

Prehistoric lexical borrowings in Northern China

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Language contact is one of the important factors that can shape languages. It also reveals the cultural dynamics among different groups of speakers. This research looks into one of the cases of prehistoric language contact, focusing on lexical borrowings, in Northern China. Specifically, this study investigates the lexical exchange between (Pre-)Proto-Sinitic speakers and their northern neighbours, including Japonic, Koreanic, Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic speakers, i.e., the Transeurasian languages, during the Neolithic and Bronze Age.

This research aims to answer the following questions: (1) What are the lexical items that were borrowed? (2) What are the borrowing directions and dates? (3) What were the factors that motivated or influenced these borrowings? (4) What inferences can be drawn about the nature of their contact?

To answer these questions, a lexical borrowing database was collected, including approximately 300 items. The data was collected based on previous literature (e.g., Starostin 2008; Miyake 1997; Oh 2005; Dybo 2007; Shimunek 2017), as well as dictionary search conducted by myself. The evaluation and analysis of these lexical borrowings is based on four criteria: phonetic match, semantic match, cultural context, and clusterability. Each lexical item receives a “grade”, and only the items with a “passing grade” will be considered valid evidence of prehistoric language contact. This research also incorporated findings from other scientific disciplines, especially archaeology and biology, which share the same research interests in human prehistory.

Preliminary results of this research identified several motivations behind the lexical exchange. First, agriculture was one of the pushing factors, reflected by the lexical borrowings such as ‘millet (*S. italica*)’, ‘rice’, and ‘barley/wheat’. Second, technological advances played a significant role, shown in exchanges of terminologies of metallurgy and transportation. Third, terms related to warfare were borrowed in larger quantity during the Bronze Age, which implies that conflict and military expansion promoted language contact and language change. The findings of this research contribute to the illustration of prehistoric language contact situations in Northern China, drawing inferences of the population contact starting as early as the Neolithic.

References

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