Altaic Languages and Historical Contact*

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1. Altaic hypothesis in Ramstedt’s and Kotwicz’s understanding

The founder of the Altaic theory is Ramstedt (Kotwicz 1953: 1, Poppe 1965: 130, Halén 1998: 331, Rachewiltz & Rybatzki 2010: 349), while the founder of the idea of Altaic language community developed from intensive language contacts is Kotwicz. Although these facts seem to be trivial, it is important to repeat some points and to show the essence of both Ramstedt’s and Kotwicz’s ideas,

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1 The first researcher who grouped the Altaic languages in one set, but together with Finno-Ugric and Samoyed languages, was Philipp Johann Tabbert von Strahlenberg (1730), though he called them Tatar, not Altaic (Róna-Tas 1976: 549). Moreover, Strahlenberg did not express the idea of affinity explicitly and he only compared a few words appended in a table to his work (Jankowski 1987: 18). The first scholar who applied the term ‘Altaic’, but for Ural-Altaic languages, was Castrén in 1862 (see Poppe 1965: 127, Rachewiltz & Rybatzki 2010: 349). Castrén was also the first to apply serious linguistic methods based on reliable language material, most of which he collected himself. However, while he stressed that the affinity of Uralic languages was proven, he argued that the relationship of the Turkic, Mongolian and Manchu-Tungusic languages must be resolved in the future.

2 Initially also Ramstedt considered possibility of the areal character of Altaic similarities, but he did not elaborate this idea. Kotwicz’s basic study edited posthumously (1953) was written in Polish and was therefore little known (cf. Stachowski 2012: 242).

since there is much misunderstanding around them.

Firstly, Ramstedt’s opinions about the character of Altaic relationship are not quite consistent and his views changed over time. On the one hand he confirms the affinity of Altaic languages, but not peoples “Es ist aber nicht nötig zu vermuten und weniger möglich zu beweisen, daß diese Völker, die früher oder jetzt eine altaische Sprache sprachen, Abkömmlinge eines einzigen Stammes seien” (Ramstedt 1957: 13). On the other hand he says that Mongolian and Korean as well as Tungusic and Turkic correspondences are the best proof for genetic origin of the Altaic languages, though in another paragraph he prefers a slightly more moderate term genetic relations “genetische Beziehungen” (Ramstedt 1951: 54).

As for Kotwicz, there were authors who properly assessed his ideas (as recently Rachewiltz & Rybatzki 2010: 350), but there were some who attributed to Kotwicz the views that Kotwicz never pronounced. For example, in one of his articles Sinor writes that “The genetic relation was taken for granted” by some scholars, included Kotwicz (Sinor 1988: 708) and that “both Kotwicz and Ramstedt were a priori convinced of the genetic relationship of the Altaic languages” (Sinor 1988: 709).

In fact Kotwicz has never advocated any genetic affinity of Turkic, Mongolian and Manchu-Tungusic. On recapitulating his first series of contributions to Altaic studies which consisted of an introduction (1931: 130–152), numerals (1931: 152–221) and colour names (1931: 222–234), he came to the conclusion that the material analysed is rather in favour of the adversaries of Altaic theory “En terminant ces remarques détachées je m’aperçois que les résultats de mes recherches – de moins en tant qu’ils concernent le tongous – témoignent plutôt en faveur des adversaires de la théorie de la parenté” (Kotwicz 1931: 234).

Kotwicz claimed that “many centuries BC” three groups of tribes which spoke similar, but distinct languages, Turkic, Mongolian and Tungusic, got close to each other in the territory of what is now Mongolia and north-east of it. The languages of these groups were differentiated and individual tribes started to separate quite
early (Kotwicz 1953: 307). In fact it is his study of 1953 that clearly shows his idea of Altaic similarity due to language contacts “między językami i ich dialektami istniały nieustanne kontakty, których mniej lub więcej wyraźne ślady widać w każdym z nich, nawet na podstawie dochowanych do naszych czasów zabytków rękopiśmiennych i współczesnych danych językowych” i.e. ‘among the languages and their dialects there existed permanent contacts the traces of which are evident in each of them more or less clearly, even when assessed on the basis of extant texts and modern language material’ (Kotwicz 1953: 310). He stressed that language contacts were more intensive between the Mongols and Turks than Tungus peoples who inhabited a territory more remote from them.

Kotwicz says that the existence of a common Altaic language is doubtful (Kotwicz 1953: 312), but we can speak of an Altaic linguistic unity in terms of not genetic, but typological similarities (Kotwicz 1953: 313). As for Korean, Kotwicz is of an opinion that Korean remained in contact with southern Tungusic in the north and with Mongolian in the north and east, though it is a separate language. The relation of Korean to hypothetical Altaic is therefore similar to Hungarian which absorbed many Turkic components (Kotwicz 1953: 314).

