ON THE ETYMOLOGY OF PROHIBITION AND NEGATION IN MONGOLIAN

by
LAJOS BESE
Budapest

The present paper is concerned with the etymology of the prohibitive and negative particles in Mongolian, touching also some related aspects of the history of conjugation treated elsewhere at a greater length.

＊

1. The etymology of the Mongolian prohibitive particles was given a perfect interpretation by Vladimircov [1916: 349–358] influenced by Ramstedt's ideas. According to his interpretation the Middle Mongolian prohibitive particle *bü* 'don't' that preceds the verb is equivalent to the imperative form of *bü-* 'to be', while the particle *bitegei* 'don't' in Written Mongolian takes its origin from **bütilgei*, that is the optative of *bü-* 'to be'. Vladimircov apparently saw no explanation for the change in meaning. In an attempt to solve this problem Ramstedt was searching for Russian and German analogies [1924: 199] but his examples are far from convincing.

The crux of the question is that the verbs to be made prohibitive take the imperative form of 'to be', which is essentially positive. E.g.: *anda bü ayu* 'Anda, don't be afraid!' [= 'Anda, be! be afraid!'] [Secret History § 171], *amitu gü'ün-e bü kelele* 'Don't tell it to any human being!' [= 'To a human being, be! tell!] [Secret History § 85], etc. That is the form of prohibition in Middle Mongolian or Mongolian did originally correspond to a double imperative. This doesn't set a semantic problem in itself. It only becomes one when the imperative *bü* 'be' or the optative *bitegei* 'be' breaking away from its own conjugation becomes independent with the prohibitive 'don't' meaning. The background against which 'be' > 'don't' semantic change takes place should be made clear in order to answer Vladimircov's question.

The so called preclassical Middle Mongolian texts from the 13th–

14th centuries have two kinds of verbs to express 'to be': *a-*, and *bü-*. The three verbs differ in the way each is conjugated, with the differences obviously being of semantic character. [How the two ways of conjugation are related belongs to a separate analysis, which I am going to make in the near future.] Presently suffice it to say that *bü-* 'to be' remained in usage in Classical Mongolian and is commonly used in Written Mongolian even today while the current spoken dialects show no evidence of its occurence though its two imperative forms have been preserved in the prohibitive [its *bükü* and *bükün* 'all' forms have survived in another function that has no relevance to the present subject]. It seems highly possible then that *bü-* 'to be' has gradually died out in Spoken Mongolian since the Middle Mongolian period presuming, of course, that it did exist when the majority of the presently spoken dialects were being formed. [For it is also conceivable that *bü-* was then already a frozen form maintained through written records.] In this way the original imperative meaning of *bü* 'be' could have faded or completely disappeared from the vocabulary of native speakers. Through consistent usage in its other meaning *bü* [or **bütügei > bitegei*] must have come to be accepted in the prohibitive function [that is to express 'don't'] in the dialects of today.

2. The negative particle *ülü* occurs exclusively before the verb and is used to express the negative form of verbs 'non.past'. *ügei* occurs after nouns and is used to express a negative nature of the noun. [E. g.: *Alan-qo'a ere ügei'üi bö'et* . . . 'Alan-goa was without a man [that is she was widowed] and . . .' [Secret History § 17].] The relationship between the two negative particles was not recognized by Ramstedt [1924: 206–207].

According to the view Sanžeev holds *-lü* component in *ülü* 'no, not' particle could be related to *-lU*., the first component of *-lUgA*, a tense marker for 'praesens perfecti' if *ü* vowel in the same *ülü* word could be regarded an extinct verbal root [1962: 281].

Ramstedt, too, suspected that the *-lU* segment in *-lUgA* had primarily been a 'perfecti' tense marker [1903: 81]. His supposition is fully justified by Dagur *-li* and Mogol *-la*. 'perfecti' tense markers. [This explains the segmentation of the Middle Mongolian *-lAgA*, or *-lUgA* 'praesens perfecti': *-lA/-lU* 'perfecti' + *-gA* 'praesens imperfecti'. Bese 1970: 30, 33.] Dagur and Mogol forms could not, in any case be preceded by Middle Mongolian *-lAgA* or *-lUgA* forms, only by **-lA*, **-lU* or perhaps by **-li* forms.

