Hide-bound Linguistics? Hungarian (< Lir Turkic) hitvány

Saklı Dilbilim? Macarca (< Lir Türkçesi) **hitvány**

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Abstract

The origin of this word was correctly identified by the great scholar Professor András Róna-Tas as Turkic ***kat-gan**, but he himself rejected the idea. His reasoning is that the Hungarian form would involve at least two rare sound correspondences. In reality it involves three such correspondences. Is this a reason to reject the etymology? The purpose of this article is to show both that the etymology is correct, and that Róna-Tas's reasoning is against it is a serious mistake. The relatively rare correspondences simply reflect the age of the borrowing: it is evidently more recent than the majority of the Hungarian words borrowed from Lir Turkic. While scientists usually employ invalid such reasoning to justify rejecting the ideas of others, it has been shown before that sometimes they do it to their own ideas (typically their own best, most daring ideas). The article briefly discusses a second such example too, involving the etymology of an Albanian word by Eric P. Hamp (another world-famous scholar). I argue that this kind of self-abnegation is not only a serious intellectual mistake but a political and sociological phenomenon. It serves to slow down progress and to preserve the power of an elite that controls a given field of science. And this is why it must be opposed with all possible force.

Keywords: *kat-gan, hitvány, Róna-Tas, etymology

Öz

Bu kelimenin kökeni büyük bilim adamı Profesör András Róna-Tas tarafından doğru bir şekilde Türkçe ***kat-gan** olarak tanımlanmıştır, ancak kendisi bu fikri reddetmiştir. Gerekçesi, Macarca biçimin en az iki nadir ses uyumu içermesi gerektiğidir. Gerçekte ise bu türden üç karşılık içermektedir. Bu etimolojiyi reddetmek için bir sebep midir? Bu makalenin amacı hem etimolojinin doğru olduğunu hem de Róna-Tas'ın buna karşı olan gerekçesinin ciddi bir hata olduğunu göstermektir. Nispeten nadir olan karşılıklar basitçe ödünçlemenin yaşını yansıtmaktadır: Lir Türkçesinden ödünçlenen Macarca kelimelerin çoğundan daha yeni olduğu açıktır. Bilim insanları genellikle başkalarının fikirlerini

reddetmeyi haklı göstermek için bu tür geçersiz gerekçeler kullanırken, bazen bunu kendi fikirlerine (tipik olarak kendi en iyi, en cesur fikirlerine) yaptıkları daha önce gösterilmiştir. Makalede, Eric P. Hamp'ın (bir başka dünyaca ünlü akademisyen) Arnavutça bir kelimenin etimolojisini içeren ikinci bir örneği de kısaca tartışılmaktadır. Bu tür bir kendini inkârın sadece ciddi bir entelektüel hata değil, aynı zamanda siyasi ve sosyolojik bir olgu olduğunu iddia ediyorum. İlerlemeyi yavaşlatmaya ve belirli bir bilim alanını kontrol eden bir elitin gücünü korumaya hizmet eder. İşte bu nedenle mümkün olan tüm güçle karşı çıkılmalıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *kat-gan, hitvány, Róna-Tas, etimoloji

A general point, or two, to begin with: first, the early and specifically Lir Turkic borrowings into Hungarian are of special importance to Turcology not just as an irreplaceable source of information about some of the oldest forms of Lir but also because here, unlike in the case of Mongolic, the possibility of them being cognates is excluded and, two, at the same time they remain an underexploited resource because of the simple fact that very few scholars in Turcology (see e.g. Erdal 2015, duly criticized in Manaster Ramer in press) are willing either to deal with this material or, a fortiori, to make an effort to learn to read Hungarian. A more general point is that any revolution devours its own children, as we have all heard repeated and ourselves keep repeating, without reflection, reflection a mere second of which would show of course that it is actually some of its parents and grandparents (Danton, Trotsky, Kamenev, Zinov'ev) that are usually destroyed, by or at least with the connivance of the children and grandchildren. Any revolution, yes, but also any counter-revolution, reaction, or plain old-fashioned so-called conservatism, which so often misrepresents itself as moderation and rectitude, in science no less than in politics or religion.

