

# ЛИНГВИСТИКА

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## **ETHNOCULTURAL AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ETHNIC MINORITY IN A GENETICALLY RELATIVE ENVIRONMENT (FIELD STUDY ON THE OIRATS IN MONGOLIA IN 2024)**

The article deals with the cultural and linguistic dynamics in the development of the Oirat ethnic minority in Mongolia, who have lived compactly in a linguistically related environment for several centuries. This includes Oirat ethnic groups such as the Durvud, Torguud, Zakhchin, Myangad, Bayad, Uriankhai, Uuld, Khotgoid, Khoshuud, Khoyt and Khoton. The Oirat language belongs to the western branch of the Mongolian languages of the Altaic language family. It is an ancient written language. The Oirat script “Todo bichg” (clear script) was developed in 1648 by the Oirat scholar Zaya Pandita.

A characteristic feature of the language situation in Mongolia is that most languages belong to the Mongolian language family and are, therefore, surrounded by other closely related languages. The article aims to analyze the dynamics in the development of Oirat idioms in Mongolia under the conditions of a cognate environment in order to specify their linguistic vitality. Language contact between related languages can lead to the assimilation of the language of a smaller language community, usually into a dialect of the dominant language community. Rapid assimilation can occur for several reasons. Firstly, the psychological factor is decisive. As a rule, the speakers of the assimilating language have no psychological barriers, since they are in a culturally and linguistically related environment and are not subject to any moral or psychological pressure from the dominant group, the language change takes place almost unnoticed. Secondly, due to the genetic proximity of the idioms with which they come into contact, the minority languages are restricted in their range of functions, giving way to the dominant language and thus losing prestige. These linguistic processes can be clearly traced in the functional and structural development of the language of the Oirat groups in Mongolia. The article analyzes the language change of the Oirat people in Mongolia based on material from a sociolinguistic field study conducted in 2024 among the Oirat people in Mongolia.

**Keywords:** *Mongolian languages, the Oirats, language contacts, cognate language environment, language shift, language vitality*

### **Introduction**

Languages functioning in a linguistic environment of related languages are a specific phenomenon of linguistic reality that is conducive to research aiming to discover the characteristic forms and ways of their development in the context of their internal and external factors. It is relevant to focus on a study of the cultural and linguistic dynamics of Oirat ethnic groups in Mongolia, a small part of the population of the country living in compact settlements for a number of centuries. They include such ethnic groups as the Durvud, Torguud, Zakhchin, Myangad, Bayad, Uriankhai, Uuld, Khotgoid, Khoshuud, Khoyt and Khoton.

A specific character of the linguistic situation characterized by close interactions with Khalkha Mongolian is considered, and the Oirat language<sup>1</sup> of these groups manifests a number of distinct features in its development. The present study, focusing on the dynamics of their linguistic and cultural development, fills another gap in the study of Oirat history and culture, contributing to a deeper insight into issues of the ethnic history of both Oirats of Mongolia and Oirat Kalmyks. The article initiated the data collected during the field research in Ulan-Bator, the Khovd, and Bayan-Ulgii *aimaks*<sup>2</sup> in 2024 [1]. In the large-scale survey, about 110 informants of Oirats participated:

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<sup>1</sup> The Oirat language belongs to the west branch of Mongolian languages (Altaic language family). It is an old-written language, the Oirat writing “Todo bichg” (Clear writing) was worked out in 1648 by the Oirat scholar Zaya Pandita.

<sup>2</sup> An aimak is a modern administrative-territorial division in Mongolia.

40% city dwellers, 60% rural residents, and different social groups (33% students, 45% intelligentsia, 22% workers).

Most scholars in the field of Oirat studies agree that the ethnonym *Oirat* means an alliance of a number of groups united by their language and ethnic identity. However, their opinions differ as far as the etymology of the lexical item is concerned. According to D. Pavlov, *Oyirad* etymologically consists of two parts: *oyira*, the root, meaning ‘close,’ and plural affix *-d* [2, p. 93]. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Pallas and Schmidt pointed out that the root *oyira* means ‘near, nearby’ while *-d* means ‘close, close relations’ [3]. D. Banzarov believed that the term *Oirat* is not ethnographic, thus in the Genghis time, it referred to a group of forest dwellers, with *oyi* meaning ‘tree, forest,’ *arad* ‘people,’ so *oyirad* means ‘forest people’ [4, p. 4].

There is very little evidence concerning earlier periods of Oirats as part of the Mongolian people, and it was only in the 14<sup>th</sup> century that any serious effort was made to study them. According to these data, being one of the feudal divisions of the Mongolian Empire, the Oirats of this period occupied the Tarbagatay region and Western Mongolia and had their own language and culture. Some scholars believe that the Oirats emerged as an ethnic entity due to a consolidation of four alliances of groups belonging to the Western branch of Mongolians after the collapse of the Mongolian Empire in China in 1368. They united into *the Oirat Confederation of Four Tümen*, an alliance of four closely related ethnic groups, to build later their Dzungar Khanate and become a formidable power in the region. From the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Oirats had begun to move along the Upper Irtysh as far as Ili and Tarbagatay. In the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, they moved in different directions and their alliance began to disintegrate so that in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, some factions of the Oirats left Dzungaria to the West for various economic and political reasons and eventually settled in the Volga Steppe, where they gradually became known as the Kalmyks. After the defeat of the Dzungar Khanate in 1757-1758 and the massive killing of its population by the Manchu-Chinese army of the Qing Empire, half of its former territory was incorporated into the Khovd district of Western Khalkha together with the surviving Oirats. The 30 *khoshun* of the Oirats who had remained in the territory of Mongolia formed an Oirat alliance under Togon Taishi and his son Esen Khan. The Oirats called themselves *Ulan Zalata* (literally *with red tassels*) and believed that they had their unique Oirat culture. The Oirat groups that were once part of the alliance moved in different directions after the collapse of the *Dzungar Khanate* to settle in different regions: the Uriankhai and Uuld stayed in Khovd and Altay, the Myangad lived along the Khovd Hol River, the Torguud moved to the Bulgan River, and the Zakhchin occupied the Sharkhulsan region along the Khovd Hol. They have remained in these areas to this day.

