



# Between East and West: Hungarian and the Volga-Kama Sprachbund

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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### ABSTRACT

While the Hungarian language is spoken in the heart of Europe, both scientific and pseudoscientific explanations trace its origins to the East. Also structurally, Hungarian shows many structural features more reminiscent of more Eastern languages. This paper examines the relationship of Hungarian, genealogically and contact-linguistically, with more Eastern languages, both related (e.g., Mansi, Khanty, Mari) and unrelated (i.e., the Turkic languages).

Historical records strongly imply that a variant of Hungarian, East Hungarian, was spoken in the Volga-Kama Region of European Russia until the 13th century, lexical evidence (i.e., borrowings) also strongly imply that historic migration took the linguistic ancestors of modern Hungarians through this area. Yet, much remains unknown about these processes: there are no written records of East Hungarian or of Hungarian predating the arrival in the Carpathian Basin in the 9th century, hence, all evidence is indirect.

In this paper, we give a brief overview of what is known and what is not known about the relationship of Hungarian with the languages of the Volga-Kama Region: What evidence do we have of historical contacts, from lexicon and language structure? For which structural features of Hungarian have scholars postulated a possible contact-linguistic explanation, possibly showing linguistic heritage Hungarians brought from the Volga-Kama Region to the Carpathian Basin?

### KEYWORDS

Hungarian, Volga-Kama Sprachbund, areal linguistics, contact linguistics, language history

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

As is the case for many European nations, Hungarian national identity is complex and eschews simplistic classification. On the one hand, the idea of Hungary as a prototypical European nation is broadly embraced; Hungary's central position in the Austro-Hungarian has been subject to a great deal of nostalgia (cf. Speidl, 2016 for instance) and still it is by some even today. At the same time, an eastward view has also long been a constant in Hungarian political discourse. By the third decade of the 21st century, the Hungarian government has framed itself in opposition to Brussels and has become an antagonistic force within the European Union; under the motto of *Keleti nyitás* 'Eastern Opening' it has been aiming to strengthen economic ties to the east since 2012. Additionally, Hungary was granted observer status in the Organization of Turkic States, as the only non-Turkic speaking nation. It would be a mistake, however, to extrapolate from this that a European identity is less important to Hungarians than it is to their neighbors. When nine European countries held EU membership referendums in 2003, support for EU ascension in Hungary was comparatively high (83.80%) – however with comparably low turnout (45.60%). These dynamics have persisted despite the radical rhetorical shifts that have happened since Hungary's ascension to the European Union in 2004.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, polling carried out across the European Union comfortably placed Hungary in the middle as regards support for continued EU membership: less support than in Luxembourg or Estonia, but more support than in Finland or the Czech Republic.<sup>2</sup>

Also linguistically, classifying Hungarian is not trivial: historical linguistics unambiguously place Hungarian in the Uralic language family, representatives of which are predominantly spoken in the Eastern European Plain; typologically Hungarian has been classified as a (peripheral) member of the *Standard Average European Sprachbund/linguistic area*, showing more structural convergence with Central and Western European languages than most of its linguistic relatives, including Finnish and Estonian (Haspelmath, 2001: 1505). While the conventional explanation on the origin of the Hungarian language are uncontroversial in international scholarly circles, it is broadly rejected in some parts of society (cf. Szeverényi, 2018; Krekó, 2018) in favor of other explanation, e.g., that Hungarian is related to other language families such as Turkic or it is a language isolate, or an *incomparabile idioma*, that is to say, a language that due to its uniqueness cannot be subjected to comparative linguistics (cf. Pusztay, 1977). Other narratives try to seek explanations that guarantee a past that is considered more "glorious", oftentimes by postulating counterfactual links to ancient empires and peoples such as Sumerians, Huns, or Scythians (Honti, 2010).

The interpretation of the seeming contradictions surrounding these data is not trivial, but it can be understood from a more holistic viewpoint of history. During the last centuries, Hungary has a habit of politically and culturally orienting itself either eastwards or westwards or embracing its intermediary position between the East and the West (as Endre Ady named it, *komp-ország* 'ferryland'<sup>3</sup>). The dynamics detailed here extend from Turanism, a movement in 19th century Hungary that saw Hungarian ethnic and linguistic origins in the East. It motivated

<sup>1</sup>[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Referendums\\_related\\_to\\_the\\_European\\_Union#Summary](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Referendums_related_to_the_European_Union#Summary) accessed 27 March 2023.

<sup>2</sup>[europelects.eu/eu-membership-approval/](https://europelects.eu/eu-membership-approval/), accessed 27 March 2023.

<sup>3</sup>[mek.oszk.hu/00500/00583/html/ady55.htm](https://mek.oszk.hu/00500/00583/html/ady55.htm), accessed 27 March 2023.



countless expeditions to different countries that sought to answer the question: where do we come from? At this time a view to the East (towards diverse peoples, cultures, and languages ranging from the Khantys to Mongols to Tibetans, among many others) pertained not only to a view on history, but also to economic and political orientation (for a detailed overview on the history of Turanism, see [Ablonczy, 2019](#)).

