

# Chaghatay Term in French Discourse: Variants and Evolution

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**Abstract:** This article examines the range of variants used for the term "Chaghatay" in French-language sources and within French Oriental studies and Central Asian studies from the fifteenth to the twenty-first century. Its primary objective is, on the one hand, to reconstruct the historical formation of Chaghatay as the name of a literary language in the narrow sense, and, on the other hand, to show how broader territorial and philological designations such as "turc", "langue turque", "turc oriental", "turc-ouïgour", "dialecte djaghataï", "turc chaghataï", "turc chaghatay", and "langue turque orientale (turki ou chaghatây)" coexisted and interacted within French discourse. Relying on French scholarly texts, manuscript catalogues, institutional descriptions, and modern digital platforms, the study reconstructs the stages of terminological evolution and demonstrates that French scholarly discourse did not rely on a single stable term but on a layered system shaped by time, transliteration practices, scholarly schools, and classificatory goals.

**Keywords:** Chaghatay, chaghatây, chaghataï, tchagatay, tchaghataï, djaghataï, djaghataïde, turc oriental, turc-ouïgour, turki, French Oriental studies, Central Asia, Navoi, BnF, Persée, OpenEdition, HAL, theses.fr.

**Introduction:** In contemporary Uzbek scholarship, the term "chig'atoy tili" ("the Chaghatay language") is generally understood as the historical literary language associated above all with Alisher Navoi, the court of Husayn Bayqara, and the wider written tradition of Central Asia that continued after the Timurid period. French-language sources, however, did not use a single designation for this language. Instead, one encounters, across different periods, a series of coexisting forms: "turc", "langue turque", "turc oriental", "turc-ouïgour", "dialecte djaghataï", "turc chaghataï", "turc chaghatay", and "langue turque orientale (turki ou chaghatây)" [Jaubert, 1825, pp. 31-32; Reinaud, 1862, p. 17; Bazin, 1984, p. 5; Toutant, 2021, p. 29; Szuppe, 2023, p. 11].

For that reason, the history of the term in French cannot be reduced to a mere orthographic fluctuation. It must instead be understood as the outcome of

broader methodological shifts within Oriental scholarship, manuscript cataloguing practices, Turkological classification, and changing French representations of Central Asia. The terminological history of "Chaghatay" is therefore also a history of knowledge production [Bazin, 1984, pp. 5-6; Roux, 1991, p. 43].

A further complication lies in the frequent confusion, at the level of non-specialist usage, between Chaghatay and the historical development of modern Uzbek, Uyghur, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and other Turkic languages. From a philological standpoint, Chaghatay refers first and foremost to the Timurid and post-Timurid written literary tradition of Central Asia, whereas Kyrgyz and Kazakh are usually classified within the Kipchak group. Yet in older French descriptive and catalogue texts, broad labels such as "turc" or "turc oriental" could occasionally encompass several written Turkic traditions within the same Central Asian space. The

history of the term is thus inseparable from processes of semantic narrowing and semantic expansion [Jaubert, 1825, pp. 31-32; Bazin, 1984, p. 5].

The present study draws on four groups of sources: first, the classic texts of nineteenth-century French Orientalism; second, institutional descriptions such as those of Gallica and the Bibliothèque nationale de France; third, modern French scholarly platforms such as Persée, OpenEdition, HAL, and theses.fr; and fourth, the uploaded files used in the preparation of the Uzbek original. On this basis, the article reconstructs the stabilization of the term, its transliteration variants, and the semantic load carried by each designation [Tamssaout, 2025, n.p.; Bibliothèque nationale de France, n.d., n.p.; Theses.fr, n.d., n.p.].

Any discussion of the earliest strata of French discourse requires methodological caution. The corpus of direct French glottonymic attestations for the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries is extremely limited. In practice, many manuscripts from that period are known to us through nineteenth- to twenty-first-century French descriptions. Consequently, the French discourse on those earlier centuries often appears as a retrospective philological commentary on manuscript practices rather than as a contemporary and fully stabilized linguistic classification [Jaubert, 1825, pp. 31-32].

