

# ALTAIC STUDIES – WHAT HAS NOT BEEN COMPARED SO FAR

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## ABSTRACT

This short article presents some of the author’s reflections on what has not yet been compared in Altaic studies, a field in which quite diverse approaches to language comparison have been employed over the past two centuries. While it is generally clear what cannot be compared, or should not be used for comparison, to clarify the linguistic relationships between the Turkic, Mongolian, and Tungus languages (onomatopoeia, children’s language, taboo language forms, etc.), it seems that hardly anyone has given much thought in recent times to what else could or should be compared. The author offers three examples: commands to call or shoo away animals, kinship terminology (or more precisely: systems of kinship relationships), and verbs relating to insect behavior.

**Keywords:** Commands to call or shoo away animals, Systems of kinship terminology, Verbs relating to insect behavior

## ÖZ

Bu kısa makale, son iki yüzyıl boyunca dil karşılaştırmasına ilişkin oldukça farklı yaklaşımların benimsendiği Altayistik çalışmalarında, henüz karşılaştırılmamış olan alanlara dair yazarın bazı değerlendirmelerini sunmaktadır. Türk dilleri, Moğol dilleri ve Tunguz dilleri arasındaki dilsel ilişkileri açıklığa kavuşturmak amacıyla hangi unsurların karşılaştırılmayacağı ya da karşılaştırmada kullanılmaması gerektiği genel olarak açıktır (yansıma sözcükler, çocuk dili, tabu sözcükler vb.). Buna karşın, son dönemde başka hangi unsurların karşılaştırılabileceği ya da karşılaştırılması gerektiği üzerine neredeyse hiç düşünülmediği görülmektedir. Yazar bu bağlamda üç örnek sunmaktadır: hayvanları çağırma ya da uzaklaştırma komutları, akrabalık terminolojisi (daha doğrusu akrabalık ilişkileri sistemleri) ve böcek davranışlarıyla ilişkili eylemler.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Hayvanları çağırma ya da uzaklaştırma komutları, akrabalık terminolojisi sistemleri, böcek davranışlarıyla ilişkili eylemler

## 1. Introduction

Since linguists do not receive Nobel Prizes – at least not for achievements in their specific field of work – and do not develop groundbreaking cures for ailments and diseases or make any other discoveries or inventions that change the world or even lead to a significant improvement in people's everyday lives, the most prestigious thing they can achieve seems to be the discovery of previously unknown or undescribed languages or the identification of linguistic relationships. Since Sir William Jones' (re)discovery of the Indo-European language family at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>1</sup> the latter has fired the imagination, and over the past two and a half centuries, all possible (and impossible) languages, language groups and language families have been compared with each other for the purpose of proving some kind of relationship. The idea of an Altaic or even Ural-Altaic linguistic relationship is therefore by no means unusual, but rather part of a seemingly endless series of attempts to reap the laurels of v. Schlegel, Bopp or Pott, who proved the previously assumed relationship. What has not been compared in order to prove the relationship between the Turkic, Mongolian and Tungus languages (and perhaps other 'candidates' such as Japanese, Korean or the language of the Ryūkyū Islands)? The history of these endeavours alone could fill several volumes.

## 2. Phases of Altaic Language Comparisons – Roughly Summarized

If we consider the history and the essential developments of (Ural-) Altaic language comparisons in the broadest terms and with almost criminal neglect of any accuracy, we can distinguish between different 'phases':

1. Initially, the lexicon was compared on a rather narrow basis (many languages were not yet documented at all or only inadequately – apart from the fact that for the Turkic languages, most of the material was taken from Ottoman Turkish, for the Mongolian languages from classical Mongolian texts or Kalmyk, and for the Tungus languages from Manžū, of all places) – pure word similarity with somehow similar meanings dominated the endeavours, as undertaken, for example, by A. Boller or W. Schott.
2. With F. M. Müller, typology (already established by W. v. Humboldt) came to the fore when he popularised his 'Turanian languages', and
3. in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was primarily morphological comparisons, including so-called 'root etymology' ['Wurzel-etymologie'] (e.g. H. Winkler or W. Bang), as is still sometimes practised today in Uralic studies.

