

The Lord's Prayer in Ket: A linguistic analysis¹

Молитва «Отче наш» на кетском языке: лингвистический анализ

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The present article deals with the Lord's Prayer translated into Ket, a small Siberian language on the verge of extinction. This is the first Ket translation of the prayer ever made and it has never been published before. The translation is presented in the official Cyrillic-based orthography. The article analyses the syntactic structure of the translated prayer, its vocabulary and deviations from the original text. The translation demonstrates the lack of many concepts related to the Christian religion in Ket, as well as a considerable degree of Russian interference, both syntactic and lexical.

Key words: Ket, Lord's Prayer, translation, Siberian languages

Настоящая статья посвящена Молитве Господней, переведенной на кетский язык, который в настоящее время находится на грани исчезновения. Это первый, ранее нигде не опубликованный, перевод данной молитвы на язык этой малой сибирской народности. Перевод сделан в официальной кетской орфографии на основе кириллицы. В статье анализируется синтаксическая структура переведённой молитвы, её лексический состав и отклонения от исходного текста.

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Перевод демонстрирует отсутствие в кетском языке многих понятий, связанных с христианской религией, а также заметное влияние русского языка, как на синтаксическом, так и лексическом уровне.

Ключевые слова: кетский язык, молитва «Отче наш», языки Сибири

Ket, also known as Yenisei Ostyak, is a highly endangered language spoken in Central Siberia. It is now the only surviving member of the Yeniseian family. The last remaining speakers of the Ket language reside in the north of Russia's Krasnoyarsk province along the Yenisei river and its tributaries. Ket distinguishes three major dialects: Southern, Central and Northern. At present, the largest number of speakers belongs to the Southern dialect.

The current sociolinguistic situation with Ket is characterized by the lack of monolingual speakers and the predominance of Russian in all spheres of communication. Although there are 1219 people who reported themselves as ethnic Kets (according to the census of 2010), only 190 of them reported having a command of their native language. However, even this number is far from the real linguistic situation encountered by the present authors. Recent fieldwork has shown that the present-day number of competent speakers does not exceed 30 people in all dialects combined. The average age of the majority of competent speakers is above 60 years.

Ket, as well as the other Yeniseian languages, is known to be strikingly different from the surrounding Siberian languages. In particular, the most important characteristics not found in the rest of Central Siberia include complex polysynthetic verb morphology and phonemic tones (high even, laryngealized, rising/falling, and falling) in the domain of monosyllabic words. The latter were discovered and described (originally for Yugh, a close relative of Ket) only in the 1960s [Verner 1966]. Therefore, they have been largely overlooked and even ignored in earlier treatments of Ket.

Although the first grammatical description of Ket written by the Finnish linguist Mathias Castrén appeared in the mid-19th century [Castrén 1858], the first attempt to create a standardized orthography for the Ket language was undertaken about one hundred years later. It was developed by the Soviet linguist Nestor Karger, who was the first to publish a school primer in Ket based on the Central dialect [Karger 1934a]. The alphabet he designed for this purpose was a Latin-based one with several diacritics. This orthography did not have means to distinguish between the four tones in Ket, though it did distinguish between certain closed and open vowels had a mark for the laryngealized tone [Karger 1934b: 224]. Unfortunately, Karger fell victim to the intense political repressions which occurred in the Soviet Union in the late 1930s and his primer and alphabet were discontinued from use in Ket schools [cf. Georg 2007: 36].

Over the next 50 years, scholars who studied Ket mostly used Cyrillic-based phonetic transcriptions with additional Latin letters and diacritics [cf. Dul'zon 1968; Krejnovich 1968]. It was not until the late 1980s that the current official Cyrillic-based Ket orthography was created. It was developed by the Ketologist Heinrich Werner [Genrikh Verner], who based it on the Southern Ket dialect. Officially accepted by the Soviet government in 1988, this alphabet has been since then used to teach the native language in local Ket schools. Although the official orthography manages to distinguish most of the tones, it nevertheless levels out the distinction between the high and falling ones for the following vowels: *a*, *u*, *ы* and *y*.