And a crucial aspect of this is the phenomenon (not commented on very much as far as I can see, certainly not in historical linguistics) of intellectual (and other) self-criticism that strikes me as exactly like what goes on outside of science. Almost a generation ago (Michalove & Manaster Ramer 2001) I detailed a few examples of some of the world's all-time greatest Indo-European historical linguists (Hübschmann, Pedersen, Hamp as it happens) advancing brilliant (and correct) ideas and immediately pulling back as if stung or burned or scalded (or facing a crowd of fanatics defending the established religion, which is exactly what they WERE facing) largely or even wholly because (sometimes this is clear, sometimes implicit only) the ideas in question seemed to them too "bold", too "daring", or simply too "good". And in fact two decades later these ideas remain taboo in that field, not just rejected but simply not allowed to be discussed.[1] And, of course, almost every day I find more of this, in many different fields. Turcology has historically not been any different. There may however be a new wind blowing, and there certainly is a new sheriff in town.

Róna-Tas & Berta's (in fact, of course, mostly Róna-Tas's) *WOT* is a wonderful work in all kinds of ways, but not entirely lacking in the kind of high-handed, supercilious dismissal of proposals of other scholars that bothers me so very much, and the more so when some of these are actually very good, and even more when some others are not correct as stated but eminently salvageable (which is what I so love to do) provided one does not simply discard them (which is what I hate so). As argued in Trifonova & Manaster Ramer (2019), all this is entirely typical:

almost anything we hear or read is MOSTLY correct, but if it contains, strategically placed, a very few but very key myths, errors (of fact or logic), blunders, and falsifications—key because they are what shapes our (yes, all of our) misconceptions of the world and of ourselves and at the same (and how could it be otherwise) what defines the system of social, indeed political, relations we live in (e.g. what makes the community of scholars ignore certain particular works of certain particular scholars and to unquestioningly follow others, follow them even to the darkest and most disastrous of places). And many or even most of these key myths involve (explicitly or implicitly) the unjustified rejection of some crucial idea or fact. For example, even though we are discussing historical linguistics, I hope the Gentle Reader will not just forgive me but even thank me for pointing out the moral and intellectual lesson of Ignaz Semmelweis's work on what we now recognize (though he did not and could not) as INFECTIOUS disease, TRANSMITTED by CONTACT. In his time, you see (and he bought into this totally) most physicians (except some but far from all in the English-speaking world) had convinced themselves that whatever epidemic illnesses (which is what he was dealing with) were NOT that, and they believed that they had the idea that they were (which was centuries old, though of course no one knew WHAT was being transmitted) had been firmly put to rest. So, yes, a great deal of the error (and evil) we all live with involves first of all the mistaken REJECTION of good idea, of valid conclusions, of true facts and only secondly (if at all) the invention of bad, invalid, fake ones.

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1   A rather amusing example of this that I became aware only in the last couple of years is Hamp (1986), who realized that Albanian **motrë**, **motёr**, which famously means 'sister' and not 'mother', could be explained not as a reflex of the Indo-European 'mother' word (***māter-** or if you insist ***meh₂ter-**, or the like, which perhaps had been noticed by one or two earlier scholars but it is not totally clear) but rather of some suffixed formation derived from that "(e.g. *mātrā as a back-formation from *mātrijā […] 'maternal cousin (fem.)'", but he felt that "the directionality remains unmotivated". By this he apparently means that he does not believe that a word for a cousin can come to refer to a sibling. I find such arguments less than compelling in general, and anyway in Hungarian **testvér**, now 'sibling' originally meant 'blood relative' (< *[of one] flesh [and] blood'), and the same semantic change is clear in Polish in the case of the collective my native Polish the collective **rodzeństwo** 'siblings' < earlier 'blood relatives'. I am as not sure but I suspect that the Romance reflexes of Latin **germanus** evolved similarly, so that (contrary to what seems to be assumed by the authorities) the meaning we find in e.g. Spanish ('brother') is secondary to that found in French ('first cousin'), and I do not insist. It thus seems to me that we COULD get to 'sister' from *'female cousin'. So even though Hamp gave the (rather obviously correct) idea up, I arrived at it independently many years later, only to discover my (as I thought) idea at https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/mot%C3%ABr (posted a decade earlier, on 27 July 2011, by someone calling himself Torvalu4), who suggests that the *mātrā we seem to need is a "variant of *méh₂truh₂ (compare Old English *modrige*, Ancient Greek μητρυιά (*mētruiá*, "stepmother"))". It actually needs be ***méh₂truih₂**, but that is detail. And so is the fact Old English **modrige** meant both 'aunt' and 'female cousin'. As a result, I am nothing less than appalled by Majer's (2019) supercilious dismissal of Torvalu4: "[…] the attempt to bridge the gap between 'mother" and 'sister' via the intermediate step 'mother's sister' is a somewhat naïve assumptions [*naïve* is replaced by *pamundur* 'impossible' in the kinder, gentler Albanian translation]. While it may make a good impression in purely abstract terms, it would be difficult to implement it in actual linguistic reality, where the aunt is quite far removed from the prototypical image of a sister". I do not know who appointed Dr. Majer to decide what is easy or difficult to "to implement in actual linguistic reality", but his own proposal makes no sense at all. He wants the Albanian word to have been ***māt(e)rā** < ***meh₂t-(e)r-eh₂** 'of the [same] mother' or 'having the [same] mother', but there is no known derivational pattern that could even with the best will in the world give this etymon such a meaning. It is this that is simply *pamundur*—if anything can be absolutely ruled out in a field like historical linguistics. Incidentally, it is not even clear that we need a proto-Albanian ***mātrā**. A simple search of several OCR'ed authorities uncovered no clear Albanian reflex of any IE word ending in *-**ui-(e)h₂** or the like, except possibly **ve-** (with various dialect variants such as **voë** and so on) 'egg' < *āuiiā (Standard Albanian **vezë**, with a suffix). The proto-form is a bit uncertain and the conditions not quite identical, but perhaps close enough. It may thus be that IE ***méh₂trui(e)h₂** simply IS the expected source of **motrë**. I should perhaps add that whether the semantic change really was via *'female cousin' obviously we cannot be sure. There may well be other ways to get there.

