



ALTAIC

ALTAIC, The Altaic peoples and languages are distributed around 45° north latitude, from eastern Europe to the Pacific Ocean. Until recently, the Altaic language family was considered to consist of three groups: Turkic (to which belong several languages locally spoken in parts of Iran and Afghanistan such as Azeri Turkish, *Ḳalaḡ* and Uzbek) in the west and center, Mongolian in the center and southeast, and Tungus in the northeast. Since the theory that these three are genetically related to Korean, Japanese, and Ryukyu has received corroboration, a total of six groups may be distinguished—three “inner” and three “outer.”

Altaic peoples. The greatest density of the inner Altaic-speaking populations is found at their western extremity, in the Turkish republic. The large territories to the east are sparsely inhabited but contain a few areas of relative congestion, e.g., in the regions of Soviet Azarbaijan, Turkestan, and the central Volga. Half of the total population of about 70 million live in Turkey, the rest from Transcaucasia eastward through Soviet and Chinese Turkestan to Siberia. In Siberia the Yakuts (numbering about 300,000) are the farthest north and east of the Turkic peoples. They live in the basins of the Lena river and its tributaries and on some of the New Siberian islands, as far as 75° north latitude. The Mongolian peoples barely exceed 3,000,000. The most numerous of them (ca. 750,000) are the Xalxa, who live preponderantly in the northern part of the Mongolian People’s Republic. Second in numbers (ca. 400,000) are the Buryats to the south, around Lake Baikal. The eleven Tungus peoples, excluding the Manchus, total only about 50,000; the Manchus, who survive in



Manchuria and the cities of northern China, seem to number about 2,000,000. (On population figures, see the note in the bibliography.) The areas of dense population are mostly agricultural and depend on irrigation; but, in recent decades, there have also developed industrial concentrations (particularly in the USSR). The steppes and deserts which extend from the Caspian to the confines of Korea allow only a few such interspersed developed areas. Along the northern boundary of the Altaians' habitat, the Eurasian forests extend in an almost unbroken line from the Pacific to the Baltic Sea; the southern boundary is formed by mostly barren plateaus of varying altitude.

As 19th-century research on languages extended beyond Indo-European and Hebrew, languages occurring in Europe such as Hungarian and Finnish attracted attention. Some of the languages now termed Finno-Ugric were recognized as related to either Hungarian or Finnish. Later a certain affinity of Turkic languages with Finno-Ugric also was perceived. About the middle of the last century the term Altaic began to be used, out of a number of proposed generic terms. "Altaic" appeared convenient, as scholars came to accept the idea of these peoples' migrations from the east, particularly from the steppes around the Altai mountains. The Altaic peoples have always been in some proximity to the ancient, highly civilized peoples of Asia and Europe: the Chinese, the Iranians, and the heirs of classical Europe—the Byzantines, late Romans, and Germans. The first Altaians who can clearly be identified are the early Huns or Hsiung-Nu in the Chinese annals from the 3rd century B.C. on. During the rule of their *shan-yü* ("leader") Mao-Dun (207-174 B.C.), the Hsiung-Nu reached the apogee of their power and ruled a great portion of northern China. Early in the period of the Later Han (A.D. 22-220), they were defeated by the Chinese and pursued as far west as the Tarim basin (Eastern Turkistan). The Huns gradually proceeded westward, encountering the Sasanian empire to the south, and appeared on the northeastern frontier of the Roman empire in the second half of the 4th century A.D.; their power was finally broken with Attila's defeat in eastern Gaul in 451 and his death in 453. Late in the reigns of Justinian (527-65) and of Kōsrow I (531-78), the Avars (the Žuan-Žuan of Chinese sources) appeared in the west. While some of their remnants were still fighting in northern China, the main body was making incursions into Roman territory from the lower Danube to the Rhine. They besieged Constantinople in 619 and again in 626, when Persian troops were also moving against the city. The Avars' power was decisively broken by Charlemagne in his campaigns of 791 and 795-96. The Avars belonged to the Śyān-bi—the same tribal confederation as the later Qitan and Mongols—and so are without doubt



the first Mongolian group to be historically attested. They were the first to use the title *ga gan* (later *qān*, *kān*) for their supreme ruler. The term was adopted by the Turks in Mongolia as soon as they shook off Avar overlordship (ca. 552), when the Avars were in general retreat over the steppes north of China.

