On Mongolian *asara-* "to nourish" and Turkish *aṣa-* "to eat"  
From Middle Mongolian to Modern Turkic Languages

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The lexical similarities between Turkic and Mongolian languages have always been exciting and were the topic of ardent discussions. These languages and borrowings that occurred between them at different times have been notably gripping especially for the young researchers who have just started to learn and study both languages. This topic provides an opportunity for leading researchers of this field for comparing the phonetical and lexical equivalences. General studies on this topic can be found in the bibliography section of the study I compiled on the phonic *d* of Altaic languages in 1991. In particular, discussions among Poppe, Clauson, Doerfer and Tekin are relevant to what I mentioned above. The correspondence studies between these languages had been carried out until the early 20th century. The works of Clauson (1962), Poppe (1965) and Tekin (1976) provide ample relevant information on this topic.

The first significant and frequent lexical exchanges started to be seen in the mid-13th century when Genggis Kagan gained hegemony in Central Asia. The borrowings between these two languages were reviewed at three stages in Clauson’s work. (For details, see Studies, p. 217, 220 and 221.)

The Turkish borrowings in Middle Mongolian were listed by Poppe in 1955. The two subsequent studies on this topic belong to Clauson (*CAJ IV* and *CAJ V*). In particular, the study of Clauson, entitled “The Turkish Elements in the 14th Century Mongolian” includes the phonetic equivalences substitutions in these borrowings.

In this article I will deal with the Turk. verb *aṣa*- “essen, speisen,” which was discussed in some of the studies mentioned above. But it has not even been mentioned in some of these studies which was first divergently handled by Ramstedt in 1957 (*Einführung*, I, 109). Ramstedt compared that verb to *ali-sun* “Spreu” (*Einführung*, I, 109; II, 139 Turk. aṣ “Speise”, Mo. *ali-sun*)
‘Spreu’, Ko. al “Samen, Getreide, Korn”, Einführung, II, 201). I presume Ramstedt’s comparison did not get wide ranging acceptance by scholars because Poppe did not mention the verb aša- in his study of the comparative phonetics of the Altaic languages (cf. Vergleichende Grammatik).

In parallel with the OT verb aša-, in the Middle Mongolian, we observe the verb asara- “to protect; to raise, bring up”: SHM asara hu “besorgen, in Obhut nehmen, aufziehen” (MNT, II, 9).

Turk. aša- and Mo. asara- sometimes are seen as interrelated with each other (details are below). In EDAL, which appeared nearly 40 years after Ramstedt’s studies, the Proto Altaic ės/[i] “to take care” was mentioned as well as the lexis such as *ēške- in Tung, *asara- in Mo., *es in Turk, *isama- in Ja, and *as-kab, *as-ki- in Ko. (for details for each language, see EDAL, p. 521-522). I am going to focus on Mo. asara and Turk. es examples from EDAL.

The authors of EDAL, after giving place to Mo. morphos related with the verb asara- in historical and modern resources, state that it was combined with Turk. aša- by Róna-Tas and Clark, and it means “quite improbable” (EDAL p. 521).

At first, I want to indicate that the base es mentioned by the writers of EDAL has not been encountered in the Old and Middle Turkic sources.1 Es only occurs in modern Turkic languages. Es that appears in a shared Proto Altaic base is not included in a text from ancient times. We do not have examples that equate Turk. e and Mo. a either (all of Vergleichende can be reviewed for this matter). For that matter, at the end of the paragraph devoted to this equation, Dybo, one of the authors of the dictionary, expressed a different opinion: “Дыбо 14. Vocalism is not quite certain (in Mong. one would rather expect a front *e-)” (EDAL p. 522).

