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Turkmen Language: Alphabet, structure and writing

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Abstract

The Turkmen Language is classified as one of the Turkic languages which are all in the Ural-Altaic language family. Like all Turkic languages, the Turkmen Language is an agglutinative language that has productive inflectional and derivational suffixes which are affixed to a word like “beads on a string”. Turkmen is spoken natively by about 7 million

people worldwide, with approximately 1 million more speaking it as a second language. The majority of Turkmen speakers are located in Eurasia and Central Asia, with the highest concentrations located in Turkmenistan, Iran, and Afghanistan.

Keywords: Turkmen, Afghanistan, Alphabet, structure

1. Introduction

Turkmen are part of the ethno-linguistic Turkic continuum that stretches from western China to western Turkey. They share a claim to western-Turkic (Oguz) heritage along with Azerbaijanis and Turks in Turkey (Golden 1972) ^[4]. Despite a distinct twenty-first century identity, Turkmen culture and traditions historically overlapped with that of other Turks. The term “Turkic” refers to this cultural and linguistic heritage that all Turkic-language speaking groups share. Nevertheless, a separate Turkmen sense of identity was born out of their particular historical experience. A nomadic heritage, distinctively Oguz dialects, and tribal traditions contribute greatly to the identity that sets Turkmen apart from other Turkic groups and shape a specifically Turkmen sense of ethnic identity.

Language, speaking and writing in Turkmen, is fundamental to Türkmençilik. According to tradition, a Turkmen who does not know his or her mother tongue is not a true Turkmen. This theme runs throughout the sources employed in this study. Although in some years the Muslim nature of Turkmen identity is stressed and in others the composition of the modern Turkmen nation is underscored, the spoken language contributes greatly to the definition of being Turkmen. Turkmen heartily recognize their shared Turco-Islamic heritage, but have privileged their Turkmen-ness, often seeking out cultural peculiarities to distinguish themselves from other Turkic groups.

Turkmen started to appear in writing at the beginning of the 20th century, when it was written with the Arabic script. Between 1928 and 1940 it was written with the Latin alphabet, and from 1940 it was written with the Cyrillic alphabet. It has an estimated five million native speakers in Turkmenistan, a further 719,000 speakers in Northeastern Iran and 1.5 million people in Northwestern Afghanistan. Turkmen has official status in Turkmenistan, but it does not have official status in Iran or Afghanistan, where big communities of ethnic Turkmens live. Turkmen is also spoken to lesser varying degrees in Turkmen communities of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and by diaspora communities, primarily in Turkey and Russia.

Alphabets

Similar to other Central Asian Turkic languages, Turkmen has been written in a number of alphabets. Textual remains of early Turkic varieties from in and around Turkmenistan are attested in a variety of scripts, including the Old Turkic runic alphabet and others. Before 1929, Turkmens used the Perso-Arabic script to write their language. Then for a short time between 1929 and 1938, they adopted a Latin script before switching to a Cyrillic script under Soviet Rule, which they used until the 1990s when the Latin script was reintroduced. Today Turkmen people who live in Turkmenistan and in other post-Soviet states use a modified Latin script, Täge Elipbiý, however those who live in Iran and Afghanistan use the Arabic script.

Dialects

Since Turkmen is spoken in several countries, it consists of a number of varieties differing from each other in a pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Ethnologue lists the following dialects: Nokhurli, Anauli, Khasarli, Nerezim, Yomud, Teke (Tekke), Goklen, Salyr, Saryq, Esari, Cawdur.

Structure**Sound system**

The sound system of Turkmen shares several important features with the sound systems of other Turkic languages. As all other Turkic languages, Turkmen is characterized by vowel harmony, a type of phonological process that involves constraints on which vowels may be found near each other. Vowels in Turkmen words must harmonize with one another in terms of front versus back, and rounded versus unrounded. Suffixes added to stems must harmonize with the vowels of the stems, e.g., the plural marker has the form –ler when added to kadi, and the form –lar when added to mugallym.

Vowels

Turkmen has nine vowels. They can be either short or long. Vowel length makes a difference in word meaning.

Consonants

Turkmen has 23 consonants, plus two that are used only in borrowed words.

Grammar

Like all Turkic languages, Turkmen is agglutinative, i.e., grammatical relations are indicated by the addition of suffixes to stems. There are no prefixes. There is a one-to-one relationship between suffix and meaning, so suffixes are strung together one after another, resulting on occasion in long words. There are various rules for their ordering. Turkmen uses postpositions rather than prepositions to signal certain grammatical relationships.

Noun phrase

Turkmen nouns have these features:

- There is no grammatical gender.
- There are two numbers: singular and plural.
- There are 6 cases: nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, ablative, locative. Cases are marked by inflectional suffixes and are governed by verbs and postpositions.
- There are no articles.

Verb phrase

Verbs agree with their subjects in person and number. Verbs have the following grammatical categories:

- two numbers: singular and plural;
- three persons: 1st, 2, 3rd;
- five moods: indicative, dubitative, imperative, conditional, subjunctive;
- two voices: active and passive;
- three tenses: present, past, future;
- Evidentially which indicates whether evidence exists for a given statement. Turkmen contrasts direct information (reported directly) and indirect information (reported indirectly).

Word order

As in other Turkic languages, Turkmen sentences have a Subject-Object-Verb word. Other word orders are also possible, depending on discourse-oriented considerations such as emphasis.

Vocabulary

Turkmen's basic lexical stock is Turkic in origin. The language has also borrowed words from Arabic (salam 'peace'), Persian (kerwen 'caravan'), and Russian (shchi 'beet soup').

Writing

Turkmen literary tradition dates back to the 14th century AD. Classical literature flourished in the 18th-19th centuries. After the October Revolution of 1917, a literary language based on spoken Turkmen began to emerge. It was written with the Arabic script until about 1930 when the Latin alphabet modeled on the Turkish orthography was developed. However, in 1940, as part of a justification campaign, it was replaced by an adapted version of the Cyrillic alphabet. It is written with the Arabic and Cyrillic scripts in Afghanistan, and with the Arabic script in Iran. Since the establishment of an independent Turkmenistan in 1991, Turkmen has been written with a version of the Latin alphabet based on Turkish.

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