

Book review

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Václav Blažek, in collaboration with Michal Schwarz and Ondřej Srba: Altaic Languages. History of research, survey, classification and a sketch of comparative grammar. Brno: Masaryk University Press 2019, 358 pp. ISBN 978-80-210-9321-8.

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The hypothesis of the so-called Altaic language family was first proposed by Gustaf J. Ramstedt and Nicholas N. Poppe in the early decades of the twentieth century. According to this hypothesis, the Turkic, Mongolic and Tungusic languages form a genealogical family. Ramstedt immediately added Korean to the discussion, and Japanese was later included as a fifth member of the hypothetical language family. Scholars have subsequently analysed these language groups and reconstructed Proto-Altaic as the oldest stratum of the family. Ramstedt's ideas were published as early as 1924, but his complete reconstruction of Proto-Altaic appeared much later, in 1952 and 1957 (i.e. only after his death in 1950). Poppe began his work on Altaic studies in 1926, but his full system was not published until decades later, in 1960 and 1965. For further details, see Georg 1999.

In addition to the proponents of the Altaic hypothesis, a group of anti-Altaicists also spoke out. The most prominent of these were Gerard Clauson (1956, 1962) and Gerhard Doerfer (1966, 1993). Their idea was that the similarities between the compared languages are due to long-term areal influences. Another group of scholars, such as András Róna-Tas (1974) and Denis Sinor (1963, 1988), represented the sceptics who expressed a critical attitude towards the hypothesis, but not rejecting it outright.

To complicate matters further, supporters of the hypothesis do not necessarily agree on the number of branches that belong to Altaic. Some use micro-Altaic or Core Altaic for Turkic, Mongolic and Tungusic, and macro-Altaic for anything broader. In addition, a new term, Transeurasian, was coined by Lars Johanson and Martine Robbeets to include all five branches.

Classical research on the Altaic languages placed an extreme emphasis on etymological studies. The original idea behind the research concept was that the question of genealogical relationship could be settled unequivocally if a sufficient number of cognate words were found and proven to be genuine. As a consequence, dozens of papers and monographs were devoted to etymological studies. A positive side-effect of this research orientation was that the historical phonologies of the languages were described in detail. The two most important sound changes, rhotacism and lambdacism, were long recognized as pillars of the Altaic hypothesis. On the other hand, the grammatical aspects of the proto-language, its morphology and syntax, were discussed very seldom and unsystematically. Such studies have either remained on the periphery, or have not taken account of advances in modern linguistics.

In recent decades, however, it has become clear that a list of cognate words alone cannot prove the hypothetical Altaic language family. Instead, scholars began to suggest that the genealogical relationship could be proven on the basis of paradigmatic morphology. This idea is based on the assumption that morphology is more stable and systematic than vocabulary (see Vovin 2005: 73). It is worth noting that the Altaic languages in their present form do not exhibit paradigmatic correspondences in inflectional morphology, as can be observed, for example, in the Indo-European languages, in their conjugations, person marking, etc. Therefore modern research started to focus on derivational mor-

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phology in the hope of finding systematic paradigmatic relationships between the Altaic languages. This line of research has yielded new results, but they too are inconclusive.

In a paper (Károly 2014) I emphasized that the analysis of morphology is by no means a panacea for the Altaic hypothesis. Overestimating the conclusiveness of morphology, even if it is paradigmatic, can lead to false conclusions just as much as a blind belief in etymologies. Juha Janhunen (2012, 23) has listed some well-known facts about the limited usability of bound morphology.

Besides all the ongoing discoveries and research efforts, the attitude and emotional vehemence of many scholars towards the Altaic hypothesis, be they Altaicists or anti-Altaicists, created a very unpleasant and uninspiring environment for researchers.

Without going into detail, suffice it to say that Altaic scholars have been unable to agree on whether there is a genealogical family of the Altaic languages, or if the similarities between them are the result of long-lasting areal contacts. This means that the discussion has yet to be settled, and the Altaic hypothesis remains an open question.

Under these circumstances Václav Blažek and two of his colleagues, Michal Schwarz and Ondřej Srba, took up the challenge and published a book on the hypothetical family of the Altaic languages. The authors state in the introduction that their work should be recognized as a handbook (manual) summarizing the state of the art in Altaic studies (p. 9).