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<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking, Sir William Jones (28 September 1746 – 27 April 1794), who discovered the relationship of the Indo-European languages in 1786 (Jones [1786]), already had a whole series of predecessors, but there is no need to deal with them here.

4. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, comparative syntax (e.g. V. Pröhle or D. R. Fokos-Fuchs) initially took centre stage or was added to previous endeavours,
5. Later, the focus shifted to the postulation of larger units – for example, in the context of the Nostratic language family or other so-called ‘super-phyla’, which literally incorporated the previously claimed ‘macro-families’, and ultimately even ‘global etymologies’, etc.

In addition, the approaches from previous ‘phases’ of comparative linguistic (Ural-)Altaic research were naturally continued, while others, such as comparative phonological considerations, were naturally employed in comparative studies at all times – we find them already in the early studies of the ‘Tatar languages’ [‘Tatarische Sprachen’] or the ‘Altai or Finnish-Tatar language family’ [‘Altai’sches oder Finnisch-Tatarisches Sprachengeschlecht’] by W. Schott.

### 3. What Cannot and Should not be Compared

While the ‘methods’ and approaches – or at least the main areas of investigation – changed over time, the question naturally arose as to what could actually be compared and what could not. In his articles, G. Doerfer occasionally summarised which lexical materials are not suitable for comparative linguistic analysis and in which cases comparisons to determine relationships are downright inadmissible. Roughly speaking, he excluded the following groups of word material:

1. Cultural words [Kulturwörter];
2. onomatopoeia;
3. children’s language forms [kindersprachliche Formen; Babysprache];<sup>2</sup>
4. taboo forms ~ language taboos;
5. loanwords (or forms that can be clearly identified as such);
6. ‘language tracts’ [‘Sprachtrakte’], i.e. pre-literary language contacts;<sup>3</sup>
7. expressive and impressive words;
8. ‘pre-relational’ forms [‘vorverwandtschaftliche’ Formen], e.g. pronouns,<sup>4</sup> i.e. forms that originate from an early phase of human language development, or more precisely: a phase before the differentiation of individual languages.

Other contemporaries, such as Doerfer’s teacher K. H. Menges, who was much more ‘open’ to the study of ‘more distant linguistic relationships’ [‘entferntere Sprachverwandtschaften’] and was also convinced of the genetical relationship of the Altaic languages, made a very clear

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<sup>2</sup> Doerfer (2001), e. g. p. 193.

<sup>3</sup> Doerfer (2001), pp. 182 and 222-223.

<sup>4</sup> Doerfer (2001), p. 182, for more details, see also pp. 223 ff.

distinction between words of primordial origin and genetically related languages. Some who were (and still are) enthusiastic about comparing languages across the boundaries of ‘established language families’ more or less adhered to this distinction (or were aware of the problems involved), while several of the “enthusiasts” ignored such objections and continued their endeavours in the ‘tried and tested manner’.

More interesting than the question of what has been compared, what can be compared and what cannot be compared is the question already raised above – albeit in a rather rhetorical or polemical form – of what has not been compared so far.

#### 4. Calling and Shooing Commands

First and foremost, of course, is the complex of calling and shooing commands for animals, which has also been dealt with by the author of these lines – albeit only for individual languages and not in an overall Altaic context. Such commands have already been studied by A. v. Le Coq for the Turki language,<sup>5</sup> by the author of this article for the question of differences between formerly nomadic and sedentary peoples on the basis of Kurmancî,<sup>6</sup> and also by the same author for Tungus languages,<sup>7</sup> on the basis of materials by S. M. Shirokogorov<sup>8</sup> and B. Piłsudski.<sup>9</sup>

