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IS KOREAN RELATED TO TUNGUSIC?

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## Is Korean Related to Tungusic?

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The various hypotheses concerning the genetic affinities of the Korean language, as most recently reviewed by Aalto (1982), offer an instructive record of what the use and misuse of well established scientific methods can yield. At best, it is a record of careful inquiry into an unknown world of many possibilities, each of which must be analyzed within a systematic theoretical framework, checked against an immense quantity of language material, and finally interpreted in terms of historical realities. At worst, it is a record of unchecked attempts at proving preconceived ideas, which often from the very beginning stand in sharp contradiction with the suggestions of common sense. The characteristic feature of this type of proposals is the axiomatic belief in the existence of discoverable genetic connections, while the possibility that a language might actually not have any living (or historically recorded) relatives is left without due consideration. However, viewing the many mutually contradictory but equally ambitious hypotheses concerning the origin of the Korean language, the critical reader can hardly avoid the impression that the most likely solution to the whole problem is, in fact, that Korean is one of the several Eurasian language-isolates. This means simply that Korean has probably developed independently, in the genetic sense, of other languages for a time long enough to surpass the average lifetime of language families - perhaps some 10.000 years, a very short period compared with the long general history and prehistory of human speech.

The single hypothesis that has, justified or not, taken the leading role in current research on the prehistory of Korean is the one relating Korean to the so called "Altaic" languages: Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic. The idea of a relationship between Korean and the "Altaic" languages has, indeed, become widely established even in popular connections, and this is the hypothesis most likely cited by any educated Korean if asked to present an opinion concerning the origin of his mother tongue. The basic weakness of the Korean-"Altaic" hypothesis is that the mutual genetic relationship of the "Altaic" languages proper also still

remains at the level of an unverified hypothesis. The research carried out so far has actually only proved that the three primary "Altaic" linguistic entities have undergone considerable mutual influence during a long period (or succession of periods) of time, resulting in the presence of numerous loanwords and other interaction phenomena particularly between Turkic and Mongolic, on the one hand, and Mongolic and Tungusic, on the other. The founder of modern "Altaic" linguistics G. J. Ramstedt - himself an outstanding scholar with an extraordinary innovative capability and a good sense for critical thinking - formulated his ideas in the belief that the languages that he was investigating were genetically related, but he would hardly have been pleased to see the stagnant dogmatism with which many of his followers have clung to this relatively unimportant issue. Ramstedt was also the first to gather an extensive material concerning the mutual relationships of Korean and the "Altaic" languages, and, again, his interpretation was based on the assumption of a true genetic relationship (Ramstedt 1949-1953, 1954, 1982, reviewed by Aalto, 1980). However, the ultimate value of Ramstedt's work on Korean lies not in his final interpretations, but in the enormous amount of significant details involving lexical comparisons between various languages of East, Central and North Asia. Although often hastily presented and insufficiently documented, Ramstedt's etymological suggestions are always worthy of careful consideration and further elaboration.

Ramstedt's work was basically of the type that has been properly termed "Omnicomparativismus" by the distinguished anti-Altaist Doerfer (1973). The omnicomparativistic line of research has been taken up by many modern scholars, who wish to regard Korean as an indisputable representative of the "Altaic" group of languages, more exactly as the "peninsular" member of a linguistic entity called "East Altaic", also suggested to comprise the Japanese language. Operating freely with the lexical and grammatical material of five different linguistic stocks - Korean, Japanese, Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic - and ignoring the basic chronological and areal realities, these modern omnicomparativists have achieved some surprisingly detailed "results" concerning the "Altaic" roots of both Korean and Japanese. Miller, perhaps the most prominent proponent of the Japanese-

"Altaic" hypothesis (Miller 1971), has in a recent study on Old Korean (Miller 1979) gone as far as to "discover" in Korean reflexes of a typically internal-Turkic phonological development, the rhotacism-lambdacism. The only way out of this kind of absurdities is to start once more from the beginning. If Korean should, indeed, happen to be related to the "Altaic" languages, then the first step is to demonstrate this relationship on the basis of two linguistic stocks only: Korean, on the one hand, and the reconstructed protoform of one of the "Altaic" entities, on the other. Only after such a simple binary relationship has become established is it reasonable to include other languages (language families) in the research procedure. This is not to say that in the internal analysis of a well established language family intercrossing comparisons between different branches and subbranches would not be possible. However, the initial stages in the process of establishing a language family, such as "Altaic", must inevitably be based on a systematic binary approach, in accordance with the diagrammatic simplification of genetic relationships known as the linguistic family tree model.

