

Cognitive-Semantic Interpretation of Social and Ethical Stereotypes in Ancient Turkic Inscriptions

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the cognitive-semantic nature of stereotypical formulas found in the Orkhon-Yenisei inscriptions and explores their significance within the context of Uzbek linguistics. The study examines stable cognitive models prevalent in these inscriptions, such as the “ruler-father” archetype, the “we-they” dichotomy, and the deifying formula Tengri tek (like Tengri). The author posits that these stereotypes function as a “cognitive map,” preserving the ethical, political, and cultural codes of ancient Turkic society across centuries. Utilizing methodologies of cognitive linguistics, specifically conceptual modeling and metaphorical analysis, the research findings establish a fundamental framework for the study of ancient Turkic cultural monuments.

Keywords: Orkhon-Yenisei inscriptions, cognitive linguistics, stereotype, cultural code, conceptual model, *Tengri tek*, ethnic stereotype, “father-child” template, cognitive script.

INTRODUCTION

The ancient Turkic runic inscriptions, known as the Orkhon-Yenisei monuments, are far more than mere historical records; they represent a vast repository of spiritual heritage that encapsulates the worldview, values, and lifestyle of our ancestors. In contemporary linguistics, the cognitive approach provides a powerful lens through which to explore these texts,

enabling us to uncover the deep-seated meanings concealed behind linguistic units.

This research places particular emphasis on the concept of “stereotype.” In this context, we define stereotypes not as superficial perceptions, but as established “mental templates” (or cognitive scripts) that were deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness over centuries. These templates played a pivotal role in governing interpersonal relationships, institutionalizing respect for the ruler, and fostering vigilance against external threats within ancient society.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze such stable formulas and imagery embedded in the inscriptions. By examining models such as the “Ruler-Father” archetype or the “Us versus Them” dichotomy, we aim to demonstrate how the ancient Turks managed their state, preserved their national identity, and maintained their ethical standards. Essentially, these stereotypes functioned as a “code of conduct” for ancient society. They served as a moral program, instructing subsequent generations on how to live and which values to uphold. Through this research, we seek to gain a deeper understanding not only of the linguistic characteristics of the ancient era but also of the cognitive patterns of the people of that time and the cultural roots that have persisted to the present day.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

The study of the language of ancient Turkic runic inscriptions has accumulated a wealth of expertise within both international and Uzbek linguistics. Scholars such as V. V. Radlov, S. Ye. Malov, and I. V. Kormushin established the foundation for the philological and historical-comparative analysis of these monuments, paving the way for more profound subsequent research. In Uzbekistan, the contributions of academicians and specialists have been invaluable, as they have extensively illuminated the lexical, syntactic, and socio-political dimensions of these inscriptions from the perspective of Uzbek linguistics [3: 60].

However, investigating stereotypes in ancient Turkic texts through the lenses of cognitive linguistics and conceptual analysis currently represents one of the most pressing and promising directions in the field. Theories concerning “mental models,” “frames,” and “scripts” – developed by prominent cognitive linguists – are unveiling new facets in our understanding of the fixed expressions within these inscriptions. Building upon previous philological studies, this article aims to enrich them with a modern cognitive-semantic approach.

The methodological framework of this research is rooted in the comprehensive approach of cognitive linguistics. We conceptualize these monuments as the “mental program” of ancient Turkic society. The research utilizes several methodologies, including conceptual analysis, metaphorical analysis, historical-comparative and interpretive methods, as well as cognitive modeling.

RESULTS

Etymologically, the term “stereotype” is derived from the Greek words “stereos” (solid, firm) and “typos” (imprint, form). Within a socio-cultural context, it denotes a stable, standardized, and deeply ingrained mental representation of a specific group, individual, or phenomenon [2: 12]. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, a stereotype acts as a “pre-existing cognitive template” or “mental mold” utilized by the human brain to organize complex information flows and facilitate a rapid understanding of the world. In the Orkhon-Yenisei inscriptions, the concept of the stereotype assumes significant importance:

1. **As a mechanism for organizing information:** In Ancient Turkic texts, stereotypes function not merely as descriptive tools but as “mental shortcuts” that preserve the historical experience of society in a concise and stable form. For instance, recurring epithets used to depict the image of a ruler or an enemy provide the reader with a pre-formatted conclusion.