In lexicographical work, such commands to call and shoo away animals have been and continue to be omitted for various reasons, as the author has occasionally emphasised,<sup>10</sup> even though the Brothers Grimm had already recognised the value of these forms.<sup>11</sup> This is mainly due to the fact that we are dealing with particularly archaic forms of calling and shooing commands, which are not easily borrowed (apart from their invention in the course of the introduction of new domesticated animals) or suppressed, they naturally appear particularly suitable for comparative linguistic studies, as the author of these lines has also pointed out in the past:

This can be explained by the fact that such exclamations demonstrate a particular ‘persistence’ – they are not subject to any (or virtually no) sound changes due to linguistic history, are rarely borrowed (if at all, then only through the appearance of new domesticated or domesticable animal species – whether as a result of changes in the settlement area or through

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<sup>5</sup> v. Le Coq (1919).

<sup>6</sup> Knüppel (2017).

<sup>7</sup> Knüppel (2013).

<sup>8</sup> Here his ‘Tungus dictionary’ (Shirokogorov [1944/1953]) and its evaluation by G. Doerfer in the form of the ‘Etymologisch-Ethnologisches Wörterbuch’ (Doerfer [2004]).

<sup>9</sup> Above all, the edition of his Tungusological notes by A. F. Majewicz (2011).

<sup>10</sup> Knüppel (2013), p. 270.

<sup>11</sup> For example, in the case of the word ‘kitz!’ in: Grimm / Grimm (1984), col. 868; as the Brothers Grimm recorded commands to call and shoo away animals in general in their dictionary.

the introduction of such animals) and do not simply disappear in the course of changes caused by the transformation of material culture.<sup>12</sup>

## 5. Systems of Kinship Terminology

The systems of kinship terminology represent a completely different area for conceivable, but as yet unrealised comparisons in the field of Altaic studies. These are also of interest to us, of course, insofar as the terms can often be counted among the basic vocabulary of a language<sup>13</sup> (apart from child language forms) and thus seem to allow conclusions of any kind to be drawn.<sup>14</sup> Although we have V. I. Cincius' groundbreaking work on Altaic kinship terminology,<sup>15</sup> this work focuses on the lexic itself and not on the comparison of the various systems of kinship terminology. The author of this article also addressed this issue several years ago.<sup>16</sup>

But first, a few brief fundamental remarks on the kinship terminology systems that have already been mentioned several times. It was recognised early on that the possible combinations of kinship terminologies are comparatively limited and that, precisely because of these limitations, a number of types can be identified that we encounter again and again. Attempts to classify these types under specific systems have been made since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, apart from early endeavours in this direction, such as those of J. F. Lafiteau.<sup>17</sup> Of course, L. H. Morgan should be mentioned here first, who divided the systems into 'descriptive' and 'classificatory'.<sup>18</sup>

Although these endeavours were, of course, 'children of evolutionism', the approach found its continuation in later ethnology, such as the various models of classification found in R. Lowie<sup>19</sup> and G. P. Murdock, which ultimately formed the basis for the classifications based on ideal-typical systems still used today for description. In Murdock, we finally find the well-known classification comprising six basic types. In the following lines, the author of this article follows the explanations in his own article from 2014:

Strictly speaking, Murdock's classification was based on P. Kirchhoff's 'core group' ['Kerngruppe'], i.e. a classification comprising two

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<sup>12</sup> Knüppel (2013), p. 273: "Dies erklärt sich daraus, daß solche Rufe ein besonderes 'Beharrungsvermögen' zeigen – sie unterliegen keinem (oder so gut wie keinem) resp. kaum nachweisbarem sprachgeschichtlich bedingten Lautwandel, werden höchst selten entlehnt (allenfalls durch das Auftreten neuer domestizierter oder domestizierbarer Tierarten – sei es infolge von Änderungen des Siedlungsraumes oder durch Einführung solcher Tiere) und verschwinden nicht einfach im Zuge von Änderungen, die durch den Wandel der materiellen Kultur bedingt sind".

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Gulya (1983).

<sup>14</sup> The fact that kinship terms are also borrowed is usually not taken into account; cf. for example the remarks made by N. Poppe and, earlier, by E. Sapir (Poppe [1974], p. 124; Sapir [1920], p. 269 and [1921]).

