Blažek, Václav & Piispanen, Peter. 2024. *Yukaghir and Uralic.* (Harvard Oriental Series Opera Minora 16) Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 292 pp. https://doi.org/10.31826/9781463247713

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1 Introduction

The monograph *Yukaghir and Uralic* by Václav Blažek and Peter Piispanen is a new attempt to shed more light on the disputed genealogical connection between the Uralic (Finno-Ugric) and Yukaghir language families. Blažek is professor of Comparative Indo-European linguistics at the Masaryk University of Brno, and he is known for his publications in the field of the history of different language families, including Uralic and Yukaghir (Blažek 2022). Although Blažek's oeuvre consists of a wide array of linguistic topics, he has discussed various long-range hypotheses (such as Nostratic) in many of his publications (see, for example, Blažek 1982, 2014). Piispanen is a researcher based in Stockholm, known for his work on the alleged relationship between Uralic and Yukaghir (such as Piispanen 2013, 2015) and on contacts between other Arctic language families. The present book is the first shared publication of the two authors.

Before going to the actual presentation of the book, some preliminary remarks on the methodology and the background are in order. This book belongs to the field of so-called long-range comparison or macro-comparativism that seeks to connect established language families with each other. Even though this approach has often been considered controversial in mainstream historical linguistics (especially in Finland; see e.g., K. Häkkinen 1996: 44–45, 129–130; Kallio 2015), many different long-range hypotheses have been suggested that connect the Uralic family genealogically with different language families of Eurasia. A possible genealogical relationship with Indo-European has been a particularly popular idea among some Indo-Europeanists (see Kloekhorst & Pronk 2019 for a collection of recent views in favor of this, and Kallio 2015 and Holopainen 2020 for more critical accounts). The relationship with Yukaghir is another relatively popular idea that has recently been supported by one of the authors of the book, Piispanen, in several publications, but thoroughly criticized by Aikio (2014a). Uralic and Yukaghir have also been considered members of larger genealogical entities, but the results have remained controversial at best (for a recent attempt to connect these with the Eskimo-Aleut languages, see Vajda & Fortescue's 2022 and for a critical review, see Holopainen 2022).

The problems involved in long-range hypotheses, in general, have been aptly described by Campbell and Poser (2008): the comparisons often include erroneous reconstructions, accidental similarity, loanwords, falsely segmented words, semantic problems and ghost words. Such issues have been involved in Yukaghir-Uralic comparisons in the past, as some recent studies, such as Aikio's (2014a) detailed scrutiny of Yukaghir-Uralic etymologies have shown (cf. also J. Häkkinen 2012). According to Aikio, many of the lexical similarities can be explained as early loanwords from Uralic to Yukaghir.

In the current situation, it should be clear that for a new work that advocates the Yukaghir-Uralic genealogical relationship, especially high standards of historical-comparative linguistics should be used, and the recent criticism should be addressed in

detail. Unfortunately, this is not the case in the monograph under review. The book by Blažek and Piispanen suffers from the usual shortcomings of long-range comparativism, and the whole approach they have taken – is not the most fruitful approach towards the problem. Blažek and Piispanen concentrate on the comparison of lexical items even though lexical evidence is not considered a particularly strong argument in the proving of genealogical relations (see Fox 1995: 220). The main body of the book consists of a listing of Uralic-Yukaghir etymologies with copious references but little commentary, and the presentation of the etymologies involves various methodological problems. In this review, this monograph will be presented, and the methodological problems and specific etymologies will be commented on in detail. The aim is to highlight its problems, also to readers in the field of general linguistics, and show what kind of issues are involved in long-range comparison in general.

2 Presentation of the book

The book starts with a short two-page preface, which is written by Michael Knüppel, professor at the Arctic Centre of the Liaocheng University and a scholar of Altaic and other so-called oriental languages, known for his positive attitude towards long-range comparison. This is followed by a short chapter titled *Yukaghir languages in time and space*, which includes the subchapters *Purposes* and *Acknowledgements*. The purpose of the book is listed as "to verify through lexical comparisons, if the Uralic and Yukaghir protolanguages are really genetically related entities" (page xi). This short chapter briefly describes further similarities between Uralic and Yukaghir, with references to Piispanen's earlier work. It is notable that here, the authors also acknowledge that some lexical similarities (to use their terminology) can be due to later loanwords from Samoyed or Ob-Ugric languages to Yukaghir, but they do not consider it plausible that all material can be explained as such.

