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A Turcological gem: The Tuhan language of Northern Mongolia

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This paper presents some new linguistic data on Tuhan, a moribund Sayan Turkic language presently spoken by a handful of old speakers and semi-speakers in the county of Tsagaan Üür in northern Mongolia's East Khövsgöl region. Linguistically, besides displaying typical Sayan Turkic characteristics, Tuhan preserves archaic features otherwise not documented in the rest of Sayan Turkic. At the same time, it shares some isoglosses with Tofan and others with Altay and Yenisey Turkic. Despite the very small number of its speakers, Tuhan appears to be a highly important language for comparative Turcology: a precious linguistic gem among South Siberian Turkic languages.

Keywords: Siberian Turkic languages, Sayan Turkic languages, copula particles, demonstratives, language contact, Turco-Mongolic relations

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Introduction

This paper¹ presents new data from my field expeditions to document speakers of Tuhan, a moribund Sayan Turkic language of northern Mongolia.²

The county of Tsagaan Üür, located east of Khövsgöl Lake at a distance of 185 km from the *aimag* city Mörön, is home to a small Turkic-speaking group, known in Mongolian sources as *Uygar-Uriankhay*. Their endonym, however, is *Tuha* [tu^hha], a variant of *tuba/tubo*, an ancient ethnic name that is common across Sayan Turkic speakers and various groups in the neighboring areas. The specific form *tuha* is shared by the reindeer herding Dukhan of West Khövsgöl and by Tuvans of the

1 I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for valuable comments and suggestions.

2 Some linguistic aspects discussed in this article are mentioned in Ragagnin (in press) and were presented by the author on March 3, 2018, at the International Symposium “Current Topics in Turkic Linguistics/Aspects of Agglutination in Turkic Languages: An Integrated Approach of Phonology, Morphosyntax and Semantics: The 3rd meeting” held at the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (ILCAA), Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Japan.

Tere-Khöl and Toju areas in Tuva.³ In Mongolia, Tuhans are also named *Üüriyn Uriankhay* ‘Uriankhay of the Üür River’, *Ĵinkhene Uriankhay* ‘real/true Uriankhay’ and *Tuha Uriankhay*. Further names found in the literature are *Soyot* or simply *Uriankhay*. The name Uriankhay—an ancient ethnic denomination used to refer to various ethnic groups and also documented in the Secret History of the Mongols (*uriangqai*) and in other sources (Rybatzki 2006: 153–154, Janhunen 2014: 76–77)—is furthermore in use to denote three Mongol-speaking groups of this area, namely *Övör Širkheten Uriankhay*, lit. ‘the Uriankhay of the Southern Flea’, *Arig Uriankhay* (from the name of the adjacent Arig River), and *Görööčün Uriankhay* literally ‘Hunting Uriankhay’; see Ragagnin (2009: 226–227). Officially, the total number of Uriankhay in Tsagaan Üür County amounts to 600. Out of the 2400 inhabitants, 650 are registered as Buryat, whereas the rest are Khalkha. Publications on aspects of the Tuhan language include, alphabetically, Bold (i.a. 2013, 1987, 1982, 1978, 1975), Eriksonas (2013) and Ragagnin, (e.g. 2009, 2013 and in press).

Presently, Tuhan is spoken by a handful of fluent older speakers and some semi-speakers, living in the village of Tsagaan Üür and adjacent areas. The youngest speaker is 67 years old. In my fieldwork sojourn in September 2017, I looked for additional Tuhan speakers in Čandaman Öndör, Bulnay and Khankh, where other Tuhan-speaking groups used to live. However, I could not find any still alive. As for clan names, the Tuhans with whom I have been interacting during my fieldwork belong to the following clans: *Danĵila*, *Derdelei*, *Yamaaday*, *Solgoy* and *Tsagaan Khuular*. The last clan name, Tsagaan Khuular, is also documented for Darkhat Mongols (Badamxatan 1987: 57). Eriksonas (2013: 225), on the basis of personal information provided by Professor V. I. Rassadin, who conducted fieldwork in these areas in the 1980s, mentions five additional Tuhan clan names, namely (in his transcription) Arĵamut, Dül’heĵik, Ĵohomdoi, Qu’rtqaahš and Sarihaahš. Mongush (2003: 167–168) also mentions the subclan Čüs-Danĵila. On the other hand, Dukhan clan names include *Soyan*, *Balikšĳi*, *Urat*, *Čoodu*, *Salčak*, *Dodot*, *Höyüg*, *Demči* and *Darga*; see Ragagnin (2011: 19) for details.

