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**Modern Oirat Language in the Republic of Mongolia
– still a Language or a Mixed Dialect of Modern Mongolian?¹**

Abstract

The paper is a short reflection on the current situation and status of the Oirat language in the Republic of Mongolia. So far most scholars have focused on the written Oirat language, on the Kalmyk language or on the Oirat language spoken in Xinjiang, while leaving out from their works or marginalizing the present status of Oirat in Mongolia. The paper deals with the most important peculiarities which should be taken under consideration, when the status of Oirat in Mongolia is revised.

There are many books, articles and academic works concerning Western Mongolian (Oirat) culture, history and language. They focus mostly on former times, giving very important information which is the basis for subsequent studies and researches. But very little has been written about the present times. Even the nowadays published scientific works report or repeat after the 20th century researches that the Oirat is spoken in the western aimags of the Republic of Mongolia by more than 150 thousand people.² There are hardly any publications about the modern Oirat language of Western Mongolia. The present author thinks that the situation there is actually quite different from the given number. Oirat's current status seems disregarded. Historical and political events of the past centuries have influenced the Oirats and their language. Due to this the Oirat language has become regarded as an endangered language in all regions where it is spoken, but

¹ By Modern Mongolian the author means modern Khalkha Mongolian (Mon.) commonly known as Mongolian proper.

² Birtalan (2003: 211).

nothing more has been done about it. Disagreement over the status of the Kalmyk language presents another problem.³

This paper presents only some general remarks and ideas which may fuel the discussion of the problem of the status of the spoken Oirat language in the Republic of Mongolia and its interaction with Modern Mongolian.⁴

Before presenting some new ideas and suggestions it is worth writing a concise, brief history of the Oirats, also known as Western Mongols. Who are they ethnically and what language do they speak? One of the existing theories says that the name or ethnonym Oirat, as we use it today, in the past referred to a tribal confederation of several groups of Western Mongols, the so-called 'Forest People' (Mon. *oin ard*)⁵ who lived, until the 13th century, to the south and southwest of lake Baikal. At the beginning of the 13th century, under the pressure of Chinggis Khan's son Jochi they moved to the steppes of the Altai region. In the 15th century Western Mongols created the Four Oirat Confederation (Mon. *Dörvön Oyirad*) and became an important political power in Asia. Soon their territory expanded from the Altai to Northern Xinjiang (Ili region), where the Jungharian kingdom was established. Later in the middle of the 18th century the Oirats were subjugated by the Manchu. As a consequence of inter-tribal conflicts some Oirat tribes dispersed over various regions (e.g. Lower Volga and the Caspian Sea).⁶ The Oirats and their descendents were and are the citizens of Mongolia, China and Russia and started to be dependent and influenced by the policy of their governments.⁷ At present their population in the Republic of Mongolia is estimated at around 200.000 and they are often called Oirat Mongols (Mon. *Oird Mongol*). Oirat Mongols are the descendants of major Oirat tribes: Torghut (Mon. *Torguud*), Dörbet (Mon. *Dörvöd*), Ölöd (Mon. *Ööld*) and minor: Bayid (Mon. *Bayad*), Minggat (Mon. *Myangad*), Zakhchin (Mon. *Zakhchin*), Uriankhai (Mon. *Uriankhai*).⁸ Their population is concentrated mostly in three western provinces (Khovd, Uvs and Bayan-Ölgii aimags) of the Republic of Mongolia. The majority are still shepherds, but there are Oirats who have abandoned their herds and

³ The problem is that some scholars consider Kalmyk as a dialect of Oirat and others as a separate language. Bläsing (2003: 230).

⁴ All data and information presented in this paper were gathered during a two-month linguistic field research in the provinces of Western Mongolia in 2007. The research project was sponsored by the Polish State Committee for Scientific Research: N 104 021 31/2075.

⁵ According to Tsevel (1966: 410).

⁶ The descendants of Oirat tribes who had migrated in the 17th century to the region of Lower Volga and the Caspian Sea became known as the Kalmyks. Soon they gave in to Tsarist Russia. The isolation of their language as well as the influence of the Russian language have contributed to the development of an independent Kalmyk language. Other parts of the Oirats migrated to Manchuria and Amdo regions, where their language was influenced respectively by Khalkha Mongolian and Tibetan. In the 19th century some Oirats migrated from Jungaria to the eastern region of Issyk Köl Lake.

⁷ This refers to the educational and language policies of each respective country. In all cases the policy was unfavourable for the Oirat peoples.

⁸ Today among the Oirat speaking tribes in Western Mongolia lives a non-Mongol (Turkish) tribe of the Khotons, who originally spoke their own language, but today use the Dörbet dialect of Oirat language. Wurm (1996: 190).

started successful careers in business, politics or office work in urban areas. Even after moving to the cities or urban areas they still preserve the Oirat traditions and customs but not the language.

Distribution of Oirat dialects in China and Mongolia⁹



The original Oirat language consisted of eight historical dialects: Bayid, Dörbet, Khoshut, Minggat, Ölöd, Torghut, Uriangkhai and Zakhchin. Later, as a consequence of disintegration of the Oirat tribal confederation and the influence of other languages, new dialects appeared.¹⁰ Before that, in 1648, the Oirat Buddhist monk Zaya Pandita developed the so-called “Clear script” (Mon. *tod bichig*), a universal alphabet for all

⁹ The map has been copied from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oirat_language.

¹⁰ There are still controversies and difficulties concerning classification of the Alashan or Darkhad dialects. The author has intentionally passed over Kalmyk, which he recognizes as an independent language with Oirat origin.

