On the Velar Stops in Intervocalic Position in Mongolian

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It is a well-known fact that the Written Mongolian ɣ (in back vocalic stems) and g (in front vocalic stems) in intervocalic position have disappeared in modern colloquial Mongolian languages in which long vowels (or diphthongs as in Dagur) correspond to Mo. (Written Mongolian) groups ɣya, ɣye, ɣyel, etc., e. g., Mo. ɣoya ‘to close, to shut’ = Khalkha (Kha.) ɣya id.; Mo. ɣula ‘mountain’ = Dag. ɣułya id.; Kh. ɣuł id., etc. The Written Mongolian groups ɣya, ɣye, etc. reflect the ancient pronunciation. Although the intervocalic consonant g (ɣ) is of diverse origin and has in many cases developed from *g < *ɣ (and *ɣɣ), *ɣɣ, and *ɣɣɣ, it reflects in a number of cases the ancient voiced (or weak) velar stop ɣ. The latter can be easily reconstructed on the basis of Turcic, and Tungusic data. Here are some examples of Written Mongolian ɣ (g) which goes back to a velar stop:


In all these cases the original consonant was really a velar stop, although in other examples Written Mongolian ɣ (g) goes back to other consonants, e. g.,

-<g>: Mo. koge ‘to swell’, Kh. ɣid. = Kh. kogel ‘to swell’, Kucha (Kha.) kogel ‘to swell’;
-<g>: Mo. segel ‘<segel’ ‘shadow, shade’, Kh. ɣeld id. = Mo. segol ‘<segel’ ‘shadow’;
-<g>: Mo. secy ‘vertebrae, vertebral column, mountain range’, Kh. ɣerd id. = AT asy ‘promontory, salient’;
-<g>: Mo. sypuy ‘<sypuy’ ‘hoof’, Kh. ɣuylid id. = AT sypuy id.

In all these cases, no matter whether Mo. ɣ (g) goes back to ɣ or another consonant, the intervocalic consonant has disappeared. It would be incorrect, however, to say that Mo. ɣ (g) in intervocalic position always disappears in colloquial Mongolian languages. As examples ɣ which has not disappeared in Colloquial Mongolian may serve the following words:

Kh. bayg ‘small’ < *baya (but Bur. baya = *bayukan ‘small’); Mo. aguy ‘grove, forest’, Kh. agulli id. = Ew. ayi ‘bush, bushes’, ayu ‘ayumu ‘dense’, ayu ‘wilderness’; Mo. agyu ‘vast, large’, Kh. agiy id. = Ew. ayi ‘open place, steppe, wide country’, Ew. agiy ‘steppe’, Mo. agiy ‘beep’, Kh. ɣiyi id. = Ew. yiyi ‘beep, whoop’;


What is the explanation of this dual development of the intervocalic ɣ (g) in colloquial Mongolian languages? Vladimir Tsvetkov believed that the disappearance of the intervocalic velar consonant had been the result of the transition of the ancient Mongols from the old society of forest dwellers and hunters to pastoral nomadism. In his opinion, those Mongol tribes which had become nomads sooner than other tribes changed the forms with -ɣ(-ɣg) to forms without this consonant, whereas tribes which remained hunters retained forms with the intervocalic consonant. This theory is untenable as Sambirnev has correctly pointed out, because the disappearance or preservation of the intervocalic consonants can hardly be regarded as a form of transition to nomadism. The explanation of this process should be sought in the language itself. Comparison of colloquial Mongolian forms with and without ɣ with corresponding forms in Solon leads to the conclusion that ɣ disappears before vowels which are long in Solon, whereas ɣ is preserved before vowels which are short in Solon, e. g., Mo. imayan ‘goat’, Kh. yama id. = Sol. imayal id., but Mo. buyu ‘stag’, Kh. buyg id. = Sol. boyo id. Consequently, the disappearance and preservation of the consonant in question depends solely upon the original length or shortness of the vowel immediately following.

I call the position in which ɣ is preserved the strong position. Its opposite is the weak position, i. e., the position before a long or originally stressed vowel.

The consonant ɣ in weak position became a spirant (i. e., *ɣ), and at a later time that spirant disappeared. The spirant *ɣ existed in Ancient Mongolian and disappeared in Middle Mongolian (i. e., after the XII century).


3 G. D. SANKHDEV, Sranvitel’ naya grammatika mongol’skix yazykov, t. I. Moskva 1953, p. 78.
The consonant *g was a strong stop in position, i.e., *g (or in back vocalic stems, and g in front vocalic stems). It was a weak but probably unvoiced stop in Middle Mongolian and *g in front vocalic stems, it was used as a back vocalic stem by Modern authors. Here are examples of *g -> g in the dictionary "Mughaldaatt al-Adab"; alegan "palm of the hand", Mo. alegan id., Kh. aleg id. = Euw. Ba. kheys < *kalga < *kalga id.; Ma. kalga id.; boogo/booya "threshold", Mo. booga id., Kh. booga id. = Bols. boog 'forest', Euw. Ba. bogho "the shady slope of a mountain"; cagodagoda "white", Mo. cagog < cagogan id., Kh. cagopt id.; gadozaga "he preserved", Mo. gadagado- "to preserve", Kh. gadagodo- = Sol. gadozad "to preserve".

