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Turkish *sarımsak* ~ *sarmısak* ‘garlic’ revisited

Abstract: Thus far, four – structurally very different – etymologies have been suggested for the Turkic word for ‘garlic’. This author adduces derivatives found in Altai, one of the Siberian Turkic languages, that provide crucial support for one of them.

Keywords: etymology; Turkic; Turkish; Altai; semantics

Despite the efforts of seasoned linguists to elucidate the etymology of the Turkish term for ‘garlic’ (*sarımsak* ~ *sarmısak*), all the suggestions presented in Turkological literature exhibit certain weaknesses. The various etymological hypotheses are based on four lines of reasoning.¹

¹ I am excluding the Proto-Altaic etymology in the *Etymological dictionary of the Altaic languages* (Leiden – Boston 2003) by S. Starostin, A. Dybo and O. Mudrak. The main reason is that a shorter etymology is better than a long one – if a word can be explained in (Proto-)Turkic terms there is no need to refer to the considerably more speculative Proto-Altaic. Besides, deriving Turkic *sarımsak* from Proto-Altaic **sera* ~ **sero* ~ **seru* ‘a kind of garlic’ does not explain either the structure (did the suffix *+ımsak*, composed of **+ımsı* and **+ak*, exist as a compound morpheme already in Proto-Altaic?) or the vowels (Turkic *a-ı* vs. Proto-Altaic **e-a/u/o*) or the semantics (was ‘a kind of garlic’ really the original meaning of ‘garlic’?).

1. A verbal etymon

The oldest line assumes a derivative from the verbal root **sar-* ‘to wrap, wind, swaddle’. It seems to have been first suggested by Carl Brockelmann (1954: 67) and it has been the most popular etymology to this day. The alternating variants of our word can easily be explained as two reflexes of the original form **sar-im+sak* (< **sar-im* ‘coil, winding’ < **sar-* ‘to wrap’) – easily but not perfectly. Gerhard Doerfer (1967: 247, nr. 1238) was right when he wrote that this etymology cannot explain one of the attested phonetic variants of the word, namely *sarmusak*, with its labial *-u-*. Theoretically, it could reflect an older form **sar-im+usak* but such a form is morphologically impossible because the suffix **+usak* does not exist. Another possibility, the one endorsed by G. Doerfer (op.cit. 248), is to assume the protoform **sarumsak* (> *sarmusak*). The problem with it is that the base **sar-um* ‘wrap’ seems to have never been attested. Additionally, one might contest the semantic adequacy of ‘coil, winding’ or ‘to wrap, wind’ as the base for ‘garlic’ which is, as a matter of fact, made up of cloves surrounding the centre. Even if the cloves are closely enveloped in sheathing leaves – which perhaps could be associated with ‘wrap’ or ‘coil’ – the characteristic, or even conspicuous feature of garlic is that it has cloves rather than that those cloves are covered in leaves. Neither the phonetic nor the semantic objections definitively disqualify this etymology but they do render it uncertain.

2. A colour-based etymon

It is, thus, natural that another suggestion appeared in the literature some forty years later. This time, the morphological base was thought to have been an adjective rather than a verb: modern Turkish *sarı* ~ older *saru* ‘yellow’ > *sarımsı* ~ older *sarımsu* ‘yellowish’ + the nominal suffix *+ak* > modern Turkish *sarımsak* (> *sarmısak*) ~ older *sarumsak* (> *sarmusak* ~ *samursak* [Eren 2020: 450]) ‘garlic’ (Stachowski M. 1994: 171).

This suggestion appears to be impeccable both from the phonological and morphological perspective. Its weak point, however, is the lack of semantic parallels for names of vegetables derived from names of colours in the Turkic languages. The author of that etymology was aware of this weakness and

tried to partially mitigate it by adducing non-Turkic parallels such as Swedish *vitlök* ‘garlic’ (< *vit* ‘white’) and Finnish *valkosipuli* ‘garlic’ (< *valkea* ‘white’) (op.cit. 172). But the two parallels might occur to actually be just one if the Finnish word was modelled after the Swedish one, which is highly probable.

3. A Sanskrit etymon

Yet another etymology can be found in Sevan Nişanyan’s (2018) on-line etymological dictionary. It is updated quite frequently but the entry “sarmısak” has not been modified since 24.01.2018 (as of 02.08.2023). Nişanyan does not mention any of his predecessors. He believes that our word cannot be connected with any Turkic root at all, and that it is a reflex of the Sanskrit word *śrīmastaka* ‘ladle, dipper’, a word apparently also used for a type of garlic and borrowed in that biological meaning to Turkic (for variants in other Turkic languages see Eren 2020: 450). Being no expert in Sanskrit, I cannot evaluate this part of Nişanyan’s etymology. Nevertheless, the idea that garlic should be called after a ladle does not intuitively appear very convincing. Nişanyan does not explain when and where the word was borrowed, how it entered Turkic, why it changed phonetically in a rather unusual way, and how Nişanyan discovered it all. As far as I know, this etymology was never accepted by other researchers. I am not going to make allowance for it either if only because the claim that the word cannot be related to any Turkic root cannot be possibly accepted, especially more than sixty years after Brockelmann’s Turkic etymology.

