

IDEAS BEHIND SYMBOLS – LANGUAGES BEHIND SCRIPTS

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One Language behind Two Different Scripts*

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Introduction

Mongolian is used both in Mongolia and in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in the People's Republic of China (abbreviated as China). In China, a group of Mongols in Hulunbuir district of Inner Mongolia speak a Mongolic language known as Buryat. The Buryat language is spoken in the Buryat Republic which is a federal subject of the Russian Federation. The Buryat people use the Cyrillic alphabet in their writing system, while Mongolian people in Xinjiang and Qinghai provinces of China speak another Mongolic language called Oirat¹; Mongols who live in Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning provinces of China use the same Mongolian language (and the same script) as the Inner Mongolians.

The overall number of Mongolian speakers is approximately 5 million people: among them 2,7–2,8 million speakers reside in Mongolia while the rest live in China (based on 2010 census, cited in Brosig & Skribnik 2018: 555; Janhunen 2012: 11). According to IMU (2005), Mongolian people in China mostly reside in Inner Mongolia and there are more than 1,200,000 Mongols who live there; Mongols are also distributed elsewhere in China as follows: (1) Over 200, 000 people live in such northeast provinces of China as Liaoning and Heilongjiang; (2) over 100, 000 reside in the northwest of China, including Xinjiang, Gansu and Qinghai; (3) 40, 000–50, 000 live in other provinces and cities of China (IMU 2005: 5). Numbering

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1 The separate branch of Oirats who received the name of Kalmyks after their migration from Dzungaria in 1607, reside now in the Republic of Kalmykia located between the rivers Don and Volga in Russian federation (western shore of the Caspian Sea) numbering about 155, 938. During their history they used different scripts to write down their original language, viz. (a) Todo-script (the Clear Letter) created by the prominent enlightener, Buddhist monk Zaya Pandita (1599 - 1662), a national hero of Kalmyks; (b) the Cyrillic alphabet (1924); and (c) the Latin script (1930). Nowadays the Kalmyks use the Cyrillic alphabet.

approximately 500,000, Buryat people is one of the largest indigenous group in Siberia.

One way to define the Mongolian language as a whole is to understand it as “the complex of Common Mongolic dialects that morphosyntactically correspond to the principles underlying Written Mongol and/or Khalkha” (Janhunen 2012: 8). Written Mongolian can either refer to the script itself or the literary language which is used in contrast with the colloquial languages. Poppe (1954) considers Written Mongolian as a different variety of the Mongolian language which is only written. In the current study, Written Mongolian refers to the literary (written) language used by the Mongols in Inner Mongolia, China, while the literary (written) language used in Mongolia is referred to as Cyrillic Written Khalkha (abbreviated as CWK).

Written Mongolian has gone through several stages of development, but different scholars delineate these periods differently. The majority of scholars agree with Vladimirtsov’s (1929) opinion. According to Vladimirtsov (1929: 20–24), the history of the written language of the Mongols covers the following periods: the ancient (from unknown times to the beginning of the 14th century), the Middle Mongolian (from the beginning of the 14th century to the second half of the 16th century) and the classical (from the end of the 16th to the 20th century) periods.² In contrast, Hsiao (2013) divides the history of Mongolian into Old Mongolian (~12th century AD), Middle Mongolian (13th to 16th centuries), Late Mongolian³ (17th to 19th centuries) and Modern Mongolian (20th century-). Here I use the term MWM to cover the period since the 20th century.

In this paper, I will first compare different orthographies used in CWK and Modern Written Mongolian (abbreviated as MWM below), then discuss the varying linguistic features of CWK and MWM. Despite the observable linguistic differences between CWK and MWM in terms of morphosyntax and lexicon, the major discrepancies between them lie in their respective orthographies.

Differences between the orthographies of Cyrillic Written Khalkha and Modern Written Mongolian

In the history of Mongolian language development, Mongolian people have used a wide range of different scripts such as Traditional Mongolian Script (based on Uigur Script which was originated from the Aramaic script), Khitan Script, ‘Phags-pa script (or square script), Todo Script and so forth to write down the language.