Now, what concrete Altaic entities could be compared with Korean in the search for a simple binary relationship in the otherwise hopelessly vague general "Altaic" context? Most often, one of two possibilities has been proposed: either Japanese, or Tungusic. Material for a Korean-Japanese genetic relationship has been most explicitly presented by Martin (1966, supplemented by Miller 1967), who believed to be able to reconstruct more than 300 common Korean-Japanese basic lexical elements, enough, he thought, to put the question of a genetic affinity beyond doubt. However, as has been pointed out by his critics, perhaps most clearly by Ramsey (1978), Martin's methods of reconstruction do not always agree with the generally accepted principles of phonological regularity and phonotactical naturalness. It seems that while the omnicomparativistic approach applied by, for instance, Miller is too powerful because of the unlimitedness of the sources of comparative material, the binary reconstructions by Martin are even more so because of the very artificiality of his complicated phonological explanations. Thus, although some of the basic lines of his thoughts concerning the binarity of genetic relationships are acceptable,

Martin has hardly been able to prove anything, if not the contrary to what he wanted to prove. It is therefore natural to continue the search in other directions. This is what has recently been done by Kim Dongso in an important monograph devoted to the problem of Korean-Tungusic relationships (Kim Dongso 1981).

Although Kim Dongso, too, starts from the canonical view that all the "Altaic" languages, including Korean, are mutually related, he recognizes the fact that this relationship is not likely to be equally manifest between any two arbitrary members of the "family". For geographical reasons, one of the best candidates for a somewhat closer relative to Korean is obviously Tungusic. It is therefore really worth while examining, whether Korean and Tungusic could derive from a common Korean-Tungusic proto-language, which, in turn, could then be compared with some other "Altaic" entity. Comparisons with Tungusic are also convenient to carry out in practice, as the Common Tungusic proto-language, dating back some couple of thousand years, is quite well known through the pioneering work done by Cincius (1949) and, in her footsteps, by Benzing (1956) and others. As Kim Dongso, for his part, is apparently very well familiar with even the most recent results achieved in the study of both Korean and the Tungusic languages, his investigation makes, at first glance, a very promising impression, indeed. The basic idea is to provide a sufficient number of lexical comparisons, which are ultimately supposed to yield a regular and consistent picture of the suggested common proto-language of Korean and Tungusic. Interestingly, even the individual comparisons, 183 in number, especially in their Korean vs. Tungusic protoforms as presented by Kim Dongso, seemingly illustrate a surprising conformity between considerable parts of the basic lexicon of the two languages. Indeed, if this were all true, then there would be no doubt that Korean and Tungusic are not only related, but even closely so.

Unfortunately, a more careful scrutiny of Kim Dongso's investigation reveals a number of significant shortcomings, which make his conclusions ultimately questionable. For one thing, Kim Dongso does not consequently distinguish between possible genetic cognates and secondary loanwords. Thus, his list of comparisons includes obvious late borrowings by both

Korean and Tungusic from a third source, either Mongolian or Chinese, and occasionally even quite recent cultural words are cited among the allegedly ancient Korean-Tungusic common lexical elements. It is without doubt rather senseless to reconstruct any protoforms for such items as (modern Korean) *kalpi* (rib, from Mongolian), *nosae* (mule, from Chinese), and *tampae* (tobacco, via Chinese). What is, however, an even greater disappointment to the reader of Kim Dongso's monography is that the seemingly good general compatibility of the phonological shapes of the compared Korean and Tungusic words proves actually to be illusory, as the preconceived mutual relationship has been anticipated in the presented "Proto-Korean" and "Proto-Tungusic" reconstructions. Thus, for instance, the "Proto-Korean" phoneme paradigm, as "reconstructed" by Kim Dongso, possesses features such as the opposition between strong and weak obstruents which can be justified only if the suggested lexical comparisons hold true. Finally, despite the obvious efforts to make the compared Korean and Tungusic words look as similar as possible, many items appear, after all, to present insurmountable semantic problems. It seems, indeed, that an overwhelming majority, perhaps some 90 per cent of Kim Dongso's lexical comparisons can hardly convince anyone of the validity of the Korean-Tungusic hypothesis. What is left is a small number of well-known parallels, which hardly allow the formulation of any explicit phonological rules of correspondence: (modern Korean vs. Proto-Tungusic) *mul* ~ \**mō* (water), *pal* ~ \**palgan* (foot), *tu* ~ \**ʃor* (two), and a few others. It must be added that practically all of the lexical comparisons presented by Kim Dongso derive from earlier scholars, particularly from Ramstedt. Certainly, Kim Dongso has done a lot of valuable work in trying to systematize the material, but, contrary to his own conclusions, the final results of his investigation are definitely negative from the point of view of the Korean-Tungusic hypothesis. In the light of our present knowledge, Korean seems not to be related to Tungusic, at least not in the sense usually implied by the concept of linguistic affinity.

