

## Some Basic Background on the Kalmyk Language<sup>1</sup>

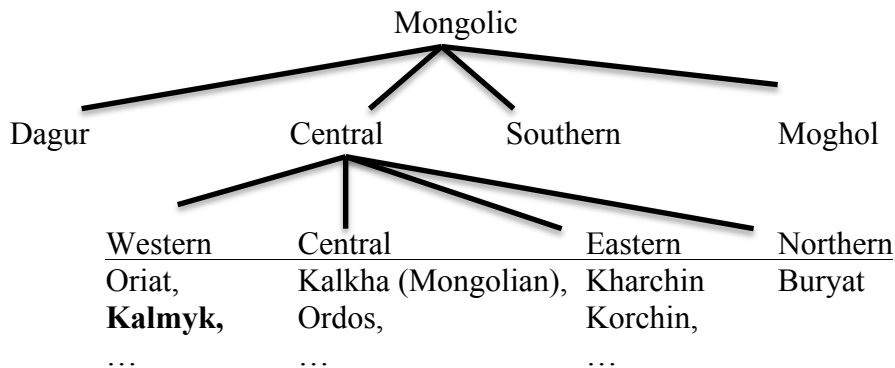
### 1. Genetic Affiliation

The Kalmyk language (/χalyɯmɡ keln/) is the westernmost member of the Mongolic languages.

#### (1) Map of the Mongolic Language Family<sup>2</sup>



The internal classifications within Mongolic are controversial, but the following is one proposal



<sup>1</sup> The information in this handout is taken from such sources as Knyazev (2015), Bläsing (2003), and the articles “Kalmyk Oriat” and “Kalmyk People” on Wikipedia (<https://en.wikipedia.org/>).

<sup>2</sup> “Linguistic map of the Mongolic languages” by Maximilian Dörrbecker.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mongolic\\_languages#/media/File:Linguistic\\_map\\_of\\_the\\_Mongolic\\_languages.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mongolic_languages#/media/File:Linguistic_map_of_the_Mongolic_languages.png)

## (2) Some Features of the Mongolic Languages

The following are features common in the Mongolic languages; we should therefore be on the look for them in Kalmyk.

- a. Agglutinative, suffixal morphology  
Both nouns and verbs can appear with a string of suffixes, with little contextual allomorphy or irregularity.
- b. Rich case system on nouns.
- c. Head-Final Word Order  
Sentences are typically verb-final; the languages have postpositions rather than prepositions; *etc.*
- d. Front vowels can be rounded (/y/, /ø/)
- e. Vowel harmony  
The vowels of suffixes are subject to phonological rules that make them ‘match’ the vowels of the root.

## 2. Sociolinguistic Properties

- (3) **Locations Spoken:** Principally the Republic of Kalmykia in the Russian Federation



- (4) **Dialects Spoken**
- a. Dörbet (spoken mainly in the west)
  - b. Torghut (spoken mainly in the east)
  - c. Busawa (mixture of Dörbet and Torghut)

(5) **Viability of the Language**

- a. Number of Speakers: 80,500 (as of the 2010 census)
- a. Viability Status: ‘Definitely Endangered’ (UNESCO)
  - The number of Kalmyk speakers, especially among the younger generations, is shrinking, as Russian is increasingly used.
- b. Historical Cause of Endangerment

Systematic pressure from Russian government, since 1600s.  
Then, the USSR, under Stalin, carried out a program of genocide against Kalmyk

  - Stalin accused the Kalmyk of collaborating with German occupiers.
  - The entire population was deported from Kalmykia, and dispersed throughout Siberia. Ethnic Russians and Ukrainians were imported in.
  - Sixty percent of the Kalmyk people died during this exile. Those who survived were not permitted to speak their language, or to teach it to others.
  - In 1958, surviving Kalmyk were permitted to return to Kalmykia, but it took until 1965 for Kalmyk to arrive in significant numbers.
  - Since that time, there has been intense economic pressure on Kalmyks to shift to Russian (language of government, higher education, and opportunity)
  - Since the 1990s, efforts have been made to revitalize the language, including the establishment of Kalmyk as an official language of the Republic.
    - Kalmyk is now also taught in schools as a second language.

(6) **Orthographies Used**

- a. 1600s – 1930s: Classical, ‘clear script’ of the closely related Oriat language (Created by Buddhist monk; based on Mongol script)
- b. 1930s – Today: Cyrillic alphabet (forced by Russian government), with modifications common to other Mongolic languages

*Since neither of these orthographies are fully phonemic, we will write Kalmyk using IPA*

### 3. Important Historical Background: The Kalmyk and the Oriat

The Kalmyk language is very closely related to the Oriat language spoken in western China and Mongolia.

- They're largely mutually intelligible.
- Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Kalmyk generally identified themselves as Oriat.

#### (8) Some Bullet Points on the History of the Oriat and the Kalmyk

- a. The Oriat ruled a large empire, the Dzungarian Khanate, from 1400s to the 1700s.
- b. Dzungarian Khanate covered an area encompassing:
  - Western China (from western Great Wall), to
  - Eastern boundary of (modern) Kazakhstan
  - Modern Kyrgyzstan, to
  - Central Siberia
- c. Politically, the Dzungarian Khanate was opposed militarily to the Khalkha Mongols (the heirs to Genghis Khan's Mongol Empire)
  - The Khalkha didn't consider the Oriat to be 'Mongols', since they had never been under Genghis Khan's rule.
- d. **In the early 1600s, some of the Oriat population – mainly members of the Dörbet and Torghut tribes – migrated to pastures between the Volga River and the Caspian Sea (see map in (1))**
  - There are several reported (and disputed) reasons for the migration.
  - Chiefly, the period prior to the migration was one of much political turmoil and civil war within the Dzungarian Khanate.
- e. The migrated Oriat formed the Kalmyk Khanate from 1630 to January 5, 1771.
  - Increased hostility/pressure from the Russian Tsar lead the last Kalmyk Khan to organize an emigration back to Dzungaria.
    - Those who left with him were eventually scattered among the Oriat, who referred to them all collectively as 'Torghut'.
    - Some couldn't leave with him, due to their inability to cross the Volga River. Those who stayed were the ancestors of modern Kalmyk.
- f. The name *Kalmyk* is an exonym, of uncertain origin (probably Turkic). Kalmyk people didn't actually use it themselves until the 1700s or so.
  - Prior to that, everyone identified simply as either Dörbet or Torghut.

#### **4. Previous Language Documentation**

- Kalmyk has been very well documented by Russian linguists. However, all of these works are written in Russian, and so are not accessible to non-Russian speakers.
- Significant documentation has also been done by German linguists. Again, however, most of this work is written in German, and so is inaccessible to non-German speakers.
- **Very little has ever been written on Kalmyk in English. To my knowledge, the work you can find mentioned on the course language page is about it (e.g., Street 1959)**

Fun Fact:

The Kalmyk language formed the basis for the constructed Ewok language found in the movie *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*.