When considering discourse pertaining to the origin of the Hungarian language and nation, it should be remembered that Hungary genuinely does have a “split past”. Hungarians are known to have migrated into the Carpathian Basin from the East before the end of the 9th century CE; the closest linguistic relatives of Hungarian are spoken in Western Siberia; there is historical, toponymical and archaeological evidence that a not directly attested variety of Hungarian (Eastern Hungarian) might have been spoken in present-day Bashkortostan (in so-called *Magna Hungaria*) in the Southern Ural Mountains up to the 13th century ([Skribnik & Laakso 2022](#): 524); the Hungarian language shows unambiguous traces of historical language contacts (most notably Turkic and Alanic – an early form of Ossetic) that might seem surprising giving its contemporary range of the language (see Section 3 below). Also in grammar, some Eastward connections have been postulated: Hungarian has been suggested as a peripheral/historical member of the *Volga-Kama Sprachbund*, a loose conglomeration of Uralic and Turkic languages spoken around the confluence of the Volga and Kama rivers in European Russia that show a significant amount of structural convergence (see Section 4 below). Thus, we can conclude that the multi-level identity of Hungarians that cause changes in their orientation from time to time originates from our fragmental knowledge of their linguistic, archeological, and genetic ancestry. While all these disciplines provide evidence about the Eastern origin of Hungarian and their language, the linguistic and historical ethnogenesis set certain questions on where and when it happened (cf. [Klima and Türk, 2021](#) and [Benkő & Bollók, 2021](#), for instance).

## 2. ON THE HISTORY OF THE STUDY OF HUNGARIAN

According to [Gábor Berezcki \(2003: 4\)](#), Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini (who would eventually become Pope Pius II) first postulated a relationship between Hungarians and Yugrians in 1458 but did so without any evidence. It was long assumed that *Yugrian* refers to the ancestors of the modern Khanty and Mansi, but this was likely a misinterpretation of the original text by Miklós Zsirai (cf. [Klima, 2021a](#)). In the second half of the 17th century Martin Fogel, a German doctor, published his observations on similarities between Hungarian and Finnish including 35 common etymologies, most of which have withstood the test of time. Additionally, he noticed some shared typological features of the languages including the use of postposition, the lack of the so-called *habeo* verb (i.e., a transitive verb expressing possession), and the usage of possessive suffixes ([Berezcki, 2010: 31](#)) – though it should be noted that these features are typologically common and can also be found in genealogically unrelated languages such as Turkish. At the same time, Hungarian scholars such as István Geleji Katona and György Komáromi Csipkés claimed that the Hungarian language is of Eastern origin and its closest or only linguistic relative is Hebrew. Later the view of a mixed or even German origin of the language was advocated ([Pusztay, 1977: 11–12](#)).

János Sajnovics's 1770 *Demonstratio idioma Hungarorum et Lapporum idem esse* convincingly argued for a genealogical link between Hungarian and Saami, spoken in northern



Fennoscandia, and thus laid the foundation for what would later become known as Finno-Ugric, and even later Uralic, linguistics. Based on surface-level similarity with nearby (and genealogically comparatively close) Finnic languages such as Finnish and Estonian, Saami was already known to be a member of a larger group of languages at the time; by linking Hungarian with Saami, Sajnovics introduced Hungarian to a language family before the principle of a language family had been coherently defined. His work introduced the essential notion that two languages can be genealogically related even if there is no intelligibility between speakers. He also pointed out the importance of morphological correspondences in the verification of linguistic affinity.

Sajnovics's work was first published in Copenhagen and a year later in Nagyszombat in an extended form. While the first version was and still is well-known within European scientific circles, the second version was better-known in Hungary. Both volumes have recently been translated into Hungarian by Zsuzsa Vladár Constantinovitsné (the first one in 2021 and the second one in 1994); she has extensively compared the two versions from a philological and a linguistic perspective (C. Vladár, 2021). Although Sajnovics's pioneering work had great impact internationally, the reception was more tepid in Hungary where it was largely neglected and questioned.

Scientific understanding of the exact make-up of this language family would continue to evolve after Sajnovics's seminal work. Sámuel Gyarmathi 1799 *Affinitas linguae hungaricae cum linguis fennicae originis grammaticae demonstrata* considerably expanded upon the Finno-Ugric language family, adding numerous languages to the mix: Mordvin, Mari, Permic (Udmurt, Komi, Komi-Permyak), Mansi – and erroneously Chuvash, which was later identified as a Turkic language. Although the etymological part of his work has its limitation, Gyarmathi pioneered the handling of morphology in historical-comparative linguistics by proving the importance of morphological correspondences (cf. Bereczki, 2003: 6).

In the 19th century, Antal Reguly became the first Hungarian scholar to travel to Western Siberia and collect linguistic data among the Mansi and Khanty. He started the expedition in 1843, after spending years studying Finnish and then Russian. He conducted fieldwork among Mansi speakers living near the river Konda and Khanty people near the river Sosva and then from the area of Obdorsk (present-day Salekhard). When returning to St. Petersburg he also visited the Volga-Kama region and conducted fieldwork among the Mari, Mordvin, and Chuvash. Due to his early death other scholars such as Pál Hunfalvy and József Pápay continued his work. Reguly's most influential claim was that Mansi and Khanty are the two closest cognate languages of Hungarian (cf. *ibid.*).

