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Japanese and the Other  
Altaic Languages

Studies in Honour of  
Roy Andrew Miller  
on His 75th Birthday

Edited by  
Karl H. Menges and Nelly Naumann

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# Cognates and Copies in Altaic Verb Derivation<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The following short remarks concern possible vestiges of an original Altaic verb derivation. As is well known, scholars such as G. J. RAMSTEDT, N. N. POPPE and R. A. MILLER have undertaken to establish parts of the Altaic system of deverbal stem formation, reconstructing a number of markers on the basis of Turkic, Mongolic, Tungusic, Korean and Japanese data. The present article will not deal in detail with the concrete forms proposed, but briefly discuss the general possibilities of arguing for genetic connections on the basis of this kind of materials. It is also intended as a plea for more openness in the debate on Altaic matters.

## Critical openness

Let us start from the last-mentioned point. The controversy over the genetic relations of the Altaic languages has long been characterized by polarization, sharp polemics and sometimes peculiarly neurotic reactions to suggestions from 'the other side'. Arguments have often been misunderstood, misrepresented, distorted. MILLER (1996) gives instructive examples of the level on which the debate has sometimes been conducted. The pressure on scholars to proclaim wholesale acceptance or rejection of the hypotheses presented, "almost as in two-party politics",<sup>2</sup> has caused much understandable aversion to the topic as such and a natural demand for nuances and complementary considerations.

1 Work on this article was carried out while the author was Visiting Professor at the Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa at *Tokyo Gaikokugo Daigaku* (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies).

2 SINOR 1990, ix.

Nevertheless, there is still little understanding for the simple standpoint taken by scholars who do not primarily wish to support one of the 'camps', but are interested in the results of the reasoning processes conducted on the basis of relevant criteria and data. Linguists expressing appreciation of both competent reconstruction efforts and competent criticism of details are often accused of agnostic attitudes or even lack of courage. It is still considered more respectable to pronounce categorical judgments on these utterly difficult matters of linguistic relatedness.

However, in view of the actual state of our knowledge of these matters, less dogmatic attitudes and stronger efforts to facilitate mutual understanding would seem appropriate. After all, nobody has so far been able to *prove* or *disprove* the genetic relationship of Turkic, Mongolic, Tungusic, Korean or Japanese to any other language. Comparative Altaistics needs an intellectually honest, less emotional discussion of the epistemological problems involved, the limits of our possible knowledge and the criteria to be adopted in order to evaluate the conclusiveness of arguments. The continued search for comparative evidence will profit from a critical openness in which arguments *pro* and *contra* are allowed and may be weighed against each other without being immediately stamped as destructive.<sup>3</sup>

### Deverbal stem formation

The etymological investigation into the deverbal markers that are our primary concern here was initiated by RAMSTEDT (1912), who documented the vestiges of what he assumed to be the original Altaic system of deverbal stem formation. Later on, POPPE (1973) reconstructed eight markers of diathesis, citing rich Turkic, Mongolic and Tungusic material. Finally, MILLER (1982, 1983) added a number of cognates found in Japanese and Korean.

Possible candidates for cognateness also include old markers of deverbal nouns, in particular the so-called aorist, mostly reconstructed as *\*-ra*, e.g. Even *emu-re-m* 'I have brought'. MENGES (1943) first demonstrated its importance for Altaic comparative linguistics on the basis of Tungusic data. The Turkic form, with which it is compared, is present in all

3 Cf. JOHANSON 1995.

Turkic languages—contrary to an often repeated assumption also in Chuvash, namely in the so-called “future”, e.g. *vul-ǎ-p* ‘I will read’.<sup>4</sup>

How to judge these reconstructions? It is true that some of them, particularly in RAMSTEDT’s work, raise problems and that the semantics is in some cases too vague to be convincing. On the other hand, it seems hard to explain the attested data of verbal morphology in all these languages without hypothesizing the existence of a common origin. According to MILLER, borrowing is excluded, “once we inspect the forms and their functions within the morphology”.<sup>5</sup> ERDAL, however, finds much of what RAMSTEDT and POPPE have to say in this domain “quite unacceptable”, since these authors “not only fail to sort out evident recent borrowings, but often stretch semantics to suit their theory and deal with modern evidence on a par with Old Turkic”.<sup>6</sup> According to DOERFER, even the Turkic and Mongolic verb systems are, typologically and probably genetically, very distant from each other: “durch eine Welt typologisch (und wohl auch genetisch) getrennt”.<sup>7</sup>

### Reconstruction

First of all, it should be borne in mind that comparative work concerns elements inherited from an original that is itself *lost*. Comparative linguistics is by definition hypothetical, since it must go beyond the oldest known linguistic records. Its role should not be confused with that of word history, which is concerned with *attested changes* of a given connection of expression and content.