² Orlovskaya (1999: 4–6) suggests that the third, classical period, made a transition into the fourth period, viz. the modern period, which starts from the beginning of the second half of the 20th century.

³ Hsiao (2013) uses the term “Late Mongolian” to cover the period lasting from 17th to 19th century in her study. In the current study, this term is used to refer to Late Middle Mongolian.

Among them, the Traditional Mongolian Script (known as Old Script or Mongolian Vertical Script), which is supposed to have been used by the Mongols since the 12th century, is the most influential and the longest used script (Poppe 1954: 1; IMU 2005: 4; 122; etc.). Even now Mongolians in regions in China (apart from Xinjiang)⁴ are still using the Traditional Mongolian Script (abbreviated as TMS). However, the script itself has undergone some slight changes, i.e. minor orthographical and morphological simplifications. Nowadays TMS is used in Mongolia only on a restricted scale.⁵ The Cyrillic Mongolian Script (also known as “New Script”, abbreviated as CMS) has been used in Mongolia since 1941. As Janhunen (2012: 10) points out, “orthographically, Khalkha is often surprisingly unsystematic, and some of its orthographic solutions derive directly from Written Mongol”. It is noteworthy that the Roman alphabet is also being used to transliterate the language by the Mongols in their daily informal communications with each other both in Mongolia and Inner Mongolia, China.

The use of different scripts leads to the following differences in CWK and MWM: (1) orthographic differences and (2) different conventions of transliteration. Firstly, different spelling rules (conventions) are complied with:

Direction of writing (horizontal vs. vertical)

TMS is written vertically (from top to bottom and left to right), which makes it harder for computer to handle its formatting, but the CMS is in line with the western writing systems, written horizontally in a left-to-right linear order, facilitating use in the print media and dissemination of information online.

Letter-case (uppercase vs. lowercase)

The CMS distinguishes between uppercase and lowercase letters. The initial letter of sentences, proper nouns (the names of persons, places or organizations) and special nouns need to be capitalized. However, no such distinction exists in the TMS.

Representation of case suffixes

Case suffixes are written connected to word stems in CMS, whereas they are written separately in TMS (except for some irregular instances where a case marker is connected to the stem of a personal pronoun, e.g. *namayi* = 1SG.ACC; *čimayi* = 2SG.ACC). For instance, *amuüz* (*amijg*) ‘the life’ (direct object in the accusative case in CMS) vs. *ami yi* ‘the life’ < *ami* ‘life’ + *-yi* = ACC (written

4 The Mongolian people in Xinjiang use the Todo Mongolian Script (also known as Oirat Clear Script), which was created on the basis of the Traditional Mongolian Script (IMU 2005: 4).

5 Traditional Mongolian Script is used on a voluntary basis in Mongolia today. Thus, the scope of usage is very limited. Some people in Mongolia are still trying hard to restore the usage of Traditional Mongolian Script; the attitude of the general public tends to be more tolerant than before towards the reintroduction of Traditional Mongolian Script into Mongolia (based on personal communication with Erdeni 2017).

separately in TMS); *гарьг* (*garyg*) ‘the hand’ (direct object in the accusative case in CMS) vs. *γar i* ‘the hand’ < *γar* ‘hand’ + *-i* = ACC (written separately in TMS) (Poppe 1970: 63).

Positional variants of letters within a word

In TMS, according to the position of the letter in the word, each letter appears in different shapes, viz. word-initial, medial and final shapes. There is no such difference in letters depending on their position in the word in CMS.

Isomorphism

Suffixes are written separately from nouns in the TMS, whereas suffixes and nouns are written together according to the rules of the CMS. Due to the connective written forms of nouns and suffixes (e.g. genitive case), isomorphism often occurs in CMS. For example, both *kündü* ‘heavy’ and *kümün dü* ‘for/to people’ < *kümün* ‘people’ + *-dü* = DAT.LOC in WMS are written by the same form *хүнд* (*хүнд*) in CMS (cf. Li & Sarina 2011: 200).