By the second half of the 19th century, the historical-comparative method had a solid methodological basis. Increasing evidence pointed towards the genealogical relation of Finno-Ugric languages (the relation of these to Samoyedic languages, completing the Uralic family, was only established comparatively late); in scholarly circles the existence of the Finno-Ugric language family and thus their common origin gained acceptance. However, there were still many questions to clarify, one of which was the nature of the relationship between Hungarian and Turkic languages. In 1870, Ármin Vámbéry, a well-known Turkologist, addressed this question through a systematic comparison of Hungarian, other Finno-Ugric languages, and Turkic languages. He assumed that the Finno-Ugric (or Ugric, as he called it) layer is the oldest in Hungarian, while the Turkic one is a result of "either linguistic contact" or "common origin". He also claimed that Mansi (then known as Vogul) is the closest sister language of Hungarian. József Budenz, head of the Altaic comparative department at university in Budapest at the time (the



present-day Finno-Ugric Department at Eötvös Loránd University), responded to Vámbéry’s work with relentless criticism, pointing out that a language cannot have two proto languages at the same time. Additionally, he categorized Vámbéry’s proposed etymologies into the groups “acceptable”, “debatable”, and “unacceptable”, thus revealing Vámbéry’s misinterpretations of regular sound correspondences. Vámbéry took this critical review personally and in turn published a monograph titled *A magyarok eredete* ‘The origin of Hungarians’ in which he revoked his former stance and maintained that the “core” of the Hungarian language is of Turkic origin. This was the beginning of a scholarly debate that is today known as the “Ugric-Turkic (or Ugro-Turkish) war”. The debate was heated and was followed by a large audience due to the complex matter of Hungarian identity discussed in Section 1. The vast majority of linguists were convinced by Budenz’s arguments, while Vámbéry’s supporters were scholars from other fields such as philology and anthropology. Budenz’s second and more detailed critical evaluation of Vámbéry’s work in 1883 showed clear evidence for the Finno-Ugric origin of Hungarian and after Budenz’s death, Vámbéry also came to accept that, at least to some extent, Hungarian must be of Finno-Ugric origin (cf. [Bereczki, 2010: 36–37](#)).

Figure 1 illustrates how the view of the Uralic language family has crystallized in the time since and shows Hungarian within a comparatively conservative genealogical tree of Uralic languages (though many other accounts subsume Finno-Permic and Ugric into the Finno-Ugric branch of the Uralic language family). There has been ample debate in recent years about the exact structure of the tree; Ugric languages have not been safe from these discussions. The conventional view, as implicit in Fig. 1, is that Proto-Ugric branched into Proto-Hungarian and Proto-Ob-Ugric. This position is still advocated by many international scholars (e.g., [Zhivlov, 2023](#)) and remains dominant in Hungary (though see [Bakró-Nagy, 2013](#) for a more agnostic point of view). Especially among Finnish scholars, the idea has been advocated that Hungarian and Mansi might share a common ancestor that was a sister language to Proto-Khanty (cf. [Janhunen, 2009](#)) and a lot of modern accounts do not commit themselves as regards the internal structuring of Ugric (cf. [Skribnik & Laakso, 2022](#) for an overview). Irrespective of the manner in which the three Ugric languages developed, a special affinity between them can easily be illustrated even to (open-minded and willing) novices by counting from two to six: Hungarian

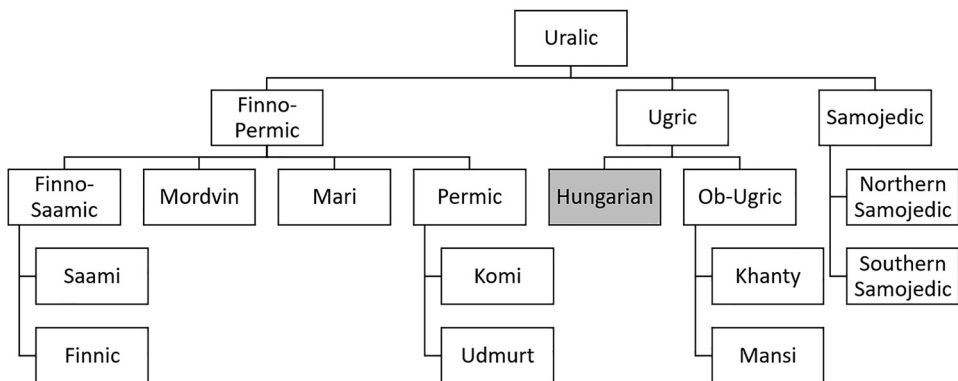


Fig. 1. Hungarian within Uralic (based on [Kulonen, 2002: 108](#))



*kettő, három, négy, öt, hat*; (Northern) Mansi *kitiγ, χūrəm, níla, at, χōt* (Riese & Bradley, 2020: 84); (Surgut) Khanty *kátγən, qołəm, íńəłə, waʔt, qut* (Csepregi, 2023: 720–721).

In summation, while minutiae of the internal structure of the Uralic family tree remain controversial, its existence is not – in fact, Uralic is one of the best-established language families in the world (cf. also Campbell 2013: 174–175). Serious scholars might disagree on what the closest linguistic relative of Hungarian is, but they do not disagree on if Hungarian is a Uralic language.