2. **As a cultural code:** Stereotypes emerge in the inscriptions as cultural codes transmitted across generations. The depiction of the Khagan as a “father” (a caring provider) is a persistent social stereotype that solidified the political values of Turkic society for centuries.
3. **As a cognitive defense mechanism:** The dichotomy of “Us” (the Turkic people) and “Them” (representatives of foreign lands) in the inscriptions constitutes a cognitive template aimed at preserving the collective identity. This stereotypical opposition served as a stable program, compelling Turkic peoples toward internal unity and vigilance against external threats

In ancient Turkic texts, stereotypes function as “cultural scripts” that preserve the historical and ethical memory of the society. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, these stereotypes manifest as conceptual models that regulate the socio-political relations within ancient Turkic society. In the Bilge Khagan and Kul Tigin inscriptions, the relationship between the ruler and the people is framed through the distinctive “father-child” archetype. In this paradigm, the Khagan portrays himself as a caring father, while the people are represented as children in need of his protection. The Orkhon-Yenisei monuments serve as a “cognitive map” imprinted with the moral and ethical stereotypes of that era. These stereotypes can be interpreted through three primary dimensions:

1. **The stereotype of sovereignty:** In the inscriptions, the image of the Khagan is consistently rendered through a specific template. The ideal ruler is depicted as a benevolent figure – the caring father of his people who “made the childless bear children and the naked wear clothes.” Here, the ruler’s institutional obligations to society take precedence over his individual traits. The prosperity of the people is directly linked to the ruler’s justice and the *qut* (divine fortune) bestowed by *Tengri*.
2. **The ethnic stereotype of “us” and “them”:** In these monuments, the concept of the “Turk” is invariably

associated with positive, noble, and divine values. Conversely, foreigners – such as the Tabgach – are frequently depicted through stereotypical tropes of being “deceitful,” “treacherous,” or “malicious.” This cognitive dichotomy served as a mechanism for self-identification, fostering internal unity, and establishing a defensive posture against external threats.

3. **The stereotype of heroism and warriorhood:** The image of the warrior in the inscriptions is also inherently stereotypical. A warrior is expected to be empowered by Tengri, loyal to his people, and courageous. Heroism is not merely an individual achievement but a required social norm and an ethical template imposed by Turkic society.

These stereotypes within the ancient monuments functioned as “cognitive programs” that defined how the people of that era perceived the world, what they valued, and how they ought to conduct their lives. These stable formulas, transmitted across texts, served as the primary vessels for the nation's cultural memory throughout the centuries.

Expressions found in the texts, such as “I made the childless people bear children, and I made the naked people clothed,” exemplify this stereotype most vividly. In this paradigm, the Khagan's primary responsibility is understood as rescuing the people from deprivation, providing for their material and spiritual well-being, and ensuring their proliferation. For the populace, this care from the ruler served as the ultimate guarantee of state stability and security. Consequently, the Khagan's social status in the inscriptions evolves into a stable cognitive model, where his legitimacy is measured by his capacity to protect and provide for his people.

In the descriptions of state governance and the personality of the ruler, perceptions linked to nature and the cosmos occupy a central place. This is not merely a stylistic choice; it is a deep-seated cognitive mechanism that shaped the worldview of ancient society. For instance, the recurring formula *Tengri tekTengridinbolmish Turk Bilge Khagan* (The Turk Bilge Khagan, born like Heaven from Heaven) is a fixed expression

that completely deifies the status of the ruler. A cognitive-semantic analysis of this phrase reveals that the ruler's authority over the people is presented not as a product of human will, electoral process, or transient political success, but as an integral component of the cosmic order. Through the expression *Tengri tek*, the grandeur, infinitude, and justice of the ruler are compared to the supreme power of the universe – the Sky (*Tengri*). Consequently, the origin of power is elevated beyond the human sphere into the realm of the sacred.

This cognitive model frames the relationship between the ruler and the people as both “natural” and “indisputable.” If authority is dictated by the cosmic order, it follows that the ruler’s decrees and methods of governance are perceived as immutable and necessary, much like the laws of nature. This stereotype transformed obedience to the ruler within society from a mere political obligation into an act of adherence to a divine order. Consequently, these formulas within the inscriptions harmonized state governance with the “cosmic order,” functioning as a vital cultural code that fostered a sense of stability and unity within the society [1: 89].

