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Dravidian and Altaic – Problems and Solutions

Abstract

The author sums up some of the results of his previous research on this topic with regard to lexical, morphological and phonetic parallels, points out some of the problems of formal and semantic interpretation of these parallels and proposes a new approach to the comparative study, not only on the basis of individual lexemes but also on the basis of established models. In addition the paper refers to a number of works on related topics (Old Indo-Aryan and contact with Dravidian, archaeological parallels, etc.).

Introduction

In this short survey of some of the problems I cannot go into great details and I recommend the reader to refer to my earlier publications on this subject for more examples of proposed concrete parallel etymological nests (see the attached bibliography).¹ The topic of Dravidian and Altaic has some history of preliminary proposals. Some examples have been mentioned already by R. Caldwell in 1850 and later the subject was raised by P. Meile (1949) and K. Bouda (Uralaltaic: 1953, 1956). The problem has also been studied in some greater detail by K.H. Menges (esp. 1964, 1977). Dravidian and Uralian was discussed very early by F.O. Schrader (1925) and later also by Th. Burrow (1943) and S.A. Tyler (1968). We should also mention the suggestions on parallels with Elamite (McAlpin 1981) on the one hand, and Korean (Hulbert 1906, Clippinger 1984) and Japanese (Ohno 1980) on the other. For a survey of the various trends in the long-range comparison of Dravidian with other language families,

¹ This concerns particularly the numbers referring to the etymological items in the text, which correspond to my earlier summary (2004b, reprinted 2006a) and the reader is invited to refer to that paper for greater detail.

cf. Zvelebil (1991 with further references). In the course of the last thirty years I have accumulated positive data, which appear to be more than a result of the operation of coincidence and which require further consideration.

The immediate parallels between the two language groups concern the **lexical level**, but there are also a few **morphological parallels**. On the basis of the lexical parallels some preliminary **phonetic correspondences** can be established. However, there are many **irregular** correspondences due to a number of lexical **doublets** on both sides, which have to be accounted for.

1. Lexical parallels

The lexical parallels are most immediately obvious for someone dealing with languages in both groups. However, the lexical parallels do not include the whole of the lexical classes and this is a serious problem, one to be explained if we seek to think in terms of the ‘young grammarians’ school of thought.

Besides item-to-item single lexical correspondences the material evidence forced me into an arrangement of broader etymological nests, often with variations within one or all of the language groups. To begin with, some of these groups appeared to have phonetic shapes which could only be seen as irregular correspondences and therefore not really acceptable. In the course of time, however, the number of examples in the individual groups increased to such an extent that a regularity of a different order could be identified in the form which I decided to call *phonetic continuum* (e.g. all the principal vowels in both families), which can be best described by using a *model*.

A number of single parallels were encountered very early on by me:

- (1) Ta. *kāl* leg, foot (DEDR 1479) – Mo. *kōl* leg
- (2) Ta. *karu* (DEDR 1395) – Mo. *xar-a* black
- (3) Ta. *maram* (DEDR 4711a) – Mo. *modu(n)* tree
- (4) Ta. *cey/ key*, Koṇḍa, Kuwi *ki-* (DEDR 1957) – Mo. *ki-* to do

In the 1990s I started adding Manchu-Tungus (MT.) and also Turkic words and discovered that particularly the MT. often fit very well, particularly on the level of the (C)VC- roots.

But it must be emphasized that not all *lexical classes* are represented equally and some are missing completely. The majority of etymologies include the **verbs** (Vacek 2004b, Nos. 4–14; cf. also Vacek 1983, 1992b, 1994, 1996b, 2003, 2004c, 2005a, 2005b, 2006b, 2006d, 2007b, 2007c, 2008a), particularly those of the **basic lexicon**, and also **nouns** from the basic lexicon – concerning the *body* (Vacek 2005c, 2006c, 2007a, 2008b), *immediate nature* (No. 3 above; Vacek 2001a, 2001b, 2002a), *some animals* (Vacek 2002c, 2004a) and *kinship terms* (Vacek 2004b, Nos. 2, 3; cf. also Vacek, Lubsangdorji 1994). But two lexical classes are missing completely, viz. the **pronouns** and the **numerals**. This is something which requires comment and at least a hypothetical explanation, which will be provided in the conclusion. The *verbs* are very

frequently represented and they appear to be very relevant for the comparison (both formally and semantically). Some of the verbal etymological nests (which applies also to some nouns) can be arranged in the form of *models* of formal structure (sometimes with interesting semantic variations). There are also some more complicated models, including the problem of semantics (cf. V a c e k 2002a).

