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“The wheel of life” in Mongolian**Abstract**

In the field of any language the changes and occurrence of new forms or constructions conform to the *system* specific to the language. This *system*, more or less realized by the native speakers, can be defined as the particular *spirit of the language* present in the minds of speakers during the centuries. When linguistic units are used up or when constructions lose their communicative functions, the system produces new linguistic units and new constructions in their place in order to maintain the communicative function of the language.

In Mongolian the most important laws resulting from the *spirit of the language* are: vocalic harmony and constant stress on the first syllable (in the phonology), progressive structuring of the words and their forms (in the morphology) and regressive development of the sentences (in the syntax). The paper examines how these three pillars of the linguistic consciousness of Mongols were represented by different structures throughout the centuries.

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The topic of this paper is not, as suggested by the title, a discussion of the Buddhist notion *samsāra* ‘endless cycle of Life’ in its Mongolian equivalents. The heading is used here in a figurative sense; the problem examined is the analogy occurring between “life and becoming” in the material world of *kāmadhatu* ‘region of desire’ and “life and changing” occurring in a real language, in this case Mongolian. The Buddhists believe that “becoming” in the material world is ruled by the law of *karman*. The liberation from the “wheel of life” or “wheel of incarnations” is impossible without rejecting a liking for material things. Similarly, in the field of any language, the changes and occurrence of new forms or constructions conform to the *system* specific to the language. This system, more or less realized by the native speakers, can be defined as the particular spirit of the language present in the minds of speakers during the centuries. It is just that as some linguistic

units are used up, or when some constructions lose their communicative functions, in their place the system produces new linguistic units and new constructions in order to maintain the communicative function of the language.

In Mongolian the most important laws resulting from the *spirit of language* are: vocalic harmony and constant stress on the first syllable (in the phonology), progressive structuring of the words and their forms (in the morphology) and regressive development of the sentences (in the syntax). These three laws are three pillars of the linguistic consciousness of Mongols.

Regardless of changes taking place in Mongolian during the centuries the words have been always formed taking the vocal harmony (of different types) into consideration. Similarly the derived words and forms were formed by adding the suffixes and endings to the invariable root or theme and, finally, the sentences have been construed "regressively" that means in practice that a predicate placed on the end of sentence is preceded by an object and a subject and all attributes are before the nouns to which they relate. The rules of phonology, morphology and syntax mentioned above were tying up Mongolian speakers, like a tight corset, so they could not free form the "matrix" of their language.

However that does not mean that no changes in these three fields of language appeared during the centuries. It's obvious that the phonological system of Modern Mongolian (i.e. Khalkha-Mongolian) is totally different to that of Ancient and Written Mongolian. But changes did not affect the most fundamental point: the principle of vocalic harmony.

In Written Mongolian there was the palatal type of vocalic harmony, i.e. the words could have either back (*a, o, u*) or front vowels (*e, ö, ü*), but not both, with the exception of *i*, which as a neutral vowel could occur in any words. This type of vocalic harmony is still continuing in Khalkha-Mongolian. But besides this Khalkha-Mongolian developed a new type of vocalic harmony called *lip attraction*. According to this new rule the words with *o* in the first syllable can only have *o ~ oo ~ ou ~ yy ~ yū* in non-initial syllables and words with *ö* in first syllable can have *ö ~ öö ~ yy ~ yū* in other syllables.

In fact the most fundamental changes occurred in the morphologic structure of words. When various and sometimes not comprehensible reasons have resulted in the using up or the fossilizing of some forms, which are important for the communicative functions of language, the *system of language* (in other words: linguistic consciousness of speakers) recreates them from different material but according to the known, set formulas or procedures. It concerns the verbal forms as well the nominal ones. Here are some examples. When the forms *-m ~ -mU ~ -mÜ* (non-past), frequent in Written Mongolian, had gone out of use they were replaced by the forms *-nA₄* in the contemporary Mongolian (i.e. Khalkha-Mongolian). Both forms have similar origins (suffixes *-m* and *-n* form nouns from verbs) and the same syntactic function (they act as a predicate). In the same way the periphrastic form *-nAm* (*<-n, T_{v>n} + a-m*, non-past of the verb *a-* 'to be'), forming the present continuous tense, was replaced by the morphologically similar and semantically identical construction *-ж (~ -ү) + бай-на*. Similarly when some case forms had been used up, they were replaced by other forms originated from derivational suffixes or from nouns earlier used as postpositions, see the examples below:

