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## A SURVEY OF BURUSHASKI STUDIES

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Burushaski, the language of Hunza and Nager, has been held in special esteem by linguists from the time it was first discovered, comparable to that of Basque in Western Europe: spoken by a small, but proud and effective tribe, it has resisted for many centuries the pressure of the surrounding great language families; it has taken over countless loans from them, but its peculiar structure has remained unchanged through the ages. There is hardly a single trait in phonology and grammar which does not have a parallel in another part of the world, but these peculiarities are integrated into a system which as a whole can be called unique within the languages of the world.

Burushaski was discovered at a rather early date, compared to many non-literary languages in Asia and other parts of the world. In 1854 the British geographer A Cunningham, in his book "Ladak, physical, statistical and historical; with notes on the surrounding country", published a vocabulary of the main dialect spoken in Hunza-Nager. Despite its shortness and many, sometimes amusing mistakes, it is not devoid of interest even today, as it shows that the language was practically the same as in the thirties of our century, when it was first fully recorded by D.L.R. Lorimer. 17 years later, another British geographer, G.W. Hayward, travelled around Gilgit, Wakhan and Hunza. He was eventually killed by the ruler of Yasin, Mir Ali Khan; his grave can still be seen in the Christian cemetery here in Gilgit. Hayward's fieldnotes are also scanty and inaccurate, but they are interesting because they contain the first wordlist of the Yasin dialect of

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Burushaski. Despite the shortcomings in the description — *a* and *u* are hopelessly confounded, Hayward's *n* is often replaced by *u* in the printed text etc. — his notes are sufficient to show that he recorded, as did Cunningham in the case of Hunza-Burushaski, a state of the language very close to that found in present-day Yasin. Moreover, most of the peculiar features which separate the Yasin dialect from the language of Hunza and Nager appear to be clearly developed. This is of some importance, because we know nothing about the date when the Yasin dialect separated from the earlier common stock of Burushaski, but we can conclude that it could hardly have taken place after the end of the 18th century.

The first attempt at writing a full grammar of Burushaski was made by two men at nearly the same time, by G.W. Leitner, an Austrian in the British Service, in 1880, and by the British Colonel J. Biddulph, the first Political Agent of Gilgit in 1889. Both grammars are not approximately the same level. The phonetic transcription is still crude and far from the true sounds of the language, but for the first time the most interesting part of the grammar, the four noun classes, are described, though in an incomplete manner; verbal paradigms and also short texts are given. Both descriptions still gave a quite unsatisfactory picture, but it has become possible now to recognise Burushaski as an independent language belonging to a hitherto unknown type, which was to attract the attention of eminent linguists. A Trombetti, in his work "Elementi di glottologia", called it *un linguaggio molto arcaico*, "a very archaic language", and P.W. Schmidt in his great work on the languages of the world (1926) remarks: "This isolated position of Burushaski is a principal of great importance, for it gives the definite proof that before or besides the Dravidian and Munda languages in India, other languages were in existence. One of them could be saved upto our days near the great Northwestern highway to India, protected, to be sure, by inaccessible valleys, 'at a place (here he quotes Grierson) where Turki, Tibeto-Burmese, Indo-Aryan and Iranian languages all meet'".

After the fieldwork of Leitner and Biddulph, the Hunza people remained unmolested by Western researchers for more than half a century. Then a new era began with the monumental work of Colonel D.L.R.

Lorimer. As Colonel Biddulph, he was the Political Agent in Gilgit, and it seems that he spent all his spare time learning local languages. He knew Urdu, Persian and Shina well and is reported to have been fluent in Khowar; but his main contribution was his great grammar of the Burushaski language. The first two volumes, comprising an "Introduction and Grammar" and a collection of texts, appeared in 1935, dedicated to the then Mir of Hunza, Sir Muhammad Nazim Khan, followed by the first dictionary of Burushaski in 1938. Considering that Lorimer had no linguistic training at all, one can find hardly appropriate words of praise for this pioneer work. Its weakest point lies again in the phonetic description. Lorimer often failed to grasp the sounds peculiar to Burushaski, and sometimes also the description of morphological differences suffers in cases where they depend on phonetic ones. But as a first comprehensive record of a still unadulterated idiom, with its valuable texts and the many illustrative examples of syntax drawn from them, it will remain indispensable for scholars as long as Burushaski will be the object of linguistic studies.