Amédée Jaubert's 1825 "Notice d'un manuscrit turc, en caractères ouïgours" is fundamental in this respect. Jaubert identifies the manuscript as a "manuscrit turc en caractères ouïgours" and, in his conclusion, describes the language written in Bukhara as "un turc mêlé de mots arabes, persans". He also uses the expressions "cette langue s'écrivait en caractères ouïgours" and "des manuscrits turc-ouïgours" [Jaubert, 1825, pp. 31-32]. These formulations show that in the earliest phase of French Oriental scholarship the language was not yet firmly named through a historical-dynastic glottonym. Instead, it was characterized through a general ethnolinguistic label ("turc"), a script-based marker ("ouïgour"), and an implicit geographic anchoring in Bukharia [Jaubert, 1825, pp. 31-32].

Three principal features emerge from this early phase. The first is a general ethnolinguistic designation: "turc" or "langue turque". The second is a script-based designation: "en caractères ouïgours" or "turc-

ouïgour". The third is a spatial designation: Bukharia. Together these markers identify the language through manuscript form, writing system, and region of circulation rather than through a narrow historical-literary identity [Jaubert, 1825, pp. 31-32].

From this perspective, contemporary French institutional discourse that describes manuscripts from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries remains highly instructive. Current BnF descriptions may present a Navoi collection as a "recueil ... en turc oriental", while elsewhere using formulas such as "turc oriental, dit chaghatay" or "texte en turc tchaghatay, un dialecte oriental". Present-day French descriptive language thus applies two layers to earlier manuscripts at once: a broad areal label, "turc oriental", and a narrower historical-literary label, "chaghatay / tchaghatay" [Bibliothèque nationale de France, n.d., n.p.; Tamssaout, 2025, n.p.].

In nineteenth-century French Orientalism, the terminological situation changed significantly. The very general label "turc" was gradually supplemented, and in some contexts replaced, by a much more specific philological term. In 1862, in a note republished by Joseph-Toussaint Reinaud, M. Belin's communication from Constantinople explicitly used the expression "dialecte djaghataï". This wording is not incidental. It signals the growing tendency within French scholarship to treat Chaghatay as an autonomous linguistic and literary unit [Reinaud, 1862, p. 17].

Alongside "djaghataï", the expression "turc oriental" also remained in active use. The semantic fields of these two expressions overlap, but they are not identical. "Djaghataï" is a historical and dynastic designation tied to the Chaghatay ulus, the Timurids, and the written literary heritage of Central Asia. "Turc oriental", by contrast, functions more as an areal-philological term used to distinguish eastern written Turkic traditions from Ottoman Turkish [Bazin, 1984, p. 5].

The nineteenth century was also marked by the systematization of dictionary making and manuscript cataloguing. Louis Bazin later observed that Pavet de Courteille had drawn scholarly attention to "le turc oriental", "en l'occurrence le tchaghataï", and that this orientation was consolidated by the publication of the *Dictionnaire du turc oriental* in 1870 [Bazin, 1984, p. 5].

The relation between "turc oriental" and "djaghataï" was therefore not oppositional. In French scholarship the two designations often functioned as complementary classifications: the former as a broad macro-areal label, the latter as a narrower historical-literary term [Bazin, 1984, pp. 5-6].

Another salient feature of nineteenth-century philology was transliteration. When the name of Chaghatay was adapted from Arabic-Persian writing to French graphic conventions, forms such as "djaghataï" emerged. In this orthographic shape, "dj" attempts to capture the affricate sound, "gh" reflects the Oriental letter traditions associated with ghayn or related guttural values, and the final "ai" corresponds to French reading habits. The term was thus not only a classificatory device, but also the product of a specific philological and transliteration regime [Reinaud, 1862, p. 17; Bazin, 1984, p. 5].

In the twentieth century, French Turkology and Oriental studies used several parallel forms. Orthographic variation did not disappear; in some contexts it even expanded. Looking back on the French tradition, Louis Bazin emphasized that Pavet de Courteille had introduced "le turc oriental", "en l'occurrence le tchaghataï", into the field of inquiry [Bazin, 1984, p. 5]. This retrospective statement shows both that "tchaghataï" remained alive in twentieth-century scholarship and that it continued to circulate alongside the broader label "turc oriental".

