

# Stretching deep into the past: an attempt to reconstruct macrofamilies of Northern Eurasia and North America

VAJDA, EDWARD & FORTESCUE, MICHAEL. 2022. *Mid-Holocene language connections between Asia and North America* (Brill's Studies in the Indigenous Languages of the Americas 17). Leiden & Boston: Brill. 531 + XIV p.

This book has very ambitious aims: it attempts to reconstruct two macrofamilies, both involving established language families in both Eurasia and the American continent. The authors are Edward Vajda, a specialist on the Yeniseian languages of Siberia and the Na-Dene languages of North America, and Michael Fortescue, an expert on the Eskaleut languages who has, over his long career, also dealt with other language families of Northern Eurasia, such as Chukotko-Kamchatkan. Of the hypotheses presented and advocated in this book, the first is the Uralo-Siberian hypothesis, discussed by Fortescue, which attempts to derive the Uralic, Yukaghir, and Eskaleut languages from a common source. The second is the Dene-Yeniseian hypothesis, discussed by Vajda, that argues for a genealogical connection between the Yeniseian and the

Na-Dene families; the existence of the latter family itself has also been doubted in the past, as described in detail by Vajda in his part of the book. Both authors have argued in favor of these long-range relationships also in their earlier work.

The present work presents reconstructions of both Uralo-Siberian and Dene-Yeniseian lexicon, phonology, and morphology, and gives possible correlations from archaeology and genetics for the spread of these alleged language families across the Bering Strait from Eurasia to North America. The book consists of an introduction written by both authors, a part on Uralo-Siberian written by Fortescue, a part on Dene-Yeniseian written by Vajda, and a rather short concluding discussion written by both authors. It also includes appendixes of Uralo-Siberian and Dene-Yeniseian cognates; these etymologies are also discussed in the respective parts of the book. A reader familiar with other hypotheses on the alleged relationship of Uralic with other language families can also predict that this book, too, will have its problems. Indeed, it can be said that in spite of offering some

interesting new ideas, the conclusions of the book are not very convincing, at least regarding the deeper prehistory of the Uralic family.

This book *Mid-Holocene language connections between Asia and North America* deals with such large topics and so many different primary language families that it is difficult to make a detailed review of this work. It is also evident that no single scholar can master the history and reconstruction of all of the families discussed in the book. In this short review I will give a concise opinion on the book and analyze some of the main problems with it, especially regarding the Uralic reconstructions.

First of all, it is not necessarily the best idea to deal with these two hypotheses in one book, as even one of these long-range ideas would certainly be enough to fill one book. The authors address this already in the introduction, noting that the speakers of Eskaleut and Na-Dene languages in North America share DNA that results from migration across the Bering Strait some 5 000 years ago, meaning that the arrival of these language families to North America might be connected. On the other hand, the authors mention in the introduction that the archaeological evidence connected with these prehistoric migrations involves problems, although the

migration of two distinct groups would be preferable to explain the arrival of these two distinct language families.

In any case, this lengthy book (more than 500 pages) now includes a huge amount of detail squeezed into a relatively small space. For example, Chapter 2 in Fortescue's part that presents the three language families involved in his hypothesis, is thirteen pages long. Since few scholars know Eskaleut, Yukaghir, and Uralic comprehensively, a longer presentation of all of these language families would have made sense. Of course, details of the reconstruction of these primary families are presented in the parts that deal with the reconstruction of specific aspects of Uralo-Siberian, but a longer presentation of the primary reconstructions would have been a friendly service to readers.

One thing that I felt is lacking in the book is a general discussion of the problems of long-range comparison. The authors occasionally refer to Campbell and Poser (2008), who discuss the methodological problems involved in these kinds of hypotheses, but in my view these methodological problems could have been addressed at greater length in the book. In spite of the fact that some hypotheses on a genealogical connection between established language families, like the

Indo-Uralic hypothesis, enjoy some popularity among serious scholars of historical linguistics, a rather widespread view (presented by works like Campbell 2004) is that going beyond the reconstructed stages of proto-languages is a risky endeavor that usually does not yield convincing results. In a work like the present book, the methodological problems – such as the credibility of the proto-language reconstructions that are used – could have been discussed in more detail.