What should, then, be done about the prehistory of the Korean language? It seems that the first thing to do is to investigate more explicitly than before the Korean language itself and its documentable contacts with

the neighboring languages. The following six steps can be suggested:

1. First, the importance of internal reconstruction and dialectological studies, as eloquently emphasized by Ramsey (1979), can hardly be exaggerated. Both interdialectal correspondences and dialect-internal morphophonological alternations can provide extremely valuable material for a true reconstruction of the early phonological shape and grammatical structure of the common ancestor of all modern and historical forms of Korean. Naturally, this line of investigation must be supplemented by a thorough philological analysis of the available written sources of Middle and Old Korean. Fortunately, a firm basis for all future work on the internal history of the Korean language is offered by the results achieved by Korean scholars, notably Lee Ki-Moon (e.g. 1977).
2. Second, the evidence contained in the mediaeval loanwords borrowed by Korean from the Manchu and Mongolian languages should be analyzed in detail with a proper consideration of what is known of the history of all the three languages. Generally it seems that these comparatively recent Manchu and Mongolian elements in Korean, present mainly in the language of specialized fields and/or limited geographical areas, never had any very strong overall impact on the development of the Korean language.
3. Third, although much has been done in the study of Sino-Korean, even more important discoveries may still become possible, if a more systematic and comprehensive view of Chinese historical phonology and dialectology is incorporated in Korean studies. The problem is that a detailed modern analysis of Middle and Old Chinese is still a matter of the future.
4. Fourth, despite the failure of Korean-Japanese comparative studies in the genetic sense, the fact must not be overlooked that the two languages do possess a number of common lexical elements in addition to an almost perfect structural similarity. A few examples of the common items include: (modern Korean vs. modern Japanese) *oip* ~ *ie* (house), *kas* ~ *kasa* (broad hat ~ umbrella), *kom* ~ *kuma* (bear), *pŏl* ~ *haehi* (bee), *pok* ~ *fugu* (swellfish), *sŏm* ~ *shŭma* (island). It is interesting to note that, while extremely lot of futile work has been put on the attempts aimed at proving the hypothetical affinity between Japanese and Korean, very few

efforts have been made to give a reasonable explanation of the factually existing parallels. The most readily available explanation would seem to be that the common lexical items and other similarities are the result of a period (or periods) of intensive interaction between the speakers of the early forms of Korean and Japanese.

5. Fifth, the linguistic connections of Korean with the non-"Altaic" languages of North Asia, notably Gilyak and possibly Ainu, should not be neglected in the unfortunate situation of the general over-emphasis on the "Altaic" hypothesis. A good start for the study of the northern connections of the Korean language is, in addition to many lexical comparisons presented by Ramstedt, the preliminary work done by Kim Bang-Han (e.g. 1976). In this connection the areal principle of explaining the spreading of phonological and other innovations seems to be of importance (cf. Janhunen 1981).

6. Sixth, the possibility exists that the speakers of Korean may have, at some time during their early history, been in contact with some eastern groups of Central Asian nomads, speaking, possibly, languages belonging to the Turkic and Iranian stocks. Traces of both Turkic and Iranian elements have been tentatively identified in Korean (cf. e.g. Kho Songmoo 1977, 1980, Harmatta 1981), but it must be said that very few of the lexical comparisons suggested so far are phonologically and semantically completely satisfactory. Nevertheless, the study of the possible contacts of Korean with the languages of Central Asia remains a promising field, which can yield more precise results in the future.

Finally, attention should be paid to the general historical interpretation of the linguistic facts. Speaking about the Korean language means also speaking about its speakers - the Koreans or, to be more exact, the Korean speech community. The basic questions are: have the speakers of Korean always lived on the Korean Peninsula, and have they always formed the only speech community in this territory? There seems to be no doubt that at least the mediaeval Manchu and Mongolian loanwords, and also the bulk of the Chinese elements in Korean, were received on modern Korean soil. But what about the other linguistic connections? An important fact to be taken into consideration is that one of the three early Korean states,

the kingdom of Koguryŏ, was actually situated largely outside of the territory of modern Korea, in southeastern Manchuria. It is also well known that the culture of Korea during the three kingdom period contains a large number of elements which have clearly originated far in the west, in Central Asia. Did this eastward flow of cultural innovations also involve some ethnic movements with significance to the prehistory of the Koreans? In view of the general situation, the possibility lies close at hand that the Korean speech community, in fact, entered its present-day territory from the north and northwest only comparatively recently, perhaps just around the time of the founding of the three kingdoms, or approximately two thousand years ago. If this was the case, then the early speakers of Korean must have assimilated the previous population on the Korean Peninsula, who obviously spoke languages different from Korean. It can be suggested that at least part of this previous population was linguistically "Palaeo-Asiatic", perhaps somehow connected with the modern Gilyaks. It is also possible that speakers of some early Tungusic idiom were present in Korea at that time. All of such assumptions remain, of course, necessarily unproved before convincing positive evidence can be found.