Jean-Paul Roux's work reveals yet another layer. In Tamerlan, he notes that the name "Djaghataï" came to designate not only a khanate but also "la langue littéraire qu'on y parlait (le turc djaghataïde), variante orientale du turc commun" [Roux, 1991, p. 43]. Here "djaghataïde" no longer functions as a pure glottonym. It becomes an adjectival historical-cultural marker used to specify the literary and stylistic affiliation of a language or corpus. This adjectival usage fits well within a broader French scholarly habit that also produced qualifiers such as "persan", "osmanli", or "mongol" in historically marked descriptive systems [Roux, 1991, p. 43].

By the twentieth century, therefore, the following forms coexisted in French scholarship: "tchaghataï", "djaghataï", "djaghataïde", "turc oriental", "littérature djaghataï", and occasionally broader formulations

folded into "littérature turque". These expressions did not all perform the same function. "Tchaghataï/djaghataï" named the language, "djaghataïde" acted as a historical-stylistic adjective, and "turc oriental" retained its macro-areal and philological scope [Bazin, 1984, p. 5; Roux, 1991, p. 43].

It would be mistaken to treat this twentieth-century diversity merely as orthographic confusion. In reality, it reflects differences in scholarly method. For Turkologists, the essential task was to distinguish eastern written traditions from Ottoman Turkish. For literary historians, the challenge was to identify the literary system associated with Navoi and the Timurid court. For historians and catalogue compilers, the dominant criterion could alternately be geographic, dynastic, or script-based. Terminological plurality was therefore a symptom of disciplinary plurality [Bazin, 1984, pp. 5-6; Roux, 1991, p. 43].

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, a certain degree of standardization has become visible in French scholarship, though without producing a single immutable norm. One of the most common current forms is "turc chaghatay". In a study devoted to a Timurid hagiographic text, Marc Toutant describes the literary output of Mir Ali Shir Nawa'i as poetry composed in "turc oriental (ou turc chaghatay)" [Toutant, 2021, p. 29]. This formulation is especially significant because it joins together three layers at once: the macro-philological label ("turc oriental"), the modern Western scholarly glottonym ("turc chaghatay"), and, by implication, the historical eastern Turkic literary tradition in which the author wrote [Toutant, 2021, p. 29].

Toutant's broader work on late Timurid literary culture confirms the centrality of this terminology. His book on imitation, power, and Sufism in the age of the last Timurids repeatedly employs "chaghatay" both to identify the language of the Khamsa and to characterize the literary field shaped around that language [Toutant, 2016, pp. 19-20]. In current French scholarship, therefore, "turc chaghatay" has become a strong academic form, but it still coexists with alternative formulations rather than replacing them completely [Toutant, 2016, pp. 19-20; Toutant, 2021, p. 29].

Maria Szuppe's 2023 synthesis on Tamerlane and the Timurids offers perhaps the clearest example of this

cautious and layered modern usage. There the language is identified as "la langue turque orientale (turki ou chaghatây)" [Szuppe, 2023, p. 11]. This formula is revealing: it preserves the broad scholarly label "langue turque orientale", integrates the historical endonym "turki", and then adds the current glottonym "chaghatây". Such wording reflects a modern effort both to respect historical linguistic realities and to maintain terminological continuity with the earlier history of French Oriental studies [Szuppe, 2023, p. 11].

The same multiplicity can be observed in the current institutional language of the Bibliothèque nationale de France. In a recent BnF feature on the cataloguing of Chaghatay manuscripts, Lamine Tamssaout defines "le turc chaghatâi" as a historical literary language and explicitly adds that it is "aussi appelé turc oriental" [Tamssaout, 2025, n.p.]. At the same time, other BnF manuscript descriptions continue to oscillate among "turc oriental", "turc tchagatay", and "chaghatay" as overlapping labels [Bibliothèque nationale de France, n.d., n.p.].