The dialectal material available today shows, in fact, that *-lA* or *-lU* segments in *-lA.gA* or *-lU.gA* compounds must have been used as independent tense markers earlier. Thus, it is not all impossible for the *lü* segment in *ülü* 'no, not' negative particle to be conceived as *-lU* 'perfecti' tense marker in Old-Mongolian. In this approach *ü* segment in *ülü* 'no, not' must logically come to mean 'not to be' or something like that. That is *ülü* 'no, not' negative particle could be segmented into *ü-* 'not to be' + *-lU* 'perfecti' element. The question is whether we have more evidence to prove this conception.

It was Sanžeev who found common roots in the etymology of *ügei*, the negative particle following the noun to express its negative idea and that of *ülü* [1962: 281]. In his opinion the segments of *ügei* are, for the time being, difficult to define but researches into it should, supposedly, take three courses: 1. *ü-g-ei* = *ü-* + *-g-* connective vowel + *-ei*, that is the *-g-* of *-tu-γ-ai* or *-su-γ-ai*; 2. *ü-gei* = *ü-* + *-gei* 'praesens imperfecti'; 3. *ü-ge-i* with mysterious *-ge-* or *üge-* [cf. *ügegüü* 'poor'] in which *-i* 'praesens' is tense marker [cf. *bui*, *darui*]. [Ibid. notes 22.]

The first way of segmentation: *ü-g-ei* is questionabele from several points of view [Bese 1970: 29]. It is least supportable from the aspect of historical morphology. The third version, *ü-ge-i* with "mysterious" *-ge-* or *üge-* seems equally unacceptable. There remains Sanžeev's third, originally second idea which suggests *ügei* = *ü-* + *-gei* 'praesens imperfecti' consisting in fact of *-gA* 'praesens imperfecti' and *-i* 'praesens durativum' or 'adjectivum' [Bese 1970: 31–32]. Thus *-gA.i*, too, could be regarded a tense marker, a tense marker compound to put it more correctly. In this tense marker compound *-i* 'praesens' marks the adjectival function the noun is made to fulfil. *ügei* negative particle is a noun then and can duly appear in different syntactic positions. It takes inflectional suffixes for instance: ... *se'üder-eče busu nökör ügei-tür* ... '... when I had no companion but [my] shadow ...' or '... *se'ül-eče busu čiču'a ügei-tür* ...' ... when [my] horse-tail was [my] only whip ...' [Secret History § 125] etc.

Returning to the *ü* segment of *ügei* we are led to conclude by what has been stated above that it is a kind of negative 'to be'. Its 'not to be' meaning is justified by the derivatives of *ügei* 'no, not' [*ügei.ši.tü* 'no [man]', *ügei.'ün* 'being without something', *ügei bol-* 'die'].

So, Sanžeev was right to suppose that *ülü* and *ügei* negative particles are related etymologically. *ü*- element in both particles goes back to the verb **ü*- 'not to be' and they both have tense markers [-*lU* and -*gA.i*] added to this verb.

Perhaps it is worth pointing out that -*lU* 'perfecti' tense marker in *ülü* provides new evidence of the Middle Mongolian -*lA.gA/-lU.gA* segmentation [Bese 1970: 30]. Again, -*lA.gA* variant, as is known, occurs more frequently in Middle Mongolian texts considered Pre-classical, while Classical Mongolian accepted its -*lU.gA* spelling variant. From this point of view it is interesting to note that *ülü* negative particle has a labial variant -*lU* despite of -*lA*. variant dominating Middle Mongolian.

3. The Mongolian *ese* 'no, not' negative particle always preceds the verb and is used for the negative of the verbs in 'non.future' or 'past' tenses. The etymology of this negative particle, too, raises numerous questions.

"Was ist dieses *ese* ? – asked Ramstedt. – Möglicherweise kann es mit tung. *esi* 'nicht' zusammengestellt werden. Oder ist es ein Wort mit der Bedeutung 'gegen' ?" [1924: 205.][1] As Tung. *esi* is a conjugated form of Tung. *e*- 'not to be', Sanžeev supposes following Ramstedt's idea that the Mongolian *ese* 'no, not' particle could be segmented into **e*- and **-se* components, the second of which is difficult to explain [1962: 280].

There is no doubt that this way of segmentation is greatly influenced by the identification of *bü* 'don't' prohibitive particle as well as the šegmantation of *ülü* and *ügei*. [Sanžeev appears to give a similar interpretation [1962: 218].] That is, if prohibitive *bü* and *bitegei* as well as negative *ülü* and *ügei* are conjugated verbs it seems safe to assume that *ese* 'not' particle belongs to a paradigm too. The assumption comes from the logic inherent of the facts.