In the ancient Turkic inscriptions, the most distinct expression of self-awareness is the dichotomy of “Us” and “Them.” The concept of the “Turkic nation/land” (*turkel-yurti*) occupies a central position, serving as the foundational anchor for perceiving the world. Simultaneously, to define the distinctiveness of Turkic tribes and solidify their unity, strict negative stereotypes were formulated regarding “foreign” peoples. One of the most prominent examples of this process is the depiction of the Tabgach (Chinese) people. In the texts, their conduct and communication style are portrayed through phrases such as being “deceived by their sweet and smooth words.” Here, the linguistic concept of “sweet words” is interpreted as a mask concealing malicious intent. From a cognitive perspective, this description generates a stable ethnic stereotype of the Tabgach as a “deceitful and dangerous enemy.”

This stereotype functions as a cognitive script aimed at ensuring the security of the society. Through the text, the reader or listener is cautioned that succumbing to the “sweet words” of

the Tabgach is equivalent to courting disaster and risking the loss of the nation's independence. In this way, the dichotomy established in the inscriptions served as a potent psychological and social mechanism that encouraged internal unity, the preservation of native values, and constant vigilance against external influences. Consequently, this played a decisive role in safeguarding the political and cultural identity of the ancient Turks.

When depicting historical events and the destiny of the people in ancient Turkic inscriptions, the authors employed a system of rigid, immutable, and concise formulas. These formulas functioned as stereotypical models – pre-existing templates for perceiving reality. One of the most striking examples of this approach is the expression: *“I have revived the people who were destined to die.”* A cognitive analysis of this phrase reveals a bipolar conceptual model: on one end lies “death and collapse,” while on the other lies “life and restoration.” In this formula, the “heroic stereotype” of the Khagan as a savior is reinforced to its highest degree. The Khagan is elevated to the level of a mythological and social hero capable of bringing life out of death and restoring order from chaos.

These fixed expressions served as the sole and absolute model for the ancient society, providing a definitive answer to the question, “What should a ruler be like?” From a cognitive perspective, this formula transcends the limitations of time and space, elevating the Khagan's actions into a normative script that every successive ruler was expected to follow. Thus, the motif of “reviving from death” establishes an unbreakable bond between the people's loyalty to their Khagan and the ruler's divine mission. Consequently, these formulas not only enshrined the past in historical memory but also defined the values of sovereignty for future generations.

The stereotype of the Khagan as a “caring father” is most clearly revealed in the Kul Tigin minor inscription: “I made the childless people bear children, and I made the naked people clothed.” This passage metaphorically illustrates the ruler's responsibility toward his people. The terms “childless” (*o'gulsiz*) and “naked” (*yalang'och*) are semantic units representing the

state of crisis the people would face if left to their own devices. They reflect the societal perception of a community's vulnerability, akin to a "family left without a father's care."

The use of the verb "I made" (*qildim*) signifies the Khagan as a creative force, a restorer of order and stability who reshapes the life of society. This phrase establishes the ruler-people relationship based on the "father-child" paradigm. In this stereotype, the ruler's social status is measured by his capacity to provide protection, material support, and the sustenance required for the flourishing of new generations. By solidifying the cognitive model of the "Ruler as a Caring Father," this formula infused the Turkic tradition of governance with values of humanitarianism and responsibility. This stereotypical template transformed the people's loyalty to the Khagan into both a social and divine necessity, forming the core of Turkic statecraft philosophy for centuries.

In the Orkhon-Yenisei monuments, the process of Turkic self-identification is vividly expressed through the dichotomy between "Us" (the Turkic people) and "Them" (representatives of foreign lands). The passage from the Bilge Khagan inscription, "Deceived by the sweet words and soft silk of the Tabgach people, many Turkic people died," serves as a classic example that elucidates the cognitive-semantic essence of this opposition.

In this text, "soft silk" and "sweet words" are not merely aesthetic descriptions; they are cognitive metaphors acting as masks that conceal fatal consequences. "Sweet words" serve as the linguistic expression of deceit, while "soft silk" functions as the material sign of deception disguised as wealth.