As for lifestyle, Tuhans herd Mongolian-style cattle, especially cows, since their pastures are very lush. My Tuhan informants often proudly refer to their homeland as *Burhan ĵu^hrtĵi* ‘God’s homeland’. With regard to the spiritual world, Tuhan beliefs are a combination of Buddhist and animist beliefs. Worth noting in this respect is the special meaning that the county of Tsagaan Üür holds for both Buddhism and animism. The Buddhist monastery dedicated to the well-known shaman deity Dayan

3 Though phonetically the ethnonym is the same, three different terms are in use in scholarly publications to refer to these three Sayan Turkic varieties: “Tuhan” with reference to the East Khövsgöl Steppe Sayan Turkic variety spoken in the county of Tsagaan Üür, “Dukhan” for the West Khövsgöl Taiga Sayan Turkic variety spoken by the reindeer-herding Dukhan community, and “Tere-Khöl Tuvan” for the variety spoken in the Tere-Khöl region in Tuva. For a description of the Dukhan language, see Ragagnin (2011). For the Steppe vs. Taiga subdivision of Sayan Turkic, see Ragagnin (2009: 241).

Deerkh lies less than 40 km from the Tsagaan Üür Village. Also connected to the cult of Dayan Deerkh is a fertility rite associated with a holy cave located approximately 15 km east of the monastery; for details, see Birtalan (2005 and 2011).

Historically, Tuhans are descendants of those Sayan Turkic peoples who formed the Lake Khövsgöl *Uriankhay Khošun* in Manchu Qing time; further see Ewing (1981: 186–187), Højer (2003: 171–174), Eriksonas (2013: 228–229), Mongush (2014: 200–201) and Žamcarano (1991). An early 20th-century source providing eye-witness information on Tuhans, referred to as “Soyotes”, is Haslund-Christensen’s travelogue (1934). According to a widespread story circulating among the Tuhan community, the Tuhan people are supposed to have come from Khan Khökhii in Uvs Aimag in Manchu times; in this respect, also see Njamaa (2011: 17–18). One of my best informants, Gombosüren, who passed away three years ago, added in this regard that Tuhan people came from the Baruun Turuun area in Uvs region. Worth noting in this respect is that in Tuvan folklore the region of Khan Khökhii (Tuvan *xaan kögei*) has specific holy connotations (Žanna Yuša, personal communication). Finally, Natsagdorj (2016) argued that Tuhan speakers historically represent former reindeer herders who changed their lifestyle from reindeer nomadic pastoralism to (Mongolian-style) pastoralism. Regarding this, also compare Ragagnin (in press).

Distinctive Tuhan linguistic features

As shown in Ragagnin (2009), Tuhan holds a very special position within Sayan Turkic. Besides displaying those typological features that characterize Sayan Turkic as such, and sharing some specific isoglosses with Tofan, Tuhan displays unique lexical and grammatical features that distinguish it from the rest of Sayan Turkic. Such features include (a) absence of word-initial spirantization of initial velar stops in Turkic words, (b) occurrence of the converb {-GAs} instead of common Sayan Turkic {-GAš}, and (c) occurrence of the low-focal intraterminal verbal suffix *-iir* as a variant after polysyllabic vowel-final verbal stems, which is neutral with respect to synharmonism, and shows similarities with Khakas and Yakut. Compare, for instance, Khakas *uzir* ‘(s)he will sleep’, from *uzu-* ‘to sleep’ (Baskakov 1975: 228), and Tuhan *udi:r* ‘id.’ In the present contribution, I would like to add that Tuhan shares the occurrence of the 2PL possessive suffix {- (X)gAr} with Altay Tuvan varieties spoken in Mongolia (Monguš 2009 [1983]: 143) and China (Yuša 2017: 68), and with Altay Turkic (Baskakov 1997: 184). On the other hand, the rest of Sayan Turkic displays {- (X)ŋAr}. Moreover, {- (X)GAr}, in accordance with Sayan Turkic grammatical rules, also marks 2PL of the past {-D-} as well as 2PL imperatives, e.g. Tuhan *šay i^hšäger* [tea drink-IMP.PL/courtesy form] ‘please drink tea’, *geldäger* [come-PAST2.PL] ‘you (pl) came’, Chinese Altay Tuvan (Jungar Tuvan) *siler kördüger* [you see-PAST2.PL] ‘you (pl) saw’ vs. standard Tuvan *siler kördüner* (Yuša 2017: 68), Mongolian Altay Tuvan *malıgar* ‘your (pl) cattle’ vs. Standard Tuvan *malınar* (Monguš 2009 [1983]: 143).

