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САЛАР ЖАНА ТҮРКМӨН ТИЛДЕРИНДЕГИ ҮНДҮҮЛӨР СИСТЕМАСЫН САЛЫШТЫРМАЛУУ ИЗИЛДӨӨ
СРАВНИТЕЛЬНОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ СИСТЕМЫ ГЛАСНЫХ В САЛАРСКОМ И ТУРКМЕНСКОМ ЯЗЫКАХ
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF VOWELS IN SALAR AND TURKMEN LANGUAGES

Кыскача мүнөздөмө: Салар жана түркмөн тилдери алтай тил үй-бүлөсүнүн курамына кирген түрк тил үй-бүлөсүнүн огуз бутагына кирет жана лингвистикалык филогенетиканын алкагында жалпы генетикалык байланыштарга ээ. Салар жана түркмөн тилдери боюнча колдо болгон илимий маалыматтардын жана лингвистикалык материалдардын негизинде, бул макалада алардын үндүүлөр системасындагы окшоштуктар менен айырмачылыктарды салыштыруу жүргүзүлөт. Изилдөөнүн жыйынтыктары бул эки тилдин жалпы лингвистикалык келип чыгышы менен шартталган көптөгөн жалпы өзгөчөлүктөргө ээ экенин көрсөтөт. Ошентсе да, алардын көз карандысыз эволюциясынын жүрүшүндө тиешелүү тарыхый шарттардын, курчап турган лингвистикалык чөйрөнүн жана жазууну стандартташтыруудагы айырмачылыктардын таасири астында алардын ортосунда мүнөздүү фонологиялык айырмачылыктар калыптанган.

Аннотация: Языки салар и туркменский относятся к огузской ветви тюркской языковой семьи, входящей в состав алтайской языковой семьи, и имеют общие генетические связи в рамках лингвистической филогенетики. На основе имеющихся научных данных и лингвистических материалов по саларскому и туркменскому языкам в данной статье проводится сравнение сходств и различий в их системах гласных. Результаты исследования показывают, что эти два языка имеют множество общих черт, обусловленных их общим лингвистическим происхождением. Тем не менее, под влиянием соответствующих исторических условий, окружающей лингвистической среды и различий в стандартизации письменности в ходе их независимой эволюции между ними сформировались характерные фонологические различия.

Abstract: Both Salar and Turkmen languages belong to the Oghuz branch of the Turkic language family under the Altaic language family, sharing an inherent genetic relationship in linguistic phylogeny. Based on existing research achievements and linguistic materials of Salar and Turkmen languages, this paper compares the similarities and differences in their vowel systems. The research results reveal that the two languages share numerous common features due to their common linguistic origin. Nevertheless, affected by respective historical backgrounds, surrounding linguistic environments and discrepancies in writing standardization during their independent evolution, they have formed distinctive phonological differences.

Негизги сөздөр: салар тили; түркмөн тили; үндүүлөр; салыштырмалуу изилдөө
Ключевые слова: саларский язык; туркменский язык; гласные; сравнительное исследование
Keywords: Salar language; Turkmen language; vowels; comparative study

I. Introduction

Languages within the Turkic language family share abundant similarities in phonological systems, lexical composition and grammatical rules. In the long process of historical evolution, each Turkic language has gradually developed unique linguistic features under the influences of geographical isolation and long-term cross-language contact and integration. Salar and Turkmen languages are both classified into the Oghuz branch of the Turkic language family. Restricted by their unique developmental histories and peripheral linguistic environments, the two languages retain the inherent phonological properties of Turkic languages, while generating distinctive developmental characteristics through continuous contact and interaction with neighboring languages.

As a Turkic language unique to China, the Salar language is mainly spoken in Xunhua Salar Autonomous County and surrounding areas of Qinghai Province[1]. After the Salar people moved from Central Asia to Xunhua of Qinghai, they have lived together with Han, Tibetan and other ethnic groups for generations. Long-term daily communication and cultural exchanges have brought certain changes to this language. Frequent language contact with Chinese has exerted a relatively obvious influence on the Salar language.In comparison, the Turkmen language is the official language of Turkmenistan[2]. Throughout history, it has had linguistic exchanges with Arabic, Persian and Russian to varying degrees. However, these foreign languages have limited influence on its vowel system, so the Turkmen language retains most vowel features seen in Medieval Turkic.