<sup>15</sup> Cincius (1972).

<sup>16</sup> Knüppel (2014).

<sup>17</sup> Here his remarks on the kinship system of the Iroquois compared to those in Europe (Lafiteau [1724]).

<sup>18</sup> Morgan's work on the Iroquois marked the beginning of various descriptions of kinship systems and the examination of the terms used to describe them (Morgan [1851]).

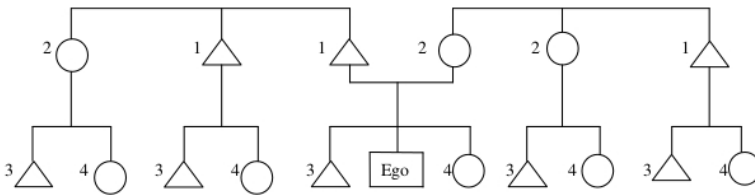
<sup>19</sup> Lowie (1928).

generations (1. parent generation and 2. ego generation [see below]).<sup>20</sup> It also included Lowie's system of naming schemes for the parent generation, which distinguished between four schemes: 1. linear system, 2. generational system, 3. bifurcated fusion system, and 4. bifurcated collateral system. All four types have in common that the relatives of the different generations are distinguished terminologically. Murdock took up Lowie's model, but further differentiated the bifurcated fusion system and named the different systems after societies in which they are found or in whose languages they are found. Murdock's designations are still used today for the basic types of kinship typology. Murdock's models are summarised below:<sup>21</sup>

### 5.1 Hawai'i system (simplified; male ego)

This is based on Lowie's generational scheme, i.e. all relatives of a generation – distinguished only by gender – are referred to by the same term. The emphasis here is on differentiation within the extended family, as no distinction is made between linearity and collaterality. The Hawai'i system is particularly common among Polynesian ethnic groups and in their languages (but also in Annamitic, for example).

Hawaii-System (vereinfacht, Ego männl.):



**Figure 1.** Hawai'i system (simplified; male ego)

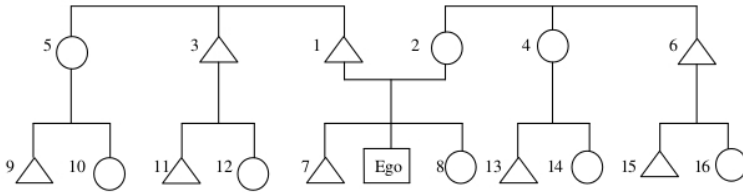
### 5.2 Sudanese system

Here, both the gender principle and the bifurcated collateral system are reflected, i.e. both the members of the core group and the parallel and cross relatives are designated differently on the patrilineal and matrilineal sides. This system was first described on the basis of South Sudanese findings. In contrast to the Hawai'i system, the Sudanese system shows the most far-reaching terminological differentiation.

<sup>20</sup> Kirchoff (1932).

<sup>21</sup> See Murdock (1949) and (1970) for details.

Sudan-System:

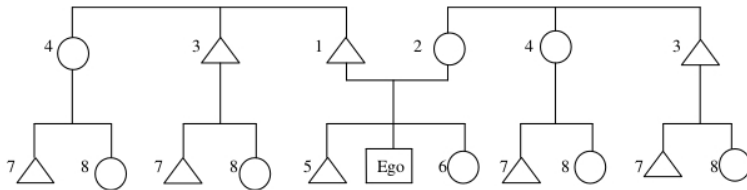


**Figure 2.** Sudan system

### 5.3 Eskimo system

In this system, a distinction is made primarily in terms of terminology between the core family and the extended family, i.e. the principle of kinship lines applies, whereby no distinction is made in terminology between parallel and cross kinship. This system is also found in Basque, for example.

