

Grammatical sketch of Monguor
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Please note: This is a rough draft! Last updated 21.05.01.

- I. Ethnonym: [maŋguer, monguer], Ch. *Tu*
- II. Population
 - a. identified as “Tu”:163,800 (1996 *Qinghai Statistical Yearbook*)
 - b. approximate number of speakers: ?42,000
- III. Geographical distribution (People’s Republic of China)
 - a. Qinghai province: primarily Huzhu, Datong, Ledu, Minhe, & Tongren counties
 - b. Gansu province: primarily Tianzhu county, also Dahejia county
- IV. Genetic language affiliation: Southeastern Mongolic

(Some scholars believe Mongolic, along with Manchu-Tungusic and Turkic, belong to a common *Altaic* family.)

Middle Mongolic (13th-14th c.) phonological and lexical features in Monguor indicate that its speakers were geographically separated from the central Mongolian groups and settled in their present locale during this period, if not earlier. Chinese historical records suggest that Monguor ethnogenesis, like that of the Salars, began with their arrival in Amdo Tibet in the early 13th c. as a part of the invading Mongolian army; certain oral accounts suggest an earlier migration from Mongolia proper.

Monguor’s classification as a Southeastern (sometimes known as *peripheral*) Mongolic language groups it with Baonan, Dagur, Santa (Dongxiang), and Enger (Shera Yugur/Eastern Yugur), as distinct from *central* Mongolic languages such as Khalkha and Buriat.

V. Multilingualism and contact languages

The significant variation between certain sub-varieties of Monguor is due to the length and intensity of contact with the two dominant languages. Huzhu Monguor exhibits significant variation (Limusishiden & Stuart 1998), likely due to Tibetan influence; other areas, such as Minhe, show less variation.

VI. Main Monguor language varieties: Minhe, Huzhu, Nianduhu/Baoan, Wutun

Within what we here term “Monguor” four main language varieties can be identified: Huzhu 互助, Minhe 民和, Niandhu 年都乎/Baoan 保安, and Wutun 五屯. The latter two are highly divergent language communities in three Tongren county townships. Wutun has aroused a good deal of interest in recent creole and language contact research, with Chinese, Monguor, and Tibetan strata. Variation between the four varieties is also due to the intensity of language contact, especially with Tibetan. Tianzhu and Datong Monguor appear to be subvarieties of Huzhu Monguor.

VII. Degree of Endangerment

The number of fully-fluent native speakers of both languages is decreasing rapidly. (We define fluency here as not just conversational fluency, but also competence in other oral forms central to culture: storytelling, oral history, singing, oratory, ritual.) The high official population statistics belie the low number of *actual* speakers: in many areas, only 30 percent of the population has an active command of the language, such as Dahejia Monguor. Estimates based on Zhu, Üyediin Chuluu and Stuart (1995:200). Generational differences are

particularly acute for all Monguor areas): speakers over 60, particularly women, are fully fluent and competent in oral art forms and are native-language-dominant; speakers over 35 have a passable-to-fluent command of their native language, but are multilingual and have no command of oral art forms; children may grow up with one of the dominant languages as their native language.

Those areas where Monguor language and folklore are best preserved are characterized by remoteness, extreme poverty, and lack of education. These include villages in Huzhu and Minhe counties. The lack of native-language schooling and a writing system to Monguor children makes the future of the language bleak.

VIII. Sound system (description based primarily on Huzhu Monguor)

a. Inventory

- i. Consonants p b m f v t d s ts dz n l r ʈ ʣ ʂ ʐ ʑ ʎ dz j k g x ŋ ɣ

This includes a three-way sibilant distinction (s ts dz ʂ ʐ ʣ ʎ j ʑ dz), though *ts* and the retroflex series occur only in loans. A number of syllable restrictions apply: ʎ occurs only in consonant clusters; voiced stops are excluded from initial position (permissible initial consonants are: p f v t ts dz ʈ ʣ ʂ ʐ ʑ dz j k x); whereas syllable-final position favors sonorants and voiced stops (permissible syllable-final consonants are: b m d s n l r ʂ ʐ g ʎ).

- ii. Vowels a, a:, e, e:, i, i:, o, o:, u, u:, and ə.

Basically a three vowel system with phonemic vowel length, plus *e* and *ə*. (*e* never occurs initially and *e* is palatalized to *je* after all consonants: *die:rien* ‘four’, *təmie:n* ‘camel’.)

Diphthongs: ai, au, iu, ua, ui, uai.

b. Phonological features

- i. reduced vowel harmony
- ii. vowel devoicing (in some initial syllables): ‘chicken’, ‘magpie’.
- iii. short word-final vowels
- iv. preservation of Middle Mongolian (MM) final nasals n, -ng: MM has (C)V(c)C, periph have (C)VCCVN.

IX. Morphosyntax features

- a. OV constituent order (etc...more to come here soon)

X. Lexical features

- a. Preservation of older Mongolic lexemes not found in modern Mongolian: ‘run’, ‘flea’, ‘turnip’, ‘smoke’, ‘scales’, ‘lotus’, air.

XI. Writing system

A Latin-script orthography based on the Chinese *pinyin* was developed in the mid-1980’s, but it is not used among the Monguor population in education. It was planned for use mainly in dictionaries, one of which was published (of Huzhu Monguor, Li Keyu 1988).

XII. Research to date

- i. Previous documentation: the standard grammar is de Smedt and Mostaert (1964). Major studies have appeared: a historical and cultural description of the Huzhu Monguor (Schram 1954, 1957, 1961; does not include Minhe), and extensive handwritten textual notes (Schröder 1959, 1970); otherwise all current work being done by Zhu Yongzhong, Wang Xianzhen, and Limusishiden.
- ii. Current research status: Stuart has been researching Monguor culture since 1988. Li, Zhu, Wang, and Stuart have many hours of video of Minhe Monguor *nadun* festivals,

funerals, weddings, *mani* lady meetings, temple meetings, and of a Huzhu Monguor wedding, temple meetings, and a long *fashi* ritual. Their audio recordings are numerous. Dr. Limusishiden, Jugui, and Dr. Stuart are in the final stages of editing a 600+ page manuscript of *Chileb* articles. *Chileb* is the only consistently produced publication written in Monguor by Monguors that has ever appeared. Unfortunately, its future is uncertain, it is produced on a poor-quality manual typewriter on mimeograph, and then “published” on an old mimeograph machine. Only one hundred copies are printed. In the course of preparing this collection of materials, several issues could not be located testifying to the fragility of this material. The only scientific work on Huzhu Monguor folklore is being conducted by Dr. Li and Jugui, and consists of transcriptions of folklore based on audio recordings. Mr. Zhu’s several hundred pages of Minhe Monguor wedding songs/orations is also excellent material in that he recorded this at weddings across the Minhe Monguor area and has transcribed this as spoken. This ranges from local Chinese dialect to local Chinese dialect mixed with Monguor to nearly pure Monguor. For Niandehu we have the a video recording of the *wutu* ritual, an exorcistic activity held in winter in the village.

XIII. References

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