- 1) when the classical ending *.A* of dative-locative-directive have disappeared it was replaced by *.᠔* ($\sim$ *.m*), the former derivational suffix with the meaning 'situated (in some place)';
- 2) when the ending *.luṡa* ($\sim$ *.lüge*) of comitative have disappeared, it was replaced in Khalkha-Mongolian by derivational suffix *.mAü₃* with the meaning 'having, possessing';
- 3) when the ancient endings *.ṡsi* $\sim$ *.si* of directive have fossilised they were replaced by new endings *.pYU₂* $\sim$ *.ḷYU₂* coming from the postposition *yyu* (Written Mongolian: *uruṡu*) 'down, downstream'.

The development of new case forms from "postpositions", which were originally independent nouns, can be observed on the example of contemporary postposition *᠐᠐᠔* 'up(wards)' (antonym to *yyu*) originated from *ögede*. As a "postposition" *᠐᠐᠔*, it governs the genitive, cf. Mo. *aṡula jin ögede* 'uphill'; Khalkha: *уул.ын ᠐᠐᠔* 'id.' After becoming a case form *᠐᠐᠔* begins to be joined with nominal themes and, like other suffixes, have its allomorphs conditioned by the law of vocalic harmony, ex.:

- 1) Mo. *ene morin aṡula jin ögede jabuṡu čidaqu ügej*; Kh. *Энэ морь уулын ᠐᠐᠔ явж чадахгүй* 'This horse can't ride uphill'.
- 2) Mo. *či tere aṡula ögede qara*; Literary Kh. *Чи тэр уул ᠐᠐᠔ хар!*; Colloquial Kh. *Чи тэр уул.аад хар!* 'Look at that hill!'.
- 3) Mo. *minu aq-a ger ögede ben jabuṡsan*; Literary Kh. *Миний ах гэр ᠐᠐᠔᠐᠐ явсан*; Colloquial Kh. *Миний ах гэрээдээ явсан*. 'My elder brother went home'.

In the same way as recognized "postpositions" transform themselves into case forms, the normal nouns (in the form of theme or the oblique case) can become the "postpositions". It seems legitimate to take as read that the casual endings in Mongolian (and very probably in other languages of the Altaic language league) are formed from the earlier "postpositions" or from the derivational suffixes. The "postpositions" themselves have as their prototypes the independent nouns or the case forms of the nouns, cf. examples:

- 1) *yčur* 'as, because, for the reason' < Mo. *učir* 'cause, reason';
- 2) *zapṡü* 'over, more than' < Mo. *ṡar-* 'to go or come out' + *-(U)j*, $T_{v>n}$, *praesentis*;
- 3) *dəpəṡḍ* 'at, by (the side of), near' < Mo. **derge*. 'vicinity' + *.de*, $T_{n>dative-locative}$;
- 4) *xṡpməḷ* '(un)till, up or close to' < Mo. *kür-tel.e*, *conv. terminale* of *kür-* 'to reach, arrive at' (*-tal.a* $\sim$ *-tel.e* is dative-directive form of verbal nouns on *-tAl*).

Especially turbulent changes are taking place in the group of verbal forms traditionally named converbs. This numerous group mostly includes the original verbal nouns in their case forms. When the case ending went out of use and the formant of the verbal noun lost its productivity the whole adverbial form lost its usefulness. But as the meaning expressed by these forms were indispensable for maintaining the communicative function, the analogous construction was made but from different material (the connection of different suffix of the type $T_{v>n}$ + case ending), cf.:

- a) *conv. finale* on *-r.A* (< *-r*, $T_{v>n}$ + *A*, *dat.-loc.-dir.*) $\sim$ *conv. finale* ending on *-quj.a* $\sim$ *-küj.e* (< *-quj* $\sim$ *-küj*, $T_{v>n}$, *futuri* + *A*, *dat.-loc.-dir.*) replaced by the construction: *nomen futuri* + *instrumentalis* (*-x.AAp₄*); Mo. *ire-r.e* $\sim$ *ire-küj.e* 'in order to come' > Kh. *upə-x.əp* 'id.';

- b) *conv. successivum* on *-qu.la ~ -kü.le* (< *-QU*, $T_{v>n}$ *futuri* + *.lA* [*<.luya ~.lüge*], $T_{n>comit.}$) replaced by the construction: *nomen futuri* + (new) *comitativus* (*-x.maiü₃*). The possibility of substituting some constructions by others does not mean that many formants can survive without any changes. Sometimes they were simply disappearing for ever, cf. *Mo. conv. praeparativum -r.Un* not having its equivalent in Contemporary Mongolian.