The first numbered chapter of the book is titled "Geographic distribution", and this very short chapter (consisting of one paragraph) only discusses the distribution of Yukaghir in current times and the last few centuries without saying anything about the current historical distribution of Uralic languages. The following chapter, titled "Yukaghir language family and its internal classification", is more detailed and lists different views in earlier literature on the internal relationship of the Yukaghir family, starting with Tailleur's (1959) pioneering work. Irina Nikolaeva's different views (Nikolaeva 2008 and the unpublished dissertation from 1988) based on quantitative methods on lexical similarities are described in detail, and the presentation ends with a family tree cited from Mudrak's unpublished manuscript from 2012. This tree, according to the authors, is a simplified version of the tree Nikolaeva presented in her unpublished dissertation in 1988.[1] Other than lexical relations between the different varieties of Yukaghir are not discussed here.

The third chapter of the book describes the different views on the genealogical affiliations of Yukaghir. This detailed description of research history is quite useful and outlines recent studies in detail. The fourth chapter presents "preliminary statistical

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[1] The unpublished works by Mudrak and Nikolaeva could not be consulted by the reviewer. The bibliographic information is given as follows in the bibliography of the reviewed volume:

Mudrak, Oleg A. 2012. *Jazykovaja situacija v Severo-vostočnoj Azii po dannym srav niteľno-istoričeskogo jazykoznanija*. Manuscript. Moskva.

Nikolaeva, Irina. 1988. *Problema uralo-jukagirskix genetičeskix svjazej*. Doctoral dissertation. Moskva.

results" of the etymological comparisons that form the core of the book. The fifth chapter is devoted to the internal classification of the Uralic family. Here, only the classifications based on lexicon are listed, and the discussions of the taxonomy of the Uralic family by K. Häkkinen (1983) and Salminen (2002), as well as several other relevant studies, are completely left out.

The sixth chapter, *Reconstruction of the Uralic protolanguage and its later stages*, provides a compact description of the reconstruction of the Uralic protolanguage, starting with the 19th-century pioneering work of József Budenz (1873–1881) and ending with the recent, highly relevant publications by Mikhail Zhivlov (for example, Zhivlov 2010, 2014) and Ante Aikio (for example, Aikio 2014b, 2022).

With more than 140 pages, chapter seven, *Yukaghir-Uralic word list*, is the main part of the book. It consists of a list of assumed cognates: the Proto-Yukaghir and Proto-Uralic reconstructions are given, and the relevant reflexes in the respective daughter languages are listed based on the existing literature. References to basic works like the etymological dictionaries HDY and UEW, and fundamental papers like Janhunen (1981) are provided. In most cases, the comparisons are presented without any further discussion, but in some cases, concrete arguments are mentioned. No attempts to give Proto-Yukaghir-Uralic reconstructions are made, which is rather surprising as the aim of the book is to provide evidence in favor of the reconstruction of such a protolanguage.

After this, the eighth chapter provides ten pages of comparisons between Proto-Yukaghir and individual branches of the Uralic family. This is followed by a Yukaghir-Indo-European word list, which explores the possible cognates shared exclusively by these two families (showing that the two authors are also open to wider hypotheses connecting the Yukaghir and Uralic families with other language families of Eurasia). Chapter ten lists the Yukaghir-Uralic cognates according to semantic groups, and chapter eleven lists the phonological correspondences found in the alleged cognates. The book ends with a surprisingly short one-paragraph chapter on conclusions, followed by the abbreviations and the bibliography.

3 General criticism

It is laudable as such that most of the up-to-date literature is cited in the book (e.g., recent studies on the history of Yukaghir, Zhivlov 2022a,b, 2023a), and the presentation of the research history as such is quite detailed. However, not all the relevant information is taken into account when the etymologies are discussed, unfortunately. A reader not familiar with the history of Uralic or Yukaghir might get a false impression that things are simpler than they actually are.

