



Obituary: Gustav John Ramstedt 1873-1950

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GUSTAV JOHN RAMSTEDT

22 OCTOBER 1873–25 NOVEMBER 1950

Exegi monumentum . . .

Gustav John RAMSTEDT, professor at the University of Helsinki, president of the Finno-Ugrian Society, member of the Finnish Academy of Sciences, and the founder of Mongolian dialectology and Altaic linguistics, died on November 25, 1950. His death is a heavy blow to science. RAMSTEDT's merits as a scientist were so great and the scientific heritage he left is so immense that it is a responsible and difficult task to make a full evaluation of his life work.

RAMSTEDT was born at Tammisaari, Finland. After graduating from high school in Turku, he attended Helsinki University,¹ where he studied Finno-Ugrian languages under the guidance of Professor E. N. SETÄLÄ. It may be that at that time he did not even imagine that he was destined to become one of the greatest of orientalists.

RAMSTEDT's first scientific work dealt with the Cheremiss (Mari) language.² This is a valuable collection of samples of the Hill-Cheremiss dialect with a dictionary and phonetic studies, a result of his trip to the Volga region in 1898. Marked by a highly precise phonetic transcription, this work is an important contribution to Finno-Ugrian linguistics. Yet RAMSTEDT dropped his Finno-Ugrian studies. When the Finno-Ugrian Society in Helsinki decided to continue the Altaic studies started long before by M. Alexander CASTRÉN, its president, Professor Otto DONNER, suggested in 1898 that several young explorers be sent to various parts of Central Asia. One of them happened to be RAMSTEDT, who went to Mongolia. Unfortunately, the greater part of his

¹ The author of this necrology took these biographic data from the obituaries by Professor Andrej RUDNEV in *Hufvudstadsbladet* (26 November 1950), and Professor Martti RÄSÄNEN in *Helsingin Sanomat* (26 November 1950).

² "Bergtscheremissische Sprachstudien," *Mémoires de la Société Finno-Ougrienne* 17 (1902).

collections was lost by the Russian railroad authorities on the way back through Siberia, and he had no choice but to make another trip to Mongolia and start his explorations anew. RAMSTEDT spent three years in Transbaikalia and Outer Mongolia.

His explorations in Mongolia resulted in two excellent publications. One of these deals with the phonology of the Khalkha-Mongolian language;³ it is a precise phonetic description of the Khalkha language and the first comparative study of one of the Mongolian languages. Its appearance was the beginning of historic and comparative studies in the Mongolian field. To arrive at a correct evaluation of this publication, one should not forget that it was the first work on Colloquial Mongolian to be based on modern linguistic methods. Another work of great importance is RAMSTEDT's thorough research on the Khalkha-Mongolian conjugation, particularly valuable in respect to syntax.⁴ In this work, too, he bases his research on the comparative and historic method.

RAMSTEDT published only a few Khalkha-Mongolian texts.⁵ Among these, those deserving most attention are the heroic sagas, e. g., the epic song *Aγūlb χāb*, which is the first specimen of the Mongolian epic ever collected. RAMSTEDT's collection completely refutes POZDNEEV's theory that the Mongols never had epic poetry.⁶

RAMSTEDT published many more texts in another Mongolian language, namely Kalmuck.⁷ They were collected in the lower

³ "Das Schriftmongolische und die Urgamundart phonetisch verglichen," *Journal de la Société Finno-Ougrienne* 21 (1902). The Russian translation: Сравнительная фонетика монгольского письменного языка и халхаско-ургинского говора. Переводъ под редакціей прив.-доц. А. Д. Руднева, доп. авторомъ. С. Петербургъ, 1908.

⁴ "Über die Konjugation des Khalkha-Mongolischen," *Mémoires de la Société Finno-Ougrienne* 19 (1903).

⁵ In the book *Образцы монгольской народной литературы. Выпуск I. Халхаское нарѣчіе (Тексты въ транскрипціи)*. Редактировали Ц. Ж. Жамцарано и А. Д. Руднев. С. Петербург, 1908.

⁶ А. Позднѣевъ. *Образцы народной литературы монгольскихъ племень. Вып. первый. Народныя пѣсни монголовъ*. С. Петербургъ, 1880. Cf. also И. Г. Рамstedтъ. О монгольскихъ былинахъ. Труды Троицкосавско-Кяхтинскаго Отд. Имп. Русск. Геогр. Общ. Т. III, вып. 2, p. 44 and foll. in which RAMSTEDT demonstrated that the Khalkha-Mongolian epics are far from extinct.