Therefore, even from Kotwicz’s standpoint the study of Turkic loanwords in Hungarian, begun by Gombocz (1908, 1912) and completed by Berta and Róna-Tas (2011) as well as the study on Altaic equivalents of Korean words by Ramstedt (1949, 1953, 1954) is very important.³

2. Assessment of Altaic hypothesis

The Altaic hypothesis has some weak points. Firstly, the Altaic hypothesis has not determined a territory where the common Altaic

³ Ramstedt published only the first of these studies, the second was published by Aalto posthumously and the third was in fact compiled by Aalto on the basis of his master’s notes (Ramstedt 1954).
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language could have been spoken. Secondly, the Altaic hypothesis has not traced the history of Altaic and has not proposed a sound periodisation. Most importantly, it has not given a thorough reconstruction of Altaic.

I start this discussion without any a priori thesis, though I believe that in addition to linguistic criteria we need to resort to history and archaeology. As a starting point we may take Róna-Tas’s position: “Unlike those who denied that such a language existed, I admit the possibility of its occurrence; but unlike those who take its existence for granted, I consider the common Altaic language only as an unproved hypothetical model” (Róna-Tas 1991: 25).

When debating on the validity of Altaic, we should keep in mind that not the number of reconstructed words, but their character and the correctness of reconstruction methods is essential. Some advocates of Altaic theory, referring to Collinder and Aalto, stress that the number of common words that go back to the Indo-European origin in Swedish and Greek is very low (Miller 1991: 227) and Ligeti (1975: 115) argued that their number does not exceed sixty. With reference to Pokorny’s etymological dictionary, Miller (1991: 227) demonstrates that there is only a single Indo-European root attested in all its fourteen subfamilies. The number of Proto-Uralic words reconstructed with certainty varies upon the author between 140 and ca 400 (Décsy 1990: 14). Recently, Róna-Tas (in Berta & Róna-Tas 2011: 1284–1316) has found only 344 Hungarian words of Proto-Ugric origin and further 121 of Proto-Uralic stock. As we can see, the low number of reconstructed words does not invalidate a hypothesis.

When we assess the Altaic hypothesis, it is not correct to neglect Korean. At this point it is essential to stress a different perspective between the study in the East which links Altaic with Korean and sometimes with Japanese, and the West where the researchers link it rather to Uralic languages (Jänne 2003: xix). Korean is closer to Tungusic than Turkic and the study on Korean should first focus on Tungusic languages.

Naturally a better and safer way is to limit the discussion to two neighbouring groups which are or were in mutual linguistic
relations, that is Turkic with Mongolian, Mongolian with Tungusic and Tungusic with Korean. However, by doing so we restrict, if not drop the concept of Altaic. In fact, the debate on the Altaic hypothesis is so difficult that some scholars just keep away from it. It is quite indicative that the Altaic hypothesis received only seven pages and a half in the otherwise excellent introduction by Rachewiltz and Rybatzki (2010: 348–355).

2.1. *Altaic homeland*

It is evident that the Altaic Mountains may not be the territory of a hypothetical Altaic language since this region is unsuitable for larger human groups to contact. However, the valleys of the rivers are good enough to live in them. In fact the Altai Mountains were inhabited by the man as early as the Upper Palaeolithic. Human settlements in Altai are better known from 21–20 millennia (Okladnikov 1990: 46). The Afanasevo Eneolithic culture in South Siberia, datable to the fourth of fifth millennium BC, is ethnically identified with Proto-Tocharians. It is this culture that gives the first evidence of copper and bronze tools and utensils (Okladnikov 1990: 79). Much better known Altai culture is the Pazyryk Iron Age culture, formerly dated to the 6th–2nd centuries BC and attributed to the Scythians. Recently some researchers date it to the 4th–2nd centuries (Klaštornyj & Savinov 2006: 378). It is known that this culture was destroyed by the Xiongnu and therefore the authors assume that the population was of the Yuezhi descent who probably were Tocharians, not Scythians (Klaštornyj & Savinov 2006: 377).

The search for an Altaic homeland in the Sayan region or along the rivers Yenisei, Abakan, Tuba and Chulym and its attribution to the Karasuk Bronze Age (1500–800 BC), the subsequent Tagar Bronze–Iron (the 9/7th–2nd centuries BC) and the Tashtyk Iron Age cultures (the 1st–5th centuries CE) is also impossible. These cultures are tentatively identified with the Scythians or the Sakas, but

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4 Some researchers provide different periods, e.g. Okladnikov (1990: 84) 13th–10th centuries.
certainly not Turkic or Mongolian peoples.

