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Grammatical Descriptors of the Language of The Secret History of the Mongols

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Summary: The present article deals with the Chinese characters descriptive of Middle Mongolian suffixes, as used in the interlinear word for word translation of the Chinese transcription of *The Secret History of the Mongols.* Taking as the starting point the way Ming scholars tackled this problematic, I try to investigate more deeply the Middle Mongolian morphosyntactic phenomena, as reflected in this text. Conclusions are drawn as to the effective span and function of these particles.

1. Introduction

The original Mongolian text of *The Secret History of the Mongols* has been preserved in the form of a phonetic transcription made by means of Chinese characters.[1] This transcription is accompanied by interlinear Chinese glosses that include the literal meaning of every word as well as a number of grammaticalized Chinese morphemes used to indicate the value of different nominal and verbal suffixes of the Mongolian language.

The aim of this paper is to review some of them, as a first approach to this question. The items to be taken into account will be primarily four:

- the grammatical function of the Mongolian suffix,
- the Chinese character(s) used for referring to this grammatical function,
- the possible reason for the choice of the given character(s),
- a testing of its capacity for performing the assigned function.

But before analyzing single cases, let's have a look at the way these grammaticalized morphemes or characters appear in the interlinear Chinese translation. Halliday (1959, p. 27) calls them "termination glosses", and they can be roughly divided into two kinds: nominal and verbal. The termination glosses of a nominal follow usually the semantic glosses, although in certain cases the contrary is also true. In his description of Chinese grammatical phenomena in the *SHM*, Halliday (1959, p. 112) calls them "postpositive nouns".

Here follow the Chinese transcriptions for *čeri'üd* and *ilējü,* excerpted from the original and provided with a translation of their glosses:



čʰɛ
ri
u
ti

軍 TRANSLATION GLOSS: *soldier*

每 TERMINATION GLOSS [1]: *plural indicator*

行 TERMINATION GLOSS [2]: *definite case*

OVERALL MEANING: *soldiers, troops* (acc.)

[*čeri'üd* § 248.29]

[1] It was compiled in Ming China in the late 14th century. It is also accompanied by an abridged translation at the end of each paragraph.

On the other hand, the termination glosses of a verbal can stand either before or after the word. Halliday (1959, p. 95-99) calls them “prepositive verbs” and “postpositive verbs”:



ji
ljɛ
čiw

教 TERMINATION GLOSS [1]: *causative*

去 TRANSLATION GLOSS: *go*

着 TERMINATION GLOSS [2]: *imperfect converb*

OVERALL MEANING: *sending*

[*ilējü* § 151.3]

Here I use for these termination glosses the term *descriptor,* because of their capacity to *describe* morphosyntactic phenomena unknown to Chinese itself. A reason to refute the use of “termination glosses” is that these morphological glosses do not stand systematically at the end of the corresponding Chinese gloss. Furthermore, in Mongolian, although affixes are added at the end of the root, only one of them “terminates” the word.

On the other hand, this term might be more appropriate than *marker,* a suffix or a particle expressing a grammatical meaning within the limits of one language.[2] A descriptor would be a stand-alone morpheme used to indicate inherited grammatical features of another language. Unlike a marker, it does not necessarily have a grammatical function in the describing language.[3] At the most it “translates” grammatical notions, but of the described language.

Most of these descriptors were specially designed to play this role as a reference or companion to the Mongolian suffixes. A few already existed at the time in a grammaticalized state in Chinese. I will attempt in this paper to give hints as to the meanings of both types of descriptors, as well as provide a description of their functioning, so as to test their capacity in this role. This should help to verify whether the Chinese transcribers intended to provide the Mongolian text with a description of its grammar and the possible reason behind this.

Note on conventions used in this paper:

Many of the assumptions made here are based on data collected and presented in my B.A. and M.A. thesis (Laurencio 2009, 2013):

· the variation in the amount of space between Mongolian words in the Chinese transcription, with the implications this can have as a system of punctuation, is taken from Street (1986);

· as regards the phonetic values of Mongolian words, they are presented in a dual system of transliteration and transcription; the transliteration (in boldface) is based on the reconstructions established by Pulleyblank (1991) for Early Mandarin,[4] the transcription is mine (although heavily indebted to Ligeti 1971 and Rachewiltz 1972).

