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Current Trends in Oirat Dialect Studies

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2014-06-05 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Purevjav, E. メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://doi.org/10.15021/00002399

Current Trends in Oirat Dialect Studies

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Language and dialect are the main instruments of human communication, to which economies, cultures, and political relationships are closely related. The Mongolian language and its dialects have tended to become similar to the central Khalkha dialect as conditioned by the Mongol nation's form and language rules. Oral dialects and the branch dialects' phonemes, grammar, and (especially) vocabulary have tended to converge through various dialectal similarities. Television, radio, cell phones, email, and the Internet, which are rapidly broadcasting our lifestyles, are influencing the standardization of the Mongolian language and its dialects.

Key words: Mongol, Mongolian Dialects, Oirat Dialects, Bayad, Dörvöd, Zakhchin, Ööld, Torgut, Uriankhai

1. Introduction
2. Studies of Mongolian Dialects
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1. Introduction

Starting in the 1950s, methods of studying Mongolian dialects and folklore at the Institute of Language and Literature of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences developed rapidly into a modern scientific approach, thanks in part to the acquisition of sound recording equipment in 1955 and the establishment of a laboratory for experimental phonetics in 1966.

At the laboratory, highly sensitive apparatuses such as a cymograph, an oscillograph, and an x-ray machine were used to study characteristics of Mongolian and its various dialects in detail. Magnetic and tape recording was also used. Meanwhile, the following monographs were made public: “Zakhchin dialect” by J. Tsoloo (1966), “Dörvöd sub-dialect” by E. Vandui (1966), “Sub-dialect of Khalkha” by J. Tsoloo and E. Vandui (1967), “The features of Torgut sub-dialect” by Kh. Luvsanbaldan (1970), *Dictionary of Local Dialects within the Mongolian People's Republic Vol. I* (Khalkha dialect) by B. Amarjargal (1988), *Dictionary of Local Dialects within the Mongolian People's Republic Vol. II* (Oirat dialect) by J. Tsoloo

(1988), *Dictionary of Local Dialects within the Mongolian People's Republic Vol. III* (Buryat dialect) by G. Gantogtokh (1988), "Comparative study of Mongolian local dialectal lexis" by J. Tsooloo (1990), "Notes on Ööld sub-dialect" by D. Badamdorj (1993), "Phonetic system of the Oirad dialect" (2002), and "The study of Mongolian local dialects" by O. Sambuudorj (2009).

2. Studies of Mongolian Dialects

Over the course of 50 years spent in the pursuit of knowledge, Sc. D. J. Tsooloo has published more than 20 scientific monographs, in excess of 10 anthologies of research papers with detailed notes, and around 100 scientific articles. His scientific monographs include "Zakhchin sub-dialect" (1965), "The principles of how Mongolian sounds are pronounced" (1967), "Khalkha dialect" (1970), "Local dialects within the Mongolian People's Republic" (1987), "The dictionary of dialects within the MPR" in 3 volumes (1988), "The comparative study of Mongolian local dialectal lexis" (1990), "Mongolian local dialects" (1997), "Buryat-Mongolians of Mongolia" (2005), "Mongolian dialect studies" (2009), and "Dialects of contemporary Mongolian" (2011). His research papers include "Notes on the Khalkha dialect practiced in west northern Arkhangai" (1960), "Some features of the Khotogoid sub-dialect" (1962), "Taking a look at studies done on Mongolian local dialects in recent years" (1963), "Some features of the Zakhchin and Torgut sub-dialects" (1964), "Some characteristics of the word structure of the Gobi-Khalkha sub-dialect" (1967), "Features of some Khalkha dialects" (1967), "Some issues in studies of the modern Khalkha dialect" (1968), "Studying sub-dialects and folklore in the northern part of Arkhangai" (1970), "Western Khalkha sub-dialect" (1970), "Some results of studying the Uriankhai dialect" (1972), "On stress in the Khalkha dialect" (1973), "Notes on Mongol Uriankhai Vocabulary" (1973), "Preliminary results on the study of the Bayad dialect" (1974), "Innovation in local dialects of MPR" (1978), "The influence of the Khalkha dialect on the national literary language" (1979), "State dialectological studies of the Mongolian language in the MPR" (1985), "Notes on homonyms in Mongolian local dialects" (1986), "On the orthoepy of language of Mongolian literature" (1992), "Terms of Mongolian dialects epithet" (1995), and "The meaning of the suffixes -laa and -lee in the Oirad dialect" (1999). All of these focus on Mongolian dialects, and together they form an exceptional contribution to the development of Mongol studies. What distinguishes the work of Professor J. Tsooloo is that he presents simple examples of Mongolian dialectal lexis with novel formulas based on the theory of general linguistics. The fact that academician B. Rinchen was his mentor and edited his first scientific monograph, "Zakhchin sub-dialect" (1965), obviously had a profound impact on his development into a "genuine researcher."