A major issue in the book is that the recent criticism on Yukaghir-Uralic comparisons, especially that of Aikio (2014a), has not been taken into account. The authors should respond specifically to detailed criticism of earlier etymologies if they wish to present convincing evidence in favor of the relatedness of Uralic and Yukaghir. Aikio's article is referred to, but his cautiously presented arguments on individual etymologies are not commented on. Because of this, the etymological material contains a large number of outdated Uralic-Yukaghir comparisons that cannot be correct, as even the Uralic comparanda are not related to each other. Below in section four, I criticize some etymologies in more detail and show what kind of problems arise when earlier criticism is not properly addressed.

Another major issue is that the general criticism towards long-range comparison

is not addressed, even though this issue has been critically discussed in several articles and handbooks (such as Campbell & Poser 2008, mentioned above). In long-range comparisons, one always goes beyond the more securely reconstructed protolanguages, which themselves also already include much uncertainty. Even in the best cases, reconstructions of protolanguages remain hypothetical, and one should use specific caution to build further hypotheses that go beyond the commonly accepted reconstructions. A reader interested in the possible relationship between existing language families would gladly see how the authors of a book like this react to the methodological problems that have been frequently raised against this kind of comparison altogether. Sadly, the present book does not present such a discussion.

Serious methodological issues are involved in the Yukaghir-Uralic word list that forms the main part of the book. The listing of cognates with little commentary makes it difficult for a reader with less experience in Yukaghir or Uralic studies to follow the material and evaluate the conclusions. It also seems that the authors have not taken the effort to evaluate the reconstructions themselves: as is known for any scholar of Uralic etymology, the reconstructions in different sources of Uralic etymology are not equally valuable, but earlier sources such as the UEW involve obsolete reconstructions (see, e.g., Zhivlov 2023b: 117–118 for a more detailed description of this issue). The approach that the authors take here is very difficult to understand: instead of utilizing the up-to-date reconstruction of Proto-Uralic phonology (as described by Aikio 2022 and Zhivlov 2023b, among others), they list Proto-Uralic reconstructions that clearly reflect very different views of Uralic historical phonology. Another major issue is that competing etymologies, such as Indo-European loan etymologies for Uralic words, are rarely taken into account. In some cases, two unrelated Proto-Uralic reconstructions are listed as a cognate to the same Proto-Yukaghir word – this is an absurd approach that demonstrates that the Yukaghir-Uralic comparison of the authors is very far from the standards of traditional historical-comparative linguistics.

Because of the etymological problems, it goes without saying that the correspondences listed in the book cannot be considered reliable. The phonological correspondences are simply listed, but the conditions for the different correspondence sets are not explained properly. For example, it is claimed that word-initial Proto-Yukaghir *i- can correspond to four different Proto-Uralic vowels, but the reader has no way of knowing what the reason for this situation is.

4 Detailed criticisms of some etymologies

Here, some etymologies are analyzed in greater detail to highlight the problems mentioned above.

To start with, the similarity of the Yukaghir and Uralic words for 'name' has been observed in earlier research, such as HDY, so it is natural that this etymology is discussed on page 133 of the monograph. However, the most recent views on the history of the Yukaghir word are not taken into account here. Although the word has been considered evidence of the genealogical relationship in the past, Aikio (2014a: 72) has argued that there is nothing that would prevent considering the Yukaghir word a loan from Proto-Samoyed *nim 'name'. Blažek and Piispanen do not comment on this option in any way but simply compare Proto-Yukaghir *ńim 'name' with Uralic *nime ~ *nimi (citing both UEW's reconstruction *nime as well as the more up-to-date *nimi) as cognates. The Uralic word for 'name' is notorious also for its possible Indo-European connections, as Proto-

Uralic *nimi has often been compared with Proto-Indo-European *h₁nomn- 'name' and its descendants, both in the framework of borrowing and inheritance (see the discussion of this issue by Kallio 2015: 370). What is even more crucial is that Zhivlov (2022b: 75–77) has actually argued that the Proto-Yukaghir reconstruction *ńim cannot be correct, as the reconstruction with *m is based on one 18th old attestation only, whereas all the other Yukaghir attestations point to *w. According to Zhivlov, the Proto-Yukaghir word was rather *niw. The resemblance of the Proto-Uralic and Proto-Yukaghir words is thus less compelling, and the superficial similarity can well be accidental. This means that before this Yukaghir-Uralic comparison could be accepted, several issues should be investigated and settled. This is something that one would expect from a book like the one at hand.

