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## The Social Group and its Designation in Middle Mongolian: The Concepts *Irgen* and *Oboq*

According to Schutz, the renowned sociologist and philosopher of science, the natural sciences and the social sciences differ fundamentally from each other in the type of phenomena with which they are concerned. In the natural sciences, the things studied themselves define the subject area on the basis of objective criteria; the subject area itself has no ‘meaning’ for the molecules, atoms and electrons which are a part of it. The social scientist is in a completely different situation. The social world which is his field of study appears before him not only as an objective phenomenon (which links it to the world of the natural sciences), but also as a complex of subjective meanings added to it by the people who inhabit it. As they seek to explain and interpret social reality, people create thought constructs around it which determine their attitude towards it and their behaviour within it. For this reason, any social science which aims at a complete understanding of the phenomena with which it is concerned necessarily has to reckon with this subjective component and, moreover, has to incorporate it into

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its theoretical foundations. 'Thus,' writes Schutz, 'the constructs used by the social scientist are, so to speak, constructs of the second degree, namely constructs of the constructs made by the actors on the social scene, whose behavior the scientist observes and tries to explain in accordance with the procedural rules of his science' [Schutz 1971a: 6; cf. Schutz 1971b: 59].

If this epistemological postulate is accepted, an adequate account of social reality is only possible when the concepts used in academic analysis are correlated with the everyday experience of the actual participants in the reality being described. Of course, in the analysis of isolated problems the researcher has the right to exclude this experiential factor from consideration. For example, an economist can study commodity circulation or the behaviour of prices, leaving aside the question of the significance these phenomena have for those involved in economic activity. That does not mean that he is not able to determine their link with subjective factors, but simply that demonstrating such a link does not always fall within the scope of his task or within the range of his current interests [Schutz 1971a: 34–5]. If, however, there really is no link between them, the theory he is proposing can have no explanatory value. After all, the litmus test for a theory in the social sciences is its compatibility with people's subjective understanding, with those first-degree constructs which people make use of in day-to-day life to help them comprehend social reality [Schutz 1971b: 62].

It follows that there is much to be gained from studying what characterises these everyday, common-sense constructs, or, stated more precisely, the constructs of a given, concrete community of people at a given, concrete period in time. The qualification is crucial: it stresses that the social conditions in which these constructs are formed differ from society to society. Indeed, Schutz argues, social conditions have a fundamental role which derives from the structure of an individual's stock of knowledge. Knowledge consists chiefly of various types of common-sense constructs. The idea that a stock of knowledge is put together from fragments of an individual's past experience is only partially true. The vast majority of common-sense knowledge is social in origin and is transmitted to a person by his social surroundings [Schutz 1971a: 10–11, 13; 1971b: 60–62; Schutz, Luckmann 1974: 7]. The ontological premise for this state of affairs is the inherent intersubjectivity of the life-world — the socio-cultural environment in which a person lives.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>1</sup> Schutz borrowed the concept of the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) from the work of Husserl, the founder of phenomenology. Limitations of space do not allow for detailed discussion of Schutz's system of views on the nature and characteristics of the life-world here. The interested reader can consult his *The Structures of the Life-World*, published posthumously, with additions, by his pupil Luckmann [Schutz, Luckmann 1974].

the method of transmission of knowledge is itself social. The constructs which society generates and endorses, typifications and efficient ‘recipes’ for action are assimilated primarily through language, the social construct *par excellence*. Language predetermines ‘what features of the world are worthy of being expressed, and therewith what qualities of these features and what relations among them deserve attention, and what typifications, conceptualisations, abstractions, generalisations and idealisations are relevant for achieving typical results by typical means’ [Schutz 1971c: 349]. Echoing Sapir and Whorf, Schutz argues that language reflects the system of things considered relevant by the users of that language, and serves to express their ‘relative natural conception of the world’.

It is impossible to describe the common-sense experience of social reality and the first-degree constructs which are formed on the basis of it without taking into account the language in which it finds expression. Moreover, ‘the pre-scientific vernacular can be interpreted as a treasure house of ready made pre-constituted types and characteristics, all socially derived and carrying along an open horizon of unexplored content’ [Schutz 1971a: 14]. Therefore, a researcher who wishes to describe the system of common-sense constructs in a particular society ought to focus his attention upon the language used by that society.

Although this point of methodology was not central to Schutz’s conceptualisation, it is of great significance to the present work, which has two aims: to give an account of how the medieval Mongols conceptualised their society (i.e. of first-degree constructs);<sup>1</sup> and to re-examine the correspondence between the social subjects’ experience and existing theoretical models of their society (i.e. second-degree constructs). The two problems are closely linked, but the former must naturally be completed before the latter can be attempted. Consequently, the need for an account of the categories of common-sense social experience which governed the lives of medieval Mongols is particularly pressing. However, an account of this sort requires support from linguistic data, and this is where Schutz’s ideas about the role of language in the common-sense construction of the social world come into their own. This theoretical approach serves, of course, to make a virtue out of necessity: the only way to ascertain the subjective meanings which medieval Mongols attached to their social reality is to analyse the ways in which they are objectively expressed in the vocabulary of Middle Mongolian.

The paper focuses on the concepts denoted by two Middle Mongolian social terms that played an important part in the medieval Mongol conception of society. The following section discusses in

<sup>1</sup> Discussion here will be restricted to the concepts denoted by the lexical items *oboq* and *irgen*.

broad outline the theoretical models which have been used to interpret Mongol society; then the linguistic evidence is analysed; finally, the models and the evidence are compared. Thus, preliminary solutions to both the above problems will be suggested, albeit in relation to just two lexical items and the concepts they designate.

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First of all, it must be noted that the words *oboq* and *irgen* lie at the heart of recent theoretical debate about the structure of medieval Mongol society. They are the subject of a monograph [Bacon 1958] and of a number of articles [e. g. Kałużyński 1977; 1989; Pritsak 1952; Skrynnikova 1990]. Despite — or maybe because — of this intense interest, a generally accepted interpretation of the concepts they express has yet to be arrived at. Although all researchers agree that they correspond to certain units within Mongol social structure, the exact definition and characteristics of these units are disputed. Making sense of the numerous different opinions is no easy matter and the present paper follows the approach to the elucidation of theoretical concepts developed and employed by Benveniste (as in, for example, [Benveniste 2002a]). Briefly stated, his approach is based upon the idea that the meaning of an academic concept is revealed by the history of its usage in the intellectual traditions which have incorporated it into their conceptual apparatus. However, where Benveniste was concerned with the history of analytical concepts, the present paper is concerned with the history of the academic interpretation of common-sense concepts, or, in Schutz's terms, with the reflection of first-degree constructs in second-degree ones.

This approach casts light on the issues under discussion here and suggests that they fit into a particular type of system. This system can arguably be described in the same way that Kuper described the history of anthropological conceptions of 'the primitive society' [Kuper 1988]. Using the ideas of Lévi-Strauss and of Cohen, the historian of physics, he suggested that the development of the concept of the primitive society could be regarded as a series of transformations made to a theoretical model with its origins in mid-nineteenth century work on evolution. At each stage of development, some elements of the existing theories remained unaltered, some were modified slightly, and some were subject to a radical shift in theoretical emphasis. Yet even the most fundamental changes were nothing more than a variation on a given intellectual theme.

The process which Kuper describes is similar in many respects to the treatment of the words *oboq* and *irgen* (and maybe even to the status of social theory as a whole) in Mongolian Studies, though there are several specific points of difference. Here, it is more

appropriate to talk not of a single original theoretical model and its transformations, but rather of the development of three entirely independent and incompatible models. One of them — Vladimirtsov's model [Vladimirtsov 1934] — may indeed be thought of as basic, for it is has the widest range of transformations (the competing models do not appear to have any) and the largest number of direct followers. For a long time this model served as the official Marxist version of Mongol social history and as such was the starting point for generations of researchers. Its primacy is evident from the fact that both of the alternative models (those of Bacon and Markov) arose as reactions against it, and, oversimplifying somewhat, through the inversion of its key tenets. Here, however, the parallel with Kuper's work ends: their origins notwithstanding, the alternative models do in fact include theoretical approaches which explain in their own way the same facts that the earlier model was designed to interpret.