From 1952 until the late 1980s, scholars at the Institute of Language and Literature organized an expedition once or twice each year to research Mongolian folklore and local dialects. They are still preparing the collection gathered through these expeditions for further study. There are 30,000 artifacts in written form and on magnetic tape in the treasury of folklore and local dialects at the Institute of Language and Literature of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences.

As Professor N. Poppe, renowned American Mongolist scholar, has noted, "The Mongo-

lian Academy of Sciences' expedition in the countryside to collect folk tales and songs should be seen as more significant cultural progress than the building of an airport in Ulaanbaatar. While it is quite easy to engage in construction with an architectural design made by another country, it is much more difficult to develop someone into a scholar who studies and collects folklore. One cannot survive on bread alone" (Poppe 2008: 226).

In the treasury of folklore and local dialects at the Institute of Language and Literature, rare manuscripts and sutras in Phags'-pa have been categorized under 1096 headings, including Mongolian religion, ceremony of offering, horoscope, prophecy, proverb, story, ritual, history, and biography.

Scholars of the collection of Mongolian folklore and local dialects published the *Dictionary of local dialects within Mongolian People's Republic* in three volumes, Vol. I (Khalkha dialect), Vol. II (Oirat dialect), and Vol. III (Buryat dialect). Moreover, with financial support from the American embassy, the entire folklore and local dialects collection was registered between 2000 and 2004, an accomplishment that was followed by the publication of the *Registration of Written Materials Kept in the Collection of Mongolian Folklore and Local Dialects*, Vol. I (2004) and the *Registration of Magnetic Tapes Kept in the Collection of Mongolian Folklore and Local Dialects*, Vol. II (2004). *The Collection of Mongolian Folklore*, a 40-volume series based on rich materials kept in the Mongolian folklore and local dialects collection of the Institute of Language and Literature, was also published.

Researchers at the treasury of Mongolian folklore and local dialects are working to update equipment and apparatuses, improve collection preservation, and transfer magnetic tapes recorded almost half a century ago onto a digital format according to schedule. Many rare materials on Mongolian folklore and local dialects are stored in the treasury of linguistics at the Institute of Language and Literature. The entire record of the treasury expedition group and all the materials collected there have been registered in 427 new files. Restoration work on the degraded magnetic tapes has begun. J. Tsooloo is the current head of the linguistics treasury.

A closer look at the various dialects and sub-dialects of modern Mongolian suggests, as Sh. Luvsanvandan has, that "While some dialects and sub-dialects retain ancient Mongolian features, some of them have undergone a great change. Some of them are even influenced by foreign languages so heavily that speakers of them are divided into two different groups. Differences among various dialects of modern Mongolian alongside various monuments that reveal features of ancient, middle, and modern Mongolian are very significant materials used in the comparative study of Mongolian dialects and Altaic languages" (Luvsanvandan 2002: 36).

In an original suggestion put forward in a research paper entitled "Mongolian Local Dialects," Professor Sh. Luvsanvandan discusses several neutral sub-dialects that contain some features of central, western, eastern, and northern dialects.

According to his classification, the neutral central sub-dialects are Khalkha, Tsakhar, and Ordos, and the eastern sub-dialects are Khorchin, Baarin, and Oniud naiman. The sub-dialects of Oirat residing near the Alisha and Ezene rivers and in Khovd derive from central and southern dialects. The Buryat and Barga sub-dialects in Selenge province are neutral sub-dialects deriving from central and northern dialects.

In order to make this classification, Sh. Luvsanvandan performed a comparative study between central and eastern dialects (Khorchin and Kharchin), central and western dialects

(Oirad), and central and northern dialects (Buryat).

The central Mongolian dialect is spoken by about one million and two hundred people (Statistics 1959); it is the main dialect, has a sophisticated vocabulary and phrase structure, and has kept the peculiarities of Mongolian. Not only in Khalkha, Tsakhar, and Ordos is the central dialect spoken, but also in Oirad, Buryat, Barga, Üzemchin, Kharchin-Khalkha in Outer Mongolia, Avga, Sönid, Darkhan-Muumyangan khoshuu in Ulaantsav, the western part of Dörvön khüükhed, and the Shine barga khoshuu of Inner Mongolia.

