

Introduction

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The Transeurasian languages are among the most fervently debated language families in modern linguistics, their data contributing extensively to our current understanding of how genealogical and areal linguistics can complement each other as twin faces of diachronic linguistics. The term “Transeurasian” refers to a large group of geographically adjacent languages, stretching from the Pacific in the East to the Baltic, the Black Sea and the Mediterranean in the West, that include up to five uncontroversial linguistic families: Japonic, Koreanic, Tungusic, Mongolic, and Turkic. It is distinguished from the more traditional term “Altaic”, which we here reserve for the linguistic grouping consisting of Tungusic, Mongolic and Turkic languages only. Figure 1 displays the distribution of the Transeurasian languages.



Figure 1 Distribution of the Transeurasian languages

The Turkic language family consists of about 35 closely related Turkic languages and dialects spoken over a wide area of the Eurasian continent, including some parts of Europe, Asia Minor, Central Asia and Siberia. The earliest clearly documented stage is the language of the Eastern Old Turkic inscriptions of eight century AD in Mongolia's Orkhon valley.

The Mongolic language family consists of about 15 closely related languages, extending over Central and Northeast Asia. The earliest documented stage is Middle Mongolian, the most reknown text being the 'Secret History of the Mongols', originally compiled in the mid-thirteenth century, but preserved in a modified seventeenth century copy.

The Tungusic family comprises about 15 languages distributed over Manchuria and Siberia. Since written materials in Jurchen are only partially deciphered, the earliest well documented stage is Manchu, the official language of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911).

Today there is only a single Korean language, but in the past various Koreanic varieties coexisted with Japonic languages on the Korean peninsula. Among the now-extinct Koreanic languages we find the languages of Paekche, Kaya and Silla, spoken before the linguistic unification of the peninsula in 668. Some fragments of writing go back to before that time, but a systematic and accurate documentation of the Korean language started only with the Hangŭl texts in the fifteenth century.

The Japonic family includes Japanese and at least five mutually unintelligible

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Ryukyuan languages. The earliest clearly documented stage of Japonic is Old Japanese, dating back to the eighth century. Evidence for the presence of other Japonic languages on the Korean peninsula is provided by a corpus of toponyms in Korean historical sources.

Hence, the Transeurasian languages form a vast linguistic continuum that crosses the physical boundaries between Europe and Asia. Contrary to the tradition to refer to these languages as “Altaic languages,” Johanson and Robbeets (2010: 1–2) coined the term “Transeurasian” to refer to this large grouping. We prefer the new term over the classical label because it avoids confusion between the different uses of the traditional term (i.e. as Turkic-Mongolic, Turkic-Mongolic-Tungusic, Turkic-Mongolic-Tungusic-Koreanic, or Turkic-Mongolic-Tungusic-Koreanic-Japonic); it may reduce the counterproductive polarization between “Pro-Altaists” and “Anti-Altaists”; the suffix *-ic* implies affinity while *-an* leaves room for an areal hypothesis; and, finally, because the reference to the Altai mountains as a homeland does not keep pace with developments in interdisciplinary research. As a result, the designation “Transeurasian” is gaining acceptance in the field, being used in the title of several recent symposia and publications.

The historical connection between the Transeurasian languages is among the most debated issues in comparative historical linguistics. Although most linguists would agree that these languages are historically related, they disagree on the precise nature of this relationship: are all similarities induced by borrowing or are some residues of inheritance? Scholars who take an areal approach—i.e. so-called “diffusionists”—admit that the Transeurasian languages share a large amount of common elements and features in phonology, morphosyntax and lexicon, but they

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maintain that these are better accounted for by an interplay of borrowing, universal principles in linguistic structuring and coincidence than by common descent. By contrast, scholars who take a genealogical approach—i.e. so-called “retentionists”—admit that the Transeurasian languages have been subject to extensive mutual contact throughout their histories, but they maintain that not all similarities are the result of borrowing, universals or chance. They argue that there is a limited core of similarities for which the linguistically most sensible explanation is inheritance.

Thus, both diffusionists and retentionists agree, first, in their observation that the Transeurasian languages have a rich inventory of linguistic properties in common and second, in their assessment that these correlations can be explained by the shared histories of the speech communities concerned. The point of disagreement is whether the shared histories are entirely contact-induced, or whether some go back to a shared ancestral stage. Given the current state of affairs, this reference guide starts from the common ground between diffusionists and retentionists: we first focus on providing empirical data and establishing correlations, while we weigh different historical explanations in the subsequent part of this volume. A principle that underlies this work is that genealogical linguistics and areal linguistics are not antonyms, but that both fields can complement each other as twin faces of diachronic linguistics.

The Oxford Guide to the Transeurasian languages is intended as an essential tool for Turkic, Mongolic, Tungusic, Koreanic and Japonic linguists as well as for general linguists involved in synchronic or diachronic research. The multi-author format combines leading international scholarship in individual Transeurasian varieties with historical comparative linguists of different theoretical backgrounds. In addition to retentionists and diffusionists, it brings together linguists from formal and functional

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approaches as well as historical comparative linguists from a more data-accumulating Russian tradition and those with a more data-sifting western approach.

The guide is organized along thematic lines into 5 parts. The first part "Sources and Classification" is concerned with the historical sources available for each grouping, the different stages in the periodization of each subgrouping, the existing classificational models and the general typological type of the Transeurasian languages. The second part "Individual Structural Overviews" provides a comprehensive and detailed structural treatment of 16 individual contemporary Transeurasian varieties against the background of the first-order grouping they belong to. Part three "Comparative overviews" is concerned with establishing correlations at different levels of linguistic structure such as phonology, lexicon, morphology and syntax, both from a synchronic and a diachronic comparative perspective. Part four "Areal vs. Inherited Connections" aims at explaining and interpreting the linguistic similarities, integrating genealogical and areal accounts. These approaches give rise to new questions about Transeurasian prehistory, which will be addressed in the final part "Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Identity of Transeurasian" by opening an interdisciplinary window into the Transeurasian past with current research in genetics, archaeology and anthropology. The volume thus forms a coherent whole, in that a rich selection of linguistic data, coupled with comparative overviews offers empirical breadth, while the assessment of the areal and genealogical phenomena against an interdisciplinary background bears a wider theoretical significance.

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