All versions of the base model — Vladimirtsov's and its subsequent transformations — associate the issues under discussion here with the clan hypothesis (Russian: *rodoplemyannaya gipoteza*), an extremely important tool for the description of Mongol society in the pre-imperial period. Some of the differences between them are simply a matter of which of their basic analytical categories they identify with the terms *oboq* and *irgen*. The reader is referred to the works themselves for detailed exposition of the various interpretations; for present purposes, it will suffice to list their conclusions: Vladimirtsov 1934: *oboq* — 'clan' (R. *rod*), *irgen* — 'tribe (R. *plemya*), sub-tribe'; Pritsak 1952: *oboq* — 'tribe', *irgen* — 'an alliance of tribes'; Doerfer [TMEN I No. 16; II No. 468]: *oboq* — 'the descendants of the mythological father of the clan, together with vassal tribes dependent upon them', *irgen* — 'an alliance made up of several clans'; Gongor 1974: *oboq* — 'clan', *irgen* — 'ordinary members of the clan'; Skrynnikova 1990, 1997: *oboq* — 'clan', *irgen* — 'tribe'.

The first of the alternative models which questions the adequacy of the clan hypothesis is [Bacon 1958]. Bacon argues that 'the term 'clan' is confusing when employed in describing the social groupings of Central Asiatic tribes because it is inapplicable in its customary anthropological meaning' [Bacon 1958: viii]. In her view, in the vast expanses of Eurasia there existed 'a pattern of social structure not hitherto fully recognised or described' [Bacon 1958: vii]. Its structural parameters differed radically from those proposed in Vladimirtsov's clan model. Bacon suggests calling her model 'tribal-genealogical' and uses the Mongolian word *oboq* as a convenient designation. The basis of 'tribal genealogical organisation' (*obok*) was patrilineal descent groups which lacked features of the typical clan such as exogamy, exclusive criteria for group membership, and group symbols. They were simultaneously kin, territorial and political group-

ings [Bacon 1958: 41–2]. The *obok* type of social organisation was modelled on the extended family, and relationships between different sectors of society were seen in terms of family relationships. An individual's position in society was not determined by membership of a group defined by common descent (as is the case in societies organised into clans), but rather by the place he occupied in the genealogy of the tribe (hence the term tribal-genealogical). *Obok* was made up of several levels of group membership which became broader higher up the lineage, and which fused and interacted according to circumstance. In Bacon's approach, the features of *obok* (as a theoretical concept) are manifested by medieval Mongol *oboq* (as a common-sense construct). For Mongols in the reign of Genghis Khan '*oboh* [= *oboq*] clearly refers to a patriarchal kin group. *Irgen*, on the other hand, may refer to the followers attached, either voluntarily or by conquest, to an *oboh*. [...] It seems probable that in earlier times the tribe was an *oboh* [...], but that during the struggle for power in Mongolia there was a considerable realignment of subgroup *oboh*'s through their attachment, either voluntarily or by conquest, to families which provided strong leadership. The *irgen* would appear to be the result of this realignment of kin groups' [Bacon 1958: 53].

While Bacon makes only an oblique criticism of Vladimirtsov's ideas, Markov engages in open polemic with them [Markov 1976]. To support his case that the base model is an unjustifiably archaic representation of social relationships in medieval Mongolia, he draws attention to the following points: 'Prior to the emergence of the empire, Mongol society did not have a clan structure. A comparison of the history of the Mongols with the history of the Huns suggests that among nomadic peoples primitive social relationships broke down in the distant past, and that so-called "clan remnants" were in fact phenomena typical of the economic and social organisation of nomadic societies' [Markov 1976: 69]. Rather than an evolution from clan-structure to feudalism, Markov's model proposes an alternation between two types of nomadic society — a 'communal-nomadic' type and a 'military-nomadic' type [Markov 1976: 311–13]. In certain respects his model is very similar to Bacon's, though it is not known whether he was influenced by Bacon's work. He, too, used the term 'genealogical-tribal structure' [Markov 1976: 55], noted the role played by quasi-familial units and fictional genealogies in the ideology underlying the unity of Mongol communities [Markov 1976: 310], and examined the concepts of *oboq* and *irgen*: 'Mongol social organisation had a communal-tribal structure. Families formed nomadic units called *oboq*; these units combined to form larger tribal subgroups called *uruq*; and these subgroups joined to form tribes, or *irgen*' [Markov 1976: 55]. The relationship between concepts is based on the hierarchical principle which was also used

by the proponents of the base model, but the key component of their approach — ‘the clan’ — is absent from Markov’s scheme. In addition, he argues that *oboq* could be ‘complex formations made up of branches (R. *kolena*) and sub-branches of families’ [Markov 1976: 55].

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There were two elements to the second of the aims set out at the beginning of the paper: to give an account of academic constructs, and to verify (or falsify) them by checking them against common-sense constructs. For the second of these tasks, a clear understanding of the significance the common-sense constructs had for the inhabitants of the life-world is vital. The main task here is to gain as clear an understanding as possible (though a degree of imprecision is inevitable, of course) by conducting a semantic analysis of the words *oboq* and *irgen*. Semantics is concerned with meanings that are accessible to ordinary language users — Schutz’s actors on the social scene. This level of meaning is known in linguistics as ‘the naïve picture of the world’; further discussion will be based upon it.

Semantic analysis is based upon the principle that the ways in which a word is used determine its meaning. Benveniste states: ‘The ‘meaning’ of a linguistic form is determined by the totality of its uses, by its distribution, and by the types of connections which arise between the two’ [Benveniste 2002c: 332]. Foremost here is the concept of distribution, by which is meant ‘all the environments in which a given item is found, or all the environments in which a given item co-occurs with identical items’ [Stepanov 1975: 203]. The present analysis applies the distributional method to a corpus of Middle Mongolian texts dating from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The longest text is *The Secret History of the Mongols* [SHM]; the corpus also contains a number of shorter Middle Mongolian texts [MMT].<sup>1</sup>

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There is a total of 22 attestations of the word *oboq* in SHM. It never occurs in free position; it always appears in combinations with the

<sup>1</sup> Quotations from SHM are given according to Rachewiltz’s transcription [SHM]. The numerals indicate the paragraph number. Quotations from MMT are given according to the editions by Ligeti [1972a; 1972b; Bur] and Sagaster [ČT]. A list of abbreviations is given in the appendix. A few words about the terminology used in the paper are essential. Following standard practice in semantics, the author distinguishes two components in the concept of ‘lexical meaning’: the extensional meaning (the set of real-world objects designated by a word) and the intensional meaning (the characteristics which are shared by all elements of this set and which a word expresses). The term ‘referent’ is used to denote an individual element of the extensional, i.e. the concrete object to which a word used in the text refers.

affix {tu}<sup>1</sup> (9, 44, 139) and its plural correlate {tan} (11, 40, 41, 42 (x5), 46 (x6), 47 (x3), 49, 263). The two combinations are shown in the following:

(1) *qorilartai-mergen qori-tumad-un qajar-tur-iyān buluqan keremün gürö'etei qajar-iyān qorilalduju mawulalduju qorilar oboqtu bolju burqan-qaldun-nu görü'üli sayita qajar sayin ke'en burqan-qaldun-nu ejēt burqan-bosqaqsan sinci-bayan uriangqai-tur newüjü ayisun aju'u 9*

'Qorilartai-mergen — [seeing as] in the land of the Qori-Tumats [the people] engaged in mutual prohibitions and outrages over the land, which had sables, squirrels and wild animals — became one who has the *oboq* Qorilar, and, saying, "The land of Burqan-Qaldun, with its wild animals that are good for hunting, is fine", he travelled to the Uriangqai Sinci-Bayan, who had erected likenesses of the [spirit-] masters of Burqan-Qaldun';

(2) *duwa-soqor ügei bolu[q]san-u qoyina dörben kö'üt inu dobun-mergen abaqa-yu'an uruq-a ülü bolqan doromjilaju qaqaqaju gējü newüba dörben oboqtan bolju dörben irgen tede bolba 11*

'After Duwa-Soqor died, his four sons, showing no regard for their uncle on their father's side, Dobun-mergen, scorned him, cut themselves off and travelled away, abandoning [him]. Having become those who have the *oboq* Dörben, they became Dörben people'.

