

An apparent sprinkling of Altaic words in a Dravidian language (Kannada). Possible historical significance for South Asia

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Abstract.

Modern Kannada, a Dravidian language of great antiquity, possesses several words which bear a striking similarity, in sound and meaning, to words in modern Turkish. Another apparent common feature is ‘agglutination’, with several suffixes being nearly identical in the two languages. These may indicate that early Altaic (the basis of Turkish) was spoken in the Indian sub-continent prior to the arrival of the Indo-Iranian peoples. It appears that the languages of the sub-continent may have evolved from early forms of Altaic, Indo-Iranian and Dravidian. If borne out by further study, these preliminary findings would be of immense significance to the cultural and linguistic history of the south Asian region.

There appear to be several words in modern Turkish that bear a close similarity in both sound and meaning to words in the Dravidian language Kannada (also ‘Kanarese’). These words are in common usage in both languages. Importantly, also, grammatical similarity is to be found in the system of suffixes employed in both the languages (‘agglutination’). In fact, some of the suffixes are practically identical in the two languages. A list of the words and suffixes is appended further below.

A possible explanation for these similarities could be that a form of Altaic, the ancient central Asiatic language that is the basis of Turkish, was the dominant language of the Indian sub-continent prior to the introduction of the Indo-European Sanskrit. Apparently, the subsequently evolving Sanskritic (Indo-Iranian) languages largely supplanted the pre-existing Altaic form in the northern and central parts of the sub-continent; possibly, however, residual traces were left over in languages that evolved in the southern reaches of this region.

It is possible that the Altaic form had been carried over from the Indus civilisation of pre-history, into the Indo-Iranian era of the sub-continent. Also, the Altaic and Indo-Iranian forms may have co-existed for a substantial period of time. This is because modern Kannada has been strongly influenced by Sanskrit and – if the present proposals are valid – may have originated as a hybrid of Altaic and Sanskrit. The creation and sustenance of such a linguistic form indicates the cohabitation of the post-Indus and Indo-Iranian cultures over a substantial period of time.

It is widely believed by scholars, however, that Kannada is a Dravidian language, based on its similarity to Tamil, the Dravidian archetype. In its antiquity, Kannada is considered second only to Tamil within the Dravidian family. Inscriptions in Kannada, based on archeological discoveries, have been dated as early as the fifth century A.D. All evidence, therefore, is believed to indicate that written Kannada is at least 1500 years old. (Modern Kannada is the

mother tongue of well over fifty million people, mostly residing in the south Indian state of Karnataka; a significant diaspora resides in the U.S.A.)

In the light of the present proposal, however, it seems possible that all three influences – Altaic, Indo-Iranian and Dravidian – formed early Kannada. It is also quite likely that an earlier blend of Altaic and Dravidian was the progenitor of Kannada. If so, it appears that the introduction of Sanskrit largely wiped out the Altaic component, leaving only the vestigial traces seen today. It is thus that in Kannada, a sliver of Altaic is (apparently) sandwiched in between Indo-Iranian and Dravidian.

A serious problem in testing the above proposal is that the Indian sub-continent was successively ruled by several Turkic-speaking Muslim dynasties in the post-medieval period (*ca.* 1000 A.D. onwards). Indeed the languages of northern India bear testimony to the fact that several words, apparently of Altaic origin, were introduced during this period, and are in routine use even today. However, the Turkic influences were largely restricted to the northern parts of the sub-continent, and are unlikely to have influenced Kannada to any substantial extent. In fact, the list of words below are unique to Kannada and (generally) bear no relation to words in other Indian languages. (A related complication derives from the fact that both Turkish and the modern Indian languages have been commonly influenced, to varying extents, by Persian and Arabic.)

An obvious approach to solving some of these problems would be to compare the earliest available versions of Altaic and Kannada. These would (hopefully) pre-date the above mentioned Turkic period in the history of the sub-continent. It remains to be seen whether the present preliminary findings would be borne out by a more rigorous and serious study. However, it should be noted that very rigid criteria, normally employed to study the evolution of linguistic forms, may not be applicable in this case. This is because of the intimate

blending of several different linguistic streams over a large historical period of time, that seems to be involved in the evolution of Kannada.

If borne out by further study and analysis of the available evidence, these proposals would entail a revision of currently accepted views and notions on the cultural and linguistic origins of the south Asian region and its peoples. It is indeed noteworthy that the Indus civilisation has been dated prior to the ‘Aryan invasion’ of northern India (*ca.* 2000 BC). Yet, paradoxically, no mention is to be found of the Indus culture in the Vedic texts of the early Indo-Iranians; neither has the language of the Indus people been deciphered so far. The present proposals may throw fresh light on this ‘murky’ era of pre-history, which, apparently, turned the sub-continent into an ethnic and linguistic crucible, a ‘rite’ that was to be countlessly repeated down the succeeding millennia.