Since the reviewer specializes in Turcology with an interest in areal interaction between Turkic, Mongolic and Tungusic, the present review will focus on the contents of the book from this perspective.

The book is divided into ten chapters, the last two of which contain the *Abbreviations and Symbols Used* and the *Bibliography*. The bibliography is an excellent seventy-page list of various publications that illustrate well the research carried out during the last hundred years.

The first chapter deals with the *History of the Recognition of the Altaic languages* (pp. 15–54) and is divided into two main parts. Sections 1.1–1.5 are an annotated bibliography of descriptive and comparative works (chiefly dictionaries and grammars) relevant to the identification and study of the individual branches, and section 1.6 is a survey of the *Formulation of the Altaic Hypothesis*. The history of Altaic research is then divided into epochs (generations of researchers), and their representative figures are labelled as optimists, sceptics, or realists. Considering the meaning of a sceptic as “a person who doubts the truth or value of an idea or belief”, the reader might get the impression that not a single scholar in the history of the research has categorically rejected the hypothesis. However, it is somewhat of a euphemism to classify Clauson and Doerfer as “sceptics”, since they not only expressed doubts about the Altaic hypothesis, but rejected it outright; see Clauson (1956) and Doerfer (1966). Similarly, it is difficult to see the works of Stefan Georg, Juha Janhunen and Alexander Vovin (*post quem* 2005) as manifestations of scepticism. Moreover, the entire presentation of scholars is biased by the terminology chosen, as it suggests that researchers who are supportive of the hypothesis are realists (i.e. more realistic than the opponents).

Chapter two provides mainly statistical data about the *Distribution and Demography of the Living Languages* (pp. 55–79). According to the authors, this data is taken verbatim from the 21st edition of the *Ethnologue* (see Eberhard, Simons and Fenning 2020). The languages are described in alphabetical order including alternate names, autonym, population size, location, dialects and script-related information. Historical languages – important for the reconstruction of a proto-language – do not receive a similar section in this chapter or elsewhere in the book. Nevertheless, it is a useful description for beginners and university students coming to the subject area for the first time. Otherwise, it does not contribute much to the relevant questions of Altaic studies.

Chapter three is of a similar character. It presents the most important attempts at classification and the corresponding genealogical trees of the individual branches. Although these trees serve well to illustrate the progress of the research, they are of little relevance to the ongoing debate about the

existence of Altaic. Wilhelm Radloff's classification (1882, 280–91), for example, is a useful work for classroom discussions of the development of Turkic studies, but its impact on the question of Altaic is negligible today. Specific issues of classification, such as the recognition of Chuvash, its position within Turkic, and its relationship to Mongolic, are more relevant from an Altaistic perspective. Similarly, a summary of the position of Kitan within Mongolic might contribute more to the discussion than the presentation of outdated classifications.

The classifications are visualized in trees (undirected graphs), and thus the individual languages are linked to branches by nodes. However, these nodes are not always defined in the quoted classifications, but have to be guessed. There are also some minor errors or misunderstandings in the presentations. For example, the treatment of Adelung's early classification is summarized on page 80, where the Karakalpak is mentioned twice: (1) "Turkestan: Karakalpak" and (2) "Ufa, Meščeriak, Baškir, Karakalpak(!)". In the first case, the colon is misleading, because it suggests that Karakalpak is the only Turkestan language in this branch of the family. A close reading of Adelung (1806–17/1, 455–6) helps to understand the position of Karakalpak in the classification: "*Turkestan. Östliche Türken an der Grenze der Mongoley. ... auch die Karakalpaken, d. i. Schwarzmützen, die zu ihnen gehören.*" Accordingly, "Turkestani, Karakalpak" is a better rendering of Adelung's intention. The other passage about the Karakalpak reads "*Orenburgische Tatarn. Zu diesen gehören vornehmlich die Ufischen Tatarn, die Mestscherjaken, die Baschkiren, und die Karakalpaken. ... Die Karakalpaken, Schwarzmützen, wohnen zwar jetzt am Aral-See in Turkestan, weichen aber sehr von den Bucharen und Turkestanern ab, und gleichen den vorigen*" (Adelung 1806–17/1, 487–8). One can conclude that the exclamation mark here is arbitrary. On the one hand, Adelung added Karakalpak to Turkestani because of their geographical proximity. On the other hand, he encountered Karakalpak as a member of Orenburg Tatar, because it seemed to be the closest relative to Karakalpak, all of them being members of the Kipchak branch. As an example of misleading presentation, the place of Urum in the tree extracted from the *Ethnologue* (p. 84) is obviously wrong, even if the database may suggest it. Urum does not form a branch in its own right. It is because of an information deficiency in the *Ethnologue* database that the Classification entry for Urum is incomplete. Such problems can easily be pointed out in an additional footnote. One could take a more radical approach and argue for the removal of the entire *Ethnologue* classification, since it is a compilation made by non-specialists on the basis of specialists' classifications. Of course, all these corrections are marginal in the light of the Altaic hypothesis, but as we know, the devil is in the details.