In these examples the related forms *oboqtu* and *oboqtan* are predicative constituents in copular constructions with the verb *bol* = 'to become'. This is the most common usage: the construction *oboqtu bol* = is attested once (9), the construction *oboqtan bol* = 17 times (11, 40, 41, 42 (x5), 46 (x5), 47 (x3), 49). The propositional function *XY + {tu}* (*pl. {tan}*) *bol* = in Middle Mongolian indicated the acquisition of Y by X, where X and Y were semantically unrestricted. It could not be used to denote possession of X by Y when Y was the name of a social unit.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, it described exactly the opposite situation, in which X was the subject and Y the object of possession. By way of illustration, all the examples of this propositional function in SHM given in Vietze's dictionary *a tergo* [Vietze et al. 1969] and Rachewiltz's index to the text [SHM] are quoted below:

<sup>1</sup> The affix {tu} used in a construction of the form *XY + {tu}* expressed a possessive meaning: 'Y belongs to X'. It had four allomorphs, which were differentiated according to two features: the place of articulation of the morpheme being modified (= *tu/ = tai* if Y is velar; = *tü/ = tei* if Y is palatal) and the gender of the semantic subject (= *tu/ = tü* if X is masculine; = *tai/ = tei* if X is feminine). In SHM the word *oboq* is used only with masculine semantic subjects, but one of the other texts (a bilingual Chinese-Mongolian text of 1335) attests an isolated instance of its being combined with the affix = *tai*: *yeke emege inu Lii oboytai* 'his great-grandmother had the *oboy* Li' [Tch 14].

<sup>2</sup> Middle Mongolian used the special affix {dai<sup>3</sup>} to indicate membership of a particular social group. See below.



**X Y+{tu} bol=**

(3) *caraqa-ebügen yaratu bolju* 73 ‘Caraqa-ebügen, having become injured (lit. ‘one who has a wound’)...’;

(4) *qo’aqcin üni’en... öre’ele eber-iyen ququraju so[l]jir ebürtü bolju* 121 ‘The brown cow... having broken one of its two horns, became [a cow] with [one] crooked horn...’;

(5) *teden-i ji’ürtü<sup>1</sup> bolju niscu tenggeri-tür qaru’asu* 199 ‘If they, having become winged (lit. ‘ones who have wings), fly off and go up to heaven...’

**X Y+{tan} bol=**

(6) *tere cuqtai müsüt metü qamtu niken eyeten bolu’asu* 22 ‘If [you] are together and in agreement (lit. ‘become ones having a single agreement’), like this bundle of staves for arrows...’;

(7) *jamuqa altan qucar qardakidai ebügejin noyakin söge’etei to’oril qaci’un-beki tede bolun niken eyeten bolju* 166 ‘Jamuqa, Altan, Qucar, Qardakidai, Ebügejin, Noyakin, Söge’etei, To’oril and Qaci’un-beki, they came to an agreement (lit. ‘became ones who have a single agreement’)’;

(8) *morin unu’atan modun nemüreten bolba tede* 174 ‘They became ones who have horses for mounts, ones who have trees for shelters’;

(9) *ye ütkekün haran aldaltan boltuqai* 203 ‘Let people who betray become guilty (lit. ‘ones having guilt’)’.<sup>2</sup>

Judging from these examples, the word *oboq* can hardly have referred to some sort of social unit. It belonged to a class of nouns denoting objects and qualities that could be possessed, such as ‘wound’, ‘horn’, ‘wings’, ‘agreement’, ‘mount’, ‘shelter’, and ‘guilt’. It is also worth noting that it appears twice in constructions with the verb *bol<u>qa=* ‘to cause to become’, which is used to describe a situation where certain persons have *oboq* conferred upon them by the subject of causation. It is particularly difficult to interpret the word as a term for a social unit in these contexts:

(10) *bodoncar ügei boluqsan-u qoyina tere jewüredei-yi ger daru’a adangqa uriangqadai gü’ün alu’a te’ün-ü’ei bui’je ke’ejü jügeli-dece qarqaju jewüreyit oboqtu bol<u>qaju jeüred-ün ebüge tere bol<u>ba* 44

‘After Bodoncar, that Jewüredei, died, saying, ‘There has always been an Adangqa-Uriangqan in the yurt. [He], most probably, is

<sup>1</sup> The use of *ji’ürtü* for *ji’ürten* here violates the principle of number agreement between the subject and the nominal predicate. See below.

<sup>2</sup> Six further examples of the predicative expression *aldaltan bol=* ‘to become one who has guilt’ from SHM (224, 227 (x2), 233, 278, 280) have been omitted here to save space.

[descended] from him,' they gave up *jügel*<sup>1</sup> and **made [him] one who has the *oboq*** Jewüreyit. He became the ancestor of the Jewüreyit';

(11) *qacula-yin kö'ün ide'en-e baruq tula yeke-barula ucügen-barula nereyitcü barulas oboqtan bolqaju erdemtü-barula tödö'en-barula teri'üten barulas tede bol<u>ba* 46 'Because Qacula's sons were greedy (*baruq*) for food, [people] called [them] Big Barula and Little Barula and **made them ones who have the *oboq*** Barulas. They became Barula — Erdemtü-Barula, Tödö'en-Barula and others'.

The examples given above illustrate all the syntactic combinations in which the word *oboq* can appear. To draw any conclusions as to its likely meaning on the basis of such a sparse distribution is highly problematic. The semantic rule formulated by Kuryłowicz should be borne in mind: 'The narrower the sphere of usage, the richer the content (sense) a concept has; the wider the usage, the more impoverished the content' [Kuryłowicz 2000: 11]. The word *oboq* is characterised by an extremely narrow sphere of usage, from which it can be concluded that its semantic content is very rich. However, all that can be said about this content is that it is related to a category of objects that can be possessed. A solution to this problem lies in one of the other combinatorial features of the word *oboq* not yet mentioned here: the word always appears in postposition to a name which distinguishes a group of people. This is clear from the examples already given, but all the modifiers of *oboq* will be listed here for the sake of completeness: *qorilar* (9), *jadaran* (40), *dörben* (11), *menen-ba'arin* (41), *belgüniüt* (42), *bügüniüt* (42), *qatagin* (42), *salji'ut* (42), *borjigin* (42), *jewüreyit* (44), *noyakin* (46), *barulas* (46 x2), *buda'at* (46), *adargin* (46), *uru'ut* (46), *mangqut* (46), *tayici'ut* (47), *besüt* (47), *oronar* (47), *qongqotan* (47), *arula[t]* (47), *sönit* (47), *qabturqas* (47), *geniges* (47), *yürki* (49), *jürkin* (139), *qurumsi* (263). Each of these names related to some sort of politically independent nomadic group, and it is very likely that the word they modify — *oboq* — functioned as a hyponym to all of them. Thus, it seems reasonable to hypothesise that the word has a generalising meaning of the sort 'name of a group'.

This view has been put forward before by Kałużyński [1977; 1989], who treats the word *oboq* in SHM as 'a group name, rather like a surname', or as a 'distinguishing name' [Kałużyński 1977: 82–3]. He supports his interpretation with the following arguments [Kałużyński 1977: 82–4]:

— When the source is describing the emergence of an *oboq*, it discusses the etymology of its name and the circumstances which gave rise to it;

<sup>1</sup> On the term *jügel*, which the Mongols used to refer to occasional family sacrifice, see Bese 1986.

— The word *oboq* is never used independently, and it always has a specified possessor;

— As well as being used in relation to nomadic peoples, it is also used in relation to representatives of agricultural civilisations; the social organisation of these civilisations must have differed from the Mongol type of organisation;

— It is not attested in the ‘Compendium of Chronicles’ by the Persian writer Rashid al-Din,<sup>1</sup> which contains a detailed description of Mongol society on the eve of the rise of Genghis Khan, and the Arab word *lakab*, ‘name, nickname’, appears in those places where it might be expected. Kałużyński concludes, ‘The debate surrounding the word *oboq* has largely been an argument about a name, rather than about substance’ [Kałużyński 1977: 84].

Kałużyński’s assertion that ‘there can be no doubt that the word *oboq* in SHM indicated a name of some sort’ [Kałużyński 1989: 193] is surely too categorical. Examples in which the context justifies such an unequivocal interpretation are very few in number. However, the analysis of the syntactic behaviour of the word *oboq* carried out here does seem to support Kałużyński’s view. Further, his view is in keeping with the fact that the subject of possession in expressions with *oboq* is always a specified group of people. In (2), for example, the referents of the two nominal predicates in the two parts of the sentence coincide: *dörben oboqtan bolju dörben irgen tede bolba*, ‘Having become ones who have *oboq* Dörben, they became Dörben people’; that is to say, *oboqtan* ‘those who have *oboq*’ and *irgen* ‘people’ are here presented as co-referential concepts (‘contextual synonyms’). Other expressions which include *oboq* are also associated either with a group of individuals, as is indicated explicitly by the pronoun *tede* ‘they’ (40, 41, 46 (x3), 47 (x2), 49), or with an isolated individual considered in the role of founder and original leader of a group, as in examples (1) and (10); it also occurs in expressions of the following type:

(12) *bodoncar borjigin oboqtan bol<u>ba* 42 ‘Bodoncar became ones who have *oboq* Borjigin’.