Still, we are sometimes warned against operating with reconstructed forms as long as the existence of an Altaic protolanguage and its properties are not known. SINOR (1990) criticizes the use of hypothetical forms; thus POPPE (1960) is “not content with establishing word correspondences that fall into a regular phonetic pattern”, but operates, already for Mongolic, with two hypothetical languages, ‘Vormongolisch’ and ‘Urmongolisch’, via which he tries to reach a still more hypothetical Altaic protolanguage.

4 JOHANSON 1976; for Mongolic, see MENGES 1968, 130–1; for Japanese and Korean, see MILLER 1996, 163–8.

5 MILLER 1991.

6 ERDAL 1997, 234.

7 DOERFER 1967, 63.

But for what reason in the world should a comparatist establish “word correspondences that fall into a regular phonetic pattern”, if not for reconstructive purposes? The hypothetical constructs are necessary instruments that do not present any ‘danger’, if they are based on attested forms of the languages under comparison and free from contradictions in themselves as well as in their relation to other known linguistic facts.<sup>8</sup>

### The original grammar

Postulating a protolanguage such as proto-Altaiic is a strong assumption that requires a strict theoretical apparatus of argumentation for the putative cognates. The reconstruction of proto-forms ideally depends on semantically, phonetically, morphologically, chronologically and geographically flawless correspondences. The comparison of complex words and parts of words presupposes knowledge of the word structures represented in the languages compared. In order to define derivations, which we are concerned with here, the comparatist must identify both the stems and the derivational devices.

The etymological task ideally consists in reconstructing the ‘original grammar’ according to which a given derived word has been formed in the initial act of creation.<sup>9</sup> It must have emerged once on the basis of a certain expression–content assignment and by means of particular linguistic resources, namely primary stems, derivational units and combination rules. It must fit into an ordered grammar, which exhibits system properties of a real natural language and which offers the adequate connection between expression and content. To prove a common origin of two putative cognates—free and bound morphemes, or combinations of them—it is necessary to demonstrate that their oldest recorded forms can be traced back to this initially motivating grammar with its specific units and rules of derivation. The hypothetical reconstruction is necessary, since the original grammar has changed irreversibly in the course of the subsequent word history.

8 Cf. JOHANSON 1994a.

9 JOHANSON 1994b; 1995.

## Copies

However, linguistic interrelations within the Altaic world are highly complex. The study of similarities and differences must also take numerous older and more recent areal interactions into account. If two languages display two units of *prima facie* similarity, one of these units may be a contact-induced global copy of the other<sup>10</sup> and thus go back to a foreign original grammar. It is important to find criteria by means of which these so-called “borrowings” may be identified and excluded from further genetic comparison.

While comparative and contact-linguistic research thus complement each other, their results are profoundly different. This fact is blurred by the frequent claim that differences between genetically related and borrowed units are only gradual, and that strong contacts may lead to relatedness. Borrowing—or, as we prefer to call it, copying—is the *imitation* of one language by another<sup>11</sup> and must be sharply distinguished from purely internal development.

It is, however, often ignored that the conditions in which units may be copied require as differentiated considerations as questions of genetic relatedness. Simplistic solutions must be avoided in both cases. Linguistic elements are not handed around haphazard across languages. Copying is far from random, but rather subject to specific restrictions. Nevertheless, similarities that cannot be explained according to strict comparative criteria, e.g. similar case suffixes in Altaic languages, are often rather generously declared as contact-induced, with sweeping references to ‘borrowing’. Conjuring tricks performed with copied morphemes are not necessarily less simplistic than uncritical attempts at genetic reconstructions.

## Evidence

What about the criteria for cognates and the criteria for copies in Altaic? A good deal of comparatively relevant regularities have been demonstrated by so-called pro-Altaicists, and many of them are also recognized by non-Altaicists. G. DOERFER stresses the value of the correspondences

10 JOHANSON 1992, 15–17.

11 MILLER 1996, 27.

established by RAMSTEDT: "We must be grateful to the ingenious founder of Altaistics as a science for discovering so many sound laws which are valid to this date."<sup>12</sup> At least, numerous details make it difficult to maintain the opinion that the similarities of the Altaic languages are exclusively due to copying.

But the situation is far from unequivocal. It is therefore important that the principles and axioms established so far are further discussed and that the criteria employed are scrutinized with respect to their value as conclusive or circumstantial evidence. In discussing comparative evidence, it is important to distinguish cases in which a given comparison is

- (i) conclusively proven to be valid;
- (ii) conclusively proven to be invalid;
- (iii) not proven to be valid, but supported by positive circumstantial evidence;
- (iv) not proven to be valid, and not supported by positive circumstantial evidence.

