

The Geographic and Linguistic Status of the Silk Roads

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Even though the languages that are spoken and written in the territories crossed by commercial and cultural routes between Asia and Europe – the “Silk Roads” – have been the object of research for many decades, the popular notion of “languages along the Silk Road” is of fairly recent origin. It is worth giving some thought to the problem of whether, or to what extent, it is actually possible and practical to continue with linguistic research in the context of the “Silk Roads.”

Just a few years ago, during the Fourth European Seminar on Central Asian Studies at Bamberg in 1991, I had occasion to draw attention to the fact that to discuss linguistic problems in connection with the “Silk Roads” raises considerable difficulties due to the complexity and range of a subject that covers nearly two thousand years and involves enormous distances and territories ranging from East Turkestan to India, Central Asia, Syria, Byzantium and Rome, on the one hand, and numerous nations and ethnic groups speaking and writing their own as well as loan languages and dialects, on the other.¹ I was struck by the virtual incompatibility of two aspects that, though quite different, were artificially brought together on the same chronological and cultural plane, i.e., the study of trade routes that were being explored mainly to understand the economics, and the study of human speech that is subject to certain physiological and sociological rules and has its own special methodology. I called attention to some ambiguous terms during the Bamberg discussions and finally asked the provocative question: “What are we really talking about?” I was convinced that “Silk Road” is a term that lacks precision; it is too broad, rather metaphorical and as such impractical and unusable

for scholarly purposes. It appeared to me to have become nothing but a popular catchword that demanded further detailed explanation in scholarly discourse. Basically I have not changed my opinion since that meeting.

We should realize that specialists still differ in their opinions about the geographic shape of what is called the "Silk Road." There is even widespread doubt about whether it is proper to use terms like "Silk Road" or "Silk Roads", "branch", "stretch", "trail," "highway;" or in German: "*Seidenstrassen*," "*Hauptstrassen*," "*Verkehrswege*," "*Verkehrslinien*," "*Abzweigung*," "*Zweig der Seidenroute*" etc. The number of smaller road stations as well as their ancient and present location are also unclear, as are the existence and layout of local feeder roads etc. Just compare a few sketches or maps illustrating how the celebrated "Silk Road" was routed and you will detect more or less fundamental discrepancies.

What in particular is in dispute is the "Silk Road's" starting point. It is generally known that the first scholar to use the term "*Seidenstrasse*" was Ferdinand von Richthofen in the past century. He employed it to denote those Central Asian routes that served China, between 114 B.C. and 127 A.D., as conduits for its trade with western countries situated along the Oxus and Jaxartes as well as with India. Only in 1910 did A. Herrmann propose to extend the notion as far as Syria. Basing his studies on A. Wylie's interpretation of the Han Annals, Herrmann asserted that the "Silk Road" started in Yümen kuan and Yang kuan, the two gates of the Great Wall, and that it ended not – as had sometimes been assumed – in Antioch, but in Tyre.² Subsequent researchers, relying mainly on the studies by E. Chavannes, tended to pinpoint Chang'an or Dunhuang as the starting points of the "Road."³

These points as well as others lead me to believe that there exist at least two meanings of the term, i.e., one in the strict sense and another one in the wider sense, with all its consequences for other fields of historical research. In the first case, the "Silk Road" is conceived of as a relatively uniform trade route running from Gansu up to, say, the mouth of the river Don, comprising two main land routes which bifurcate in Central Asia and then meet again. The sea route or a combined land-sea route is viewed as a development of a later epoch and is hence of secondary importance. In the sec-

ond case, the idea of the "Silk Road" has been extended eastward to Korea, if not even to Japan. In the West, the "Silk Road" is assumed not to have ended in Mesopotamia, but to have stretched to the Caucasus and the Mediterranean, including Egypt, and even to eastern and central Europe. This broad conception of the "Silk Road" is marked by its numerous "formal" branches, on the one hand, and by its many seemingly independent trade routes, on the other, that in fact crossed it at several points and created additional opportunities for transporting all sorts of goods, including silk. Most of these routes no longer exist and have been covered up by the inexorable movement of the deserts.