In the late 12<sup>th</sup> and early 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, Mongolian dialects spoken by different groups of Mongolian clans and families were variants of the common Mongolian language. There are many notes on the oral Mongolian of this period, including lists of words, phrases, and glossaries. The analysis of these materials shows that the diverse Mongolian groups forming part of the Genghis Empire spoke the dialects of the common Mongolian language, and the differences between them had less radical character than those of present-day Mongolian languages. According to G. Sanzheev, after the collapse of the Empire, the remaining ethnic groups scattered over different territories. Their common language was lost due to the lack of a widespread standard variant, which might have become a uniform base, connecting separate Mongolian groups whose dialects had failed to lose their differences and form one language. Later, those dialects had their own distinct ways of development [5, p. 34]. The language spoken by Oirats was a variant of common Mongolian, but it was also known for its distinct character among the dialects of other Mongolian groups. The great Persian scholar Rashid-ad-Din pointed out this fact in his manuscript, and he wrote, “Oirats somewhat differed from the rest of Mongolians by their language. Though it was Mongolian, the Oirat language still had a difference from those spoken by other ethnic groups” [6, p. 118–119].

*Hudm Bichig*, the Mongolian script, appeared in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century and developed based on the Uyghur writing system, a variant of the Sogdian alphabet related to the Aramaic one. Oirats had used this common Mongolian writing system by the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century when, in 1648, in the heyday of the Dzungar Khanate, Namkai-Dzhamtsa Zaya Pandita, the great Oirat educator, developed his Oirat writing system which was called *Todo Bichig*, or Clear Writing. This remarkable event also marked the beginning of the Oirat language development based on the dialects of the Mongolian groups, forming the Oirat Alliance. The language's vocabulary expanded due to Oirats' language contact with other ethnic groups.

Thus, the formation of the Oirat people within their own state structures required further efforts to promote their culture and development. According to D. Pavlov, the development of the Oirat Clear Writing was due to a number of factors: 1) the new writing system was to promote all the aspects of the developing Oirat society; 2) it was to contribute to the spread of Lamaism among the people and do away with the influence of Shamanism and 3) it was to stop the discrepancy existing between the written language (Old Mongolian) which reflected the outdated pronunciation and the current norms of Oirat speech [7, p. 43-45]. Scholars have highly estimated the role of the Oirat Clear Writing. Thus acad. B. Vladimirtsov pointed out that "Zaya Pandita did not simply introduce new letters and new orthography but worked towards developing a new standard, the written form of the Oirat language, and he quite succeeded in fulfilling his task as the founder of the general literary norm developed on the basis of Oirat tongues" [8, p. 25-26]. According to D. Pavlov, "Thanks to a largely uniform character of the Oirat dialects Zaya Pandita was able, in addition to a perfect writing system, to develop a literary language which was *on a par* with other written languages of the time in its style and richness of linguistic resources. Hence, the new script and literary form gave impetus to the development of Oirat literature" [7, p. 68].

At this point, it should be noted that the Oirats, staying on the territory of Mongolia, can be subdivided into two groups in accordance with the time they moved there.

1. Oirats who moved for various political reasons to Mongolia in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, such as Khoyt, Batud, and other groups, escaping from their princes to join Khotgoid *noyons* of the Altin Khans' state in Khalkha; Oirats who were given to Khalkha princes as part of dowries when marriages took place between the families of Oirat *noyons* and rulers of Khalkha; and those who stayed behind after the wars waged by Galdan Boshogtu Khan, the ruler of the Dzungar Khanate, against Khalkha princes in the period from 1688 to 1697.

2. Oirats who joined the Qing Empire during the last days of the Dzungar Khanate and after its collapse given by the Qing authorities to the Mongolian princes, awarding them in this way for their collaboration in the military activities against Dzungars [9, p. 16].

Therefore, the Oirat ethnic groups, one of the largest groups of Mongolians today, were formed at different periods. At present, the Oirats, having lost their independence as a result of certain historical events, are part of the population in the territory of three neighboring countries: Mongolia, Russia, and China.

***The linguistic situation in Western Mongolia.*** The development of the functions of a language and spheres of its use depend on social circumstances, including such important factors as its status, linguistic situation, and language policy. As a rule, the interactions of ethnic languages and a state language entail various controversial issues because "the absence of outside impetus to the development of the functional properties of a language results not only in the loss of balance between its potentialities for growing both inner structural and outer systemic variations but also in a gradual reduction of these components, thus finally the language may be degraded to a dialectal form or lose most of its functional aspects" [10, p. 5].

The state language of Mongolia is Mongolian, according to *the Law of a State Language of Mongolia*, adopted for the first time in 2003. Prior to this law, the linguistic situation in the country

had been regulated by certain articles of the Mongolian Constitution (1992) and a number of other legislative acts, which also pointed out that Mongolian was a state official language of Mongolia, having a complete set of social functions. According to the census of 2020, the major component of the population in the country is Khalkh-Mongolians (83, 80%, in 2010 – 82.4%) [11, p. 52; 12, p. 26]; hence the social functions of their language are much wider than those of other thirty ethnic groups of the country.

