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The Role of Rivers in Language, Culture, and Identity of Tungusic Peoples

Tungusic peoples live in Siberia and northern China, a region well known for its large streams. Rivers are not only connected to a series of practices such as fishing and the building of birch bark canoes but also function as some kind of reference-point for both orientation and identity. This finds a linguistic expression in directional terms, many stories, and tribal names. Some aspects of cognitive linguistics and ecological psychology will be adopted to describe the underlying mechanisms.

“Meaning is the outcome of our situated interactions with the world.”¹

“Water, in short, has many kinds of meaning.”²

This paper elaborates on earlier work³ and briefly explores the importance of rivers in language, traditional culture and identity of Tungusic peoples, especially the Manchu and their forerunners, the Jurchen. The **Tungusic** language family may roughly be classified into four branches, Ewenic (e.g., Evenki, Solon), Udegheic (e.g., Udihe), Nanaic (e.g., Nanai, Ulcha), and Jurchenic (e.g., 'Jurchen, Manchu).⁴ The geographical setting is Siberia and northeastern China, a region well known for its large streams. Historical evidence indicates that Tungusic peoples have lived along the rivers of Manchuria for a very long time. The Korean Sin Chung-il, who was sent to the Jurchen leader

1 Gallese 2008, p. 322.

2 Gibson 1979/86, p. 38.

3 Hölzl 2012, also cf. Lavrillier 2006.

4 Janhunen 2012.

Nurhaci living north of the Liaoning peninsula in 1595 “found Jurchen society to be organized into villages, usually of twenty households or less, most of them clustered along the forested riverbanks”.⁵ Several hundred years later, Tungusic peoples such as the Udihe still had a similar lifestyle and “lived in small riverside hamlets which were like small patches floating on the sea of forest.”⁶ Much earlier, the history of the Jurchen Jin dynasty (1115–1234) already tells us that the “uncivilized Jurchen” lived along the river Hüntung,⁷ which seems to refer to the upper reaches of the Sungari.⁸

Evidence for the dominant role of rivers can not only be found in practices such as fishing, the building of birch bark canoes, the fabrication of clothes out of fish skin (Nanai), or the migration along rivers, but also in many stories and in spiritual regards. The Udihe, for instance, have deities of river, water, and fish.⁹ In the Manchu tale of the Nišan Shamaness, she travels into the underworld and has to cross several rivers that serve as a “demarcation between ordinary and extraordinary realms”.¹⁰ Among the Evenki rivers are considered to be a dividing line between life and death, as well.¹¹ Alternatively, there may be demarcations along the course of a river. The Udihe have a riverside shrine at the river Bikin that marks the transit from a humanized to a wild zone.¹² There is also a boundary between human settlements along the rivers and the surrounding forest marked by sacred trees.¹³ Another example is the Manchu origin myth, in which the ancestor of

5 Crossley 1997, pp. 40 f.

6 Sasaki 2011, p. 267.

7 AGS 13.

8 Cf. Hölzl 2012, p. 85. The following sentence equates the Hüntung with the Heilongjiang (Chin. ‘black dragon stream’), however, which nowadays designates the Amur. This could be explained by the fact that for the Manchu the Sungari was the main river and the name Heilongjiang may have later shifted to denote the Amur (Ma. *sahaliyan ula* ‘black stream’).

9 Sasaki 2011, pp. 265 f.

10 Nowak & Durrant 1977, p. 110.

11 Lavrillier 2006, p. 17.

12 Sasaki 2011, p. 273.

13 Ibid., cf. Lavrillier 2006, p. 6.

„La rivière est elle aussi considérée comme lien symbolique entre la vie et la mort.“ (Lavrillier 2006: 17)

the Manchu is conceived and born next to a lake on a mountain and subsequently travels down on the Hüntung, one of three rivers that originate there.¹⁴

The end of the 20th century saw what is often called the ‘spatial turn’, but the focus on space is problematic. What is of importance for human beings and, therefore, for the description of “space in language”, is not a physical conception of space but rather the ecological level of perception and action that “is better described in terms of a *medium*, *substances*, and the *surfaces* that separate them.”¹⁵ As far as rivers are concerned, we are mainly interested in water and the surrounding ground. But while water is a medium for a fish, it is mostly a substance for a human being.

