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Chuvash Historical Phonetics

An areal linguistic study

With an Appendix on the Role of Proto-Mari
in the History of Chuvash Vocalism

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Foreword

The aim of historical linguistic research – no matter what language is subjected to historical study – is twofold. Its primary task is to determine, describe and set up a chronological order of the processes that, affecting a subsystem of any linguistic system, have led from an earlier point of departure to the present state of a language, or the other way round: starting from the present state of a language and using appropriate methodology, the researcher can reconstruct an earlier stage with their help. These requirements being met, the results thus achieved are made use of within the subdisciplines that study linguistic activity and phenomena.

The other task of historical linguistic research is to act as an auxiliary discipline of the historical science and, employing the existing correlations between language and ethnic community, to provide arguments for historical conclusions through the interpretation of linguistic data available in the historical sources.

The present thesis with its historical linguistic topic has been designed to meet both of the above aims. On the one hand, the author, by interpreting data of written historical records and comparing them with other sources, aims to widen the scope of the ethnic and linguistic constituents that are known to have existed in the Middle Volga region prior to the Mongol invasion. On the other hand, by making use of all the data of Ogur Turkic linguistic history hitherto disclosed and, applying the historical comparative method, she also makes an attempt to reconstruct the stage of language simultaneous with the late Old and Middle Chuvash sound system and marked it off from all the other Volga Bulgarian dialects. The changes in the history of sounds and other structural alterations generated by Mari-Chuvash linguistic contact also will then be presented in comparison with that stage.

Naturally, there have been earlier attempts to compose a history of Chuvash phonetics. Each author who has dealt with this topic has had to face the dilemma of how the phonetic history of a language with only a small number of written records can be described as a process. In theory, there may be three solutions to this problem.

The first of these is a model of linear descent based on a merely theoretical method of reconstruction and on the family tree theory. Its aim is to grasp the specific changes typical of the language in question that have occurred in it since it became separated from the protolanguage, following exclusively linguistic considerations of systems theory. This solution, with only slight modifications, was applied by Mudrak in his reconstruction of Chuvash (Mudrak 2002: 677–89). Since the antecedent of Chuvash separated from the Proto-Turkic language somewhere in South Siberia in the late Proto-Turkic period probably in the first centuries AD, Mudrak specifies the Proto-Turkic set of sounds by taking parallel South Siberian sound changes into account. Parallel sound changes originating from the common basis shared by the antecedent of Chuvash and South Siberian languages is a working hypothesis treated by Mudrak as one of certainty without, however, actually proving it, which makes his theoretical reconstruction of later periods following Late Proto-Turkic rather instable.

Another possibility is the presentation of sound changes of Chuvash in the context of sound changes that have taken place in all the branches of the Turkic language family. Although this approach does not allow grasping the process of changes but it can highlight