Oirat dialects.¹¹ The Oirat script was created mostly because the Oirats were not able to understand the Buddhist writings written in Mongolian.¹² Creation of one universal alphabet was possible as a result of a common uniformity of the Oirat dialects. It might be also regarded as an act of strengthening the unity of all tribes. But soon after spreading out, the Oirat language has been exposed to the influence of other languages and has started to change dynamically.

At the level of the spoken Oirat phonology, according to the description of the Oirat language by Heinrich Zwick¹³ and later researchers, its vowel system is very conservative (it preserves vowel harmony and labial attraction); it has reduced non-initial short vowels **ežen > ezn* 'owner, master', and developed monophthongs (long vowels) from diphthongs **sayin > sän* 'good, well'. The peculiarity of its consonant system concerns the front velars **k* and **g*, which may occur before back vowels **qoni > koni* 'sheep'.¹⁴ At the level of morphology the most significant peculiarity is the development of personal suffixes in conjugation, as it has happened in the Buryat language.

Person	Singular	Plural
1	-v	-vdn
2	-ch	-t/-tn
3	-ø	--ø

With the beginning of the 20th century the Oirat language started to change as a consequence of historical and political events. The independence of Mongolia, claimed in 1911, and again in 1921, as well as the creation of the People's Republic of China (1949) and later the political tensions between two USSR and China, all led to separate the Oirats, who live in the western regions of the Mongolian Plateau. In 1944 the Oirat "Clear Script" as well as the Mongolian Script used in Outer Mongolia were replaced by the Cyrillic alphabet.¹⁵ Both were recognized as anachronisms and elements of the feudal period. This had a direct influence on the Oirats and their language. The Mongolian government's policy to decrease the level of illiteracy with the beginning of the 1940s made Khalkha Mongolian the standard language to be taught at primary schools. Additionally,

¹¹ The "Clear script" was based on an existing and commonly used Mongol alphabet of the 17th century. It was used until the 20th century by all Oirats. Today it is used only by the older generation of the Xinjiang Oirats. This is due to the fact that there were political pressures to abandon it – Svantesson (2005: 148). As a consequence of the Chinese policy concerning the standardization of the Mongolian language in the PRC, began in 1982, the Chakhar dialect of Mongolian, spoken in Inner Mongolia, was chosen to be a standard. At that time the "Clear script" was replaced by the Mongol script. It has directly influenced the Oirat language which started to assimilate with the Chakhar dialect of Modern Mongolian.

¹² Poppe (1965: 18).

¹³ Zwick (1851).

¹⁴ Birtalan (2003: 213).

¹⁵ Before that in 1924, the "Clear script" used by the Kalmyks was replaced by the Cyrillic alphabet. In 1930 it was abandoned in favour of the Latin alphabet, but later, in 1938, again replaced by the new Cyrillic alphabet.

it was recognized as the official language of the Mongolian People's Republic.¹⁶ As a consequence, first the Oirat "Clear script" was abandoned and subsequently the Oirats from the western regions were offered education only in Khalkha Mongolian as a language of all Mongols in the MPR. This accelerated the process of assimilation of Oirat to Mongolian proper.¹⁷ In the beginning most of the Oirats was bilingual, but as time passed new, young generations, who did not have any permanent contact with the language, except at home, started to abandon the language of their ancestors. As this huge influence of Khalkha Mongolian was initiated, the Oirat language assimilated with it very fast, mostly in urban areas. But the lack of modern literature and newspapers in the Oirat language, as well as due to Khalkha Mongolian being a standard of education, using the Cyrillic alphabet and the lack of interest in preserving their own language by the Oirats themselves, have all caused irreversible changes in the spoken Oirat language. The linguistic gap between the older and younger generation of the Oirats¹⁸ drives modern Oirat to a faster assimilation with Khalkha. This is the right place to pose the question: Is the Oirat language in Mongolia still an independent language or has it become a new mixed dialect of Khalkha Mongolian?¹⁹ There is much evidence saying that it has already become a mixed dialect of Khalkha Mongolian. Even the Oirats themselves are called Oirat-Mongols (Mon. *Oird Mongol*). As the author's research shows²⁰, the old generation of the Oirats from the western provinces of the Republic of Mongolia is bilingual, while younger Oirats use the Oirat-Khalkha mixed dialect, which is characterized by preserving the Oirat phonetics and adopting the Khalkha Mongolian morphology, e.g. losing personal suffixes in verb inflection. At the lexicological level the Oirat-Mongol/Oirat-Khalkha dialect has preserved its own words and regionalisms,²¹ but most words now come from Modern Mongolian. Contact not only with Khalkha Mongolian, but also with Turkic languages, like Kazakh, Uyghur etc., has been the reason that today borrowings from Turkish languages are still alive in the Oirat-Mongol dialect.²² The affection process does not work in one direction only. There are some traces of influence of the Oirat language on spoken Khalkha Mongolian. Recently, we could observe the monophthongization process of diphthongs, e.g. **sayin* > *sān* 'good, well' or **bayi*- > *bā*- 'to be'. Note that this might be regarded as a next development stage of Modern Mongolian, though it might also be considered as the effect of the Oirat-Khalkha interaction.

In conclusion I would like to emphasize that it is worth considering if the current situation and status of the Oirat language in the Republic of Mongolia should be revised and thoroughly studied, which I hope will happen in the near future.

¹⁶ In 1968 the Mongolian authorities announced there was no more illiteracy among adult Mongolians.

¹⁷ Of course some changes and assimilations were observed before as well.

¹⁸ The language of the old generation is considered old-fashioned and a language of non-educated people.

¹⁹ Sanžeev noticed that some dialects of Oirat, like Bayid, are in the shift towards Khalkha Mongolian. Sanžeev (1953: 62).

²⁰ Rogala (2007).

²¹ For example: in the Bayid dialect *ūs* 'milk'.

²² Like Oirat. *Hashg*, but Mon. *khalbaga* 'spoon'.

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