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Introduction: Language contact in the Amdo Sprachbund

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ABSTRACT

This paper gives a brief introduction to the *Himalayan Linguistics* special issue *Language Contact in the Amdo Sprachbund*. It briefly reviews some of the scholarship regarding language contact in the region, and traces the history of recognition that Amdo should be considered a Sprachbund. It suggests that Campbell's (2017) concept of a "trait-sprawl area" offers a good way to characterize this Sprachbund. The seven papers included in the volume are also briefly summarized.

KEYWORDS

language contact, linguistic areas, Amdo Sprachbund

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Introduction: Language contact in the Amdo Sprachbund

A special issue of Himalayan Linguistics

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1 Introduction

The Amdo Sprachbund lies at a historical crossroads, where many different cultural and linguistic groups have interacted over many generations. It is where the Yellow River descends from the northeastern edge of the Tibetan plateau, intersecting ancient silk road trade routes by which China and Central Asia have conducted commerce for centuries. It is a frontier region where farmers and nomads have traded produce and livestock, and where river valleys have drawn successive new arrivals into sustained contact with long-settled populations. Control of parts of the territory has variously fallen to warlords, lamas, distant empires, and invading armies. Political and/or military control has often introduced new languages to the region, or reconfigured the relative status of those already present.

The linguistic legacy of this history is represented by modern-day language varieties belonging to four different language families: Bodic, Sinitic, Mongolic, and Turkic. Local varieties from these disparate linguistic family trees have participated in many processes of structural convergence--consequences of a complex sociocultural history of intergroup interactions.

This collection of papers does not attempt to present a systematic overview of the Amdo Sprachbund. The editors and authors have the much more modest goal of raising the profile of this linguistic area among scholars of language contact. We hope that the papers included here will demonstrate the pervasive impacts of contact-induced change across this region, and will help to substantiate our belief that Amdo should be considered a prototypical Sprachbund. Furthermore, we hope that the phenomena which we and others discover in Amdo may make some small contributions to the general study of the processes of language contact.

2 Language Contact in Amdo

Li (1983) seems to have been the first to comment on the potential significance of the Amdo region for a general understanding of language contact processes. He says (1983: 50) "the linguistic situation in the border region between Qinghai and Gansu offers us an unusual opportunity to take

the study of languages in contact to a new frontier... We have in this geographical area two diametrically-opposed typological groups of languages in contact: verb-final agglutinative languages versus verb-medial isolating languages.” Li sees the importance of the region in this way: “the situation is a close approximate to a controlled experiment of contact-induced language change” (1983: 50). In his contribution to this volume, Szeto (this issue) echoes this sentiment, calling the Amdo Sprachbund “a natural laboratory for the study of language contact and human interaction at large”.

Li was not alone in his early noticing of the profound significance of language contact in Amdo. The pervasive influence of contact-induced changes has been noted by nearly every author who has described any language of the Amdo region. Indeed, linguists have even called some local language varieties *mixed languages* or *creoles*, due to their extreme divergence from the features we would have expected them to inherit from their apparent language families of origin.

Unfortunately, some of the earliest linguistic literature about languages of the region was based on minimal information about the languages in question, and was prone to searching in implausible places for sources of contact-induced changes. Furthermore, many conclusions about language contact were advanced which seemed to have a tenuous connection to accepted definitions of contact-related terminology. For example, in my own doctoral dissertation (Slater 1998) I referred to Mangghuer as a “mixed language”, but my definition of a “mixed language” was not aligned with the scholarly consensus of the time. The early Gangou Chinese Dialect paper to which I also contributed (Zhu et al 1994) attracted the attention of some language contact specialists, but the data was meager, insufficient to support serious evaluation of the paper’s claims.

This is one reason that Li’s (1983) suggestion that the Amdo region might serve as a laboratory for the study of contact-induced change was not followed up on for many years. In addition, though, there was an even deeper issue: documentation of the languages of Amdo and their mutual interactions did not keep pace with the field of contact linguistics. Thomason and Kaufman’s influential *Language Contact, Creolization and Genetic Linguistics* appeared in 1988, five years after Li’s (1983) paper, and in fact did discuss some implications of that paper and a companion one (Li 1994). But further descriptive studies of the Amdo region only trickled out piecemeal, from scholarly communities that did not have much contact with each other, so that contact linguists simply did not have adequate data to connect the Amdo region to major theories, or even to major questions, within the field. Thus, Thomason’s *Language contact: An Introduction*, published in 2001, actually has less to say about the Amdo region than the earlier (1988) book did (2001: 86, 97-8).

Today there is still a dearth of information about how and why languages in Amdo have influenced one another’s historical development, and language contact specialists may be forgiven for perhaps having developed a certain wariness about the region. It remains difficult to assess the claims made about the histories of Amdo language varieties.