1 Clauson 252 b: “D esirge-: Den. V.(?) but not semantically connected with any known word *es; the basic meaning was apparently ‘to regret’ which evolved in two opposite directions; (1) ‘to be sorry for (someone)’ (2) ‘to regret parting with (something); to grudge’. Survives in NC Kir., Kzx., and SW Osm. Uyğ. vii ff. Bud. yürü taňşayu ėsirgeyũ ɪglayu ‘admiring the song, pitying him and weeping’ pp. 71, 3-4: Xak. xi ol esirge:di: ńeqni: tahanassara ʻalā fawiti’l-şay‘ wa ta’assafa ‘he regretted the loss of the thing and was distressed’ Kaş. I 306 (esirge:rer, esirge:memek): Çağ. xv ff. ėsirge- diriğ dāstan ‘to grudge, withhold’ San. 103r. 16 (quotns.): Xwar. xiv ėsirge- ‘to pity (someone Acc.)’ Quṭb 22: Kom. xiv ditto CCG; Gr. 94 (quotn.): Kip. xiv ėsirge- raḫima ‘to pity’ Ęd. 13: xv ditto Tuh. 17b. 3: Osm. xiv ff. ėsirge- ‘to pity’; c.i.a.p.; the second translation ‘to protect’ is less common TTS I 278; II 400; III 266; IV 310: xvii after Çağ. entry; ‘and in Rüm raḥm kardan San. 103r. 16”
The relationship between Mo. asara- “to nourish, take care of” and Turk. aša- “to feed” was dealt with extensively by Róna-Tas. It seems that the first scholar who noticed the affinity between the bases of these verbs was Róna-Tas. Róna-Tas put forward his ideas on that affinity while examining and criticizing the theory of Altaic Languages through such items as Chuv. usra-, GT asra-, asira-, and Mo. asara-: MMo. as(a)ra- “to nourish, take care of” → *asra- > Chuv. usra- (cf. Tat. asra-, Bashk asira-, Kirg., Kazk., Nog., Kklp., Kum, Krč., Alt., Hak., Tuv., Uzb., NUig., Turki, Salar, Yellow Uig.) ← Mong asa + ra- → Manchu; See Turkic aš “food”, aša- “to feed” (Róna-Tas, p. 202).²

As we will mention subsequently, Róna-Tas correctly compares Mo. asa with Turk. aš and shows the second vowel in Mo. ( ). Now let us look at the information related with these two verbs collected from Mo. and Turk. sources before returning to Róna-Tas’s work.

The earliest occurrence of the word aš and its derivative forms come from the Old Turkic Inscriptions which date from 720 (or later). However, we have only aš (? T 8) and ašsz (KT East side 26, BK East side 21) in the Orkhon Inscriptions. We do not see the verb aša- “to eat”; the only verb attested for the meaning “to eat” is ye- in these inscriptions.

As and aša- occur in Old Uighur texts, which date to mostly after the 9th century or later: künkä aşadukmüz beş tāyri yarok “What everyday we eat is the light of ‘Five Gods’” (according to Chuastuanilt line 328, cf. also UigWb 240 b). Here and after that, in Old Uighur aša- means not only “to eat”, but also “empfangen; genißen; erleiden [to receive; to enjoy; to suffer]”: adın kişi aşamak törösi yok “es gibt kein Gesetz dem, nach dem ein anderer [die Tatenfrucht] empfangen würde” (UigWb 241a). For more examples and details, see UigWb 240 b-241b.

In addition to the Uighur texts, DLT also has the same word: “ür aş aşadı the man ate (akala) the food. The Khāqāniyya use this word only of nobility; the other Turks use it without distinction, and this is according to rule.” CTD, II, 281.

Aša- is mostly a synonym with ye- in most historical and some modern languages. (See OTWF § 5.11, s. 418.)³

² Except direct and compiled citations, I have changed č to ç, ğ to ğ, ı to i, ng to y, ş to ç.
³ “5.11 +A- aš+a- ‘to eat’. In this sense practically a synonym with ye-; except that ye-is sometimes used to signify ‘to devour’, or in some other negative senses,
For historical examples on aša-, see Clauson. More examples from Old Uighur in the publications appeared after 1988 will be discussed in the new edition of UigWb (Verbs) in detail (forthcoming).

In Middle Mongolian we have the following form: asara- “besorgen, in Obhut nehmen; aufziehen”, MNT II, S. 9.

In Classical Mongolian, we also have asara- meaning “to be compassionate; to take care, raise, foster, nourish, or support by charity; to be a benefactor or philanthropist; to love” (Lessing 56b). For more derivations, see Lessing.

In modern Mongolian, we have asra- (asrax) “uhajivat, zabotitsya (nurse, look after; take care of)” MonOrT 46 a.