2.1. Phonetic parallels

These are established on the basis of the lexical parallels, which sometimes appear in complex groups of etyma. Besides item-to-item or individual correspondences (of the ‘young-grammarians’ type), we can also identify ‘series’ or ‘groups’ or, as it might more appropriately be expressed, ‘models’ of correspondences, in such cases (cf. e.g. V a c e k 2002a, 2004b).

Individual correspondences

1. *m*-, *n*-, dental stop, velar stop, labial stop – are often quite regular in both language groups, mostly in the initial position, medially also in the nasal-plus-stop combinations, though the opposition voiced/voiceless is not necessarily identically represented (cf. V a c e k 2004b, Nos. 1, 3, 4, 15–23 for velars; Nos. 6, 24 for labials; No. 25 for dentals; Nos. 2, 29 for nasals, etc.).

2. Initial stops and nasals may occasionally alternate – *p/m* (V a c e k 2004b, No. 29; and e.g. ‘body’: Mo. *bej-e(n)*; Ta. *mey* [DEDR 5073]); sometimes this also concerns *t/n* (V a c e k 2004b, Nos. 25a, 25b). There are a number of examples of this type of correspondence (and also variation in one language, cf. the Mongolian examples below Section 2.2.) and they will have to be listed more exhaustively in future. There may hardly be any phonetic reason for this variation, which may rather be due to dialectal variation within the ancient linguistic areas (cf. below).

3. **p*- – for lost initial labial in Mongolian with occasional variation in Dravidian, cf.:
 Mo. *olan*, Ta. *pala* (DEDR 3987) many;
 Mo. *ongyu*- to burn (inside), feel heat; Ta. *poŋku* (DEDR 4469a) boil up;
 Mo. *öri* 1. debt, obligation; Ta. *ari* / *vari* (DEDR 216, 5266) tax, impost, toll, contribution / tax, duty; tribute etc.).

4. There is something like a ‘prothetic’ vowel before initial nasals in some lexemes in Mongolian:

- Ta. *maṛa*- to forget, neglect; To. *maṛ*- to forget; etc. (DEDR 4760)
 Mo. *umarta*-, *marta*- to forget

Ta. *naku-* to laugh, smile, etc. (DEDR 3569)

Mo. *inege-*, *inige-*, *inije-* to laugh, chuckle

5. Though the above-mentioned phonetic correspondences appear to be mostly straightforward, in some cases we can observe a special alternation of sibilants and liquids (a typical Turkic-Mongolian isogloss [cf. P o p p e 1960, pp. 77ff., 81ff.],² in Dravidian often represented by cerebral liquids), with some unpredictable irregularities. Here is an interesting case (cf. also V a c e k 2004b, No. 4), which displays the Altaic sibilant as against the Dravidian cerebral liquid:

Ta. *kīla-* to say; *kīlavu* word, speech, language

Go. *kel-* to tell (6 Dravidian languages) (DEDR 2017b)

Mo. *kele-* to utter words, speak, say, tell

MT. *KILAN* to shout (Evenk. < Yak.); Even. *kilŋija* sonorous (voice) (MTD I,382)

OT. *keläčü* word; *kele:čü:* talk, conversation (< Mo. according to Cl. 716)

Yakut *kylan-* to shout sharply, to yell (MTD I,392)

In this case there is an interesting parallel of forms with sibilants in MT. and Turkic, which seems to be typical of those etyma that in Dravidian have a cerebral liquid:

Orok. *xese* word, speech, language (MTD I,483)

Ma. *gisu-*, *gisure-* to speak, explain, to argue, debate

gisun word, speech, language (s.v. *GIS* drumstick, MTD I,156)

Chuv. *kəəʃkəər-* schreien, quacken (= to shout, to croak, to quack) (Paas. 70)

Or:

Ta. *tukał* / *tūł* dust; *tūci*, *tūcu* dust (DEDR 3283)

vs.

Mo. *toγusu(n)* / *toru* – dust / flying dust (V a c e k 1981, No. 2.13).

This variation was not immediately obvious and it certainly did not yield to the ‘young-grammarians’ approach, which in the beginning appeared to me to be obligatory and I believed that the correspondences should be regular and systematic. Ultimately under the pressure of the material evidence which appeared to be rather persuasive and undisputable, I realised that some of the correspondences may be ‘systematically unsystematic’ and that we have to document them thoroughly first and then look for variant interpretations of this phenomenon (see below).

² This correspondence has been broadly discussed in Altaic and it certainly deserves more attention also in the light of, and with regard to, the variable Dravidian parallels.