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[2] By a way of example, the morpheme 見 *jiàn* was a marker for the passive voice in Classical Chinese (Nikitina 2005, p. 17), in the same manner as the suffix *-ɔd-* is a marker for the same syntactic function in Modern Mongolian. On the other hand, the morpheme 被 *bèi,* as used in the gloss of the SHM, is a descriptor for the Middle Mongolian passive suffix *·qda· / ·kde·*.

[3] This might not always be true, as we shall see, because in some cases the descriptor appears to be an already grammaticalized word in Chinese. In any case, its use obeys, within the gloss, the necessity of indicating Mongolian grammatical values, and for this reason it does not necessarily follow Chinese grammatical and syntactical rules, which disqualifies it as a marker.

[4] Early Mandarin, the current vernacular, emerged with the advent of the Yuan dynasty (Pulleyblank 1991, pp. 3-4), and is most probably at the base of the phonological system used in the transcription of the SHM.

Sources for the examples presented:
· for the original text in Chinese transcription: YZMS (1936),
· for the English translations: Rachewiltz (2004).

List of symbols:
[-] suffix appended to the root by means of a hyphen (i.e. **-yin** → *tenggiri-yin*)
[·] suffix written together with the root (i.e. **·basu** → *orobasu*)
[§] paragraph in the *SHM*
[,] divides different allomorphs of a suffix (i.e. **-yi, -i**)
[**/**] divides variants of a suffix according to vowel harmony (i.e. **-un / -ün**)
[/] boundary of word not marked with a space (in the Chinese transcription)
[//] boundary of word marked with a small space (in the Chinese transcription)
[///] boundary of word marked with a big space (in the Chinese transcription)
[馬x行d] translation gloss (x) and grammatical gloss or descriptor (d)
[伯原作n] editorial note (n)
[○] lacking translation gloss
[~] the corresponding gloss appears attached to the next word
[¤] lacking grammatical gloss or descriptor (in cases where it is expected to be)

2. The definite case

The Middle Mongolian nominal suffix **-yi** / **-i** indicates what Street calls the definite case:

> *In the traditional treatment of Mongolian, this particle is called the accusative ending, but since nominals both with and without this particle occur both as subject and object of verbals, this name, and the implied meaning, are not applicable to it. I call it rather THE DEFINITE PARTICLE, since nominals modified by it have a more specific meaning than those not so modified.* (Street 1957, p. 30)

I follow here his opinion on this ending. I do so partly for a practical reason connected with its treatment in the Chinese gloss: whereas there is a descriptor in the presence of the suffix, there is none in the event that it is absent, even though the nominal is also the object of a verbal.

The first form **-yi** regularly appears after a vowel, whereas the second one **-i** is to be found after consonants. It should be noted that in the case of a final *n*, a phonetic doubling can occur, as in *kö'ün-ni* (§ 16.2), as opposed to such instances as *irgen-i* (§ 39.1). In Modern Mongolian, it would correspond to the forms *-ыг*[2] */ -г*.

The descriptor mainly used is 行 *xíng*,[5] which conveys in Chinese the idea of a performed or carried out action.[6] From a random statistical calculation, it appears that this descriptor is used in 75 percent of cases of the appearance of the suffix.[7] In 8.33% of cases 將 *jiāng* is used, and in the remaining 16.66% no descriptor is available. Not included in the statistics are the cases of nominals acting as objects of verbals without taking the suffix.

In the following examples we see how a nominal such as *čeri'üd* can be the object of a verbal both with and without the case ending. The Chinese descriptor 行 nevertheless is applied only in the event that the suffix is appended to the Mongolian word:

[5] Along with every Chinese descriptor, its modern pinyin pronunciation is given here.
[6] According to Mathews' *Chinese-English Dictionary* (1931, p. 410): *To do, to act.*
[7] These statistical results are taken from my B.A. Thesis (Laurencio 2009, p. 69).

[248.29] //扯舌里兀的軍x每d**行d** [248.30] /中合舌里兀勒周教d回x着d //亦出罷退x了d伯原作n

čʰɛriuti χɔriulčiw jičʰypa
čeri'üd-i qari'ulǰu ičuba
He ordered back *the troops* […] and withdrew.

