongolian and the diphthongs of non-final syllables in Middle Mongolian have been preserved in most Mongolian dialects, but in the Oirat dialect they have lost their diphthongized characteristics and become the long vowel *a:*, *ü:*.

Oir. dā:n (Ba, Dör, Min, Ö, Tor, Ur, Zakh.) < MM dain (Mu.) < AM dayin

(Sub.); Cf. Tod. sayin; CM sañ (Kha.)

Oir. ö:msēn (Ba, Dör, Ö, Tor, Ur, Zakh.)

Oir. noxa: (Ba, Dör, Ö, Tor, Ur.) < noxa:ĩ < MM noxai < AM noqai < PM

*noqaj

Oir. nekä: (Ba, Dör, Ö, Tor, Ur, Zakh.) < neke:ĩ < MM, AM nekei < PM

*nekej

Oir. duğu: (Ba, Dör, Ö, Tor, Ur, Zakh.) < MM, AM duyui < PM duyuj

c. The (C)VCV:(C) structure that characterizes most words in Mongolian dialects appears as (C)V:(C) in the Oirat dialect. This confirms that the (C)VCV:(C) structure was also evident in those particular words.

Oir. nü:l (Ba, Dör, Min, Ö, Tor, Ur, Zakh.) < nü'ü:l < ni'ü:l (Ph.) < AM nigül

(BT); Cf. Tod. niü:l; CM nügel (Kha.)

Oir. ä:m (Ba, Dör, Min, Ö, Tor, Ur, Zakh.) < MM e'e:m < AM ege:m; Cf. Tod.

ee:m; CM egem (Kha.)

Oir. mö:rsən (Ba, Dör, Ö, Tor, Ur, Zakh.) < mö'ö:rsen < mö'e:rsün < AM

möge:rsün (Mo.); Cf. Tod. möe:rs; CM mögö:rsə (Kha.)

In sum, it is important to note that the Oirat dialect is a significant linguistic source through which we may examine the evolution not only of the dialect itself but also of Ancient, Middle, and Modern Mongolian.

Abbreviations

AM	Ancient Mongolian
Ba.	Bayad dialect
BT	Bodhicaryavatara-yin tayilburi
Bur.	Burqan bayši-yin arban qoyar jokiya
CM	Contemporary Mongolian
Dör.	Dörbet dialect
IM	Mongolian glossary in the dictionary of Ibn-Muqanna
Kha.	Khalkha dialect
Kho.	Khoton dialect
L	Leiden Handwritten Dictionary in Leiden Library
MM	Middle Mongolian
Mo.	Classical Mongolian
Mu.	Mongolian interlinear translation of Muqaddimat al-Adab
Ö	Ölet dialect
Ph.	'Phags-pa Monuments
SH	Secret History of the Mongols
Sub.	Subhasittaratnanidhi
Tod.	Todo Script
Tor.	Torgut dialect
Ur.	Uriankhai dialect
Zakh.	Zakhchin dialect

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Notes

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