Firstly, there may be orthographical ambiguity in CMS. For instance, the letter *н* is used to represent both /n/ and /ŋ/, so *анд* (*and*) means either ‘friend’ (/andə/) or ‘to a game animal’ (/aŋdə/) (Poppe 1970: 61). In TMS, they are clearly distinguished: *anda* ‘friend’ vs *ang du* ‘to a game animal’ < *ang* ‘game’ + *-du* = DAT.LOC.

Secondly, since there is no phonemically adequate official system of Romanization for Mongolian, different transliteration schemes are available for CMS and TMS. The National Standardisation Council adopted MNS 5217.2012 transliteration system for CMS; in comparison, the Vladimirtsov–Mostaert system (V–M) is the most widely-used transliteration system throughout Mongolian studies worldwide for the transliteration of TMS. (cf. Sanders 2013: 168–169; Svantesson et al. 2005; Mostaert 1968; Balk & Janhunen, 1999).

As for how the sounds of Mongolian are rendered in written form, the CMS is primarily phonemic in its spelling, whereas there is a marked divergence between orthography (spelling) and pronunciation with the TMS, whose spelling is based upon archaic pronunciation.⁶ Compare the following pairs:

- (1) *нар* (*nar*) ‘sun’ (CMS) vs. *nara* (TMS)
- (2) *ус* (*us*) ‘water’ (CMS) vs. *usu* (TMS)
- (3) *уул* (*yuul*) ‘mountain’ (CMS) vs. *ayula* (TMS)
- (4) *юм* (*jum*) ‘something/thing’ (CMS) vs. *γayum_a* (TMS)⁷

⁶ According to Grivelet (2001: 84), the Cyrillic Mongolian Script is mainly phonemic, while the Traditional Mongolian Script is more morphophonemic.

⁷ The underlining sign “_” is used to denote the positional variants of letters such as *A*, e.g. “_” is used in *sar_a* ‘month’ to distinguish it from *sara* ‘moon’.

Linguistic differences between Cyrillic Written Khalkha and Modern Written Mongolian

Differences between CWK used in Mongolia and MWM used in China are conditioned by the different dialects they are based on: CWK is based on the Khalkha dialect, while MWM is based on a range of dialects extending from Proto-Mongolic to the various Modern Mongolic dialects (Janhunen 2003: 34). This definition of MWM seems to combine two different dimensions, i.e. historical and socio-geographical. Nowadays, the Chakhar dialect, which is a variety of Mongolian spoken in the central region of Inner Mongolia, serves as the base of the oral norm for the MWM. Although the linguistic differences between CWK and MWM are not significant, there are still observable discrepancies in terms of morphosyntax and lexicon. In the following I will not discuss the phonetic differences between CWK and MWM, given that Written Mongolian is a non-spoken language which is transmitted via an abstract graphic code with no pronunciation involved (cf. Janhunen 2003: 34).

Morphosyntax

There are differences between CWK and MWM in terms of morphosyntax (cases, reflexive-possessive/reflexive suffixes, finite verbal forms and converbal/quasiconverbal forms).⁸ Some suffixes or suffix variants are newly appearing while others have ceased to exist in CWK.

A new case, viz. the allative case with the suffix *-rUU/-IUU* ‘towards’, has entered CWK; in contrast, no such case suffix exists in MWM, whose closest counterpart is the postposition *uruYu* ‘downwards; towards; along’, pronounced as *-urUU*. In addition, there are more suffix variants for the genitive case in CWK than its counterparts in MWM (Guntsetseg 2016: 36; Poppe 1954: 73–75). Compare the following pairs:

- (5) Genitive case (*-ijn, yn, -ij, -y*) (CWK) vs. Genitive case (*-yin; -un/-ün; -u/-ü*) (MWM);

In addition, the reflexive-possessive (reflexive) suffixes differ in Khalkha and in MWM. Note below:

- (6) *-AA* (CWK) vs. *-ban/-ben; -iyan/-iyen* (MWM).

Certain finite verbal forms are used mostly in CWK, whereas others may occur only in MWM: the potential imperative suffix *-mdz* occurs only in CWK (Svantesson 2003: 166); in comparison, the optative suffix *-tuyai/-tügei* appears only in MWM (IMU 2005: 509–511).

