

# Professor examines convergence of languages, cultures in Chinese Inner Asia

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When Arienne Dwyer identified an area in Chinese Inner Asia as a language convergence zone some 19 years ago, she discovered that the grammars of unrelated languages had grown to resemble one another. Moreover, when some speakers of these diverse languages come together in song contests, they would harmonize their melodies even faster than their languages.

Her acclaimed research is aimed at understanding the rise and fall of human languages—how they disappear under threat from other languages and how new languages emerge. In Chinese Inner Asia, conglomerations of unrelated languages are giving rise to new languages.

Dwyer studies the linguistic, ecological and social conditions under which languages and cultures can merge or split apart. Languages and cultures everywhere in the world converge and diverge; Chinese Inner Asia, however, is a hot spot for these processes.

"There's no such thing as a pure language or a pure culture, but the degree to which they mix varies. I work in an area in Central Asia where they mix really heavily," she said.

Beyond being able to research the universal processes of language emergence and disappearance, the many individual languages of Inner Asia— which are mostly unwritten and unknown— provide insights about speakers' conceptual organization of the physical and abstract world, she said.

"From ethnomedicine to biological and grammatical classification, all are organized differently in [different languages](#), and it's scientifically interesting to be able to document and compare these practices," said Dwyer, a University of Kansas professor of linguistic anthropology and co-director of the Institute for Digital Research in the Humanities.

Dwyer recently received two prestigious fellowships—a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation fellowship and another from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Guggenheim fellowship will allow her to bring together several previously separate projects of her academic career in Central Asia into a book to analyze how grammars and cultures converge in this language contact zone.

This area, whose epicenter is the north Tibetan region of China, has two dominant languages, Tibetan and Chinese, but both were influenced by a dozen nondominant languages related to Mongolian and Turkish. Extending from Tibet to Mongolia and western China to Central Asia, Chinese Inner Asia is centrally important to human history, traversed by the Silk Routes and the site of some of the oldest Indo-European languages. Dwyer is one of the few experts in the world on Inner and Central Asian languages, and she speaks and reads many of them fluently.

"This project suggests: Let's look at these peoples and this place also as one big cultural conglomerate, rather than solely as discrete individual groups," she said.

Alongside the convergence that is so striking in Inner Asia, sometimes languages and cultures, or some of their subsystems, resist converging. Dwyer is as fascinated by this resistance to change as with the changes themselves. For example, Turkic and Mongolic languages appear resistant to the Tibetan case-marking system, even though these languages have adopted many other features of Tibetan grammar.

Dwyer has documented reasons for the different influences among dominant and nondominant languages.

"It's partly because this is an ecologically hospitable place," she said. "A lot of people come together. They talk with each other, trade with each other and through that the languages and cultures can converge."

Data for the Guggenheim project will come from Dwyer's more than 25 years of work with communities in the region, including the U.S. National Science Foundation sponsored Interactive Inner Asia, or IAIA, project. Dwyer, as principal investigator on that project and a previous six-year Volkswagen Foundation grant, consulted local communities on their needs and trained 25 local speakers of the different languages to video- and audio-record and transcribe their languages.

Later, Dwyer led a team of researchers to translate and create useful products from these rich resources. The projects were aimed both at creating a large primary data source on little-known languages and at facilitating community language maintenance. The data and analyses are being made [freely available online](#) at KU. That project allows comparisons across five unwritten Turko-Mongolic languages—Salar, Monguor, Baonan, Wutun and Kangjia—as well as of Tibetan and Chinese.

The local communities in China retained copies of their collaborative data; the transcribed stories, oral histories and conversations by Dwyer's team on the IAIA website and searchable dictionaries should foster the maintenance of their languages. Also, such valuable primary resources allow other scholars to expand upon the work of Dwyer's research teams to study not only language contact but also cultural history and ethnography.

"The Chinese spoken in Inner Asia, despite being the most powerful

language of the region, has been totally changed by contact with Tibetan and Mongolian, so that the word order is more like Tibetan and Mongolian," Dwyer said. "It has lost tones. It has added a case system. It has adopted a lot of features of these languages. Even to a speaker of standard Mandarin in Beijing, the Chinese spoken in Inner Asia sounds weird."

In addition to her research on language convergence areas, Dwyer is known for her work on Uyghur, a major Turkic language in the region. Through her initiative, KU became the first U.S. university to regularly offer academic-year Uyghur. Dwyer's co-authored Uyghur language textbook is freely available from KU ScholarWorks and is one of their most-downloaded books. Her research team is building a longitudinal Uyghur [language](#) corpus, which is also available online.

The Guggenheim project represents an initial culmination of her extensive in situ work documenting many individual languages and cultures in Chinese Inner Asia. Dwyer will also try to answer questions that have a bearing on all human languages.

"Looking at the region's languages and cultures as a complex interlinked organism rather than as separate entities allows us to see patterns between them," Dwyer said. "Analyzing these patterns is plenty, but can we also explain what factors may make certain languages and cultures predisposed to converge or diverge?"

Provided by University of Kansas

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