However, in examples (2) and (12) the problem of the extensional interpretation of the form *oboqtan* arises. What class of referents did it denote? Of whom could Mongols predicate the property of ‘having *oboq*’? Kałużyński thought that ‘[the referents] could be various groups, at least in terms of numbers’ [Kałużyński 1977: 83]. In his opinion, the property was predicated both of the leaders of groups and of the ordinary people they led [ibid.]. In addition, he thought that bearers of *oboq* were linked by blood [Kałużyński 1989: 193–5].

<sup>1</sup> Not in fact the case: see TMEN I № 61, p.183.

Whilst the first of these points is borne out by the sources, the same cannot be said of the other two. The following extract from SHM casts doubt upon them:

(13) *ede jürkin irgen-ü yosun jürkin olurun qabul-qan-u dolo'an kö'üd-ün angqa aqa ökin-barqaq büle'e kö'ün inu sorqatu-jürki büle'e jürkin bolurun qabul-qan-u kö'üd-ün aqa ke'ejü irgen-ü'en dotoraca ilqaju helige-tür sölsütü heregei-tür honcitan a'uşgi dü'üreng jirigetü aman dü'üreng a'urtan ere tutum erdemütten books gücüten-i ilqaju ökcü a'urtan sölsütan omoqtan jörkimes tula jürkin ke'ekdegü yosun teyimü teyimün omoqtan irgen-i cinggis-qahan dorayita'ulju jürkin oboqtu-yi ülitkeba irgen-i ulus-i inu cinggis-qahan ö'er-ün emcü irgen bolqaba 139* 'The circumstances [of the emergence] of these Jürkin people. When they became Jürkin, the oldest of the seven sons of Qabul-qan was Ökin-Barqaq. His son was Sorqatu-Jürki. When they became Jürkin, Qabul-qan, saying, '[Ökin-Barqaq] is the oldest of [my] sons,' chose from among his people and gave [him] strong men who had gall in their livers, who had in their thumb the ability to draw a bow, who had lungs full of courage, who had mouths full of rage, each of whose men are capable. Since [they] were unbeatable (? *jörkimes*), and had gall, rage and bravery, — such were reasons why they are called Jürkin. Cinggis-qahan [Genghis Khan] subjugated these brave people and destroyed those who have *oboq* Jürkin. Their people (*irgen-i ulus-i*) Cinggis-qahan made his own people'.

Two points of interest arise from this extract. The first relates to the way in which the Jürkin group was formed. The leader of the nomads places a number of his people under his son's control, selecting them on the basis of their exceptional personal qualities, rather in accordance with considerations of kinship. The group is formed ad hoc, with no regard paid to whether there are any existing social ties between its members. Since the sources contain very little information about the conditions that gave rise to new social units in Mongol society in the time before Genghis Khan, this process of group formation can to some extent be considered paradigmatic. The second point of interest is found at the end of the extract: *jürkin oboqtu-yi ülitkeba irgen-i ulus-i inu cinggis-qahan ö'er-ün emcü irgen bolqaba* 'Cinggis-qahan destroyed<sup>1</sup> those who have *oboq* Jürkin, and he made their people his own people'. In contrast to example (2),

<sup>1</sup> Middle Mongolian had a whole range of verbs denoting destruction, which were differentiated according to the means of destruction employed. The verb *ülitke=* means, roughly, 'to destroy by breaking up into small pieces'. In morphological terms, the causative affix *=ke=* is added to the form *ülit=*, itself comprising the root *ülü=* and the affix *=t=*, which expresses the realisation of whatever is denoted by the root [Poppe 1937: 136; Poppe 1974: §241]. The root *ülü=* is never found in isolation; it can be taken to mean 'a small part of something'. Cf. its derivatives in the modern Khalkha dialect: *ylt* 'in smithereens', *yltlekh* 'to boil (meat etc.) to a pulp; to break, pulverise', *yltes* 'fragments; rags; tufts of fibre' [BAMRS 3: 408]. The /i/ in {*ülü*} is most probably a linking vowel.

here the referents of *oboqtu*<sup>1</sup> and *irgen* do not coincide. The former is destroyed and, moreover, is described as the possessor of the latter (the third-person singular possessive pronoun *inu* refers to *oboqtu*), whilst ‘the people’ live on and become subjects of Genghis Khan. Therefore, in this extract *oboqtu* refers not to the Jürkin group as a whole, but to a particular part of it. But which part exactly?

A clue is to be found in 137, where the same situation is described thus: *saca taicu qoyar-i büte’et qariju irejü jürkin-ü irge gödölgeküütür* ‘When [Genghis Khan], having finished off Saca and Taicu, went back and took the Jürkin people [for himself]...’. Saca-beki and Taicu were leaders of the Jürkin group who were killed after the defeat of the alliance they headed, and it is to them, therefore, that the form *oboqtu* in 139 refers. They are bearers of the collective name Jürkin; the ordinary members of the group under their leadership are not.

This conclusion makes it necessary to re-assess the various uses of the lexeme *oboq*. It is very likely that in all other contexts as well *oboq* is not equated with all the members of a particular nomadic formation, but only with the rulers. Indeed, in the predicate expression *X Y oboqtu (oboqtan) bol= (bol<u>qa=)*, X represents the names of the members of the ruling elite of various groups, and expressions of the type exemplified in (12) describe the circumstances in which they acquire a special distinguishing title Y. The meaning of *oboq* is narrower than ‘name of a certain group’, then: it means ‘title of those who lead a certain group’.

Furthermore, although the range of applications which Kałużyński proposes for the word *oboq* is not supported by usage of the key word itself, his interpretation does in fact hold for its hyponyms. Consider the following:

(14) *tedüi kereyit irge dorayita’ulju jük jük qubiyaju tala’ulba* 186  
 ‘Then, having subjugated the Kereyit people, they dispatched [them] in different directions and let them pillage’.

To whom does the noun phrase *kereyit irge* ‘the Kereyit people’ refer here? It clearly cannot refer to the leaders of this nomadic formation, since 185 records that after the defeat of their forces they fled and escaped capture. It refers instead to those who formed the core contingent of the group, and who occupied a subordinate position

<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking, *oboqtü* is singular in form, and it would be correct to translate it as ‘one who has *oboq*’. The pronoun *inu* ‘his’, referring to *oboqtü*, is also singular. That said, in example (13) the two lexical items are certainly plural in meaning (see below). The discrepancy between signifier and signified arises because in Middle Mongolian number agreement is no longer obligatory; the formal expression of plurality is facultative [Doerfer 1955: 226–42]. See [Mostaert 1952: 312] on the use of *inü* ‘his’ for *anü* ‘their’ in SHM and other Middle Mongolian texts.

within it. Analysis of all the hyponyms of the word *oboq* shows that this usage is widespread and can be considered standard.

The evidence of SHM indicates that the word *oboq* had two meanings in Middle Mongolian. One of the meanings was elucidated by Kałużński; the other has been discussed here. They are: a) ‘the name of some sort of community of people’; b) ‘the title of those who lead some sort of community of people’. Thus Kuryłowicz’s rule connecting semantic richness and infrequency of attestation is upheld. The meanings discussed here have not been assigned numbers. Numeration should reflect the hierarchy of meanings associated with a polysemous word, but here it is not clear what criteria could be used to order the meanings of *oboq*. Although the polysemy is surely motivated metonymically, the direction of derivation remains uncertain. Some light can be cast on the matter by considering the distribution of the four most common group names in SHM, as illustrated in the table:

**Attestation of group names  
in the ‘Secret History of the Mongols’**

Group name	Number of attestations		
	meaning a)	meaning b)	Unclear
<i>Merkit</i>	36	12	25
<i>Tatar</i>	36	5	14
<i>Naiman</i>	19	2	28
<i>Tayici’ut</i>	21	12	12
Total	112	31	79

According to the table, a) should be considered the primary meaning of *oboq* on the grounds of frequency. However, as Shmelev has observed, ‘How we determine whether a meaning is ‘basic’ or ‘primary’ on the one hand, or whether it is ‘secondary’ or ‘derived’ on the other, depends upon whether we are interested in the historical development of a word’s semantics, or in its current usage’ [Shmelev 1977: 94]. It seems that, in historical terms, meaning a) of *oboq* is a metonymic extension of meaning b), but that in the period to which SHM attests the word underwent ‘semantic restructuring’ (R. *semanticheskoe pererazlozhenie*; [Shmelev 1977: 106]), as a result of which meaning a) became predominant and meaning b) was restricted to the periphery of everyday usage. The Mongols themselves evidently viewed the semantic development of the word in this way, for, as was seen earlier, SHM describes the formation

of a new social unit as a process in which a ruling elite was assembled, and the special name given to this elite then became associated with all the nomads dependent upon it.