⁸ The reflexive-possessive suffix is also known as the reflexive suffix, and some converbs are sometimes termed quasiconverbs (cf. Svantesson 2003).

The following distinctions can be made between the converbal (quasiconverbal) suffixes in CWK and MWM (Svantesson 2003: 167; IMU 2005: 523–528):

- (7) successive converb: *-x-l-AAr* ‘as soon as’ (CWK) vs. *-qula/-küle* (MWM);
- (8) contemporal converb: *-ms-AAr* ‘when; after’ (CWK) vs. *-mayča/-megče* (MWM);
- (9) abtemporal converb: *-s-AAr* ‘when; since’ (CWK) vs. *-ysayar/-gseger* (MWM).

All the above-mentioned converbs in CWK are regarded as secondary quasiconverbs in Svantesson (2003: 167).⁹

Lastly, CWK has developed a more elaborate grammaticalised evidentiality¹⁰ system than that of MWM. In accordance with Brosig & Skribnik (2018: 559–564), there are up to seven evidential specifications in CWK, whereas in MWM the use of evidential markers is less obvious. Brosig & Skribnik (2018: 559) describes the existence of the following evidential markers in CWK:

- (10) past: direct perception (*-lAA*); inference (*-ž(ee)*); established past (*-sAn*);
- (11) present: direct perception (*-nA*); established present (*-AA*);
- (12) future: (*-x ge-ž bai-san/bai-(g)aa*); direct/indirect inference (*-x ge-ž bai-na/bai-laa/bai-žee*)

Forms presented in (12) are analytic constructions, viz. (1) *-x ge-ž bai-san* < *-x=FUT.PTCP, ge-ž* < *ge-* ‘say’ + *-ž=IPFV.CVB, bai-san* < *bai=AUX + -san=PRF.PTCP*; *bai-(g)aa* < *bai= AUX + -(g)aa=IPFV.CVB*; (2) *-x ge-ž bai-na* < *-x=FUT.PTCP, ge-ž* < *ge-* ‘say’ + *-ž=IPFV.CVB, bai-na* < *bai=AUX + -na=PRS/FUT*; *bai-laa* < *bai=AUX + -laa=PST*; *bai-žee* < *bai=AUX + -žee=PST*. These evidential markers should be present in MWM, but whether they denote similar meanings to those of CWK is debatable.

In comparison, evidential markers in MWM tend to be restricted to the past tense, which I suspect is still largely consistent with that of Middle Mongolian used in the thirteenth century. As Brosig & Skribnik (2018: 558) illustrate, in Middle Mongolian the suffix *-ba* is used to denote evidentially neutral factual past events, whereas *-lUGA* and *-JUGU* refer to direct and indirect past events respectively. Likewise, Wu (1995: 96) argues the suffix *-l a/-l e* (derived from *-lUGA*) typically refers to “an event that has been witnessed or is commonly known” which can be analysed as an evidential meaning; but he holds a sceptical view of its applicability

⁹ The suffixes *-x-l-AAr*, *-ms-AAr* and *-s-AAr* are respectively represented as *-x-l-Ar*, *-ms-Ar* and *-s-Ar* in Svantesson (2003: 167).

¹⁰ Evidentiality refers to the grammatical marking of information source (Aikhenvald 2018: 1).

for MWM. In his opinion, *-jai/-čai* is the most frequently used past tense suffix in both written and spoken languages; the suffix *-ba/-be* occurs mostly in the written language, but he does not discuss the evidential meanings of these suffixes. IMU (2005: 503) argues that the meaning and usage of the suffix *-ba/-be* is not differentiated from that of *-jai/-jei* in MWM.

Notably, sentence-final particles can also be used to express evidentiality both in MWM and CWK. Note the following examples in CWK:

(13) indirect evidence (*až*) (Brosig & Skribnik 2018);

(14) recollection (*bilee*) (Brosig 2012).

The particles *až* and *bilee* correspond to *ažai* and *bile* respectively in MWM. Both particles share the same evidential meanings in CWK and MWM.