In a series of relatively minor movements, Turkic groups began to occupy territories in western Central Asia and eastern Europe which had previously been held by Iranians (i.e., Turan). The Volga Bulgars, following the Avars, proceeded to the Volga and Ukraine in the 6th-7th centuries. The Pechenegs and Qomans moved into the plains north of the Black Sea and the Danube lowlands (modern Rumania and Bulgaria) in the 9th-10th centuries; while the Hungarians advanced from the Ural to their present homeland. Sasanian Iran was not seriously molested by these latter nomadic movements. The situation changed in the early 2nd/8th century, however, when the Arabs, having conquered Iran, were beginning to penetrate Transoxania. Turkic groups who had belonged to one of the *Türküt* confederacies in northern Mongolia were then uniting in the vast Oghuz confederacy and arriving in Transoxania in ever greater numbers. Within a short time they dominated the steppes and established strongholds in or near the well-developed agricultural and urban centers of the Sogdians. From there they embarked on numerous campaigns and the extension of their power into the Iranian plateau. The dynasties of the Saljuqs, Ghaznavids, and Ghurids attest their domination in Khorasan. But with the rise of the Saljuq dynasty, the political center of gravity began to shift westward. The conquest of Iran was completed; and, following the victory over the Byzantines at Manzikert (Malāzgerd) in 463/1071, the Saljuqs took over much of Anatolia, as well as the Syro-Palestinian possessions of the Arabs. But in the east they were defeated by the Qitan (now called the Qara *Kitay*) near Samarqand in 536/1141. The Qara *Kitay* mastered all of Turkestan and soon installed themselves in Iran. A branch of these, the Qutluğ Khan dynasty, survived the Mongol conquest in Kermān until 703/1303. The Saljuqs consolidated in Anatolia after the conquests of Turkestan and Iran by the Mongols under Jengiz Khan (615-18/1218-21); and they proceeded, in the 8th/14th and 9th/15th centuries, led by the Ottoman dynasty, to conquer the entire Eastern Roman empire and to Turkicize Anatolia and parts of the Balkans. Mongols laid the foundations of dynasties such as the *ulūs* of Chaghatay (624-765/1227-1365) in Turkestan, from which Timūr (765-807/1365-1405) was descended; that of the Golden Horde or Qipchaq (624-907/1227-1502), which ruled Russia until 1480; that of the Il-Khans in Iran (663-744/1265-1344); and the Yüan Dynasty in China (1206-1368). With the



Mongol conquest, most of the Turkic people still well known assume their final habitat: the Oghuz (Osman) in Anatolia, the Balkans, and some neighboring areas; the Tatars (ca. 5,000,000), Bashkirs (ca. 1,000,000), and Noghays (ca. 50,000) in the east and south of Russia; the Tatars in west Siberia; the Uzbeks (ca. 6,000,000) in western (i.e., Soviet) Turkestan; the Uighurs (ca. 4,000,000) in eastern (i.e., Chinese) Turkestan (where their ancestors had migrated in the 7th-8th centuries, encountering the eastern Iranian—Sogdian and Saka—and Tokharian peoples of the region); the Qazaqs (ca. 5,000,000) and Qirghiz (ca. 1,000,000) in western Turkestan; and the three groups of South Siberian Turks, the Oirot, Abaqan, and Tuva (each ca. 50,000), as well as the more numerous Yakuts, who retreated from the Mongols as far northeastward as possible. They drove a huge wedge into the sparse Tungus tribal groups of reindeer-breeders and hunters, forcing them farther northeast, east, and southeast. The South Tungus peoples in the lower Amur basin, along the Ussuri river, and in Manchuria do not seem to have been dislocated. Very few Mongols are found west of Mongolia proper: the Moğol in northwest Afghanistan, the Sart-Qalmyq in the Tien-Shan mountains near Lake Issiq-Köl, and traces of a Mongol residue in Daghestan. The Qalmyqs (ca. 100,000) in the steppes between the Don and Volga south of Volgograd acquired their habitat in 1632, after seceding from the Dzungarian realm.

Altaic languages. The inner languages may be enumerated as follows: 1. Hunnic. Extinct; no relics. 2. Turkic. Central: Türküt (Orkhon, runic), Uighur, New Uighur, Chaghatay, Qirghiz, Khalaj. Southwest (Oghuz): Türkmen, Azeri, Osman. Northwest (Qipchaq): Qoman (extinct), Tatar, Qazaq. Siberian: Oirot, Abaqan (Khaqas), Tuva; Yakut. Chuvash, found west of the Tatars on the central Volga and strongly influenced by Finnic languages, is apparently an ancient link between Turkic and Mongolian. 3. Mongolian. Central: Literary Mongolian, modern Xalxa. North: Buryat. South: Ordos. West: Qalmyq, Oirot. Relics: Moğolī (Afghanistan), Dagur (northern Manchuria), Monguor (northwest China—Kansu and C'ing-Hai [Kökö-Nör]). Extinct: Šyän-bi, Avar, Qitan. 4. Tungus. South: Jürchen, Manchu, Nānai. North: Ewenki, Lamut, Solon.

