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The phonology of Mongolian

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1. Introduction

This book contains a study of the phonology and phonetics of Standard Mongolian, as well as an overview of the historical development of the Mongolic languages. The description of the phonology and phonetics of Standard Mongolian, defined as the variety of Halh Mongolian spoken in Ulaanbaatar, the capital of the Republic of Mongolia, is based on original data collected by the authors from Ulaanbaatar Halh speakers. The chapters at the end of the book on diachronic phonology are designed to put the synchronic phonology in the perspective of its historical development.

2. Synchronic Phonology: Halh Mongolian

The first two chapters, titled “Vowels” and “Consonants,” present acoustic details of the phonetics of Mongolia vowels. The phonemes are then discussed in chapter 3.

In chapter 1 the authors show that there are seven long and six short vowels in initial syllables, as well as eight full and seven reduced vowels in non-initial syllables. Using duration measurements from three speakers, they show that short initial vowels have roughly the same duration as full non-initial vowels. In chapter 3, both of these are analyzed as short vowels while the initial long vowels are analyzed as long. The non-initial reduced vowels are analyzed as epenthetic and not present in the underlying representation. Chapter 1 also charts all the vowels and the four diphthongs using F1 and F2 measurements.

Chapter 2 discusses consonant phones including stops and affricates, fricatives, nasals, liquids, glides, and palatalized consonants. There are fifteen stops and affricates in five places of articulation. There are voiceless and voiceless aspirated labial and dental stops and dental and alveo-palatal affricates, while all velar and uvular stops are voiced.
All stops except the uvular stop [ɡ] have palatalized counterparts. There are five fricatives, six nasals (including two palatalized nasals [mʲ] and [nʲ]), two liquids with palatalized counterparts, and two glides [w] and [wʲ]. All the palatalized consonants contrast with plain consonants, but only in words with pharyngeal vowels. Mongolian has pharyngeal vowel harmony with three pharyngeal vowels [ʊ, ɔ, a], three non-pharyngeal vowels [u, o, e], and one neutral vowel [i]. Palatalized consonants go with pharyngeal vowels because of Old Mongolian palatal vowel harmony, which shifted to pharyngeal vowel harmony in Halh Mongolian. This is discussed later in the book.

Chapter 3 discusses Mongolian vowel and consonant phonemes. There are seven basic vowels, as well as seven long vowels and four diphthongs. There are thirty-two consonants in seven places of articulation: labial, palatalized labial, dental, alveolopalatal, palatal, velar, and uvular.

Chapter 4, titled “Writing Systems,” discusses the two main writing systems that have been employed in writing Mongolian and how these systems compare with the phonology discussed in chapter 3. A Syrian-based vertical script was used before the Soviet era, and a Cyrillic-based script has been the primary system since.

Chapter 5 on phonological processes is primarily a discussion of vowel harmony, which according to the authors is the most important phonological process in Mongolian. Vowel harmony functions in the domain of the non-compound word and functions both within roots and between stems and suffixes. The authors build an analysis of vowel harmony based on the features [pharyngeal], [palatal], and [velar], showing both the shift from Old Mongolian palatal harmony to Halh Mongolian pharyngeal harmony, as well as the less prominent rounding harmony.

Chapter 6 discusses syllabification and epenthesis. The maximum syllable is CVVCCC. Epenthesis of reduced non-initial vowels is closely related to syllabification as these vowels are inserted in illicitly large consonant clusters.

Chapter 7 is titled “Prosody” and discusses focal accent, final prominence tone, boundary signaling, questions, and word stress. Perhaps the most interesting part of this chapter is the authors’ analysis of word stress. Using acoustic measurements, they show that fundamental frequency (F0), duration, and quality of vowels do not correlate with word stress. F0 is used to show prominence and boundaries on the level of the prosodic phrase, while vowel duration and quality distinguish long, short, and epenthetic vowels. The authors conclude that “word stress is not phonologically relevant in Mongolian” (96).

3. Diachronic Phonology: The Development of the Mongolic Languages

Chapters 8, 9, and 10 discuss the historical phonology of the Mongolic languages. Chapter 8 presents Old Mongolian, chapter 9 introduces the modern Mongolic languages, and chapter 10 shows the phonological developments from Old Mongolian to the various Mongolic languages.
In chapter 8 the authors differentiate between Old Mongolian and Proto-Mongolic. Although the two are very similar, the analysis here is of Old Mongolian which is actually represented in many old texts and can thus be analyzed independently of the modern Mongolic languages. There are Old Mongolian texts written using four writing systems: the vertical Uigur script (based on the Syrian script), Chinese, Arabic, and 'Phags-Pa (based on the Tibetan script). After the difficulties of deciphering these texts is discussed, Old Mongolian consonants and vowels are presented along with morphophonological processes. At the end of the chapter is a wordlist of about 250 items that shows the words along with the source texts where the words are found.

The eleven Mongolic languages discussed in chapter 9 include the three relatively well-known languages Mongolian, Oirad, and Buriad and eight “peripheral” languages: Kamnigan, Dagur, Shira Yugur, Monguor, Santa, Bonan, Kangjia, and Moghol. Mongolian is spoken primarily in Mongolia and northeastern China. Oirad is spoken mainly in western Mongolia and northwestern China, while Buriad is spoken in northern Mongolia, across the border in Russia, and in northeastern China. Most of the “peripheral” languages are spoken in northern China; Moghol, which is nearly extinct, is spoken in Afghanistan. There are roughly six million speakers of Mongolic languages, most of them speaking some form of Mongolian. Chapter 9 ends with a comparative vocabulary of about 240 items.

Chapter 10 is a comparative look at the sound changes in Mongolic languages from Old Mongolian. Vowel shifts included pharyngealization, velarization, and polarization. Different combinations of these three shifts yielded different vowel systems in the various languages. The chapter discusses various other segmental changes in vowels and consonants, including a lengthy section on vowel palatalization. At the end of the chapter there is a brief discussion of syllable and word structure changes. Halh Mongolian words are shorter than Old Mongolian words, and have a more complex syllable structure.

4. Analysis and Conclusion

This book is an excellent study of Mongolian phonology. Its usefulness is accentuated by both the breadth of the research and the detailed analysis of the phonology of one dialect of Mongolian. It is a very tedious read, but this is to be expected with a topic of this level of complexity and scope. My only issue with this book is that its organization is not very intuitive. When beginning to read the book, it is not immediately obvious that there are two distinct sections: 1) synchronic phonology of Halh Mongolian and 2) historical phonology of the Mongolic languages. Also, it is difficult to read the two initial chapters on the phonetics of vowels and consonants before the chapter on phonemes. While this order might be well suited for conducting phonological analysis, as a final presentation it is not, in my opinion, very user friendly. It is also not clear why chapter 4 on writing systems is put between chapters on phonemes and phonological process. Its purpose is to relate the writing systems to the phonology and to provide background information for later transcriptions throughout the book; however, it may be better suited as introductory material rather than a chapter on its own. The internal organization of each chapter is very clear, however. The whole book is based on excellent research and is an invaluable resource for anyone interested in the topic.