

An example of Nganasan-Dolgan linguistic contact

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The use of the third person singular possessive suffix as a marker of definiteness is quite common in Turkic languages. In North Dolgan, however, this function is performed by the second person possessive suffix. This phenomenon is probably a result of Nganasan influence and is a distinguishing feature of the North and South Dolgan dialects.

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1. We do not know very much about Dolgan dialects. Nearly all Dolgan texts published so far were written in Southern Taymyr, i.e. by Dolgans who come from or, at least, have been living in the South for a longer period of time (that is, normally, in Dudinka or Noril'sk).

The Dolgans themselves distinguish between Lower (= Northern) and Upper (= Southern) Dolgan, the border running through the village Khatanga. During my stay in Dudinka (1995), I was fortunate enough to meet a Dolgan lady, Miss Elizaveta Aleksandrovna Bettu, who spoke her native Lower Dolgan, although not every aspect of her dialect was equally well understood in Dudinka. When translating some texts by various Russian authors as well as a few fairy-tales of other Siberian peoples into Dolgan, Miss Bettu attempted to use the Upper Dolgan dialect, which seems to be—probably because of the publications which have appeared in the South—more prestigious. Fortunately for us, however, she did not always manage to avoid using Lower Dolgan grammatical constructions.

Another Dolgan lady who is also very important for this study is Mrs. Anna Alekseevna Barbolina. She comes from the North, in fact, but her close contact with Upper Dolgan in Dudinka and with Yakut

allows her to distinguish many words and expressions typical of Northern Taymyr and different from those used in the South. Characteristically, Mrs. Barbolina, too, oriented herself by applying standards of Southern Dolgan.

2. One of the unpublished texts translated by Miss Bettu and then corrected by Mrs. Barbolina is of special importance to us. It is an Evenk fairy-tale about ‘An orphan and his grandmother’ (Dolgan *Tulajak ogonu kytta äbätä*). In the text, we encounter four constructions with the possessive suffix of the second person singular, which however functions as a definite article:

- (1) Dolg. *ontuŋ*
‘that one; he himself’ (not ‘you yourself’); cf. otherwise *ontuta* ‘id.’
(Stachowski 1993:194)
- (2) Dolg. *bu ogoŋ alaŋānnaŋ ytta*
‘The boy (not ‘your son’) shot (an arrow) from his bow.’
- (3) Dolg. *hās küölüŋ aryllan balyk tuttalar*
‘In the spring, when the lake (not ‘your lake’) became free of ice, they caught fish.’
- (4) Dolg. *onton uol ogoŋ ulätta*
‘Then the boy (not ‘your son’) grew (into a young man).’

Only in 4 did Mrs. Barbolina alter *uol ogoŋ* to *uol ogoto*. When I asked Miss Bettu why she had written, for instance, *bu ogoŋ* (2) but not *bu ogoto*, she said that for her it was the only “normal” way of speaking.

Another example of the same possessive construction is found in Miss Bettu’s Dolgan translation of a story by V. Zavarzina with the title “Autumn is passing away” (Dolgan *Kühün baranar*):

- (5) Dolg. *horoguŋ ..., nōŋüöläriŋ ...*
‘Some ..., others ...’ (not ‘some of your people ..., the others of your people’ or the like).

When talking to a group of people, the second person plural possessive suffix is used, as in the following example:

(6) Dolg. *ontugut ämiä k̄ys bugat̄yr*

‘Auch dieses (Mädchen, von dem ich euch erzähle,) ist ein heldenhaftes Mädchen.’ (Artem’ev 1992: 117)

3. The fact that the possessive suffix of the third person singular can function as a marker of definiteness is quite common in Turkic languages (see, e.g., the chapter “Der Artikel” in Grönbech 1936: 92-101 and Kowalski 1938: 589). But, as far as I know, the possessive suffix for the second person singular does not perform this function in any Turkic language. That is why one may expect foreign influence having led to this special use of the second person singular possessive suffix.

Indeed, this is a normal construction in Nganasan, the neighbouring language of Dolgan. Tereščenko (1993: 353) remarks that its possessive suffixes of the second person singular appear as a kind of definite article (“Lično-pritjažatel’nye suffiksy 2-go lica vystupajut v vide svoeobraznogo opredelennogo artiklja”). For the same phenomenon in other Uralic languages, see Tauli (1966: 148-149).

In view of old and sometimes very close contacts between Nganasan and Dolgan (resulting, for instance, in the partial Nganasanization of the Dolgan clan *Oko* (Hajdú 1985: 131)), the adoption of a Nganasan grammatical construction in Dolgan appears quite possible.

4. Now, let us return to the translation by Miss Bettu and its correction by Mrs. Barbolina. I think that Mrs. Barbolina consciously oriented herself along the lines of what is usual in Yakut and Upper Dolgan. Probably, she viewed the use of the second person singular possessive suffix to mark definiteness as a kind of Northern Dolgan “provincialism”. Yet the construction was so familiar to her that she neither noticed nor changed it in three of the four examples.

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