It should be pointed out that in Tungus (Solon, Ewenki, Lamut) borrowings from Mongolian, this Middle Mongolian g < *g is rendered by g. This evidence does not lend itself to the consonant in question sounding like g to the borrowers. And it should also be remarked that the vowel immediately following this g is short in Solon. Thus, the conclusion can be drawn that *g became a spirant before long vowels and disappeared, whereas it remained a stop before short vowels. Consequently, the dual development of *g is due to different positions and not to the transition from hunting to pastoral nomadism as Vladimirsky believed.

A case example of the preservation of the ancient g (g) which are found in Vladimirsky's book leads to the conclusion that in some of them the original intervocalic consonant was not even *g but *k. In other words, such examples do not prove what they might be.

The intervocalic *g (in back vocalic stems) and *k (in front vocalic stems) are usually represented by g and k resp. in Written Mongolian, but in some cases the strong consonant has developed into a weak one both in Written Mongolian and in some dialects. It is interesting that in Middle Mongolian, in such cases g and k correspond to Written Mongolian g and k resp. Moreover, a k is found also in Turkic and Tungus correspondences, no matter whether the words in question are borrowings from Mongolian or words of common origin. Thus, there is ample evidence that in some stems the intervocalic g (g) was a strong stop (fortie).

Examples

A. Mo. boge 'father', Kh. choga id. = Euw. gki 'father-in-law', Lam. gki < *etikei 'father-in-law, father of the husband' = Cha. chik 'uncle, tutor', Tatar (Tat.) chik 'daddy', Mo. obaga 'the brother of the father', Leidens manuscript (L) obaga 'uncle' = Cha. abaga id., Yakut (Y.) abaya < *abaya id.; Mo. gegege 'pigtail, queer', Kh. gegega id. = Sol. gëègë 'the occupant', Euw. Ba. gegega id.; Mo. ormyegg 'coarse cloth made of camel wool', Kh. ormyeggid. = Kazakh ormyegg 'cloth, cloth', Mong. ormyeggid. = Hungarian ormyegg < Proto-Turkic *orkk 'cloth'. Ovni. chik 'young animal, young camel', Mo. cik 'kid', Kh. cik = Uig. chik 'goat'.


C. Mo. sigasan 'fish', L sigasan id., Mu. sigasanu (acc.) / sigasan 'fish', Kh. qogse < *qorguse, cf. firorgas 'fish' = Ma. nimagha < *nimgase 'fish', Mo. nogadurga 'chin-strap', Kh. xaqadrag id. = Kaz. xaqadrag 'chin-strap'; Mo. quorga 'tail-strap of a horse harness', Kh. xudorga id. = AT qorga 'tail, Ya. xaturk id.; Mo. nigade 'clenched fist', Kh. nudorga id., Mu. nudorga id. = Altai (Alt.) yudorga id., Sagai (Sag.) nurag id. = Mo. kirgen < *irkken 'son-in-law' = Sol. xerxegid.; Kh. xurdorga id.; Mo. qorgula/purlgus < *xulxu 'ear-wax, cerumen', qulge< *kulgep 'a cap or hood which also covers the ears' = Cuvass zely < yulag < *yulag 'ears', AT qolag id.


From the examples given above the conclusion can be drawn that the ancient *g- and *k- have resulted in Written Mongolian g and g respectively in the final open syllables qa and ka resp. in trisyllabic stems, e.g., Mo. ogili < *etiie 'father' = Euw. gki 'father-in-law' = Cha. atük 'uncle' (A). The same development has occurred in the endings *gan-/-ken and *gan-/-kün in Mo. ogen < *etiken 'old man', Mo. udagon 'shamaness', Mo. nigein < *nökekken 'naked', etc., and in Mo. nigen < niken 'one' (B). In the latter example, i.e., in niken, this development is due to analogy.

Further examination leads to the conclusion that the consonant q (k) immediately preceded by r or l has resulted in Mo. q (r) resp., e.g., Mo. gurdaq < *quorga 'tail-strap' = AT quorga 'tail', Mo. kirgen < *irkken 'son-in-law' = Sol. xerxeg 'uncle' (A). The same development has occurred in Mo. quorgul 'ear-wax, cerumen' = AT qorga 'ear', Oxekek qulaq id. This development occurs also in such cases in which the consonant *g (in *yg and *k) has disappeared, e.g., Mo. sigasan < *qorgus 'fish' (C).

The most difficult cases are those listed under D. In some of them, the vicinity of the consonants r and l may be responsible for the development *g > g and *k > k, e.g., Mo. dopulay 'limping, lame', quqal - 'to split', tugol 'call', toqurjyn 'crane'. No satisfactory explanation can be given, however, to Mo. eqeci < *ekteki 'elder sister', Mo. toqus 'complete', Bur. Aga yuyp 'child' = Mo. keken id., and some other words which are few in number.

The general conclusion is that -g- disappears in weak position and is retained in strong position. The intervocalic consonants g and k remain as such in Written Mongolian in all positions with the exception of the final syllable qa (ke) in trisyllabic words. The consonants g and k have also developed into g and g resp. in the endings gan-/-ken and gan/-kün, immediately after r and l, and in the vicinity of the latter. Finally, they have resulted in g and g resp. in a few stems under conditions which are not quite clear.

2 Porțne, op. cit., p. 185–139, 143–144.