A further noteworthy feature of Tuhan is the occurrence of a four-way distinction in demonstratives: *bo* ‘this’ (proximal), *ol* ‘that’ (distal), *no:* [that (the other one) (distal)] ‘yonder’, and *de:gi* (more distal and (possibly) not visible) ‘that’.

The Tuhan form *de:gi* goes back to the pronoun *dee* augmented with the relational suffix *-ki*. The rest of Sayan Turkic displays cognates void of *-ki*, e.g. Tuvan *döö* ~ *doo* ~ *düü* and *duu* (Isxakov & Pal’mbax 1961: 231–232), Tofan, Soyot and Dukhan *dee* (Ragagnin 2011: 99). Menges (1959/1960: 108) hypothesized that this distal pronoun may originate from the Mongolic distal demonstrative pronoun **te-*. Cognates of the distal demonstrative *dee* also occur beyond Sayan Turkic, e.g. Altay *tigi* (Verbitskij 2005[1884]: 354), Khakas *tigĩ* (Baskakov 1975: 148–149), Tatar *tege* (Dewletschin et al. 1989: 235), Chulym Turkic *teg* (Birjukovič 1981: 19). Turkish *öte-ki* ‘the other, the other one’ may also belong here (Marcel Erdal, personal communication).

As far as I know, the distal pronoun *noo*—displaying word-initial *n-*, which is untypical of Turkic—is unique to Tuhan and not hitherto documented in any other South Siberian Turkic language. It is quite likely related to Western Yugur/Yellow Uyghur *naqĩ* ‘yonder’, referring to people and objects at a distance from the speaker (Roos 2000: 83–84), and possibly related to Common Turkic *narukĩ* (< *anaruki*) ‘situated beyond, on the other side’ (Roos, personal communication). A relation either with the distal stem *in+* documented in Old Turkic (Erdal 2004: 205–207) or Mongolic **nögee* ‘other’ (Nugteren 2011: 463) might also be considered.

Finally, Tuhan holds a special position within Sayan Turkic regarding Mongolic lexical copies. For Mongolic copies that clearly display more archaic features than the rest of Sayan Turkic, pointing to earlier contacts with Mongolic varieties (possibly of Khamnigan type), see Ragagnin (2009), (in press) and (forthcoming).

Copula particles

Unique to Tuhan is the occurrence of the assertive copula particle *erĩ* continuing East Old Turkic *erür*, which is otherwise not documented in the rest of Sayan Turkic. Two examples are quoted below:

- (1) *Men bi^hšek ñon-mas erĩ men.*
 I knife whet- NEG.INTRA COP I
 ‘I don’t whet knives (indeed).’ (Field notes)
- (2) *Bağši gi^hşĩ erĩ*
 teacher person COP
 ‘He is (indeed) a teacher.’ (Field notes)

On the other hand, the copula particle *duru* ~ *DXrX* is void of assertive contents. One example is quoted below:

- (3) *Hös mal semis duru.*
 cow cattle fat COP
 ‘Cows (lit. cow-cattle) are fat.’ (Field Notes)

The copula particle *duru* ~ *DXrX*, as is common in Turkic languages, can also be omitted:

- (4) *ǰuga:la-ǰ-ǰir dil Tuha dil.*
 speak-COOP-INTRA language Tuhān language
 ‘The spoken language is the Tuhān language’ (Field notes)

Yet, in the Tuhān material I have analyzed so far, *erǰ* also occurs in affirmative answers bearing the meaning ‘yes, true, correct’. Close formal and functional correspondences of Tuhān *erǰ* are found exclusively in Western Yugur/Yellow Uyghur. One example is quoted below:

- (5) *Senəng dioma jer er.*
 You-GEN opinion right COP
 ‘Your opinion is (indeed) right’ (Cheng 2009: 251)

For Yellow Uyghur copulative particles, also see Roos (2000: 148–149).

