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YARASA – REVISITING THE TURKISH NAME FOR BAT

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Abstract

A recently discovered Old Uyghur variant of the Turkic name for bat is difficult to explain. This author presents his view on the structure and the development of this word, as well as of several other forms in the Turkic languages.

1

Hans Nugteren (2025) has recently published an inspiring article on some Turkic names for the bat in the Turkic languages. “The motivation to pick up this topic again”, he explains, “is the appearance of one new data point” (Nugteren 2025: 146). This new attestation is an Old Uyghur form ⟨yʻrsqw⟩, found in a fragment from the manuscript of the *Maitrisimit*, published for the first time by Laut and Semet (2021: 316, leaf 10v). As I had previously authored an article on the Turkish name for the bat, *yarasa* (Stachowski 1999), a new study on this subject was of particular interest to me. It is beyond doubt, that Nugteren’s study is a new (and important) step towards a good etymology, even though I see a few aspects somewhat differently.

2

Hans Nugteren’s general lines of reasoning are as follows:

[2a] The Old Uyghur word ⟨yʻrsqw⟩ (= *yarsku* ~ *yarsko* ~ *yarsgu* ~ *yarsgo*) is “now probably the oldest recorded Turkic word for ‘bat’ [...]” (Nugteren 2025: 147).¹

¹ For the palatal variants cf. Mahmud Kaşgari’s notation that can be read *yärskü*, *yärskö*, *yärgü* or *yärgö* (Nugteren 2025: 148). For other possible readings see section 3. Note that Kaşgari’s

[2b] “[...] given that *yarsko* and *yärskö* are as old as the *yarasa*-type forms, *yarsko* and *yärskö* cannot simply be explained as later morphological alterations of *yarasa* to make the word more Turkic-looking or more etymologically transparent” (Nugteren 2025: 155).

While the assertion in [2a] is certainly correct, the inference in [2b] is not equally obvious. Firstly, we do not know for sure at what time the word *yarasa* came into being because Turkish evolved centuries (Seljuk: 11th century, Ottoman: 14th century) after the *Maitrisimit* (appr. 9th century; dating varies between the 8th and 11th centuries in various works). It might have been used even earlier than *yarsko* but in a different, non-Uyghur area.

Secondly, contrary to popular belief, chronology is not a reliable basis for etymological reasoning. The fact that a certain word A is attested earlier than some other word B does not necessarily prove that it is also older than B. The opposite may in fact be the case: the word B is older but was recorded later than A – just as a younger sister may get married (\approx ‘be recorded’) before the elder one. Both words can also coexist as is the case with two close sister languages: Karachay *bo-yunsxa* ‘yoke’ (with the original *-k-) ~ Balkar *boyunsa* (without the *-k-) (Nugteren 2025: 154). This is a common phenomenon in various languages. Let us see some non-Turkic examples:

The name of my city, *Kraków*, first attested in 966 (Malec 2003: 131), is clearly a derivative with the suffix *-ów*. The original meaning of its initial part, *krak*, is unclear even today.² Nevertheless, *krak* had doubtless existed earlier than *Kraków* but the name *Kraków* was recorded earlier.

The Latin word *asparagus* was first recorded in English as *sparage* (15th century; the apheresis of *a-* resulted from metanalysis of *asparagus* into *a*, interpreted as an article and thus rejected, and **sparagus*) while the original form *asparagus*, though also attested in the 15th century, only came into regular use in the 19th century, and as late as 1791 it still had “an air of stiffness and pedantry” (Onions 1966: 54). Thus, the original form existed simultaneously with its corrupted form but was rarer than it.

Another group of such examples are city names derived from river names, e.g. in Germany: *Gera* (995) from the river, first recorded as \langle Gerahe \rangle (1108); *Goslar* (10th century) from \langle Gosa \rangle (1185); *Hameln* (8th century) from \langle Hamme \rangle (14th century), and so on (Fischer et al. 1963: 98, 102, 103).

After years spent with etymology, I have arrived at the conclusion (contradicting my earlier opinion) that the Flemish etymologist Félicien de Tollenaere was,

notation \langle y(a)r(i)s(a)ã \rangle clearly points to the form *yarisa*, which is a good parallel to the Turkish variant *yarasa* and refutes the assertion that *yarasa* is an innovation and occurs exclusively in the Turkish language.

