



Standing Committee for the Humanities

OMLL: The Origin of Man, Language and Languages

A EUROCORES (European Science Foundation Collaborative Research) programme

East meets West. Linguistic and genetic comparison of modern Eurasian populations. A joint program in anthropology, ethnology, linguistics and population genetics (CRP 01-JA18)

- François Jacquesson, Laboratoire des Langues et Civilisations de Tradition Orale, CNRS, Villejuif, France
- Antti Sajantila, Department of Forensic Medicine, University of Helsinki, Finland

Abstract:

This Collaborative Research Project associates two teams, one Finnish and one French. Both teams work on the history of the populations of Asia by comparing data from different sciences, mainly genetics, linguistics and anthropology. Other specialists are also consulted: historians, archaeologists, historians of climate, for instance. We also organized expeditions in the areas under study.

Both Projects have a common aim: to improve on our knowledge of the movements of populations between Eastern and Western Eurasia. Both make a special effort in associating a range of different sciences in order to provide the most sensible picture. Geneticists are especially important in that respect: recent developments in the genetics of populations offer a better approach for research into smaller communities, and considerably improve earlier results, when this science tried to tackle large entities such as 'Asia'. Another recent development is the use of palaeo-genetics (when conditions allow it), namely the assessment of DNA markers of ancient populations from their bones, found by archaeologists. Linguists and anthropologists have been at work in these regions for two centuries, and often developed a detailed knowledge of the present distribution of the populations, their characteristic customs and traditions (especially important for us, when it comes to marriage practice and exchange of wives), and the recent history of these populations. Lately, these sciences have become more sensitive to the complex notion of 'population', of the importance of patterns of mobility and exchanges, and of the societal and political use of ethnic names or multiple designations.

The two study zones for this Collaborative Research Project are:

- 1) South, covered by the French team, and consisting of:
 - a) Eastern and North-Eastern India and the corridor between India and SE Asia on the other side of the Himalayas, where, populations speak Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burmese, and Austroasiatic languages,
[b) The French team also works on the mid-Asia Turkic-speaking region].
- 2) North, covered by the Finnish team, and consisting of two distinct entities:
 - a) Central Asia with a majority of Turkic and Iranian speaking populations.

b) The extremities of Central Asia (Uralic speakers in the West and Mongolic speakers in the East).

The geographical continuum “Eurasia” that unites most of the regions covered by the Finnish and the French teams is self-evident. The recurrent debate about the Uralo-Altaic entity, ever since the pioneering work of Hungarian scholar S. Gyarmathi published in 1799, was one of the first scientific fields to stress the need for collaboration among independent sciences. The growing importance, throughout the 20th century, of multidisciplinary research has, by now, successfully enrolled such new perspectives as climatic history, genetics, flora and fauna movements and distribution, not to speak of the spectacular progress in human prehistory.

The regions in the Northern zone, which are intimately connected, have a long history of so-called 'nomadic' populations, most of them herders until recently, with a complex history of populations (expansion, migrations, fusions). There are no sharp borders here, but instead diffuse gradients. The Southern zone, on the other hand, corresponds to a rather sharply defined barrier between the East and the West, with dense and mostly settled populations of agriculturalists.

The acknowledgement of the importance of the corridor between India and South-East Asia is rather recent. So far, we know far less about the complicated groups of so-called ‘tribals’ supposed to live in ‘jungles’ along politically sensitive borders. Nevertheless, this is a very promising field, and significant discoveries, such as the relationship between Munda and Mon-Khmer (by W. Schmidt in the 1900s), or the patterns of populations and language typology among the Tibeto-Burmese groups, give exciting clues on the whole of south Asia, from India to China.

In both zones, we study and compare genetic and linguistic affiliations, in order to determine to what extent a common linguistic affiliation represents a common genetic ancestry and to identify linguistic and genetic barriers. This information together with ethnological and archaeological data is used to infer population histories in the study zones and to understand the processes underlying language and/or genetic exchange and evolution. In addition, this project intends to elaborate contrastive models of genetic and linguistic exchange at these major zones of contact between the East and the West.

This is a multi-disciplinary project with the following partners:

- population geneticists from the Institut Pasteur and the Musée de l'Homme (within Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle), Paris and from Helsinki University (Finland).
- anthropologists (ethnologists, historians) from the Institut Français d'Etudes sur l'Asie Centrale in Tashkent, from Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), Paris and from University of Franche-Comté (France).
- linguists from « Laboratoire des Langues et Civilisations de Tradition Orale » (CNRS), from Musée de l'Homme, Paris, from University of Michigan (USA) and from Helsinki University (Finland).

Also associated are other French, Finnish, and US researchers. Current international collaboration with academic institution includes 2 Institutes of Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences, and two Indian Universities in Orissa and Arunchal Pradesh states. Additional collaborations are expected.