Models of correspondences

A. *Medial velars* vs. *labials* (including the nasal+stop groups) – cf. V a c e k 2004b, Nos. 7a–7b, 22a–22c, 25a–25b; 26a–27b. This appears to be a rather regular and acceptable model situation.

B. The models may also include vowels, ranging from front vowels to back vowels in one etymon. This ‘variation’ occurs particularly with lexemes belonging to the basic vocabulary (cf. V a c e k 2002a). It may appear less acceptable at first sight and can only be explained within the framework of a special sociolinguistic situation (see below).

2.2. Morphological parallels

In morphology there is a layer of *-VC*, *-VL* suffixes following immediately the *CVC*-root – which can be called stem extensions:

e.g. *-r-* (V a c e k 2004b, Nos. 6, 11), *-k-* (V a c e k 2004b, No. 9), *-c-* (V a c e k 2004b, No. 16a).

An interesting example of such an etymon with stem extension is e.g. V a c e k 2004b, No. 29:

Ta. *meluku* to smear, varnish (floor with cow dung) (DEDR 5082)

Mo. *milaya-* to smear with oil (including ritualistic overtones in both languages)³

bila- to coat with, smear, spread; to soil

bilca- to smear all over; to splash in the mud

MT. *BIRE-* to knead the dough (Nan., Ma.) (MTD I,85)

?*MELŽER* spot (between the eyes of a dog) (MTD I,566)

Another morphological parallel is the so-called *temporal suffixes*, originally verbal nouns:

Ta. *-ku*, Mo. *-ku/-kü*;

Ta. *-tu/-ttu*, Mo. *-ju/-cu*, OT. *-di*.

I noticed these parallels of temporal suffixes very early on. My first paper read in UB in 1976 (cf. V a c e k 1977, English version 1978) discussed the temporal suffixes among other things. Later, in the 1990s, I mentioned the stem extensions in several of my papers.

In addition there are a number of *particles* or *clitics*, which may be considered to belong partly to the lexicon and partly to grammar (cf. V a c e k 2002b).

This may appear to be a rather meager morphological parallelism, but it concerns the level of formation of secondary stems (*extensions*) and verbal noun suffixes (immediately

³ This immediate parallel of two words was first mentioned in one of my early papers (V a c e k 1983, p. 10, No. 2.36.1) and later repeated in V a c e k 2002a, pp. 295–296, and most recently V a c e k 2004b, p. 443ff., No. 29, as part of a broader etymological model with more extensive variation (repr. V a c e k 2006a).

after the *CVC*- root), and in that sense both represent the basic level of the system of derivation, more stable and not immediately exposed to ‘attrition’. The verbal noun suffixes later became temporal suffixes – or rather they specialized in that meaning (at least in Dravidian and Mongolian). So far I have not dealt with morphology of MT. or Turkic (except for recording the parallel in Turkic *-di*).

One note concerning **reconstruction**. Though I reckon with phonetic correspondences in establishing the relevant etyma, I refrain from reconstruction, which I consider to be only a “summary” of the existing forms (useful pedagogically or in ‘grasping’ the individual groups of lexemes). A reconstruction can even occasionally be misleading (cf. August Schleicher’s Indo-European reconstruction), though in the long run it can perhaps be accepted as an approximation (cf. the later development of IE linguistics), but in my opinion it is hardly absolutely reliable or reflecting the phonetic realization of the language in the past into which it is projected.⁴

3. Conclusion – implications

In my earlier papers I expressed a reserved attitude towards the interpretation of these facts in terms of a language family. I should like to underline again that I am sceptical with regard to this interpretation. Only repeated encounters with words and sets of words in one group which I knew to be in the other group induced me to deal with the subject repeatedly in the last thirty years. At the same time, and in spite of a number of rather regular and straightforward correspondences, I can see clearly that the material is not systematic enough (the great variability of lexical forms is quite conspicuous) to satisfy the requirements for the definition of a language family of the type of IE. That is also why I refrain from reconstructions and hasty conclusions in general. This follows especially from the fact that there are not only many **irregularities**, but also **‘vacancies’ in the system** (numerals, pronouns) as well as in the individual etymological nests. However, there is no doubt that there are many similarities and parallels between the two language groups, which sometimes appear to be unbelievably close. This is the reason why I think that the subject should be studied seriously without any prejudice, historical or ideological.

The facts point not to **a traditional language family** (e.g. like Indo-European) but to a group of languages related in a different manner. The most immediate answer is that we have to do with an ancient **linguistic area** or areas (cf. Vacek 2002a, pp. 25ff., see the Index, with further references),⁵ which would best account for the many parallels (pointing partly to common origin) and particularly for the many irregularities (contact

⁴ This question has been discussed in other contexts (e.g. Birnbaum 1977; Schwink 1994) and would require separate treatment.

