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Phonetic and Morphonological Parallels between Azerbaijani and Japanese in the Context of Altaic Studies: The Limits of Genetic Interpretation

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Abstract. *This article examines phonetic and morphonological correspondences between Azerbaijani Turkic and Japanese within the broader framework of Altaic and, more recently, Transeurasian studies. Adopting a historical-comparative perspective, the study revisits the development of the Altaic hypothesis – from the foundational work of Ramstedt and Poppe to subsequent contributions in the Russian tradition, including Syromyatnikov, Starostin, and Dybo – while also engaging with contemporary approaches such as the Transeurasian model. The analysis demonstrates that the two languages display several structural convergences, including agglutinative morphology, suffix chaining, and the central role of the verb in grammatical organization. At the same time, significant differences emerge at the phonetic and morphonological levels: Azerbaijani Turkic is characterized by systematic vowel harmony, person-number marking, and stress-based prosody, whereas Japanese exhibits moraic organization, pitch-accent, the absence of person-number categories, and class-based morphonological alternations. The findings suggest that such parallels, while analytically valuable, cannot in themselves be treated as conclusive evidence of genetic relatedness. More decisive criteria – regular sound correspondences, stable cognate sets in the core lexicon, shared grammatical morphemes, and the exclusion of borrowing – remain essential for establishing genealogical relationships.*

Keywords: *Altaic theory, Transeurasian hypothesis, Azerbaijani Turkic, Japanese, phonetics, morphonology, comparative-historical linguistics, genetic relatedness*

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Altayşünaslıq kontekstində Azərbaycan və yapon dillərində fonetik və morfonoloji paralellər: genetik interpretasiyanın məhdudiyyətləri

Oqtay Cəlilbəyli 

Xülasə. Bu məqalə Altay nəzəriyyəsi və daha son dövrdə Transavrsiya yanaşması çərçivəsində Azərbaycan türkcəsi ilə yapon dili arasında fonetik və morfonoloji uyğunluqları araşdırır. Tarixi-müqayisəli yanaşma əsasında aparılan tədqiqat Altay hipotezinin inkişaf mərhələlərini – Ramstedt və Poppenin əsaslandırıcı işlərindən başlayaraq, rus elmi ənənəsində Syromyatnikov, Starostin və Dybo tərəfindən irəli sürülmüş töhfələrə qədər — yenidən nəzərdən keçirir; eyni zamanda, Transavrsiya modeli kimi müasir yanaşmaları da müzakirəyə cəlb edir. Aparılan təhlil göstərir ki, hər iki dil bir sıra struktur oxşarlıqlar nümayiş etdirir; bunlara aqqlütinativ morfolojiya, şəkilçi zəncirlənməsi və feilin qrammatik strukturda mərkəzi rolu daxildir. Bununla yanaşı, fonetik və morfonoloji səviyyələrdə mühüm fərqlər də müşahidə olunur: Azərbaycan türkcəsi sistemli sait harmoniyası, şəxs-kəmiyyət göstəriciləri və vurğuya əsaslanan prosodiya ilə xarakterizə olunduğu halda, yapon dili moraiik quruluş, ton-vurğu, şəxs-kəmiyyət kateqoriyalarının olmaması və sinif əsaslı morfonoloji alternasiyalar ilə seçilir. Nəticələr göstərir ki, bu cür paralellər analitik baxımdan dəyərli olsa da, təkbaşına genetik qohumluğun qəti sübutu kimi qəbul edilə bilməz. Geneoloji əlaqələrin müəyyənləşdirilməsi üçün daha etibarlı meyarlar — müntəzəm səs uyğunluqları, əsas leksik fonda sabit koqnat sistemləri, orta qrammatik morfemlər və alınmaların sistemli şəkildə istisna edilməsi — həlledici əhəmiyyət daşıyır.

Açar sözlər: Altay nəzəriyyəsi, Transavrsiya hipotezi, Azərbaycan türkcəsi, yapon dili, fonetika, morfonoloji, müqayisəli-tarixi dilçilik, genetik qohumluq

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Introduction

The origin of languages and the question of distant genetic relationships remain among the most complex issues in historical linguistics. Within this broader context, the external affiliations of Japanese are of particular interest: while the language is securely classified within the Japonic family, its potential connections to wider macrofamilies continue to be debated. Azerbaijani Turkic, by contrast, belongs to the Oghuz branch of the Turkic languages and is supported by a well-established comparative-historical framework. Against this background, a comparison between Azerbaijani Turkic and Japanese is not only typologically informative but also methodologically relevant for evaluating the Altaic hypothesis – more recently reformulated as the Transeurasian hypothesis. Two principal approaches can be identified in the literature. One interprets structural and lexical similarities among Turkic, Mongolic, Tungusic, Korean, and Japanese languages as evidence of common origin. The other explains these parallels through long-term contact, borrowing, and convergent typological development (Janhunen, 2023; Hübler & Greenhill, 2023). A key methodological point follows from this distinction: structural similarity should not be equated with genetic relatedness. Features such as agglutination, word order, or postpositional structure acquire

evidential value only when supported by regular phonological correspondences and shared morphological innovations (Comrie, 1998; Starostin, 1991). In Azerbaijani scholarship, the work of O.B.Jalilbayli has contributed significantly to this field, particularly through the comparative study of verb structure. His research demonstrates that both similarities and intra-systemic differences must be considered in parallel (Jalilbayli, 2016; Jalilbayli, 2022). Accordingly, the present study aims not merely to catalogue structural parallels, but to assess the extent to which these parallels can support a genetic interpretation at the phonetic-morphonological level.