Due to the sociolinguistic situation among the Kets, which deteriorated drastically in the late 20th century, the official orthography is now almost obsolete. According to a study undertaken in the early 2000s, out of 885 ethnic Kets (age 8 and older) only 2.8% can read and write it, and 10.5% can only read it [Krivonogov 2003: 86]. It seems fair to assume that the current situation is even more deplorable. Therefore, despite the fact

that Ket is officially regarded as a written language, the official orthography is not used by native speakers in their daily life at all [Kazakevich 2003: 241–242].

The Lord's Prayer

There are only a couple of short Christian texts translated into Ket to date. The present Lord's Prayer (taken from Matthew 6) has never been translated and published before. A literal translation of this rendition, which does not include the doxology, reads as follows:

Этна Он

(vocative: Этна Обо!)

- | | | | | | | |
|------|-----|-----------|----------------|------------|----------|-----------------|
| [9] | Ket | Этна | Обо, | У, | аня | есда хьлаткагу, |
| | Rus | наш | отец | ты | кто | на небе /есть |
| | Eng | our | father | you | who | in heaven / are |
| | Ket | Ук | и | џан | | святыйтаџ |
| | Rus | твоё | имя | пусть (да) | | святится |
| | Eng | your | name | let | | be hallowed |
| [10] | Ket | Ук | есбаџ | џан | этаџа | даиксибес. |
| | Rus | твой | небесный мир | пусть | к нам | придџт |
| | Eng | your | heavenly world | let | to us | come |
| | Ket | Ук | џо'й | џан | ситаџ | бия |
| | Rus | твоё | желание (воля) | пусть | будет | как |
| | Eng | your | wish (will) | let | be | as |
| | Ket | есдиџта | то'н | хай | бандиџта | |
| | Rus | на небе | так | и | на земле | |
| | Eng | in heaven | so | and | on earth | |
| [11] | Ket | Этна | ися | на'н | индџудаџ | енџоџ. |
| | Rus | наш | каждого дня | хлеб | дай нам | сегодня |
| | Eng | our | each day | bread | give us | today |

[12]	Ket	Хай	этнна	алгераң	таяҕ		
	Rus	и	наши	долги	оставь		
	Eng	and	our	debts	leave		
	Ket	Биля	этно	бик	деҥна	алгераң	тавагин
	Rus	как	мы	других	людей	долги	оставляем
	Eng	as	we	of other	people	debts	leave
[13]	Ket	Хай	то'н	этно	кундагус	атн	ҕан
	Rus	и	так	нас	веди	не	пусть
	Eng	and	so	us	lead	not	let
	Ket	ҕомам-эсаң,					
	Rus	грешно было (стало) чтобы					
	Eng	that it was (became) sinful					
	Ket	пасатдаҥальгит		этно	айтисдиҥал.		
	Rus	спаси		нас	от дурного		
	Eng	save		us	from the bad		

In fact, translating religious themes into Ket is rather hard as the language lacks many words and concepts related to the domain of religion. This is well demonstrated by the present text in which, for example, the phrase ‘be hallowed’ in verse 9 had to be translated with the Russian word *святой* ‘saint, holy’ incorporated into a Ket verb form.

In general, the entire translation demonstrates a visible influence of the Russian language. For example, the use of postnominal relative clauses formed with the help of interrogative pronouns *аня* ‘who’ in verse 9 is a clear calque of Russian, where similar constructions represent the major relativization strategy [Nefedov 2015: 220–234].