On the other hand, the authors are aware of the dangers involved in their attempts, and both Vajda and Fortescue repeatedly note that they do not consider their hypotheses as proven, and that the present work is an attempt to show possible genealogical relationships but does not show clear evidence that Uralo-Siberian and Dene-Yeniseian proto-languages can be reconstructed. Also, when discussing the reconstructed lexicon of these macrofamilies, the authors often acknowledge the uncertainty of many etymologies and sometimes present counterarguments to their own etymological suggestions. In some cases, however, this cautious attitude is forgotten. Fortescue states in the summary of his chapter, for example, that “The situation of Afro-Asiatic, Sino-Tibetan, or indeed of Indo-European including Hittite may after all not be

so different from that of Uralo-Siberian.” This is a strange claim, as at least the Indo-European proto-language can be very well reconstructed involving evidence from Hittite (and the other Anatolian languages), while Fortescue’s Uralo-Siberian reconstruction is, unfortunately, still quite far from that.

Regarding the use of Proto-Uralic data in the Uralo-Siberian reconstructions, several problems can be mentioned. The etymologies are taken from different sources, often from the works of Ante Aikio and Sammallahti (1988) but sometimes also from the UEW, which means that also poor etymologies are included in the discussion (such as Proto-Uralic *\*čäkV* ‘hard ice’). Also words with no clear Proto-Uralic status are sometimes used to represent the whole family. The role of Samoyed is particularly problematic in Fortescue’s etymologies: the data from Proto-Uralic and Proto-Samoyed is listed separately in the comparisons, which is difficult to understand. Sometimes a Proto-Samoyed word that has a clear Uralic etymology is presented separately as a reflex of some Uralo-Siberian word. For example, Proto-Samoyed *\*pura-* ‘drill’ is presented as a possible reflex of Proto-Uralo-Siberian *\*pura-* ‘go into’, although it is in fact a reflex of Proto-Uralic *\*pura-* ‘drill’. Fortescue

also presents a Finno-Permic *\*pura-* ‘enter’ as an uncertain cognate of this same word, also mentioning that “Samm[allahti] 1988 also has FU *\*peeri-* ‘go in’. Réd[e]i 1988 has (P)U *\*purV* ‘space behind’”.

As a general and rather crucial note, it must be said that Fortescue, although he refers to Aikio’s (2014) results on Uralic-Yukaghir lexical (loan) connections, does not seem to accept Aikio’s convincing arguments on the non-relatedness of Uralic and Yukaghir. Fortescue mentions Aikio’s criticism, but since this issue is very crucial for his hypothesis, a more detailed commentary on Aikio’s ideas might have been in order.

Regarding the reconstruction of Uralo-Siberian historical phonology, the Proto-Uralic data is again not free from errors. Fortescue does refer to recent research, such as Aikio (2022), but he does not follow the standard, commonly accepted Proto-Uralic reconstructions completely. For example, he agrees with the criticism of Reshetnikov and Zhivlov (2011) on the reconstruction of Proto-Uralic *\*j*, as reconstructing *\*a* for many etymologies that require *\*j* fits his Uralo-Siberian hypothesis better. It would have been appropriate to refer also to Zhivlov’s (2014) paper on Uralic vocalism where the reconstruction of Proto-Uralic *\*j* is clearly supported.

I hope these remarks on the Uralic data help to show that the book, unfortunately, involves similar problems as many other works that attempt to connect established language families and derive them from a more distant proto-language. Reconstructing beyond proto-languages is impossible if the reconstructed forms that are used involve problems or inconsistencies.

To end with some positive remarks, the book is clearly written and well-edited, and despite the problems with space mentioned above, it nevertheless offers a lot of detailed information on all the relevant families. The cautious approach of the authors also makes this work by Vajda and Fortescue a more interesting piece of reading than many other works dealing with similar hypotheses. Scholars interested in the problems of long-range comparison can read the book as an interesting, even if inconclusive, case study of hypotheses that attempt to reconstruct distant predecessors of established language families.

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