Complex edges, transparent frontiers:
Grammatical complexity and language spreads

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I survey as many languages as possible in two language areas whose centers and peripheries can be well defined and where something is known of the historical linguistic geography and sociolinguistics: the eastern Caucasus (occupied almost entirely by the old and much-diversified Nakh-Daghestanian language family) and the eastern Eurasian steppe and nearby (occupied by languages from a variety of families, most fairly young and not much diversified). In both areas, peripheral languages are more complex and less transparent than centrally located languages. In the eastern Caucasus, the periphery is the highlands, where towns are essentially city-states, societies are endogamous and closed, and the geography isolates towns. On the eastern steppe, the center is the steppe (where large language spreads have taken place frequently since at least the Neolithic and probably longer) and the periphery is the nearby forest, tundra, desert, and mountains. Each steppe spread (e.g. Iranian, Bulgar Turkic, Common Turkic, Mongol) has a frontier, clearest at its western edge, where the sociolinguistics and contact patterns were complex and there was much contact-induced change that favored the spread of less complex and more transparent patters.

To describe this with precision one needs to distinguish four different types of complexity: (1) Structural complexity or size of inventory; (2) Opacity (non-transparency, non-biuniqueness); (3) Non-canonicality (actually similar to opacity, as canonicality in many respects equals biuniqueness); (4) Entropy (the opposite of I-simplicity: Ackerman, Blevins, Malouf 2009, the extent to which any one form can predict the rest of its paradigm). I hypothesize that all these forms of complexity are associated with isolation, but various non-isolation scenarios distinguish different kinds of complexity: frontiers favor transparency, inter-ethnic languages foster structural non-complexity, unidentified contact factors reduce entropy.