The dialect's strength can be attributed to the practice of speaking only Mongolian and to the tradition of writing all official state documents in Mongolian, which result in the ever-increasing impact of the central dialect on Mongolian. In fact, the central dialect has grown into the main modern Mongolian literary dialect in terms of grammar and vocabulary. On the other hand, Mongolists believe that Sh. Luvsanvandan's classification helps illuminate how other local Mongolian dialects unite with the central dialect to create three neutral sub-dialects that differ phonetically, grammatically, and lexically for practical and linguistic reasons and how central dialect speakers use written Mongolian daily in their lives (Tsoloo 2009: 21).

Professor Sh. Luvsanvandan compared the views of Russian and Chinese scholars of Mongolian and concluded that modern Mongolian dialectal divisions as established by noted scholars were not suited to the modern reality. The scholars at issue include A. D. Rudneev, who divided the Mongolian language into two groups, Southern and Northern, in 1908; B. Vladimirtsov, who divided it into West and East in 1929; G. D. Sanjeev, who divided the modern Mongolian dialect into six types (Mongol, Oirad, Buriat, Daguur, Mongor, and Mogol) in 1953; N. Poppe, who divided it into Western and Eastern and further classified it into Daguur, Mongor, Eastern Mongolian, Buryat, Mogol, Oirad, and Khalimag in 1955; and Chingeltei, who divided the Mongolian dialects and related languages into six independent languages (Mongol, Daguur, Mongor, Dunshaan, Boan, and Shar Uighur) in 1957. To classify the various dialects, Rudneev, Vladimirtsov, and Poppe used the ancient tribal and provincial authority system, while Sh. Luvsanvandan compared the ideas of Sanjeev, who focused on the administration and governance relationship, with those of Chingeltei, who focused on understanding, to generate his own framework. He discusses this process in *The Meaning of the Mongolian Language and its Dialects*, in which he argues that modern Mongolian dialects fall into two categories: the Khalkha, Tsakhar, Ordos, Khorchin, Kharchin, Oirad, and Buryat dialects are fragmented dialects, whereas the Daguur, Mongor, and Mogol dialects are non-fragmented. In 1966, Sh. Luvsanvandan wrote, "People who speak the Daguur, Mogol, and Mongor dialects cannot directly understand each other as well as other fragmented dialect users. So, they are considered as separate and independent dialects" (Luvsanvandan 1966: 5).

Language is the most important instrument of human communication, and its main purpose is to transfer information. In 1995, Yu.Mönkh-Amgalan said, "If people speaking a specific language and dialect can understand each other without a dictionary, the instrument that transfers the information is considered a dialect, but not a language" (Mönkh-Amgalan 1995: 20).

The ethnic breakdown of the Mongolian population in 2000 is given below.

Ethnicity	Number of people
Mongolian nationals	2,365,269
Khalkha	1,934,674
Dörvöd	66,706
Bayad	50,824
Zakhchin	29,766
Uriankhai	25,183
Ööld	14,634
Torgut	12,628
Myangad	6,082

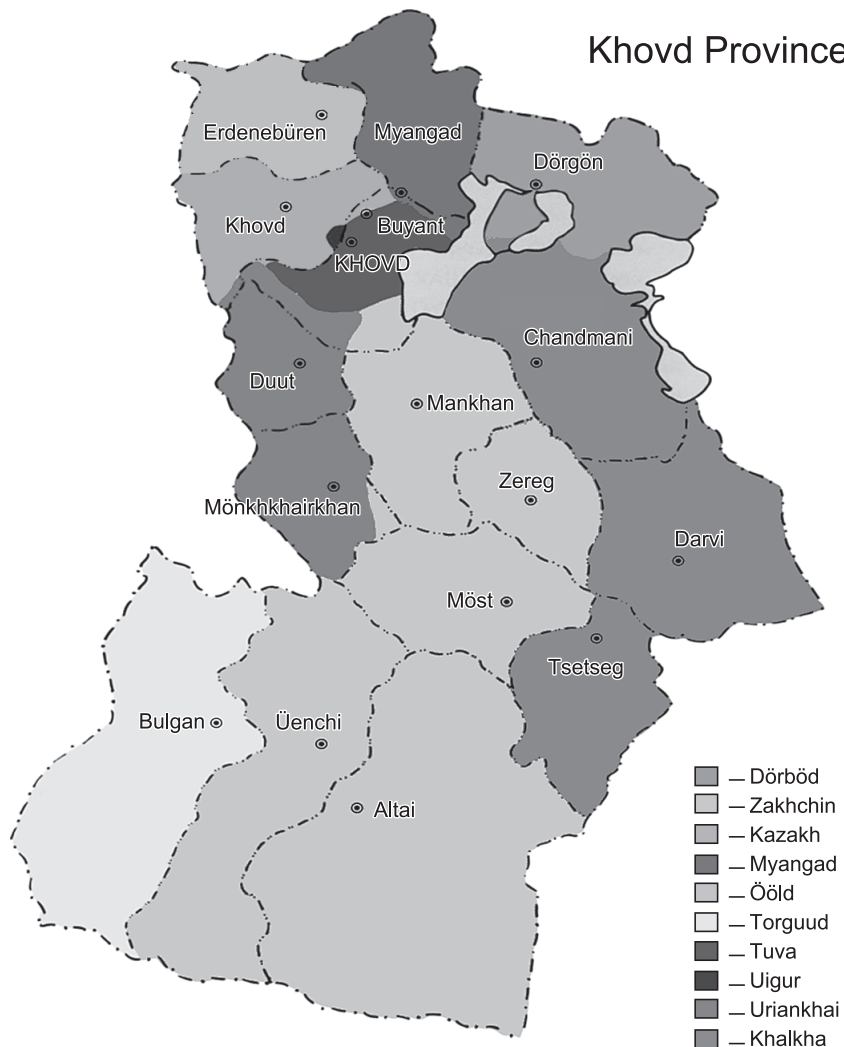
Mongolian dialects are divided into Khalkha, Buryat, and Oirat. The Khalkha dialect, the base dialect of Modern Mongolian literature, is divided into three groups: the Central Khalkha dialect, the Eastern Khalkha dialect, and the Western Khalkha dialect. Approximately 80% of Mongolia's people (1,934,674) are Khalkha.