The total number of Oirats in Mongolia is over 400,000 people, including about 270,000 in Western Mongolia (mostly in the Uvs and Khovd aimaks). As has been mentioned before, the Oirats are comprised of a number of smaller ethnic groups, such as the Durvud, Torguud, Zakhchin, Myan-gad, Bayad, Uriankhai, Uuld, Khotgoid, Khoshuud and Khoyt who speak Oirat dialects of the Mongolian group of the Altaic family of languages. As part of a unique social communicative system, Oirats dialects in Mongolia show a number of specific features in their development. The speakers of Oirat dialects and dialectal forms use them in their interactions, and they also have a fluent command of the literary Mongolian language. Notably, most of these modern dialects are very close to each other, so their speakers usually understand each other without much difficulty. But at the same time, the research has shown that some ethnic groups of Oirats, especially those living in town, have faced assimilation problems, entailing their adoption of Khalkha-Mongolian.

**The Durvud.** This most numerous ethnic group of Western Mongolia lives in the somons of Buhmuren, Turgen, Sagil, Davst, Ulaangom, Ulgiy, Umnygovi, Hovd, Naranbulag, Zavkhan of Uvs aimak and somons of Durgen, Tsagan-Nur of the Khovd aimak, as well as in some other regions of Mongolia. According to the census of 2020, they were 83,719 (2.6%) in number, while in 2010, there were 72,403 (2.8%) of them [11, p. 52; 12, p. 26]. The Durvud are comprised of such clans as Tsoros, Targad, Tsoohor, Khoshuud, Duraal, Shaazgan, Khoid, Sharayd, Tsagachuud, Borluud, Shangas, Bulgadar (Bilgadr), Tongoruud (Tongrud), Khir-gis, Hkarnuud (Kharnyud), Khereyd (Keriad), Ih Tugtan (Tugtun Utuggyn), Baga Tugtan, Tsagan Tugtan, Bulgad, Zutarag (Zuutryg), Zyod, Tsasan, Mongul-mood, Khari-yarga, Byogyud (Byoo) and others [13, p. 95].

It should be noted that in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, some groups of Durvud were extinct. This is evident if we compare the evidence in G. Potanin's and K. Vyatkina's works with that of modern Mongolian scholars. The Durvud made up the major aimak of the Dzungar Khanate; according to legends, they were the descendants of the four children of Duva Sohor, the forefather of ancient Mongolians. From the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, as part of the Oirat Confederation, they lived along the rivers of Talas and Erchis; later, a faction of them followed the Torguud to travel to the Volga region of Russia while the rest of them stayed behind in the Dzungar Khanate. Since 1789, the Durvud were assigned to serve as the Altay guards [14, p. 138]. In 1911-1912, as a result of the national liberation movement in Mongolia, the Mongolian state was established, and the Khovd region became its part. At the time, the delegations from the two Durvud aimaks appealed to the Mongolian government for citizenship in the Autonomous Republic of Mongolia.

Regarding the ethnonym Durvud, some scholars believe it might have originated from the singular form of the numeral *dyorben* 'four,' though the *Secret History* does not indicate any interpretation of the ethnonym along these lines. Considering the historical context of the time, G. Sanzheev suggested that when it was being formed, the ethnic group got its name associated with the numeral because they were descendants of Duva Shohor's *dyorben* 'four' sons. Rashid-ad-Din mentioned *Durban* in his chronicle. Already in our time translating the *Secret History* into modern Mongolian, Ts. Damdinsuren used the numeral *dyorben* in its plural form as the ethnonym when he wrote "Durvud ovogton bolov," i.e., "they became to be known as the nation of Durvud."

According to B. Vladimirtsov, the Khovd Durvud made use of both writing systems: Old Mongolian *Hudm Bichig* and Oirat-Kalmyk *Todo Bichig*, though they used the former more often despite

the fact that they got to know *Hudm Bichig* only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They had only manuscripts in Oirat and both manuscripts and xylographs in Mongolian. It is interesting that literacy spread among the social strata of Durvud, as it seems only the nobility and clergy could read and write. Lamas knew only Tibetan and had no knowledge of Mongolian. Besides, Manchu was still used as the language of documents, while Chinese and Uyghur were no longer used.

**The Uriankhai.** There are small groups in the somons Altay, Buyant, Bulgan, Bugat, Sagsai of the Bayan-Ulgii aimak and in the somons of Munkhkhairhan, Duut of the Khovd aimak. According to the 2020 census, there were 29,021 (0.9%) in number, while in 2010, there were 26,654 (1%) of them [11, p. 52; 12, p. 26]. By their origin, they are divided into two groups: Mongolian and Turkic. We will discuss the Mongolian group on Uriankhai.

The Uriankhai are one of the indigenous ethnic groups of Mongolia, and they were a major power at the time the Mongolian Empire was being formed. In the Yuan state, they settled down among Oirats, some of them joining their Confederation and the rest moving to Eastern Mongolia. Y. Grumm-Grzhimaylo points out that the ethnonym was used earlier to refer to the indigenous population of the Uriankhai region while, in fact, some small groups in Mongolia and Altay, in particular, in the eastern part of the Chyorny Irtysch estuary and up the Urungu River, were also known under this name. According to G. Potanin, they were the descendants of the Uriankhai of the Middle Ages, mentioned by Rashid-ad-Din as one of the ‘forest tribes.’ The scholar added that the ethnonym was first used to refer to all the ethnic groups populating the mountainous and forest area in the northern part of modern Mongolia, even if they spoke different languages. The Mongolian-speaking Uriankhai were originally Turks who dropped their Turkic mother tongue. He points out that there was no uniform name for them as Mongolians called them Uryankha, Kokchulutun (i.e., ‘having blue stones’ from Mong. *hoh chuluu* ‘blue stone’), Monchak, as well as Kokmonchak (i.e., from Tuv. *kok monchak* ‘blue ribbon’); they used to decorate their headgear with blue ribbons or blue beads [13].