If diachronic criteria are used, the semantic structure of *oboq* can be represented as follows:

- OBOQ 1. ‘title of those who rule a community of people’  
2. ‘name of a community of people’<sup>1</sup>

A rather large number of the attested group names cannot securely be equated with either the first or the second meanings of the word *oboq*, and these cases are represented in the table in the column ‘unclear’. They include the following: *jürkin-ü sorqatu-jürki-yin köün saca-beki taicu qoyar* 122 ‘the sons of the **Jürkin** Sorqatu-Jürki Saca-beki and Taicu’; *kereyid-ün jaqa-gamba* 150 ‘the **Kereyid** Jaqa-gambu’; *jaqa-gambu buru’utcu naiman-tur oroju’u* 152 ‘Jaqa-gambu changed allegiances and submitted to the **Naiman**’. It is basically impossible to say for certain which of the two meanings is intended here, a difficulty which is by no means unique to the present matter. Shmelev writes about the principle of diffuseness in the meanings of polysemous words, according to which in some usages of a word ‘meanings which in other circumstances would be distinct appear, as it were, in a combined form’ [Shmelev 1977: 90]. It follows that the meanings of a polysemous lexical item are not mutually exclusive, i.e. they cannot be strictly separated from one another [ibid; Shmelev 1973: 98]. Contexts in which both meanings of the word *oboq* are realised simultaneously form the category of ‘unclear’ attestations, which can be termed ‘diffuse uses’.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from diffuseness, another feature characteristic of the use of group names in SHM is the frequent change from one meaning to another within short sections of text. Genghis Khan’s speech upon subjugating the Tatars contains the phrase:

(15) *tatar-i muqtqaju daulin baraju ulus irgen anu ker kikün* 154

<sup>1</sup> Crucially, the available evidence suggests that in Middle Mongolian the concept of ‘a community of people’ did not find direct lexical expression, but was only expressed morphologically, by means of the special affix {*dai*<sup>3</sup>}, which denoted membership of a group. This affix had three allomorphs, two of which had facultative variants. The allomorphs were differentiated according to two features: the place of articulation of the root they modified (=dai ~ =tai for roots ending with velar consonants, =dei ~ =tei for those with palatal endings), and the gender of the person denoted (=dai ~ =tai / =dei ~ =tei for masculine referents, =jin — for feminine referents). In his work on the affix {*dai*<sup>3</sup>}, Poppe [1975: 162-3] does not note the variant with fortis initial /t/. Cf. *uriangqadai gü’ün* 12, 82 ‘an Uriangqan’, *qadagidai gü’ün* 131 ‘a Qadagin’, but *besütei gü’ün* 53 ‘a Besüt’. Generally speaking, more work needs to be done on the expression of social group membership in Middle Mongolian.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ratchnevsky’s remarks on the use of Mongol group names in Chinese sources from the period of the Yuan dynasty: ‘The texts do not generally make any distinction between tribal leaders and tribes’ [Ratchnevsky 1966: 183, note 11].

‘Having finished destroying and capturing the Tatars, what are we going to do with their people?’

The name ‘Tatars’ must relate here to the rulers, since earlier (153) Genghis Khan’s elimination of the Tatar ‘important people’ (*erkit irge*) was discussed. However, in an account of how Genghis Khan and his kinsmen killed the ordinary members of nomadic groups whom they had taken prisoner (called simply ‘people’ (*ulus irgen*) in (15)); the latter are also described as ‘Tatars’:

(16) *tatar-i ci’ün-tür ülijü kidun baraju* 154 ‘Having finished slaughtering the Tatars by breaking them on the wheel...’

Examples (15) and (16) are from the same paragraph, but in (15) the name ‘Tatars’ is used in meaning 1, in (16) in meaning 2.

It is beyond the scope of the present work to consider why the word *oboq* occurs so infrequently as an independent lexical unit (ignoring its hyponyms) in SHM, even though its role in the Mongols’ conceptualisation of their social world can hardly have been insignificant. This issue does not relate to the semantics of the word and requires detailed investigation in its own right. Suffice it to add that the word is found only four times in MMT. One attestation is given in footnote 4, the rest are given here:

(17) *Čiu ulus-tur gegegen uqayatu baysilayči Yin oboy-tu noyan бүкү-yin siltayabar* HkVII 13a2–4 ‘Because amongst the people Zhou was a noyan (i.e. a leader, a nobleman), **who had oboy** Yin, and was a teacher with a fine mind...’;

(18) *suutu boyda činggis qayan töröjü čambutib-taki yurban jayun jiran nigen keleten doluyan jayun qorin nigen oboytan arban jiryuyan yeke ulus-i tabun öngge dörben qari bolyan* ČT I:1,2 ‘The most august Činggis qayan, after being born, made those who had 361 tribes, **those who had 721 oboy**, the 16 great peoples found in the universe, ‘the five coloured ones and the four foreign ones’;

(19) *činggis qayan köke mongyol ulus-ača ekilen čambutib-taki yurban jayun jiran nigen keleten. doluyan jayun qorin nigen oboytan-i... nigen törö-dür oroju* ČT I: 3, 1–2 ‘Činggis qayan, beginning with the blue Mongol people, brought under one rule... those who have 361 tribes, **those who have 721 oboy** found in the universe.’

\* \* \*

There are 246 attestations of the word *irgen* in SHM. It is the most common of all social terms in Middle Mongolian, and its analysis poses the opposite problem from that posed by the word *oboq*. Whereas the environments in which *oboq* is found are essentially of the same type, the sphere of usage of *irgen* is so wide as to make a



full account of its distribution impracticable here. Moreover, there would be little heuristic value to the exercise, since not all the environments in which *irgen* is found are indicative of its meaning. In the field of semantics it is well known that the objective referent of a word cannot always be determined from context [Shmelev 1977: 216]. In the case of *irgen*, examples include contexts in which the word, functioning as an attribute, is combined with personal names and titles (e.g. *kereyit irgen-ü ong-qan* 96 ‘Kereyit + *irgen* + genitive marker + Ong (personal name-title) + khan’; *kitat irgen-ü altan-qan* 132 ‘Chinese + *irgen* + genitive marker + khan’; *gür irgen-ü gui ong* 206 ‘all + *irgen* + genitive marker + gui ong (title)’), or contexts in which it the object of verbs which govern objects of any semantic class (e.g. *irge ök*= 242 (x5), 243, 244, 245 ‘*irge* + to give’). These and similar cases are referentially opaque, and this relatively narrow range of uses is excluded from the summary of the typical combinatorial possibilities of the word *irgen* given below.