It was already Ramstedt who realised the unsuitability of the term Altai and the Altai region for the homeland of Turkic, Mongolian and Tungusic peoples.\(^5\) In his view the centre of Altaic contacts should be placed at the Khingan Range or South Mongolia and South Manchuria (Ramstedt 1951: 57–58). As is known, the name Altai appeared considerably late, at the time of the Dzungars, while its Turkic name *Altun yïš* is known as early as the 8th century.\(^6\)

If we want to include all the territory where Altaic languages met, we should take an immense area from Korea in the east to what is now Kazakhstan in the west, but if we reduce it to a region of more intensive contacts, we can place it between the Greater Khingan Range (Old Turkic *Qadïrqan yïš*) and the Altai Mountains. Thus Altay would barely be the western border of the Altaic homeland. However, we know that between the 3rd BC–155 CE this territory was ruled by the Xiongnu who conquered the previous state of the Rong and Di, supposed to had ruled since the 7th or 6th BC and identified with the Yuezhi, the Xiongnu’s enemies whom they defeated in 175 BC (cf. Kljaštornyj & Sultanov 2006: 68–69), although they are deemed to share some features with the Tung-hu. As is known, the origin of the Xiongnu is still a debatable question.

There were attempts to relate the Xiongnu language (or at least the language spoken by the leading ethnic group of the Xiongnu) to Turkic, Mongolian, Iranian, recently also to Yeniseian (Vovin 2003).\(^7\) Although the activity of the Xiongnu profoundly reshuffled the whole region and had a tremendous effect on the ethnic and linguistic map of the Eurasia comparable to the later Mongolian invasion in the 13th century, settling the problem of the Xiongnu language does not solve the problem of Altaic.

\(^5\) Despite this, many opponents of the Altaic theory use the term ‘Altaic’ or ‘so-called Altaic’.

\(^6\) For its Turkic name see Clauson (1972: 131), for the meaning of Altay see Molčanova (1979: 130–131).

\(^7\) Some etymologies proposed by Vovin may be refuted in favour of Turkic, e.g. Xiongnu *kʷa-la ‘son’ equated with Yeniseian Pumpkol *p-halla ← *b-halla ‘my son’ (2003: 391), is not better than ← Trk. *bala ‘son’, though both are highly problematic.
In short, the adherents of the Altaic hypothesis should offer the idea of a territory where the common Altaic language could have been spoken. An alternative to the idea of a static Altaic homeland may be the idea of a few changing regions of areal contacts. We may accept a large area of contacts which spans the territory north of the Great Chinese Wall in the east and East Europe in the west. This is how the Xiongnu migrated (Érdy 2003: 125, figure 13), and this area of “dynamically changing homeland” could be projected into the 3rd–2nd millennium BC when the nomads appeared in the Great Steppe (Khazanov 2002: 184).

2.2. Hypothetical Altaic language and its history

In general, the theories which establish proto-languages have a weakness related to time – the established proto-languages are dated not earlier than the Neolithic Age. When discussing the time of the hypothetical emergence of Altaic, we can draw a parallel to the Uralic languages. The Uralic language family, which is an established, indisputable fact, probably came into being between the Ural and the Ob and dissolved into the Finno-Ugric and the Samoyedic branches before the 4th millennium BC (Hajdú & Domokos 1980: 67, 348).

Stachowski (2012: 259) postulates the need of reconstruction of Common Proto-Turkic, Proto-Bulgar Turkic, Proto-Mongol and Proto-Tungus first and then, he says, we may attempt to combine these reconstructions to see if the reconstruction of common Altaic is possible. However, before discussing some aspects of lexical correspondences, it is worthy of stressing that the similarities between the Altaic languages rest in phonetics, morphology and syntax, while the vocabulary evidences common elements in culture words, title and rank names, and synsemantic functional words, which are clear products of language contact.

As far as lexical correspondences are concerned, a methodological weakness of Ramstedt’s comparisons is that material is mostly selected from two groups only. For example, many Korean words in Ramstedt 1949 are compared with Tungusic languages, but
Mongolian and Turkic correspondences are lacking. Another weakness lies in selecting correspondences among culture words. For instance, Ramstedt’s Mong. *topći* ‘Knopf’, Tung. *topti*, Trk. *top* ‘Ball, Kugel’, Kor. *top* in *pel-mä-dop* ‘a bee-shaped knot on the pocket string’ (Ramstedt 1951: 52–53, 1949: 273) certainly does not belong to the proto-vocabulary which could prove a relationship, if the Korean parallel to the remaining is correct. Another problem with Korean is the reading of Chinese characters in which Korean texts were written. Lee (1964: 188) calls this “a mere guesswork.” Unfortunately, the texts written in the Korean phonetic script Hangul are late and not numerous, they are available from the 15th century onwards.