Notes on the list of words and suffixes that follows

The English meaning of each Turkish word is taken from ‘*Langenscheidt’s Universal Dictionary Turkish-English English-Turkish*’ by Prof. Dr. H.-J. Kornrumpf; Altın Kitaplar (Istanbul) – Langenscheidt-Verlag (München), 1998. The phonetics and pronunciation therein are assumed for the purposes of the present study. The suffixes have been taken from ‘*Turkish in Three Months*’ by Bengisu Rona; Hugo’s Language Books (London), 1998. (However, I remain responsible for all errors of interpretation.) The English meaning of each Kannada word is based on the author’s personal knowledge of the language, the words being in routine use. In the case of the Turkish verbs only the stem is given (followed by a hyphen) and the (vowel-harmonising) ending is assumed.

The relatively apparent examples are marked in bold. One also notes that even when their meanings are not identical, the words may belong to similar classes (*e.g.* ‘hangi-henge’ are both interrogatives). It is also interesting to note that in many cases, Kannada possesses words of equivalent meaning but deriving from different sources; in these cases one of the words

apparently possesses a specific or occasional sense. Thus, 'give' in normal parlance is 'kodu', clearly of Dravidian lineage; however, the apparently Altaic 'biru' specifically refers to the offering of sesame during the harvest festival. Similarly, 'cut' is normally conveyed by 'kattharisu', clearly of Indo-European origin; however, the apparently Altaic 'bolusu' specifically means 'shave'. It appears that synonyms of differing origins were accommodated in this manner as the three different linguistic streams merged in Kannada. A few of the Kannada equivalents are also to be found in other Indian languages, notably Sanskrit and Tamil, e.g. 'enge' for 'where' in Tamil. Similarly, 'dal' (branch, part, unit) and 'gobar' (manure) are widely used in India. These cases may well indicate the interaction of Altaic with both Dravidian and Indo-Iranian (perhaps 'early Sanskrit').

One cannot, however, overstate the above cautionary caveat on the common ground, that exists for historical reasons, between Turkish, Persian, Arabic and the modern Indian languages. Even the Kannada-speaking regions were continually ruled by Muslim dynasties from *ca.* 1400 – 1800 A.D., and the resulting linguistic imprints are apparent even today. Thus, 'zamin' – clearly from the Persian – is routinely used in Kannada to imply a plot of land. Therefore, further work would be needed to disentangle the skein of historical and linguistic evidence, before the above speculations can be confirmed or laid to rest, as the case may be.

List of Turkish words with Kannada equivalents

(English meaning in brackets)

<u>Turkish word</u>	<u>Nearest Kannada equivalent</u>
1) Ağla- (Cry)	Alu (Weep, Cry)
2) Ağrı (Pain)	Uri (Burning sensation)
3) Al- (Take)	Arisu (Pick, Gather)
4) Alçalt- (Reduce)	Allisu (Erase, wipe off)
5) Altı (Six)	Aaru (Six)
6) (Arka)daş (Friend)	Dasa (Follower)
7) Aşır (Excessive)	Aatra (Hurry, haste)
8) Bağır- (Shout)	Bayyi (Scold)
9) Bağla- (Tie, bind)	Bagi, bigi (Fasten, tie tightly)
10) Baskan (Chief)	Bhaskar (Popular name)
11) Başar (Success)	Basari (Pregnancy)
12) Ben (I)	Yen (I, old Kannada)
13) Bere (Bruise)	Bare (Burn, bruise)
14) Bir (One)	Bari (Only)
15) Boşal- (Drain)	Bacchalu (Drain)
16) Böğür- (Bellow)	Bogalu (Bark, bellow)
17) Bölün- (Be divided)	Bolusu (Shave, cut)
18) Çalış (Work)	Kelasa (Work)
19) Dal (Branch)	Dal (Branch)
20) Dillim (Slice)	Thilli (Dilute); Thelu (Thin)
21) Durak (Stop)	Dorku (Last long, 'halt' long?)
22) Eki (Sown)	Agi (Dig, an agricultural operation)
23) Geniş (Wide)	Genu (Width)
24) Gıda (Food)	Gadad (Heavy meal)
25) Gırtlak (Throat)	Gilla (Lower chin)
26) Göl (Lake)	Kola (Pond)
27) Gör- (See)	Gur (Stare, 'Guri': Aim)
28) Görev (Duty)	Gaurava (Honour)