Research

The Formation and Development of the Altaic / Transeurasian Hypothesis. The Altaic hypothesis has a long and complex intellectual history. While early ideas concerning possible relationships among Eurasian languages date back to the seventeenth century, a systematic comparative framework was established by G.J.Ramstedt and later developed by N.Poppe. In the twentieth century, the inclusion of Japanese – particularly in the work of Miller – reinvigorated the debate (Robbeets, 2018). Critics, however, have consistently emphasized the limited number of reliable cognates in the basic lexicon and the likelihood that many similarities can be explained through borrowing rather than inheritance (Robbeets, 2018). The Russian tradition played a key methodological role in refining the problem. Syromyatnikov highlighted the importance of isolating earlier lexical layers in Japanese, particularly by removing later Chinese influence (Syromyatnikov, 1967, 1971). A similar principle is emphasized in Jalilbayli's work. Starostin advanced the discussion by linking genetic classification not to general typological similarity, but to systematic phonetic correspondences and shared grammatical morphemes (Starostin, 1991).

The *Etymological Dictionary of the Altaic Languages* (Starostin et al., 2003) represents a major attempt to systematize such comparisons across Turkic, Mongolic, Tungusic, Korean, and Japanese data. Subsequent research has incorporated statistical methods. Studies involving Dybo and G.Starostin, as well as permutation tests conducted by Kassian et al. (2021), identify non-random signals of similarity, though these are interpreted cautiously as potential indicators of deep contact or remote relationship rather than definitive proof. In the twenty-first century, the term “Transeurasian” has gained prominence, emphasizing both geographical continuity and possible historical connections among these languages. Bayesian modelling (Robbeets & Bouckaert, 2018) and interdisciplinary approaches combining linguistics, archaeology, and genetics (Robbeets & Savelyev, 2020; Robbeets et al., 2021; Bellwood, 2021) have expanded the scope of the debate. However, the current situation remains far from consensual. Ceolin (2019) reports statistically significant results only for certain language pairs, while Hübler and Greenhill (2023) demonstrate that structural features provide mixed signals, with morphological evidence generally stronger than phonological or syntactic indicators. Janhunen (2023) interprets Altaic as an areal-typological complex rather than a unified family. Furthermore, critical responses to the Transeurasian model (Tian et al., 2022; Yanshina, 2024) highlight unresolved linguistic, archaeological, and methodological issues. The present stage of research can therefore be best described as an active but unresolved scientific debate.

Phonetic and Morphonological Comparison. A comparison between Azerbaijani Turkic and Japanese is most productive when it focuses on phonetic and morphonological organization rather than direct lexical correspondences. Both languages exhibit an agglutinative tendency: suffixes are added sequentially to the root, grammatical meaning is constructed cumulatively, and the verb functions as the central structural element. At the phonetic level, however, significant differences emerge. Azerbaijani Turkic preserves a highly systematic vowel harmony system, where suffix allomorphs vary according to phonological features of the root. This system is transparent and predictable. Japanese, by contrast, lacks systematic vowel harmony; its phonetic organization is defined by a five-vowel system, moraic rhythm, and pitch-accent prosody, with restricted coda positions (Rybin, 2022).

At the same time, certain parallels have attracted scholarly attention. Syromyatnikov emphasized correspondences at the level of initial syllables, while Jalilbayli proposed a “molecular” approach focusing on deeper structural patterns rather than surface similarity (Syromyatnikov, 1967; Jalilbayli, 2016). At the morphonological level, both languages form verb constructions through suffix chains. Azerbaijani Turkic typically follows a root + negation + tense/aspect + person-number pattern, maintaining clear morpheme boundaries. Japanese also exhibits chained morphology (e.g., causative-passive-tense sequences), but its alternations are conditioned by verb classes and historical phonetic processes (e.g., *kaku* → *kaita*, *yomu* → *yonda*). A major structural difference lies in the absence of person-number marking in Japanese, which contrasts with the rich inflectional system of Azerbaijani Turkic. While this does not necessarily exclude genetic relatedness, it indicates divergent developmental trajectories. Thus, agglutinativity in the two languages should be interpreted as a shared typological tendency rather than evidence of identical structural mechanisms.

Criteria for Genetic Relatedness. A central principle of historical-comparative linguistics is that typological similarity does not equate to genetic relationship. Genetic relatedness requires evidence such as regular sound correspondences, stable cognate sets in the core lexicon, shared grammatical morphemes, and common innovations not attributable to contact (Comrie, 1998; Starostin, 1991). When evaluated against these criteria, the Azerbaijani Turkic-Japanese comparison yields mixed results. Structural parallels are evident, and some statistical studies suggest non-random similarity signals (Kassian et al., 2021). However, significant differences in phonological systems, prosody, and morphological categories limit the strength of any genealogical claim. The principal methodological risk lies in interpreting typological or areal parallels as evidence of common origin. Current research does not provide a unified conclusion, and the question remains open.

Conclusion

The comparison of Azerbaijani Turkic and Japanese within the framework of Altaic and Transeurasian studies represents a productive yet methodologically sensitive area of research. While the two languages share several structural features – most notably agglutination and verb-centered morphology – these similarities can often be explained in typological or areal terms. At the same time, substantial phonetic and morphonological differences remain, particularly in vowel harmony, prosodic systems, and grammatical categories. Consequently, phonetic-morphophonological parallels should not be treated as conclusive evidence, but rather as valuable material for testing broader hypotheses. At present, the question of genetic relatedness remains open, and further research – especially involving systematic correspondences and core vocabulary – is required.

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