One of the most interesting problems about the prehistory of the Korean speech community is, no doubt, concealed in the Korean-Japanese linguistic parallels. During the well-recorded part of the historical period, starting roughly with the unification of Korea by the Silla dynasty, there are many indications of occasional cultural and warlike contacts between the Koreans and the Japanese. However, it seems that even more intensive interaction would have been necessary to produce, in particular, some of the striking structural similarities between the Korean and Japanese languages. The problem is: when and where did this interaction take place? Interesting light on this question is cast by the toponymic material contained in the *Samguksaagi*. In this document, many names denoting places within the territories of the three Korean kingdoms are clearly Korean in origin but, curiously, a number of names cited among the toponymic material of the Koguryŏ state resemble Japanese words. Indeed, as the place names in the *Samguksaagi* are consistently recorded both phonetically and semantically, there seems to be no doubt that the material represents

two different languages: early Korean, on the one hand, and an idiom essentially identical with Japanese as spoken in the first millenium A.D., on the other. This circumstance has obviously been considered as a somehow delicate issue in the past, so the linguistic identity of part of the Koguryŏ toponymic material with Japanese has never been explicitly stated neither in Korea nor in Japan. Instead, the current interpretation is based on the idea that both the Korean and Japanese elements in Koguryŏ place names belong to one and the same language, the so called "Old Koguryŏ language", which, in accordance with the Korean-Japanese affinity hypothesis, is often regarded as a transitional link between the two languages. Such an assumption, accepted, incidentally, even by such an authority as Lewin (1976), is seriously anachronistic. The Korean and Japanese languages of today differ materially so greatly from each other that speaking of transitional idioms in a comparatively recent past is an absurdity even in the case that the two languages should happen to be ultimately related.

Kim Bang-Han has convincingly showed that the Japanese-like elements contained in the Koguryŏ toponymic material do not actually represent the main language the Koguryŏ state (Kim Bang-Han 1981). These elements are, in fact, present mainly in place names referring to the central part of Korea, a territory that formed the frontierland between the three kingdoms. The natural explanation seems to be that the population in this very region during the three kingdom period spoke a type of Japanese, which in this special case could, of course, also be termed the "Pseudo-Koguryŏ language". By contrast, the bulk of the Koguryŏ population and, what is even more important, the populations of the southern Silla and Paekche kingdoms were apparently Korean speaking. Thus, the speakers of Japanese in central Korea in the first millenium A.D. represented a closed group, surrounded by speakers of Korean both in the north and in the south, and separated from the main part of the Japanese speech community on the Japanese islands. It is only natural that this continental group of Japanese speakers has subsequently become completely assimilated by the speakers of Korean. This may have happened already by the time of the unification of Korea, but in any case the *Samguksaagi*, whatever its original sources, preserves clear evidence of the one-time

presence of the Japanese language on the Korean Peninsula. This is also the simple explanation of at least part of the similarities between the Korean and Japanese languages: Korean has a Japanese substrate.

The fact that the Korean and Japanese languages have in a not very remote past coexisted on the Korean Peninsula is of paramount importance to the study of the prehistory of the two speech communities. Where did the speakers of Japanese come from to central Korea? It might, of course, be a question of a group which had originated on the Japanese Islands. However, an explanation much more likely is that the speakers of the "Pseudo Koguryŏ language" represented the last continental remnant of the general Japanese speech community, whose main part had crossed the Korea Straits to enter the Japanese Islands, perhaps in connection with the appearance of the Yayoi culture, as has often been suggested. There is, on the other hand, no reason to regard Japanese as the "original" language of the Korean Peninsula. It seems that within a more general ethnohistorical framework both the Korean and Japanese speech communities may derive geographically from the eastern limits of Central Asia, perhaps the territory of modern Manchuria. On the Korean Peninsula and on the Japanese Islands the speakers of Japanese and Korean appear to represent two successive nomadic waves, pushed southward and eastward by other ethnic movements in the more central parts of Asia. If this interpretation holds true, then future work on the relationships of both Korean and Japanese with various linguistic groups of Central and North Asia should certainly yield interesting results. In this sense, and in the context of ethnic history - but not necessarily in that of hypothetical linguistic affinities - the Korean-Tungusic relationships must also be subjected to further analysis.

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