The modern Uriankhai are part of the Mongolian group, living mainly in Western Mongolia, forming the Oirat cultural and linguistic community. Most of the older generation knows the names of their clans and families. According to the informants, from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the ancestors of present-day Altaic Uriankhai used to live on the western side of the Mongolian Altay, in particular, in the upper Irtish area, as well as in Kyok Tokay, Sary Sume, Ebin- kool, Urungu, Chingil (Khoyt Chingil), Chokur-Elesin and Tozhu-yurt, their neighbors being Kazak, Chinese, Tatar, Uyghur and Dungan. In an earlier period, they lived in the east - near Lake Baikal and in Northern (Khentii) Khangay; this toponymy is still preserved in the folklore of the people. Up to 1907, Uriankhai lived in the seven khoshun of Western Mongolia ruled by the Khovd Hebey-Amban’; already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many of them had been mongolized. During the Revolution, they moved to the somons of Bugat, Sagsay of the Bayan-Ulgii aimak, and the somons of Munke-Khairhan, Dut of the Khovd aimak. According to Y. Ayizhy, an ethnographer, Uriankhai do not differ much from Durvud, their neighbors, in terms of their language, material and spiritual culture, but they also have some specific customs and traditions that Mongolians lack [15, p. 7]. Thus, it is obvious that the people have undergone the acculturation process, with many of them adopting Mongolian and Buddhism.

**The Torguud.** Originally, the Torguud were a Western Mongolian ethnic group. They were the khans’ guardsmen at the time of the Mongolian Empire. Later, they joined the Oirat Confederation as its major aimak, but then at the time of the Oirat apogee, Khorlyuk, the leader of Torguud, quarreled with other Oirat leaders and in the 30s of the 17<sup>th</sup> century left Tarbagatay with his people for the Volga steppes where they remained independent up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the Torguud clans stayed behind, remaining part of the Dzungar Khanate, but after its collapse, Shiyren Taydji, with his 10,000 households, also moved to the Volga. In 1771, however, led by Shiyren Taydji and Ubushi Khan, the Torguud returned to their former homeland. There is a compact settlement of the Torguud

in the Bulgan somon of the Khovd aimak. According to the 2020 census, there were 15,596 (0.5%) in number, while in 2010, there were 14,176 (0.5%) of them [11, p. 52; 12, p. 26].

According to V. Gungaadash, the ethnonym *Torguud* was derived from *torgon tserег*, the term used to refer to the guardsmen of Mongolian khans in the 13<sup>th</sup> c. Kh. Luvsanbaldan believes that it originates from Turkic *tur*, which means ‘stand up, standing, day guard,’ with the plural affix *-uud* added to it *turhag* (*turgat*) was formed. According to Zh. Tsooloo, the ethnonym *Torguud*, was produced due to a change in the pronunciation of a vowel in the word *turag*, meaning ‘big, tall and strong.’ The words *turhag*, *turgag* mean guardsmen who used to serve at the nobles’ places in old times.

**The Uuld.** The first evidence about them is contained in historical records dating to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. According to Oirat chronicles, Khamag Taishi, Esen Khan’s grandson, had some Tsoros families among his subjects whom he called Uuld. Uuld were one of the major aimaks of the Oirat Alliance. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, led by Galdan-Boshogtu, they moved along the Khovd River to settle down in the region and start farming. Their compact settlements are located near Ubsu-Nur Lake in the Erdeny-Buren somon of the Khovd aimak. According to the 2020 census, they were 14,666 (0.5%) in number, while in 2010 there were 15,520 (0.6%) of them [11, p. 52; 12, p. 26]. There are over twenty clans of Uuld, including Burguud (Khar-Burguud, Tol’ton-Burguud), Elzhiged/Ilzhged, Bailgas, Avgas, Toos, Tsuvdag (Hhulan-Tsuvdag, Khulkhay-Tsuvdag), Egyos, Boroldoy / Borulta, Tsoros, Shar-Mongol, Tsagaantug, Khoid, Mundas, etc. When asked about the origin of the name of their most numerous clan of Burguud, the elders failed to explain, though they denied it had anything to do with the word *byurged* ‘golden eagle.’ N. Ekeev associates *Burguud* with another well-known ethnonym *Buruut* (*Buruud*) as in modern Mongolian languages (except for the Uuld and some other Oirat dialects), the letter *g* tends to be lost in some proper names as compared with the Old Mongolian written form [13, p. 94].

**The Zakhchin.** Since 1755 the Zakhchin have lived in a compact way in the somons of Mankhan, Dzerek, Altay, Must, Uyenchy of the Khovd aimak, though many of them also live in some aimaks of Central Mongolia. According to the census of 2020, they were 37,407 (1.2%) in number, while in 2010, there were 32,845 (1.2%) of them [11, p. 52; 12, p. 26]. According to some scholars, the ethnic group was formed from different Torguud, Durvud, and Uuld clans who were military settlers guarding the eastern borders of the Dzungar Khanate at the time of Galdan Khan. There are about fifteen clans of Zakhchin, including Khereed, Byugyunyuud, Kharchin, Kharnuud, Khirgis, Khyunkheer, Shangas, Emch, Taraachin, Buuchin, Turdaankhan, Nokhoinkhon, Shambiynkhan, Kharazargynkhan, etc [14, p. 138].

Their ethnonym is believed to come from Mong. *zakh* ‘edge’ because they served as border guards. Since 1754, they had been under the Manchu rule; during the period of the Autonomous Mongolian Republic and Bogdo Khan rule, they became the subjects of Unen-Zorigto, the Durvud Khan.