It is not my aim to discredit the Altaic reconstruction and comparisons done by Ramstedt and Poppe, but it must be said that many correspondences proposed by them are unacceptable. From the 1950s on, there has been much criticism against the Altaists, e.g. on the part of Clauson (1956), Ščerbak (1959) and Doerfer (1963), and there is no need to repeat the whole debate anew, the more so as there are a few summarising surveys and there is no place to do that in this paper. However, the critics also committed mistakes. For example, in my opinion Ligeti succeeded in refuting many of Clauson’s claims against the Altaic hypothesis. In his case against the Altaic theory, Clauson set up two lists of hundred words of the hypothetical basic vocabulary and tried to prove that basic words in Turkic, Mongolian and Tungusic languages are unrelated and therefore, these languages may not go back to a common origin. Although Clauson’s arguments look quite convincing, Ligeti demonstrated that many of Clauson’s comparisons were ill-established. For example, he argued that Trk. *kögüz* ‘breast’ should not be compared with Mong. *će’eǰi*, but with Mong. *kökö*, Mandchu *xuxun*; Trk. *qil* ‘bristle’ has a correspondence not in Mong. *hüsü*

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8 Doerfer stressed that lexical similarities may not always demonstrate a genetic relationship, they may result from (1) accidental occurrence, (2) onomatopoeic similarity, (3) accidental convergence, (4) borrowing, and (5) adstratum languages (Doerfer 1963: 54–55).
‘hair, bristle’, but in kilγasun ‘1. bristle. 2. string (in a musical instrument)’ etc. (Ligeti 1975: 103–14). Ligeti argued that two words in two languages should be compared etymologically, and not only semantically. He exemplified his claim with the English word head which semantically corresponds to German Kopf, but which etymologically should be linked to German Haupt (Ligeti 1975: 103).

The weakness of Altaic reconstructions is even more evident from the works of later Altaists, e.g. Dybo (1996) and Starostin, Dybo & Mudrak (2003). For example, in Dybo 1996 there are both phonetical, morphological and historical shortcomings. A phonetically unacceptable reconstruction is *k‘udur-g- for ‘tail’ (Dybo 1996: 9), if the author proposes it along with *niŋdruka for ‘fist’ (Dybo 1996: 317). While the former proto-word is supposed to yield Trk. *kuðru-k, Mong. *kudur-ga, Tung. *xujrguj-, the latter one in the author’s opinion produced Trk. *jüŋðruk, Mong. *nidurga, Tung. *ńurga/*ʒurga. Leaving aside the question of the semantical problem with the former word (Mong. *kudurga ‘crupper’ seems to be borrowed from Trk. and it is the source of the Tung. word10), we have to ask where is the *Proto-Altaic consonant *-d- in *ńurga/*ʒurga, if a similar *-d- in *k‘udur-g- changed to *-j- in *xujrguj-. Another unacceptable reconstruction is Altaic *t‘öru- ‘поросенок’, TM *toro-ki, Mo *torui ‘поросенок’, Tu *tōrum, *torm+ suffixes ‘верблюжонок, теленок’ (Dybo 1996: 7). Naturally, Evenki torokī ‘кабан’ (Boldyrev 1994: 151) may be matched with Mong. mopoū, WM toroi, but not with Trkm. tōrum ‘camel colt’ (Clark 1977: 155–156), since no denominative suffix +m exists in Turkic and the final -i ~ -m cannot be explained phonetically.

The period of hypothetical Altaic is usually assumed to last between 4,000 and 3,000 BC. This is the Neolithic Age in which the most important are such words as ‘stone’ and ‘earth (earthenware); clay’, in addition to such impermanent materials as ‘wood’ and ‘rope’.

As for ‘stone’, the Altaic hypothesis is given some support from

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9 Reference is made to an updated French version of Ligeti’s 1971 article.

10 The Turkic word in the meaning ‘crupper’ wandered farther from Middle Mongolian into Middle Korean (Lee 1964: 191).
such words as Trk. \(tāš\), Mong. \(čilagun\), Tung. \(ʒolo\). However, the question remains if this word originated from a common Altaic word and developed into the forms as above or spread from Trk. *\(tāš\) → Bulg. Trk. *\(čul\) → Mong. \(čilagun\) → Tung. \(ʒolo\), especially in the meaning of the material for tools, since there are also other words for ‘stone’, especially in some Tung. languages.\(^{11}\) In my opinion, the problem of the Altaic origin of ‘stone’ was not solved in the recent article by Kempf (2010).

