

Kur-Urmi (Kili) in a perspective of small-scale mixed languages

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Mixed varieties based on genetically related languages, referred to here as ‘small-scale mixed languages’, are rarely mentioned in a general discussion on mixed languages, although they seem to be widespread. For instance, in the volume Mazzoli & Sippola (2021) focusing on non-prototypical mixed languages, two such cases are addressed.

→ Small-scale mixed languages are reported to lack an important characteristic of mixed languages, i.e. clear borders between source language_A elements and source language_B elements.

→ For small-scale mixed languages (as for other outcomes of language contact between close languages, see Epps et al. 2013), it is technically hard to differentiate between elements of source language_A vs. source language_B.

→ Many small-scale mixed languages belong to “blended languages”, i.e. unstable varieties emerging in bilingual border areas, which are in uninterrupted contact with both source languages. Bakker (2017:227) mentions them among challenging cases going beyond the core of mixed languages.

→ The picture observed in small-scale mixed languages is similar to or even diachronically related to a specific type of code-switching attested for closely related languages, i.e. congruent lexicalization in terms of Muysken (2000), see this claim for Tojol-ab'al (Mayan) in Law (2017).

I address these claims with data of Kur-Urmi (Kili), an under-described Tungusic language. Earlier, it was attributed as a dialect of Nanaic (Sunik 1958). In recent papers, it is mentioned as a separate language manifesting features of two branches of Tungusic, i.e. combining the Nanaic morphosyntax with the Ewenic lexicon (see Janhunen 2024:10).

Classifications of Tungusic give controversial results for Kur-Urmi (Nanaic in Whaley & Oskolskaya 2020, Ewenic in Kazama 2003, Jurchenic in Oskolskaya et al. 2022). A problematic attribution of Kur-Urmi is discussed in Sunik (1948), Doerfer (1973, 1975, 1984), Hölzl (2017).

This paper considers:

→ Nanaic vs. Ewenic elements in the Kur-Urmi basic vocabulary. Not only presence/absence of a cognate in Nanaic vs. Ewenic, but also sound correspondences will be taken into account. The preliminary results argue for a mixed lexicon (27% shared with both Nanaic and Ewenic, 32% shared with Nanaic, 21% shared with Ewenic; 20% specific).

→ The inventory of morphological markers. Most of them are common for Nanaic and Ewenic or specific for Nanaic, but several ones are Ewenic.

→ Grammatical structures. Several domains showing a complicated picture will be discussed: negative, spatial, and comparative constructions.

The main data come from the Kur-Urmi dictionary (Sunik 1958) and corpus (2020).

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