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Book Review: Comparative-Historical Grammar of Turkic Languages. Regional Reconstructions

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Tenishev E. R. (executive editor). Sravnitel'no-istoricheskaja grammatika t'urkskih jazykov. Regional'nye rekonstruktsii. [Comparative-Historical Grammar of Turkic Languages. Regional Reconstructions]. - Moskva: Nauka, 2002. - 767 pages. ISBN 5-02-022638-6

Reviewed by Yuri Tambovtsev

Specialists in comparative studies and re-constructions of world languages are happy to receive a new book on the problems, which were in the focus of attention of the world community of linguists. This great book both in content and in volume (767 pages) is written by outstanding linguists of the Institute of the Linguistics of the Russian Academy in Moscow, including the late E. R. Tenishev (1921 - 2004), G. F. Blagova, A. A. Chechenov, A. V. Dybo, E. A. Grunina, I. V. Kormushin, L. S. Levitzskaja, O. A. Mudrak, K. M. Musaev, and D. M. Nasilov. The authors put forward the following classification of the Turkic languages:

1) Oguz group

(Turkish, Gagauz, Azeri, Turkmen, Salar, Sonkor-Turkic, Khaladj, Khorasano-Turkic and the language of the Balkan Turks);

2) Kypchak group

(Alabugat Tatar-Nogaj, Astrakhan Nogaj-Karagash, Jurt-Tatar, Nogaj, Tatar, Baraba-Tatar, Bashkir, Karaim, Kazakh, Karakalpak, Karachaj-Balkar, Altai, Krym-Tatar, Krymchak, Kumyk);

3) Karluk- Ujgur group

(Ujgur, Uzbek);

4) Kyrgyz group

(Khakas, Shor, Chulym-Turkic, Saryg-Jugur and the language of the Fujuj-Kyrgyz);

5) Tobas or Ur'ankhaj group (Tuvin, Tofalar and Ujgur-Ur'ankhaj);

6) Jakut group (Jakut and Dolgan); Bulgar group (Chuvash).

They did not put the Urum language either in the Oguz, nor in the Kypchak group.

One can see that this classification of the Turkic languages is somewhat different from the existing Turkic classifications of those of 1) I. Adelung; 2) N.A. Baskakov; 3) A. A. Balbi, 4) I. N. Berezin; 5) V. Bogoroditskij; 6) I. Hammer; 7) A. N. Kononov; 8) G. Klaproth; 9) F. E. Korsh; 10) L. Ligeti; 11) S. E. Malov; 12) K. G. Menges; 13) A. Palmblad, 14) W. Radloff; 15) M. Raesaenen; 16) G. Ramstedt; 17) A. N. Samojlovich; 18) A. M. Shcherbak; 19) M. Z. Zakiev.

An outstanding researcher of the Turkic languages Andrej Nikolaevich KONONOV correctly used to emphasize that all the proposed classifications were not able to represent clearly the phonetical and grammatical structure of all the Turkic languages (Kononov, 1982: 322). His words seem to be still correct some twenty years later, since new Turkic language classifications are being proposed (Zakiev, 2003: 10 - 13).

The Moscow linguists of the Institute of Linguistics mentioned above seem to believe in the genetic tree of the Turkic languages. They want to improve the Proto-Turkic reconstruction by attracting the historical and areal methods. Nevertheless, they consider the "tree" model of the Turkic language classification to be prevailing over the historical and areal approach. It seems quite correct for them to emphasize that the genealogical trees may turn out to be different if one takes different features. Thus, the tree built on lexical features may be quite different from the tree constructed on the basis of the phonetic features (p. 3).

Nevertheless, they are sure that any sort of the tree is an objective reality.

The form of the tree should be preserved under any circumstance (p.3). They are against the "wave" model, because one cannot use the methods of re-constructions under it. According to them it is not strict enough. They seem to be also against the complex "liniar" model of Eugenij A. Khelimskij, which he detailly described elsewhere (Khelimskij, 1982).

As a matter of fact, the authors of the book under review admit that in the course of its existence this or that group of the Turkic languages may get united with this or that group, but then separate from it to be united with some other group. One should take into the account the nomadic character of life of the Turkic peoples who spoke Turkic languages. The authors seem to be aware of the fact that the innovations received in some group may then be transported to the other group. They agree that the nodes of the classification of Turkic languages may depend on the number of these innovations and the number of the archaic features. We have shown elsewhere that the number of the peculiar features on phonological level influence the division of the language into taxons and the distances between them (Tambovtsev, 2004: 145 - 147; 151 - 165).