Generally accepted is the existence of two main routes of the "Silk Road," i.e., the Northern Route and the Southern Route, supplemented by the Middle Route, the Sea Route (Canton – Bangkok – Madras – Goa – Karachi – Muscat – Alexandria), and by combined part-land and part-sea routes.⁴ We know that a land route connecting eastern Europe and China existed in prehistoric times. According to Herodotus's description of ca. 430 B.C., the Northern Route started at the mouth of the river Don, a region belonging to the Sarmatians; it then crossed the Volga (Oarus)⁵ and continued to the Ural river. Next it ran to the Aral Sea and to the mouth of the Syr-daria, and thence to the regions inhabited by the Sauromates, the Budin people and the Serers-Issedons, before it finally reached Gansu.⁶ As to the Southern Route, its numerous stretches and stops still require expert reconstruction, since the description of it in Chinese sources and in a manuscript in Saka (the Staël-Holstein scroll from the eleventh Century) remains very incomplete. It is supposed to have encompassed a stretch running from Khotan to the Uighur State in Gansu. Its western part extended from Mesopotamia across Ekbatana to Sogdiana and finally to the river Silis or Jaxartes.⁷ It is practically impossible to identify all branches of the "Silk Roads" and the smaller routes which crossed them. Here are a few examples: the North-East route, connecting Turfan and Korea across northern China and Manchuria; the route to the Indus Valley across the Karakorum passes;⁸ the route along the Black Sea shore from Tamatarkha to Trapezunt; the route along the Kuban river across the Caucasus.⁹ This list could easily be expanded.

These examples illustrate merely one aspect of the problem, though a fundamental, i.e., geographical, one. They are intended to highlight that the term with which we are dealing should be used with extreme caution since the reality it is supposed to describe has not been sufficiently investigated and defined until now. It may serve in a very limited way as a framework within which certain groups of languages and dialects developed and interacted with one another. Needless to say that these languages played a cultural role and should first be submitted to an internal analysis.

In fact, many serious problems arise if we want to link the geographic and socio-economic reality of the vast areas of Asia and Europe to linguistic questions. It is clear that the acceptance of the idea of the "Silk Road" in the wider sense expands the territory to be submitted to linguistic analysis so much that, practically speaking, no reasonable research is possible.

It should be evident that all the vague generalities concerning the linguistic geography of the ancient languages of Central Asia and its adjacent territories play no more than a secondary role. Linking them directly to various events that happened on some caravan route can in no way help us to develop serious hypotheses. Manuscripts and xylographs which, despite their great number and all our efforts to make them available, still await publication, must remain the foundation of our knowledge of those dead languages. Annemarie von Gabain has repeatedly reminded us that texts have been given priority over all other sources of information; still, when we are dealing with the history and culture of a given people, inscriptions of all sorts are also of great importance.

Yet, is it possible to determine the linguistic and ethnic attribution of the peoples who inhabited a particular region on the basis of a number of recovered manuscripts, as was often the case with those found along the "Silk Roads" of East Turkestan? It is by no means easy to draw firm conclusions in such cases, if we remind ourselves of the frequent migrations of both those peoples and manuscripts. An accumulation of texts in a given language seems to indicate, however, that they were used and understood. This is particularly true of texts of a religious character. At the same time, we cannot know whether the same language was commonly spoken in daily social intercourse.

Since the main object of our investigation is language we are, roughly speaking, confronted with three linguistic phenomena on a diachronic plane: 1) common languages, dialects, or even slangs that were used by merchants, pilgrims, missionaries, envoys or the military and others in a given epoch to facilitate human contact on the caravan routes; 2) languages or local dialects spoken and in rare cases also written, by local populations (often very mixed) who lived in oases, towns, and villages through which a given stretch of one of the "Silk Roads" was passing; 3) languages recorded in texts of various kinds that have been found locally in ruined buildings, caves, stupas, temples, towers etc., i.e., languages which, as a rule, were no longer in use or used in a limited way when the "Silk Roads" were being travelled. It should be added that speaking about languages with respect to the Sea Route does not seem to make much sense.

