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CENTRAL ASIA AT A GLANCE

One of the most fascinating aspects of Central Asia is its languages. The Central Asian languages are principally divided between those classified as Turkic (such as Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, Uyghur and Uzbek) and those related to Persian (like Tajik and Pashto), thus included in the huge Indo-European family of languages which includes English.

A distinction should be made between Turkic and Turkish. While Turkish is one language, Turkic is a language family that includes Turkish as well as those mentioned above.

Many Central Asians, especially those in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, speak both Turkic and Persian languages. Persian grammar is similar to the major Indo-European languages so it is relatively easy to learn. Knowledge of Latin grammar will help to some degree, since, like Latin, Turkic verbs also are placed at the end of the sentence. Learning Turkic dialects is especially enjoyable because they are highly expressive.

As one travels throughout the Turkic heart and periphery of Central Asia it becomes abundantly clear that the Turkic languages are really dialects of one another and not distinct languages at all. This means that in learning one, all the rest are understandable to a large degree. Herein lies the fun and the challenge.

Speaking the native languages of Central Asia to any degree will be tremendously appreciated by the local people. It will also increase your mobility and access to the various Central Asian cultures. Very few of the inhabitants of even the major Central Asian cities speak western languages, though many do know Russian or Mandarin depending on their colonial legacy. Attempting to speak any local words is greeted with an outpouring of warmth. Central Asians are incredibly hospitable so be prepared upon uttering a simple *yakhshimu siz?* 'How are you?' to be invited into a family home and be served tea, sweets and cakes.

historical origins

It's a common misunderstanding that the Turkic languages emanated from present day Turkey. In fact, the Turkic languages developed with the Turkic Empire in the 6th century. The Turkic people, who were centered in Mongolia, spread their influence east and west. The Uyghur Empire (745 to 840 AD) developed in Mongolia and was the first nomadic empire to have its own writing system. Uyghur scribes and scholars would later become the major advisors to Jenghiz (Genghis) Khan and the Mongol Empire. The Turks spread their influence to the west and into Iran.



Prior to the year 1000 AD, the lingua franca of Central Asia was Persian. Turkic dialects, though spoken in the Central Asian oases and villages, had not yet been accepted by elite society. But by 1000 AD, this began to change and within two hundred years, Central Asia was principally using Turkic for communication to the detriment of the Persian language. How this happened is still not completely known. It was as late as the 11th century that Turkic tribes moved into the Anatolian peninsula, today's Turkey. Thus, Turkey was one of the last stops of Turkic civilization, not its origin.

The over 70 existing Turkic languages were delineated during the tsarist Russian conquest of Central Asia beginning in the 1860's. The tsars, and later the Soviets, magnified the minor linguistic differences between the Central Asians, who did not see themselves as separate people, to differentiate the Central Asians into numerous ethnic people speaking different languages. This is not to say that there were no distinctions. Turkic is divided into four main dialects:

1. Eastern dialects of the Altay region near the Chinese border with former Soviet Central Asia
2. Western dialects of the Kyrgyz and Tatar
3. Dialects of Western Turkestan
4. Southern dialects of the Turkmen, the Azeris, and the Anatolians

In late tsarist and early Soviet Russia, distinct republics were created from linguistic lines that were faint and faded at best. In the early years of the Soviet empire during Lenin's leadership, a young Josef Stalin led the ethnic definition project in Central Asia that drew the borders. The legacy of divide and rule is



still exerting its influence especially since the independent Central Asian nations inherited their Soviet-drawn borders. In your travels through Central Asia and in using a few of the various dialects you'll discover how faint the differences truly are between the Turkic people.

varieties of central asian languages

The Persian and Turkic languages which form the core of Central Asian languages are spoken by more than 250 million people. The Turkic languages are spoken from Macedonia to Siberia and China. The Persian languages are spoken in Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia and into China. The major languages covered in this book are spoken in Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Xinjiang Province, China. At the end of this book we have included 10 other languages that will come in handy in your travels.

Rather than employing the various scripts used for the languages in their home countries, we've attempted to use a unified script employing the Roman alphabet and based on a modified transliteration system commonly used for Turkic and Persian languages.

The Turkic languages are based on the ideal of vowel harmony, in

that a word should contain either the vowels formed in the front of the mouth (ä, ö, ü) or the vowels formed in the back of the mouth (a, e, i, o, u), but not both types. The Turkic dialects have a melodious quality due to the use of front vowels, as is clear in the words **tünügün** (Uyghur for 'yesterday') and **körüdösüngör** (Kyrgyz for 'you (pl) are seeing').

Although both Pashto and Tajik belong to the Persian (Iranian) family of languages, Pashto is an eastern Persian language while Tajik is a south-west Persian language. They, subsequently, have a few differences.

While they are both SOV languages, Unlike Tajik, Pashto has grammatical gender, and number in nouns. Adjectives, in Pashto, normally come before the noun and agree in number and gender with the noun they describe.

language essentials

There are always essential words you need to know in a language. In Turkic there are the all-purpose greetings:

yakhshimu siz?

How are you?

qandaq/qanday?

What's happening?

When you say **yakhshimu siz?** and shake hands at the same time, the unique Central Asian handshake should be used. Your hands are held out close together and your right hand slides between the other's hands while your left hand rests on top of the other's right hand. It forms a hand sandwich or a four-hand layer cake with alternating layers. The slide in is performed very gently and hands only lightly touch. There is no firmness in the hands and no grabbing. After the hands slide in, pull back your hands open palmed and draw them towards your eyes and nose, and then pull them downward as if stroking a beard, imagined or real. This same beautiful gesture is made when completing a meal or finishing study of the Koran.

‘Yes’ is **hää**, and ‘no’ is **yaq**. When you say **yaq** you can whine and grimace a little for a good effect, especially if it is about something particularly disgusting. ‘Thank you’ is **rakhmät** and to express heartfelt thanks hold your right hand over your heart and give a modest bow. ‘Goodbye’ is **hosh**, which literally means ‘happiness’ and is said with the same heart holding and bowing. This gesture’s beauty comes close to the handshake but beware for it is highly addictive and you may find yourself continuing to do it even after you have returned to your native country.

abbreviations used in this book

| | | | |
|------|------------|-----|-----------|
| coll | colloquial | pl | plural |
| f | feminine | pol | polite |
| inf | informal | lit | literally |
| m | masculine | sg | singular |