Minawar Abibulla（米娜瓦尔.艾比布拉）conducted a detailed analysis on vowel phonetic variants of Salar language, including vowel devoicing, long vowels, tense vowels and accompanying sounds in *Characteristics of Vowels in the Salar Language*[Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа.]. Meanwhile, in the work *A Comparative Study of the Turkmen Language and the Salar Language*, Ma Wei（马伟）pointed out that vowel length constitutes a phonemic distinction in the Turkmen language, while this contrast cannot be observed in the Salar language[Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа.]. Findings from other relevant scholarly works converge on the view that phonemic vowel length contrast is a salient feature of the Turkmen language's phonological system.

On the basis of previous research findings, this paper focuses on a comparative analysis of vowel systems of Salar and Turkmen. By sorting out their phylogenetic relations and language contact backgrounds, this paper explores the similarities, differences and formative causes of their vowel features, aiming to enrich comparative research achievements of Turkic languages.

II. Historical Connections between the Salar People and the Turkmen People

The Salar people refer to themselves as Salïr（撒拉尔）. In Chinese historical records dating back to the Yuan Dynasty, they were mostly transcribed as "Sala'er"（撒剌儿）or "Sala"（撒剌）. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, alternative transcriptions such as "Shala"（沙剌）, "Shalazu"（沙剌簇） and "Sala"（萨剌）appeared in written Chinese sources. All these Chinese names are different phonetic transcriptions of the ethnic self-appellation of Salar. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the ethnic group was officially named "Salar"（撒拉族）through national ethnic identification. Following the founding of the People's Republic of China, official ethnic identification work formally established the official ethnonym .As

[1] According to *China Statistical Yearbook 2021*, the total population of the Salar ethnic group reaches 165,159. Most Salar people are concentrated in Xunhua Salar Autonomous County, Gandu Township of Hualong Hui Autonomous County in Qinghai Province, and Dahejia Town of Jishishan Bao'an, Dongxiang and Salar Autonomous County in Gansu Province. Scattered Salar settlements can also be found in Xining City, Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Haibei Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Qinghai Province, as well as Xiahe County in Gansu Province, Yining County and Urumqi City in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.

[2] Turkmen language has approximately 7 to 7.5 million native speakers worldwide. Its speakers are mainly distributed in Turkmenistan, with additional populations residing in Iran and Afghanistan. Small scattered Turkmen-speaking communities are also located in Uzbekistan, Russia, Syria and Iraq. This paper adopts the Teke dialect, the official dialect of Turkmenistan, to make a comparative study with the Salar language.

early as the 1990s, Professor Hu Zhenhua（胡振华） proposed that the Salar people has close historical connections with the Salur tribe in Turkmenistan[Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа.].

According to The Encyclopedia of Islam, the original name of the Salar people is Salur. The *Jami' al-Tawarikh* by Rashid al-Din, compiled in the 14th century, gives a detailed account of the twenty-four Oghuz tribes, among which the Salur tribe is recorded as Salur.Scholars including Mi Yizhi （芈一支）and Ma Wei hold the consensus that the Salar endonym Salïr is a phonetic variant of Salur. Records related to the Turkmen people can be found in the *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk* compiled by Mahmud al-Kashgari in the 11th century, where the tribe is written as Salğur. The author explicitly states that the Oghuz constituted a confederation of Turkic tribes consisting of twenty-two subgroups, the fifth of which was Salğur, namely the ancestors of the Turkmen people[Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа.]. Early historical documents both in ancient China and overseas rarely record the early ethnic origin of Salar people, and relevant historical information about their migration is mainly inherited through oral legends. The Salar people have passed down from generation to generation that their ancestors migrated from Samarkand.During the 9th and 10th centuries, Salur Turkmen communities settled in Nurobod and Qoshlobod around Samarkand. From the 11th to the 13th centuries, the Qipchaqs gradually became the dominant inhabitants in this region, and local Salur Turkmen have been fully integrated into Uzbek people nowadays[Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа.].Today, Turkmenistan has five major tribes: Teke, Yomut, Salyr and Saryk. Except for the Salyr tribe, all other tribes are descendants of Salyr.[Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа.].