4. Doubts and a taste-based etymon

While working on KEWT I thought about the colour-based etymology again. My doubts concerned the word-final *-g, that is generally accepted to have existed in the Common and Proto-Turkic form **sārig* ‘yellow’. Its derivatives should have preserved traces of the *-g but forms such as **sārig+ıms+ak* are not attested in any source. I, thus, thought that a link between *sarımsak* and *sarı* (< **sārig*) is less certain than I had assumed in 1994.

Another etymon, a taste-based one, suggested by me in KEWT 294, is a Turkish reflex of the Arabic word *şārim*. However, the Ottoman reflex *sârim* ~ *sârım* was known to me with its German sense ‘scharf’ which means

both ‘sharp’ and ‘spicy’. But the Arabic word (and, probably, also its Ottoman reflex) meant ‘sharp = suitable for cutting’ rather than ‘spicy’ (at any rate, Meninski’s *Thesaurus* (1680: col. 2916) only gives two meanings: ‘gladius acutus & vir durus [...]’, that is for a sword and for a man). Besides, it is historically unlikely that an Arabic adjective would have spread across all the Turkic languages and, moreover, always only as a base for the word for ‘garlic’ but never with its original Arabic meaning ‘sharp’. This is why I now feel that this proposal should be withdrawn.

5. The present situation

The primary motivation for me to write this article was the discovery of a group of words which align very well with the “colour etymology”. They are all attested in dialects of the Altai language, also called Oïrot in the years 1917-2000.² Two out of six Altai dialects, namely Chelkan ~ Chalkan (also called Lebedin) and Tuba (not to be confused with Tuva) are of great importance to us.

The consonant *t* is known to alternate relatively often with various fricatives in the Siberian languages, which opens up the possibility of equating the original Altai **sarımtık* (> Chelkan *sarımdık* ‘yellow’³) with Turkish *sarımsak* ‘garlic’. The only difference is the final suffix: Chelkan (*sarı+md*)+*ık* vs. Turkish (*sarı+ms*)+*ak*. However, since both suffixes are synonymous and very productive even today, the two words can be said to share the same basic structure: *sarı+mS+i/ak*.

But the Altai language offers even better examples. The original form **sarımsak* ‘a yellowish thing’ appears as *sarımsak* ‘yellow’ in Tuba (D’ajym 2004: 86) and, again with a voicing, as *sarımsak* ‘yellowish’ in Chelkan (op.cit. 97). This enables us to unite the two lexical groups into one evolutionary chain:

Turkish *sarımsak* ~ *sarımsak* ‘garlic’ < **sarımsak* ‘a yellowish thing’ >
Chelkan *sarımsak* ‘yellowish’ = Tuba *sarımsak* ‘yellow’

² The rather complex confusion of language and dialect names in this context is discussed in Stachowski K. 2023: 552.

³ Used in a compound adjective *poro-sarımdık* ‘grey-yellow[ish]’ (D’ajym 2004: 99).

The morphological structure of **sarımsak* is clear: < **sarımsı+ak* < **sarı+msı* 'yellowish' < *sarı* 'yellow'. The answer to the question why the suffix *+ak* produced a noun in Turkish but an adjective in Tuba, is connected to the fact that nominal categories are not specifically marked in Turkic. In this context, cf. Turkish liter. *kof* 'empty, hollow' vs. Turkish dial. *kofak* id.; Turkish liter. *yaş* 'wet, damp' vs. Turkish dial. *yaşak* id. (Güzel 2019: 56) – in both cases, a basic adjective received the suffix *+ak* in Anatolian Turkish dialects, without, however, becoming substantivized.

Though the problem of Common Turkic **-g* in **sarıg* and modern Turkish *sarımsak* without a *-g* remains unsolved it is impossible to claim that Turkish *sarımsak* 'garlic' and Altai (Tuba, Chelkan) *sarımsak* ~ *sarımsak* 'yellow(ish)' are two different words that have nothing in common.

In this situation, I would like to suggest that the Common Turkic verb **sār-* 'to be yellow' yielded two parallel and synonymous adjectives: **sāri* and **sāriḡ* 'yellow'. Since the word-final **-g* was lost in Turkish the modern form *sarı* may reflect either **sāri* or **sāriḡ* but, judging by *sarımsak* (< **sārimsak*), the variant **sāri* is a somewhat more probable candidate for the Common Turkic etymon.

In modern synchronic terms one might present the etymology as follows:

The Turkish word *sarımsak* ~ *sarmısak* 'garlic' is a substantivized (*+ak*) adjective *sarımsı* 'yellowish'. Morphological parallels for this structure can be found in two Altai dialects: Chelkan and Tuba.

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Turecki *sarımsak* ~ *sarmısak* ‘czosnek’

(streszczenie)

Jak dotąd zaproponowano cztery – strukturalnie bardzo odmienne – etymologie tureckiego słowa oznaczającego ‘czosnek’. Autor przytacza derywaty występujące w języku ałtajskim, jednym z języków turkijskich Syberii, które stanowią istotny argument na rzecz jednej z hipotez.

S ł o w a k l u c z e: etymologia; języki turkijskie; język turecki; ałtajski; semantyka