3 Amdo as a *Sprachbund*

The concept of a *linguistic area* or *Sprachbund* is one that many linguists have found useful, but that has eluded the pursuit of definition-writers; Campbell (2017) presents an excellent discussion of the issues, and in fact shows that there are good reasons to doubt that the concept actually can be *defined* in any of the ways it is customarily approached. I will return shortly to Campbell’s suggestion of a better way to conceptualize the Sprachbund phenomenon.

Sprachbund is a prototype category, based upon a core concept which can be extended without obvious limitation. There is nothing inherent about the idea of intense language contact that helps us to draw a line (either geographically or linguistically) beyond which it can be said not to apply. Nonetheless, there are some situations, such as the Balkans, which are widely accepted as instances of the Sprachbund phenomenon.

The best-accepted Sprachbünde tend to involve relatively small geographic areas within which multiple languages, especially from unrelated families, display a high degree of congruence in multiple linguistic subsystems, especially including phonology and morphosyntax (lexical borrowing alone is not enough). This congruence should be demonstrably related to historical processes of *convergence*, in which inherited linguistic structures in individual languages have changed to become more like the structures of neighboring languages. Convergence can also be thought of in terms of *diffusion*, the spreading of features outward from one language variety into others. Sociologically, there should be evidence of extensive multilingual practices, leading to many individual and communal opportunities for borrowing and substratum interference; these are the mechanisms that lead to widespread structural convergence.

In our view, the northeastern part of Amdo, along the modern borders of Qinghai and Gansu Provinces, qualifies as a very good example of this phenomenon. In this relatively compact geographic area speakers of Bodic, Mongolic, Sinitic and Turkic language varieties have been in contact for hundreds of years. Regionally and locally, speakers of these languages have occupied shifting positions of cultural, economic, and political influence for many generations. Multilingual practices are widespread; intermarriage and language shift are common. As a result, languages spoken within the region have converged to share a large number of linguistic features which cannot be attributed solely to inherited typological similarities.

The first acknowledgement that these patterns of contact-induced change merit recognition of the region as a linguistic area was provided by Dwyer (1995), who called the region “the Northwest China *Sprachbund*.” This suggestion was rapidly accepted by specialists who study languages of the region, because the *Sprachbund* concept very naturally captures the widespread convergence processes which quickly present themselves to the documentor of any specific language variety in the region.

What to call this Sprachbund, however, has been less clear. The label “Amdo Sprachbund” has only recently gained currency as the generally accepted name for this linguistic area, and earlier terminological variation may well be one of the reasons that contact linguists have not been very aware of this Sprachbund. Dwyer’s “Northwest China *Sprachbund*” label was followed by the labels “Qinghai-Gansu border area” (Slater 1998: 33) and “Inner Asian Frontier” (Slater 1998: 37). Janhunen (2007, originally presented as a conference paper in 2001) referred to the “Qinghai Linguistic Complex”, and also suggested several alternative names: “Qinghai Sprachbund”; “Amdo Sprachbund”; “Amdo Linguistic Region”; and “Yellow River Plateau Language Union”. Slater (2003) proposed the term “Qinghai-Gansu Sprachbund”. Janhunen et al (2008) seem to suggest that there is still no clear consensus as to the region’s name when they refer to Wutun as “an integral member of a larger areal union of languages **which may be termed the *Amdo Sprachbund***” (2008: 21; bold emphasis added, italics original). Seven years later, Xu (2015) refers to “the Northwest China Linguistic Area”, but also uses the label “Gansu-Qinghai Sprachbund”.¹

¹ This is like Slater’s (2003) suggestion, re-ordered to match the customary sequence of these provincial names in Standard Chinese.

The reader who consults the publications just mentioned will find that references to this Sprachbund generally do not include attempts to define its geographical boundaries. Indeed, the various proposed names listed above are mostly based on political divisions (themselves at least partly based on geography), and each would thus seem to imply different geographical boundaries to the area. This, I think, is because we all recognize in the region an intense contact zone which Campbell (2017) would call a “trait-sprawl area”, in which contact causes linguistic traits to diffuse into neighboring languages such that “individual traits can pattern in disordered ways, with some crisscrossing some languages while others crisscross other languages, with some extending in one direction, others in another direction, with some partially overlapping others in part of their distribution but also not coinciding in other parts of their geographical distribution” (Campbell 2017: 28). Geography has certainly contributed massively to the diffusion of linguistic features across Amdo languages (see Xu 2015), but the reason we can think of Amdo as a Sprachbund is that there have been many intense diffusion events in the region, not because there is any clear geographic delineation of where those events have stopped.

4 Overview of the Papers in This Issue

This issue includes seven papers, which fall into three broad categories: descriptions of contact-influenced changes in specific language varieties; studies of areal features; and a general overview of the historical sociocultural motivations for language contact across the region.