*Irgen* can ‘request’ something of somebody (*quyu*= 29), ‘ask’ (*asaq*= 29), ‘answer’ (*ügüle*= 35) and can ‘talk’ in general (*ke’e*= 67, 146, 189, 190, 265); the noun *irgen* can be the subject of the verbs ‘to remember’ (*durat*= 67), ‘to plot, plan evil’ (*oyisulad*= 67), ‘to be afraid’ (*ayu*= 249, 277), ‘to be angry’ (*kilingla*= 270), and ‘to be very happy’ (*kibqang*= 272); it acts as an object to predicates denoting physical destruction: ‘to finish off’ (*muqutqa*= ~ *maqutqa*= 153, 28, 268, 281), ‘to slaughter’ (*kidu*= 154 (x2), 214), ‘to kill’ (*ala*= 154, 200, 214), ‘to annihilate’ (*ülitke*= 214, *ügei bolqa*= 268); but *irgen* itself can ‘kill’ (*ala*= 254), ‘destroy’ (*ükü’ül*= 189, 200) and ‘ruin’ (*bara*= 133, 154, 266), and can also ‘die’ (*ükü*= 270) without any explicit cause; *irgen* has ‘chest’ (*ebür* 113), ‘liver’ (*helige* 113, 275), ‘clothing’ (*qubcasu* 189) and ‘a name’ (*nere* 203); it is used with the predicate expressions ‘to raise daughters’ (*ökid-iyen ösge*= 64), ‘not to milk one’s mares’ (*ge’üd-iyen ülü sa’a*= 145), ‘to become accustomed to the sword and spear’ (*üldü jida-tur dadu*= 170), ‘to vow’ (*aman kelen alda*= 199), ‘not to fulfil a promise’ (*üge-tür ülü gür*= 268); *irgen* can have ‘parents’ (*eke ecige* 268), ‘maternal granddaughters’ (*je’e ~ jē* 64, 176), ‘daughters’ (*öki(n)* 54, 64, 176); *irgen* can ‘seize’ (*ha’ul*= 35, 36, 152), *dawuli*= ~ *dauli*= 39, 67, 136, 144, 156, 157, 162 (x2), 163, 177 (x3), 187, 197 (x2), 198, 208, 240, 268, 272 (x2) 274, 275); however, it can also be the object of the verbs ‘to catch’ (*bari*= 53 (x2), 241) and ‘to seize’ (*dawuli*= 152); one can ‘give a girl’ (*ökin ab*= 53) to *irgen*, and conversely can ‘ask [it] for a girl’ (*öki quyu*= 61, 62); *irgen* is described as ‘taking vengeance’ (*hacitu* 113, *öšten* 133, 199, 214), and ‘having nine tribes’ (*ysisün keleten* 245 (x2)); it can ‘give’ something (*ök*= 67, 249), ‘feast’ (*qurimla*= 67, 240), ‘harness’ and ‘trot’ camels (*kölgejü qatara’ul*= 64), ‘elevate to khan’ (*qa ergü*= 144) ‘build a camp in the shape of a circle’ (*güre’ele*= 145, 146 (x2)) and ‘engage in battle’ (*qatquldu*=

170); it can be the object of the verbs ‘to subjugate’ (*dorayita’ul*= ~ *dorayida’ul*= 139, 186, 187, 214, 260), ‘to divide’ (*qubiyaldu*= 154, 260, *qubiya*= 186, 242, *qubila*= 203) and ‘to rob’ (*tala*= 186); *irgen* can be subject of the verb ‘to submit’ (*else*= 176 (x3), 241), and it can be ‘mutinous’ (*bulqa* 176, 241, 275); it can be made ‘to suffer’ (*jobo’a*= 279) and ‘to fear’ (*ayu’ul*= 200), it can be forbidden ‘to laugh’ at someone (*bu ine’e’ül*= 255).

The word *irgen* is often the subject of verbs of motion, both directed (*oro*= ‘to enter’ 5, 150, 207, 239; with the causative affix =‘*ul*’= 239 (x2), 240, 241, 265, 275, 277; *ire*= ‘to arrive’ 130, 150; *ayisu*= ‘to approach’ 5, 6; *gür*= ‘to reach’ 268; *ot*= ~ *od*= ‘to leave, set off’ 64 (x2) 152, 177, 199, 245 (x2), 265 (x2); *yabu*= ‘to go’ 5 (with the reciprocal affix =*ld*=), 207), and undirected (*newü*= ‘to roam, migrate’ 5, 6, 73 (on its own), 28, 30 (with the orienting verb *ire*=); *dürbe* ‘to run’ 110 (x2), 146 (on its own), 110 (with the orienting verb *ayisu*=); *gödöl*= ‘to move’ 137 (with the causative affix =*ge*=), 146, 148 (with the orienting verb *ire*= and the causative affix =*ge*=)).

To summarise, the syntactic behaviour of the word *irgen* indicates that an extensional component of its meaning is ‘people’. The fact that it expressed grammatical plurality rather than singularity can be deduced from a number of features of its distribution: it appears in combinations with numbers bigger than one (*tümen* ‘ten thousand’ 243 (x2), *naiman minqat* ‘eight thousand’ 242, *tabun minqat* ‘five thousand’ 242, *dörben minqat* ‘four thousand’ 242, *qoyar minqat* ‘two thousand’ 242, *niken minqan tabun ja’ut* ‘one thousand five hundred’ 242, *niken minqan dörben ja’ut* ‘one thousand four hundred’ 244), and with the quantifying adjective *gür* ‘all’ 203, 206; the verbs ‘to single out’ (*ilqa*= 139) and ‘to divide, share’ (*qubiyaldu*= 154, 260, *qubiya*= 186, 242, *qubila*= 203) are used in relation to it, as is the word *qubi* ‘part, share’ 203, 242, 260. Thus it is clear that in Middle Mongolian *irgen* denoted something countable and divisible which was made up of individual units. It was not morphologically plural, however, and so is to be categorised as a class noun.<sup>1</sup>

This extensional interpretation of *irgen* is further supported by the fact that the word appears in attributive and predicative constructions which are morphologically marked as plural. Of the 118 attributes and predicates used in relation to *irgen* which could appear in the plural according to Middle Mongolian norms, 74 (62.7%) do indeed take this form. In addition, in SHM the word *irgen* often appears as an antecedent to third-person plural pronouns, both

<sup>1</sup> Class nouns are defined as nouns having a collective meaning which is not expressed formally; they are not derived from the name of an individual representative of the class. (It will be shown below that an individual representative of *irgen* was designated by the word *gü’ün* ‘a person’). A definition of class nouns and criteria for identifying them are given in [Semantika i kategorizatsiya (Semantics and Categorisation) 1991: 147–52.]

demonstrative (used as personal pronouns) (*tede* 35, 170 (x2), 176, 189, 265 (x2) 270 (x2); *miit* 190) and possessive (*anu* 67, 113 (x4), 145, 176, 177 (x2), 189, 190 (x5), 193, 265).

These facts leave no doubt as to the extensional characteristics of the lexeme *irgen*. However, in Middle Mongolian there were several words which had ‘people’ as a common component of meaning and which were similar in their extensional semantics, while differing in their intensional semantics. The word *irgen* had the quasi-synonyms *ulus* and *haran*. In order to determine the intensional characteristics of *irgen* which set it apart in the language system, it is necessary to examine those contexts in which it alone was used and where its intensional characteristics are clearest.

The word *irgen* occurs in a rather broad category of contexts where the capacity for collective action is ascribed to its referent. Thus, it can appear as the collective subject of speech (29, 31, 67, 146, 190, 265), the subject and the contractor of marriage agreements (53, 54, 61, 62, 64, 208), the object of military operations (58, 157, 170, 200, 239, 240, 247, 251, 254, 256, 257, 260, 261, 265, 267, 268, 271, 272), the subject and object of vengeance (53, 58, 67, 68, 113, 133, 154, 199, 214, 254), and the subject of a promise (268). No such uses of *ulus* or *haran* are attested. These uses evidently reflect qualities which the Mongols associated specifically with the concept of *irgen*. They can be summed up under the general heading of ‘community’. This sense, it is argued here, is the basic intensional component in the semantic structure of *irgen*.

It is important to stress that for speakers of Middle Mongolian ‘community’ was rather a vague concept, not determined by external criteria. Instead, the understanding of community was based upon a particular people sharing the subjective conviction that they all belonged to the same social group; ideally, the members of this group were closely associated with one another.<sup>1</sup> This subjective conviction is expressed linguistically when the word *irgen* occurs together with forms of the first-person plural personal pronoun *ba* (31, 63, 64, 249 (x2), 265). In contrast to its ‘inclusive’ counterpart *bida*, the ‘exclusive’ pronoun *ba* excluded the addressee from its sphere of reference. It referred to the community of which the speaker considered himself a member at the time of speaking, and it is to this community that the concept of *irgen* corresponds. It follows, then, that its extensional meaning had been eroded and varied according to the

<sup>1</sup> The associations between them could take the form of family ties. For example, the group called *olqunu’ut irgen* in SHM is described using kinship terms: *torgüt* ‘a wife’s relatives (in relation to her)’ 61 and *naqacu nar* ‘a wife’s relatives (in relation to her children)’ 61, 62. The solidarity with which members of the group acted in society, notably when making marriage agreements, underlines the fact that these terms encompassed the group as a whole. See [Cleaves 1949: 509–10] and [Kaluźynski 1972: 220] on the terms *torgüt* and *naqacu nar*.

social situation (just as the people a speaker refers to as ‘we’ varies). It was no longer to be defined in semantic, but rather in pragmatic terms.