Another formal correspondence of Tuhān *erǰ* is the Khalaj copula particle *+Ari* /*+r* / *+rǰ*; see Doerfer (1988: 200–201) and (1989) and Doerfer & Tezcan (1980: 111a). Two Khalaj examples are quoted below:

- (6) *Biz-üm baluq ēydi-si ho’ul-ari.*
 we-GEN village master-POSS3 good-COP
 ‘Unser Dorfherr ist gut.’ (Doerfer 1988: 200–201)
- (7) *Bo pādīšā-r.*
 this padishah-COP
 ‘Der ist ein Herrscher.’ (Doerfer 1988: 201)

For traces of *er-* in modern Turkic languages, see Doerfer (1989), Johanson (2000) and Brendemoen (2010).

The set of Tuhān particles originating from **er-* also includes the conditional and concessive copula particles *erse* and *erǰp*, shared with Tofan and Soyot, but otherwise not found in the rest of Sayan Turkic. Some examples are quoted below:

- (8) Tuhān
Ol bis-təŋ ǰooǰaš bol-gan erse men göskǰis-er men.
 that we-GEN near become-POST COP I show-INTRA I
 ‘If we were near, I would show it (to you).’ (Ragagnin 2009: 239)

- (9) Tuhan
Tuha g^hšī erip ĵuga:la-vas.
 Tuhan person COP speak-NEG.INTRA
 ‘Although she is Tuhan, she does not speak.’ (Field notes)
- (10) Tofan
Īndīy čaraš erip, šin-nīy bol-dīy.
 such small COP truth-ADJ.DER become-PAST2SG
 ‘Although you are so small, you were right.’ (Rassadin 2016: 585)
- (11) Tofan
Sen men-den burun gel-dīy erse,
 you I-ABL before come-PAST.2SG COP
bod-uŋ bile sooda-ar sen.
 REFL-POSS3SG with speak-INTRA you
 ‘If you come before me, then you will tell (it) yourself.’ (Rassadin 2016: 585)
- (12) Soyot
Ol kiši kel-gen erse.
 that person come-POST COP
 ‘If that person came.’ (Rassadin 2010: 225a)
- (13) Soyot
Ajiri sooq bol-γan erip, bud-īm doŋ-maan iik.
 extremely cold become-POST COP self-POSS1 freeze-NEG.POST PTC
 ‘Although it was very cold, my legs did not freeze.’ (Rassadin 2010: 43)

Yet, another copula-like particle that occurs in Tuhan and displays a high functional load is *GXy*. It occurs after nominals (nouns, adjectives and verbal nouns), and functionally it appears to focus the psychological interest. On this important function of copula particles, cf. Karakoç (2009). See the Tuhan examples below:⁴

- (14) *Men de:gi g^hšī Tsevelma: guai bile ĵuga:li:r gīy men.*
 I that person Tsevelmaa title with speak:INTRA COP I
 ‘I speak with that person, with Mrs Tsevelmaa.’ (Field notes)
- (15) *Monu:n aru:l al-gas hota-ğīdī id-īp sa^ht-ar gīy.*
 this:ABL aruul take-CONV city-DIR send-CONV sell-INTRA COP
 ‘After the *aruul* (type of cheese) is got from here, it is sent to the city (i.e. Ulaanbaatar) and sold’ (Field notes)