Before turning to a more detailed analysis of the translated prayer, a few words about the orthography used in the translation are in order. Although the translator uses the official Cyrillic-based orthography, there are certain deviations from the standard which are rather controversial. This, first of all, concerns the presentation

of palatalization. The official orthography is based on the phonetic representation of Ket sounds, therefore it distinguishes palatal sounds which, however, are not distinguished in Ket phonology [Georg 2007: 71–72]. It is unclear to us why the translator uses both palatalized forms, for example, *уся* ‘every day’ in verse 11 and *насамдауальгит* ‘save us’ in verse 13 (their non-palatalized representation would be *уса* and *насамдауалгит*, respectively) and non-palatalized ones, for instance, *на’н* ‘bread’ in verse 11 and *айтис* ‘evil thing’ in verse 13. According to Verner [2002: 10, 71], the official norm for the latter is *ня’нь* and *айтись*, respectively. In addition, the correct official transcription of the word ‘father’ is *ən*², but not *on* as it is presented in the title [cf. Verner 2002: 73]. In our further analysis, other similar orthographical idiosyncrasies will be ignored. When citing such words from the present translation, however, we will stick to the orthography used in Verner [2002].

Verse 9: The verse starts with the phrasal address ‘Our Father’ in which the Ket word *Ən* ‘father’, similar to *Отче* in the Russian translation, stands in its vocative form *Обо*. It is followed by a relative clause headed by the noun-class neutral interrogative pronoun *аня* ‘who’.³ As we mentioned above, such relative clause constructions are a recent innovation developed under the influence of the Russian language. In addition to the pronoun, the relative clause contains *есьда хълаткагу* which is a locative predicate with the meaning ‘you are in heaven’. This predicative construction can be analyzed as *есьда хълат* ‘heaven’ + *ка* ‘locative relational morpheme’ + *гу* ‘2nd person singular predicative marker’. The phrase *есьда хълат* ‘heaven’ refers to native Ket beliefs and

² The letter *ə* stands for the sound [o] in the high even phonemic tone.

³ In Ket, every noun simultaneously belongs to one of three gender classes (masculine, feminine, or neuter) and one of two animacy classes (animate or inanimate). In addition to *аня* ‘who’ (pl. *анетау*) which is unspecific about noun-classes, there are also *wh*-pronouns that distinguish between them: *битсе* ‘who (masculine)’ and *бия* ‘who (feminine)’ (pl. *бияусянь*). They can likewise be used in relative clauses.

literally means ‘god’s or sky’s suede’, where *есьда* is *есь* ‘god, sky’+ *да* ‘3rd person masculine possessive marker’ and *хьлат* is ‘suede (i.e. soft tanned leather)’. It is important to mention here that in the native Ket pantheon *Есь* represents the chief positive male deity. As an appellative, *есь* stands for ‘sky, heaven’, as well as ‘nature, taiga’. It is also often given as the translation equivalent of the Christian God [Georg 2007: 30]. Interestingly, Kets’ image of *Есь* as “an old man with a beard, dressed in a white parka” likely occurred under the influence of Christianity [Aleksenko 1967: 171].

The second part of verse 9 contains the verb *святыятаҕ* ‘it becomes hallowed’ with the optative particle *ҕан*. As we already mentioned, *святыятаҕ* represents a Russian borrowing incorporated into the native Ket verb form. The Russian part of the verb, *святой-* (< rus. *святой* ‘saint, holy’), is clearly an ad-hoc borrowing (i.e. it is not regular), since Ket tends to avoid initial consonant clusters and thus assimilates all regular loanwords accordingly [cf. Georg 2007: 58; also see verse 13 below].

Verse 10: Since Ket has no word for ‘kingdom’, the translator expresses it as *есьбау* ‘heavenly world’ where *есь* is, as we already mentioned, ‘god, heaven’ and *бау* is a polysemic word meaning ‘place, ground, land, world’.

Although the word order in Ket is pragmatically rather free, it tends to be SOV [cf. Kryukova 2012: 56]. However, the postverbal position of the phrase *биля есьдиута то’н хай баудиута* ‘as in heaven so and on earth’ can be justified in this case since there is a frequent tendency in Ket to place “heavy” constituents marked with relational morphemes after the verb [cf. Nefedov 2015: 64–65, 234–235].

