It is premature to declare the fall of the common Altaic theory pioneered by G. J. Ramstedt and N. N. Poppe. By Altaic I mean to include Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic groups. We should go through the accumulated Altaic scholarship to see what pros and cons are there in the theory. Among the works of Altaicists, those of Poppe had been of the most general and fundamental significance in inheriting what has been done in the past and ushering what should be done in the future by describing Mongolic and advancing the Altaic theory. As I wrote somewhere in my publications, the Altaic genealogical unity is reasonable and tenable. However, Altaic comparative studies had proved inadequate for the aimed task—the contradiction of theorization with linguistic connections was overwhelming and many interested students yearning for a better method to resolve the issues. Notably, the two main pillars—the Ramstedt-Pelliot’s hypothesis and sigmatism/zetacism—in support of the Altaic theory that provide focal points for the development of sound correspondences are wrong. Henceforth, the validity of the Altaic theory cannot be assessed by relying on the wrong organization of sound changes or correspondences. The Ramstedt-Pelliot’s hypothesis (or the so-called Ramstedt-Pelliot’s law) refers to the sound change of \(*p > f > h > 0\). Since sound change and its possible resultant correspondences are a core subject, not just one of many things that are to be discussed, in comparative studies, I have been working to question the validity of the two pillars and presented the Altaic sound change of \(k/q > h > 0\) and of rhotacism/lambdacism with a host of telling examples.

The common assumption in Altaic studies is that a sound change intended to support the genetic unity of Altaic languages can be hypothetical reconstructions, which are partial in the sense of not involving all the groups or leaving aside a group. One notable example is the study of Middle Mongolian (MMo) \(h\)- and its eventual exclusion of the Turkic group out of the Altaic loop. We do not necessarily agree with this school of thought and some other adherents of the Altaic theory that it is the hypothetical reconstruction that really matters. Among most of the interested researchers, Altaic linguistics has largely been about down-to-earth matters such as gathering data, analyzing data, and producing research findings. Most objective researchers who work on Altaic in comparative terms would be able to agree that Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic go stringed together in the domain of change from \(k/q\) to \(h\) and that neither can be well understood without the other.

Words are made up of a variable combination of phonetic segments that are essential part of phonological system of a language. We now understand that Turkic, at least in its old stage, was conservative in word-initial position occupied by \(q/k\), while Mongolic and Tungusic were relatively innovative. Phonetic segments of a language vary greatly in their functional load in certain positions at a given period of historical development. By going through \(ДТС\) (Древнетюркский словарь (Old Turkic Dictionary), 1969), I found the \(q/k\) in Old Turkic very active in word-initial position. In \(ДТС\) with 643 pages for word entries, the words beginning with \(k\) have forty-four pages (288-332), and those beginning with \(q\) occupy seventy-seven pages,
together making up a total of 121 pages presenting 18.8 percent of the pages for entries in the dictionary. In contrast, the words beginning with \( h \) and \( ḥ \) receive only four pages (197-200) filled in by largely foreign, Arabic, loanwords. There seems a few native Turkic words such as \textit{hana} ‘mother’ and \textit{hata} ‘father’ alternating with \textit{ana} and \textit{ata}, respectively. This systematic distribution of the relevant consonants signals the recalcitrance of the Old Turkic (OT) \( q/k \) to erosion to the fricative \( h \) or the like. As a further phonotactics, in some crosslinguistic borrowing the foreign word beginning with \( h \)- presented itself with \( q \). For example, Chinese \textit{huma} (胡麻) ‘Hu hemp, Hu flax’ and \textit{hongdou} (紅豆) ‘red bean’ became OT \textit{quma} and \textit{qundu}, respectively, in the same sense (\textit{ДТС} 465, 466). But this is not a clear-cut indication of the phonotactics because we see Chinese \textit{huashen} (化身) ‘incarnation’ was taken as \textit{χuašin} in Old Turkic (\textit{ДТС} 638). The way Old Turkic responded to Chinese \textit{huma} is similar to that of Dagur \textit{kima} from Chinese \textit{huma}.

