

*Salar grammatical sketch*  
Arienne M. Dwyer

Note: this is a rough draft, slightly modified on 21.05.01

- I. Ethnonym: [salar], Ch. *sala*
- II. Population
  - a. number identified as "Salar" in the 1990 census:
  - b. approximate number of speakers:
- III. Geographical distribution in The People's Republic of China
  - a. Qinghai province: primarily Xunhua and Hualong counties
  - b. Gansu province: Jishishan county
  - c. Xinjiang Uigur Autonomous Region: Yili county
- IV. Genetic language affiliation  
(some scholars claim both Salar and Monguor belong to a common *Altaic* family)

SALAR:                      *Family:* Oguz (SW) Turkic                      *Main varieties:* Eastern,  
Western

The Salars are in origin Oguz from Central Asia (Transoxiana), who settled in their present homeland in Northern Tibet (now Qinghai) over six centuries ago; small Salar populations are found in other parts of Qinghai, neighboring Gansu, and in the Xinjiang Uigur Autonomous Region. The Turkic component of the language preserves many important Old Turkic features no longer found in the other Turkic languages of the region (Dwyer 2000); Salar remains one of the least-investigated Turkic languages. Salar has two dialects, *Eastern* (the main Salar dialect, spoken in Xunhua, Hualong, and Gansu) and *Western* (in Ili, Xinjiang); their considerable differences are due almost entirely to language contact (see below).

Ethnographic and linguistic evidence suggests that the Salars were originally part of a Turkmen Turkic clan inhabiting Central Asia near Samarkand. In the 13th century C.E., a group of these people migrated eastward along the northern branch of the "Silk Road", likely as a contingent of the Mongol army. They settled on the northeastern edge of the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau in China, intermarrying with the local Tibetan and Hui (Muslim-Chinese) population. Later, some of these Salars resettled in Xinjiang. After 700 years in such an environment, the Salars have assumed a tricultural identity: they have assimilated large portions of Tibetan and Hui culture and language while retaining their Central Asian Turkic core.

V. Multilingualism and contact languages

The significant variation between certain sub-varieties of Salar is due to the length and intensity of contact with the two dominant languages. Within Eastern Salar, Xunhua exhibits Chinese-type innovations, while Hualong county across the river shows the most Tibetan contact-induced variation. The geographically-distant Western Salar, with Uyghur and Kazakh as contact languages, is mostly unintelligible to Eastern Salar speakers.

VI. DEGREE OF ENDANGERMENT

The number of fully-fluent native speakers of both languages is decreasing rapidly. The high official population statistics (163,800 Monguor, 77,300 Salars (1996 *Qinghai Statistical Yearbook*) belie the low number of *actual* speakers: in many areas, only 30

percent of the population has an active command of the language. ( E.g. Gandu Salar Estimates based on fieldwork by Dwyer in 1992) Generational differences are particularly acute for certain areas (e.g. Xunhua): speakers over 60, particularly women, are fully fluent and competent in oral art forms and are native-language-dominant; speakers over 35 have a passable-to-fluent command of their native language, but are multilingual and have no command of oral art forms; children may grow up with one of the dominant languages as their native language.

Those areas where Salar language and folklore are best preserved are characterized by remoteness, extreme poverty, and lack of education. These include Munda and Ashnu (Eastern Salar).

The lack of native-language schooling and a writing system for Salar children makes the future of this language rather bleak.

## VII. Quick Overview

### a. Contact Languages

- Northwest Chinese: resultative complements, the copula, lexicon
- Tibetan: phonology, modal particles, lexicon
- Mongolian: lexicon
- Other Turkic languages: suprasegmentals, aspectual verbs, lexicon

### Contact-induced changes in Salar

- phonology: loss of vowel harmony; borrowed Chinese and Tibetan segments
- morphology: simplification
- syntax: Chinese and Tibetan serial verb constructions
- lexicon: Chinese, Tibetan, and Mongolic loans

### Cultural and Economic Factors

- Commerce: Lingua Francas (Chinese, Tibetan)
- Education: only available in Chinese language
- Religion: link to the Hui (Muslim-Chinese)
- Government language policy: disallows a Salar orthography

### Social Factors

- Prestige (of Chinese)
- Multilingualism
- Inter-marriage

## VIII. Research to date.

To date there exists a thin (ca. 4000-word) Salar-Chinese lexicon (Lin 1992), a grammar in Russian (Tenishev 1976), a book of texts in broad IPA and English translation (Ma, Ma, and Stuart 1993) and a phonology (Dwyer forthcoming 2000).

## IX. References.

Dwyer, Arienne M. Forthcoming 2001. *Salar: a study in Inner Asian areal contact processes, Part I: Phonology*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

- Ma Wei, Ma Jianzhong, & Kevin Stuart. 1999. *Folklore of China's Islamic Salar Nationality*. Curzon.
- Lin Lianyun. 1992. *Sala-Han Han-Sala cihui* [A Salar-Chinese, Chinese-Salar lexicon]. Chengdu: Minzu.
- Tenishev, E.R. 1976. *Stroj salarskogo jazyka*. Moskva: Nauka.