**The Myangad.** This ethnic group with a distinct character lives in the somon of Myangad of the Khovd aimak. According to the 2020 census, there were 8,125 (0.2%) people, and in 2010, there were 6,592 (0.3%) of them [11, p. p.52; 12, p. 26]. As they had been under the rule of different Mongolian and Turkic dynasties, Myangad as an ethnic group originated from a mixture of Mongolian and Turkic clans. According to one of their clan histories, they separated from Khotgoid to settle down on the banks of the Khovd-Gol River. G. Potanin pointed out that they believed that their people were part of the Tangnu-Uriankhai nation, while N. Bichurin wrote that they were related to Durvud; during Galdan Khan’s rule, some of them were sent by Dzungar to Talas, in 1757, they were returned to join the Dzasaktu Khan’s aimak, and in 1765, they were sent to the north of

Khovd to become the subjects of the Khovd Khebey-Amban'. There is also another opinion, according to which they were part of Turkic-speaking Tatars but later separated from them to become a distinct group.

As far as their ethnonym is concerned, it is believed to come from the word *Mangd* 'Tatars'. N. Ekeev points out that some Myangad clans worshipped Okon-tengry (Lkhamo) as their deity, making sacrifices with white horses and blue ewes. The Bashgid clan worshipped Ataa-tengry, the head of eastern tengry, making sacrifices with speckled-brown horses, while the Khirgis clan had Khayrkhan as their deity, whom they sacrificed blue-gray horses. Thus, the differences between these three groups in terms of their make-up and religious beliefs show that modern Myangad have come from three distinct ethnic groups [13, p. 95].

**The Khoshuud.** The descendants of this Oirat ethnic group live in the Bulgan somon of the Khovd aimak. According to the 2000 census, there were 183 people, and in 2020, there were 382 of them. They appeared on the historical scene as one of the major allies of the Oirat Confederation during the Min dynasty in China. In *Men-gu-mu-tsi*, one of the Chinese sources dealing with Mongolians, there is a reference to Khoshuud, Dzungar, Durvud, and Torguud as the four Oirat groups at the time of the Min dynasty. No references to Khoshuud are found in Mongolian sources dealing with the history of Mongolians and Oirats in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This fact can be interpreted as evidence showing the absence of such people at the time or that they might have been known under some other ethnonyms. Their history is very controversial. Thus, when they joined the Confederation, the Tsoros rulers were at the head of this union, but they were then substituted by Khoshuud, who had become an important force among the Oirats. The people believe they belong to Bordzhigit, the direct descendants of Chinggisids, as their chieftains come from the family of Djuchi Khasar, Genghis Khan's younger brother. The Bordzhigit descendants became the leaders of the Oirat military alliance. As part of the Oirats, the Khoshuud were influential, shaping the history of the Oirat and Kalmyk populations and their neighboring states and nations in Central and Inner Asia.

**The Bayad.** This Oirat group left Dzungaria with Durvud in 1753-1759 to settle down in Khalkha. In the past, they were one of the divisions of the Durvud and, together with them, were ruled by the Tsoros leaders of Dzungaria. In the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, they were known as Djida Bayagud, Bayagud Duklas, and Kheeriyin Bayad. They joined the Mongolian Empire as part of the Oirat Confederation; much later, after the Dzungar Khanate's collapse, they settled with Durvud near Uvs Nur Lake.

At present, they form compact groups in the somons of Khirgis, Malchin, Tes, Dzun-Goby, Naran-Bulak of the Uvs aimak, as well as other aimaks of Central Mongolia. According to the 2020 census, there were 63,775 (2%) people, and in 2010, 56,573 [11, p. 52; 12, p. 26]. B. Vladimirtsov described their language, culture and everyday life in his *Report on the Study Trip to Bayad of Kobdosky District*. During his study trip, the scholar managed to record three long epic poems, a story devoted to Djanggar, 15 folk tales, 30 songs, and about 100 proverbs and riddles [16].

**The Khoyt.** They were one of the five main Oirat groups. They live in the somons of Turgen and Ulan-Gom of the Khovd aimak, where they settled down in 1755 after Durvud had left the region. There is also a small group of them in the somon of Sharga of the Govi-Altai aimak. They number 5,000 people in Mongolia and 15,000 people in China [14, p. 139]. According to some Mongolian researchers, this ethnic group contributed to the growth of Khotgoid. N. Bichurin pointed out that the Khoyt were related to Durvud. They separated from them in the period of Tsevan Rabdan rule in the first quarter of the 18th century but later joined them again.

The etymology of the ethnonym is also still under discussion. Since *khoyt* means 'north,' 'behind' in Chalkha-Mongolian, Nyansambu and N. Zhukovskaya interpret the term as a reference to

the geographical location of the people who settled in the north [17, 18]. However, Sh. Norbo pointed out that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, they traveled on the farthest southern part of the Oirat territory, particularly in Zultus and the three rivers of Tashigay alongside the Khoton. In his opinion, it seems more plausible to associate *Khoyt* with *Soyot* ~ *Soyit*, the name of ancient Samodian groups. This is supported by some phonetic evidence as in a number of languages of ethnic groups, related to Oirats, there is a change of consonants *s* ~ *kh*. Others believe that the proper name was derived from *khyod* ‘sheep’.

**The Khotgoid.** At the time of Genghis Khan, the Khotgoid lived by the Chorny Irtish and began to be associated with Oirats in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries under Zosoktu Khan’s rule. They settled down on the territory of the modern Khuvsgul and Zavkhan aimaks. First recorded in the Mongolian chronicle of *Altan tobchi*, they were described as the population of the Chorny Irtish valley. G. Potanin grouped them with Western Mongolians, but it should be noted that at the time of his visit, the people’s acculturation process and a shift to Mongolian culture were not conspicuous. S. Purevzhav points out that they are descendants of the Khoyt who were part of the Four Oirat coalition in the Middle Ages. In his study of the Khotgoid of the 18<sup>th</sup> c. at the time of the dissolution of Altan khans’ principedom, S. Chuluun points out that they had some traditions, differing them from the Khalkha as they wore boots fashioned after those of Myangad and their women had tsegdek<sup>3</sup> dresses like Myangad women. As the scholar believes that most Western Mongolians, including Myangad were mongolized Turks, he assumes that the Khotgoid also belong to the same group.