As for ‘earth; clay’, the situation is unclear. There is a Turkic word \(balčïq\) ‘clay; mud, slush’ which may go back to *\(bal\), see such words (derivatives?), considered to yield Tuv. (quoted as “Soy.”) \(balar\) ‘scum; slime; clay, slush’, Tuv., Kaz, Alt. etc. \(balγaš \sim balqaš\) ‘mud, slush, clay’ (ÈSTJa VII, 102–105). This word has neither Mongolian nor Tungusic equivalents. Moreover, Tuv. \(balar\) may be of Mong. origin, though the meaning of Mong. \(balar\) is different, i.e. ‘dark; obscure’ (Lessing 1960: 79).\(^{12}\) This word is sometimes compared with Trk. \(balyk\) ‘wall; town’ (e.g. ÈSTJa VII 105), certainly borrowed into Middle Mongolian as \(balγašun\) ‘town’, see ÈSTJa (II 59) which shows it as Middle Mong. \(balaqasun\) ‘town’, Mong. \(balgasun ← *bálaka-sun\), Tur. \(baliq ← *bálq ← *bálaka ‘город’\). In spite of this a common origin is difficult to establish due to the uncertainty of the root of \(balčïq\). The Tungusic equivalents of the Trk. \(baliq\) shown by Dybo (1996: 15) do not go to any common Altaic proto-form as Dybo argues, but clearly are loanwords from Mongolian. The word \(balčïq\) was also borrowed by Mongolian languages, for the correspondences see Ramstedt (1976: 32) and ÈSTJa (VII 105). It must also be added that the Mongols use another word for ‘earth’ as the material for pottery, earthenware, it is Written Mong. \(sibar\) ‘mud, slush, morass, marsh, mire; clay, plaster, stucco’, Mong. \(šavar\) (Lessing 1960: 694).

The attempt to look for a common Altaic origin of the Trk. word

\(^{11}\) As Ramstedt (1949: 272) observes, Kor. \(tol\) is uncertain because of \(t\) and \(ʒ\), see also Räsänen (1969: 466), though Miller (2001: 56) relates the Middle Korean \(to:l\) ‘id’ to the Turkic and Mongolic equivalent words.

\(^{12}\) Despite Tatarincev’s Tofa parallel (Tatarincev 2000: 184), Rassadin provides the Tofa word with different meanings: ‘небрежный, неряшливый, неаккуратный’ (Rassadin 1995: 14), i.e. ‘careless, incautious, inaccurate’.
topraq ‘soil, ground’ is also wrong. This word has a clear Turkic etymology, it is derived from topra-, according to Clauson (1972: 443) “topra- → topra:k ‘something dry’, in practice ‘dry ground, soil, earth, dust’.” Therefore, Written Mong. toγoraγ and Mong. toorog must be Trk. loanwords and they do not go to any common Altaic proto-form, as Dybo (1996: 11), and following her idea Tenišev ed. (1997: 99) argued. Moreover, the Mong. words toγoraγ and the like are not used in the meaning ‘earth’ perceived as the material for earthenware, as it is the case with Turkish (Redhouse 1968: 1182).

The next important group of words is metal terminology which is crucial to Bronze and Iron Age cultures. However, accepting the existing periodisation, one must be aware that the terms for metals have been coined or borrowed after the dissolution of Altaic and may only be regarded as culture words.

The OT ← AT term yez ← *yas is of Tocharian origin (Rybatzki 1994: 224). As the initial ğ- → ʒ- demonstrates, it was also borrowed by many Mongolian languages from Turkic. In most Türkic languages it denotes ‘brass’, whereas in Mongolian ‘copper’. Therefore, it may not be an Altaic word. The Türkic word tuč → tunč for bronze is borrowed from Chinese (Rybatzki 1994: 225–226). Another term baqır for ‘copper’, probably of Trk. origin, was once widely used, but now its use is limited to the south-western and north-western languages. It is not used in Mongolian and the extant evidence in Öörát is doubtful (Rybatzki 1994: 219–221). The later term çoyun ‘cast iron’ ← çoðün, an interesting word, since originally it denoted not cast iron, but ‘copper’ or ‘bronze’, is supposed to be of Chinese origin (Clauson 1972: 403, Rybatzki 1994: 221). The Mong. word kürel ‘brass’ of unclear etymology was probably borrowed into Siberian Türkic languages as küler ~ xüler (Rybatzki 1994: 228–229) and may not be Altaic. The last term which is evidenced in all Altaic languages is Trk. qola ‘bronze; brass’ (although the area of its spread is limited to Noghai and Tatar in the west), Mong. γuuli ~ γaoli ~ γuλi etc., ‘copper; grass; bronze’, Tung. gōli ~ gaoli ‘id’ etc. is also of an unclear etymology, perhaps Chinese (Rybatzki 1994: 226–228, ÉSTJa VI 46). The form in Mongolian speaks in favour of a loanword, which probably spread among the Türk. languages after
the 13th century with Mongol invasion.