Section 3.6 (pp. 120–3) quotes five different classifications of Altaic from Poppe (1960, 8) to Robbeets and Bouckaert (2018, 158). The typical time span that the reconstructions account for is about 5,000 to 6,000 years. This depth of at least 4,000 years prior to the first written sources is an ambitious undertaking, given the limitations of the available methodology of linguistic reconstruction.

Chapter four provides the *Etymological Analyses of the Main Ethnonyms or Choronyms* (pp. 124–55). Here the proper names *türk*, *mongol*, *tungus*, *korea*, *joseon* 'alternative name of Korea', *japan* and *wo* 'old name of Japan' are discussed, including their earliest attestations in sources and their etymologies.

In chapter five (pp. 156–81), titled the *Sketch of the Comparative Phonetics of the Altaic Family*, we are getting closer to the issues relevant to Altaic studies. The survey is extremely cursory, however. It merely provides lists of reconstructed sounds without putting them into context. Section 5.4, *Comparison Between the Altaic Branches* (pp. 169–81), provides more explanation, but in the end it also resorts to a tabular list of raw sound correspondences. For example, the question of rhotacism and lambdacism, once the pillars of Altaic, receives approximately a half-page treatment in the book (pp. 47, 156, and 169). The reconstructed sounds of the proto-language and their correspondences in the modern languages are verbatim copies from Starostin, Dybo and Mudrak (2003) and Robbeets (2005).

The problematic character of these reconstructions has already been severely criticized by many scholars (see e.g. Vovin 2005, 76–7).

Chapter six treats the *Nominal Case System in the Altaic Languages* (pp. 182–8). The most important list, the reconstructed set of Altaic case markers, is on page 188. It shows not only significant gaps within the family, but also obscure correspondences: (1) the dative-instrumental suffix in **-nV* is reconstructed on the basis of Turkic *-(l)n* (instrumental), Middle Korean *?-i* (nominative < ergative) and Old Japanese *-ni* (dative-locative); and (2) the comitative-equative suffix in **-č'a* is based on Turkic *-čA* (equative), Mongolic *-ča* (ablative) / *-čaya* (terminative), Middle Korean *-s* (genitive, < Old Korean **-ci/*-ci*) and Old Japanese *-tō* (comitative). Such an *ad hoc* comparison of unrelated functions rides roughshod over the principles of historical linguistics.

Chapter seven (pp. 189–214) discusses the *Altaic Pronominal System*. The authors present long lists of corresponding elements that favour the hypothesis. Critical views or other scholarly opinions are completely disregarded. See, for example, Janhunen (2013), who came to the conclusion that personal pronouns cannot be utilized for a genealogical interpretation of Altaic.

Chapter eight (pp. 215–85) deals with the *Altaic Numerals in an Etymological Perspective*. The authors argue (p. 215) that the study of numerals is of paramount importance for the comparative method, and that the absence of common numerals has always been an important argument against the hypothesis.

Numerals represent a specific semantic field, where deep archaisms can appear beside recent loans in various language groups. The comparative method allows us to stratify different layers in lexicon: 1. Substrata; 2. Inherited lexicon; 3. Adstrata. 4. Superstrata. ... The Altaic hypothesis in its wider version supposes a genetic relationship of Turkic, Mongolic, Tungusic, Koreanic and Japonic languages. One of the most frequent arguments of its opponents (Clauson, Ščerbak) is based on an imaginary absence of common numerals. The presence of common (= inherited) numerals certainly represents an important argument for a genetic relationship. But its absence has no explanatory value – there are more safely related languages with almost no inherited numerals.

