

Week's End

HAARETZ תרבות

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 2009

Anyone here speak Nostratic?

Is it possible that there is a 'genetic' connection between different linguistic families that grew out of one common source? Aharon Dolgopolsky does, and he has devoted his life to studying it

By Baruch Podolsky

"Nostratic Dictionary," by Aharon Dolgopolsky, McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, Cambridge University

What was it that led a man living near the seaside in the Haifa neighborhood of Bat Galim to create a monumental dictionary of the Nostratic language group, encompassing some 4,000 pages in four volumes?

"I came to Israel from Moscow in 1976," answers the linguist Aharon Dolgopolsky, a professor at the University of Haifa. "In Moscow I had already raised a young generation of linguists who had been badly bitten by the Nostratic bug. But there are also plenty of polyglots wandering around here, and they inspire me."

The original Nostratic language is not spoken anywhere today, but it is reasonable to assume that about 10,000 years ago there was one single tongue from which evolved many of the languages spoken today. Hebrew, for example, is known to be a Semitic language, a relative of Aramaic, Arabic, Akkadian, Ugaitic and others. Semitic languages have "distant cousins," like ancient Egyptian, Berber, and African languages in Ethiopia, Chad, Cameroon and northern Nigeria. All of these, together with their Semitic cousins, form one big family known as the Hamito-Semitic or Afro-Asiatic language group. Is it possible that there is a "genetic" connection between different linguistic families that grew out of one common source?

Many scholars reject such a hypothesis. Even if certain words have a similar sound and meaning, this is not proof of a common origin. Some words are onomatopoeic (like "cuckoo," which has a similar meaning in many languages), and others are borrowed, such as the Roman name Caesar, which became a generic term.

Nevertheless, historical linguistics set rules for examining whether there's a "genetic" connection between languages, or whether similarities are merely coincidental. The important rule in determining a genetic link is the existence of phonetic laws known as phonetic shifts. If we find that sound A in a certain language appears as sound B in another language, and not only in one word but consistently, in a large number of words, it may be argued with some certainty that there is a genetic link between the two languages. In Hebrew for example, a year is *shana*, and in Arabic it is *sana*; *shalom* is *salaam*; *zahav* (gold) is *dahab*, and so on. Historical linguistics, in its various branches, deals with finding such shifts and reconstructing the protolanguage from which the newer languages developed (proto-Semitic, proto Indo-European, etc.). It is fascinating but very hard work. And it is many times more difficult to find the similarities between protolanguages. The people who do this work have to know not only each language, but also their histories, that is, their phonetic and grammatical development. Linguists who can do this sort of thing are very rare, and Aharon Dolgopolsky is one of them.

The hypothetical relationship between various European and Asiatic language groups was first suggested about 80 years ago by the Danish linguist Holger Pedersen. In the 1960s, two young linguists in Moscow – independently of each other – began examining the idea. One of them, Vladislav Illich-Svitych, was killed in a car accident in 1966. Dolgopolsky, who was the second

scholar, took the dead man's work and, in 1971, the first volume of "Prolegomena to the Nostratic Comparative Dictionary" was published, under Illich-Svitych's name.

What languages comprise the Nostratic family? According to Dolgopolsky, the protolanguage is made up of six families: Hamito-Semitic, Indo-European, Uralic (Hungarian and Finnish), Altaic (Turkic, Mongolian, Tungusic, Japanese and Korean), Kartvelian (Georgian), and Dravidian (southern Indian languages). It is not to be ruled out that there are several other languages that also belong to this protolanguage, such as Eskimo and Etruscan, but this has not yet been established.

The new dictionary heralds a new era in comparative linguistics. It makes it possible to find commonalities among Hebrew, Mongolian, Hungarian and Japanese. According to the Nostratic hypothesis, there is much evidence of a common genetic relationship: The first person singular 'I,' for example, in Indo-European languages, is reconstructed as "*m-egyho*" and appears in Latin as *ego*, as *aham* in ancient Indian and *Ich* in German. The related word in Hamito-Semitic languages is *aaku*, which is to be found in Akkadian, and *anokhi* in Hebrew. The first person plural in Semitic languages is made up of the prefix "an" with a denominative element added on. There is a similar word in ancient Egyptian, Berber, and some African languages. There are some phonetic shifts evident here – for example the "g" in the Latin *ego* changes to *kaf/dalet* in Semitic languages. The second person in Indo-European is *tu* in Latin, *am-ty* in ancient Indian, *du* in German, *ty* in Polish. In Semitic languages, we find the element *ta*, like *ata* in Hebrew and the suffix *-ta* in verbs in the past tense (*shamarta*) and the prefix in verbs in the future tense (*takum*). In the Finnish languages, this common denominator appears as *ton* in Mordovian, *sinal*



Aharon Dolgopolsky. Searching for the genetic connection between languages.

tina in Estonian, and *sen* in Turkish. At work here is a clear *s/d/t* phonetic shift.

The negative word *ma* is thus documented in Indo-European languages, ancient Greek, Indian and Iranian languages, Aramaic and Hamito-Semitic languages (Arabic, Egyptian, and African languages). It is even found in Turkic, Mongolian and Korean languages.

The Hebrew word *keren* resembles the English "horn" and the Latin *cornu*. Why does the Hebrew word *kalah* mean both "bride" and "daughter-in-law"? *Kalah* is actually a woman who does not belong to the tribe by birth but joins it later. In Latin we find the word *glos*, which means "the sister of a husband," also a woman who comes into the family from the outside. Note the phonetic shift: Hebrew *kaf*, Latin "g," as we

have already seen in the Semitic *aaku-an* and the Latin *ego*.

That's only a minute selection from the 3,000 words and morphemes in Dolgopolsky's Nostratic dictionary, which represents the culmination of half a century's toil. This dictionary is far more than a collection of words. It contains a detailed introduction and a collection of reconstructed phonetic shifts, those phonetic laws that prove a genetic connection between languages. It also contains a list of morphemes reflecting the grammar of the Nostratic language. Perusing these volumes also reveals fascinating facts about pre-Neolithic civilization, for example a profound knowledge of anatomy, description of methods of gathering food from the ground, and the movements of various parts of the body.

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