Lexicon

Apart from lexical elements of a native origin, Mongolian possesses words stemming from a variety of sources, including those originating from the Mongolic, Turkic, Tungusic, Sino-Tibetan and Indo-European language families; there are loan words from Chinese, Greek, Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Manchu, Russian and so forth (IMU 2005: 9; 788). Chinese and Russian have become the two main sources of the more recent loanwords in Mongolian.

Modern scientific, technological and political terms based on standard international vocabulary have entered into both CWK and MWM via Russian (Janhunen 2003: 55). For instance, words such as *masin* ‘automobile’, *program* ‘programme’, *radio* ‘radio’, *kino* ‘film’, *katr* ‘cadre’ and *atom* ‘atom’ were all transmitted into Mongolian through Russian.

However, the number of Chinese borrowings varies significantly between CWK and MWM. The number of Chinese loanwords is significantly less in CWK, being restricted only to material culture. For instance, such words as *buuz* ‘steamed buns’ (Chi.: *bāo zi*), *ganz* ‘restaurant’ (Chi.: *guǎn zi*), *luus* ‘mule’ (Chi.: *luó zi*), *waar* ‘tile’ (Chi.: *wǎ*) and *tsonx* ‘window’ (Chi.: *chuāng hù*) are borrowed from Mandarin (Svantesson 2003: 174). In comparison, there are a larger number of Chinese loanwords in MWM, covering all aspects of political, economic and cultural life. For instance, *yangbir* ‘fountain pen’ (Chi.: *gāng bǐ*), *čiyiü* ‘petrol’ (Chi.: *qì yóu*), *diyanbou* ‘telegraph’ (Chi.: *diàn bào*), *nangqu* ‘thermos flask’ (Chi.: *nuǎn hú*), *liyouzi* ‘woollen fabric’ (Chi.: *liào zi*) and *pipa* ‘the Chinese lute’ (Chi.: *pí pá*) are all Chinese loanwords.

In addition, words of Tibetan origin are in relatively more active use in CWK than in MWM. Words relating to Buddhism are becoming obsolete in MWM, while some Tibetan loanwords have become an indispensable part of the vocabulary (IMU 2005: 801). For instance, CWK retains loanwords from Tibetan for the terms for the seven days of the week: they are *nyam* ‘Sunday’, *dawaa* ‘Monday’, *myagmar* ‘Tuesday’, *lxagwa* ‘Wednesday’, *pürew* ‘Thursday’, *baasan* ‘Friday’ and

byamba ‘Saturday’ (Svantesson 2003: 174). In contrast, the concept behind the days of the week follows the Chinese model in MWM, viz. *sayin edür* ‘Sunday (lit.: ‘the good day’), *yaray un nige* ‘Monday (lit.: the first day of the week), *yaray un qoyar* ‘Tuesday’, *yaray un yurban* ‘Wednesday’, *yaray un dörben* ‘Thursday’, *yaray un tabun* ‘Friday’, *yaray un jiryuyan* ‘Saturday’. The following are Tibetan loanwords which are still used in MWM: *lama* ‘lama’, *bum* ‘hundred thousand’, *say_a* ‘million’, *sil* ‘glass’ and *baybur* ‘a bowl with cover’ (see IMU 2005: 801 for more examples).

4. The symbolic value of Traditional Mongolian Script

There have been attempts to reintroduce Written Mongolian into Mongolia since the 1990s (Grivelet 1995: 49–60; Janhunen 2003: 32). Although the attempts were unsuccessful, TMS still possesses strong symbolic value:

Firstly, because of the non-phonetic nature of TMS, it can serve different Mongolian language groups in China as a communal written medium. TMS is a culturally and linguistically unifying factor for the majority of Mongols. It was during the reign of Chinggis Khan that the TMS was standardised and the language itself attained official status. Written Mongolian “was reinforced by Chinggis Khan as a general medium of administration and literature” and it “has ever since remained in use as the principal literary language of the Mongols” (Janhunen 2012: 6).