The comparison of the words for 'father' on page 59 is quite similar in that it has been discussed and criticized by Aikio (2014a), but the authors do not take this into account. Furthermore, in comparing Proto-Yukaghir *eče: 'father' with Uralic *äćä 'father' as well as "*aćća / *eć(ć)a / *ić(ć)a / *ajća (to cite the reconstructions they use), the authors resort to sloppy methodology, as this shows clearly that the reconstruction of the Proto-Uralic word for 'father' is not settled at all. I cannot see how the Proto-Uralic word could be compared with any alleged external cognates at the present stage of research.

To mention another problematic instance, on page 172, Proto-Uralic *tal- 'evening' is compared with both Proto-Uralic *tälwä 'winter' and Proto-Samoyed *tʲålwə 'evening', two unrelated words that cannot be related to each other regularly within Uralic. It is difficult to understand what purpose such comparisons serve: are the authors not aware of the irregularity, or do they assume that providing a Yukaghir cognate would somehow solve the irregular relationship of these unrelated Uralic words?

Comparison with cognates in individual branches of the Uralic family in chapter eight suffers from the same problems. The authors' idea that cognates in other branches than Samoyed can also be found worth pursuing, but the approach the authors take is not very professional, as the reconstructions are not up-to-date, and in a couple of cases, reconstructions are not given at all. For example, on page 193, Proto-Yukaghir *loŋqə 'bow' is compared with South Khanty ləŋk 'dull arrow' and Mansi (pl.) laŋkt 'blunt-pointed arrow' without giving a protolanguage reconstruction that would account for the Khanty and Mansi words. If the Khanty and Mansi words are indeed related to Yukaghir, one should be able to give a Proto-Uralic reconstruction for them.

The Yukaghir-Ugric etymologies in general involve grossly outdated reconstructions. For example, on page 195, Proto-Yukaghir *talu:tə- 'to call magic words' is compared with UEW's Proto-Ugric reconstruction *tultɜ 'sorcery, witchcraft'. Even though the Ugric etymology is listed as plausible in the UEW, subsequent research has shown that this etymology is very problematic, and most probably, a Ugric word cannot be reconstructed at all, as the Hungarian word has a convincing Turkic etymology and part of the alleged Ob-Ugric cognates are not related to each other (Róna-Tas & Berta 2011: 841–846; Holopainen 2023: 133). A similar case is Proto-Yukaghir *kiče- /*kise- 'to show' ~ Proto-Ugric (in UEW's reconstruction) *kećɜ 'to follow the tracks' (p. 192). Aikio (2014b: 1–2) has shown that the Khanty cognate listed in the UEW has a more convincing Uralic etymology (it is regularly related to Finnish kutsua, North Saami gohččot, and not to Hungarian kísér as listed in the UEW), which leaves Hungarian kísér 'to follow' isolated. Needless to say, the comparison of a Proto-Yukaghir word with a Uralic word only attested in Hungarian would be less convincing, especially as it is not clear at all in this case what Pre-Hungarian word kísér would reflect (Hungarian i has several possible Proto-Uralic sources; cf. Zhivlov 2023b: 142).

5 Concluding remarks

As is evident from the criticism expressed above, the book does not yield compelling new evidence that would make the assumption of a Yukaghir-Uralic language family more compelling. The etymological material suffers from serious shortcomings, and the authors do little to reconstruct the actual Proto-Yukaghir-Uralic lexemes.

The main merit of the book is the collection of research history and references. In this sense, it can serve as a starting point for future research on Uralic and Yukaghir. However, the book does not fulfil the aims of the authors and, unfortunately, provides very few new solutions as such. The monograph can best be used by scholars familiar with Uralic or Yukaghir, but it does not serve as a good starting point for scholars of historical linguistics who want to familiarize themselves with the problem.

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