### 3. HUNGARIAN THROUGH THE LENS OF CONTACT LINGUISTICS AND TYPOLOGY

Contemporary language can often offer a window into the past of the language and its speakers. This applies to Hungarian as well: different layers of lexical and structural borrowings paint a vivid picture of the language's history and prehistory. The loan word layers are of special interest as regards historic migration patterns: borrowings from a certain language or language family at a specific point in time necessitates that there were contacts between the different speaker communities, which puts useful constraints on what one can and should assume about historic migration. A brief overview of the most important loan word layers is provided here. All etymologies given here are, if not indicated elsewhere, taken from or at least corroborated by the *Új magyar etimológiai szótár* (Gerstner, 2022).

**Indo-Iranian:** In addition to numerous older Indo-Iranian borrowings found across the Uralic language family (see Holopainen, 2019), Hungarian in particular has a layer of comparatively younger (though still predating the migration) Iranian borrowings, including numerous from Alanic, a historic relative of modern-day Ossetic (today spoken only in the Caucasus, but historically spread over a much larger area). Postulated Alanic borrowings include *egész* 'whole', *gazdag* 'rich', and *asszony* 'lady'.

**Turkic:** A number of Turkic loanwords (some of which are ultimately of Persian or Arabic origin) entered Hungarian during the Ottoman period (16th and 17th century), e.g., *csárda* 'tavern', *dohány* 'tobacco', *dzsámi* 'mosque',<sup>4</sup> *kávè* 'coffee', *papucs* 'slippers'. Interestingly, only very few of them became part of modern vocabulary, while many others have dropped out of use, such as *vilajet* 'vilayet'<sup>5</sup> and *szandzsák* 'sanjak'.<sup>6</sup> The lion's share of Turkic borrowings into Hungarian are older and can easily be shown to be from genealogically distinct Turkic varieties. Notably, Hungarian *tenger* 'sea' is etymologically connected to Turkish *deniz* 'id.', but shows an *-r* in the final position. This is typical of Oghur Turkic, the branch to which modern Chuvash belongs, where final *-r* corresponds to a final spirant in other Turkic languages (Golden, 1992: 96). Indeed, most of the well-established Turkic loans in Hungarian are Oghur and predate the migration to the Carpathian basin, such as *dél* 'noon' and *disznó* 'pig'. Hungarian has provided important data for the reconstruction of Oghur as spoken west of the Ural during the Middle Ages

<sup>4</sup>[www.arcanum.com/hu/online-kiadvanyok/Lexikonok-magyar-etimologiai-szotar-F14D3/d-F1C23/dzsami-F1E33/](http://www.arcanum.com/hu/online-kiadvanyok/Lexikonok-magyar-etimologiai-szotar-F14D3/d-F1C23/dzsami-F1E33/), accessed on 3 May 2023.

<sup>5</sup>[www.arcanum.com/hu/online-kiadvanyok/Lexikonok-magyar-etimologiai-szotar-F14D3/v-F4386/vilajet-F4488/](http://www.arcanum.com/hu/online-kiadvanyok/Lexikonok-magyar-etimologiai-szotar-F14D3/v-F4386/vilajet-F4488/), accessed on 3 May 2023.

<sup>6</sup>[www.arcanum.com/hu/online-kiadvanyok/Lexikonok-magyar-etimologiai-szotar-F14D3/sz-F3D93/szandzsak-F3DF0/](http://www.arcanum.com/hu/online-kiadvanyok/Lexikonok-magyar-etimologiai-szotar-F14D3/sz-F3D93/szandzsak-F3DF0/), accessed on 3 May 2023.



(cf. Róna-Tas and Berta, 2011). The estimated number of Old Turkic loans is over 400 and more importantly it consists not only of nouns but verbs, which implies an intensive contact situation. However, Gugán (2013) points out that Hungarian-Turkic contacts are still low on the borrowing scale of Thomason and Kaufman (1988).

**Slavic:** Here again, in the largest layer of loan words (Klima, 2021b), the window into the past that Hungarian offers is of relevance to scholars of other languages as well: Hungarian loan-words in Slavic, which by necessity occurred after the Hungarian migration to the Carpathian Basin (conventionally thought to have occurred in 896 C.E.). Early Slavic borrowings into Hungarian show nasal consonants (*n*, *m*) as reflexes of nasal vowels that were lost in most (but not all – notably not in Polish) Slavic languages, e.g., Hungarian *rend* ‘order’ ~ Croatian *red* ‘row’ ~ Polish *rząd* ‘row’, Hungarian *munka* ‘work’ ~ Croatian *muka* ‘trouble’ ~ Polish *męka* ‘torment’, Hungarian *gomba* ‘mushroom’ ~ Croatian *guba* ‘id.’ ~ Polish *gęba* ‘face, gob’. Other Slavic borrowings into Hungarian include *pálinka* (a Hungarian fruit brandy), *görög* ‘Greek’, and *medve* ‘bear’. It has also been postulated that some Slavic borrowings, critically *lengyel* ‘Polish’, might be old East Slavic borrowings predating the migration to the Carpathian Basin (Zoltán, 2014: 205).

