

# A language vitality assessment for Mongolian in Inner Mongolia, China ...and a test of UNESCO's assessment guidelines

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Bloomington, Indiana

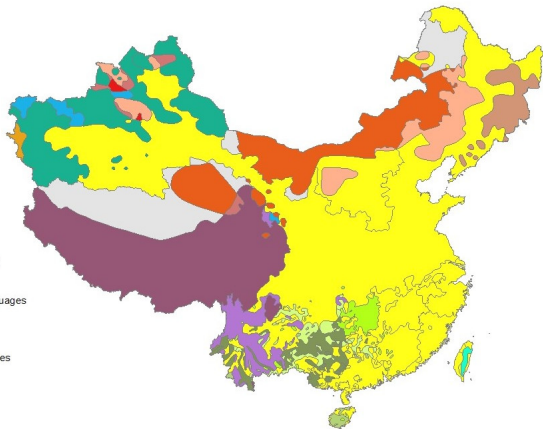
October 08, 2016

# Why this topic and this approach

- Wondering how Mongolian in China is doing presently, and what its future prospects are like
- Wondering about “borderline” endangered languages, cf. Javanese in Indonesia (Ravindranath & Cohn, 2014) and Northern Khmer in Thailand (Vail, 2006)
- Wondering how well UNESCO’s language endangerment scale can capture the situation

## ACASIAN - DIGITAL LANGUAGE ATLAS OF CHINA

### Major Language Areas



data src: <http://dvn.iq.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/acasian>

map: Merrick Lex Berman

# Mongolic and Inner Mongolia



# Target of this assessment

By “Mongolian in Inner Mongolia” I mean:

*Mongolic languages/dialects/varieties...*

*spoken in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China...*

*(or in adjacent areas of Heilongjiang, Jilin, Liaoning and Hebei)...*

*by people who identify themselves as Mongols*

*(and/or are classified by the Chinese government as Mongols).*

- Examples: Khorchin, Chakhar, Baarin, Barg, Ordos, Kharchin-Tümed, Khamnigan, Ejine
- On dialect classification see e.g. Svantesson et al. (2005); Bayancoyту (2007); Janhunen (2012); IMAR Local Annals Office (2013).

## About the UNESCO guidelines, 2003 version

- Document adopted by the International Expert Meeting on UNESCO Programme Safeguarding of Endangered Languages Paris, 10–12 March 2003
- PDF available from <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/language-vitality/>
- “No single factor alone can be used to assess a language’s vitality or its need for documentation... . A language that is ranked highly according to one criterion may deserve immediate and urgent attention due to other factors.” (UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003)

## **Language vitality factors**

- 1: Intergenerational Language Transmission
- 2: Absolute Number of Speakers
- 3: Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population
- 4: Shifts in Domains of Language Use
- 5: Response to New Domains and Media
- 6: Availability of Materials for Language Education and Literacy

## **Language attitude factors**

- 7: Governmental & Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies Including Official Status & Use
- 8: Community Members' Attitudes towards Their Own Language

## **Urgency of the need for documentation**

- 9: Type and Quality of Documentation

## **Round 1: the full 9-factor assessment**

- Personal judgment based on experience, reading, and discussion with other researchers and experts
- Special attention to variation: *regional, urban-rural and interpersonal*

## **Round 2: an in-depth look at certain factors (transmission, population)**

- Data from an ongoing study of intergenerational transmission



# 1: Intergenerational Language Transmission

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## Factor 1: Intergenerational Language Transmission

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Degree of endangerment	Grade	Speaker Population
safe	5	The language is used by all ages, from children up.
unsafe	4	The language is used by some children in all domains; it is used by all children in limited domains.
definitively endangered	3	The language is used mostly by the parental generation and up.
severely endangered	2	The language is used mostly by the grandparental generation and up.
critically endangered	1	The language is used by very few speakers, mostly of great-grandparental generation.
extinct	0	There are no speakers.

