
Reviewed by Mikael Thompson, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

Juha A. Janhunen has written a thorough study of spoken Mongolian. An introductory chapter (1–20) is followed by chapters on segmental structure (21–55), morpheme structure (57–93), nominal morphology (95–141), verbal morphology (143–84), phrasal syntax (185–222), clausal syntax (223–61), and complex sentences (263–89). The end matter includes the transcription of a folk tale (291–96), a short table of paradigms (297–99), an orthographic chart (301–303), a bibliography (305–11), and a grammatical index. (This reviewer read a preliminary version of the first three chapters and provided some data.) There is little to quibble with in any respect; two topics merit comment.

Mongolian is known among phonologists for its system of vowel harmony, which is usually presented as a front-back opposition with i front but transparent. In fact, due to vowel shifts, most Mongolian dialects are better analyzed as having ATR (advanced tongue root) or pharyngeal harmony in reflexes of modern Mongolian simple vowels, and conditioned fronting of former back vowels has left little phonetic basis to Mongolian vowel harmony (78–79). J treats the vowel system well, but his transcription, based on contemporary pronunciation, is counter-intuitive: digraphs indicate both quality and quantity (e.g. the short vowels ü, u, ö, and o, pronounced roughly [u], [o], [ü], and [ö], are transcribed u, ou, eu, and o; 34). Moreover, as it differs from the standard transcription and that adopted in Svantesson, Tsendina, Karlsson, and Franzén’s The phonology of Mongolian (Oxford University Press, 2005), this makes his data less accessible.

Morphologically, Mongolian is usually presented as having seven cases. In fact, the status of Mongolian case endings as inflectional endings distinct from derivational endings can be challenged. As Mongolian lacks productive agreement, cases must be defined by verbal and postpositional government, and by alternations in pronominal stems. These criteria do not entirely agree. In addition, some derivational suffixes can be productively added after certain case endings. On this point, J’s analysis could be sharpened: while J treats the suffix -x used to make the predicate form of the genitive and the attributive form of the dative-locative as a nominal case marker of sorts (114–17), it is also used to form the attributive of the instrumental, certain postpositions, and certain adverbial verb forms (e.g. tal-aar ‘with respect to’ < tal ‘side’, tö löö ‘for (beneficiary)’, and -tal ‘until’ all may take -x), and should better be treated as a derivational suffix indicating the government of a word form. In general, grammatical roles and functions in Mongolian need detailed re-examination; this book provides a good starting point.

Although Mongolian has been the subject of a significant body of research, a study summarizing and analyzing the language as a whole is needed. This book fills that need. The data are reliable, the coverage is comprehensive, and the treatment of unsettled questions is judicious. It is highly recommended to all Mongolists and will interest many other linguists.