⁷ "Kalmückische Sprachproben, gesammelt und herausgegeben von G. J. RAMSTEDT,

Volga and Stavropol' region in 1903-1905, and represent the first phonetically irreproachable samples of Kalmuck poetry with a German translation. The importance of all the above-mentioned explorations is indeed great, because they laid the foundations of Mongolian dialectology. Later on, after many years, RAMSTEDT also published his monumental Kalmuck dictionary,⁸ the first scientific dictionary in that language. Distinguished by its detailed transcription and precise translation and explanation of words and locutions, it contains about 12,000 basic Kalmuck words with a German index enabling the reader also to use the dictionary as a German-Kalmuck dictionary. This work is much more than a Kalmuck dictionary, since it also contains rich material collected among the Oirat tribes of Sinkiang. RAMSTEDT did not confine himself merely to translating the Kalmuck words; in almost all cases he added the correspondences in Written Mongolian, Turkic, Tungus, and sometimes Korean. His dictionary, therefore, is an etymologic work as well, containing hundreds of carefully established Altaic etymologies.

RAMSTEDT also explored the language of the Moghols of Afghanistan. To study it, he made a journey in the autumn of 1903 to the Afghano-Russian frontier, where he succeeded in finding two Moghols, but unfortunately the three of them soon became ill with malaria and his explorations had to be stopped. Nevertheless, even the material he was able to collect in a few days was of great value and shed much light upon various obscure questions of Mongolian historic phonology, particularly the history of the groups *Vowel + *γ (*g) + Vowel*.⁹

If we add to the above-mentioned works the glossary of the dialect of the Yellow Yogurs (Shera Yögur), compiled by RAMSTEDT from materials collected by the late C. G. E. MANNERHEIM during the latter's travel in Eastern Turkestan,¹⁰ we find that RAMSTEDT explored four Mongolian languages. These explora-

Erster Teil, Kalmückische Märchen I-II," *Mémoires de la Société Finno-Ougrienne* 27, 1-2 (1909-1919).

⁸ "Kalmückisches Wörterbuch," *Lexica Societatis Fenno-Ugricae* 3 (1935).

⁹ "Mogholica: Beiträge zur Kenntnis der Moghol-Sprache in Afghanistan," *Journal de la Société Finno-Ougrienne* 23, 4 (1906).

¹⁰ C. G. E. MANNERHEIM. "A Visit to the Sarö and Shera Yögurs," *JSFOu* 27.

tions alone sufficed to make RAMSTEDT a preeminent Mongolist.¹¹ Yet he published many other first-rate works, especially in the field of Altaic comparative studies. A valuable contribution to Mongolian historical linguistics is his article on Mongolian pronouns.¹² One of its achievements was the restitution of the ancient pronoun of the third person **i* (gen. *inu*, acc. *imayi*, etc.).¹³

RAMSTEDT's greatest merit is that he did not confine himself to collecting material on Mongolian languages and merely describing the latter, but he also laid the foundations of Mongolian historical linguistics and comparative studies. His work "Das Schriftmongolische und die Urgamundart phonetisch verglichen" is remarkable in that RAMSTEDT was the first to quote ancient data on Colloquial Mongolian of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, e. g., such forms as *hutut* "stars" in the history of Kirakos. He was the first to point out the value of ancient glossaries. He was one of the founders of Altaic comparative studies and the most brilliant among them; his only outstanding predecessor in this field was his great fellow-countryman M. Alexander CASTRÉN. RAMSTEDT started his Altaic comparative studies with explorations in the Turco-Mongolian field, and soon came to the well-founded conclusion that the Turkic and Mongolian languages are really related. One of his earliest works in this field is his article on numerals.¹⁴ Another important article of his concerns the tribal name *Oyirad*; this is one of the few RAMSTEDT articles published in Russian.¹⁵ It contains a series of Turco-Mongolian etymologies, mainly demonstrating the correspondence Mo. *r* = Turk. *z* (e. g., Mo. *üker* = Turk. *öküz* "ox") and the development **γi* > Mo. *yi* (e. g., *ayil* < **ayil* "yurt" = Turk. *ayıl* "corral"). His work on the derivation of verbal stems is dedicated to

¹¹ There are also several small items of his on Mongolian subjects: "Ein Fragment mongolischer Quadratschrift," *JSFOu* 27, 3; "Mongolische Briefe aus Idikut Schähri bei Turfan," *Sitzber. d. K. Preuss. Akademie d. Wissenschaften* 32 (1909). 845 ff.

¹² "Über mongolische Pronomina," *JSFOu* 23, 3 (1906).

¹³ RAMSTEDT, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹⁴ "Über die Zahlwörter der altaischen Sprachen," *JSFOu* 24, 1 (1907).