**Romance:** Post-migration borrowings into Hungarian from Romance languages include *palacsinta* ‘pancake’ (~ Latin *placenta*), *narancs* ‘orange’, and *szappan* ‘soap’.

**Germanic:** The comparatively late, but numerous, German borrowings into Hungarian include *muszáj* ‘must’ (German *muss sein*), *pernahajder* ‘rascal, scamp’ (German *Bärenhäuter*, lit. ‘bear skinner’, from Germ. *auf der Bärenhaut liegen* ‘to rest, to be lazy’), *krumpli* ‘potato’ (German dialectal *Grundbirne*, lit. ‘ground pear’).

Language contact is never a one-way street; a number of Hungarian borrowings have traveled across the world, notably English *goulash* (Hungarian *gulyás*), *coach* (Hungarian *kocsi*), *biro* (Hungarian *bíró* ‘judge’, via the name of the inventor László Bíró) and etymologically connected words across the globe.<sup>7</sup>

From a typological point of view, Hungarian – in spite of its flexible word order – has a lot of features typical of languages with the basic word order Subject-Object-Verb (SOV): it has concatenative morphology, i.e. it employs clearly identifiable suffixes (such as person-number agreement markers on verbs: *szerezet-het-né-lek* love-POT-COND-2SG<1SG ‘I could love you’); case, number & possessive suffixes on nouns: *a szív-em-ben* the heart-PX1SG-INE ‘in my heart’). Hungarian verbs agree not only with their subjects but their objects (*olvas-ok* read-1SG ‘I read (something)’ vs. *olvas-om* read-1SG.OBJ ‘I read it’), as also happens in Ob-Ugric, Mordvin and Samoyedic languages, in different manners though. It uses postpositions rather than prepositions and modifiers (e.g., attributive adjectives) usually precede their heads. Generally speaking, fusion and syncretism are atypical for the language and Hungarian generally prefers synthetic forms as opposed to analytic ones. These properties also characterize not only other members of the language family but also members of the Eurasian linguistic macro area in general. Another characteristic feature of the language is the usage of separable so-called verbal prefixes that originally had clearly locational meaning (as in *el-megy* away-go.3SG ‘(s)he goes away’) but later aspectual functions (as in *el-olvas* away-read.3SG ‘(s)he reads through’. Similar elements can be found in Estonian, where they are a clear structural borrowing from German (cf. Hasselblatt,

<sup>7</sup>www.etymonline.com.



1990), and also in Russian, but critically also in the Ob-Ugric languages – i.e., they are not simply a structural borrowing from German.

Thus, in broad strokes, Hungarian is, typologically speaking, a well-behaved Uralic language. Among the features considered in the *Typological Database of the Ugric Languages* (Havas et al., 2015) and the *Typological Database of the Volga-Kama Finno-Ugric Languages* currently under development (cf. Asztalos et al., 2021), Hungarian shows the same values as its close relatives (Northern) Mansi in 89/182 cases and (Surgut) Khanty in 98/208 cases, while with the more distant relatives in the Volga-Kama region Hungarian shows overlap with Mari in 80/205 cases and Komi-Permyak in 79/205 cases.<sup>8</sup> It does however show a number of “European” features which have prompted its inclusion as a peripheral member of the *Standard Average European* linguistic convergence area (cf. Haspelmath, 2001):

- Usage of definite and indefinite articles: *egy könyv* ‘a book’, *a könyv* ‘the book’ (ibid.: 1494),
- Relative clauses with relative pronouns: *a nő, aki jött* ‘the woman who came’ (ibid.),
- Particles used in comparative construction: *olcsóbb, mint az autó* ‘cheaper than the car’ (ibid.:1499) – though note the alternative marking with the adessive and ablative in dialects (Havas et al., 2015),
- Comparative marking on adjectives: *nehez-ebb* difficult-COMP ‘more difficult (ibid.:1501),
- Same encoding for co-participant in an action and instrument used for an action: *színésznő-vel* actress-INS ‘with an actress’, *autó-val* car-INS ‘with a car’ (ibid.:1502) – though note that there is also an ending *-stull/-stül* which can indicate co-participants, but not instruments (Havas et al., 2015).

#### 4. THE VOLGA-KAMA SPRACHBUND AND HUNGARIAN

A number of Uralic and Turkic languages of the Volga and Ural regions of European Russia are often subsumed as the *Volga-Kama Sprachbund* (cf. Bereczki, 1984; Bradley, 2016; Wintschalek, 1993; Helimski, 2003; Agyagási, 2012; Hesselbäck, 2005) or language convergence area: “a geographical region containing a group of three or more languages that share some structural features as a result of contact rather than as a result of accident or inheritance from a common ancestor” (Thomason, 2001: 99). Conventionally, three Turkic languages (Chuvash, Tatar, Bashkir) and two Uralic languages (Mari, Udmurt) are considered core members of this Sprachbund which show strong convergence, while other Uralic languages (the Komi and Mordvin languages) are considered peripheral members, showing some convergence, but less. All of these languages show considerable variation; in some cases, there is an ongoing debate if variants (e.g., for Mari: Meadow Mari, Hill Mari) should be considered dialects or languages. The distribution of contact features between dialects is highly uneven (Bradley, 2016: 11).