People of Salïr/Salyr origin live not only in China and Turkmenistan, but are also widely distributed across Turkey, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and other regions. Some of these communities still keep their Turkmen ethnic identity; some regard themselves as Turkish; others have assimilated into local residents and gradually become part of the Uzbek population[Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа.].

In summary, from the perspective of linguistic genealogical classification, Salar, Turkmen and Turkish all fall under the Oghuz branch of the Turkic language family, and the three languages sharing universal linguistic similarities. As a native Salar speaker, I have found while learning Turkmen language that, in comparison with other Turkic languages, Turkmen bears far greater similarities to Salar in phonetics, vocabulary, as well as certain expressions and semantic usages. This firsthand language-learning experience further lends evidence to the closer linguistic kinship between the Salar language and the Turkmen language.

III. Similarities in Vowels between Salar and Turkmen Languages

(I) Identical Basic Vowel Phonemes

The Salar language has eight vowel phonemes: a, e, ï, i, o, ö, u, ü. The Turkmen language possesses nine vowel phonemes, namely a, ä, e, ï, i, o, ö, u, ü, with an additional phoneme ä absent in Salar. According to Ma Wei (2019), the vowel e in Salar can occasionally appear as an allophone ä in certain contexts, as seen in the example išgä (meaning "going to eat"). However, these two sounds do not create phonemic contrast, Accordingly, the grapheme e is universally adopted for all standardized written transcriptions of Salar in academic research.. I also hold this conclusion to be valid: there are no minimal pairs in Salar where the sound ä differentiates lexical meaning, proving ä does not exist as an independent phoneme within Salar’s vowel system.

(II) Existence of Tense Vowels (Fricative-ending Vowels) without Lexical Distinction Function

Both Salar and Turkmen have tense vowels, also known as fricative-ending vowels or accompanying transitional vowels. Such vowels refer to short vowels with laryngeal tension and short transitional sounds when preceding plosives and affricates. Professor Chen Zongzhen（陈宗振）named such vowels fricative vowels in his research on Western Yugur, and pointed out that Western Yugur has six fricative vowels: ah, ɘh, eh, oh, uh, øh.These fricative vowels form phonemic opposition with pure vowels and can distinguish lexical meanings in minimal pairs, for instance, Western Yugur aht means “horse” while at means “name”; oht means “grass” while ot means “fire”; ahq- means “to flow” while aq means “white”[Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа.].Tenishev defined such sounds as tense vowels, and recorded four tense vowels in Salar: ah, eh, oh, øh. He argued that tense vowels in Salar originate from aspirated consonants within the phonological system, and

the aspiration feature of consonants has gradually fused with adjacent vowels to form such accompanying sounds[Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа.].Unlike Western Yugur, however, fricative-modified vowels in Salar and Turkmen carry no phonemic contrast and cannot differentiate lexical meanings.The distinguished Turkologist Tenishev classifies the above-mentioned sounds as laryngeally constricted vowels. He documents four laryngeally constricted vowels in the Salar language, namely ah, eh, oh and øh. He proposes the phonetic formation mechanism of these vowels: the Salar phonological system possesses a series of aspirated consonants, whose inherent aspirated feature gradually assimilates into neighboring vowels, giving rise to this special vocalic pronunciation[Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа.]. Different from Western Yugur, tense vowels in both Salar and Turkmen cannot distinguish lexical meanings and carry no phonemic contrast function.

(II) Compliance with Vowel Harmony Rules

Vowel harmony is the most typical phonological constraint of the Altaic language family including Turkic languages.It restricts intra-word vowel combinations from two dimensions: tongue position (front and back) and lip rounding (rounded and unrounded), requiring vowels of word roots and suffixes to belong to the same vowel category for harmonious syllable pronunciation.Both the Salar language and the Turkmen language follow the typical front-back vowel harmony mechanism widely adopted by Turkic languages.