3. Oirat Dialects

The Bayad, Dörvöd, Zakhchin, Ööld, Torgut, Khoshuud, and Altain Uriankhai dialects are included in the Oirat dialect. Scholars have researched sub-dialects spanning the history of the Mongolian language that have kept its peculiarities and its sophisticated vocabulary and phrases. Many ethnic groups have settled in Mongolia throughout the centuries: the ööld (who have a fire stamp) in the Erdenebüren soum in Khovd province; the Uriankhai (who have a bow stamp) in the Mönkhkhairkhan and Duut soums in Khovd province and in the Altai, Buyant, Bulgan, Altantsögts, and Sagsai soums in Bayan-Ölgii province; the Zakhchin (who have a degree stamp) in the Mankhan, Altai, Üyench, Zereg, and Möst soums in Khovd province; the Torguud (who have a sun-moon stamp) in Bulgan soum in Khovd province; the Dörvöd (who have a degree stamp) in the Davst, Sagil, Türgen, Bökhmörön, Zavkhan, Khovd, Ömnögobi, Ölgii, Naranbulag, and Ulaangom soums in Uvs province, in the Dörgön and Myangad soums in Khovd, and in the Nogoonnuur soum in Bayan-Ölgii province; and the Bayad (who have a bellyband stamp) in the Khyargas, Malchin, Tes, and Züüngobi soums in Uvs province.

People who use the Oirat dialect differ in language, dialect, clothing, songs, melody, work, lifestyle, and cattle earmarks. The Oirat dialect is divided into two main groups: Southern and Northern. The Zakhchin, Myangad, Ööld, Torgut, and Uriankhai use the Southern dialect, and the Bayad and Dörvöd use the Northern one. The Modern Oirat dialect differs from other Mongolian dialects in its vibrant consonants and double vowels. Oirat Mongolians, who moved to Russia during the 17th century, are called "Khalimag." Around 300,000 Khalimag currently live in Russia.

The Bayad people live in the Züüngobi, Malchin, Tes and Khyargas soums in Uvs province.



Map of Khovd province divided into its sub-dialects

There were about 50,824 Bayad people in 2000.

Dörvöd is one of the Dörvön Oirads. The Dörvöd people live in the Bökhmörön, Davst, Naranbulag, Ölgii, Ömnögobi, Sagil, Türgen, and Khovd soums in Uvs province and in the Dörgön soum in Khovd province. There were about 66,706 Dörvöd people in 2000.

The Zakhchin live in the Altai, Zereg, Mankhan, Möst, and Üyench soums in Khovd province. There were 29,766 Zakhchin people in 2000.

The Myangad people live in the Myangad soum in Khovd province; their population was 6,082 in 2000.

The Ööld people live in the Erdenebüren soum in Khovd province, and the Ölziit soum in Arkhangai is home to Ööld people who are considered the remnants of the Oirads. The

Ööld numbered 14,634 according to the 2000 census.

The Torgut people live in the Bulgan soum in Khovd province and in 2000 numbered 12,628.

The Uriankhai people live in groups in the Duut and Mönkhkhairkhan soums of Khovd province, while they live separately in the Altai, Bulgan, and Buyant soums of Bayan-Ölgii province. The Uriankhai people living in Bayan-Ölgii call themselves “Öölög Uriankhai.” The Uriankhai population totaled 25,183 in 2000.

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