Secondly, a large number of historical and literary documents of great value are written in the TMS, and these documents shed some light on the history of mankind since the times of Chinggis Khan. As is noted by Grivelet (2001: 86), TMS is “considered the script of the ancestors and a symbol of the past”. The oldest known monument of Written Mongolian is an inscription dating back to about 1225, erected in honour of Yisüngge, known as the Stele of Yisüngge. The most ancient text of Mongolian literature, *mongyol un niyuča tobčiyān*, viz. *The Secret History of the Mongols*, was supposedly first written in the TMS in the 13th century (de Rachewiltz 2015: vii), although the original version which was written in the Old Script was lost and the current surviving text is in the form of transcriptions into Chinese characters. Ancient texts, especially those of a religious nature, are not transcribed into CMS, so the TMS has to be learned by someone who is interested in having access to historical texts (Grivelet 2001: 86). For instance, the xylographic editions of Buddhist works of the 16th and 17th centuries were created in the TMS (Poppe 1954: 1–3).

Thirdly, TMS helps to keep record of diachronic (historical) changes of the language. TMS preserves some grammatical forms which existed in ancient times but are lost in MWM. Therefore, it also facilitates our understanding of the history of the language of the Mongols. For example, in Classical Mongolian the present tense suffixes are *-mui/-müi*, *-nam/nem* and *-yu/-yü*, while the past tense suffixes

are *-ba/-be* (or *-bai/-bei*), *-luya/-lüge* and *-juqui/-jüki* (*-čuqui/-čükü*) (Poppe 1954: 91–93). In MWM the newly formed suffix *-n_a/-n_e* is used to denote the present indicative mood, while the old forms (*-mui/-müi*, *-nam/nem* and *-yu/-yü*) cease to exist unless in archaic texts. Likewise, the past tense suffixes *-l_a/-l_e* (or *-lai/-lei*), *-ji/-či* and *-jai/-čai* (*-jei/-čei*) have replaced *-luya/-lüge* and *-juqui/-jüki* respectively; and the past tense suffix *-ba/-be* is still used, while *-bai/-bei* is obsolete (IMU 2005: 499). Some suffixes have changed their meanings in MWM. For example, according to Poppe (1954: 89), the suffix *-ytun/-gtün* is used to form the benedictive in Classical Mongolian, viz. a polite request to the second person. However, in MWM, it expresses a command to the second person. The benedictive is expressed by the newly-formed suffix *-yači/-geči*, which was not documented by Poppe (1954). In Classical Mongolian, the suffixes *-tuyai/-tügei* and *-suyai/-sügei* were occasionally confused in reference to person; in MWM the suffix *-tuyai/-tügei* is used only for the third person and the suffix *-suyai/-sügei* is used exclusively for the first person. The voluntative suffix *-suyai/-sügei* is rarely used in MWM and it has ceased to exist in CWK (IMU 2005: 511; Poppe 1954: 90).

Last but not least, TMS still plays a decorative (ornamental) role in important social-cultural events in the Mongolic realm. For instance, important billboards such as welcome signs at the entrance of Ulanbaatar and commemorative signs for the 750th anniversary of *The Secret History of the Mongols* are written in TMS (Grivelet 2001: 90).

Conclusion

The current study comprises of three major parts: (1) orthographic differences between CWK and MWM; (2) linguistic differences between CWK and MWM; and (3) the symbolic value of TMS.

To summarise, the major differences between CWM and MWM lie in morphosyntax and lexicon. Due to the adoption of two different scripts, viz. CMS and TMS, CWK and MWM appear as if two different languages at the orthographic level. However, after a closer look at the language structure, it is not difficult to realize that we are dealing with slightly different versions of the same language. It is worth emphasizing that the TMS plays a crucial bonding role in preserving the Mongolian language and culture, leading to cultural unification of the Mongols and boosting their mutual understanding.

Abbreviations

ACC	accusative case
AUX	auxiliary verb
Chi.	Chinese

CMS	Cyrillic Mongolian Script
CVB	converb
CWK	Cyrillic Written Khalkha
DAT. LOC	dative locative case
FUT	future
IMU	Inner Mongolia University
IPFV	imperfective
MWM	Modern Written Mongolian
PRF	perfective
PRS	present tense
PST	past tense
PTCP	participle
SG	singular
TMS	Traditional Mongolian Script

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