Four of the papers focus on the processes and results of contact-induced changes in specific language varieties. Detailed studies of this sort are helpful to our understanding of the specific mechanisms which have led, in individual language varieties, to the convergence patterns which emerge across the region.

- Sandman (this issue) describes the system of Differential Argument marking in Wutun (Sinitic), showing that the semantic and pragmatic features of the system are unexpected from a comparative Sinitic point of view, but consistent with hypothesis that Amdo Tibetan contact motivated the development of the system.
- Kerbs (this issue) describes the phonological system of Gān’gōu Chinese (Sinitic), and identifies a number of phonological innovations (and one retention) which can probably be attributed to areal influence.
- Zhou (this issue) studies an inherited Sinitic pronoun in Zhoutun Chinese (Sinitic), showing that its synchronic constellation of functions has most probably developed through a grammaticalization pathway at least partly influenced by Amdo Tibetan.
- Slater (this issue) shows how Mangghuer (Mongolic) borrows Chinese lexemes that are synonymous, or nearly so, with existing vocabulary. He shows that extensive borrowing from a typologically different system creates a new category of “bound synonyms” in Mangghuer.

Two papers look at areal features (case and number) found in the Sprachbund.

- Xu (this issue) looks at two case phenomena found in the Amdo Sprachbund: syncretism of Accusative and Dative; and the Dative subject possessor construction. Xu finds that the

historical emergence of these patterns in individual languages is best seen as having multiple motivations, some language-internal and some from contact languages.

- Simon and Noûs (this issue) survey patterns of non-singular number categories across the Amdo Sprachbund, showing that the grammaticalization of these patterns in many individual language varieties has been influenced by contact with neighboring languages. Sinitic, Bodic and Mongolic/Turkic varieties are all shown to have functioned as “model languages”, motivating historical changes in neighboring varieties.

Finally, one paper, Szeto (this issue), looks at the relationship of genes and language in Amdo linguistic groups. This birds-eye view across the Sprachbund shows that the history of sociocultural interactions is critical for a complete understanding of the many and varied types of linguistic convergence that we observe in individual language varieties.

This ratio of 4:2:1 was not planned, but it seems to me to be very appropriate to the documentation needs of the Amdo Sprachbund. A wealth of detailed studies of contact-related changes in individual languages should provide a foundation for a smaller set of areally-focused studies, occasionally brought together in an overview or summary of what makes Amdo a Sprachbund.

The missing element, of course, is alluded to by my use of the word “documentation” in the previous paragraph: there is a tremendous need for additional, contextualized, primary language data from every language community in Amdo. Perhaps the accidental ratio which emerged in this collection could be pleasantly extended to 8:4:2:1, suggesting that primary data sources should outnumber linguistic studies of any sort, even in the aggregate.

An important observation which appears in several of this volumes’ contributions is that change events that result in convergence within Amdo are rarely attributable to a simple diffusion of a feature from language X to language Y. The complex network of intercultural and interlinguistic relations in the region means that it is rarely possible to identify a single “donor” language for any given trait upon which multiple language varieties have converged. This observation is particularly prominent in the papers by Xu (this issue) and Simon and Noûs (this issue), which focus specifically on specific linguistic features that are found in multiple languages across the region. Szeto’s (this issue) discussion of the complex history that is suggested by genetic markers in the region makes these linguistic observations unsurprising; linguistic influences must have flowed in many directions, as intercultural relations were reconfigured many times over the centuries.

5 Conclusion

More than 25 years have passed since Dwyer (1995) first referred to Amdo as a *Sprachbund*, and still this linguistic area is not well-known, and does not typically appear in lists of recognized linguistic areas. Thomason (2001: 98) was aware of the claim that the region is a Sprachbund but did not commit to an evaluation of that claim, and the situation is not much different today. Campbell (2017: 21) does include Amdo in a list of 75 linguistic areas that have been proposed by at least

someone, some time, but like Thomason he makes no evaluation of the proposal.² At this writing, the Amdo Sprachbund is not even mentioned on the Wikipedia page “Sprachbund” (Wikipedia contributors 2021), nor does it have its own Wikipedia page.

Of course, being “well-known” is a consequence of publicity, and the Amdo Sprachbund has received too little of this. There are still too few grammatical descriptions (of limited scope), too few sociolinguistic and sociocultural descriptions, too few examples of primary language data, and so on, to enable general recognition of the history of language contact processes in this region.

The contributors to this volume hope that our collection of papers constitutes a modest improvement of the situation. We are grateful to *Himalayan Linguistics* for the opportunity to cast a bit of a spotlight on a region that we believe should be included when prototypical Sprachbünde are discussed.

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² Alongside “Amdo sprachbund (Qinghai-Gansu sprachbund)”, Campbell’s (2017:21) list also includes “Northwest China sprachbund”. Since Campbell does not give references in this list, it is not possible to determine whether these actually refer to the same region; it may be that “Northwest China” represents a broader proposal than just the Amdo region.

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