Moreover, the authors claim that recent advances in research allow us to identify more inherent numerals (p. 215). The description begins with a list of basic numerals, followed by their proposed etymologies; see e.g. section 8.1.3 *Comparative-Etymological Analysis of the Turkic Numerals*. Although the authors made a great effort to collect all the etymological proposals, they did not always critically review them. For example, one of the etymologies of the Turkic numeral **ekki* ‘two’ states that the final segment **-ki* is identified as the suffix of ordinals, and the hypothetical primary root is related to the verb **eg-*; see **eg-er-* ‘to follow’. Putting aside the fact that **-ki* was not an ordinal suffix, the authors gloss over the problem that it cannot be added directly to a verbal root. Other fancy proposals are excellent classroom examples of how etymology should not be done: “Turkic **sek(k)iř* ‘8’ is segmentable into **ek(k)i* ‘2’ & **-ř* ‘dual marker’; for the initial **s-* the meaning ‘without’ can be expected. Its direct traces are not evident in Turkic, but the negative verb in Mongolic and Tungusic represents a promising candidate” (p. 225).

It is very unfortunate that the authors continue to support the unfounded etymologies of Starostin, Dybo and Mudrak (2003). Discussing the Mongolic numeral *nige(n)* ‘one’, they quote the following interpretation: “In EDAL 990 Mo. **nige(n)* ‘1’ is compared with Tk. **janıř* ‘lonely, single’” (p. 234). They also (2003, 990) reconstructed the Altaic word **nıǝne* ‘one, single’ on the basis of Tungusic **non-* ~ **non-* ‘to begin; to be the first; at first’, Mongolic **nige(n)* ‘one’, Turkic **janıř* ‘lonely, single’, Japanese **nami* ‘only’, and Korean **njənı(k)* ‘other, different’, noting that it is “a good common Altaic root”. On the same page they quote a single example from Old Turkic in favour of the comparison, namely the Enisei Kyrgyz word *janıus* ‘lonely, single’. The correct reading of the word, however, is *jalanıus* or *jalııus* (Kormushin 2008, 163), which is similar to all other examples known to me from Old Turkic. The problem of the “unnecessary” consonant /l/ is solved by the argument that Proto-

Turkic **janjir* is “usually regarded as a contraction < *jalanjuz*, which is probably wrong in the face of external evidence”. Without considering the semantic difficulties associated with this etymology (‘to begin’ : ‘one’ : ‘lonely’ : ‘only’ : ‘other’), the prioritization of any external evidence over an internally resolvable issue of Turkic violates one of the most important principles of historical linguistics, namely that the simplest explanation is the most plausible one, until evidence is presented to prove it wrong.

The comparative description of the *Cardinal Numerals in the Altaic Daughter Protolanguages and their Probable Cognates* is provided in section 8.6 (pp. 279–82) together with the *Conclusion on the Altaic Numerals* in section 8.8 (pp. 283–5). The authors conclude (p. 283), among other things, that

the present etymological analysis of systems of numerals in all described Altaic languages allows to divide the studied forms into several sets: ... B. Forms which are common in several branches; they are etymologizable within Altaic: 4₁, 5₂, 10₁. C. Forms analyzed as related in several branches, without internal etymology, but with hypothetical external parallels: 1₄, 2₃, 3₂, 4₂, 5₃.

In order to illustrate the level of cognateness between the compared words, see e.g. Proto-Mongolic **tawu-[ya]n* ‘all’, Proto-Tungusic **tuañña* ‘all fingers’, Proto-Korean **taNsw* < **ta-son* ‘whole hand’, Koguryō cf. **tək^{Be}*, **tök^{Toh}* ‘10’ < **töwök* < **töwö-kVrV* ‘all fingers’ and common Japonic cf. **töwo* ‘10’ for the cardinal numeral ‘five’ (p. 279).

