

SOME METHODS AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE WORK ON REMOTE RELATIONS

There has been considerable discussion of the merits of various proposals mentioned. Some of the relevant Russian literature is now available in English translation (Shevoroshkin and Markey 1986). There are some methodological points that have arisen in the course of the work on Nostratic and other macrofamilies (and their proto-languages) that may be worthwhile to discuss in some detail.

One concern is the importance of stable vocabulary. The first and most important step in comparing language families is the decision about what items to compare. To solve this problem, Dolgopolsky (1986) surveyed 140 languages of Europe and Asia in an attempt to make a list of the meanings that typically were reflected by words that had almost never been replaced either by borrowing or by neologism but rather appeared to represent the original etyma of their proto-languages. Since in many cases the proto-language was not fully known, Dolgopolsky followed the simple procedure of assuming that if a given meaning is expressed by several unrelated words in related languages, this is, necessarily, a case of replacement, whereas if a given meaning is represented by cognate forms in all or nearly all members of a family, this may be presumed to represent the original etymon. The latter would then be words that could be studied for evidence of common ancestry for any languages or language families, since it would be highly probable (Dolgopolsky provided some statistical estimates) that languages sharing words on this list would have to be related. To avoid comparisons based on superficial similarities, Dolgopolsky eliminated all words involving onomatopoeia, interjections, and baby talk.

Dolgopolsky then produced a list of meanings that are expressed by words that are seldom or never replaced. The stablest fifteen were the words with the following semantics, given in the order of decreasing stability:

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| 1. I/me [first person sg. pronoun] | 8. heart |
| 2. two/pair | 9. tooth |
| 3. thou/thee [second person sg. pronoun] | 10. no/not [negative and prohibitive particles] |
| 4. who/what | 11. fingernail/toenail |
| 5. tongue | 12. louse/nit |
| 6. name | 13. tear(drop) |
| 7. eye | 14. water |
| | 15. dead |

These meanings were represented by words that ranged from those that had not been replaced in any of the 140 Old World languages studied to those where replacement had taken place in no more than a fourth of the languages studied. In a second list, the words were subject to replacement only slightly more frequently:

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|-----------|----------|
| 16. hand | 20. full |
| 17. night | 21. sun |
| 18. blood | 22. ear |
| 19. horn | 23. salt |

These lists can be of considerable use in evaluating competing hypotheses about the relationships among languages and language families. Similarly, the lists of cognate sets proposed for each of the proto-languages cover the stablest lexemes (as well as grammatical morphemes), including but not restricted to those on the Dolgopolsky list.

Of considerable importance in all of the work surveyed here has been the assumption that multiple comparison is better than binary. The validity of this assumption is borne out when we consider the sets of correspondences within any language family. The crucial point is that certain contrasts are preserved better in one branch than in another. For example, in Nostratic the vowels are best preserved in the eastern languages (PD, PA, and especially PU), the stops in PK and PAA, the sonorants in PU, laryngeals in PAA, the ***k' : **q'* distinction in PK, and so on. Binary comparisons would either miss entirely or discover only belatedly many of the archaic distinctions that must be the building blocks of a Nostratic reconstruction.

An important criterion for the success of any hypothesis about the relatedness of languages or language families is whether a proposed relationship—and the proto-language reconstructed on the basis of it—throws light on problems in the history of each member of the proposed family or phylum that could not be solved internally. For example, Nostratic data provide a new understanding of the origins of some hitherto troublesome subsystems of PIE phonology. One involves the three-way contrast, in PIE, of velars (*k, g, gh*), palatovelars (*ḱ, ḡ, ḡh*), and labiovelars (*k^w, g^w, h^w*). The validity of such a ternary system has sometimes been questioned. However, we now

⁴Several other Kartvelian-Indo-European items are not on the Dolgopolsky list but seem to be quite stable as well and are thus likely to be genuine cognates (e.g., PK **diqa* 'clay' : PIE **dhǵh-em-* 'earth', PK **tep-* 'warm' : PIE **tep-* [ditto], and so on).