These elementary distinctions are often ignored. The last two cases (iii–iv) may of course not be mistaken for the first case (i) = proof. But it is equally incorrect to deal with them as if they represented the second case (ii) = disproof. Lack of evidence is not tantamount to counter-evidence. It leads to an intellectually unsatisfactory and practically unfruitful situation if, on the one hand, absence of conclusive evidence is assessed as counter-evidence and, on the other hand, inference from known facts that are otherwise hard or impossible to explain remains unrecognized.

### Arguments from silence

In the specific case of derivational systems, we may say that safe reconstructions require that both stems and suffixes are attested. On the other hand, lack of this evidence does not necessarily invalidate a given reconstruction. In particular, arguments from silence based on lack of East Old Turkic evidence are not conclusive. We must not "jump to the unwar-

12 DOERFER 1985, 135.



ranted conclusion that the study of written records itself constitutes linguistic history".<sup>13</sup> The fact that a unit is not attested in East Old Turkic derivation as mirrored in the records available to us does not mean that it is irrelevant under a comparative aspect. Its absence does not mean absence at earlier stages of development.

It is true that in a synchronic description of the East Old Turkic derivation system "a single verb does not make a formation".<sup>14</sup> Thus, *aδru-* 'excel' cannot be derived from *aδ°r-* 'separate', since evidence for a productive deverbal suffix *-U-* is lacking in the corpus. But this fact does not invalidate RAMSTEDT's etymological hypothesis concerning a corresponding Altaic type of derivation.<sup>15</sup> The grammar that has motivated the original etymology of the complex stem is not at work in the East Old Turkic word-formation system. Compare correspondences such as Japanese *tar-* 'be sufficient, full' → *tas-* 'fill up', with Altaic  $*l_1 > r$  and  $*l_2 > s$ , and East Old Turkic *tol-* 'be full' → *toš-* 'fill up, make complete' with  $*l_1 > l$  and  $*l_2 > š$ .<sup>16</sup>

The reason why we cannot rule out all phenomena lacking in the East Old Turkic corpus is not only the limited extent of this corpus. The grammar found there can, in principle, never be identical with the motivating original grammar of the putative Altaic derivations, which must be thousands of years older.

### Copies and copiability

To be able to discriminate between cognates and copies, comparatists have tried to establish, on empirical grounds, general tendencies with respect to the susceptibility of lexemes to copying. Similar observations are possible concerning the copiability of other elements, e.g. bound units. Certain units are more readily copied than others. This fact suggests that two comparable units are more likely to be akin in origin if they represent types that are known to be impervious to copying. Comparative Altaistics

13 MILLER 1996, 14.

14 ERDAL 1991, 477.

15 JOHANSON 1994b.

16 MILLER 1996, 142-3.

should thus pay attention to materially and semantically similar units of this kind.

Although bound morphemes often undergo special processes of analogy, similarities in certain derivational and grammatical suffixes may represent a special value for genetic comparison. In the verbal flexion, suffixes closest to the primary stem, markers of actionality and diathesis, seem relatively little susceptible to copying. It would be a strong clue to a common origin if this 'intimate' part of verbal morphology exhibited systematic correspondences of materially and semantically similar morphemes within congruent combinational patterns.

### Misrepresented arguments

In a recent book (1992), I suggested that the suffixes closest to the primary verb stem might be the part of Turkic morphology that is most resistant to copying and recommended an examination of them in search of genuine correspondences between the Altaic languages. The arguments presented have, however, not always been correctly understood. One reviewer takes this suggestion to concern Turkic verb formation in general and implies that it refers to something called "Thomason's hypothesis of an essentially stable morphology".<sup>17</sup> On the contrary, the book indeed argues *against* such ideas and in reality supports S. G. THOMASON's *criticism* of the "superstable morphology hypothesis" (1980). The arguments are thus misrepresented in the review. My suggestion is based on a more complex argumentation, which has been excellently summarized by another reviewer:

. . . even within the set of individual affixes, there are striking differences, with those most liable to copying being those that are most peripheral, such as the [. . .] case suffixes and person-number suffixes. By contrast, the suffixes standing closest to the stem of a Turkic verb, namely those expressing actionality and diathesis, are the most impervious to copying. In this way, one can establish degrees of attractiveness independent of social factors. [. . .]

