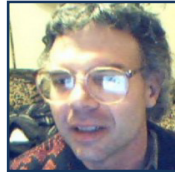


□ Robert Lindsay  
MA, California State University, Fresno



### Mutual Intelligibility among the Turkic Languages

Turkic is a large family of about 40 languages stretching from Turkey all the way to China. Most of the languages are pretty close, and it's often been said that they are all mutually intelligible, and that you can go from Turkey all the way to the Yakut region of Siberia and be understood the whole way.

This is certainly not the case, although there is something to it. That is because the languages, while generally not above 90% intelligible which is the requirement to be dialects, do have varying degrees of intelligibility. That is, there is some intelligibility between most of the Turkic languages, but generally below 90%.

The truth is that the mutual intelligibility in Turkic is much less than proclaimed.

Turkish and Azeri are often said to be completely intelligible, but this is not true, though the situation is interesting. The two are not intelligible, but there are intelligible dialects between them. The far eastern dialects of Turkish are closer to Azeri than to Turkish. Turkish has about 65-90% intelligibility with Azeri. After a few weeks of close contact, they can often communicate pretty well. Azeri is spoken in Azerbaijan.

This situation is changing now due to increased contact. However, nowadays due to exposure to Turkish TV, most Azeri speakers can speak Turkish well, and due to exposure to Azeri TV, Turks understand a lot more Azeri than they used to.

Kazakh and Kirghiz are also close, with probably 75-80% intelligibility between them. In addition, they have been growing closer recently. Kazakh is spoken in Kazakhstan, and Kirghiz is spoken in Kyrgyzstan.

Tatar and Bashkir are probably even closer to that, with intelligibility on the order of 85%.

Uzbek and Uyghur are fairly close, but they are still probably only 65-70% intelligible. Uzbek is spoken in Uzbekistan, and Uighur is spoken Nanjing Province, China. Uzbek and Kazakh are not intelligible, but there is an intelligible dialect between them.

Tofa and Tuvan are not intelligible, but there are intelligible dialects linking them. Both are spoken in Russia in the same region as Altai below.

The truth is that Altai and Uzbek are not even intelligible within themselves. Altai is spoken in the Altai region of Russia where China, Russia and Mongolia all come together. Altai is split into North Altai and South Altai, separate languages. Uzbek is split into North Uzbek and South Uzbek, separate languages.

Azeri is split into North Azeri and South Azeri, although the two are said to be intelligible, in truth, there are large differences in phonology, morphology, syntax and loan words. Nevertheless, they are more or less intelligible. The split was probably done for political reasons, as North Azeri is the official language of Azerbaijan and South Azeri is a language spoken in Northwest Iran.

The Oghuz languages are said to be fully intelligible, but that's not really the case. The question of the intelligibility of Turkmen with Azeri and Turkish is controversial, as some sources say that they are mostly intelligible. Personally, I think the intelligibility of Turkmen and Turkish is probably around 40%. Turkish has low intelligibility between Crimean Tatar and Karaim. Crimean Tatar speakers say that Turks cannot understand their language (Dokuzlar 2010).

The intelligibility of Turkish and South Azeri may be quite high, on the order of 85% or so, higher than between Turkish and North Azeri.

The intelligibility of Turkish and Khorasani Turkic is probably around 55-60%.

Practically speaking, Turkish has low intelligibility with Kazakh (Kipchak Branch), Uyghur and Uzbek (Uyghuric branch) and Khakas (Siberian branch). I would estimate that Turkish-Kazakh intelligibility is less than 40%. There is probably also low intelligibility between Turkish and Bashkir, Nogay, Kyrgyz and Tatar (Kipchak Branch).

Turkic has effectively 0% intelligibility with Yakut or Sakha.

The intelligibility of Turkish and the Central Asian Turkic languages like Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Turkmen is much exaggerated.

Speakers of these languages who went to study in Turkey said they had problems with the Turkish language. It's true that Turkish TV is not much watched in the Central Asian Turkic nations, but probably the main reason for that is that Central Asian Turkic

speakers can't understand it. They can't even understand the simplified Turkish used in these broadcasts. After the fall of the USSR, people from these new nations visited Turkey, but they had to bring interpreters with them to communicate.

In truth, the whole notion of the mutual intelligibility of all Turkish languages is a pan-Turkic conceit. Pan-Turkic is a noxious form of ultranationalism headquartered in Turkey. It says that all speakers of Turkic languages are part of a Greater Turkey and often uses ominous irredentist language implying that Turkey is going to conquer all the Turkic lands and take them back.

The Pan-Turkics have a snide attitude towards other Turkic speakers, insisting that they all speak dialects of Turkish and not separate languages. Speakers of other Turkic tongues resent this snideness.

A number of Turkic languages may be nothing more than dialects and not full languages. Urum and Krymchak may be dialects of Crimean Tatar. Urum is spoken in SE Ukraine, and Crimean Tatar and Krymchak are spoken on the Crimean Peninsula. Krymchak is the language of the Crimean Jews. Salchuq is probably an Azeri dialect. It is spoken in Iran. Qashqai, also spoken in Iran, may also be an Azeri dialect.

Gagauz has very high intelligibility with Turkish, so high that it may be a dialect of Turkish. SIL says that not only Gagauz but also Balkan Gagauz Turkish are separate languages, but I wonder what criteria they are using to split them. The Gagauz are Christians living in Moldavia who strangely enough speak a Turkish language with many Christian Slavic loanwords. The Balkan Gagauz Turks live in far west Turkey, Greece and Macedonia.

Kumyk is said to be intelligible with Azeri, which would make it a dialect of Azeri. Kalmyk is spoken in Dagestan. Karakalpak is so close to Kazakh that some claim it is a dialect of Kazakh. Karakalpak is spoken in Western Uzbekistan. Chulym and Shor may be dialects of a single language. Chulym and Shor are spoken north of the Altai Mountains in the Ob River Basin near the city of Novokuznetsk.

Further research regarding the intelligibility of these languages is indicated.

### References

Uygar Dokuzlar, Crimean Tatar speaker. April 2010. Personal communication.