Figure 2 shows the political subdivisions of the Russian Federation associated with the relevant speaker communities, which by default only roughly match settlement areas of the speaker communities – the geographical scopes of the individual languages are wide and overlapping.

The subdivisions shown are:

<sup>8</sup>The differing total number of features is due to missing data in some cases.



Turkic (dark grey)	1) Tatarstan (Tatar)
	2) Chuvashia (Chuvash)
	3) Bashkortostan (Bashkir)
Uralic (light grey):	4) Mari El (Mari)
	5) Udmurtia (Udmurt)
	6) Mordovia (Mordvin)
	7) Komi (Komi)
	8) Komi-Permyak Okrug (Komi-Permyak)



Fig. 2. Titular republics and okrugs of the languages of the Volga-Kama Sprachbund<sup>9</sup>

The languages placed within this *Sprachbund* show, in addition to intensive sharing of lexicon, intensive structural convergence on various levels of language (phonology, morphology, syntax). Frequently named typical features of the Sprachbund include the following:

**Borrowed affixes:** A wide range of affixes have been borrowed between the languages of the region, for example a Turkic derivational suffix used among other things to create abstract

<sup>9</sup>Based on [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russia\\_-\\_blank\\_map\\_\(2008-01\).svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russia_-_blank_map_(2008-01).svg).



nouns (Tatar *sâβ* ‘healthy’ > *sâβĥâq* ‘health’, Bashkir *hâβ* ‘healthy’ *hâβĥâq* ‘health’, Chuvash *siv(ă)* ‘healthy’ > *sivlăx* ‘health’) borrowed into Uralic (Mari *taza* ‘healthy’ > *tazalâk* ‘health’, Udmurt *taza* ‘healthy’ > *tazalik* ‘health’) (Saarinen, 1997: 390, Bradley, 2016: 8), the Chuvash comparative case marker (*kayăkla* ‘like a bird’) borrowed into Mari (*kajăkla* ‘id.’) (Hesselbäck, 2005: 140), or causative markers borrowed from Turkic (e.g., Tatar *açulan-* ‘to get angry’ > *açulandır-* ‘to anger’) into Uralic (e.g., Mari *jom-* ‘to get lost’ > *jomdare-* ‘to lose’) (Bradley et al., 2022b: 112–113), assorted indefinite prefixes borrowed from different Turkic languages into Uralic (e.g., Tatar *kem* ‘who’ > *ällä kem* ‘somebody’ ~ Meadow Mari *kö* ‘who’ > *ala-kö* ‘somebody’ ~ Udmurt *kin* ‘who’ > *alo-kin* ‘somebody’; Chuvash *kam* ‘who’ > *ta-kam* ‘somebody’ ~ Hill Mari *ma* ‘what’ > *ta-ma* ‘something’, Erzya *koso* ‘where’ > *ta-koso* ‘somewhere’) (Bereczki, 1984: 311).

**Reduced vowels:** It is typical for the languages of this region to make broad use of reduced (i.e., centralized, shortened, typically unstressed) vowels (see Johanson, 2000), e.g., Mari *omăđămăĥăk* ‘sleeplessness’ (Riese et al., 2014 s.v. ОМЫДЫМЫЛЫК).

**Aspectual auxiliary constructions:** In numerous languages of this region, a non-finite (converbial/gerundial) form of a verb is coupled with a second verb that loses its lexical meaning partly or completely, and only communicates an aspectual value, e.g., Tatar *aşap beter-* ‘(lit.) eating finish’ > ‘to eat up’ (Isanbayev, 1978: 81, see also Schönig, 1984), Bashkir *kölöp jebär-* ‘(lit.) laughing send’ > ‘to break out laughing’ (Landmann, 2015: 101), Chuvash *çarsa lar* ‘(lit.) drying sit.down’ > ‘to dry up’ (Isanbayev, 1978: 73–74, see also Lebedev, 2016), Mari *jöraten şände-* ‘(lit.) loving place’ > ‘to fall in love’ (Riese et al., 2014: йöраташ (-ем), see also Bradley, 2016), Udmurt *kiržasa ležini* ‘(lit.) singing let.go’ > ‘to break out in song’ (Kel’makov, 1975: 96, see also Horváth, 2013).

**Third-person possessive suffixes denoting “whole-part relationship”:** Third-person possessive suffixes can be used to indicate that the marked item, or items, are part of a greater whole that is in some way salient in a conversation, e.g., Mari *iktă-že* one-PX3SG ‘one of them’, *južă-št* some-PX3PL ‘some of them’ (Riese et al., 2014 s.v. ИКТЫЖЕ, ЮЖЫШТ):

- (1) Tatar (Bereczki, 1984: 311)
- |               |              |               |            |
|---------------|--------------|---------------|------------|
| <i>ber-se</i> | <i>qızıl</i> | <i>ike-se</i> | <i>kük</i> |
| one-PX3SG     | red          | two-PX3SG     | blue       |
- ‘One of them is red and two of them are blue.’
- (2) Mari (Simonenko, 2014: 5)
- |            |           |                   |             |               |
|------------|-----------|-------------------|-------------|---------------|
| <i>tač</i> | <i>ik</i> | <i>kniga-žă-m</i> | <i>tudo</i> | <i>lud-eš</i> |
| today      | one       | book-PX3SG-ACC    | (s)he       | read-3SG      |
- ‘Today (s)he is reading one book (of a set that was just discussed).’