² The most widely accepted interpretation is that *krak* is a dialectal variant of modern literary Polish *kruk* ‘raven’, cf. liter. *krak-ać* ‘to croak’ (Malec 2003: 131; for the discussion of other possibilities see Babik 2018). If this explanation is correct a (partially) parallel naming model can be seen in German *Krefeld* < Middle Low German *kra*, *krage* ‘crow’ (Fischer et al. 1963: 109).

in the final analysis, only partially right when he coined, in 1983, the maxim: “Etymologizing without dating the material is like navigating without a compass” (Gold 2005: 25). Chronology is on the whole an important hint but only a hint; it can also be useless or, sometimes, even misleading. And that is precisely what I would like to suggest here. A comparison of a (very imprecisely) dated word in one language with an undated form in another one cannot be relied on.

3

Hans Nugteren says that the Old Uyghur notation ⟨yʾrsqw⟩ should be read *yarsku*, etc. I am not a specialist in Old Uyghur and cannot decide whether the reading *yarisku* or *yarasku* is possible, too. Probably not, because otherwise Nugteren would have mentioned them. But in Mahmud Kaşgari’s notation ⟨y(a)rs°kw(u)⟩, the “sükûn” is only placed above ⟨s⟩ while no diacritic stands above ⟨r⟩ and this fact entitles us to read the word not only *yärskü*, etc., but also *yäräskü*, *yäriskü* or *yärüskü*.

Unlike Nugteren who relies on chronology, I do not see convincing arguments for treating the form *yarsku* as the original etymon, and Turkish *yarasa* as its descendent form. Rather, it is easier to accept *yarasa* as a starting point in this evolutionary chain, even if some questions are still unanswered (see section 4), and will remain so, irrespective of whether **yarasa* or **yarasku* (**yarasgu?*) is regarded as the initial form. My suggestion is as follows:

- [3a] In Turkic, the oldest form is *yarasa* < **yarVsa* which in turn comes from a Mator word **riarV+sa* (Stachowski 1999: 130, 134).
- [3b] The word must have sounded unfamiliar to the Turkish ear and that is why it was expanded with a native suffix in some Turkic languages:
- +*an*, e.g. Salar *yarasan* (Nugteren 2025: 151) < **yarasa+an*; it will be difficult to imagine an elegant transition from *yarsku* to *yarasan*
 - +*ık*, e.g. Ottoman *yarasıık* (Stachowski 1999: 131) < **yarasa-k*
 - +*kı*, e.g. Baraba *yarıskı*, Tuvinian *ça”skı* (Stachowski 1999: 131) < **yar(ı)skı* < **yarıskı* < **yaraskı* < **yarasa+kı*
 - +*ku*, e.g. Old Uyghur *yarsku* (Nugteren 2025: 148) < **yarısku* (? < **yarasku*) < **yarasıku* < **yarasa+ku*
 - +*ka*, e.g. Soyot *çaska* (Nugteren 2025: 150) < **yarska* (? < **yarıska*) < **yaraska* < **yarasıka* < **yarasa+ka*

Two processes can be observed here: the extension of the original word aiming at the naturalization of a borrowed word, and vowel ellipsis aiming at shortening the three- or four-syllable descendent forms of **yarasa+kV*.

It is merely in part true that the word *yarasa* is attested in the Oghuz languages but remains unknown in Siberia. It is not used as such in Siberia but its derivatives are known across the entire Turkic world (cf. also fn. 1).

Nevertheless, I acknowledge that some aspects of this etymology are still unclear:

- [4a] The compound **yara+sa* is not attested in Mator. This is indeed an important objection. There are three reasons why I, despite this, continue to favour this etymology. Firstly, the Mator language is extinct and attested only in a limited number of sources. Secondly, lack of evidence is not evidence of absence. Thirdly, I am not aware of a serious alternative etymology for Turkish *yarasa*. Unfortunately, Nugteren does not offer an etymology of *yarsgu*.
- [4b] Should Turkish *yarasa* be connected in etymological terms with Middle Turkic *yarig kanat*, Altai *yarnat*, Shor *çarnat* id.? (see Stachowski 1999: 131, 134; Nugteren 2025: 157, 162–163)
- [4c] What is the origin of the consonant *-v-* in Turkmen *yarvāza*? (see Nugteren 2025: 151). Is the Turkmen word in some way connected with the protoform of the Turkish dialectal *yavsun* id. (ibid.)? Did it result from a contamination, such as was the case with Turkmen *yuvdarhā* (~ Ottoman *ajdarhā*) ‘dragon’? (see Stachowski 2002: 191–192).
- [4d] How should we explain the palatal variants, for instance *yelese(n)* (Nugteren 2025: 151, 154) and Kaşgari’s *yär(Ǟ)skü*, etc. (see fn. 1)?
- [4e] The issue of *-g-* or *-k-* in the last syllable should be examined separately. Nugteren (2025: 149) speaks of the “loss of postconsonantal *-g/k-*” in Turkic; however, the phenomenon only concerns *-g-* and we have no unambiguous examples of *-g-* in our words.

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