Summing up, none of the words denoting ‘bronze’, ‘brass’ and ‘copper’ evidenced in the Altaic languages may be reconstructed as a common Altaic word.

The word temür ‘iron’ is attested to in both Turkic and Mongolian languages. There are various etymologies of it (ÈSTJa III 188–190, Rybatzki 1994: 239–242, Tenišev ed. 1997: 409), among them the Sanskrit and Chinese etymologies prevail, though some take it rather for Turkic (Rybatzki 1994: 241). The word temür with the same meaning ‘iron’ is also evidenced in Korean, but in Korean it is a loanword from Mongolian encountered in proper names (Lee 1964: 197).

Since the term for ‘iron’ must have been coined or borrowed in the 7th–5th centuries BC at the earliest, it must be a contact word and may not be dated to the time of the third millennium BC when the hypothetical common Altaic language supposedly came to an end. However, on the other hand the lack of this word in Altaic does not invalidate the existence of such a common language, since iron – identically to bronze and copper – was unknown then. In the same way it is not surprising that there is no common term for ‘stirrup’ in Altaic (Róna-Tas [1973] 1986: 52, Tenišev ed. 1997: 549).

Although agriculture was not an important activity among the Altaic peoples, some kinds of agricultural technology and terms were borrowed by the Turks and Mongols from the Yuezhi and Wusun or Tocharians and Scythians who beyond pastoralism – horse, cattle and sheep breeding – also cultivated land. Therefore, such words as Trk. tarïγ ‘millet’ and arpa ‘barley’ for food producing and orγaq → oraq ‘sickle’ and ketmen ‘mattock’ should be examined.

As for Trk. tarîγ ← tari- ‘to cultivate’ (Clauson 1972: 532, Tenišev ed. 1997: 456–458), it is present in all Altaic languages, but in my view it is a typical culture word. The same holds true for arpa,

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13 Although Róna-Tas ([1973] 1986: 52) argues that the metal stirrup appeared not earlier than the Türk Empire in the 6th century, stirrups are seen on some objects pertaining to the Kushan state ca 150 AD, though it is still much later that the supposed Altaic period.
regarded as an Iranian loanword (Tenišev ed. 1997: 460, Berta & Róna-Tas 2011: 78), which was borrowed into Mong. arbai and Tung. arfa.

The etymology of Trk. orγaq ‘sickle’ is clear. It is derived from the Trk. verb or- ‘to mow, to reap (crops)’ (Räsänen 1969: 364, Clauson 1972: 194, 216). The other tool mentioned above, ketmen, is explained as derived from the verb kǟt- or kärt- (Räsänen 1969: 259) ‘to notch’ or ket- ‘id’ (Clauson 1972: 704). As Berta and Róna-Tas conjecture, there was also another type of sickle in Turkic languages, the traces of which are present in Hung. sarló, Chuv. šurla, reconstructed by Berta & Róna-Tas (2011: 697) from West Old Turkic *čarlaγ ← *čarla- ‘to whet, to grind’. However, this may be just another name of an identical object.

According to Róna-Tas (1991: 25) “[...] in the Neolithic Age the nature of the human society, the system of the interhuman communication drastically changed. With the present methods we cannot reconstruct the languages spoken earlier, because in the Mesolithic and Palaeolithic Ages the size of the extant human groups, their migration and their communication system were totally different from those in the Neolithic Age.” Therefore, Róna-Tas starts his discussion of Altaic with the fifth millennium. However, this is not a single opinion. Some scholars date the beginning of anatomically modern man to 200,000 years ago and judging upon such cultures as Cro-Magnon, they assume the start of behavioural modernity at about 43,000 years ago. Archaeologists have proved that in the Middle Palaeolithic period the same culture of Mousterian type as in Europe existed on the Yenisei and in Mongolia (Okladnikov 1990: 50). Human settlements dated to the period of the Upper Palaeolithic existed in the valley of the Orkhon river near Karakorum (Okladnikov 1990: 54) that is in the region of the famous Türk inscriptions and burial places of the 8th century. Among the Palaeolithic population of Siberia and Mongolia there were artists who produced cave paintings (e.g. at Khoit-Tsenker), bone carvings and statuettes showing sewn clothing. It is therefore an unquestionable fact that we have to do with modern man who certainly was able to speak. Pusztay (1980: 35) draws attention to
the fact that the Afontov culture between 22,000 and 14,000 years ago spread from the Yenisei and the Angara probably as far as the Selenga river. This culture shows first Mongoloid features. After the glacial period in the Mesolithic and Neolithic ages we can reckon with domestic cattle breeding in Mongolia (Okladnikov 1990: 71).