4 A contrastive analysis of Tuhan copula particles will be the subject of a forthcoming publication.

- (16) *Tuha uruγ-lar surgu:l-ga gir-ges aday dīl bil-bes*
 Tuha child-PL school-DAT enter-CONV Mongolian language know-INTRA
Tuha dīl-līy gir-īp tur-gan ġīy.
 Tuha language-DER enter-CONV stand-POST COP
 ‘When Tuhan children started (lit. entered) school, they did not know Mongolian. They started school (only) knowing Tuhan (and not Mongolian).’ (Field notes)
- (17) *Öske bo habī-de ĵuga:li:r gi^hšī jōk ġīy.*
 other this surrounding-LOC speak:INTRA person inexistent COP
 ‘There is nobody else speaking (Tuhan) around here.’ (Field notes)
- (18) *Bo me:s-te ay ün-er.*
 this forest-LOC lily-bulb exit-INTRA
Ay ġas-īp ĵi:r
 lily-bulb dig-CONV eat:INTRA
gašġaay de-es bir ĵime dur-ar ġīy.
 white lily-bulb say-CONV one thing stand-INTRA COP
Am bo me:s-te bar.
 now this forest-LOC existing
 ‘In this forest there are lily-bulbs (Lat. *lilium pumilum*). We dig and eat lily-bulbs. There is a thing called white lily-bulb.⁵ Now you can find it in this forest.’ (Field notes)
- (19) *Qor^h-ar ĵime jōk ġīy.*
 fear-INTRA thing inexistent COP
 ‘There is nothing to be afraid of.’ (Field notes)
- (20) *Ĵarim ĵime-sīn men bil-bes ġīy men jōŋ!*
 some thing-POSS3.ACC I know-INTRA COP I EMPH.PTC
 ‘I certainly don’t know some things (mentioned before)!’ (Field notes)
- (21) *Eremsi:r⁶ ġīy men.*
 be thankful:INTRA COP I
 ‘Thank you.’ (Field notes)

In Tuhan, the participle *-GAn* and *gXy* often, especially in rapid speech tempo, merge into *-GAy*, as seen in the following example:

5 Cf. Mongolian *tsagaan töms* ‘white potatoes’.

6 Tuhan *eremse-* ‘to be thankful’ most likely is diachronically related to East Old Turkic *ögir-* ‘to rejoice’ (Clauson 1972: 113–114) augmented by the simulative suffix *{-msA}*. Tofan, Dukhan and Soyot display the corresponding item *öör-* ‘to rejoice’, whereas Tuvan has *öörü-*. The absence in Tuhan of an initial long vowel, however, is difficult to explain.

- (22) *Halha gi^hši bile dur-gas tuha-sjn jugaala-vas*
 Khalkha person with stand-CONV Tuha-POSS3.ACC speak-NEG.INTRA
bol-ɣ ber-gey men [...]
 become-CONV give-POST.COP I
 ‘I married a Khalkha person and I stopped speaking in Tuhan (lit. ‘I became a non-speaker’).’ (Field notes)

On the other hand, in such copular syntactic function the rest of Sayan Turkic displays the auxiliary noun ‘(some)thing’: Tuvan *čüve*, Tofan and Dukhan *jüme* ~ *jime* ‘thing’, inspired by Mongolic **yauma*⁷ (cf. Written (Literary) Mongol *yayuma*, Khalkha *yüüm* and Buryat *yüüme(n)*) both formally and functionally). In Tuhan, *jüme* only occurs as a noun meaning ‘(some)thing’ and never in such copular position (cf. examples 20–22). Tuvan, Tofan and Dukhan examples displaying the auxiliary noun ‘(some)thing’ in copular function are quoted below:

- (23) Tuvan
Süür-ool baza seen dugay-iñ čugaala-vaan čüve
 Süür-ool also you:GEN concern-POSS2 speak-NEG:POST thing
 ‘Also Süür-ool did not speak about you.’ (Monguš 2009 [1983]: 110)
- (24) Tofan
Unuun bääri kiši-ler ol ool-ni ay kiši-si
 that:ABL since person-PL that boy-ACC moon person-POSS3
de-p ülegäär-lä-är jüme.
 say-CONV story-V.DER-INTRA.VBN COP
 ‘The thing is that, thereafter, people named him moon boy.’ (Rassadin 1996: 10)
- (25) Dukhan
A^hšta-p suksa-p jora:š ol i^ht-ï börü
 be hungry- CONV be thirsty- CONV move:CONV that dog-POSS3 wolf
bol-a ber-γen i^höögü-lüγ jime.
 become-CONV give-POST.VBN history-ADJ.DER COP
 ‘It was constantly hungry and thirsty, and that’s the story of how the dog began to turn into a wolf.’ (Ragagnin 2011: 229)