[151.3] ///亦難察人名x //中罕皇帝x ///扯舌里兀惕軍x每d //亦列周教d去x着d

jinančʰa χan čʰɛriutʰ jiljɛčiw
Inanča qan *čeri'üt* ilējü
Inanča Qan dispatched *his troops* […].[8]

Yet from this other example, in which the suffix **-yi / -i** appears with the subject of a verbal, with the subsequent use of the descriptor 行, we can establish that its use is rather mechanical, according to a simple principle: suffix you see, descriptor you get. In some ways, this fact reinforces Street's statement about this suffix not necessarily fulfilling an object function, and makes it extensible to the descriptor.

[265.7] ///成吉思太祖x /中合罕泥皇帝x**行d** [265.8] /秣舌驪納察馬x行d //兀納阿速倒x了呵d
//馬里牙班肌膚x自的行d //馬石好生x //額別惕抽疼x着d [265.9] /搠斡舌児中合惕地名x
//保兀罷下x了d伯原作n

čʰiŋkis χɔxanni mɔrinačʰa unaɔsu malijapan maši jajpjɛtʰčʰiw šwawwɔpχɔtʰ pɔwupa
Činggis *qahan-ni* morin-ača una'asu maliya-ban maši ebetčü Čo'orqat bawuba
Činggis *Qa'an* fell off the horse and, his body being in great pain, he halted at Čo'orqat.

Let's turn our attention to the competing descriptor 將 *jiāng*. This morpheme has a high degree of grammaticalization in Chinese, since it is used in this language as a co-verb for introducing the object of the main verb. In any case, the reason for its use as descriptor is something which deserves deeper study, since it is not apparent why we have, for example, *namayi* glossed as 將我 on the one hand, and as 我行 on the other:[9]

[77.10] /納馬宜**將d?**我x /也勤爲甚x //你覩訥眼x的d //速舌里木孫毛x ///阿馬訥口x的d
/中合中合孫梗x //孛勒中合梅¤d做x有d //塔您x

namaji jɛkʰin nitunu surimusun ɔmanu χɔχɔsun pɔlχɔmuj tʰa
namayi yekin nidün-ü surimusun amanu qaqasun bolqamui ta
[…] why do you regard *me* as a lash in the eye, a thorn in the mouth?

[8] The absence of suffix in this example indicates that the object is not definite (or, in Street's words, that the nominal concerned does not have a specific meaning). Therefore it would be more appropriate to translate this passage as "Inanča Qan dispatched / sent troops".

[9] We can make the assumption that the descriptor 行 *xíng* automatically replaces the suffix, without accounting for differences in function and meaning, and that 將 *jiāng* appears in contexts where the status of the nominal as a definite OBJECT is fully guaranteed, but this hypothesis needs to be confirmed through the analysis of more occurrences. Another possibility would be to consider 將 *jiāng* as part of the translation gloss rather than as a suffix descriptor in view of its appearance before the object referred to, as it would in Chinese itself.

9. Conclusions

Throughout the extant original of *The Secret History of the Mongols* there is a consistent attempt to provide every Mongolian suffix with its grammatical meaning in Chinese. As some of the Mongolian grammatical categories are unknown to the Chinese language, most of these grammatical descriptors were especially devised for their use in the *SHM.* This might give us an important clue as to the reasons while a transcription like this was at all devised: to provide relevant grammatical information for the teaching of the Mongolian language to Chinese officials.

As we have seen here, the use of these descriptors seems to be rather mechanical, a fact that can have its advantages. To give an example, it can help to reconstruct a suffix eventually lacking in the transcription, due to a copyist's mistake (if we assume that every time a grammatical descriptor is found, it systematically refers to a suffix). It can also help to clarify ambiguous readings due to the difficulty to convey Mongolian phonemes by means of Chinese characters (such as the restitution of the long *ē* of the causative).

Nevertheless, the reality of the descriptors is more complex than this. As we have also seen, there are cases in which the same descriptor is used for more than one suffix, and at the other extreme, there are cases in which more than one descriptor is used for the same suffix, to distinguish different grammatical functions, or without apparent reason or a clear function. This raises the question whether the descriptors are meant for describing the meaning or function of every suffix, or merely for indicating their presence, automatically replacing them. I shall concentrate on this issue in a further development of this work.

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