Eskimo-System:

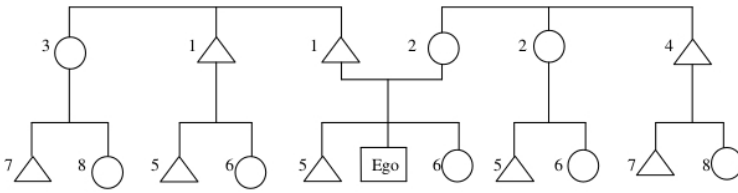


**Figure 3.** Eskimo system

### 5.4 Iroquois system

In this system, the only distinction made in terms of terminology is between gender and generation. The terms for the core group merge with those for parallel relatives, i.e. it corresponds to Lowie's scheme 3 (furcated fusion system).

Irokesen-System:

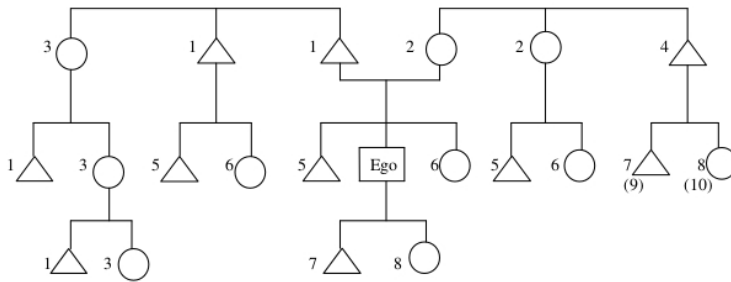


**Figure 4.** Iroquois system

### 5.5 Crow system (simplified; male ego)

In this system, which also corresponds to Lowie’s scheme 3, descent takes precedence over the generational principle. Here, the terms used for parallel cousins correspond terminologically to those used for siblings, but a distinction is made between patrilineal and matrilineal cross cousins.

Crow-System (vereinfacht, Ego männl.):

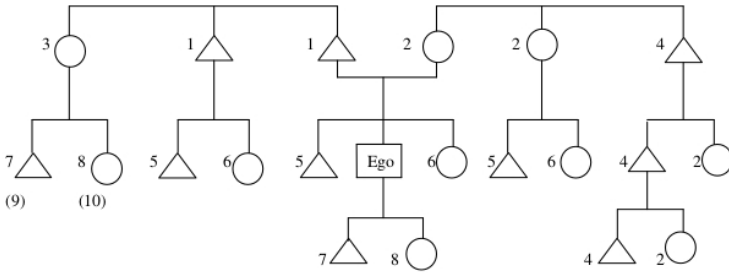


**Figure 4.** Crow system (simplified; male ego)

### 5.6 Omaha system (simplified; ego female)

As with the Crow system, the Omaha system is also a variant of Lowie’s scheme 3, i.e. here too, descent takes precedence over the generational principle. The Omaha system is, so to speak, the patrilineal counterpart to the Crow system.

Omaha-System (vereinfacht; Ego weiblich):



**Figure 5.** Omaha system (simplified; ego female)

Of course, it quickly becomes clear that the conditions in the Turkic, Mongolian or Tungus linguistic world do not necessarily follow any of these ideal models, and the usability of the expected data for answering the so-called ‘Altaic question’ is limited insofar as the affiliation to certain types and systems within classifications and typologies can change over the course of centuries or millennia (just think of the possibility of a change in the typological status of a language, e.g. Northern Tažik, which was already in the process of transitioning from an inflecting language to a suffix-agglutinating one [a process that was only reversed by language policy in the Soviet Union]). But even knowledge of such possible changes was already a gain. Of course, it must also be taken into account that not all languages in a group of languages or a language family necessarily belong to the same typological system (for example, the typological affiliation of West Greenlandic differs from that of the other Eskimo-Aleut languages, which belong to the Eskimo system [see above]). Nevertheless, it should be clear that while the borrowing of individual kinship terms is conceivable, the borrowing of a complete kinship terminology system is not – and here it is important to compare these systems with each other (if necessary, also on the basis of reconstructions of earlier states), not the less meaningful terminology.