It is suggested here that the definition of the lexeme *irgen* should reflect both the notion of community and the notion of the subjective perception of community. The definition can be enhanced by applying comparative methods of analysis.

One of the fundamental assumptions of modern semantics is that the lexical system of a language should be studied comparatively, the points of comparison being semantically similar linguistic units. The comparative method is used particularly in the study of quasi-synonyms — words whose meanings partially coincide. Quasi-synonyms neutralise the semantic distinctions which separate them in certain contextual conditions,<sup>1</sup> and so a comparative description normally indicates neutralised contexts where they can replace one another and maximally diverse contexts where they are not interchangeable [Apresyan 1995: 158–163, 239–243; Krongauz 2001: 172–174]. Since the semantic contrast between the words *ulus* and *irgen* is of great importance here, the comparative method will be applied, and an account of the neutralised and maximally diverse contexts in which they occur will be given.

Examples of the neutralisation of the distinguishing components of meaning of the words *ulus*<sup>2</sup> and *irgen* are given elsewhere [Rykin forthcoming]. The examples most often involve the compound word *ulus irgen*, or show the two lexical units being used co-referentially in descriptions of a range of situations. On the basis of the examples, a rule regarding the circumstances in which neutralisation took place can be formulated: neutralisation of the semantic distinctions between the words *ulus* and *irgen* occurs in conditions where two classes — a class of politically dependent people, and a class of people who were personally free but who acted as members of a self-conscious community — intersect. The intersection between these classes is where the extensional meaning common to *ulus* and *irgen* is located. Thus, *ulus* and *irgen* became interchangeable when they referred to free individuals who formed a community (the components of meaning relevant to *irgen*), whilst remaining dependent upon some form of political authority (the component of meaning relevant to *ulus*).

There are two sets of conditions in which the meanings of the two words are maximally diverse. The first is represented by three

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<sup>1</sup> Some consider this property the defining feature of exact synonyms [e.g. Shmelev 1973: 130; 1977: 193-6].

<sup>2</sup> Research suggests that in Middle Mongolian the word *ulus* meant ‘people belonging to X’, where ‘belonging to X’ seems to have indicated political dependence.

examples: by the noun phrase *irgen-i ulus-i inu* in example (13) above, where *irgen* and *ulus* are both accusative complements; by the group *irge orqa ulus*<sup>1</sup> in the sentence — (20) *cinggis-qahan... toqto'a-yi gödölgejü sa'ari-ke'er-e irge orqa ulus inu dawuliba* 197 'Cinggis-qahan... having driven Toqto'a away, captured his **people** in the Sa'ari steppe' — where the constituents *irge orqa*<sup>2</sup> and *ulus* are not marked for case; and in the expression:

(21) *naiman irgen ulus yeketü irge olotu* 190 lit. 'The Naiman people have many people (*irgen*) and many people (*ulus*)'.

All of the examples involve two subgroups of people within a larger nomadic formation. The subgroups — which are not co-extensive — are denoted by the words *ulus* and *irgen*. In these cases, their complementary distribution can only be tentatively accounted for. It is probable that the Mongols made a distinction between people who as members of a group were directly subordinate to the group leader (they were called *ulus*) and people who formed semi-autonomous units within the group under lower-ranking leaders (they were called *irgen*). The following example supports this interpretation:

(22) *tende uru'ut mangqut e'en irgen inu bui* 170 'There are his **people**, called Uru'ut and Mangqut'.

The word *inu* refers to Genghis Khan. The Uru'ut and Mangqut, said here to be *irgen*, are known to have been separate groups within Genghis Khan's coalition; their leaders were personally subject to him. Genghis Khan also had a class of people to whom the word *ulus* was applied (166, 180). The interpretation of examples (13), (20) and (21) is based upon this difference in reference.

The second set of uses in which there is maximal divergence of meaning involves the expression *naiman irgen-ü ulus* 196, lit. 'people of the Naiman people', and the subject phrase *naiman irgen* in example (21) above. In both cases the referent of the word *irgen* can be determined fairly easily: it follows from the unacceptability of collocations such as *\*naiman ulus-un irgen* and *\*naiman ulus ulus yeketü irge olotu*. In this type of expression the word *irgen* relates exclusively to the rulers of the group as opposed to its ordinary members (*ulus*, but in (21) also *irgen* in the sense that was indicated

<sup>1</sup> The noun phrase *irge orqa ulus* can in principle be regarded as a complex word made up of three constituent elements. However, no other examples of complex words with three constituents are attested in Middle Mongolian.

<sup>2</sup> *irge orqa*, an exact synonym of *irgen*, is treated as 'an equipollent substantive compound' in Street's classification [Street 1957: 4.16]. Its second component *orqa ~ orqo* is hardly ever attested in isolation. To judge from the Chinese-Mongolian dictionaries from the time of the Ming dynasty, it differed little in meaning from *irgen*. The complex word *irge orqa* is found quite frequently in SHM and other Middle Mongolian sources. A summary of the data can be found in [Mostaert 1952: 360–1 and Poppe 1957: 122, note 83].

in the preceding paragraph). There are no other examples of this restrictive use of the word *irgen* in SHM; social status is not normally a factor. However, the fact that they occur at all sets *irgen* apart from *ulus*, which cannot be used in these syntactic positions. In contrast to *irgen*, the word *ulus* was marked for status and denoted only politically dependent members of a nomadic grouping. Admittedly, there is one example in SHM where the noun phrase *erkit ulus* ‘important people’ (208) is used with unclear reference. Nonetheless, this expression, together with its synonym *erkit irge* (153) evidently denoted lower-rank leaders, i.e. not khans, but noyans, who were to some degree dependent upon the hereditary ruling line.

It is also important to compare *irgen* with *haran*, for this makes it possible to include the component ‘to be personally free’ into the semantic structure of the key word. As well as containing the abstract idea of ‘community’, this component presumably formed part of its intensional meaning. Details of the comparative analysis will be given elsewhere; for present purposes, this component of meaning will be assumed without argumentation and exemplification. Thus, the following definition of the lexeme *irgen* can be given:

IRGEN ‘personally free people who see themselves as members of a community’

This interpretation is fully in accordance with Kuryłowicz’s semantic rule as discussed above, though here it is more appropriate to talk not of the impoverished content of the word *irgen*, but rather of the vagueness and flexibility which allow it to designate a group of people of any size, from a small acephalous ‘group’ (*bölok irgen* 5, 8, 28) to a broad, politically organised ‘imaginary society’ like ‘the Mongols’ (*mongyol irgen* 189; *Mongyol irgen* Jig 17; Bur IX 65a). This definition surely does not convey the content of the word entirely adequately: the degree of precision with which its intensional components have been elucidated is considerably lower than that achieved in identifying its extensional components. The difference arises because the intensional component of a concrete lexical item relates not to facts of reality, but to the concepts that people associate with them. Concepts of this kind are amorphous and cannot be observed; they are only partially realised in the distribution of a word; and therefore they are not amenable to strict definition. Ultimately, the concept is as complex and refined as the mental world of which it is a product.

Like any class noun, the word *irgen* always functioned as a plural. Its singular (a noun denoting an individual member of a group), as well as the singular of *ulus* and *haran*, was the noun *gü ün* ‘person’. These nouns governed attributes denoting group names in different ways: such attributes combined with *irgen* in the form of a root to which a plural affix was added (e.g. *kiyat irgen* ‘Kiyats’ 63, where *kiyat* < *kiyan* + {*t*}); they combined with *gü ün* in the form of a root to which the

affix {dai<sup>3</sup>} denoting group membership was added (e.g. *qadagidai gü'ün* 'A Qadagin' 131, where *qadagidai* < *qadagin* ~ *qatagin* + {dai<sup>3</sup>}); in both cases the final consonant has been lost. But the word *gü'ün* was not restricted to the singular. In SHM there are examples in which it is seen with numbers greater than one (*ja'un gü'ün* 'one hundred people' 150, 177, *qorin qucin gü'ün* 'twenty or thirty people' 177) and with quantitative adjectives which were usually modified by semantically plural forms (*olon gü'ün* 'many people' 190, 213, 224, 270, *cö'en gü'ün* 'few people' 196, 197, 198, 213). Presumably in cases like these *gü'ün* designated a diverse group of people, not connected by any stable social ties or by a perception of unity. If this hypothesis is correct, the words *irgen* and *gü'ün* (in its plural meaning) stood in a complementary distribution with regard to the features of 'community' and 'self-perception of community'.