The Mongolian parallel syntactic function of *yum* ‘(some)thing’ can be seen in the two examples below:

- (26) Mongolian
Tzengxer ool-s-ii.g dab-aad yab-sen youm.
 azure mountain-PL-ACC cross-CONV move-POST COP
 ‘We traveled crossing azure mountains.’ (Janhunen 2012: 229)

7 Reconstructed Mongolic forms are quoted according to Nugteren (2011).

(27) Mongolian

En' unen ug youm.
 this true word COP

'This is the truth.' (Janhunen 2012: 230)

Finally, following a participle suffix, *yum* is generally cliticized in the spoken language. For instance, the past participle {-*SO*n} and *yum* merge into *-siim* (Janhunen 2012: 229). On Mongolian *yum*, also see Mönkh-Amgalan & Kan Šin (2014: 324).

Further functions of *GXY*

The item *GXY* can also occur as a general noun referring both to animates and to inanimates, as seen in the examples below:

(28) *Üš giy hota-da bar, hi giy mında bar.*
 three GN city-LOC existent two GN here existent

'Three "ones" are in the city (i.e. Ulaanbaatar), two "ones" are here.' (Field notes)⁸

(29) *Men hi giy-ni al-gan men.*

I two GN-ACC take-POST I

'I took two "items".' (Field notes)

Furthermore, *GXY* combined with demonstratives (*bo*, *ol*, *de*: and *no*:) forms a special class of extended demonstrative pronouns widely used in Tuhan and not found in any other Sayan Turkic variety, e.g. *bo gıy* ~ *bo gïy* ~ *boğïy* 'this one', *ol gıy* ~ *ol gïy* ~ *olğïy* 'that one', *no: gıy* ~ *no: gıy* ~ *no:gïy* 'yonder one' and *de: giy* ~ *de:giy*, 'that one (more far away), with reference to both animates and inanimates. Such extended demonstratives are then inflected regularly, e.g. *no: gıylar* ~ *no:gïylar* 'yonder ones', *bo gıyğa* ~ *boğïyğa* 'to this one', *olğıyni* 'that one (ACC)', *boğïy bile* 'with this one' etc.

Origin of *GXY*

As for the origin of Tuhan *GXY*, in Ragagnin (2009: 236) I proposed to trace it back to Turkic **qañu* 'which'. I was obviously wrong. Now it seems to me more plausible to relate Tuhan *GXY* with Western Yugur *kô* / *kɔ* 'this, that', which is mostly used as a personal pronoun (Roos 2000: 84), and to the Chuvash proximal demonstrative *ku* <ky>. Historically, Tuhan *GXY* could then be related to Bolgar Turkic <Ꞩ, underlying *kô* / *kü* / *gö* / *gü* and occurring as a comment of a nominal sentence, exactly like in the Tuhan sentences presented above. See the discussion on an Altaic

8 The informant is speaking about her children.

particle *gU* in Erdal (1991). Whether or not the Kazakh particle *goy* <ғой>, occurring in sentence-final position after nominals, including participles, but also after finite verbal forms, belongs here is an open question that needs a detailed analysis.

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Transcription and abbreviations

The transcription used in this contribution follows Lars Johanson’s principles outlined in (Johanson forthcoming). Abbreviations occurring in the grammatical glosses are: ABL: ablative, ADJ: adjectival, ACC: accusative, CONV: converb, COP: copula, COOP: cooperative, DAT: dative, DER: derivation, DIR: directive, EMPH: emphatic, GEN: genitive, GN: general noun, IMP: imperative, IND: indirective, INTRA: intraterminal viewpoint operator, LOC: locative, NEG: negative, PAST: past, PL: plural, POSS: possessive, POST: postterminal viewpoint operator, PTC: particle, REFL: reflexive, SG: singular, V: verbal, VBN: verbal nominal.

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