As for the origin of the ethnonym, G. Potanin, for example, supported the idea that it was a compound formed by combining *Khoto*, or *Koto*, the name of the extinct Dinlin tribe of Kotto, and *Gaytu*, the proper name which was in use in Southern Siberia. S. Purevzhav also thinks that it is a compound consisting of two components *khoyt(d)* and *goyt(l)*, though associating it with the Khoyt who settled in Khalkha and lived beside the Khalkha and since in their pronunciation *khoyt* sounded like *goyt*, they became known as Khoyt-goyt which gradually became Khotgoid. According to the 2020 census, there were 8,583 (0.3%), and in 2010, there were 15,460 (0.6%) of them in Mongolia [11, p. 52; 12, p. 26].

**The Khoton.** In the past, they were a Turkic-speaking people and Muslims. Some scholars believe Dzungar rulers resettled these descendants of the Uyghur from Eastern Turkistan in their Khanate to do farming, i.e., they belonged to the Oirat population of Dzungaria. B. Vladimirtsov pointed out that they came from the land of Kunker Khan (the title referred to all the rulers of Inner Asia). He believed they were once a sedentary group of Turkic people living in Southern Kazakhstan and were farmers. There is a point of view that in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, their ancestors were driven to Dzungaria by the Oirat Khan Tseren-Ubashy, who in 1754 became a Manchu subject. Thus, the Khoton joined the Oirat Confederation, became Oirat military men, and settled near Ubsu-nur Lake.

They do not have any legends about their past. According to some scholars, originally related to the Kazakh people of Zheetekey, the Khoton mixed with the Durvud as they had lived among them for over 200 years. As a result of these processes, their seven clans were mongolized, and their mother tongue was dropped. Though B. Vladimirtsov pointed out that they differed to a great extent in their appearance from Durvud, their neighbors, as their eyes were not slanted, they had straight noses, and quite many of them wore beards. Their mother tongue, originally related to the Kazakh and Kara-Kirghiz languages, had undergone profound changes due to the influence of Mongolian in the early 20th century to be completely ousted later. They have also become Mongolians in their everyday lives, although they remember that they were once a separate group. They currently live in

<sup>3</sup> A tsegdeg is a women’s dress without sleeves.

the somon of Tarialan of the Ubsnur Aimak. According to the 2020 census, there were 12,057 (0.4%) people; in 2010, there were 11,304 (0.4%) [11, p. 52; 12, p. 26].

### **Discussion**

The survey of ethnic cultures and languages of Oirats in Mongolia shows that the linguistic situation of the country is quite specific and characterized by different types of bilingualism and multilingualism. It is known that any contact of languages results in their interaction and interrelationship. According to some scholars, there may be three main consequences of linguistic contacts: 1) substitution of one language by another; 2) functional coexistence of languages in contact; 3) development of a new idiom on the basis of two languages in contact [19, p. 28]. The idea of 'a mixture of languages', illustrated by an example from Mongolian languages, was first formulated by B. Vladimirtsov, who described a mixed dialect developed as a result of interactions between Khalkha and Oirat-Bayad in Mongolia. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the scholar points out that "sometimes when living in an environment where two or even more languages meet, a Mongolian has to become to a certain degree bilingual, i.e., speaking two dialects, for example. More often, however, in this case, he (she) speaks a mixed sort of language without realizing which of the dialects is actually in use" [20, p. 83]. Thus, he believes that when dealing with Mongolians, a linguist would prefer speaking about their dialects rather than ethnic loyalties. As Khalkha and Oirats speak a mixed dialect, it includes the structural characteristics of both languages; its character does not allow to identify whether one deals with an established language or is just an example of code-switching. Thus, according to B. Vladimirtsov, this form is characterized by the use of the phoneme [k], which is absent both in Khalkha and Oirat dialects and hence cannot be pronounced properly by either an average Bayad or an average Khalkha [20, p. 80]. The available material shows that a new dialect is being formed when the two related languages, Khalkha-Mongolian and Oirat, come in contact.

As a result of linguistic interactions, some elements of the Khalkha dialect appeared in the speech of Oirats, and finally, this gave rise to intermediate forms of speech, especially in situations characterized by intense contact between Khalkha and Oirat groups. While analyzing the reasons for the process and its specific features, G. Sanzheev first points out that the Oirat-Bayad speech is a mixed form characterized by the use of palatalized [k], which is absent both in Khalkha and Oirat dialects. He adds that the consonant resulted from a combination of articulation features of both dialects: in Khalkha, the palatalized [x'] sound was formed from early [k] in a position before the early vowel [i], e.g., *max'* 'ä←*makija* 'hen' while in Oirat this early [k] was not palatalized in this position, e.g., *maka'* 'hen,' hence the Bayad-Khalkha speech developed [k'], e.g., *maka'ä* 'hen,' which adds to its obstruent character the palatalization characteristic of the Khalkha sound. On the lexical level, the Bayad-Khalkha speech also includes some mixed variants of Khalkha and Oirat components which have undergone a number of changes, e.g., Oirat *acxh*, Khalkha *ÿdëu* and Bayad-Khalkha *ÿdëui* 'evening' [5, p. 114].

The gradual loss of their prominent features by dialects and their final disappearance can be slowed in some historical circumstances due to a lack of economic and political concentration, and thus, some intermediate speech forms and dialects may have quite a long life. Dialectal features such as agricultural terminology and phonetics may linger in some spheres of lexis.