In the Salar language, the front vowel group consists of rounded front vowels /y/, /ø/ and unrounded front vowels /e/, /i/; its back vowel group includes rounded back vowels /o/, /u/ and unrounded back vowels /a/, /ə/. In the Turkmen language, the front vowel group covers rounded front vowels /y/, /ø/ and unrounded front vowels /e/, /i/, /æ/, while its back vowel group contains rounded back vowels /o/, /u/ and unrounded back vowels /a/, /ə/. Both languages classify vowels based on tongue position and lip rounding, with clear distinctions between front and back vowels, rounded and unrounded vowels, and they adopt identical vowel classification criteria.

The Salar language is dominated by front-back tongue vowel harmony. All vowels within a single word of this language must belong exclusively to either the front vowel group or the back vowel group, and front and back vowels never coexist in one word. For instance, the Salar language words *emex* (bread) and *issi* (hot) consist purely of front vowels, while *altun* (gold) and *bala* (child) contain back vowels.The Turkmen language follows the identical rule. Its words including *çörek* (naan, bread) and *gelmek-* (to come) adopt front vowels, whereas *altyn* (gold) and *çagalar* (children) take back vowels. In both languages, vowels of word roots and suffixes keep consistent front or back tongue positions. This phonological feature ensures harmonious pronunciation of vocabulary and regular grammatical inflection.

IV. Differences in Vowels between the Salar Language and the Turkmen Language

(I) Phonemic Vowel Length Contrast and Lexical Distinction Function

Long vowels in Turkic languages fall into two categories, namely primary long vowels and secondary long vowels. The etymology of primary long vowels remains unclear, and they most probably emerged in the initial stage of language formation. Secondary long vowels refer to secondary phonetic sounds, which are mostly formed gradually in the process of language evolution due to phonetic changes such as phoneme merging and sound deletion. The origin and historical retention of primary long vowels have long been a controversial research topic in the field of Turkic phonology. As early as the 19th century, two renowned Turkic linguists, Radloff and Betzlinger, argued that primary long vowels did not exist in any Turkic languages. On the contrary, Э.Р. Tenishev, Б.А. Serebrennikov, Н.З. Gadzhieva and other scholars proved that primary long vowels were inherent in Proto-Turkic[10]. With the continuous expansion of linguistic corpus and further development of targeted research, most contemporary scholars now reach a consensus that primary long vowels originated from the Proto-Turkic period and are widely preserved in modern Turkic languages and dialects.

Some scholars hold that long vowels have existed in the languages of ancient Turkic tribes since ancient times, which can be verified by the Orkhon-Yenisei inscriptions dating back to the 7th to 9th centuries. For instance, based on the phenomenon of letter reduplication in Uyghur manuscripts, A.V. Gaban inferred that ancient Turkic (Old Uyghur) had long vowels /oː/ and /øː/, citing typical words such as *oon* "ten", *oot* "fire", *toon* "clothes", *tooz* "dust" and *öök* "hatred"[Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа.]. Likewise, Talat Tekin also

confirmed the existence of long vowels in the language of ancient Orkhon inscriptions in his monograph *Grammar of Orkhon Turkic*[Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа.].

Other researchers have identified potential long vowels in certain words recorded in *Compendium of the Turkic Dialects* compiled by Mahmud al-Kashgari in the 11th century, and such findings have been verified in modern Turkmen. In addition to the aforementioned short vowels, the Turkmen language has eight long vowels: aa, ee, ïï, ii, oo, öö, uu and üü. Importantly, long and short vowels in the Turkmen language form phonemic contrasts and can distinguish lexical meanings, as exemplified by minimal pairs: *al* "to take" vs. *a:l* "red", and *ot* "grass" vs. *o:t* "fire".