The evidence of theses.fr points in the same direction. In the metadata of Marc Toutant's doctoral dissertation, "Littérature djaghataï" appears as a controlled keyword, whereas "Chaghatay" is listed among the free keywords [Theses.fr, n.d., n.p.]. This means that even in contemporary French bibliographic metadata one still encounters the coexistence of older Orientalist forms such as "djaghataï" with more recent spellings such as "Chaghatay". The digital catalogue thus preserves several historical layers of French scholarly usage [Theses.fr, n.d., n.p.].

The French variants can be classified not only graphically but also semantically and functionally. A first group consists of general ethnolinguistic or descriptive labels such as "turc" and "langue turque".

These belong to a phase in which no special philological distinction had yet become stable. A second group consists of script- and manuscript-based labels such as "en caractères ouïgours" and "turc-ouïgour". Here the primary identifying feature is not the language as a literary-historical system, but the writing system and the codicological profile of the manuscript [Jaubert, 1825, pp. 31-32].

A third group consists of areal-philological designations such as "turc oriental" and "langue turque orientale". A fourth group contains narrower historical-literary glottonyms: "djaghataï", "tchaghatâi", "chaghatâi", "chaghatay", and "chaghatây". A fifth group comprises literary-historical derivatives such as "littérature djaghataï", "djaghataïde", and "littérature chaghatay". A final group includes historically anchored endonyms and explanatory formulas such as "turki" or "turki ou chaghatây" [Bazin, 1984, p. 5; Roux, 1991, p. 43; Toutant, 2021, p. 29; Szuppe, 2023, p. 11].

Particular attention should also be paid to the expression "vieil ouzbek" ("Old Uzbek"). This label exists in French scholarship, but it is generally understood less as a neutral Orientalist glottonym than as the result of later Soviet and national philological reinterpretations. For this reason, in current French scholarly usage it is not treated as a straightforward synonym of "turc chaghatay", but rather as a separate historiographical phenomenon [Szuppe, 2023, p. 11; Theses.fr, n.d., n.p.].

Some secondary or more popular modern texts also feature unstable forms such as "tachaghatâi". Such spellings demonstrate that complete standardization has not yet been achieved. Yet these remain marginal in scholarly publications. The dominant pair in contemporary French academic discourse remains "turc chaghatay" and "turc oriental" [Tamssaout, 2025, n.p.; Bibliothèque nationale de France, n.d., n.p.].

### 6. Principal terminological variants from the fifteenth to the twenty-first century

Period	Variant	Meaning / function	Representative source	Comment
15th-18th c. (as retrospectively described)	turc; langue turque	General designation for a Turkic language	Jaubert, 1825	No specialized glottonym yet
15th-18th c. (as retrospectively described)	turc-ouïgour; en caractères ouïgours	Identification through script and manuscript type	Jaubert, 1825	Script-centered identification

19th c.	dialecte djaghataï	Narrow historical-philological language name	Reinaud/Belin, 1862	A major turning point in French Oriental studies
19th-20th c.	turc oriental	Macro-areal philological label	Pavet de Courteille; Bazin, 1984	Used to distinguish eastern written traditions from Ottoman Turkish
20th c.	tchaghataï; djaghataï	Alternative transliterations of the same glottonym	Bazin, 1984	Dependent on scholarly school and transliteration habits
20th c.	djaghataïde	Adjectival literary-historical marker	Roux, 1991	Used in expressions such as "turc djaghataïde"
21st c.	turc chaghatay	One of the main current academic forms	Toutant, 2021	Among the most frequent modern variants
21st c.	turc chaghataï	Institutional catalogue form	Tamssaout, 2025	Used by BnF alongside "turc oriental"
21st c.	turc oriental (ou turc chaghatay)	Explanatory dual formula	Toutant, 2021	Bridges broad and narrow labels
21st c.	langue turque orientale (turki ou chaghatây)	Layered historical-scholarly formula	Szuppe, 2023	Combines endonym and modern glottonym
21st c.	turc oriental, dit chaghatay; turc tchaghatay	Institutional popularizing variants	BnF Essentiels	Illustrates intra-institutional variation
21st c.	Littérature djaghataï; Chaghatay	Bibliographic metadata forms	theses.fr	Older and newer forms coexist