Turning to the controversy surrounding the external genetic relations of Turkic languages within Altaic, Johanson suggests that the conservatism of

17 ERDAL 1997, 234.

Turkic verb structure—stable even in as de-Turkicized a language as Karaim—and in particular the extreme resistance to copying of the positions closest to the verb might provide a more reliable tool than any of those used in the past to test whether there are indeed shared elements that testify to genetic relatedness, rather than intensive and long-lasting language contact, among the groups of languages that would constitute Altaic.<sup>18</sup>

It should also be stressed that my conclusions are the result of a line of reasoning pursued throughout the book. They do not *follow* a suggestion of R. A. MILLER, who argues along different lines, but actually *meet* and thus *corroborate* MILLER's arguments. The assumption of morphemes less susceptible to copying is made on independent grounds, without any intention of backing up the Altaic hypothesis.

ERDAL raises the criticism that the possibility of the relatedness of the Altaic languages "is not taken into consideration throughout the rest of the book".<sup>19</sup> Why should this possibility have been discussed earlier, if it is expressly the topic of the last sections alone and if the preceding parts of the book provide the necessary premises for dealing with it?

### Typological similarity

Another assertion that does injustice to the approach is the completely wrong claim that the "main source of inspiration" for my reasoning concerning the relatedness of Altaic languages is "typological".<sup>20</sup> On the contrary, the secondary verb formations are indeed units compared to each other on the basis of their material and semantic properties.

The degree of confusion becomes clear when the reduplicative pattern found in Turkish *kapkara* 'jet-black' ← *kara* 'black' is cited as a feature that might have been presented as an argument for relatedness on similar grounds. Given the frequent occurrence of this pattern in the earliest known Mongolian sources, ERDAL asks how one can be certain that it is not inherited from a common ancestor. The obvious answer is that there cannot be any certainty whatsoever in this respect. This highly copiable pattern is a textbook example of a typological property that cannot clear

18 COMRIE 1995.

19 ERDAL 1997, 234.

20 ERDAL 1997, 234.

questions of genetic relatedness.<sup>21</sup> This is of course why it is not discussed in the only part of the book devoted to genetic questions. Here again, a basic idea of the approach is misrepresented.

### Typological arguments

Typological similarities of this kind can certainly not prove relatedness. But does this mean that structural arguments are totally out of place? Comparative research is rightly based on strict correspondences of units with certain common material and semantic properties. It is widely assumed that structural features are copied easily from language to language and that purely typological similarities thus cannot provide any conclusive evidence for genetic issues. As a result, common structural patterns are mostly completely disregarded in current discussions on comparative issues of the Altaic languages:

The overall syntactic parallels and similarities among all the Altaic languages are so great and so immediately striking that—in a curious variety of the logic of inverse argumentation—they are, today at least, virtually never mentioned in any of the literature, whether pro- or anti-Altaic.<sup>22</sup>

As already stated, contact-induced copying processes should not be less strictly argued for than genetic connections. If the common structural features of the Altaic languages are studied in an accurate and differentiated way, with due attention to the interplay of structural and social factors, it might well turn out that at least some of the typological correspondences provide strong arguments against copying and give positive circumstantial evidence in favour of genetic connections. As regards the verbal systems, there are, for example, common patterns in the use of so-called causative morphemes such as *\*-bū-*, which may be interpreted both as ‘causatives’ (‘let do’) and as ‘passives’ (‘be done’), without being identical with any of them. These markers actually signal the semantic notion of ‘transcendence’ in the sense that the range of the action transcends the domain of the first actant, which is either the source or the goal of the action.<sup>23</sup>

21 For its existence in Tungusic dialects, see TSUMAGARI 1997, 180.

22 MILLER 1991b, 308.

23 For Turkic, see JOHANSON 1974; 1998, 55–6; for Even *-w-*, see BENZING 1955, 48; for ‘reversives’ in Japanese, Korean, etc., see MILLER 1982; 1996, 126.

## The work ahead

“Where do we go from here?” asks R. A. MILLER in the concluding chapter of his book on Japanese, Korean, and Altaic.<sup>24</sup> His own answer is that “we simply go in the same direction, implementing the same Neogrammarian postulates as before”, in the quest for more and more light to be thrown upon the problems, ignoring the “false alarms of those who persist in heralding the perennially premature ‘death of Altaic’”. There are indeed important tasks for future research in this area, and the work will be more successful without, as MILLER puts it, “biased *studium* against all visible signs of progress in the work of others.”<sup>25</sup>

The verbal markers dealt with above represent one of the domains that merit thorough investigation, and there are positive signals of a certain consensus in this respect. For example, in spite of his reservations cited above, even ERDAL admits that there is some promising evidence in the domain under discussion: “I quite agree with Johanson that this is one topic which could contribute to a solution of the perennial Altaic question.”<sup>26</sup> Let us hope for a critical and constructive discussion in these and similar matters.

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25 MILLER 1996, 215.

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