Naturally, we have no proof to extend the beginning of the established proto-languages such as Proto-Uralic to such an early dates, there are no grounds for that. However, we should ask if the languages in earlier ages were really completely different.

3. Language contacts in Kotwicz’s understanding and beyond

Some researchers assume an integration of cultures during the final stage of the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic from Yakutia to Eastern Mongolia (Okladnikov 1990: 59). It is supposed that in Siberia and Mongolia there existed areas of intensive language contacts at least in the Neolithic (Pusztay 1980: 17, 35).

Recent studies demonstrated that many common words once thought to be inherited from a common proto-language are in fact later loanwords which were borrowed due to language contacts. For example, a lot of words common for Mongolian and Turkic were identified as Turkic loanwords (Clark 1977). When we analyse Mongolian loanwords that were borrowed into Turkic after the Mongol invasion in the 13th century, we can see the same words borrowed from Mongolian into Middle Korean (Lee 1964). They were borrowed from Mongolian by the Koreans during Yuan Dynasty, more exactly from the beginning of the 13th century to the middle of the 14th century. These words pertain to such semantic fields as horses, falconry, arms and clothing (Lee 1964: 188).

The Ancient Turkic, Mongol and Tungus languages were spoken in the areas where they were in contact with other languages. We can indicate a few areas of this type. For instance, if we take

14 For earlier studies on Old and Middle Turkic loanwords in Mongolian, see the references in Clark (1977: 110).
Ancient Turkic, we have the following contact groups: Ancient Turkic–Ancient Samoyedic, Ancient Turkic–Ancient Iranian/Old Iranian languages, Ancient Turkic–Ancient Mongol, Ancient Turkic–Tocharian, Ancient Turkic–Old Chinese. The notion *ancient language* which is a stage in the development of a language preceding its old stage called *old language* should not be confused with with the notion *proto-language* which is the first stage of the historical development of a language. In most cases, both ancient languages and proto-languages are hypothetical, reconstructed structures. For those languages which are the established offshoots of a proto-family such as Proto-Indo-European or Proto-Uralic, we do not normally apply the *proto-* prefix for a single language. However, such languages as the latter are reconstructed from all known or recorded daughter languages, while a proto-language which does not have an established family must be reconstructed from its old stage. Needless to say, proto-languages were also in contact with other (proto-)languages. In the case of many languages without a written tradition, including Turkic, Mongolian and Tungusic, we may only speak of their old or even middle periods. Moreover, some modern languages are assumed or established as newly emerged languages that have their roots in another language, cf. e.g. the relationship of Tofa, Dokha ~ Tokha and Soyot to Tuvin, whereby we do not normally speak about an older stage in their development.

It is evident that before we reconstruct Ancient Turkic, Ancient Mongol, Ancient Tungus and the question of Altaic, we cannot discuss the contacts of Altaic with other languages. It is more reasonable to discuss the contacts of Ancient Turkic, Ancient Mongol and Ancient Tungus. Róna-Tas (1970: 229)\(^{15}\) presumed that the opposition *z: r* and *š: l* was caused by a substratum in Ancient Turkic and that this substratum could lie in Ancient Mongolian.

In the following, I will discuss some issues related to the contacts of these languages with Ancient Samoyedic.

1. **Ancient Turkic–Ancient Samoyedic**

The unity of Samoyedic languages which has come into being

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after the dissolution of Uralic stock is dated to the beginning of our era (Hajdú & Domokos 1980: 68). In other words Common Samoyedic coexisted with Ancient Altaic languages (Ancient Turkic, Ancient Mongolian and Ancient Tungus). The contact area with Ancient Turkic could have included the Sayan mountains (OT Kögmen yiš) and the area north of it, the territory of the Qırqız (as noted in the Orkhon inscriptions) where such south Samoyedic languages as Karagas, Motor and Koibal were spoken before the 18th–early 19th century when they started to assimilate to Turkic, known as Modern Tofa(lar) and Khakas.