Scholars have reached divided conclusions regarding vowel length in the Salar language. During his field investigation in Xunhua Salar Autonomous County of Qinghai Province in 1958, Э.Р.Tenishev recorded five pairs of long and short vowel contrasts in Salar, including *sarï* "yellow" vs. *sa:rï* "edge", and *ma:* "give me" vs. *-ma* (conjunction), and he affirmed the existence of long vowels in the Salar language. By contrast, Lin Lianyun（林莲云) denied the presence of long vowels in Salar in her work *A Brief Sketch of the Salar Language* and relevant academic papers[Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа.].Dwyer,Arienne further pointed out that she found there was no phonemic contrast between long and short vowels in Salar during her field research from 1992 to 1993. She also proposed that the Salar language had probably lost its inherent vowel length distinction over the previous 35 years[Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа.].Minawar Abibula (2005) put forward another viewpoint that secondary long vowels do exist in the Salar language. Such vowels feature longer pronunciation duration than ordinary short vowels under specific phonetic environments, yet they fail to form phonemic long-short vowel oppositions and carry no function of distinguishing lexical meanings. Based on phonetic evolution rules, secondary long vowels in the Salar language are formed in three major ways. First, the elision of medial consonants leads to the combination of two adjacent vowels and prolonged pronunciation, as illustrated by phonetic changes: *u:ši* derived from *uiši* meaning "damp", and *balju:n* derived from *baljin* meaning "bee". Second, devoiced vowels are pronounced briefly, which lengthens the vowel in the preceding syllable, such as the word *ili:čux* meaning "just now". Third, vowels in stressed open syllables are naturally lengthened in pronunciation, including*jaš:ir* meaning "to shelter and hide" and *su:vA-* meaning "to stroke". All these long vowels emerge under specific phonetic conditions; they are not independent phonemes and cannot distinguish lexical meanings separately.

From my perspective, unlike the Turkmen language, the modern Salar language has no primary long vowels. It presents an indistinct long-short vowel contrast, and all its long vowels belong to secondary long vowels. In the Salar language, lexical meaning and word class are distinguished mainly by linguistic context and agglutinative suffixes attached to word stems, rather than vowel duration. For example, Turkmen distinguishes *a:k* (white, noun) and *ak-* (to flow, verb) via vowel length, while the corresponding Salar word *ax* covers both the noun meaning "white" and the verb meaning "to flow" without relying on vowel length differences.

(II)Vowel Changes Caused by Loanwords

No language develops in complete isolation. Languages are universally interactive and mutually influential, and such linguistic interactions are mainly driven by language contact. Language contact is defined as "linguistic relations formed by social interactions between different ethnic groups and communities, which is a prevalent linguistic phenomenon across human languages"[15].

China boasts abundant and diversified linguistic resources, with domestic languages belonging to multiple language families and branches and featuring distinct structural characteristics. Languages of all ethnic minorities are indispensable components of fine traditional Chinese culture. As an inevitable outcome of long-term exchanges, communication and integration among various ethnic groups, language contact brings mutual penetration and influences at phonological, lexical and grammatical levels. It not only records the historical process of cultural learning and emotional integration among different ethnic groups, but also presents a vivid linguistic reflection of the pluralistic and integrated pattern of the Chinese nation.

Despite their common linguistic origin, Salar and Turkmen have evolved in vastly different linguistic environments and maintained long-term in-depth contact with languages of different families and types

throughout history. After the eastward migration of Salar ancestors from Central Asia to Xunhua of Qinghai Province, Salar has been surrounded by languages of the Sino-Tibetan language family, and Chinese has exerted lasting and far-reaching influences on its overall linguistic system. By contrast, Turkmen has been in contact with Arabic, Persian and Russian successively, yet it still retains most phonological features of Medieval Turkic. The striking differences in external language contact conditions, combined with internal inherent evolutionary trends of the two languages, have led to phonological changes of varying degrees in both linguistic systems. Salar has maintained long-standing contact with Chinese, and the specific influences of Chinese on Salar vowels are summarized as follows:

(1) Emergence of Apical Vowels /ɿ/ and /ʅ/

Frequent language contact with Mandarin Chinese has introduced a large number of Chinese loanwords into Salar. Along with these loanwords, the two apical vowels /ɿ/ and /ʅ/ collocated with Chinese initial consonants z, c, s, zh, ch and sh have also been borrowed into the Salar phonological system.