So, now, while it is usually the ideas of various others that *WOT* dumps on, if one looks careful, one finds at least one case where the same kind of illogic masquerading as methodological probity leads Professor Róna-Tas to dismiss one of his own best ideas (*WOT* 1232):

> **hitvány** [hitvāń] 'worthless, of inferior quality' | 1171 PN Hituand [hitvan-d], c1350 [hi]tuan [hitvān] | hitvāń < *χitγan < *χatγan ← WOT *katγan | EOT katkan < katgan < kat- 'to be hard' > Chuv χïtkan 'lean,[2] meagre'.[3] The Chuv word goes back to *kïtkan < kat-. The /tk/ > /tv/ change would be the same as that of törvény. The /i/ > /a/ change would have occurred in H, as in tiló. The many hypotheses make this etymology, which I proposed in an earlier phase of this work, improbable. […] According to Benkő (1993–1997/1: 563), the H word is of unknown origin.

Two is not actually so "many", but how about three? For, in fact, there is a THIRD rare correspondence that would be involved in the derivation of this Hungarian word from Lir Turkic, one that is left unmentioned in *WOT*. Usually Hungarian has **k-** (much less often **g-**) for Lir Turkic, and only in a very few cases **h-** (Gombocz 1912: 166).

So, if this etymology is the true one (as I will argue), it actually involves THREE rather rare correspondences. Is this then a good reason to dismiss it?

To me it seems that this whole approach exactly the opposite of what scientific and mathematical considerations tell us. The word is both long and complex enough and the meaning specific enough (and these are absolutely key considerations, as compared to, f.ex., a word like Hungarian úr 'master, lord', which I discuss elsewhere) to make coincidence not very likely, and what is also not unimportant is there is no competing etymology at all. The reasoning here is exactly the same as that which is (or at least is supposed to be) employed in the courts of law to decide who is right or wrong, innocent or guilty.

The fact that the three sound correspondences are rare may simply mean that this is one of a handful Hungarian loanwords of Lir Turkic origin that came from some Lir dialect rather different than the one(s) that the bulk of such loanwords come from. Or, rather, that the difference is not of (geographical) dialect but of date.

Consider the following for comparison. No one (linguist or layman) rejects the relationship of English **lingerie** l[ɑn]ž[ə]r[ey] to French [lɛ̃žri] (see Manaster Ramer 1981) just because the first and third vowel correspondences are UNIQUE, the second not very frequent, and the (recent) consonant correspondence of [ž] : [ž] is definitely much less common than the (old) [j] : [ž] one.

Which reminds me to make good on what I said just above, about dates (more recent vs. older). At least one of the three correspondences in **hitvány** urely does belong to relatively more recent borrowings. Older Lir loanwords in Hungarian have **k-** or **g-** because at that time the Lir dialects still had velar stops, and more recent ones have **h-** because by that time some Lir dialects (notably Chuvash but also Khazar, as I discuss elsewhere) had shifted these stops to fricatives. Whether the same is true of the other two correspondences is less clear, but this is

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2   This of course is the original meaning of English **hide-bound**, so the word play was inescapable. The word also means (or meant) 'dry, dried out' (e.g., of soil).

