

Manchu dialect diversity and its implications for Tungusic reconstruction

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In the standard reconstructions (e.g., Benzing 1955), Written Manchu (WM) is treated as a representative of a wider set of closely related dialects or languages including Jurchen and Sibe. On the basis of uniquely shared innovations across all grammatical domains (phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon, etc.), this set is uncontroversially recognized as a genealogical clade within Tungusic, called “Jurchenic” (Janhunen 2012) or some equivalent name.

So far, however, relatively little work has investigated the full range of documented diversity within Jurchenic, to illuminate the history either of this lower clade or of Tungusic generally. Once such data is taken into account, it is clear that WM has diverged from its proto-Jurchenic ancestor in significant ways. Thus, to take a familiar phonological example, Benzing’s rule of pTg *p- > Manchu f- is clearly a misleading oversimplification: some Jurchenic varieties preserve p-, indicating that proto-Jurchenic originally retained *p- (along the lines of Nanaic). In this paper, I examine several similar cases of phonological differences between proto-Jurchenic and WM, and discuss their consequences for wider Tungusic taxonomy.