The chapter concludes with a comparison of the internal diversity of numerals in Altaic and in Cushitic. The idea behind this comparison is that Cushitic, an otherwise undisputed language family, also shows the same level of diversity; i.e. the number of cognate numerals within the family is very low. The assumption that languages can form a genealogical family without having cognate numerals in their reconstructed proto-language is certainly correct, but such negative evidence obviously does not prove the existence of Altaic. In other words, the reconstruction should be based on observational data, not on its absence. Astonishingly, this is where the scientific discussion of Altaic ends in the book.

In the light of the above criticism, it is very unfortunate that the authors have not addressed the question of the common Altaic lexicon in general. In the preface, they briefly state that “any new analysis would require a new monograph reviewing the preceding studies, but this has convincingly been done by Martine Robbeets” (p. 12). Considering the very critical reviews of the two most recent monographs on the Altaic lexicon (Starostin, Dybo and Mudrak 2003; Robbeets 2005), one might find it difficult to associate these works with the phrase “convincingly done”. One can therefore conclude that the first part of the sentence is correct: a new monographic description of the supposed Altaic lexicon is urgently needed, even if it will not provide much support for the hypothesis. A recent study by Erdal (2019) reviewing the lexical parallels between Turkic and Mongolic in the realm of basic vocabulary shows how meagre the list of cognate-like words is.

The question of word formation is also left untouched by the authors. They cursorily state (p. 12) that

There is also nothing about word formation. Again, this was already covered in the classics such as Ramstedt (1912, 1952/1957b) and Poppe (1972). And finally, the Altaic verb is quite disregarded here. Besides the classic contributions of Ramstedt (1933–1935, 1952/1957b) there is a long series of impressive studies by Martine Robbeets, which shift the comparative analysis of the Altaic (Transeurasian in her terminology) verb to a new and higher quality (Robbeets 2007b, 2007c, 2010, 2012, 2014c, 2014d, 2015, 2016a, 2017g).

This brief summary gives the impression that all the relevant questions have already been answered and that the results support the hypothesis. Apart from the fact that current research in morphology has gone far beyond Ramstedt and Poppe, Robbeets’ recent studies on Altaic verbal morphology are far from convincing. To illustrate the problems that abound in Robbeets’ contributions to

the field, one can mention some of her recent reconstructions, such as Proto-Mongolic **e-se-negation* and Proto-Turkic **e-negation*, or Proto-Mongolic **-sA/*-si: finite* and Proto-Turkic **-sA past finite* (Robbeets 2020, 512–3), which deviate widely from our understanding of Turkic and its relation to Mongolic. Reconstructing an element – in our case a negative verb for Proto-Turkic – requires explaining how it relates to the already described system of Turkic. Robbeets' argument, however, comes up empty in that regard, because not a single piece of internal Turkic evidence supports it. The question of **-sA past finite* also requires a serious discussion of the very existence of finiteness as a distinct category for Proto-Turkic. Indeed, the evidence suggests that Proto-Turkic had no real finite forms at all – except for a few special categories. Some scholars express this by saying that there was no distinction between finite and non-finite in Turkic, and thus verbal nouns, verbal adjectives (*aka* participles) and verbal adverbs (*aka* converbs) all could naturally occur in both positions. In my view, Turkic (as well as Altaic) mainly had only non-finite suffixes – with the exception of mood suffixes – to express action, event, process, aspect, attribute, property, propensity or the like, but never had the pure category of time or temporal anchoring. Of course, all of this requires a formal definition of finiteness, a topic that is definitely beyond the scope of this review.

The book *Altaic Languages* is indeed a manual in the sense that it attempts to summarize the knowledge relevant to a particular field of study. But it is a biased manual, written by supporters of the Altaic hypothesis, and thus is an ideal means of indoctrinating general linguists and naive beginners who do not have sufficient knowledge about the Altaic languages and the history of their research. The authors present almost all their claims as established, well-founded, unquestionable facts. In doing so, the book leaves no room for criticism, scepticism or other scholarly opinions.

Readers of this manual should keep the following in mind: whatever the book may suggest, the debate is not over and, more importantly, scholars of Altaic languages are not actually in a position to provide conclusive evidence on the question of whether the Altaic languages are genealogically related to each other. I phrase this cautiously for the purposes of this review, although I share the view that the similarities between Turkic, Mongolic, Tungusic, Korean and Japonic (and at the same time Uralic) are due to long-standing areal interactions.

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