It would appear to be unnecessary to characterize in detail those languages and dialects, that are to be found in the texts from East Turkestan and are hence thought to be related to the "Silk Roads." Let us merely mention some of their names. Starting with India, we must take account of Sanskrit and of certain Prākritis (especially the western type and the Gandhari); then there is Tokharian "A" and Tokharian "B", Scythian (used *inter alia* by the Serers-Isse-dones); next comes the Middle Iranian group of languages with Choresmian, Khotanese (Khotan-Saka), Hephthalite, Parthian, Saka, and Middle Persian, followed by the Altaic languages along with a practically unknown language of the Xiong-nu; there are also the Mongolian, Manchu and Turkic languages represented by Old Turkic with probably two dialects, Uighur and Karakhanid; finally Chinese, Tibetan, Tangut, probably also the language of the Hsi-Hsia; and last but not least the Semitic family of languages with Syriac and probably also Hebrew. As regards the earlier period in the western stretches of the "Silk Road," the following languages should be added: Arabic, Aramaic, Greek, New Persian, perhaps also Latin and some Slavic dialects.¹⁰

The list of systems of writing, mainly alphabetic, for recording the above languages is also familiar: Arabic, Aramaic, Brahmi, Chinese, Estranghelo, Greek, Hebraic, Hephthalite, Kidan, Khorosthi, Latin, Manichaeic, Phags-pa; there are the runes of the

Turkic type, with at least two variants, Sogdian and Tibetan. The intersection of these two lists constitutes the philological and linguistic reality that confronts user of the Turkestan collections.

A special kind of linguistic research relates to the migrations of people, and this naturally also applies to the "Silk Roads." This research focuses on the transfer of linguistic elements from one language to another. Travel and the establishment of trading posts abroad were, of course, conducive to various ways of borrowing, both oral and written. Unable to study the former, we have made the latter an object of intensive investigation. Special attention has been paid to loan words in texts of the *Kök Türks*, Uighurs, and Khirgizes. It is generally known that such words refer mainly to religion, political and social organization, trade, and every-day life. It is quite a difficult problem to ascertain whether a given word was foreign or loaned.¹¹ Finally, the specification of so-called "*Kulturwörter*" is also far from satisfactory, especially with regard to ancient periods.

Still, in giving priority to the study of texts written in original languages we should not forget that credible information about the conditions under which the "Silk Road" languages were used can also be really valuable. Data relating to the production, transportation, and translation of manuscripts are of special value. As far as spoken languages are concerned, bilingualism and multilingualism pose particularly fascinating problems, as do the qualifications and skills of the guide-translators as well as the slang used along the caravan routes, a *lingua franca* or *koiné* of a particular epoch. We cannot exclude the notion that we should distinguish between the idiom that was a medium of broad communication (no doubt quite mixed) among the users of a given "Silk Road" or one part of it, and the professional, semi-secret slang of the tradesmen. It is regrettable that we have so little information about the dialectological differentiation of the idioms in question.

The position of the translators of written texts, chiefly of religious content, is bound to be of great importance. We admire the results of their prodigious activity. However, only in very rare instances do we have their names. The place where the translation was done is often also unknown. It is reasonable to suppose that the texts were not produced at the stations along the "Silk Roads," but in remote localities from which they were then imported. At

the same time we know that most of them were produced in Buddhist, Christian, and Manichaean convents with very busy special translation offices (in German: *Schreibstuben*).¹²

Some translators were employed by a variety of faiths. In Turfan the texts in Sanskrit, Syriac, Parthian, and Middle Persian were translated into Sogdian, Tokharian, and Uighur. If the translators into Uighur did not have Buddhist or Sanskrit texts at their disposal, they made use of Sogdian and Tokharian translations.¹³