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### Color Scheme

Taking Inner Mongolia as a whole

Accounting for regional, dialectal or interpersonal variation

## 2: Absolute Number of Speakers

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Factor 2: Absolute Number of Speakers

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*“It is impossible to establish a hard and fast rule for interpreting absolute numbers, but a small speech community is always at risk.”*

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# 3: Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population

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## Factor 3: Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population

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Degree of endangerment	Grade	Proportion of speakers within the total reference population
safe	5	All speak the language.
unsafe	4	Nearly all speak the language.
definitively endangered	3	A majority speak the language.
severely endangered	2	A minority speak the language.
critically endangered	1	Very few speak the language.
extinct	0	None speak the language.

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## 4: Shifts in Domains of Language Use

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### Factor 4: Shifts in Domains of Language Use

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Degree of endangerment	Grade	Domains and functions
universal use	5	The language is used in all domains and for all functions.
multilingual parity	4	Two or more languages may be used in most social domains and for most functions.
dwindling domains	3	The language is used in home domains and for many functions, but the dominant language begins to penetrate even home domains.
limited or formal domains	2	The language is used in limited social domains and for several functions.
highly limited domains	1	The language is used only in a very restricted number of domains and for very few functions.
extinct	0	The language is not used in any domain for any function.

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## 5: Response to New Domains and Media

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### Factor 5: Response to New Domains and Media

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Degree of endangerment	Grade	Domains and functions
dynamic	5	The language is used in all new domains.
robust/active	4	The language is used in most new domains.
receptive	3	The language is used in many new domains.
coping	2	The language is used in some new domains.
minimal	1	The language is used in only a few new domains.
inactive	0	The language is not used in any new domains.

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# 6: Availability of Materials for Language Education and Literacy

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## Factor 6: Availability of Materials for Language Education and Literacy

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Grade	Availability of written materials
5	There is an established orthography and a literacy tradition with grammars, dictionaries, texts, literature and everyday media. Writing in the language is used in administration and education.
4	Written materials exist and children may be exposed to the written form at school. Writing in the language is not used in administration.
3	Written materials exist and children may be exposed to the written form at school. Literacy is not promoted through print media.
2	Written materials exist, but they may only be useful for some members of the community; for others they may have a symbolic significance. Literacy education in the language is not a part of the school curriculum.
1	A practical orthography is known to the community and some material is being written.
0	No orthography is available to the community.

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# 7: Governmental & Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies Including Official Status & Use

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## Factor 7: Governmental & Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies Including Official Status & Use

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Degree of endangerment	Grade	Official attitudes towards language
equal support	5	All languages are protected.
differentiated support	4	Minority languages are protected primarily as the language of private domains. The use of the language is prestigious.
passive assimilation	3	No explicit policy exists for minority languages.
active assimilation	2	Government encourages assimilation to the dominant language. There is no protection for minority languages.
forced assimilation	1	The dominant language is the sole official language, while non-dominant languages are neither recognized nor protected.
prohibition	0	Minority languages are prohibited.

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# 8: Community Members' Attitudes towards Their Own Language

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## Factor 8: Community Members' Attitudes towards Their Own Language

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Grade	Community members' attitudes towards language
5	<i>All</i> members value their language and wish to see it promoted.
4	<i>Most</i> members support language maintenance.
3	<i>Many</i> members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.
2	<i>Some</i> members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.
1	Only <i>a few</i> members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.
0	<i>No one</i> cares if the language is lost; all prefer to use the dominant language.