It remains to be established whether there was any change in the meaning of the word *irgen* towards the end of the Middle Mongolian period. Here again the distributional criterion is the starting point for investigation: 'A change in the distribution of a linguistic element which continues to contrast with other elements is equivalent to a change in meaning' [Stepanov 1975: 91]. Evidence of possible changes in the collocations of *irgen* can be sought in MMT; any such changes would have a crucial bearing on its semantics. Detailed analysis of the distribution of the word in these texts supports the interpretation already argued for on the basis of SHM, though it is worth noting that towards the end of the fourteenth century its extensional component was narrowed to exclude reference to members of the ruling elite. The word *irgen* came to be marked for social status, as was *ulus*. This process was reflected in several pairs of oppositions which are to be found in Middle Mongolian texts of the Yüan and early Ming periods: in the Chinese-Mongolian dictionary *Huayi yiyu* the referent of *irgen* is clearly contrasted with 'bureaucrats' (*tüšimet* HY B3: 6a–b), 'princes' (*ong* HY B1: 1b) and 'noblemen' (*noya* < *n* > *li'ut* HY B6: 15a); in the Mongolian translation of *Xiao jing* it is opposed to 'leaders', lit. 'the upper' (*degedüs*<sup>1</sup> Hk XII 25a3); in the Chinese-Mongolian bilingual inscription of 1362 it is opposed to 'the sons' of a nobleman (*köbegün sibayun* Hin 29). However, there is no evidence to suggest that the changes in the extensional component of *irgen* affected its intensional properties.

A distributional analysis of the words *oboq* and *irgen* elucidates a fairly wide range of attestations in which the words are not used to refer to the realia of the nomadic world, but are used in relation to

<sup>1</sup> In Middle Mongolian texts the form *degedüs* was typically used as a *pluralis majestatis* referring to the Yüan emperor. However, in the extract from *Xiao jing* cited, reference to the emperor is out of the question. There, the adjectival noun is most probably to be understood in its literal lexical meaning.

societies with completely different types of social organisation. The word *oboq* was used in connection with the Khorezmi (263) and the Chinese (Tch 14; Hk VII 13a3); the word *irgen* with the Chinese (132, 247, 250 (x2), 251 (x2), 263, 266 (x3), 271 (x2), 272 (x3)), the Tangut (249 (x5), 250 (x2), 256 (x2), 265 (x5), 267, 268 (x4)), inhabitants of Central Asia (254 (x3), 256, 257, 260 (x2), 263, 264, 265 (x3); Gen 2), Indians (261), Russians (262, 270, 275, 277 (x2)), Hungarians (262, 270), the Volga Bulgars (262, 270), Christians [DocII 3: 11], and ‘the Franks’, i.e. Europeans [DocII 5: 4]. Kałużyński used some of these examples to support his thesis that *oboq* was not to be interpreted as a clan [Kałużyński 1977: 82]. It is argued here that they should be viewed from a broader theoretical perspective. To quote Benveniste, ‘For the speaker, language and the real world are exactly equivalent: the sign coincides completely with reality and dominates it; moreover, it *is* that reality’ [Benveniste 2002b: 93]. In accordance with this view, the medieval Mongols regarded as real only those things which found expression in the lexical system of their language, and they utilised its lexical resources as tools for understanding the outside world. In Schutz’s words, this is because ‘the life-world presents the primal types of our experience of reality’ [Schutz, Luckmann 1974: 25]. Fixed in language, these types serve to unify the infinite diversity of the world, to make the unknown known. For the Mongols, the most important way of understanding social systems different from their own was conceptual assimilation by adapting them to the resources of their own language; and one of the strategies deployed in conceptual assimilation was the use of the words *oboq* and *irgen* to refer to social contexts other than those in which they had first arisen.

\* \* \*

Schutz stresses that ‘the thought objects of the social sciences have to remain consistent with the thought objects of common sense formed by men in everyday life in order to come to terms with social reality’ [Schutz 1971a: 43]. The thought objects with which social theory in Mongolian studies traditionally operates hardly meet this condition. Standard academic interpretations of the words *oboq* and *irgen* are at a considerable remove from what medieval Mongols meant and understood by them. The differences between the base and the alternative models are not important here: explaining the concept of *oboq* with the help of the term ‘clan’ is no more satisfactory than explaining it with reference to the terms ‘nomadic community’ or *obok* (as defined by Bacon); and to interpret the concept of *irgen* in the sense of ‘tribe’ is no more valid than taking it to mean ‘followers attached to a tribe’.

The wish expressed here to introduce new postulates into the



traditional theories of Mongolian Studies and to evaluate the tradition according to criteria not previously considered important may prompt objections. The new approach can be justified on the grounds that theoreticians of Mongol society have always claimed that their models and transformations (second-degree constructs) are based on original Mongol texts, which are, of course, first-degree constructs. The following quotation illustrates the point: “**The Secret History**” shows [our emphasis — P. R.] that even though some scholars assert that the Mongol clan (*obog*) was amorphous and did not correspond to the classic type of clan, the Mongol clan of the eleventh-thirteenth centuries was in fact a homogeneous structure made up of blood relations’ [Skrynnikova 1990: 101]. It is difficult to agree with statements of this sort.

That said, the interpretation of the words *obog* and *irgen* suggested here makes no pretence to conclusiveness: it sets out to raise questions rather than to answer them. The words at issue relate to idiosyncratic concepts for which there are no equivalents in European languages. For this reason, semantic analysis will inevitably be problematic. Lexical semantics is based upon the assumption that semantic descriptions are imperfect [Apresyan 1995: 64–5; 90–4], an assumption which is all the more pertinent in cross-linguistic research. It is hoped that the current work, together with Kałużyński’s, will be one of the foundation stones upon which scholars in the field of Mongolian Studies can construct a new theoretical approach.

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## List of Abbreviations

### a) Middle Mongolian texts

- Bur — Ligeti, L. *Les douze actes du Bouddha: Arban qoyar jokiyangyui üiles de Čhos-kyi ‘od- zer. Traduction de Šes-rab sen-ge*. (Monumenta linguae mongolicae collecta; 5). Budapest, 1974.
- ČT — *Die Weisse Geschichte (Čayan teüke): Eine mongolische Quelle zur Lehre von den Beiden Ordnungen Religion und Staat in Tibet und der Mongolei* / Hrsg., übers. und komment. von K. Sagaster. (Asiatische Forschungen; Vol. 41). Wiesbaden, 1976.

- DocII3 — a letter from il-khan Arγun to Pope Nicholas IV (1290) [Ligeti 1972a: 248–9].
- DocII 5 — a letter from il-khan Öljeitü to Philip the Fair (1305) [Ligeti 1972a: 252–5].
- Gen — ‘Genghis’s Stone’ (c. mid 13<sup>th</sup> c.) [Ligeti 1972a: 17–18].
- Hin — Chinese-Mongolian bilingual inscription in honour of the prince Hindu (1362) [Ligeti 1972a: 63–75].
- Hk — Mongolian translation of *Xiao jing* (late 13<sup>th</sup> c. — early 14<sup>th</sup>c.) [Ligeti 1972a: 76–104].
- HY — the Chinese-Mongolian dictionary *Huayi yiyu* (1389) [Ligeti 1972b: 135–63].
- Jig — Chinese-Mongolian bilingual inscription in honour of Jigüntei (1338) [Ligeti 1972a: 51–8].
- SHM — Rachewiltz, I. de. *Index to The Secret History of the Mongols*. (Indiana University publications: Uralic and Altaic Series; Vol. 121). Bloomington, Ind., 1972.
- Tch — Chinese-Mongolian bilingual inscription in honour of Zhang Yingrui (1335) [Ligeti 1972a: 36–50].

*b) Other*

- BAMRS — *Bolshoi akademicheskii mongolsko-russkii slovar v 4 t.* [Four-volume Mongolian-Russian dictionary]. Eds. A. Luvsandendev, Ts. Tsendendamb and G. Ts. Pyurbeev. Moscow, 2001–02.
- HJAS — *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*.
- TMEN — Doerfer, G. *Türkische und mongolische Elemente im Neupersischen: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung älterer neupersischer Geschichtsquellen, vor allem der Mongolen- und Timuridenzeit*. Wiesbaden, 1963–1975. Vols. 1–4.
- UAJ — *Ural-Altäische Jahrbücher*.

*Translated by Sarah Turner*