Gisun-i kooli: A Manchu Essay on Phonology

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A number of texts were written in the Qing for the purpose of teaching the Manchu language. One of these texts is titled *Manju nikan fe gisun be jofoho acabuha bithe* (Chinese *Mǎn Hàn chéngyǔ duìdài* 滿漢成語對待), roughly translated as “Interlinear text in the original languages of the Manchus and Chinese.” The Harvard Yenching library has two copies of this text, a manuscript copy in four fascicles (call number TMA 5806.09 5022), and a print copy in eight fascicles (call number TMA 5806.09 5021). Of these two, the manuscript copy has fewer errors, but otherwise they appear to be identical. I was unable to find a date on either of the copies in the Yenching, but a date of 1702 for this text is given in Takekoshi (2006:22).

The main body of this work consists of interlinear dialogues in Manchu and Chinese, but perhaps its most interesting feature is a section at the beginning of the first fascicle, titled *Gisun-i kooli*, “Rules of Speech,” which appears only in Manchu, with no Chinese translation. One small passage from the *Gisun-i kooli*, discussing the difference between the back and front *k* sounds, is translated in Schmidt (1932:581), and Schmidt’s translation is quoted by Ligeti (1952:248). To the best of my knowledge, however, the entire essay has not been presented in full, and I believe it deserves to be. Though many of the technical terms are obscure, this essay is important not only as an original Manchu linguistic treatise, but also because it provides us with some detailed information on 18th century Manchu phonology.

I present the text of the *Gisun-i kooli* in transliteration below, with my own attempt at a literal translation into English, followed by a discussion of points that I feel are of interest. The text begins with a brief declaration of a variety of places and manners of articulation, followed by some specific descriptions of pronunciation for a few syllables, and concluding with a system of supplementary diacritics that the student can use as reminders of the correct pronunciation of words.

Gisun-i kooli

Rules of Speech

*Manjurara de, mudan-i ujen weihuken
bisire, jergi ilhi be facuhūarakū, urgen
giyan-i meni meni wajici acara bade
wajibuci, terei tob be teni ufarakū ombi.*

In speaking Manchu, one will be unerringly correct only if one does not confuse the system of heavy and light sounds, and one pronounces them with the correct lengths, and in the places that are appropriate for their pronunciation.

Hergen mudan bilha de wajirengge bi,

There are syllables whose sounds are

heheri de wajirengge bi, weihe de wajirengge bi, kamnifi anggai dolo wajirengge bi, neifi angga tule wajirengge bi, oforo dolo wajirengge bi, ilenggu-i da de wajirengge bi, ilenggu dubede wajirengge bi.

pronounced in the throat, those that are pronounced at the palate, those that are pronounced at the teeth, those that are pronounced in the closed mouth, those that are pronounced outside the open mouth, those that are pronounced in the nose, those that are pronounced with the base of the tongue, those that are pronounced with the middle of the tongue, and those that are pronounced with the tip of the tongue.

sundalahai jibsibume hū dun-i hahilaci acara babi, ujen be weihuken-i gisureci acara babi, weihuken be cira saifi gisureci acara babi.

There are places where it is appropriate to hurry, folding up while riding double. There are places where it is appropriate to speak heavy sounds as light, and places where it is appropriate to bite light sounds strictly when speaking them.

Duibuleci, kū ka sere juwe hergen, mudan-i urgen ujen, bilha de wajirengge. Hergen mudan be weihuken i gamame gisureci, terei tob be teni bahaci ombi. Heheri de guribuḟi cira gisureci ku k'a ombi. Gi ki sere juwe hergen, mudan-i urgen ilenggu-i beye, heheri de wajirengge. Ilenggu dubede obuḟi weihe de beneci ji ci ombi.

For example, consider the syllables *kū* and *ka*, which are heavy in length and pronounced in the throat. If you speak the sounds lightly, only then can you get them right. If you move them to the palate and pronounce them strictly, then they become *ku* and *k'a*. The length of the syllables *gi* and *ki* is the middle of the tongue, and they are formed on the palate. If one makes them with the tip of the tongue, carried to the teeth, then they become *ji* and *ci*.

Ba guribuhede hergen mudan uttu tašarabume ofi, tuttu behe be jijume, temgetuleḟi, terei gisurere giyan be tob bahabumbi.

If one changes their places, and so gets the sounds of the syllables mixed up, then by marking them up with an ink-stick as follows, one can get the manner of pronouncing them exactly right.

└ uttu wesihun mudakiyame jijuci hergen-i mudan den ofi, oforo heheri de wajimbi.

└ If one makes this mark that is bent upwards, the sound of the syllable is high, pronounced on the palate or in the nose.

┐ uttu fusihūn tataci, hergen-i mudan ujen ofi, bilha ilenggu da de wajimbi.

┐ If pulled downward like this, the sound of the syllable is heavy, pronounced in the throat or at the base of the tongue.

— uttu hetu jijuci, hergen-i mudan necin-i wajimbi.

— If one draws horizontally like this, the sound of the syllable is pronounced flatly.

△ *uttu šulihūn kūwaraci, hergen-i mudan
be sundalahai jibsibufi hūdun-i hahilambi.*

△ If one makes a pointed enclosed shape like this, the sound of the syllable is hurried, folded up while riding double.

○ *uttu muheliyen i kūwaraci, hergen-i
mudan be sirame faidafti elhei neigenjembi.*

○ If one makes a round enclosed shape like this, the sound of the syllable is pronounced evenly and uniformly in order.

*Aika ere songkoi jijun temgetu be tuwame
jurcerakū tacime gisureci, tumen hacin
emu šošombi.*

If, following this, one looks at the marks and symbols, and studies them and practices pronouncing them without fail, the ten thousand varieties are brought together as one.