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# 9: Type and Quality of Documentation

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## Factor 9: Type and Quality of Documentation

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Nature of documentation	Grade	Language documentation
superlative	5	There are comprehensive grammars and dictionaries, extensive texts, and a constant flow of language materials. Abundant annotated high-quality audio and video recordings exist.
good	4	There is one good grammar and a number of adequate grammars, dictionaries, texts, literature and occasionally updated everyday media; adequate annotated high-quality audio and video recordings exist.
fair	3	There may be an adequate grammar or sufficient numbers of grammars, dictionaries and texts but no everyday media; audio and video recordings of varying quality or degree of annotation may exist.
fragmentary	2	There are some useful grammatical sketches, word-lists and texts useful for limited linguistic research but with inadequate coverage. Audio and video recordings of varying quality, with or without any annotation, may exist.
inadequate	1	There are only a few grammatical sketches, short word-lists and fragmentary texts. Audio and video recordings do not exist, are of unusable quality or are completely un-annotated.
undocumented	0	No material exists.

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## Summary of Mongolian's status

“Languages cannot be assessed simply by adding the numbers; we therefore suggest such simple addition *not be done*. Instead, the language vitality factors given above must be examined according to the purpose of the assessment.” (UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003, 17)

# Summary of Mongolian's status

Factor	Rating					
1: Intergenerational Language Transmission	0	1	2	3	4	5
2: Absolute Number of Speakers	<i>A few million (all dialects combined)</i>					
3: Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population	0	1	2	3	4	5
4: Shifts in Domains of Language Use	0	1	2	3	4	5
5: Response to New Domains and Media	0	1	2	3	4	5
6: Availability of Materials for Language Education and Literacy	0	1	2	3	4	5
7: Governmental & Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies Including Official Status & Use	0	1	2	3	4	5
8: Community Members' Attitudes towards Their Own Language	0	1	2	3	4	5
9: Type and Quality of Documentation	0	1	2	3	4	5

## Questionnaire:

- Self-assessment of spoken and written Mongolian and Chinese ability
- Assessment of parents' (or caregivers') language abilities
- Childhood residence, current residence
- Some other stuff

## Fieldworkers:

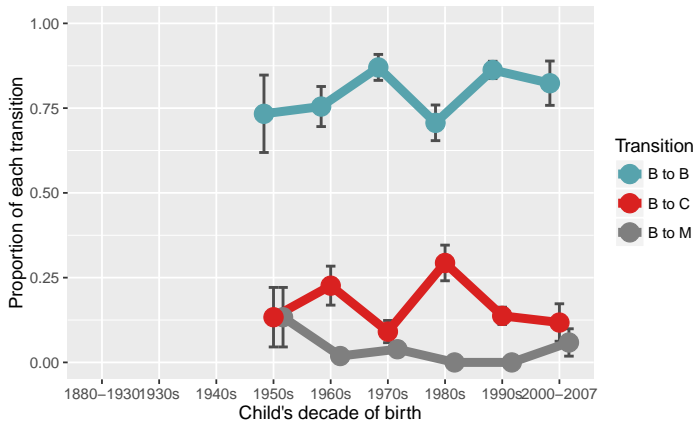
- All bilingual\* in Mongolian and Chinese
- Ten local Mongols and me

## Sample Composition:

- Ethnic Mongols from Inner Mongolia (79% Mongolian-speaking)
- Inner Mongolia, October 2014-July 2015
- Recruited via social network and institutional channels
- 600+ collected, 592 analyzed to date
- Born between 1930 and 2008, mostly 1960-1999

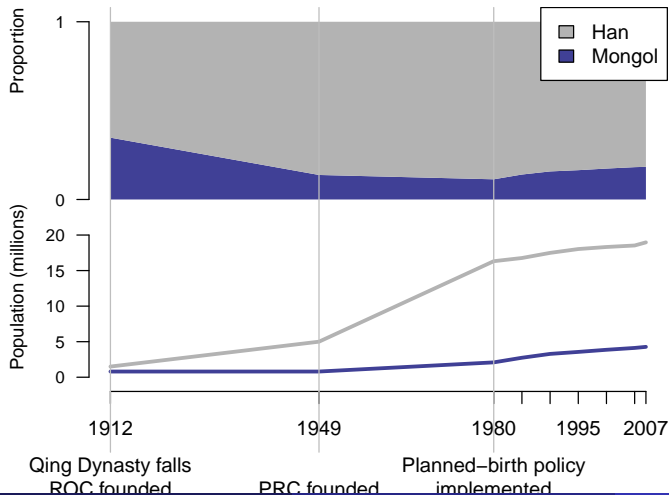
# Intergenerational transmission over time