The use of the interrogative adverb *биля* ‘how’ as a comparative conjunction in the sense of ‘as, like’ is another instance of Russian interference (cf. Russian *как* ‘how, as, like’).

Verse 11: The postverbal placement of the Ket adverb *енҕоу* ‘today’ does not seem to be justified in this verse, since it is not a “heavy” constituent, as the phrase in verse 10 above. Time

adverbials in Ket are more likely to occur sentence-initially or at least before the verb. The reason for this placement seems to be the influence of the source text used for translation.

Verse 12: In this verse, the translator follows the traditional Russian variant of the prayer and renders 'forgive us our sins' as *этнона альгерау таяу* 'leave our debts' (cf. Russian *остави нам долги наша* 'leave us the debts of ours'). This choice of translation is also justified by the fact that Ket has no native equivalents either for the noun 'sin' or for the verb 'forgive'.

Verse 13: This verse is another case in which the translator had to rephrase the original text. Due to the lack of a direct translational equivalent of 'temptation' in Ket, the translator changed the sentence as follows: *хай то'н этн кундаузус этн зан юмам-эсау* 'and lead us so, that it was not sinful'.

The second phrase contains another verbal borrowing, because Ket has no native word for 'save'. Instead, it makes use of the Russian loan *насам* (< rus. *спасать* 'save') incorporated into the Ket verb in the imperative form. Note, that unlike *святой* in verse 9, *насам* is a relatively old borrowing, since it is an already assimilated form (i.e. there is no initial consonant cluster).

The postverbal placement of the personal pronoun *этно* 'we'⁴ in *насамдаунальгит этн* 'save us' seems to be a calque from the original text, since Ket, as a rule, omits referents activated in the previous discourse (cf. the occurrence of *этно* in *хай то'н этн кундаузус* 'and lead us so'). It is possible because of the polysynthetic nature of the Ket verb which indicates subjects and direct objects with the help of verb-internal pronominal markers. In case of *насамдаунальгит*, it is the pronominal marker *-дау-* that refers to the 1st person plural direct object. Therefore, one would expect simply *насамдаунальгит айтисьдиуналь* in this sentence. Moreover, postverbal placement of subjects and direct objects in Ket is usually connected with introduction of a new/

⁴ Subject and direct object pronouns (as well as nouns) in Ket are morphologically unmarked, cf. *этно* 'we' as the subject in verse 12.

unknown participant [Nefedov 2015: 65], which is obviously not the case here.

The final remark concerns the word *айтись* ‘evil thing’. It is not a common noun but the nominalized form of an adjective: *айтись* < *айти* ‘bad, angry, evil’ + *сь* ‘nominalizer’. While *айтись* itself is ambiguous between an animate and inanimate reading, i.e. ‘someone evil, bad’ or ‘something evil, bad’, it is the use of the relational morpheme *диңаль* ‘inanimate Ablative marker’ that indicates that ‘evil thing’ is the intended reading.⁵

Conclusion

In the present article, we have analyzed the first translation of the Lord’s Prayer, excluding the doxology, ever made in the Ket language. The analysis has demonstrated that the translation bears a visible degree of Russian linguistic influence, which correlates with the current sociolinguistic situation in the Ket community. Here belong the use of postnominal relative clauses (for example, the *аня*-clause in verse 9), non-canonical word order (as in verse 13), as well as the use of borrowed lexical items (the verb *святыятау* ‘it becomes hallowed’ in verse 9). These lexical borrowings and paraphrases (as in verse 13) also indicate the lack of respective concepts related to Christianity in Ket.

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⁵ It should be noted, though, that *дингаль* is actually ambiguous between the feminine and inanimate Ablative meaning. Therefore, while it may not be the translator’s intention, the use of *дингаль* also elegantly hints at the native Ket beliefs in which the chief evil deity was a female [cf. Georg 2007: 30].

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