Sanžeev also noticed that the prohibitive and negative particles in Mongolian are all palatal. This makes it conceivable – Sanžeev went on – that in pre-Mongolian or proto-Mongolian there was antinomy between *a*- 'to be' and **e*- 'not to be' auxiliaries [1962: 281]. This – he says – is confirmed by different co-variants to be found in Mongolian [ibid.: 281–282].

True, Sanžeev did not take great pains to prove velar and palatal co-variation. But his hypothesis of the existence of *a*- 'to be' and

---

[1]   Later Ramstedt suspected the Mongolian *ese* corresponded to Chuvash *an* 'not' particle. Kalm. Wtb., 128.

*e- 'not to be' co-variation is so ingenious that until it is sufficiently disproved we must accept it.

So now we are faced with the problem of identification of *-se which is supposed to be the second component. This component was thought by Sanžeev difficult to explain "for the time being". He may have overestimated the difficulty involved.

I have investigated the question of the Mongolian -gsAn 'nomen perfecti' recently [Bese 1971: 220–221]. In Middle and classical Written Mongolian it is a suffix to form the infinitive. In present dialects it serves as a suffix to form the infinitive and the past tense. I have concluded that -gsAn is a morpheme cluster in which .sA. segment conveys a 'perfecti' meaning. If *e- segment in ese 'not' negative particle could be regarded a verb with 'not to be' meaning, .sA. 'perfecti' element in -g.sA.n morpheme cluster could be identified as *-se segment in ese, as a tense marker. This explanation is also supported by the fact that ese (> *e- 'not to be' + *-se 'perfecti') makes the past tense markers (-g.sA.n among others) negative. This seems to prove the way of segmenting ese 'not' negative particle as suggested by Sanžeev.[2]

If we are right in this process, if our evidence given above is acceptable, then we can state: the prohibitive and negative particles in Mongolian are of verbal origin without exception.

---

[2]   There are a few remarks to be made concerning the etymology of ese 'not' negative particle as suggested in this paper: Sanžeev says that Ramstedt was right to have found the *e- component in the Mongolian ediii 'not yet' and 'this many' [a homonymy perhaps?] as well as ese in the Mongolian esergüü 'opposite'. Beside this ese was conjugated in Written Mongolian so it seems a verb stem [1962: 280]. Here are a few reflections on the problem raised by Sanžeev's statements.

The Mongolian ediii could hardly mean 'not yet'. If this were so sayi ediii could not mean 'just now' in . . . sayi ediii ayalan surun büküi-tür . . . '. . . when they are just learning warfare . . .' [Secret History § 260]. In fact, ediii in -gA 'praesens imperfecti' + ediii 'this many' construction is only used to give more emphasis. And from etymological point of view the e. root of ediii 'this many' [< e. dü. i] seems related to the e. root of the demonstrative pronouns. [Cf. e.ne 'this', e.de 'these', e.yi.n 'so, thus', e.yi.mü 'such', e.dü.ge 'now, at present'.]

The Mongolian esergü 'opposite' does includ ese negative particle, and tesergü 'against', on the other hand, could be seen as an assimilation that has come about by the effect of ene 'this', tere 'that' etc.

We left the problem of the conjugation of ese last. It requires a separate research. We can say in short that ese was not conjugated Preclassical and Classical Mongolian. This phenomenon is a new development, it is dialectal. In my view these conjugated forms are of secondary importance.

LITERATURE

B. Ja. Vladimircov: O časticax otricanija pri povelitel'nom naklonenii v mongol'skom jazyke. Izvestija Imp. Akad. Nauk. – 1916. 349–358.

G. J. Ramstedt: Die Verneinung in den altaischen Sprachen. Mémoires de la Soc. Finno-ougrienne. LII [1924]. 196–215.

G. D. Sanžeev: K voprosu ob otricanii v mongol'skix jazykax. Acta Orient. Hung. XV [1962]. 273–282.

L. Bese: Remarks on Middle Mongolian Conjugation. Acta Orientalia Havniae. XXXII [1970]. 21–35.

L. Bese: Problémák a mongol igeragozás történetében. [Some problems of the history of Mongolian conjugation.] Nyelvtudományi Közlemények. LXXIII [1971]. 217–222. [With resumé in English.]