The most characteristic feature of the linguistic situation in Mongolia is that most languages are Mongolian and thus surrounded by other languages closely related to them. Here is an important observation by B. Vladimirtsov, who pointed out that "there is no such thing as common Mongolian.... All the Mongolian groups speak languages and dialects that differ from each other to a greater or lesser extent, but still, it should be noted that most of the time they are very close so that speakers of different tongues can communicate with each other without much difficulty.

This closeness of two or more dialects may stem from the fact that they belong to the same branch of the Mongolian family of languages, i.e., they have the same parent language. Sometimes, however, their closeness and possibility of mutual understanding between the speakers may be justified by the fact of their familiarity with the tongues of neighboring ethnic groups with whom they may have a long history of constant interactions [8, p. 4].

It is well known that interactions between related languages may result in the assimilation of the language of a smaller speech community, changing into a dialect of a larger community language. This process is quite characteristic of Mongolian languages [21, p. 12]. However, it should be noted that this is not a specific feature of the Buryat or any other dialect of Mongolian but rather a general linguistic pattern in the development of languages in contact, though assimilation may take less time in the case of related languages for a number of reasons. First, a psychological factor should be taken into consideration: the speakers of the language being assimilated do not, as a rule, have any psychological barriers to the process; moreover, being in an ethnically and linguistically familiar environment, they do not feel any moral or psychological pressure on the part of the dominant group. Second, as the structural closeness of the languages in contact takes its toll, minority languages tend to be reduced in their functional sphere, giving way to the dominant language and thus becoming less prestigious. Still, in such situations, the psychological factor plays a decisive role.

According to Mongolian linguists, the Buryat and Oirat idioms in Mongolia have been assimilated and become Mongolian dialects. The speakers of these dialects use their own tongues in group interactions, but, as a rule, they also have a strong command of the literary Mongolian language. However, many Russian scholars do not agree with this opinion. The Oirat groups, for example, have always been separated from other Mongolians in terms of their territory, and these divisions have been largely preserved till the present time. Thus, according to G. Sanzheev, because the Oirat fiefdom divisions chiefly coincided with those of their former group loyalties, this contributed to the survival of their tribal dialects as well. Separated by physical distances, the Oirat language is characterized by dialects scattered on a large territory, which is why they still have had their features intact since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. During this period of Oirat history, the people turned out to be scattered in all directions, with members of the same group living in different regions and having no contact even with their neighboring Oirat groups, which contributed to preserving their original speech habits.

On the one hand, the perseverance of the Oirat dialects is justified by the fact that for historical reasons, the people's clan divisions remained almost intact till the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, the Oirats in Mongolia, separated from their majority, have been under certain influence of the Khalkha language. Their historical circumstances prevented the people from developing their full-fledged literary language, though they had their own Oirat alphabet with historical, clerical (Buddhist), and epic literature appearing in it.

There are also subjective factors to be taken into consideration in the discussion, particularly self-discourse, which is the opinion of Oirat dialect speakers themselves. Further, we consider the results of the survey carried out in May 2024 in Ulan-Bator, the Khovd, and Bayan-Ulgii aimaks. There were about 110 informants, Oirats, 40% city dwellers, 60% rural residents of various social groups – 33% students, 45% intelligentsia, and 22% workers.

The survey shows that 94% of informants believe that their ethnic groups differ from others of the given region in their languages, 53% of informants believe they differ in their customs and traditions, 23% of them point out their specific facial features, 25% define their difference in character and behavior features, etc. 98% of the informants Oirats indicated that they are Buddhist. On the question "From whom does your ethnic group originate?" 83% of informants indicated that from the Mongols, 11% - from the Turks, 6% found it difficult to answer [1]. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, G. Potanin pointed out that the Durvud differed from Khalkha Mongolians in terms of their language, appearance and type of their social and everyday life. In terms of their appearance, the Durvud might

look like Tangut-Uriankhai with their somewhat long faces, long noses, angular chins, and skin color darker than that of Khalkha Mongolians. There also were some differences in clothes and customs as “they wore special caps and boots, their women wore tsegedeks and had no head-falsies as Khalkha women” [22, p. 30].

The ideas the speakers of an ethnic group may have about themselves as a group are important elements of their national identity because, in this way, they compare themselves with other groups and realize their differences. Thus, the Oirats in Mongolia see their common origin not only in the sense that they are related and close but also in terms of their historical past. Their national feelings are most acute when they speak their own languages with other speakers, read literature in their mother tongue, and celebrate their holidays. Their group identity is based on important aspects such as their linguistic loyalty and feeling of pride in belonging to the group and sharing their common past. It is important to consider these components of the national feeling as they are part of the psychology of individuals as members of the group. The respondents’ answers to the question of their nationality show the importance of the ethnic identity issue for the Oirats, as 98% of them say they are proud to be Oirats, and only 2% show their indifference.

This study has also shown that 78% confirm their mother tongue loyalty while 15% point out that Khalkha Mongolian is a native language, and 8% indicate Khalkha Mongolian and Oirat as native languages [1]. The statistics correspond to the real language situation; functionally, Oirat is inferior to Mongolian. While serving as a means of communication and cultural transition in the historical development of ethnic communities, language becomes part of their common cultural and national heritage. Most Oirats in Mongolia speak their mother tongue in their everyday interactions and within their family circle; thus, they have preserved their national identity to a greater extent. Their first language competence is high, and it is *de facto* their mother tongue used within their families; Oirats get their first linguistic experience in their own language as 81% of informants say it was the language of their childhood, 9% say it was Mongolian and 10% spoke both languages [1].

The following figures indicate high language competence in Oirat: 67% speak Oirat fluently, 8% speak it poorly, and 25% do not speak Oirat (mainly urban residents). Only 24% of respondents think in Oirat, 27% think in both Oirat and Mongolian, and 49% think in Khalkha-Mongolian [1].