The phonology of the Altaic languages is characterized by aversion to spirants and to consonant clusters; only one consonant may occur in initial position. Sound harmony, well developed in the inner three, is apparently an ancient, common Altaic feature. In some languages the sound harmony is not exclusively vocalic but is also manifested in a strict division of velar (and velarized) and palatal (and palatalized) consonants. Cf. Turk. *qal-maq* “to



remain” : *käl-mäk* “to come;” *soq-* “to beat into” : *sök-* “to scold.” Some languages have a rather symmetrical vowel system, e.g., Turkic *a : a, y : i, o : ö, u : ü*. The Altaic languages are morphologically agglutinative, using only suffixes. Each suffixal element usually carries only one meaning, in contrast to Indo-European morphology. Cf., e.g., the following forms of the Turk. stem *käl-* “come”: *käl-t-im*, 1st sing. perf. act.; *käl-iš-ür-lär*, 3rd pl. aor., cooperative aspect, “they are coming together;” *käl-iš-sä-d-in-iz*, 2nd pl. perf., cooperative and desiderative aspects, “you wished to come together.” In most Altaic languages words are strictly divisible into the categories of noun and verb; but in some, archaically, this distinction is less sharp. The subdivisions of noun and verb are much less differentiated than in inflectional languages and often not developed at all. The majority of Altaic languages lack an adjective/adverb category. Although gender is lacking, the declension is rich in cases and in plural (collective) suffixes. A distinct pronomial declension originally existed, as in Indo-European; but, apart from a few relics, it has been absorbed by the nominal declension. The Altaic verb is basically nominal; the predicate of a sentence is expressed with gerunds or participles, to which personal pronouns or possessive suffixes are attached. Aspect formation (including expression of voice) is quite rich. Less so is that of tense, which is more recent in the development of Altaic (as also of Indo-European). A verb stem takes first the aspect suffixes, then those of tense which have gerundial or participial function. If the verb is to serve as predicate, personal suffixes are attached. Some Altaic languages approach the inflectional type in their verb morphology, e.g., southern and western Turkic and southern Tungus.

Altaic syntax is strict, requiring in a sentence the sequence subject-object-predicate. Subordinate elements in a sentence (i.e., adjectival or genitival word or subordinate clause) always precede the word (or, in the latter case, the predicate) to which they refer. Genitive and accusative are designated by suffixes only when they are definite. A genitive attribute requires that the possessive suffix of the third person be attached to the element of the sentence to which it is subordinated. The Altaic lexicon has, in most areas, been exposed to influences from other language families. Some of these have been sustained and powerful: that of Chinese in the three outer languages especially, but also in the three inner; that of Tibetan in Mongolian; that of Indo-Iranian (particularly Iranian), followed by that of Arabic, in Turkic; and, in recent times, that of Russian in the three inner groups.

The Iranian world has exerted enduring and profound influences upon the



Turkic peoples, from the historical beginnings in eastern Turkestan down to the present in western Turkestan, Transcaucasia, and Iran itself. Iranian linguistic influences include the infringement on, and the dissolution of, Altaic sound harmony in Chaghatay, New Uighur, and Uzbek: e.g., fluctuations in certain Chaghatay suffixes, such as the dative *-ġa/gä*; the loss of the opposition *y : i* in New Uighur with merger into *i*; the loss of the typical Turkic vowels *y*, *ö*, and *ü* in Uzbek and their replacement by *u*, *o*, and *u*; the complete dissolution of sound harmony in the Iranized (urban) dialects. More recent is the use of the Persian prefixes *nā-* “not, un-, in-” and *bī-* “without” in Uzbek, e.g., *na-toġri* “incorrect;” *na-tiñč* “restless, unquiet;” *be-kuč* “without strength;” *be-săč* “bald.” Another aspect of strong Indo-European influence is found in grammatical subordination, which appears to a varying extent in most of the Turkic languages adjacent to Indo-European. Iranian has strongly exerted this influence on classical Uighur, Chaghatay, New Uighur, Uzbek, Osman, and Qazan; it is less prominent in Qazaq and Turkmen. Further, the Persian conjunction *ki* has been borrowed as a particle of subordination; and the use of optative forms to express the subjunctive in subordinate clauses also reflects Iranian influence. The Altaic peoples have employed various scripts. The *Türküt*, in the 7th-8th centuries, had a runic script based on an unknown Aramaic prototype. In Turkestan the Sogdian script was used by the Uighurs and it was later adopted by the Mongols and Manchus. Wherever Islam spread, the Arabic script was introduced; and it remained among many of the Turkic peoples until the 1920s, when the Latin alphabet replaced it. In the USSR, since the 1940s, the Cyrillic script has been used.

See also Turkish.

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