⁵ The concept of a much broader linguistic area including other parts of Central and Eastern Asia was proposed by C.P. Masica (1976). Later he also used the term ‘Indo-Turanian’ linguistic area including not only South Asia, but also the area of Central Asia, Korea and Japan (cf. P.E. Hook 1987, pp. 155–156).

of languages and mutual borrowing). The linguistic material collected in the course of time could therefore not be grasped in terms of a 'young grammarian' one-to-one system of phonetic and lexical relations. Ultimately I have adopted the idea of **models** accommodating **groups of lexemes** and also sets or subsets of sounds, though occasionally we can also point out one-to-one parallels of individual lexemes and individual phonetic correspondences. Hopefully this new approach will allow for a more dynamic picture of the linguistic space under scrutiny, though it may appear to be rather 'post-modernistic' from a purely young-grammarian point of view.

What can the implications be concerning the developments in **time** and **space**? Judging from the fact that the R̥gveda has a relatively small number of Dravidian borrowings (Witzel 1999, 16ff.), while the later Vedic texts, the *Atharvaveda* and in particular the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, are much more influenced by the Dravidian lexicon, we can say that contact between the two language groups occurred at a period later than the R̥gveda but possibly preceding the composition, or in the course of the composition, of the later texts.⁶ The real answer, however, remains hidden and we have to search for it in the interface between linguistics and archaeology. It will depend on our ability to compare various data and to interpret them trustworthily. So far this has been done for the IA languages (Parpola 1999) or IA languages with some consideration of Dravidian (Southworth 2005), though the question of contact between Aryan and pre-Aryan has also been raised with regard to Hinduism (Sjöberg 2005). I would agree with Sjöberg (2005, p. 73), that the 'arrivals' (he speaks about the Sanskrit-speaking Aryans) did not necessarily have to be massive invasions. Smaller and technically (esp. militarily) advanced groups would have been able to settle in the area and establish new social and cultural (and also linguistic) relations.

As for Indo-Aryan, A. Parpola (1999) has proposed a 'historical correlation' of various archaeological periods and development of the OIA languages and dialects, including the pre-IA stages in Central Asia. Perhaps some of his findings can also be considered in the light of the above Dravidian and Altaic parallels and of the lack of Dravidian borrowings in the earliest Vedic texts, and can eventually be re-interpreted accordingly. But this remains to be done and will require more exhaustive linguistic material on the one hand, and possibly also the relevant cultural material on the other.⁷ This is a sphere of pure theoretical considerations, which as a necessary prerequisite

⁶ Cf. Witzel (1999, p. 21, web version p. 23): 'This result is important for the time of the immigration of speakers of Dravidian into the Panjab and it specifically underlines that the Indo-Aryans *did not at once* get into contact with speakers of Drav. but only much later, when the tribes speaking IA were already living in the Panjab and on the Sarasvatī and Yamunā. Apparently, Dravidian speakers began influencing the Panjab *only at this moment in time* (cf. Allchin 1995: 31 sqq., see above). *Consequently, all linguistic and cultural deliberations based on the early presence of the Drav. in the area of speakers of IA, are void or they have to be reinvestigated.*' However, the question remains from which direction the early Dravidian language was brought. In the light of the Dravidian and Altaic parallels, it probably was not 'middle and later RV immigration of Drav. speakers from Sindh' as Witzel (1999, p. 21; web version, p. 24) would assume.

⁷ Could the form of dwelling of the early Iron Age megalithic people be relevant in this context? 'These dwellings recall the yurts of the Central and East Asian nomads.' (Parpola, *ibid.*, par. 4.4). The timing of the

demands the most complete linguistic material, well structured and arranged according to a unifying concept. No less important are the archaeological data and the data concerning the material culture which must then be correlated with the purely linguistic data.⁸ The practical and methodological implication of these areas for work in historical linguistics is obvious. In this context it is interesting to note the contribution of Deshpande (1995), who among other things discusses linguistic, cultural and biological identities (p. 78f.), but also points to disciplinary limitations and the need for caution (pp. 80–81). And last but not least, research into the Dravidian and Altaic relationship is to be seen as being complementary to other areas and directions of comparison of Dravidian languages and their culture/cultures (e.g. with Munda and African languages and cultures) and should always be assessed in that context.