The first conclusion is that "Chaghatay" did not appear all at once in French discourse as a ready-made and stable scholarly term. It emerged gradually out of broader descriptive labels such as "turc", "langue turque", and "turc-ouïgour". This development reflects a broader shift in French Oriental scholarship from describing manuscripts to classifying languages [Jaubert, 1825, pp. 31-32; Reinaud, 1862, p. 17].

A second conclusion is that the relation between "turc oriental" and "Chaghatay" should not be simplified as one of simple synonymy. In many contexts, "turc oriental" designated a broader geographic or philological field, whereas "Chaghatay" referred to a narrower historical-literary language. Their coexistence within the same text therefore signals not contradiction but analytical precision [Bazin, 1984, pp. 5-6; Szuppe, 2023, p. 11].

Third, orthographic multiplicity is itself a historical

source. Forms such as "djaghataï", "tchaghataï", "chaghataï", "chaghatay", "chaghatây", and "tchaghatay" are not merely accidental misspellings of one and the same object. They are the visible traces of French scholarly traditions, transliteration schools, and institutional styles. The history of terminology is therefore inseparable from the history of philology, textual scholarship, and systems of knowledge [Bazin, 1984, p. 5; Roux, 1991, p. 43].

Fourth, although relative standardization is visible in the twenty-first century, it has not produced full unification. The form "turc chaghatay" has become central in current French academic usage, yet "chaghataï", "turc oriental", "langue turque orientale", and "Littérature djaghataï" continue to circulate in institutional and bibliographic practice. This persistence demonstrates the vitality of a layered terminological system rather than the triumph of a single norm [Toutant, 2021, p. 29; Szuppe, 2023, p. 11;

Tamssaout, 2025, n.p.; Theses.fr, n.d., n.p.].

Finally, from the perspective of the modern Turkic languages mentioned in the Uzbek original, French discourse historically moved in two directions at once: toward a narrow historical-literary naming and toward a broader Turkological generalization. If one is speaking of the written tradition of the Timurid and post-Timurid period, "Chaghatay" remains the central term. If one is describing a wider Central Asian Turkic linguistic space, expressions such as "turc oriental" or "langues turques de l'Asie centrale" come into play instead [Bazin, 1984, pp. 5-6; Szuppe, 2023, p. 11].

### CONCLUSION

From the fifteenth to the twenty-first century, the term now commonly rendered as "Chaghatay Turk" or "turc chaghatay" in French discourse passed through several distinct stages. It first circulated within broad descriptive formulations such as "turc/langue turque" and script-oriented expressions such as "turc-ouïgour/en caractères ouïgours". By the nineteenth century, "dialecte djaghataï" and "turc oriental" initiated a process of philological normalization. During the twentieth century, numerous orthographic and stylistic variants, including "tchaghataï", "djaghataï", and "djaghataïde", remained in use. In the twenty-first century, forms such as "turc chaghatay", "turc chaghataï", "turc oriental (ou turc chaghatay)", and "langue turque orientale (turki ou chaghataï)" have become especially visible [Jaubert, 1825, pp. 31-32; Reinaud, 1862, p. 17; Bazin, 1984, p. 5; Roux, 1991, p. 43; Toutant, 2021, p. 29; Szuppe, 2023, p. 11].

Most importantly, French discourse has never expressed this language through one eternal and unambiguous name. Each variant fulfilled a specific scholarly task: some highlighted the script of the manuscript, others its geographic affiliation, and still others its historical-literary identity. To read French sources correctly, one must therefore move beyond the search for the single "right" form and instead examine when, where, and for what scholarly purpose a given variant was used. Only in this way can the true intellectual biography of the term "turc chaghatay" be reconstructed [Tamssaout, 2025, n.p.; Bibliothèque nationale de France, n.d., n.p.; Theses.fr, n.d., n.p.].

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