Now we can turn back our attention to the problem and discuss the relationship between aš, aša- and asara-: First of all, Mo. asara- is related to a never attested *asa which goes to Turkish aš. It is well known that if whereas aša- is positive. This fits well with Kāšgārī’s statement that the Xākānī Turks use aša- only of the nobility, and accords with the fact that aša- is derived, i.e. secondary: It may have arisen as a euphemism. Nevertheless, cf. the biverb aša- ye- in TT V B 53 and elsewhere. Also signifies ‘to enjoy (something, not just food)’, ‘to enjoy, sc. life’, rarely even ‘to suffer something’. See the UW entry for exs. A further instance from Schwitz 32 should be added to par. 2 of that entry; cf. the runic ex. in the EDPT.”

ED p. 256 b: “D aša-: Den. V. fr. 1 aš; properly ‘to eat’ in a physical sense; sometimes metaph. ‘to eat up, destroy’ or ‘to enjoy, experience (something)’. S.i.a.m.l.g. Cf. yé-: Türkü vııı ff. (or, if it is savoury food) ašayıncın ‘may I eat it’ Toyok III 1r. 7 (ETY II 179); Man. künke ašadukumuz bęs teşri yaruk ‘the light of the five gods which we have enjoyed daily’ Chuas. 300-1: Üyğ. vııı ff. Bud. kértgünç erser nomluğ tatığığ aşaguluk elig erur ‘as for faith, it is the hand with which one consumes the sweet (food) of the doctrine’ TT V 22, 45; o.o. PP 50, 3-5 (uđuğ); TT V 24, 53 (yé- aša-) Suv. 529, 13 (ditto); in Buddhist terminology the skandha of vedanā ‘perception’, usually translated teğimek, is sometimes translated aşamak TT VI, p. 66, note 157: Xak. xı er aš aşadır: ‘the man eat (akala) the food’; the Xākānī Turks use this word only of the nobility (al-akābira), but other Turks use it indiscriminately Kaş. III 253 (aşar, aşamak); it is pointed out in III 261, 7-11 that aşar is the Aor. of both 1 aš- and aša-: KB sevinçin avınçın kévışın eli aşasu ‘may he enjoy his realm in joy, happiness and pride’ 123; o.o. 836, 1480: Çağ. xv ff. aşa- (spelt) xwurdan wa aşāmidan ‘to eat and drink’ San. 41r. 14: Xwar. xıı(? ) aša- iç- ‘to eat and drink’ Oğ. 94. 364: xıı aša- Qutb 13, MN 96: Kom. xıı ‘to eat’ aša-CCI; Gr.: Kip. xıı akala- (ye:- and) aša- Hou. 43, 9.”
Mongolian borrows a word from Turkish that ends in a consonant, the loanword ends with an added vowel:  

Mo. aba “chase, hunt” Lessing 2 b <= OT ab  
Mo. agta “gelding; castrated” Lessing 15 b <= OT at  
Mo. araga “molar; tooth of a cogwheel” Lessing 47 b <= OT azig

5 Such vowels appear just in the first and second period loans. Some scholars accept or believe that those word correspondences/-equivalences are good evidence for the genetic relationship between Mongolian and Turkish. But at this point my aim is not to argue this problem; I have already discussed this matter in a paper read in 2002 in Beijing. Of course, examples I mentioned here are just a selection on the topic. Some of these examples belong to the first period and some to the second period loans in Mongolian (see Studies p. 217). In my opinion, an important difference between the first and the second period (also the third period) is the Old Turkic and its representations in Mongolian: In the first period Turkish loans in Mongolian we find -lb-, -lc- or -lç-: kalbaga (< Tu. kąk), in the second and third period loans we have mainly s = ş: ulus (< Tu. uluş).

After I had prepared the above-mentioned list, I saw U. Posch’s compilation at Altaistik (pp. 23-25). I have checked his list in relations to our topic. Some of the items in the list are not suitable for our comparison: Tu. äb, äv / Mo. egüden “Hüte”; Tu. barq / Mo. baraga “Objekt”; Tu. bizağ(i) / Mo. birağ “Kalb”; Tu. çab / Mo. çabi “Lenden”; Tu. çaq- / Mo. çaqi- “reiben”; Tu. çoq- / Mo. çogi- “klopfen”; Tu. ög / Mo. eke “Mutter / Mo. mother”; Tu. oy? ög / Mo. oyun “verstand”; Tu. qır / Mo. kira “gesicht /”; Tu. saq- / Mo. saqi- “verteidigen, bewachen”; Tu. suç- / Mo. suçu- “rennen in gebeugter Haltung”; Tu. sür / Mo. süri “Titel”; Tu. tart- / Mo. tata- “schlappen”; Tu. tün / Mo. tündür “Nacht / Night”; Tu. yos / Mo. yosun “Gesetz”.