The phonological evidence for the Old Turkic \( q \) variation toward \( χ \) is in the feature relative to back vowels. The \( χ \) or \( x \), depending on the style of transcription by individual researchers, seems to be a fricative. \textit{ДТС} uses \( χ \), and Clauson (1972) has \( x \). To study sound change, it is necessary first to go through the data in relevant languages. Because a sound change may be a lasting phonological process over time, there could be a series of supporting examples. In \textit{ДТС} (635-637) I found phonetic variation of \( q \) in the direction of \( χ \) such as \textit{qalï} \( \sim \) \textit{χalï} ‘if’, \textit{qïz} \( \sim \) \textit{χïz} ‘girl’, \textit{qamağ} \( \sim \) \textit{χamağ} ‘all’, and \textit{qïtay} \( \sim \) \textit{χïtay} ‘Kitan’. These variations constitute pieces of solid evidence for the origin of MMo \( h- \) from \( k/q \), which has nothing to do with the *\( p \). Unfortunately, to the best of my knowledge, no one in Altaic studies had done such a work to shed light on MMo \( h- \). In short, the change from \( k/q \) to \( h \) or \( χ \) is a predictable and attested change. It operated first on phonetic variation, already present in Old Turkic. The similar variation took place in Old Turkic as well between \( q \) and \( ġ \), e.g., OT \textit{qïsqa} \( \sim \) \textit{qïsğa} ‘short’ (\textit{ДТС} 448) and some other ones. The emphasis on Old Turkic may not seem obvious at first, but an example can demonstrate the point. Suppose you support the common Altaic theory advocated by Ramstedt and Poppe. If you follow them in reconstructing the *\( p- \) to connect the three groups without considering its consequence, do you think the hypothetical Mongolic form *\textit{pulağan} ‘red’ can fulfill its purpose to support the Altaic unity in the face of OT \textit{qïz-} ‘to redden’? Not all. Instead, MMo \textit{hulağan} came from *\textit{hulgan} (< *\textit{hus-ğan}) through lambdacism occurred in the postvocalic position in comparison with OT \textit{qïz-}. The rhotacism/lambdacism goes beyond Altaic. To exemplify this change, just consider how Old Turkic \textit{alma} ‘apple’ derived from Arabic \textit{asmār} ‘fruits’ (for details, see the link https://cwu.academia.edu/PenglinWang).

In my articles (Wang 1993, 1992) I dealt with the MMo \( h- \) by restoring the place and role of Turkic group in the Altaic sound change from \( k/q \). I took note of the most elementary dimensions of the sound change of \( h- \) occurring in MMo and its continuation in modern Mongolic languages and then moved to those running through Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic.

Pursuit of scholarship and truth may be disrupted with prejudice and misjudgment. My approach to MMo \( h- \) met with criticism by Janhunen (1999). As I publish my research findings, I welcome criticism as far as it is of scientific essence and fairness. Janhunen’s (1999:116, 118) article about MMo \( h- \) includes two threads of observation as follows:

- “the whole development from Pre-Proto-Mongolic to Modern Mongolic may be reconstructed as *\( p > *f > (*)h > 0’’”.
- “All of this is now common knowledge, and any radical reinterpretation of the situation, such as that proposed by Wang Penglin (1993), can only be based on an insufficient familiarity with the linguistic facts”.

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As far as the article goes, these are conclusive remarks of what Janhunen is talking about. It does not, however, say anything concerning the linguistic facts underlying the origin of MMo initial fricative $h$- that Janhunen held to be at the heart of Mongolic historical linguistics to the exclusion of Altaic comparative studies. The whole development? Not really. As Janhunen rejects the common Altaic theory, although he has adopted the Altaic sound change proposed by the Altaicists, he has to transplant it from Altaic to Mongolic. Therefore, his effort fits very poorly and misleadingly.

Holistic capturing sound changes so as to generalize concerning their characteristics requires considerable expertise and skill. A genuine familiarity with the linguistic facts must be manifested with concrete presentation of linguistic data drawn from the concerned languages. While Janhunen as a reconstructionist has enthusiastically pursued his work, he hardly asked himself what ‘familiarity with the linguistic facts’ means and what ‘the linguistic facts’ are. In this particular case, no single linguistic fact was presented to support the hypothetical $p$. So the issue of ‘familiarity’, that is, whether or not the reconstructionist is really familiar with what they are claiming to be familiar, hardly ever arises. For Janhunen at the moment of his writing, ‘familiarity’ meant to ‘imagination’ at worst and ‘reconstruct’ at best, and ‘linguistic facts’ were an endless series of the hypothetical reconstructions with the signs $*$ throughout his seventeen pages. To his initial unfair and counterfactual calling out me for ‘an insufficient familiarity with the linguistic facts’ was added the still further bias by keeping deadly silent to his ‘familiarity’ when Janhunen swiped out his favorite $p$- in his 2003 work by actually adopting my research findings, for he lost courage to explain why he abandoned his favorite stand and to identify the source of his ‘familiarity’. This is not to suggest that such a bias vitiates the results: it does not appear to do so because Janhunen was no longer able to enjoy selling and repeating his $p$-. Rather, it is to remind that the kinds of professional concerns and responsibility researchers have about innovative approaches and their sources have not been the same as those of laymen.

References


ДТС = Древнетюркский словарь (Old Turkic Dictionary), edited by В. М. Наделяев et al. 1969. Ленинград: Наука


