

Towards a handbook of Uralic studies

DENIS SINOR (ed.), *The Uralic languages: description, history and foreign influences*. (Handbuch der Orientalistik, VIII: I.) Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988. xx+841 pp.

Editing an international manual of a large and diffuse discipline is no enviable task. An editor has innumerable problems to cope with, some of which are scholarly, while others are of a more practical type. The necessary initial steps involve drawing up a general outline for the future work, as well as selecting a qualified team to write the contents. A handbook is not supposed to be an anachronic collection of heterogeneous papers, but a well-organized sequence of thematically-balanced and harmoniously-sized contributions, which should basically reflect a more or less uniform understanding of the state of the art. The most unpleasant practical problem which any editor inevitably encounters is how to force the contributors to keep to the size limits and time deadlines. Finally, since a handbook is normally intended to serve as an authoritative source of reference for a long time to come, the editor, in collaboration

with the publisher, has to pay special attention to the finishing stages of the work. It would seem desirable, for instance, to apply unified solutions concerning terminology and transcription.

It cannot be said that DENIS SINOR has failed on every point, but neither has he succeeded particularly well on any single detail of his editorial task. The most serious practical failure is connected with the extreme sluggishness with which his handbook was produced. It becomes clear from the preface to the volume that the idea of a new manual of Uralic studies first originated in 1974. A plan for the work was circulated soon afterwards, and the first deadlines for contributions ran out by the end of the decade. The proofs for the book are reported to have been ready by the time of the Finno-Ugrian Congress in Syktyvkar in 1985, but the complete volume is dated three years later, actually becoming available only in 1989. The editing and publishing process thus took some fifteen years, and during this time only the first volume of the originally planned two-volume set was produced. While the first volume deals

exclusively with the Uralic languages, the second volume was going to be devoted to the cultural background of the Uralic-speaking ethnic groups. In the first volume Sinor still refers to the forthcoming companion. There is no reason not to wish him another fifteen (and more) years of productive work, but it is probably a relief to everybody involved to learn that the production of the second volume has by now been abandoned.

The slow timetable has resulted in considerable differences between the contributions as far how up-to-date they are, a problem which, incidentally, has become almost chronic in the otherwise splendid and prestigious series of the *Handbuch der Orientalistik*. In the new volume, some contributions essentially represent restatements of views from the 1960s, while others reflect the level of scholarship up to 1985. There are also clear differences concerning innovativeness. While it may be prudent in a handbook to avoid radically new solutions to old problems, some innovative speculations here and there will, nevertheless, add to the value and readability of any work of this type. Sinor has allowed all too many contributors to present their formulations in an extremely traditional and unstimulating way. In very few cases do we find truly fresh ideas expressed and discussed at a level which not only conforms with the static conceptions of past research but also calls for dynamic developments in the future.

Sinor has divided his handbook into four sections entitled (1) "present-day languages", (2) "the history of individual languages", (3) "comparative Uralic linguistics", and (4) "relations with other linguistic groups". Unfortunately, the correctness of this editorial decision is highly questionable. Uralic studies is basically a field of diachronic linguistics, and therefore material on diachrony and synchrony should have been organized in a much more integrated way. A simple and ideal solution would have been to present all the major languages and/or branches of Uralic in a single sequence of panchronic descriptions, an approach which has been successfully applied in a number of similar handbooks on other linguistic families, one of the best examples being offered by the *Philologiae Turcicae Fundamenta*. Such a survey of the Uralic language material could then have been followed by another sequence of papers dealing with the general typological and areal characteristics of the family as well as the reconstruction of the deeper diachronic levels of Proto-Finno-Ugric and Proto-Uralic.

As it is, the first section in Sinor's volume contains ten separate papers by nine different authors, offering synchronic presentations and shallow-level diachronic comments on Samoyedic, Northern Sámi, Balto-Finnic, Mari, Mordvin, Komi, Udmurt, Mansi, Khanty, and Hungarian, in this rather uncommon order. It is true, Sinor uses, and makes his

contributors use, the so-called old appellations for certain languages and nationalities. Whatever is thought of the justification for this decision, it is delightful to note that there has at least been an attempt at a unified ethnonymic standard throughout the work. In view of this it appears strange that no unification has been attempted concerning the transcriptional standards. Although some kind of phonemic notation has been the aim of all contributors, the graphic variation in quoting material from the individual Uralic languages and branches is now considerable and will certainly disturb any non-Uralist reader. Perhaps even more curiously, the text-processing system used by the esteemed publisher has clearly been unable to deal satisfactorily with some of the transcriptional conventions applied by the contributors.

The branch-level diachronic descriptions, forming the second section in Sinor's volume, are seven in number and cover Samoyedic, Lappic, Balto-Finnic, Volga-Finnic, Permian, Ob-Ugric, and Hungarian. This taxonomy may represent a pragmatic decision by the editor, but it gives a somewhat distorted picture of the Uralic language family, for the existence of Volga-Finnic and Ob-Ugric as separate branches is highly controversial, while Hungarian should probably still go together with Mansi and Khanty into a Ugric branch. In fact, in his chapter on Volga-Finnic GÁBOR BERECZKI clearly denies any possibility of a Volga-Finnic genetic unity and goes on to present the dia-

chronic backgrounds of Mordvin and Mari in two separate treatments. BÉLA KÁLMÁN is more restrained in his formulation, but from his presentation of Ob-Ugric it can easily be deduced that the specific linguistic parallels between Mansi and Khanty are not genetic, but areal in origin. Although these problems are also recognized by the editor himself in his general introduction to the volume, it might have been a good idea to devote some more space to genetic taxonomy. It seems that the internal division of Uralic is becoming a major issue in Uralic linguistics, and a modern handbook should contain the basics for a future discussion.