Some of the technical terms used in this passage are not too difficult to decipher. The tongue is divided into three parts, according to which part of the tongue makes contact with the top of the mouth. This seems to be what is meant by the term *urgen*, “length,” perhaps referring to how far the tongue is extended, or how far along the tongue is the point of contact. These three parts are the base (*ilenggu-i da*), the “body” or middle (*ilenggu-i beye*), and the tip (*ilenggu dube*). We are also given three fairly transparent places of articulation, the uvula (*bilha*, literally “throat”), the palate (*heheri*), and the teeth (*weihe*). Likewise, we have three manners of articulation: stops, continuants, and nasals, produced in the closed mouth, open mouth, or in the nose.

Four series of stops are discussed explicitly, and they are four interesting series. It is commonly noted that the back *k* should be a uvular /q/, and this is clear from the description of the back *k* as being formed in the throat with the base of the tongue. The front *k*, however, has two allophones. In the syllables *ku* and *k’a*, it is formed with the base of the tongue on the palate, while in the syllables *ki* and *gi*, it is formed with the body of the tongue on the palate. From this, it seems as though the front *k* and *g* ordinarily represent the velars /k/ and /g/, but these velars become palatalized before *i*, so [kji] and [gji].

The palatalization that occurs here, however, is not the kind of palatalization usually associated with northern dialects of Mandarin. Whereas Chinese palatalization involves the merging of the “guttural” and “sibilant” series of consonants, the palatalized allophones of Manchu *k* and *g* do not become identical to *c* and *j*, since the latter sounds are formed with the tip of the tongue at the teeth, rather than the body of the tongue on the palate. A second Manchu textbook, the *Qīngwén qǐméng* (清文啓蒙), refers to the palatalized velars as a special class of sounds called *yǎozì* (咬字), “bitten characters,” saying that they are to be pronounced “with the root of the tongue up and the tip of the tongue down” (咬字者。舌尖下貼。舌根上貼也。). In other words, they are laminal consonants, and not apical ones.

There is an interesting similarity between the term “bitten character” in the *Qīngwén qǐméng*, and the statement that “there are places where it is appropriate to bite light sounds off strictly when speaking them.” If we understand “biting” (*saimbi*) to refer

to palatalization, then this could indicate a continuity in linguistic terminology over the three decades between the publication of the *Gisun-i kooli* and the *Qīngwén qīméng*. It would be interesting if other sources could be identified that used the same kinds of terms.

Western European authors writing in the 17th and 18th centuries make no special remarks on the pronunciation of *k* and *g* before *i*, but those writing in the 19th century often hold that these consonants were pronounced identically to *c* and *j* in this environment, usually as *ts* and *dz*, respectively (e.g. Gabelentz, 1832:18; Harlez, 1884:15; Möllendorff, 1892:1). This latter description is impossible to reconcile both with the distinctions made in the *Gisun-i kooli* and with the description given in the *Qīngwén qīméng*. Since the merging of *ki* and *gi* with *ci* and *ji* makes its appearance in the literature only after Manchu has become moribund in the capital, it seems more likely that Europeans (other than Russians) writing in the 19th century learned Manchu through the medium of Chinese, thereby losing the distinction between these two series of consonants.

Aside from places and manners of articulation for the consonants, the *Gisun-i kooli* also mentions a few terms that seem to relate to prosody. The phrase *sundalahai jibsime hūdun-i hahilambi* is used twice, though its precise meaning is difficult to unpack. It certainly refers to some kind of rapid pronunciation (*hūdun-i hahilambi*), and also seems to refer to some kind of doubling-up. The verb *jibsimbi* means “to lie in layers or folds,” and *sundalambi* either means “to ride double on a horse” or “to give hot pursuit.” According to the system of diacritical marks outlined in the second half of the *Gisun-i kooli*, syllables pronounced like this are to be marked with a triangle. This is reminiscent, to me, of the phenomenon described by Verbiest (1696:6-7), where certain syllables are pronounced so quickly that the vowel is almost inaudible, or becomes entirely absorbed. Among his examples we find words like *tofohon* and *esukiyeme*, which are pronounced *tofhon* and *eskieme*. This method of pronunciation is rapid, since the vowel is shortened or disappears, and involves the doubling up of the consonants on either side of the vowel. These syllables, he says, are marked with a *V* in his Latin-Manchu lexicon.

If the rapid, doubled-up syllables described by the *Gisun-i kooli* are the same as the rapid syllables described by Verbiest, then the graphical similarity between the *V* that Verbiest uses to mark these sounds, and the triangle suggested by the *Gisun-i kooli*, raises an interesting question. We know that there were other Manchu scientific works that were actually written by the Jesuits, such as the anatomical handbook translated into Manchu by Parrenin, and the Manchu translation of Euclid that was begun by Verbiest. Is it possible that this short essay was actually written by a Jesuit scholar?

As intriguing as this possibility is, there is little more evidence to support it. The Jesuit phonological descriptions that I have read almost always try to explain sounds by mentioning a similar sound in a language known to the reader. Had a Jesuit written the *Gisun-i kooli*, we might expect him to compare the sounds in Manchu to those in Chinese. Instead, the author has taken an entirely different approach, describing places and manners of articulation in a very detailed way, unlike any Jesuit work I’ve seen. Moreover, the use of the equestrian metaphor, “riding double,” imparts a distinctly Manchu flavor to this terminology.

The value of the *Gisun-i kooli* would be enhanced if we could find a text that has been annotated with the system of diacritical marks that it describes, providing a broader context for our understanding of the terminology in use here. Still, even without that, this is an informative little essay, and as a native Manchu linguistic work it gives us an insight into how the Manchus understood the sounds of their own language.

Primary Sources

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