1. **The "deceitful enemy" stereotype:** This metaphorical sequence constructs a stable ethnic stereotype of the Tabgach as a "deceitful and dangerous enemy." Within the Turkic worldview, this stereotype establishes a clear causal link between "external appeal" and "internal destruction."
2. **The "warning script":** From a cognitive perspective, this expression serves as a "warning script" designed for future generations. This script urges Turkic society to remain vigilant against the subtle political manipulations of

foreigners, to preserve their national values, and to maintain a constant state of alertness regarding external influences.

The Orkhon-Yenisei inscriptions operate as a sophisticated cognitive system where the stability of the state is not an accident of history but the direct result of a carefully constructed stereotype: the imperative of unity. At the heart of this social philosophy lies the formulaic recognition that the survival of the *El—the nation—depends* entirely on the synchronized alignment of all social strata, specifically the Beks (leaders) and the common people. When the texts recount that “because the Beks and the people were united... they were able to hold the state,” they are not simply recording a past event; they are establishing a fundamental cognitive equation where Unity equals Sovereignty.

This formula acts as an internal compass for the society, categorizing any form of internal discord as an existential threat. By repeatedly framing unity as the only pathway to strength, the inscriptions transform political cooperation into a moral and cosmic obligation. Central to this is the concept of *o’ng*, which signifies being “aligned,” “straight,” or “right.” In the ancient Turkic worldview, to be *o’ng* is to exist in harmony with both the collective will and the divine order of the universe. When the leaders and the people are properly aligned, they function as a single, invincible organism. This synchronization serves as a psychological shield, institutionalizing a collective “fear of discord” that acts as a social vaccine against fragmentation.

The inscriptions further elevate the Khagan as the architect of this cohesion. His political legitimacy is not measured by individual charisma alone, but by his capacity to maintain this state of *o’ng* among his subjects. Because unity is presented as a state of harmony with the cosmos, it is inextricably linked to *Qut*, or divine fortune. Therefore, the people believe that as long as they remain unified, they are blessed by Tengri, and the state will prosper. Conversely, the texts consistently remind the reader that past collapses were not caused by a lack of bravery, but by a failure of internal cohesion.

This stereotype functions as a social learning machine that imprints a specific, vital habit upon the collective psyche: a

perpetual vigilance against internal division. By enshrining the principle of unity within their foundational monuments, the ancient Turks turned the volatile task of managing diverse nomadic tribes into a universally understood and stable social principle. It communicated a clear, unwavering message to every member of the nation – from the highest official to the common herdsman – that their individual survival and the security of their families were inextricably linked to their ability to stand with their neighbor. In this worldview, a divided nation was a defeated one, while a unified nation was, by its very nature, destined to endure.

Stereotype type	Cognitive template	Purpose
Unity	“Unity = Success”	To prevent internal conflicts
Geographic	“Ruler of the four corners”	To elevate political legitimacy to a cosmic level
Historical	“Remembering the past = Guarantee for the future”	To ensure security and vigilance
Existential	“Honorable death = Eternal name”	To maintain a warrior spirit

The table provided outlines a sophisticated system of “cognitive templates” found within the Orkhon-Yenisei inscriptions, which functioned as the ideological software of the ancient Turkic state. These templates were not merely literary ornaments; they were essential social tools designed to simplify complex realities and guide the collective behavior of the population [2: 34].

At the core of this system is the unity template, which operates on the simple, immutable formula that unity equals success. By framing cooperation as the sole condition for sovereignty, this template effectively acted as a preventative measure against the internal fragmentation that threatened the stability of nomadic alliances. Complementing this is the geographic template, specifically the “Ruler of the Four Corners” concept. This shifted the perception of political power from a mundane, temporary administrative role to a divine, cosmic responsibility, thereby justifying the Khagan’s authority as a reflection of the universal order.

Furthermore, the historical template serves as a vital pedagogical tool, establishing the principle that remembering the past – especially past failures – is the ultimate guarantee for future security. This transformed historical memory into a defensive mechanism, constantly reminding society of the dangers of complacency and external manipulation. Finally, the **existential** template addresses the individual's role within the collective, defining honorable death as the path to an eternal name. This provided a powerful psychological framework that sustained the warrior spirit, ensuring that the personal sacrifice of the soldier was viewed as a permanent contribution to the enduring glory of the nation.

