

# *Amsterdam Studies*

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## **The Truth, the Whole Truth, and nothing but the Truth**

Amsterdam Studies is a multi-lingual Internet forum for analyses on political, economic and cultural developments in Europe.

**ISSN 1873-3042**

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## **Angela Marcantonio: The origin of the Hungarian language**

**Issue #24.**

**8 January 2007**

Historically, most scholars thought that the Hungarian language was mainly connected with Turkic and Mongolian. This belief was based on clear phonological, lexical, morphological and typological correlations between the languages. The few available historical records, such as the Medieval Hungarian Chronicles, also appeared to support this connection.

In 1770 Sajnovics proposed an extension to this concept, in which Hungarian was related to a wider range of languages, extending through the Asiatic steppes to China in the East, and to Finland and Lapland in the North. He listed some words that appeared to be similar between Hungarian, Saami, Finnish, Turkic, Mongolian and Chinese.

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, under the influence of Darwin's evolutionism, there arose a dominant assumption that languages, like organisms, must be traced back to a single ancestor (rather than their being the result of a mixture of influences from different languages). A vigorous debate ensued as to the immediate single ancestor of Hungarian. In Hungary the academic debate was called the 'Ugric-Turkic battle'. It centred on whether the immediate ancestor was North European or Turkic/Mongolian. Among the leading figures, Vámbéry supported the Turkic connection whilst Budenz believed that Hungarian belonged to the "Ugric" (now called Finno-Ugric) language group, which in turn was associated with Turkic because they all belonged to the "wide Altaic family".

This linguistic debate was eventually settled by political events. The Austrian Habsburgs had played a crucial role in ousting the Ottoman Turks from Hungary at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. During the '*Ausgleich*' period (the 1860s) Hungary enjoyed full administrative autonomy within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It would have therefore been embarrassing and disruptive to claim an immediate Turkic origin for the Hungarians. In 1876, Treford Ágoston, Minister of Education, said, "We need a European connection, not an Asian one. Therefore, in the future only those who support the 'finno-magyar' connection will receive governmental aid in the form of fellowships, academic positions, etc....." (*Akadémiai Értesítő* 1923).

There followed a massive re-interpretation in the academic literature. For example, the Turkic and Chinese connections in Sajnovics' work were 'airbrushed out'. He came to be universally reported as establishing a unique relationship between Hungarian and Saami/(Finnish). Likewise the Altaic connection was not mentioned in reports of the work of Gyarmathi and Budenz. These scholars were presented instead as the founders of the 'standard' Finno-Ugric theory. This re-interpretation has unfortunately been propagated into modern work by contemporary scholars.

On a methodological level, the similarities between Hungarian and Turkic were also re-interpreted. Although there was no historical evidence for it, it was assumed there was a long period of cohabitation ('symbiosis') lasting 3 centuries between early magyar and Turkic tribes, from the 4<sup>th</sup> /5<sup>th</sup> Century AD. Thus the Turkic-Hungarian correlations could be dismissed as 'borrowing' by academics. This model however does not explain how the Hungarian language survived, instead of being assimilated by the much more numerous and powerful Turkic tribes (as typically happens in similar circumstances for minority languages).

During the period of Soviet Union's influence, the official theory continued to enjoy political support because it envisaged the origin of Hungarian in the Ural Mountains, in the centre of the Soviet Union.

In recent years, acclaimed scholars such as Janhunen have called for a professional debate about the validity of the standard Uralic theory. Some scholars (including myself) point out the lack of supporting evidence for the existence of the Finno-Ugric /Uralic protolanguages and the many items of counter-evidence to the theory. For example the evidence from archaeology, anthropology and genetics contradicts the predictions of the linguistic model. Other scholars (such as Wiik and Künnap) do not ask whether the conventionally established correlations are valid, but assume they are correct and interpret them as deriving from a Uralic *lingua franca*, that is, the interplay of a chain of languages / dialects, which Pusztay says also extends beyond the traditional Uralic area.

In consequence, a debate has now re-opened about the origin of Hungarian. There are no simple answers. Certainly, the Darwinian assumption of a single immediate ancestor appears particularly unsuited for Hungarian, where features typical of Inner Asian languages are intertwined with other features typical of the (Indo-)European languages. This 'double relationship' ("kettős rokonság", as defined by Balázs) may prove a fruitful area for future research.