## 6. Verbs Relation to the Behaviour of Insects

A third complex of previously uncomparable terms is the use of verbs from the field of zoology. This does not refer to the obvious terms found in every dictionary and known to every child – the horse *neighs* and *trots* or *gallops*, the cow *moos*, the dog *barks* and *wags* its tail ... – but rather those that do not appear to be listed anywhere and are not related to domesticated animals (which, in case of doubt, are also ‘cultural words’), but rather to animals that are predominantly native to almost all of Eurasia and have always been part of the natural environment of humans in the

region in question. Insects in particular seem to be particularly suitable for this purpose – for example, the *chirping* or *singing* of crickets and cicadas, the *buzzing* of mosquitoes or even the *tapping* of certain beetle larvae.

The author of these lines has occasionally dealt with such terms relating to insects from various Turkic languages in a series of articles.<sup>22</sup> Of course, corresponding studies can also be conducted beyond the boundaries of this language family on the basis of Mongolian and Tungus findings. However, when it comes to possible Altaic relations, one must not make the mistake of focusing on any similarities between words. Rather, it would be necessary to determine whether, for example, all Altaic languages originally distinguished between the *biting* and *stinging* of such insects, which have corresponding ‘mouthparts’ or stingers, or whether the distinction is made for larger animals but not for smaller ones, or whether corresponding ‘patterns’ can be found consistently in the languages of the three language families or not.

This is not about etymological playings (as we see in their most extreme form among various ‘long rangers’ – Matisoff spoke in this context of ‘megalocomparison’,<sup>23</sup> Doerfer of ‘omnicomparatism’<sup>24</sup>), but about comparing structures that need to be uncovered and defined more precisely. In essence, we are of course dealing here with something completely different from what Ernst Lewy once mockingly remarked with regard to attempts to determine ‘more distant linguistic relationships’: ‘Give me two dictionaries and I will prove to you that the languages are related!’ [‘Geben Sie mir zwei Wörterbücher und ich beweise Ihnen, daß die Sprachen miteinander verwandt sind!’]<sup>25</sup> As with the comparative study of kinship systems, it is a matter of comparing structures, not words!

## 7. Conclusions

With a little creativity and serious effort, there are certainly many more areas that could be brought into play for one reason or another. What has not been compared is perhaps even more interesting than what has already been compared. On the one hand, because it is tiring to keep doing the same exercises over and over again – especially when nothing fundamentally new emerges (except perhaps the addition of ever new ‘empirical findings’ for or against the assumption of an Altaic language relationship) – and on the other hand, because this also raises the question of why completely different areas were not included in the considerations. Now, the previous proponents of conflicting views should not be accused of a lack of creativity at this point – some of them may even have been ‘blessed’

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<sup>22</sup> Knüppel (2025), (–a) and (–b).

<sup>23</sup> Matisoff (1990).

<sup>24</sup> Doerfer (1973).

<sup>25</sup> Personal communication from G. Doerfer (Göttingen); Lewy had explained this while speaking to an audience (including G. Doerfer) in one of the offices in Berlin, standing in front of a bookshelf. In somewhat simplified form, the quote can also be found in Doerfer, e.g. in Doerfer (2001), p. 183: “Gib mir zwei Sprachen, und ich beweise dir, daß sie verwandt sind”.

with a little too much imagination – but dogmatism has never led to truly new insights in science, as is well known. In other words, it is high time to change our perspective again or – to stick with the image given above – to move on to the next ‘phase’ of Altaic research, to open a new chapter.

Given the space available here, it is not possible to explore any of the proposed areas of investigation, let alone exhaustively. That would require a completely different scope. But perhaps one or two colleagues will be inspired by these lines, which are purely programmatic in nature (some may simply regard them as polemical nonsense), to undertake corresponding projects – and who knows what the possible outcome might be? One should always bear in mind that no one really gains anything if it is proven that the Altaic languages are related to each other in the sense of a genetic relationship, and no one loses anything if the opposite is irrefutably established. As I said at the beginning, no one will receive the Nobel Prize for this, be canonised by the church, or be remembered by humanity as a new Alexander Flemming, Louis Pasteur, Paul Ehrlich or Robert Koch!

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