¹⁵ И. Г. Рамstedтъ. Этимология имени Ойратъ. Сборникъ въ честь Г. Н. Потанина къ 70-лѣтію со дня рожденія. Зап. Имп. Русск. Геогр. Общ. по Отд. Этногр. XXXIV (1909).

the problems of Mongolian and Turkic comparative morphology.¹⁶ These researches were followed by others far exceeding the limits of Mongolian linguistics and invading the field of Altaic comparative phonology. One of his articles in the latter category deals with the correspondence $*\beta > \text{Mo. } \gamma = \text{Turk. } p$ (*b*) of the type Mo. *qayalya* < $*q\alpha\beta\alpha\gamma\alpha$ "gate" = Turk. *qapïy id.*¹⁷ Another is dedicated to the affricates in the Mongolian and Turkic languages;¹⁸ but perhaps the most important is the article on the initial voiceless labial consonant in Common Altaic, in which he investigates the development Mo. *o* (*Zero*) < Middle Mongolian *h* < Ancient Mongolian $*\phi$ or $*p$ = Manchu *f* and Goldi *p*, e. g., Mo. *ulayan*, Middle Mong. *hula'an* < Ancient Mong. $*\phi\text{ulayan}$ or $*p\text{ulayan}$ "red" = Ma. *fulgiyan id.*¹⁹

There reigned great confusion in regard to the Chuvash language, before RAMSTEDT. It is known that W. RADLOFF considered the Chuvash language an original Finno-Ugrian language which had passed through three stages of Turkization.²⁰ It was RAMSTEDT who found that the Chuvash language is, on the contrary, a very archaic Turkic language (we would even say Proto-Turkic) which has absorbed numerous recent Turkic loanwords.²¹ His was one of the most splendid discoveries in both the Turcologic field and that of Altaic linguistics in general. Among all the phonetic laws established in this article, we shall only mention here the correspondences Chuvash *r* < $*r'$ > Turk. *z* and Chuvash *l* < $*l'$ > Turk. *š* which were misunderstood by the others as Chuv. *r* and *l* < $*z$ and $*š$. Of his remaining works on Altaic subjects his article on the palatalization in the Altaic languages,²² the semantically

¹⁶ "Zur Verbstammbildungslehre der mongolisch-türkischen Sprachen," *JSFOu* 28, 3 (1912).

¹⁷ "Zur Geschichte des labialen Spiranten im Mongolischen," *Festschrift Vilhelm Thomsen* (1912).

¹⁸ "Zur mongolisch-türkischen Lautgeschichte I-II," *Keleti Szemle* 15, pp. 134-150; *id.* III, *Keleti Szemle* 16, pp. 66-84.

¹⁹ "Ein anlautender stimmloser Labial in der mongolisch-türkischen Ursprache," *JSFOu* 32, 2 (1916-1920).

²⁰ W. RADLOFF, *Phonetik der nördlichen Türksprachen* (Leipzig, 1882), §116.

²¹ "Zur Frage nach der Stellung des Tschuwassischen," *JSFOu* 38, 1 (1922).

²² "Die Palatalisation in den altaischen Sprachen," *Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae* 27, pp. 239-251.

interesting research on the negatives,²³ and a short article on the deverbal noun in *-m* in the Altaic languages²⁴ deserve great attention.

Not only was RAMSTEDT a brilliant Mongolist, but he also had an excellent knowledge of the Turkic languages.²⁵ He translated and explained two ancient Turkic inscriptions he had discovered in Outer Mongolia.²⁶ This work is a masterpiece in the Turcologic field.

A characteristic feature of RAMSTEDT's works is his precise linguistic method, his unusual gift for drawing conclusions and finding the most convincing solutions. Studying his writings, one feels that their author is not only an excellent connoisseur of the material, not only an expert on the language or languages concerned,²⁷ but also an outstanding theoretician, a highly trained phoneticist, and a scientist equipped with perfect methods of historical and comparative linguistics.

RAMSTEDT might have remained within the limits of the Altaic family as comprising the Mongolian, Turkic, and Tungus languages. This is a vast field and the still-unsolved problems are numerous. But it happened otherwise. When Finland obtained her independence and established diplomatic relations with other countries, the Finnish government entrusted RAMSTEDT with the duties of *chargé d'affaires* in Japan, China, and Siam. RAMSTEDT spent ten years in the Far East (1919-1929).²⁸ It is not difficult to realize that RAMSTEDT used his sojourn there to the greatest profit for his research. He studied Japanese and Korean, and from then on he worked mainly on the Korean language and its rela-

²³ "Die Verneinung in den altaischen Sprachen," *MSFOu* 52, pp. 196-215.

²⁴ "Das deverbale Nomen auf *-m* in den altaischen Sprachen," *MSFOu* 98 (1950), 255 ff.

²⁵ RAMSTEDT also collected valuable material on the language of the Nogai in the former Stavropol' region north of the Caucasus.