It should have become obvious by now that a collective handbook may be viewed, in the first place, as the work of its editor. For this reason, no detailed criticism of the individual contributions to Sinor's handbook will be presented here. Some remarks may, however, be in place concerning the selection of contributors. For instance, while the synchrony and dialectology of Samoyedic is, not surprisingly, authored by PÉTER HAJDÚ, with TIBOR MIKOLA taking care of the corresponding diachrony, one cannot help asking, whether a more up-to-date (panchronic) description of Samoyedic could not have been prepared by EUGENE HELIMSKI. For most of the languages and branches, the editor seems to have been eager to involve different contributors to comment on synchrony and diachrony, and this may have been a good solution

within the framework adopted. In the case of Sámi, however, he has employed MIKKO KORHONEN for both tasks, while we find no KNUT BERGSLAND in the list of contributors. The editor may have had his reasons, but it is interesting to note that, with three exceptions, all of the contributors are either Finns or ethnic Hungarians.

One of the three exceptions is BERNARD COMRIE, who introduces the third section of Sinor's book with an elegant presentation of the "general features of the Uralic languages". This is the kind of paper of which there should have been many more in the volume. It is indeed a pity that we do not have ROBERT AUSTERLITZ among the contributors, for he could also have presented ideas of general interest concerning the areal and typological position of Uralic. We now only find ALO RAUN writing about "Proto-Uralic comparative-historical morphosyntax", with frequent references to PAAVO RAVILA's antiquated conceptions from the 1950s. The third contributor to the section on comparative Uralic studies is PEKKA SAMMALLAHTI, whose voluminous paper on "historical phonology" is, without doubt, the most significant contribution of all. A milestone in comparative Uralic linguistics, the paper presents for the first time a systematic study of the Uralic background of Ugric and Permic. Ironically, even this excellent and highly stimulating contribution reveals inadequacies in the editorial process, for both in size and contents

it remains poorly coordinated with the rest of the handbook. One can also guess that Sammallahti was late with his paper, but, then, the deadline is not really something for contributors to worry about: it is a problem for the editor.

The fourth section in the volume is perhaps the most successful one, for it contains several completely acceptable overviews pertaining to the external relations of the Uralic languages. The section is introduced by AULIS J. JOKI, who here, in one of his last papers, presents a brief summary of his life-long studies of "Kulturwörter" in Balto-Finnic. Another important contribution is that by ANDRÁS RÓNA-TAS on "Turkic influence on the Uralic languages", an insightful presentation of a complex field of linguistic and historical problems. Sinor's own chapter on "the Ural-Altai relationship" also provides stimulating reading, although it is easy to see that the author is really no linguist himself. Some other contributions are less well suited for a handbook. SÁNDOR ROT, for instance, is supposed to write about "Germanic influences", but concentrates instead on rather irrelevant operations with "lexico-semantic microsystems". One really wonders, why JORMA KOIVULEHTO was not asked to write this chapter, for, whatever is thought about some of his far-reaching etymological suggestions, he could have related the theme in a reasonable way to both diachronic phonology and ethnic history.

The many editorial shortcomings notwithstanding, the new handbook will certainly remain as a bold and significant achievement in the history of Uralic studies. Being the most up-to-date presentation of the entire field, it can be favourably compared with the earlier one-man handbooks by BJÖRN COLLINDER and PÉTER HAJDÚ. Its only predecessor as a collective work was the Russian *Osnovy finno-ugorskogo yazykoznanija*, which, however, had the serious drawback of lacking Samoyedic competence altogether. There is no doubt that a considerable period of time will elapse before Sinor's handbook gets a successor. Until then, a generation of Uralists and non-Uralists will rely on this volume for information on a variety of material and interpretational questions. In some cases they will

find the work useful and get the information they are looking for, while in many other cases they will have to find more modern sources. This is really the most acute problem of all handbooks in our time: new ideas and solutions are being presented at such a speed that no editor can catch up with the development.

In one sense, then, Sinor may have produced the ultimate handbook of Uralic studies. With recent progress in data technology in mind, it is quite possible that nobody will ever undertake the editing of another similar work in book form. Instead, the next stage may well be an electronic data network, with constant input by those who are doing the active research.

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Current issues in Jurchen studies

Jurchen studies has long been the most neglected field of Tungusology. This situation is currently changing for three reasons. Firstly, after the lengthy stagnation caused by the Cultural Revolution there is a growing interest in China in any non-Han contributions to the Chinese cultural heritage. This interest is particularly

intensively directed towards the history of the three mediaeval states of Liao, Jin and Xixia, formed around the ethnic cores of the Khitan (*Qidan*), Jurchen (*Nüzhen*) and Tangut (*Dangxiang*), respectively. Secondly, the archaeological discoveries made in the Russian Far East, are continuously increasing our