For example, the correspondence of Tu. bizağ(i) / Mo. birağ “Kalb” is not of the type I mentioned above. The Turkish word always had three syllables in Old Turkic and developed into a two-syllable word later on. Therefore, it is not possible to put forward a correspondence of Tu. two syllables = Mo. three syllables here. kıs- “wollen” (the correct form is kūse- as in Mo.), saq-, suç-, and yos forms mentioned here are not attested in Old Turkic.

Although they may seem relevant, some of the connections made in that list are not directly related to the topic discussed above: Tu. bāk / Mo. beki “stark”; Tu. bay / Mo. bayan “Reich”; Tu. omuz / Mo. omurğun “Pferdebrust”; Tu. ot / Mo. oçın “Feuer”; Tu. qadağ / Mo. qadağasun “Nagel”; Tu. qat š / Mo. qatağ “hart”; Tu. qoy ~ qony / Mo. qonin “Schaft”; Tu. qulaq / Mo. qulağ “Ohr”; Tu. qut / Mo. qutğ “Glück”; Tu. saq / Mo. sayin < *sağın “gut”; Tu. yūrāk / Mo. cirâken “Herz”. In addition, the form omuz is a very late form and is not attested in Old Turkic, therefore, it has to be taken out from the list. Another word that has to be taken out of the list is the word tavuk which was paired with Mo. takiya(n) “chicken”. Because the Old Turkic form of this word is takigu.
Mo. asa- “to stick, cling to” Lessing 55 b3, Vergleichende 65 <= OT as-
Mo. berke “difficult, hard” Lessing 99 b <= OT bärk
Mo. boda “substance, matter; body” Lessing 108 b2 <= OT bod
Mo. boro “grey, brown; dark” Lessing 121 a-b <= OT boz
Mo. büütü- “to be(come) formed or fulfilled” Lessing 152 a <= OT büüt-
Mo. çida- “to be able, be capable” Lessing 176 a <= OT tüd-
Mo. çilağun⁶ “stone, rock” Lessing 182 a <= OT taš
Mo. dūrı- “shape, form, figure; appearance” Lessing 282 a <= OT yüz
Mo. ere “man, male” Lessing 321 a <= OT är
Mo. erke “right, power” Lessing 328 b <= OT ärk
Mo. ikire, ikere “twins” Lessing 401 b <= OT ikiz
Mo. qaqa- “to close; to block” Lessing 905 a < cf. OT kapgak, kapg, kapa-
Mo. qalbağan(n) “spoon” Lessing 97 b <= OT kaşık
Mo. kerçi- “to cut, mince” Lessing 905 a <= OT kär-
Mo. kirğa- “to cut off, shear” Lessing 471 b <= OT kırk-
Mo. kıs- “to hamper, impede” Lessing 473 b <= OT kıs-
Mo. köğurge, kögerge “bridge” Lessing 480 a2 <= OT köprüg
Mo. köke “blue, sky-blue” Lessing 482 a <= OT kök
Mo. quça(n) “ram” Lessing 979 a <= OT koç⁷
Mo. quçı-, quça- “to cover, cover up” Lessing 979 a <= OT kuç-
Mo. küçü(n) “power” Lessing 496 a <= OT küçük
Mo. nidurğa “fist” Lessing 578 a <= OT yudruk, yıdrık
Mo. önge⁸ “color” Lessing 637 b <= OT öy
Mo. sağa- “to milk” Lessing 656 a <= OT sag-
Mo. sere- “to awaken” Lessing 689 a <= OT sez-
Mo. söge- “to become hoarse or husky” Lessing 730 b <= cf. OT sökäl
“ill, sick” ED 820 b⁹
Mo. uçra- “to meet, come across” Lessing 859 b <= cf. OT utru
“opposite, facing” (< *utur-)

In general, Mo. çilağun compared with Tu. taš (*tiş) by both altaists and contra-
altaists, but there is not a satisfactory explanation for a +gün suffix anywhere (cf.
Mongolistik and other works). An older, reconstructed form “Pre-Mongolian tiğun” is included in Comparative (p. 114); there is only a deverbal -gün in
Mongolian, see TMEN II, § 855, especially p. 438; ED 557 a2.

