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Abstract

Eynu is an alleged threatened contact language of Uyghur [Turkic; China] and Iranian languages, spoken in scattered enclaves in southwestern Xinjiang, China. We conducted fieldwork on the language in 2018 and provided a most up-to-date documentation of the language. Based on the data collected, we claim that Eynu is best classified as a Turkic language, since the majority of its grammar patterns with Uyghur. However, certain phonological and morphological features attest to language contact, notably with Persian languages. In addition, diachronic analysis with the help of previous data attest to an ongoing process of lexical replacement and language attrition.

Documenting Eynu: A Case Study of Language Contact

Siyu Liang*

1 Introduction

Eynu is a contact language spoken in scattered enclaves around the southern rim of the Taklamakan Desert in north-western China. It is arguably a Turkic language with the majority of its grammar patterning with that of Uyghur, the dominant language in the region. In addition, the language is heavily lexified by Iranian languages. Previous fieldwork has been done to document the language, notably by two teams headed respectively by Hayasi et al. and Zhao and Axim (Hayasi et al. 1999, Zhao and Axim 2011). However, these works only touched on a small portion of the area where speakers of Eynu are known to reside, and the data collected were far from complete. Our fieldwork spanned two months in 2018 and provides the most recent documentation on the language since two decades. We will present here the vocabulary, phonology and morphology of Eynu, since they offer evidence for language contact. Additional discussion of its typology and language change is also made based on both this fieldwork and previous work.

2 Fieldwork

Fieldwork took place from July to August in 2018. With the help of previous demographic descriptions, we visited ten villages in the Prefecture of Kashi and Kizilsu (Ethnic Language Committee of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region 2002). Elicitations were conducted in both Mandarin and Uyghur. The villages we have visited on this fieldwork represent more than half of the geographical area known to have communities that speak the language.

3 Vocabulary

We collected around 500 words in Eynu during our elicitation sessions. Despite the ambitious word list we had prepared, the modest glossary that we ended up with is arguably due to the increasingly dominant use of Uyghur vocabulary in the language. Remaining speakers of the language tend to be of advanced age, and often have difficult time coming up with original Eynu words. Although more than half of the items on the word list we elicited have also been attested in the lexicon section in previous publications (Zhao and Axim 2011), we also witnessed semantic change in certain words. For instance, the verb ‘deχlej’, previously only used to mean ‘to cut,’ has now taken on a wider range of meanings, such as ‘to clean, to wash’. At the same time, the specific words for each action now fell into disuse. The observed language attrition also relates to the ongoing process of diachronic change as discussed in Section 7.

4 Phonology

Eynu’s phonological inventory overlaps with Uyghur to a great extent. The phoneme inventory of Eynu shares most of its features with Uyghur. Both Eynu and Uyghur have a large phoneme inventory and complex vowel harmony paradigms. The significant differences of the two languages pertain to the distribution of the allophones of voiced stops and internal vowel harmony.

In Uyghur, voiced stops cannot surface word-finally, a phenomenon not present in Eynu. In Uyghur, underlying voiced stops will surface as voiceless. An example is the comparison of the derivation of nouns and their affixed forms of Uyghur and Eynu data in Table 1 and 2. In Table 1, the word-final bilabial stop in the Uyghur word is realized as voiceless, while the suffixation

*My sincere thanks for all my language consultants during my fieldwork, without whom this research would be impossible.

Underlying form	Surface form	Gloss
dʒɛnub	dʒɛnup	‘south’ (Engesæth et al. 2009)
dʒɛnubi	dʒɛnubi	‘southern’ (Engesæth et al. 2009)

Table 1: Allophonic variation of voiced stops in Uyghur.

Underlying form	Surface form	Gloss
χurd	χurd	‘small’
χordɛn	χordɛn	‘small’ (Zhao and Axim 2011)

Table 2: Derivation of voiced stops in Eynu.

reveals the underlying voice. In contrast, Table 2 shows an underlyingly voiced stop in Eynu, with consistent surface forms both in the word-final position and with additional suffixation.