(2) Generation and Growth of Diphthongs

Diphthongs are generally absent in the syllable structures of typical Turkic languages. However, diphthongs have emerged in both native words and loanwords of modern Salar. Typical examples of diphthongs in native Salar words include *diot* (four) and *yiel* (wind). For comparison, the corresponding words in Turkmen are *dört* (four) and *ýel* (wind), while those in Turkish are *dört* (four) and *rüzgar* (wind). Zhong Jinwen（钟进文）pointed out that six diphthongs including /iə/, /iu/, /ua/, /ue/, /uo/ and /ye/ in Salar and Western Yugur originated from Chinese loanwords. Both phonetic forms and lexical meanings were borrowed simultaneously, which enriched the vowel inventory of the two languages and became an indispensable part of their modern vowel systems[16].

(3) Weakening of Vowel Harmony

Chen Naixiong (陈乃雄) argued that "the strictness, coverage and retention of vowel harmony largely depend on the vowel system of a given language, as well as the nature and degree of variations in vowel correspondence relations"**Ошибка! Неизвестный аргумент ключа.**. Although modern Salar still follows vowel harmony rules to a certain extent, long-term Chinese influence has triggered the combination and differentiation of vowel phonemes and the restructuring of phonetic elements within native words. These changes make the original vowel harmony rules incompatible with the updated linguistic environment, resulting in the gradual weakening of vowel harmony in Salar.

In particular, newly borrowed Chinese loanwords carry distinctive inherent syllable features and are barely constrained by the original vowel harmony rules of Turkic languages. Examples include loanwords such as *guojia* (country), *zhengse* (policy), *tuenjie* (unity) and *kexui* (hold a meeting)[18].

(4) Different Completeness of Labial Harmony

The Salar language and the Turkmen language differ remarkably in the completeness of labial harmony. The Turkmen language maintains full and consistent rounded vowel harmony, as illustrated by examples including *üzüm* (grape), *gözüm* (my eye), *odun* (firewood), and *dostuňuz* (your friend).

By contrast, labial harmony in the Salar language is restricted. It mainly operates for back rounded vowels: when the vowel in the final syllable of a stem is /o/ or /u/, the suffix vowel is mostly /u/. Relevant examples are listed as follows: in Salar, *qol* (arm) + *-um* develops into *gulum* (my/our arms), and *goz* (eye) + *-um* develops into *guzum* (my/our eyes). In comparison, the corresponding inflections in Turkmen are more complete: *gol* (arm) + *-um* → *golum* (my arm), *gol* + *-umuz* → *golumuz* (our arms); *göz* (eye) + *-üm* → *gözüm* (my eye), *göz* + *-ümüz* → *gözümüz* (our eyes).It can be concluded from the above examples that Salar has loose and inconsistent rounded vowel harmony rules, lacking the complete front rounded vowel harmony mechanism preserved in Turkmen. Furthermore, Salar has a less developed possessive suffix system than Turkmen. This discrepancy indicates the simplification of labial harmony rules and personal possessive markers during the evolutionary process of the Salar language.

Although Turkmen has undergone intensive language contact with Persian, Arabic and Russian throughout its history, external languages have exerted minimal impacts on its vowel system, only bringing about partial weakening of vowel harmony in a small number of loanwords. Typical cases include the Arabic

loanword *kitap* (book), the Persian loanword *merdan* (brave), and the Russian loanword *wilka* (fork). Overall, external linguistic contact has not substantially altered the vowel system of the Turkmen language.

V. Conclusion

To sum up, Salar and Turkmen share considerable similarities in their vowel systems. Meanwhile, certain differences have arisen from their disparate language contact environments and distinct evolutionary paths. Drawing on previous studies, this paper explores the driving factors behind vowel divergences between the two languages through comparative analysis. Nonetheless, limited historical phonological records and the absence of early spoken corpora leave some evolutionary details underexamined. Further field investigations are expected to collect authentic spoken data, refine phonological evolution rules of the two languages, and enrich comparative research on Oghuz languages.

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