Turkic-Samoyedic lexical comparisons were the subject of many studies, of which the most important is Joki (1952). Some Turkic words in Samoyedic are well-known, e.g. *juntå ~ juntə̑ ‘horse’, e.g. Nganasan junta, Selkup čunti (Janhunen 1977: 49). In contrast to Sinor (1988: 737), I take this word for a Turkic loanword and not a relic of a linguistic substratum. It is because horse breeding is more characteristic of Turkic than Samoyedic people. This word must be quite old, since it is absent from the modern Turkic languages of the region (Clauson 1972: 946, ÈSTJa IV 253), probably from the time of Old Turkic, but certainly not later than the end of the 18th century.

Another interesting word is the Samoyedic name for ‘hundred’, *jür, e.g. Kamas дю́рь, Karagas dshur (Janhunen 1977: 50). This word was borrowed into Samoyedic from a Turkic language of Bulgarian type and according to Róna-Tas (1982: 122) it certainly predates the time of the 1st century AD. However, since this word shows rhotacism, the time of borrowing must be determined to the 1st–5th century (see also Róna-Tas’s correction of his previous opinion in 1991: 27–28).

2. Ancient Mongol–Ancient Samoyedic

Mongolian-Samoyedic contacts may be demonstrated by such words as Samoyedic *jekɜ, e.g. Selkup câg(a) ‘white’ (Janhunen 1977: 42). It is a Mongolian loanword, and the initial č- shows that it was borrowed from Middle Mongolian at the latest, cf. such

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16 For a more recent article see Helimski, Stachowski (1995), in which there is an overview of earlier studies.
spellings as те́ген, те́гын and че́ан (Helimski 1983: 188). However, Mongolian loanwords in Samoyedic are quite few and it is possible that they were borrowed indirectly via Tungus (cf. Xelimskij 1985: 208–209).

3. Ancient Tungus–Ancient Samoyedic

Tungusic-Samoyedic contacts are quite long and diversified. According to Xelimskij (1985: 207), intensive Tungusic-Samoyedic contacts took place at the time preceding dissolution of Proto-Samoyedic and Proto-Tungusic which he dates in a general sense to the time before the new era, e.g. Samoyedic *ńä and Tungusic *niā ‘man, somebody’, but he tries to establish a phonetic feature due to which the first contacts must have been dated to the time before the beginning of the 1st millennium BC. There are also Evenki loanwords in Selkup as well as Samoyedic loanwords in Evenki. Later Samoyedic-Tungusic language contacts proceeded in the north between the northern Samoyedic languages such as Nenets and Nganasan and the north group of Evenki on the Lower Yenisei.

In conclusion we may say that Turkic-Samoyedic language contacts were predominantly in the south especially with the languages of the south group of Samoyedic, at present represented by a single language, Selkup, but in the past with other languages as well. These contacts may be dated to the first half of the first millennium AD.

While the Turkic-Samoyedic contacts proceeded from the south to the north, the Somoyedic-Tungusic contacts went on the axis west-est, along the line of the migration of Samoyedic peoples eastwards (Xelimskij 1985: 208).


Róna-Tas stressed the importance of cultural-historical background which should be examined in addition to the study of language material (Róna-Tas 1974: 36–37). There is somethings that may wrongly direct our thoughts and this is national and linguistic self identification of a people studied. As Ramstedt (1951: 49)
demonstrated, the process of Sinization of Koreans went so far that they had even accepted their national name Han from the Chinese and treated the Northern Barbarians in the spirit of Chinese historical tradition, notwithstanding that the Northern Barbarians were their ancestors. Another example goes from the history of the Hungarians. There is no trace of any Uralic or Finno-Ugric past in the historical consciousness of the Hungarians who inherited some remnants of a tradition going back to Atilla’s Huns in the 5th century, although their historical memory registered in early texts principally goes back to their ruler Álmos in the 9th century.

Needless to say, we have few data on the national self-identification of the Altaic peoples from the past where it was not shaped by state policy and institutions. It seems that self-identification may be formed by language, ethnic compositions, in some extreme cases by religion and other factors. As for ethnic composition, there are the following basic types: (1) peoples who have their unchanged historical memory (genealogy, epic), e.g. the Ewenki or the Kazakhs; (2) peoples whose ethnic composition is complex, e.g. the Uzbeks (Krader 1962); (3) peoples who changed their language or culture, in some cases a few times, e.g. the Khoibal, and adopted another people’s historical memory or not. We have to reckon with an adstratum in case (2) or a substratum in case (3).

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17 Choi (2005: 31) ventured to prove that Korean is most closely related to Turkic. He even tried to prove that the name of the Korean state Han comes from Trk. khan which is naturally a strange idea. The genuine national term for ‘Korean’, Koryŏ-saram is used by the Koreans in Russia and the post Soviet states.


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