**Reduplication denoting intensification:** Total reduplication (i.e. the unchanged repetition of a word) and partial reduplication (i.e. the repetition of a part of a word, with some modification) can be used to denote the stronger intensity of a quality, e.g. Udmurt *gord* ‘red’ > *gord-gord* ‘very red’, Komi-Permyak *görd* ‘red’ > *görd-görd* ‘very red’, Mari *kande* ‘blue’ > *kande-kande* ‘very blue’ (Asztalos et al., 2021: 266). Of special note is the so-called p-reduplication (see also Stachowski, 2014) in which the first syllable of an adjective is used as a prefix, but has the final consonant replaced with a p, e.g. Tatar *qart* ‘old’ > *qap-qart* ‘very old’, Meadow Mari *taza* ‘healthy’ > *tap-taza* ‘very healthy’ (Asztalos et al., 2021: 267).



**Derivational suffixes after case suffixes:** In contrast to the conventional ordering of suffixes in most languages of the world, in languages of the Volga-Kama Region one can encounter derivational suffixes occurring after inflectional suffixes (Bereczki, 1984: 309), e.g., Tatar *ay-da-ğt* moon-INE-ADJ ‘lunar’ (Asylgarayev et al., 2007 s.v. айдагы), Chuvash *vărman-t-i* forest-INE-ADJ ‘(of the) forest’, Hill Mari *akvarium-âštâ-šâ* aquarium-INE-ADJ ‘(of the) aquarium’ (Krasnova et al., 2017: 87), Erzya *vašlo-do-ń* distant-ABL-ADJ ‘from the distance’ (Bereczki, 1984: 309).

**Absolute superlatives:** Languages of the Volga-Kama Sprachbund allow for the creation of superlative forms with a pattern “the X of X” to denote a high intensity: Tatar *yaxşı-dan yaxşı* good-ABL good ‘the very best’, Chuvash *pisäk-ran pisäk* big-ABL big ‘the very biggest’, Mari *ladâra deč ladâra* branchy from branchy ‘the most branchy’, Udmurt *teď’i-leš teď’i* white-ABL white ‘the very whitest’ (Bereczki, 1984: 311).

**Evidential past-tense forms:** Turkic (Tatar, Bashkir) and Uralic (Mari, Udmurt) languages of the region tend to show a wealth of past-tense forms, both morphological and periphrastic (Bradley et al., 2022a: 921–923). In Turkic languages, the general explanation for the wealth of past-tense forms is *evidentiality*: the grammatical encoding of if information is based on direct observation or not (cf. Johanson, 2003). It is common for evidential forms to undergo *mirative extension*, where *mirativity* “covers [a] speaker’s ‘unprepared mind’, unexpected new information, and concomitant surprise” (Aikhenvald, 2006: 195). The exact parameters determining the choice of different past-tense forms in these languages are complex (cf. Bradley et al., 2022a: 921–923, Siegl, 2004), evidentiality and mirativity without a doubt factor into binary tense distinctions found in Mari and Udmurt.

A comprehensive overview of structural convergence in the area is currently (as of March 2023) under construction by the project *Linguistic Diversity in the Volga-Kama Region (LIDI-VOKA)* at the University of Vienna ([lidivoka.univie.ac.at](http://lidivoka.univie.ac.at)); an extensive general typological profile of Meadow Mari, Udmurt, and Komi-Permyak is being created at ELTE University in Budapest (cf. Asztalos et al., 2021). It should be noted here that the presence of an areal feature on its own does not constitute evidence for affinity to a Sprachbund. Features that originated in one involved language family can occur in related languages outside of the region (e.g., Turkish *sağ* ‘healthy’ > *sağlık* ‘health’, Bradley, 2016: 8) and from these can have been borrowed into other languages (cf. also Klumpp, 2002; Behnke, 2020 about the borrowing of aspectual auxiliary constructions into Uralic languages of Siberia from their Turkic neighbors); in the case of morphosyntactic features, these can arise in genealogically unrelated languages by coincidence (cf. Honti, 2013 arguing for an internal development of aspectual auxiliary constructions in Uralic languages and opposing the more widely held contact-linguistic explanation, and Szabó, 2022 for a language-internal explanation for the development of evidential strategies in Udmurt that are generally explained through Turkic influence).