Relatively little is known about the bi- and multilingualism of inhabitants and newcomers along the "Silk Roads" in their everyday lives. It seems that the users of the trade routes – religious men, merchants and others – when starting on their long-distance expeditions, either had themselves a knowledge of some foreign languages that was greater than that of their tribesmen, or they used interpreters. Such knowledge was indispensable for acquiring information, paying customs duties at check points, and engaging caravan men etc. According to Ibn Hurdadbeh, the Jewish traders from Mesopotamia, called *radanniya*, were reputed to have a knowledge of Arabic, Greek, Persian, as well as Spanish, French, German, and a certain "Slavic language." A group of Jews living in Sogdiana used New Persian as a *lingua franca* in their commercial correspondence, mixed with Sogdian and Arabic words.¹⁴

The problem of interpreters, their qualifications and the places in which they were recruited is quite perplexing. It is evident that – amateurs or more probably professionals that they were – the traffic on the caravan routes could not thrive without them. Their role in creating and proliferating the trade idiom was no doubt of fundamental importance. Their number must have been considerable throughout the ages, but they have remained anonymous. In this connection the following information relating to the early period of the "Silk Road" seems interesting. According to Herodotus (IV, 23, as reported by H.W. Haussig), Greek merchants, passing through a region inhabited by the Argypaioi had to change, on their way to Central Asia, their interpreters as much as seven times.¹⁵ In another case, we are told that the Varagians used to have Greek interpreters at their disposal.¹⁶

Clearly, the linguistic problems connected with the "Silk Roads" must be considered against the broader background of the cultural

development of the adjacent territories during different epochs. In fact, these territories are closely linked to a cultural exchange on an exceptionally large scale: along with travellers and goods there also moved the products of foreign thought, skill, and imagination. Both tradesmen and pilgrims, missionaries, envoys and diplomats who frequently accompanied them usually played the role of newsmongers; they invented new ideas, beliefs, legends, and pieces of art. In this connection individual sections of the "Silk Roads" and the neighboring territories must be studied not only in terms of economic history, but also as regions in which fresh ideas, concepts, and intellectual currents proliferated and were received.

It should always be remembered that the "Silk Roads" crossed enormous, often deserted areas of south-eastern Europe, Anatolia, Central Asia, the territories situated roughly to the north of the Caspian Sea and Iran in the West all the way to China proper in the East; from southern Siberia in the North to the Himalayas in the South. The region in question corresponds broadly to the contemporary territories of Afghanistan, East and West Turkestan, Mongolia, China, and Tibet. This means that the modern researcher of the "Silk Roads" cannot be indifferent to the many aspects of the history and culture both of the ancient and the Byzantine Greeks, Romans as well as of the Scythians, Sakas, Parthians, the T'a Yüen-chin (probably the Serers-Issedons), the Xiong-nu (the Huns), the Hephthalites, the Avars (Var-khionites and Pseudo-Avars), Onogurs, Bulgars, Khazars, the T'u-küe, Uighurs, Kirghizes, Tatars, Mongols, Tanguts, Chinese, and Tibetans; of the Tokharians, Bactrians, Sogdians, Alans, Armenians, Georgians, Slavs, Jews, Arabs, the forefathers of the Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Ottoman Turks, Pechenegs, Polovcians, and others. Small wonder that work on the "Silk Roads" has become an important subject for Oriental Studies.

As to questions of religion, including animistic and shamanistic cults, the expansion of the great religions of the ancient and medieval world can easily be seen. Apart from the beliefs of the Greeks and Romans, the religions of the peoples of the Ancient Near East and of Central Asia, China, India, and Tibet (Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Buddhism-Lamaism, Confucianism, Daoism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity in the form of Nestorianism and

others) must be considered. And along with new religious ideas many sacred books travelled up and down the "Silk Roads."