The margin between land and water stops the pedestrian. But animals can wade if the water is shallow, float if their specific gravity is not too high, or skitter over the surface if they are insects. Some terrestrial animals can swim on the surface of water, as the human animal can after a fashion, and dive under the surface for a short time. But water does not afford respiration to terrestrial animals with lungs, and they are always in danger of drowning. Considered as a substance instead of a surface or a medium, water is a necessity for terrestrial life, not a danger.¹⁶

These so-called **affordances**, simply put, are possibilities of action. Depending on its size, form, and the surrounding vegetation, a river may afford humans walking along, crossing, swimming, or wading through. As opposed to a lake, a river also possesses a current (Ma. *eyen*) that affords travelling on a birch bark canoe, for instance (Ma. *alan weihu*). For fishing or getting drinking water, a hole has to be dug into the ice in winter (Ma. *šuyen*). Consequently, what is of interest are facts about the human-environment interface such as in Evenki *kellokon* ‘a river one can ski on’,¹⁷ and not a physical description of the amount of water or the like.

14 MYK 1–2.

15 Gibson 1979/1986, p. 16, cf. p. 21 and ch. 8.

16 Ibid., p. 38.

17 Sirina 2006, p. 82.



A Nanai bear hunter around 1895.¹⁸

One result from a relatively new field of research called ‘**language and landscape**’ (or ‘landscape in language’) is that there are very few (if any) linguistic universals involved.¹⁹ One obvious reason may be the fact that landscapes are very different from one another. Furthermore, landscapes are not necessarily part of the ecological level. We never see a river in its entirety and we have many ways of interacting with rivers. It is not surprising, therefore, that “[t]erms glossed as ‘river’ differ considerably as to what they denote.”²⁰ Manchu, for instance, has a distinction based on size, *birgan* < *bira* < *ula/gyiyang* (Chin. *jiang* 江) and Evenki has a huge amount of vocabulary referring to special kinds and parts of rivers, e.g. *kholokit* ‘a river for travelling upstream’.²¹ Additionally, there may also be metaphors involved. In English we find expressions such as *arm of a river* or *river mouth* and in Manchu there is the word *gargan* ‘branch > tributary’. Another possibility is to use the river domain as a source domain of a metaphor. Similar to Mandarin,

18 Haase & Richartz 1989, p. 39.

19 Cf. Mark et al. 2011 for an overview.

20 Burenhult & Levinson 2008, p. 141.

21 Sirina 2006, pp. 80 f.

Manchu maps the river domain onto the starry sky (*sunggari* ‘a river > Milky Way’, *eye.re usiha* ‘flowing star > meteor’). Some languages may employ a metonymy such as in German *Gewässer* (cf. *Wasser* ‘water’), which is a generic term denoting all kinds of rivers or lakes (cf. Ma. *muke* ‘water > river’).

Rivers are also connected to cultural identity. Not only an individual person may present himself in relation to rivers among the Evenki,²² but also many tribal and dynastic names are derived from rivers. In Udihe, *maymu* denotes both a river (the Amur) and the Nanai (living on the lower Amur).²³ The Ulcha were once called *Mangun*, too. Etymologically, these lexemes seem to correspond exactly to the name *Manchu* that first may have denoted the Sungari and then the people living alongside it. Note the ‘three drops of water’ 𐰆 in the Chinese characters for both Manchu 满洲 and their dynasty (Qing 清 1636/1644–1911).²⁴ The ‘Blackwater’ Mohe, probably forerunners of the Jurchen, seem to have taken their name from the Sungari or Amur as well. Further examples include the Jurchen Jin dynasty (金, from a river named ‘Golden’) or Manchu tribes such as the Sahaliyan (Ma. ‘black’), the Usuri (cf. the Ussuri), the Hunehe (cf. the Hun river), the Yehe (cf. the Yehe), the Ula (Ma. *ula* ‘stream’), the Muren (Mongolian for ‘river’), or the Hûrha (Ma. *hûrha* ‘fishing net’).²⁵ The Solon may have taken their name from the word *solo-* ‘going upstream’. For the 12th and 13th century we have at hand names of sociomilitary groups of the Jurchen in Chinese transcription that are often named after rivers 必剌 (*bila*, Ma. *bira*) or lakes 斡/窩母 (*womu*, Ma. *omo*).²⁶ Interestingly, native Evenki maps drawn on birch bark around the beginning of the 20th century showed rivers, lakes, and settlements in