Proportion of maintenance vs. shift by decade, given bilingual (B) elders



# A closer look at population ratios

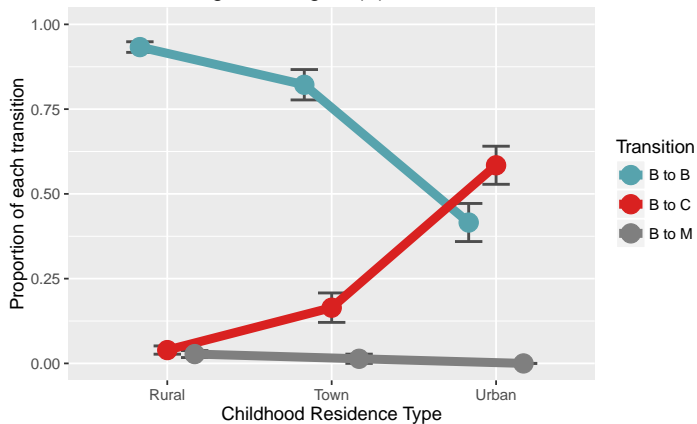
**Proportion and absolute population of Mongols and Han in Inner Mongolia, 1912–2007**



From census figures reported in Song et al. (1987) and Zhao & Yang (2009).

# Transmission and urbanization

Maintenance vs. shift by urban/rural residence, given bilingual (B) elders



# Recap of Mongolian's status

Factor	Rating					
1: Intergenerational Language Transmission	0	1	2	3	4	5
2: Absolute Number of Speakers	<i>A few million (all dialects combined)</i>					
3: Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population	0	1	2	3	4	5
4: Shifts in Domains of Language Use	0	1	2	3	4	5
5: Response to New Domains and Media	0	1	2	3	4	5
6: Availability of Materials for Language Education and Literacy	0	1	2	3	4	5
7: Governmental & Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies Including Official Status & Use	0	1	2	3	4	5
8: Community Members' Attitudes towards Their Own Language	0	1	2	3	4	5
9: Type and Quality of Documentation	0	1	2	3	4	5



# Thoughts on the UNESCO methodology

- Captures Mongolian's situation better than GIDS/EGIDS (Lewis & Simons, 2010; Lewis et al., 2013)
- Best suited for informal, subjective evaluations?
- Missing piece: economic pressures

# Acknowledgements

- Field research was funded by a Fulbright US Student Grant and a UW Boeing Graduate Research Abroad Fellowship.
- Further research was funded by the Li Fang-kuei and Hsu Ying Fellowship for Chinese Linguistics and the UW Linguistics Department
- Institutional support came from Inner Mongolia University School of Mongolian Studies and Mongolian Language Research Institute; and the University of Washington Department of Linguistics, Linguistic Phonetics Lab, and Center for Statistics and the Social Sciences.
- Special thanks to Sharon Hargus, Stevan Harrell, Richard Wright, Betsy Evans, Zev Handel, Prescott Klassen, Darryl Holman, Borjigin Badma-Odsar, Hasuntuya Bayagud, Yurong, Ürlee, Sachiral, Liling, Örlög, Subud, Nargil, Uyanga, Narsu, Solongo, Böxöö, Jonathan Sande, Xuan Wang, KC Lee, Daniel McCloy, Russell Hugu, Nathan Loggins, Molly FitzMorris and the UW Multilingualists.

Find these slides at <http://sarala.puthuval.net>

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