It is interesting that there appeared among the travellers of the "Silk Roads" also troupes of dancers, acrobats, actors, and musicians. In their case, pantomime allowed them to overcome linguistic difficulties. The role played by these groups in cultural exchange along the "Silk Roads" should not be underestimated.

These remarks on the geographic shape of the Asian and European caravan routes and of the languages used along them aim not only to increase our knowledge of a few historical aspects of these difficult problems, but also to offer a more critical look at the research methods that have been used until now. At the same time these lines reflect my admiration for this incredible network that served as a link between the world's great civilizations as virtual "Roads of Dialogue."

Notes

1. E. Tryjarski, "Languages along the Silk Road. A Few Critical Remarks on a Knotty Problem," in: I. Baldauf and M. Friedrich (eds.), *Bamberger Zentralasiestudien. Konferenzakten ESCAS IV, Bamberg 8.-12. Oktober 1991*, (Islamkundliche Untersuchungen, vol. 185), Berlin, 1994, pp. 123-32.
2. See A. Herrmann, *Die alten Seidenstrassen zwischen China und Syrien. Beiträge zur alten Geographie Asiens*, Berlin, 1910, pp. 10, 17, 78.
3. The term "Silk Road" has been criticized, among others, by P. Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road. The Search for the Lost Cities and Treasures of Chinese Central Asia*, London, 1980, p. 17.
4. A. von Gabain, "Sprachen und Völker im Tarim-Becken entlang der Seidenstrasse," in: H.G. Franz (ed.), *Kunst und Kultur der Seidenstrasse*, Graz, 1987, p. 93. H. W. Haussig, *Die Geschichte Zentralasiens und der Seidenstrasse in vorislamischer Zeit*, Darmstadt, 1983, p. 11. Numerous details about these routes were earlier discussed by A. Herrmann, *Die alten Seidenstrassen*, passim.
5. Since the nineteenth century the identity of Volga and Oarus has been assumed, e.g., in the edition of Herodotus by H. Stein, vol. I, Berlin, 1870, p. 273. See also George Rawlinson (*History of Herodotus. A New English Version*, vol. III, London, 1875, p. 101): "The Oarus is generally supposed to represent the Volga (Ritter, Rennell, Monnert)."
6. H. W. Haussig, "Die ältesten Nachrichten der griechischen und lateinischen Quellen über die Routen der Seidenstrasse nach Zentral- und Ostasien," in: *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, vol. XVIII, 1-4 (1983), pp. 9-14; idem, *Die Geschichte*, pp. 14-15.
7. H. W. Haussig, *Die Geschichte ... in vorislamischer Zeit*, pp. 20ff, 260.

8. Idem, *Die Geschichte Zentralasiens und der Seidenstrasse in islamischer Zeit*, Darmstadt, 1988, p. 25.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
10. See especially the fundamental work by A. von Gabain, in: K. Rohrborn and W. Veenker (eds.), *Sprachen des Buddhismus in Zentralasien. Vorträge des Hamburger Symposiums vom 2. Juli bis 5. Juli 1981*, Wiesbaden, 1983 (vol. XVI of the publications of Societas Uralo-Altaica).
11. There exists a rich, though sparse literature on loan words in Asian languages. On these words in the Turkic languages see, e.g., K.H. Menges, *The Turkic Languages and Peoples. An Introduction to Turkic Studies*, Wiesbaden, 1968, pp. 165-79; Sir Gerard Clauson, *Turkish and Mongolian Studies*, London, 1962, pp. 15f., 51f., 63, 77, 129, 168, 172, 175f., 178, 184, 232ff.
12. H. W. Haussig, *Die Geschichte ... in vorislamischer Zeit*, pp. 208-9.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 209.
14. Idem, *Die Geschichte ... in islamischer Zeit*, pp. 156, 208.
15. Idem, *Die Geschichte ... in vorislamischer Zeit*, p. 17.
16. Idem, *Die Geschichte ... in islamischer Zeit*, p. 181.