Thus, and this has to be emphasized, the main task remains the *heuristic work* – the need to collect the material (and not only in linguistics), to know the *history* of the individual lexemes (if indeed this is possible in all details), whether and from which language they were borrowed and when etc. (in this respect I agree with Ts. Shagdasarüring 2005, p. 180ff.). The obvious problem is the fact that we often have to do with languages with very little or no written materials or historical records. Many of the languages have existed naturally within the spaces of linguistic areas, have had contacts with other related and unrelated languages, which often resulted in mixed languages, but these languages can hardly be considered to be mixed because their history was not or could not be studied and therefore their linguistic status is not clarified.⁹ In other words, we do not have sufficient documentation to prove this fact. We know from other languages that there are many processes involved in the contact of languages which obscure the origin of some etyma. This may be due to borrowing and re-borrowing¹⁰ or else it may be due to the fact that the foreign lexemes were thoroughly integrated through the (perhaps universal?) operation of *folk etymology*. Folk etymology, it needs

megaliths (1100–800 B.C.) would coincide with the increased number of ‘Dravidian’ borrowings, particularly in the texts of the later *Vedas* and *Brāhmaṇas* (1st quarter of the 1st Millennium B.C.).

⁸ Some inspiration may also be drawn from studies in onomastics, e.g. Balakrishnan 2005. Obviously the final evaluation of the results will have to be done in other contexts (ethnic, cultural, possibly also linguistic), but onomastics could indicate some specific areas for further more detailed research. In fact, Balakrishnan’s paper points to a considerable number of parallels of personal and local names of the Koya tribe in Koraput district of Orissa and local names in Nigeria, West Africa! His Table 1 (place names, pp. 177f.) has 463 items, Table 2 (Koya tribe names and place names in Nigeria, pp. 191f.) has 47 items, Table 4 (Koya ethnonyms and place names in Nigeria, pp. 195f.) has 110 items.

⁹ A relevant example is the linguistic area of small languages in Central India, which could be studied with profit not only for concrete knowledge of the relevant languages and their characteristics, but possibly also for inspiration with regard to the linguistic methods, linguistic theory and also to the interpretation of the data. Cf. B.R. Reddy (2005).

¹⁰ With languages having a well documented history it is relatively easier to obtain the relevant information. Cf. e.g. the English words *guard* / *ward*, both of Germanic origin, whose modern meaning does not necessarily point to a common origin. But the first one (*guard*) was filtered (or rather preserved in a more archaic form) through the borrowing into French and then from French into English, while the latter (*ward*) underwent a regular development from the early Germanic form into English.

to be emphasised, interprets borrowed words against the background of the formal and semantic structure of the receiving language.¹¹

What is therefore needed is a (sufficiently *flexible*) **system**, a structural framework to accommodate and classify the results of the required heuristic work. We have to approach this task with an open mind, but at the same time respect the requirement for a rigorous and systematic presentation of the data. Interpreting (and also reconstructing) the mixture of systematic (regular) and unsystematic (irregular) elements (lexical and phonetic) hastily would undermine any future work with this data. It is evident that the described parallels do not allow us to speak in terms of a **classical language family**, but rather in terms of a **prehistoric linguistic relationship** filtered and altered through an **ancient linguistic area**, or areas. Dealing with the material on the basis of flexible **models** will allow us to arrange the materials produced by heuristic work in a systematic way. There is a requirement for a **shift of the paradigm** of our linguistic analysis. A vast area (Indo-Turanian, cf. Masica) which presumably consists of a series of smaller linguistic areas can only be properly evaluated in the light of modern theories of language contact and creolization processes (cf. e.g. Thomason, Kaufman 1988). Or, as it was put rather emotionally by G. Doerfer (1973), who refuses any comparison beyond the established language families and calls it deridingly ‘omnicomparatismus’: ‘The young grammarians are dead. Long live the young grammarians of the future!’¹²

As for the historical **implications** in the narrower sense of the word, they concern primarily the early history of India, but also that of Central Asia, though more hypothetically (cf. Vacek 2004b, pp. 449–50 and 2006a, pp. 90–91). And there will possibly also be implications for the understanding of the composition of the tissue of Indian culture in general as well as its various local variants and their historical development.

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¹¹ E.g. the German capital Berlin goes reportedly back to the Slavonic word *brlina* describing a landscape type represented by countryside with lakes etc. Folk-etymologically, however, it is perceived as if connected with the word for ‘bear’ and the city also has the bear on its coat of arms! For some more examples of folk etymologies cf. Vacek 1995, Note 2.

¹² ‘Die Junggrammatiker sind tot. Es leben die Junggrammatiker der Zukunft!’ (Doerfer 1973, p. 122).

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