In 1934 Lorimer came again to Hunza for 14 months and collected considerable new material, also from the Yasin dialect, but the Hunza-Nager notes were not incorporated in his grammar and remained unpublished in the library of the London School of Oriental Studies. On this second tour, which was sponsored by the Leverhulme Research Fund, he was accompanied by his wife, E.O. Lorimer, who afterwards wrote a charming book on her experiences under the title "Language Hunting in the Karakoram". In 1962, shortly before my second trip to Hunza, Lorimer's vocabulary of the Yasin dialect was published, together with a few texts and short grammatical notes.

My own interest in Burushaski was raised at the very moment I discovered Lorimer's three volumes in a corner of the linguistic library at Munich. From this fascinating language I expected the solution for at least a part of the problems of the linguistic history of pre-Sanskritic India, but at the same time I realized that far-reaching historical conclusions could be drawn only after a thorough revision of Lorimer's work, especially of the phonology. This could be done only on the spot. In three stays of three months each, the first of them as a member of the German-Austrian Karakoram Expedition, I collected more than 80 texts of the three dialects

of Hunza, Nager and Yasin and revised the whole grammar and dictionary. In the dictionary work I could make use of the voluminous unpublished material of Lorimer which I mentioned above. Together with Lorimer's published material and my own new findings, about 6000 words are recorded now. Of all this only my grammar of the Yasin dialect has appeared so far, my Hunza-Nageri material I hope to publish in the year to come.

In the past years additional research on Burushaski has been carried out. A Canadian linguistic team under Prof. E. Tiffon has contributed some articles on special problems of phonology and morphology and is working now with Nazir-ud-Din Hunzai, the well-known Ismaili poet, in Canada. Mme. Fremont has published in a thesis — under the guidance of Prof. Fussman of Strasbourg — 19 texts in the Nageri dialect, together with translations and notes. I found that both these contributions added many illustrative examples for the rules of grammar and the use of words but as a whole do not essentially change the picture delineated by Lorimer and me.

Speaking of future tasks in Burushaski linguistics therefore cannot mean to expect new decisive data on phonology and morphology. There may, however, exist quite a number of undiscovered words or dialectal variants of known words, especially in the technical vocabulary. It is high time to collect them, as a good deal of the old vocabulary still used by elder people has been forgotten by the younger generation or replaced by Urdu words. One can deplore such a development, but it seems inevitable under the changed conditions of modern life, where even stronger languages with a tradition of written literature have to struggle for their survival. The grammar has, of course, remained the same, but only seen from the outside; Urdu influence starts creeping in already in disguise, especially in the syntax. For instance, educated speakers of Burushaski now have a tendency to form relative clauses using the interrogative pronoun as a relative pronoun — a remarkable offence against the rules of the older language which uses participles instead.

So it seems that we know all of what Burushaski is and has become, but where it comes from is still an unsolved mystery. In Hunza-Nager the last remnant of a once greater Burushaski speaking area, or have the Burusho

immigrated from a remote place as a small group from the beginning, and if so, from which direction did they come, and who are the people who can claim to be their closest relatives? Local tradition is silent about this. Comparative linguistics does not give the aid we might expect from it; so far no connection with another language group has been found. The structural similarity with Basque and Caucasion – to mention only the most tempting out of many theories – is obvious, but what is still missing are really convincing etymologies on which sound laws, the indispensable basis for serious comparisons, can be established, and the chances they can ever be found are poor, for reasons which cannot be discussed here.

It seems, however, that other sources than language comparison can throw some light on the prehistory of the Hunza people and their language. In old Tibetan literature a language named Bru-za is mentioned many times, and it is unmistakably located in Hunza and Gilgit. It is reported that Bon-po and Buddhist texts were written in this language. Even a title of a Buddhist *sutra*, consisting of 33 syllables, has been found in the Kandjur, together with a translation into Sanskrit and Tibetan. After a thorough examination of it, Pavel Poucha, a Czech scholar, could not find any plausible connection with present-day Burushaski, but this does not mean too much, considering the many factors that could have obscured it for our understanding today. Is it really probable, that in the Hunza-Gilgit region formerly a language was spoken, the name of which is strikingly similar to that of Burushaski, but denoted some other language which itself like Burushaski was not related to any of the surrounding languages? If, however, Bru-za was the predecessor of Burushaski and a full-fledged literary language, there certainly is hope that some other, larger document may come to light some day. It would perhaps prove that Morgenstierne, the great Norwegian linguist, was mistaken, when he remarked in his preface to Lorimer's grammar, that the speakers of Burushaski have "..... never played any role in history, nor contributed anything to the development of civilization."

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