

So Close and yet so Distant ... On Turkic Core Structures, Genealogical and Typological Grouping of Varieties, and Mutual Intelligibility

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The Turkic languages and dialects form a well-defined genealogical group whose members are closely related to each other in the sense of genealogical proximity. They exhibit specific linguistic core structures, which are not overruled by code-copying as effects of their numerous external contacts. Extensive copying may make certain relations difficult to recognize, but it does not lead to dissolution of the family bonds.

Grammatical categories pertaining to the verb systems appear to be most fruitful for defining the specific core structures of Turkic: viewpoint aspect categories, postverbs as actional modifiers, moods, and evidential markers. One typical feature of Turkic languages is that they preserve and renew such categories, often modifying the way they are expressed morphologically.

The relations between Turkic varieties can also be defined in terms of distance: the degree of superficial similarity, important for mutual intelligibility, or the degree of typological proximity, which can also have an impact on interlingual communication. These variables are in principle independent of the genealogical grouping. Closely related varieties may be relatively distant from each other, facing problems of interlingual comprehension. Conversely, less closely related varieties may be relatively similar to each other.

The distances can be measured in various ways. Degrees of distance sometimes serve as the basis for grouping of languages and dialects. Since the introduction of lexicostatistics, researchers have been constructing methods for dealing with look-alikes, i.e. using similarity as a criterion for grouping. The search for quantifiable degrees of distance is, however, often problematic.

Another question is still open: whether Turkic is part of a larger so-called Transeurasian family, traditionally called Altaic, with whose other members, Mongolic, Tungusic, Korean, and Japonic, it shares some of its most specific features. Ongoing research in genealogical and contact linguistics, e.g. at Mainz University, aims at investigating Transeurasian as a candidate for a valid genealogical grouping. Work on shared bound morphology appears to be particularly promising.