3   I was susprised, having spoken English as my main (though not native) language since the age of 12, that **meagre** can mean 'lean' in English, but it turns out that it can. Still, since presumably there are many English speakers/ readers who do not know this, and only use the word (as I do) in a quite different sense, it still might be better to not use it in glossing the Chuvash.

not so important now. Unlike **lingerie**, none of them are even unique.

Hence, in spite of the self-abnegation, Professor Róna-Tas's etymology seems to me to have been BRILLIANTLY right. Of course, we can say that it is not entirely certain, but no one etymology can ever be, for rather obvious *a priori* reasons (Manaster Ramer 1999). On the other hand, it seems to me very likely indeed, likely enough so we can regard it (not as proven with mathematical certitude but) as "proven" beyond a REASONABLE doubt. And in particular much more certain than those of MANY other words whose etymologies *WOT* preaches as gospel (e.g., úr 'gentleman, lord', which in fact I will argue elsewhere has an entirely different origin from the one that WOT 972-974 claims). The short and simple shape[4] of that word and the very unspecific semantics make it, of course, much harder to be sure—and thus serves to make it clear why the case of **hitvány** is radically different. The very fact that historically there have been numerous etymologies of úr (see especially Holopainen 2016 for a roll-call of these ideas, some hair-raising but of course treated with all due respect because their authors were members of the club and their content did not rock the boat but on the contrary contributed to the success of the dominant business model in the field) is proof of the general (and really mostly mathematical) point I am trying to drive home here. It is all but inevitable for a word like úr to have more etymologies proposed by ever-eager scholars than for a word like **hitvány**, because of the all but inevitable relative formal and semantic difficulty of finding a match for the latter and relative ease for the former.

And yes, it is a primarily methodological gospel that I came here to teach, and to exemplify. Because, as the saying goes, *Nur das Beispiel führt zum Licht, vieles Reden tut es nicht*. But even the best example(s) will be powerless and will simply be ignored (as in fact essentially all my work has been for a half-century, including recently Manaster Ramer 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b, 2022, 2023a, 2023b and as surely Manaster Ramer in press, and to appear will also be)—so long as the current intellectual and above all social structure of science (here, Turkic historical linguistics, but the issue is far more general) remains in place. As long as it does,

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4   It does not need the services of someone who used to teach advanced mathematics to unhappy (and justifiably so) computer science students to see this. It is a point that (even if much too rarely) HAS been made by historical linguistics who never had to earn a living that way, e.g., by the universally respected Mayrhofer (1992: 39), who comments on the difficulty finding "[ü]berzeugende außerarische Verbindungen mit dem kleinen, vieldeutigen Wortkörper [á]*k*[a-]" (a word of Indo-Iranian that on top of that also has rather unspecific semantics). And this is *a priori* obvious. I am tired of having, for some fifty years, to keep reminding unhappy linguists that this is a general point that cannot be gotten around. It is the reason, f.ex., why (in case anyone still pretends not to get this), when I speak my non-existent Chinese, I have to avoid monosyllables (because the natives often, greatly amused, fail to understand me when I do use them), whereas they have no difficulty with my horrible mispronunciation of disyllable and polysyllables. Because, again, in general (other things being equal—because there ARE several other factors, each of which is also probabilistic, so the way we must reason is the same!), the *kleiner* the *Wortkörper*, the more *vieldeutig* it is. And so, *a priori*, a word like úr would be expected to be more vieldeutig (and hence to have more formally possible etymologies, even before we get to the semantics) than a word like **hitván**. And the problem, like most problems, is not that anyone does not understand these things, much less that they are not discussed in the literature. Everyone does, and they are. No, the problem is not even that things that are both known and discussed (and anyway obvious) are deliberately, studiedly, in-your-face IGNORED by almost all scholars almost every day. No, the problem is not even that, when this is done, the accommodating OTHER scholars (not to mention the public ever as eager to be misinformed about such topics as etymology, prehistory, or antiquities as it is happy to be misinformed about life, health, and war) readily acquiesce. The problem is that, when anyone points anything like this out, they are ignored or worse (e.g., allowed to starve—or to teach advanced mathematics). THAT is the problem.

whatever I say will simply not even be noticed, and whatever is printed in *WOT* (and other works with the right status but also the right content and tone, in whatever field) will completely dominate the discourse in every field. And, of course, even if someone else were to be saying it (though who would?) instead of me, it would be an uphill struggle. But again it is a matter of probabilities. If someone were to join me, it would be hard, but a little less hard. And so we have to tear down the walls, one after another, of this and of every other intellectual Bastille. If not today or tomorrow, surely the day after it can be done. It must be done.

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