22 Lavrillier 2006, p. 10.

23 Nikolaeva & Tolskaya 2001.

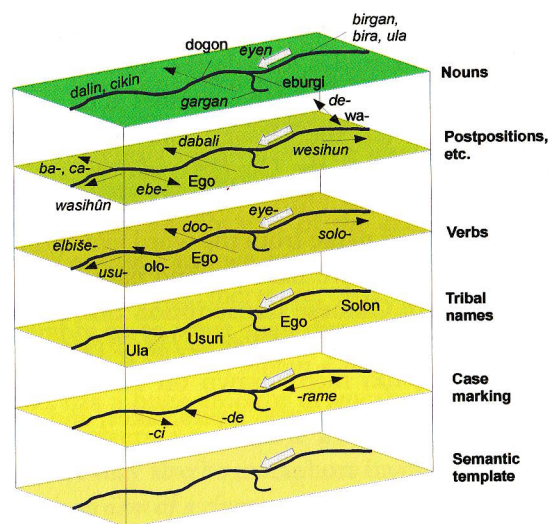
24 The names of the Chinese Han 汉 and Kitan Liao 辽 dynasties are also derived from rivers.

25 Benzing 1955, pp. 12 f., Norman 2003, p. 484, Franke 1990, p. 414, Hauer 2007.

26 Franke 2000, p. 140.

relation to tributaries, exclusively.²⁷ In Evenki there is also a specialized suffix that forms tribal names such as *tugur-chen* (cf. the river Tugur).²⁸

All these examples may be explained by (1) cognitive reference points, and (2) a shift in profile (a metonymy). Both phenomena are special kinds of focusing of attention. So-called **reference-point** reasoning is “the ability to invoke the conception of one entity for purposes of establishing mental contact with another, i.e., to single it out for individual conscious awareness”.²⁹ For identifying a tribe, the river on which they live may be evoked as a reference point. The **profile** (often indicated with boldface) is what a term designates and is a focused subpart of the whole concept. The word *riverbank* (Ma. *dalin, cikin*) focuses on the land next to a river but evokes the river as background. The profile may also shift from the reference point (river) to the target (tribe).



The Manchu river template.³⁰

27 Harrison 2007, ch. 4.

28 Cf. Hölzl 2012, p. 84.

29 Langacker 1993, p. 5, cf. Langacker 2008, pp. 66 ff.

30 Based on Hölzl 2012, p. 81, cf. Lavrillier 2006, p. 13 and Hauer 2007.

Another model from cognitive linguistics, introduced mainly for the study of language and landscape, is called **semplate**, “a configuration consisting of distinct sets or layers of lexemes, drawn from different semantic subdomains or different word classes, mapped onto the same abstract semantic template.”³¹ A theory that may be capable of bringing together this and many other phenomena mentioned thus far is the theory of **domains**.³² While a metaphor is a mapping from one to another cognitive domain, a semplate is similar to a metonymy in evoking one domain only. Metonymies take one part of a domain to denote another. In semplates, on the other hand, there is only one domain that has several expressions. In Manchu there is specialized vocabulary such as *elbiše-* ‘to swim in a river’ or *olo-* ‘to wade (through a stream)’. The most important orientation system in Tungusic languages also depends on rivers. Some of the relevant expressions may even be traced back to Proto-Tungusic about 2000 years ago, cf. Ma. *de-* ‘upwards (away from the river) > east/west’, *ba-* ‘on the opposite side (of the river)’, *usu-* ‘to go downriver’, *solo-* ‘to go upriver’, or *doo-* ‘to cross a river’.³³ The system consists of a river (flowing in one direction) and a vantage point (the ego) in relation to it. Note that this is a topological system in which the exact distance and the form and size of the river are of no importance. Some stems such as *ca-* ‘on the opposite side (of the river)’ are irregular or only partially productive (e.g., *ca.rgi*, *ca.la*). This may reflect the fact that rivers lost most of their importance for those Manchu who, after the conquest of China in the 17th century, left their home and lifestyle in Manchuria.

In sum, while the data offered was enough to point out the importance of rivers within language and traditional culture of Tungusic peoples, a detailed analysis in large parts is still missing. Besides adding a little piece to the picture, the paper made a proposal of integrating some concepts of ecological psychology into linguistic research. While new advances such as the theory of ‘semplates’ ease the description of ‘landscape and language’, cognitive linguistics still

31 Levinson & Burenhult 2009, p. 154, cf. Hauer 2007.

32 Langacker 2008, pp. 44–54.

33 Benzing 1955, pp. 96 ff., Janhunen 2012, cf. Shirokogoroff 1928, Nikolaeva & Tolskaya 2001, p. 368, Lavrillier 2006, p. 13.

could learn much from James J. Gibson who had extensive experience in "scrambling through the underbrush".³⁴

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³⁴ Gibson 1979/1986, p. xiv.

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