On the other side there came into being completely new converbal forms not having their structural equivalents in Ancient Mongolian; they serve to express new meanings or shades of meanings which could not be expressed by existing converbs. This remark concerns especially two new converbs (that is *conv. occasionis* ending on *-h₂AA₄* and *conv. contemporale II* on *-[h₂]YYm₂*), which have a meaning slightly different from the existing two converbs: *conv. terminale* ending on *-tAlA₂* (Kh. *-mAl₄*) and *conv. contemporale* ending on **-QU.lUTA.bAr₂* (Kh. *-xlAAp₄*).

The essential characteristic of Mongolian is a principle of "expressing" an action by "naming" it. In other words the indicative and imperative-optative forms of a verb are originally the so called *nominalizations*, i.e. the verbal nouns (*nomina verbalia*) or deverbal nouns (*nomina deverbalia*). To stress their predicative function such (de)verbal nouns joined a predicative vowel (~ diphthong) or some possessive suffix (ex. *.lAj*). The ancient predicative vowel (*A* or *U*) could receive semi-vowel *j* forming the diphthong *Aj* or *Uj* which with the suffix of (de)verbal nouns constitutes the predicative form, ex.: the nouns on **-b + A* (~ *Aj*) > *-bA* (~ *-bAj*), $T_{v>perfectum}$ *I* or the nouns on **-m + U* (~ *Uj*) > *-mU* (~ *-mUj*), $T_{v>praesens\ futurum}$. The form of the past in *-bA(j)* still exist in Khalkha-Mongolian (cf. *-ø*) while the form of present future on *-mU(j)* was replaced by new present future in *-h₂A₄* (< **-n*, $T_{v>n}$ + *A(j)* *predicative vowel (diphthong)*), corresponding to the late Mongolian *-nA(j)*. The last example shows, that Mongolian speaker did not forget the real meaning of the form *-mU(j)* while substituting it by new form *-h₂A₄*.

The presence of the possessive suffix *.lAj* can be proved in several predicative forms, ex.: *Mo. -sUTaj*, $T_{v>voluntativus}$ (< **-s*, $T_{v>n}$ + *+U* +, *connective vowel* + *.lAj₂*, $T_{n>possessivum}$) maintained in Khalkha-Mongolian in the form *-cyzaü₂*, or in Pre-classical Mongolian *-lUTAj* (> *Mo. -lUTA*) (< *-l*, $T_{v>n}$ *actionis* + *+U* +, *connective vowel* + *.lAj*, $T_{n>possessivum}$). The nominal origin of verbal forms is proved by the imperative form ending *-z* which must be identical with Mongolian *-γ ~ -g* forming deverbal nouns like *biči-g* 'writing' or *žiru-γ* 'drawing'.

A history of two negative particles (*Mo. ülü* and *ese* 'not') is a good example illustrating how forms can be replaced by new ones. In classical Mongolian the two particle were used prepositionally, *ülü* before imperfective forms of a verb, *ese* before perfective forms. It's hard to say why these negative particles began to go out of use in contemporary Mongolian. But, as the negative forms are necessary in any language these particles were replaced by the suffix *.γü* (< *üge-j* 'absence, lack of; no, not') used after nominal forms of verbs. Such substitution resulted in all negative forms (especially the predicative ones) being expressed by the verbal nouns with *.γü*, cf. *ява-х.γü* 'he won't go'; *яв-сан.γü* 'he didn't go'; *яв-аа.γü* 'he has not yet gone'; *яв-даг.γü* 'he usually doesn't go'.

The cited examples prove, if any evidence is necessary, that so long human beings are living, so long their language is changing and developing. Only a few *things* are constant in language. Becoming and dying are – like in the *sansāra* ‘the wheel of life’ – the main characteristics of any language. However, the change and development in language are not linear. Bringing to mind Einstein’s famous thesis about “mass bending the space” one may say that a system of language (~ ‘the linguistic consciousness of speakers’ ~ “*spirit of language*”, no matter what it is called) causes the changes that are inevitable in language to be in the form of a spiral roller than a straight line. The *spirit of language* **bends** its line of development. The language, its units, forms and constructions return to the same (initial) point but on another, higher level. And in this way the linguistic “wheel of life” is turning and turning.