For another example Mo. u = Tü. o, cf. Mo. huriyan = Tü. közi.

I will deal with önge, mingan and similar words in another article.

Clauson thinks that sökäl perhaps goes back to sök- “to kneel down” ED 819 a2.
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Mo. *uka- “to understand, know” Lessing 890 b <= OT *uk- “to understand (something Acc.)” ED 77 b ¹⁰
Mo. *uran “artist, craftsman” Lessing 879 b <= OT *uz “a skilled craftsman” ED 277 b

Secondly, the suffix in asara- is not a deverbal medial or simulative like in some OT examples (cf. for medial -r- UigWb *alajur- from *alaju-, ägir-, köpir- etc. OTWF II p. 535-538). On the contrary, this is a denominal verb like *asa+ra-:

Mo. *köke “blue” > köke+re- “to become blue”
Mo. *köşsin “old” > köşindre- “to become old” ¹¹
Mo. *ügei “poor” > ügeyire- “to become poor”
Mo. *şira “yellow” > şirayire- “to become yellow” ¹²

The same suffix occurs also in Chaghatay Turkic with a similar function:
gandra- “to stink, smell badly” < Persian *gand “stink, stench, foul smell”
muşra- “to be worried or sad” < muş “sadness, sorrow”
telbere- “to go mad, become insane” < telbe “mad, insane, crazy” ¹³

Mongolian asara- comes back to Turkic after the first half of 13th century. For Uighur asira-, see UigWb 232-233; and also VEWT p. 29. For other examples from modern Turkic languages, see ESTYa I p. 173. Turkic forms are mostly with -ı- instead of -a-, as in Old Uighur and in some modern languages (like Tuvinian azira- TuWp. 83 a).

¹⁰ For utur- “to oppose one another” cf. Middle Turkic work Muqaddimat al-adab (according to Yong-Sông Li, p. 512, footnote 512) and ED: *utur- (...) “became an early l.-w. in Mong. as uçira- “to meet”” 67 b.

¹¹ For köke “blue” to köşsin “old” need to think “*grey > old”; compare it semantically to Tuv. kök “blue; grey” and kökpeş (TuWp. 206-207), Mo. köke(n) “blue; ash-colored, dark (of face)” Lessing 482 a.

¹² For examples, see Poppe, Written § 246, p. 65;

¹³ János Eckmann, Chagatay Manual, Bloomington 1966, p. 70. What Eckmann mentions here ög+re-n- “to get used to, learn” from Old Uighur ög “reason, sense, comprehension” is not an acceptable etymology any more. For a more plausible etymology for ögrän- from ögür-“herd” as *ögür+ä-n-, see OTWF p. 609-610. What Ramstedt mentions in his comparative study of Mongolian and Turkic, denominal verbs have different suffixes, there is only asra- related to our topic (see p. 34).
What I dissent from Róna-Tas’s explanation is about the etymology of *asa+. Róna-Tas accepts that asara- is a verbal derivation and he compares it with Mongolian ebdere- meaning “to break down” < ebde- “to destroy”, dabara- “to exceed” < daba- “to climb over”, bulgara- “to be uprooted”.¹⁴ Many examples in different studies formed with -ra/-re- or +ra/+re- are mostly reflexive, intransitive or onomatopoetic verbs,¹⁵ but asara- is a transitive verb and for that reason we can compare the denomial suffix +ra- with Turkic +lA-; for r ~ l alternation, see Poppe, Comparative Studies, p. 160-161.¹⁶ On this topic, see also TMEN I § 20, TMEN IV, N 11 = 1956.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ABBREVIATIONS


¹⁴ For the same conclusion, see also L. Clark 1980, p. 42.
¹⁵ For such examples, see above kökere- etc.
¹⁶ The weak aspect of my comparison of +lA- > +ra- is that such alternations or dissimilation related mostly with an -r- consonant at a word root. Secondly, the suffix +lA- may be a late borrowing in Mongolian during the Chagatay period. But we have asara- in Mongolian from earliest texts.

KT: Kül Tegin Inscription


Li Yong-Sông 2004: *Türk Dillerinde Sontakılar*, İstanbul.


Mo: Mongolian


OT: Old Turkic


SHM: Secret History of Mongols

Studies: CLAUSON 1962.

T: Tunyukuk Inscription


Tu: Turkic