Thus, the mother tongue as a means of passing on the people’s traditions, history, and culture is very much alive in the interethnic communication of Oirats in Mongolia, playing an important role in their ethnic and linguistic identity. They have a special feeling of loyalty to their own culture and language. As for intergenerational continuity of native language, it is high in Oirat families, and 60% of Oirat informants speak Oirat with their parents, 18% speak Mongolian, and 22% speak both Oirat and Mongolian. 56% of respondents speak Oirat with their children at home, 24% speak Mongolian, and 20% speak both Mongolian and Oirat. 76% speak Oirat with their grandparents, 11% speak Mongolian, and 13% speak Mongolian and Oirat. 33% speak Oirat with their grandchildren at home, 50% speak Mongolian, and 17% speak Mongolian and Oirat [1]. At this point, it should be noted that the situation characteristic of the Oirat speech community in Mongolia has resulted from a long history of their life on the territory with the dominant ethnic group closely related to them in terms of origin and language.

However, this study has also shown that Oirats, especially town dwellers, face the problem of assimilation and a shift to Khalkha Mongolian, which is the main and often the only means of communication for Oirat younger generations living in towns. As far as older generations are concerned, the informants switch from one language to another depending on the situation. In a multilingual situation, an Oirat can make use of any language he (or she) knows, which is required by the specific circumstances of a communication act. In public places, 17% of Oirat informants speak only Oirat, 67% speak only Mongolian, 16% speak both Oirat and Mongolian. In the workplace, 7% of Oirat informants speak Oirat, 51% speak Mongolian, and 42% speak both Oirat and Mongolian [1]. The assimilation process is also encouraged by a growing number of inter-

marriages and an awareness of the links between the ethnic groups, their shared historical past and mentality.

It should also be pointed out that particular ethnic groups may have specific features in their cultural and linguistic situations due to differences in their historical development and sociocultural circumstances. So far, due to the compact pattern of settlements, their linguistically and culturally distinct character has been preserved despite active ethnic and cultural contacts with Khalkha Mongolians.

Having discussed some peculiarities in the functional development of Oirat dialects in Mongolia found in different speech communities, a number of general and specific conclusions can therefore be drawn.

– The study of linguistic interactions presupposes that the results of contacts between languages are not accidental but have the character of shifts that can be recorded in their functional and internal structural systems, i.e., they must be innovations in the respective languages. The analysis of the results can be useful in the elaboration of language policies, i.e. in the practice of linguistic optimization, which is to a certain extent part of any language development.

– Social circumstances, numbers, and compact or dispersed populations have an impact on the mentality of ethnic groups and ultimately on the well-being of their languages, especially in terms of their functional development, as languages are important tools in the transformation of ethnic mentality.

– Stability and a favorable environment are conducive to the sustainability of a group's ethnic and linguistic identity and its unity.

– Assimilation processes show that the unity of a group is weakened, adaptation strategies increase under the influence of the dominant language and culture.

– Despite the peculiarities of their development and functioning, the Oirat language groups of Mongolia are aware of the importance of preserving their ethnically and linguistically distinct character, and their awareness depends on the unity of a group.

It should be noted that the existence of a small ethnic group and its language is possible as long as its ethnic identity is promoted, as this is an organizing factor of general importance for the continuity of the group.

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## **ЭТНОКУЛЬТУРНОЕ И ЯЗЫКОВОЕ РАЗВИТИЕ МИНОРИТАРНОЙ ЭТНИЧЕСКОЙ ГРУППЫ В ГЕНЕТИЧЕСКИ РОДСТВЕННОЙ СРЕДЕ (МАТЕРИАЛЫ ПОЛЕВОГО ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ ОЙРАТОВ МОНГОЛИИ 2024 ГОДА)**

В статье рассматривается этнокультурная и языковая специфика развития миноритарной этнической группы в генетически родственной среде на примере ойратов Монголии, компактно проживающих на данной территории несколько столетий. Ойраты Монголии включают в свой состав следующие родо-племенные группы: дербеты, торгуты, захчины, мингаты, байты, урянхайцы, элюты, хотогойты, хошуты, хойты и хотоны. Ойратский язык относится к западной ветви монгольских языков алтайской языковой семьи.

Ойратское письмо «Тодо бичг» (Ясное письмо) было разработано в 1648 году ойратским просветителем Зая Пандитой.

Цель статьи – проанализировать динамику развития ойратских идиомов в Монголии в условиях генетически родственной среды, определить их языковую витальность. Языковой ситуации в Монголии характерно софункционирование родственных языков, относящихся к монгольской языковой семье. Языковые контакты близкородственных идиомов часто ведут к ассимиляции языка меньшего языкового сообщества, которое, как правило, становится диалектом языка доминирующего языкового сообщества. Быстрый темп ассимиляции может происходить по ряду причин. Во-первых, определяющим является психологический фактор, у носителей ассимилируемого языка, как правило, отсутствуют психологические барьеры, находясь в культурной и языковой родственной среде, они не испытывают морального и психологического давления со стороны доминирующей группы, языковой сдвиг происходит почти незаметно. Во-вторых, по причине близости контактирующих идиомов, языки меньшинств, как правило, сокращают сферы функционирования, уступая место доминирующему языку, становятся менее престижными и социально востребованными. Данные языковые процессы четко прослеживаются в функциональном и структурном развитии языка ойратов Монголии. В статье в основе анализа языкового сдвига ойратов Монголии материалы полевого социолингвистического исследования, проведенного в 2024 г. среди ойратов Монголии.

**Ключевые слова:** монгольские языки, ойраты, языковые контакты, родственная языковая среда, языковой сдвиг, витальность языка

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