Taken together, these templates illustrate that the Orkhon-Yenisei monuments functioned as a form of social engineering. By distilling profound governance principles into concise, memorable, and culturally resonant formulas, the ancient Turks successfully synchronized the worldview of their people, ensuring the long-term resilience and unity of their state across generations.

DISCUSSION

The formula *Tengri tekTengridinbolmish Turk Bilge Khagan* represents far more than a royal title; it is the cornerstone of ancient Turkic statecraft and a profound expression of cosmic-political consciousness. By anchoring the Khagan's authority directly in the divine, this expression transforms the state into a terrestrial reflection of the celestial realm. The power of this formula lies in its ability to collapse the distance between the human political sphere and the infinite nature of the Sky (Tengri), effectively neutralizing the possibility of political dissent by framing it as a violation of the natural order.

From a cognitive-semantic perspective, the phrase serves as an ultimate "legitimization script." By asserting that the Khagan is "born like Heaven," the inscription bypasses any need for earthly validation, such as consensus or inheritance, and replaces it with a mandate of ontological necessity. The ruler becomes a living metaphor – an embodiment of the Sky's justice,

impartiality, and vastness. This cognitive framing accomplishes a critical socio-political shift: the Khagan is no longer a fallible agent operating within the limitations of human history, but an immutable constant, as essential and inevitable as the celestial bodies themselves.

This perspective creates an unbreakable “ideological loop.” If the Khagan’s origin is divine, then his decrees – ranging from legislative acts to military mobilizations – are not merely the expressions of a personal will, but are interpreted as the activation of cosmic law. Within the society, this fosters a deep-seated cultural psychological posture: obedience to the ruler is not perceived as servitude to another human, but as an act of alignment with the rhythm of the universe. To follow the Khagan is to exist in harmony with the Tengri, while to oppose him is to introduce chaos into the world – a risk no individual or group would dare to undertake in a society built upon the preservation of order.

Furthermore, this formula positions the Khagan as the vital bridge between “Heaven and Earth.” In the volatile environment of the steppe, where survival necessitated extreme cohesion, this central figure acted as the anchor. The stereotype ensures that the state system is not viewed as a fragile, human-made structure, but as a sacred entity sanctioned by the universe. By encoding this worldview into the very language of their monuments, the ancient Turks created a self-sustaining political culture where the authority of the Khagan and the stability of the state were protected by the weight of cosmic inevitability. Ultimately, this formula provided the psychological security needed to maintain a centralized empire, ensuring that the legitimacy of the sovereign remained as unshakable as the firmament itself.

CONCLUSION

The study of stereotypes within the Orkhon-Yenisei monuments demonstrates that these inscriptions are far more than mere historical chronicles; they are a “cognitive map” that encapsulates the worldview, ethical norms, and political ideals of the ancient Turkic people. The stable templates and recurring

expressions embedded in these texts have preserved the mechanisms of social order, interpersonal relationships, and self-identification across centuries.

Specifically, the relationship between the ruler and the people is framed through the “father-child” archetype. In this paradigm, the Khagan is not merely a head of state but a caring father figure who rescues the people from deprivation, provides for them, and offers constant support. This stereotypical depiction established the ruler’s duty toward his people and the people’s loyalty to their Khagan as a divine and social necessity.

Simultaneously, the dichotomy of “Us” and “Them” – a fundamental aspect of self-identification – is vividly manifested. The frequent warnings against being deceived by the “sweet words and soft silk” of foreigners, such as the Tabgach, serve as critical examples. These metaphorical descriptions solidify the image of the enemy as “deceitful,” acting as a cognitive defense mechanism that encourages the society to maintain constant vigilance and preserve national unity. Ultimately, these ancient inscriptions reveal that the linguistic structures of the past were sophisticated tools designed to safeguard the political and cultural identity of the Turkic people.

Furthermore, the authority itself is sanctified through the formula *Tengri tek* – born like Heaven from Heaven. This expression links the status of the Khagan not to human will, but to the cosmic order, establishing his rule as an indisputable truth. In summary, these immutable templates – stereotypes – in ancient inscriptions did not merely record historical events; they served as a ready-made “guide” for every generation regarding their relationship with the state, society, and their own identity. Analyzing these texts from a cognitive perspective allows us to gain a deeper understanding not only of our ancestors’ language but also of their mode of thought and the roots of the cultural codes that have endured to the present day.

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