In addition, Uyghur has a strong tendency for word-internal vowel harmony, and disharmonious words usually only occur in loan words. Therefore, the majority of its lexicon contains exclusively either front vowels or back vowels. An example is the consistency of vowel backness in compound nouns in Table 3. The four words in the Table 3 exemplify word internal vowel harmony with vowels in different syllables of the same word matching in backness.

IPA	Gloss	Note
ujβur	‘Uyghur’	back+back
qizil	‘red’	back+back
seriq	‘yellow’	front+front
qara	‘black’	back+back

Table 3: Word-internal vowel harmony in Uyghur.

However, Eynu, being a contact language, has a lexicon that contains a significant number of disharmonious vowels inside words. Some of such words are most likely loan words from Persian, thus accounting for the retention of original internal disharmonious vowels. Table 4 gives a few examples of these disharmonious words.

IPA	Gloss	Note
χolɛt	‘yoghurt’	back+front
guʃɛ	‘ear’	back+front (Persian loan word)
dædang	‘tooth’	front+back (Persian loan word)

Table 4: Disharmonious words in Eynu.

5 Morphology

The morphology of Eynu shares the majority of its patterns with Uyghur as well. However, there are words in Eynu whose internal structures show a different person and possession paradigm. Modifiers in Uyghur always appear pre-nominally, while compound words in Eynu show another pattern.

- (1) baza-din nurβun jaχʃi nɛrse satiwal-dim
market-from many good thing buy-1SG.PST
‘I bought many good stuff from the market.’ (Uyghur)
- (2) sipit sav-bisjar ket-ti
pilaf money-many come-3SG.PST
‘Pilaf has become expensive.’ (Eynu)

- (3) sav-kəmtær
 money-little
 ‘poor/inexpensive’ (Eynu)

However, this unconventional order is not productive and there are few additional occurrences that conform to such order. It is probable that these words are nominalized copular construction. A more plausible explanation is language contact with surrounding Iranian languages, such as Persian, which has a different nominal order from Uyghur.

- (4) golə ɣɛli zibaje mæn
 flower very beautiful 1SG.POSS
 ‘my very beautiful flower’ (Persian)

6 Typology

Based on general observation in the fieldwork and the notable differences presented above, we claim that Eynu is a contact language of Uyghur and Iranian languages. Uyghur is the superstrate language, and Iranian languages act as the the main lexifier. An additional cue for our claim is the endonym for the language that we discovered during this fieldwork, /paris/, a possible derivation of the endonym for Persian, /farsi/.

7 Language Change

Since all speakers of Eynu use Uyghur as their primary language, the use of Eynu is in a process of decline. The estimate we make for the remaining speakers of Eynu is around 500, a drastic drop from the initial estimate of 12,000 upon discovery of the language (Zhao and Axim 2011). Lexical replacement is evident as well. While the syntactical structure remained unchanged from data elicited previously, preference for the use of Uyghur lexical items is observed, as in examples (5) to (7). A comparison of the same sentence elicited by Zhao (5) and on this trip (6) shows an increase of Uyghur words in the present-day usage when compared to the translation in Uyghur, as in (7).

- (5) ɣani-də mike hes mu
 house-in goat exist Q
 ‘Is there goat in (your) house?’ (Eynu, Zhao and Axim 2011)
- (6) øy-də gøspənd bar mu
 house-in goat exist Q
 ‘Is there goat in (your) house?’ (Eynu, elicited on this trip)
- (7) øy-də øfjkə bar mu
 house-in goat exist Q
 ‘Is there goat in (your) house?’ (Uyghur)

8 Conclusion

Based on the data presented, we claim that Eynu is best classified as a Turkic language. However, Eynu’s hybrid nature and its location in a diverse linguistic area also result in deviation from its superstrate language, notably with extensive contact with Persian languages. Besides differences in the lexicon, other domains such as phonology and morphology (nominal word order) show evidence of Eynu’s distinctness from Uyghur. Typologically, these categories are coincidentally among those that are most prone to assimilation in a certain linguistic area (Cristofaro and Zuniga 2018). Considering the different aspects of the language and the level of lexical replacement, assimilation to the dominant language Uyghur is arguably already at an advanced stage.

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