29) Gbre (Manure)	Gobra (Manure)
30) Grlt (Loud noise)	Gurulu (Rumble)
31) Halı (Carpet)	Haasu (Spread on the floor)
32) Hangi (Which)	Henge (How: <i>Interrogative</i>)
33) Hareket (Gesture)	Harke (Vow, religious gesture)
34) Hela (Toilet)	Helu (Excrement)
35) İ (Inside)	Iche (Outside, this side)
36) Isyan (Revolt)	Asainya (Repellant)
37) İŖte (Like)	Ishta (Like, Love)
38) It- (Push)	Idu (Put, Push)
39) İyi (Good, well)	Haayi (Soothing)
40) Kabuk (Rind, Shell)	Kabbu (Sugar cane)
41) Kalk- (Depart)	Kalach- (Detach, Fall off)
42) Kara (Black)	Kari (Black)
43) Karga (Crow)	Kaage (Crow)
44) Katı (Hard)	Gatti (Hard)
45) Katlan- (Suffer)	Kashta (Difficulty, suffering)
46) Kol (Arm)	Kol (Stick), Tolu (Arm)
47) Kopar- (Break off)	Kopa (anger)
48) Korku (Fear)	Korgu (Worry)
49) Kt (Bad)	Kettu (Bad, Evil)
50) Kurul- (Be established)	Kurusu (Set/sit down)
51) Kutu (Box)	Kattu (Build, Tie, Package)
52) Kuzu (Young of lamb)	Koosu (Kid, babe)
53) Kk(Small)	Chikk(a) (Small, Tiny)
54) Narin (Slender)	Naaru (Long and slender fibre)
55) Oku- (Read)	Odu (Read)
56) Orta (Middle)	Ardha (Half)
57) đle (Noon)	Hagalu (Day)
58) lu (Measure)	Alte (Measure)
59) nce (In front)	Munje (Before)
60) nde (In front)	Munde (In front)
61) rt (Cover)	Hoddu- (Cover with blanket)
62) te (Yonder)	Atta (That side)

63) Payla- (Scold)	Bayyi (Scold)
64) Pibek (Cat, old Altaic)	Bekku (Cat)
65) Salla (Shake)	Alla- (Shake)
66) Satiş (Sale)	Setty (Dominant merchant caste)
67) Sayrı (Ill, Sick)	Saayi (Die)
68) Seda (Sound)	Shabda (Noise)
69) Sevgili (Darling)	Cheluvi (Girl)
70) Sıcak (Hot)	Shakha (Warmth)
71) Sıra (Chain)	Sara (Chain, necklace)
72) Tarak (Rake)	Yerka (Harrow)
73) Tepe (Hill)	Tippe (Rubbish heap)
74) Tırmanmak (Climb)	Tirmana (Conclude, final ruling)
75) Tunç (Bronze)	Kunch (Brass, bronze)
76) Tüm (Whole)	Thumba (Full)
77) Ucuz (Cheap)	Uchita (Free)
78) Uyu- (Sleep)	Uyyale (Swing, Cradle)
79) Uza- (Lengthen)	Udda (Length/long)
80) Ütü (Press)	Ottu (Press)
81) Var- (Arrive)	Bar- (Come, arrive)
82) Vardiya (Shift period)	Vare (Shift, move)
83) Ver- (Give)	Biru (Offer)
84) Vırıldan- (Talk incessantly)	Varalu (Grindstone)
85) Vurgu (Stress)	Ooru (Press heavily)
86) Yat- (Lie down)	Yatne (Suffering)
87) Yedi (Seven)	Yelu (Seven)
88) Yemek (Food)	Melk (Chew, cud)
89) Yetki (Capacity)	Yetku (Reach up, also a measure of ability)
90) Yirmi (Twenty)	Ippattu (Twenty)
91) Yudum (Gulp)	Gudum (Gulp)
92) Yün (Wool)	Unne (Wool)
93) Yüz- (Swim)	Iju (Swim)

Suffixes*

<u>Turkish</u>	<u>Kannada</u>
-(n)in (Genitive)	-ina (Genitive) <i>Identical meaning</i>
-li (with)	-li (within)
-ki (of, in)	-ke (for)
-de, -da (locative)	-da (of)

*N.B. Typical examples: Istanbulun (Istanbul's), Bangalorina (Bangalore's); Ankara'da (in Ankara), Kalkattada (of Calcutta); the accusative and dative suffixes are also similar and involve vowel endings, but with an intervening 'k' or 'g' in the Kannada case.