The conventional conception of the Volga-Kama Sprachbund is purely *synchronic*: it includes languages spoken in this region today but cannot properly take into account languages which have been spoken in the region historically and have gone extinct. Hungarian is a special case, though: as detailed above, it was spoken in this region historically, but it did not go extinct. In the lexicon, the influence of Oghur Turkic, to which Chuvash belongs, is apparent. Can Hungarian thus be treated as a historical, marginal member of the Volga-Kama Sprachbund? While the features detailed above as typical for the Volga-Kama Sprachbund are unusual through the lens of contemporary Hungarian, scholars have entertained the notion of



a marginal affiliation. Eugene Helimski suggested a Volga- Kama affiliation of Hungarian as a side thought:

*It seems, however, that the Sprachbund came into existence still earlier and counted in the beginning and in the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> mill. among its members also Magyar (> Hungarian) and Alan (> Ossete), as well as Proto-Permian (> Votyak, Komi), the languages spoken at that time in the Volga-Kama area. A specific accentuation rule (stress mobile due to its recession from high vowels), found in Chuvash, Cheremis, Moksha-Mordvin, Komi-Permyak, Yaz'va Komi, Ossete, and reconstructable for Proto-Hungarian, must have been one of early Volga-Kama Sprachbund manifestations [...] (Helimski, 2003: 160);*

Gábor Bereczki illustrates some structural analogies between the traditional Volga-Kama languages and Hungarian, esp. Csángó Hungarian, but does not commit himself to what he is observing here: a historic contact feature or a coincidence, though he does attribute centuries of Turkic influence on Hungarian as a likely contributing factor to structural convergence (Bereczki, 1984: 307). “Volga- Kama-like” features in Hungarian he observes are:

- A derivational suffix following a case suffix in the Csangó Hungarian adjective *leán-t-i* girl-LOC-ADJ<sup>10</sup> ‘from girlhood’ (ibid. 309). Standard Hungarian *nagy-ban-i piac* large-INE-ADJ market ‘wholesale market’ follows the same pattern.
- A Hungarian superlative construction, illustrated by the example *szebb-nél szebb* prettier-ADE pretty more beautiful than beautiful’ (ibid. 311).
- The historic complex past tense system in Hungarian (mostly lost in contemporary language), which he tries to explain through Turkic influence (ibid.: 313).

Other scholars have built upon his likening of the historic Hungarian tense system to Turkic: In contrast to contemporary Hungarian, earlier forms of the language employed more than one past tense. While some linguists claim that the compound past tense forms (forms such as *megy vala*, *megy volt*, *ment vala*, *ment volt* ‘(s)he went’) were a result of inner convergence with Latin influence, others support a Turkic origin, i.e. code-copying of the system (cf. É. Kiss, 2013).

Additionally, some parallels of the above-mentioned aspectual auxiliary constructions can also be found in Hungarian, such as *sír-va fakad* cry-PTCP burst ‘to burst into tears’ (Horváth, 2012: 9). Hungarian also uses reduplication as a productive category, however the expression of intensification is not its main function: *néha-néha* lit. ‘sometimes-sometimes’ means ‘very rarely’, for example. Hungarian rather employs full reduplication in order to express aspectual meanings (e.g., *ki-ki-néz* out-out-look.3SG ‘(s)he is looking out [many times]’) or to form distributive numerals (cf. Brdar et al., 2023 [to appear]).

## 5. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Evidence for interactions between Hungarian and the languages of the Volga-Kama Sprachbund from morphosyntax remains plausible, but anecdotal. Several factors are conducive towards viewing structural features of Hungarian through the lens of the Volga-Kama Sprachbund:

<sup>10</sup>In the source *-t* is glossed as an inessive ending.



- Lexical evidence for contacts with relevant languages (esp. Oghur Turkic) is strong.
- Historical records indicating that some form of Hungarian was spoken in present-day Bashkortostan until the 13th century CE are convincing; archaeological evidence potentially supports historic accounts.

However, the picture was and is muddled by a number of factors:

- The assumed disappearance of Eastern Hungarian community in the 13th century and the extinction of the completely undocumented language spoken by it. Notably, to the best of our knowledge there are also no known Hungarian contact features in the modern languages of the Volga-Kama region, i.e. there is also no linguistic evidence through language contact.
- Later Turkic-Hungarian contacts have had a structural influence on Hungarian as well; written records of Old Hungarian are comparatively sparse and do not allow for a sufficiently good view of Hungarian before more recent Turkic influence.
- As both Hungarian and the languages of the Volga-Kama-Sprachbund have a strong tendency towards SOV word ordering, typological pressures on all of these languages are comparable.
- None of the “Volga-Kama-like” features documented in (oftentimes dialectal and Hungarian) forms of Hungarian – accentuation rules, a duality of tense systems possibly governed by evidentiality, a peculiar comparative construction, an unusual suffix ordering found in one word – can be, contact-linguistically, considered a smoking gun: they are not so typologically rare or specific in their realization that parallel development should be excluded as a possibility.

This paper could, thus, as expected not offer a clear solution to any questions of identity plaguing the Hungarian language. As is the case regarding national identity, however, a “Eastern” component does not have to be framed in contradiction to a “Western” component: facets of identity are not mutually exclusionary.

## ABBREVIATIONS

<	(object to left, subject to right)
1	1 <sup>st</sup> person
2	2 <sup>nd</sup> person
3	3 <sup>rd</sup> person
ABL	ablative
ACC	accusative
ADE	adessive
ADJ	adjective
COMP	comparative
COND	conditional
INE	inessive
INS	instrumental
LOC	locative
OBJ	objective conjugation
PL	plural



POT	potential
PTCP	participle
PX	possessive suffix
SG	singular

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