However, it was already pointed out by several linguists in the field of Turkic studies that it is hard to construct the classification of Turkic languages in principle because these languages mixed with one another too much (for the details see Tambovtsev, 2001: 56 - 61).

The well-known researchers of Turkic languages who wrote this huge and comprehensive volume believe that the general classification and re-construction of the Turkic languages must use the results of the regional re-constructions as the basis. Though they write that the traditional genetic classification is still quite adequate, they do not mention which classification in particular they mean. At the same time they correctly remark that without the special works on regional re-constructions of some Turkic language groups, the classification characteristics of these groups are rather typological than genetic. This is why, this book may give solutions to the problems of the Proto-Turkic language state. To my mind, the Proto-Turkic, Proto-Finno-Ugric, Proto-

Uralic, Proto-Indo-European and other re-constructions must take into account the statistics of the frequency of occurrence of different sounds in different reference languages. The approach of Sandor Csucs, Laszlo Honti, Zsuzsa Salanki and Judit Varga, to the best of my knowledge, was the only work, in which the most reliable clues for re-construction of various sounds is given. Statistics of sounds helps to solve the problem of reconstruction constricting the choice of the possible interpretations (Csucs et al., 1997). The other possible way out is to take into account the typological distances between some of the Turkic languages derived by the functioning of their phonemes in their speech sound chains (Tambovtsev, 2001: 80 - 84).

The fact that in the book under review, the Turkish, Azeri and Turkmen are put in one group, that is, the Oguz group means that the linguists feel that they are closer to each other than to the other Turkic languages, e.g. Kazan-Tatar, Baraba-Tatar, Kazkh, Karakalpak, Altai, etc., which enter the Kypchak group. Indeed, our distances show that Turkmen is much closer to Azeri (6.62) and Turkish ((6.90) than to Karakalpak (7.77), Kazakh (8.42), Baraba-Tatar (9.36) or Altai-Kizhi (14.26). Moreover, Turkmen is also less closer to Uighur (10.24) or Khakas (10.07), which both belong to some other Turkic groups (Tambovtsev, 2001: 81). The authors of the book, indeed, put Uighur to the Karluk-Uighur group and Khakas to the Kyrgyz group (p.4). Therefore, one can see, that modern linguistic investigations, which use the methods of linguistic statistics help to solve the linguistic problems unsolvable by other methods of linguistics. A fair example of it is the part of this book devoted to classification of Turkic languages on the basis of morphological statistics by Oleg A. Mudrak (713 - 737). He gives the results of his investigations in the form of the matrices and schemes. Mudrak's results are quite convincing since he uses 83 important features. One should agree with Oleg A. Mudrak that his data on the similarity of the Turkic languages and dialects based on his 83 features give a better foundation for the classification of the Turkic languages, than the traditional subjective method, when a linguists "feels" that this or that sort of classification should be constructed. Usually, traditional linguistic classifications do not use the features at all.

More often than not, it is impossible to guess on what features this or that classification in question is built. In fact, Mudrak's classification is built on the values of similarity, expressed in per cent. The matrices of similarities are provided (p. 726 - 728) and the schemes of classifications are given (p.730 - 734). We found certain similarity between our data and those of Oleg. A. Mudrak. He correctly explains his result by the movements of the Turkic peoples during the history of their ethnic development (p.729). The general conclusion of O.A. Mudrak is quite interesting: Oguz languages are as close to Kypchak languages (46% of similarity) as to Karluk languages (47% of similarity). At the same time, in general Oguz languages are less similar to the languages of the Siberian Turkic peoples (38%). The Runic Orkhon Proto-Turkic language is closer to the Karluk group of Turkic languages.

Inside this group it is the closest to the Uzbek language (55% of similarity). It is not much since Azeri and Turkmen (both Oguz) show the value of similarity of 76%, or Kazakh and Karakalpak (both Kypchak) 93% (p. 726-727). Taking into account Mudrak's data, it is possible to construct a more objective classification of Turkic languages.

This may attract young linguists to follow the tendency of using the exact methods of linguistic statistics (in the way Oleg A. Mudrak applied) for the construction of objective language classifications for other language families.

The journal space limits do not allow us to analyse in detail the other parts of the book, which are written in a more classical way. Students of linguists who deal with comparative Turkic language studies may find an abundance of reliable Turkic material in this book. Linguists who deal with reconstructions and protolanguages should consider it. The book under review is an incentive to induce the ways of correct language classifications.