²⁶ "Zwei uigurische Runeninschriften in der Nord-Mongolei," *JSFOu* 30, 3 (1913).

²⁷ RAMSTEDT had a scientific knowledge of the Finno-Ugrian, Mongolian, Turkic, Tungus, Korean, Sanscrit, and Japanese. He was also a passionate Esperantist. Besides, he spoke brilliantly the main European languages.

²⁸ RAMSTEDT described his life in the Far East in his interesting book *Lähettiläänä Nipponissa. Muistelmia vuosilta 1919-1929*. (Porvoo-Helsinki: Werner Söderström Osakeyhtiö, 1950).

tions to the Altaic group.²⁹ When RAMSTEDT started his Korean studies, that language was little explored in its dialectologic, historical, and comparative-linguistic aspects, and one could only guess that it was somehow connected with the Altaic languages. RAMSTEDT resurrected from under the foreign layers of this language, which was greatly influenced by the Chinese, its ancient Altaic substratum, and he gave science two monumental works. One of these is his *Korean Grammar*,³⁰ marked by that expertly scientific method which can best be called "RAMSTEDT's method." Although this is primarily a descriptive grammar, it contains numerous parallels from related languages. Another outstanding work is RAMSTEDT's Korean etymologic dictionary.³¹ This is a highly valuable book, containing abundant and precious material for a comparative grammar of the Altaic languages.

A linguist with an unusually broad scientific horizon, RAMSTEDT explored the ties connecting the Altaic family with unrelated languages.³² He also discovered the affinity of the Ket language (Yenissei Ostiak) and the language of the Sino-Tibetan group.³³

RAMSTEDT's publications are numerous and the problems he solved, so far-reaching that it is difficult to discuss them thoroughly in a brief article.³⁴ Much still remains unpublished.³⁵

²⁹ RAMSTEDT published the following articles on Korean subjects: "Remarks on the Korean Language," *MSFOu* 58 (1928); "The Nominal Postpositions in Korean," *MSFOu* 67 (1933); "Koreanisch *kes* "Ding, Stück,"" *JSFOu* 48, 4 (1936-1937).

³⁰ "A Korean Grammar," *MSFOu* 82 (1939).

³¹ "Studies in Korean Etymology," *MSFOu* 95 (1949).

³² "The Relation of the Altaic Languages to other Language Groups," *JSFOu* 53, 1. RAMSTEDT also found Mongolian loanwords in the Scandinavian languages: "Finnish *Turku*, Swedish *Torg*, Danish and Norwegian *Tory*, a Word from Central Asia," *Bulletin de la Société Néophilologique de Helsinki (Finlande)*. *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 50, 5-8 (1949), pp. 99-103. Cf. also RAMSTEDT's etymology of Finnish *talkkuna*, Russian *толокно* < *Mo. talqa* "flour," established in one of the volumes of *Finnisch-Ugrische Forschungen*.

³³ "Über den Ursprung der sogenannten Jenissej-Ostjaken," *JSFOu* 24, 2 (1907).

³⁴ In addition to the commonly known books and articles by RAMSTEDT there are a few less well-known works published in less familiar languages. First of all, there are articles in the Finnish language in the *Finnish Encyclopaedia (Tietosanakirja)*, a few articles in Hungarian: "Az *ŋ* hang a mongóiban és a törökben," *Nyelvtudományi Közlemények* 42, pp. 229-238; "Egy állítólagos török-mongol hangtörvény," *Nyk*, pp. 69-74; and a booklet in Mongolian: *Uyirgur ulus-un teüke (History of the Uigurs)*, published in Urga before the Russian revolution.

³⁵ There are unpublished texts in Khalkha-Mongolian (tales, sagas, songs, and

It is now the duty of RAMSTEDT's disciples, of whom the writer is one, and of his followers to complete and publish his unfinished work. It is self-evident that no one could have performed this task so successfully as RAMSTEDT himself, because such scholars are born only once in a century. After CASTRÉN there had not been such an explorer of the Altaic languages until RAMSTEDT. At the present time, there is no one in their field who equals RAMSTEDT.

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riddles) quoted in RAMSTEDT's "Über die Konjugation des Khalkha-Mongolischen"; his Kalmuck texts (only the first part containing tales was published). It is also known that RAMSTEDT collected Turkic and Onkor-Solon texts. From a letter of Dr. Pentti AALTO, Secretary of the Finnish Oriental Society, of 27 November 1950, the writer has learned that there is also RAMSTEDT's huge work "Einleitung in die altaische Sprachwissenschaft," which is not quite complete and the first part of which, through the middle of the chapter on the verbal system, is devoted to morphology. There is also a manuscript containing a preliminary sketch on comparative phonology and many other works in various stages of completion.