

The Oxford Guide to the Uralic Languages: A major albeit uneven handbook

BAKRÓ-NAGY, MARIANNE & LAAKSO, JOHANNA & SKRIBNIK, ELENA (eds.). 2022. *The Oxford Guide to the Uralic Languages*. Oxford University Press. LV + 1115 pp.

The study of Uralic languages is a vast field, with a tradition comparable and complementary to that of Indo-European linguistics, spanning over two hundred years, covering several dozen languages belonging to nine distinct branches and involving a myriad of topics and linguistic theories. It is thus appropriate that a major handbook addressing the discipline as a whole should also be a work of considerable size, both in the number of pages and in the topics covered. *The Oxford Guide to the Uralic Languages* (OGUL), edited by Marianne Bakró-Nagy, Johanna Laakso, and Elena Skribnik and comprising the contributions of 43 authors altogether (cf. the list of contributors on p. xlix) is undoubtedly a work of great value. However, it is not without flaws. In this general review, the authors wish to point out some of the major problems

with OGUL, without forgetting to mention its merits.

The handbook under review is a massive work consisting of 54 chapters, across a total of 1,170 pages, and comprising a vast number of language descriptions and other topics important for Uralistics. Because of the size of the work, it is practically impossible for one, or even three, persons to review the book comprehensively. To manage such an endeavor one ought to possess a knowledge of a number of topics, which in the present diversity of linguistics is practically impossible. Therefore, we have opted to review only parts of the handbook but focus on these with our best competence. By choosing such an approach, we hope to display the variation in the handbook without jeopardizing the reader's opinion of the work by reviewing it less than adequately. This introductory review will touch on some of the topics handled in the first chapters of OGUL, as well as more general concerns, while the subsequent reviews by individual authors will address a selection of topics in more detail.

Structure and composition

The volume is divided into three sections. The first section, titled “Introduction”, consists of six chapters that provide general information on the history of the language family (Chapters 1 and 2), as well as on the development of the sociolinguistic situation of Uralic nation-state and minority languages (Chapters 3–5). Finally, Chapter 6 is a brief account of the kinds of writing systems used for the Uralic languages. The second and largest section comprises language descriptions, arranged according to subbranches and from West to East. This section has the ambitious goal of providing an account not only of each Uralic subbranch (Saami, Finnic, Mordvin, Mari, Permic, Samoyed, and the branches of Khanty, Mansi, and Hungarian, often subsumed under Ugric), but also of each individual Uralic language. This goal is achieved quite well, although individual descriptions are missing for several lesser-known Saami languages (Ume, Pite, Akkala, and Ter), as well as Ludic in the Finnic branch and Mator in the Samoyed branch. The third section, “General issues and case studies”, addresses several topics related to synchronic descriptive phonology, morphology, and syntax, such as palatalization,

prosody, case and person marking, and word order. This section is clearly aimed at readers looking for more general information on certain characteristics in the Uralic family.

One of the most valuable contributions to Uralistics brought about adjacent to this volume is undoubtedly the extensive number of very detailed maps illustrating the areas in which the Uralic languages have been spoken during various periods in history and at present (see Rantanen et al. 2022). This collection of maps, which were based on a detailed analysis of the data and involved collaboration between many experts, is by far the highest-quality one produced to this date. They are also open access and licensed in a way that allows other researchers to use them. Although the maps are part of an independent project, their use in this volume will surely bring them much deserved attention.

Typological considerations

A clear improvement over previous handbooks in Uralistics (e.g. Sinor 1988; Abondolo 1998) is the adoption of a typological perspective. Even though typologically oriented research has been gaining ground among Uralists (as mentioned also by the editors, Chapter 40), there

have not been any collections of general typological features found in Uralic languages. The typological orientation is evident in many chapters on individual languages, where typologically interesting phenomena are brought up more than in previous works (e.g. the secondary declension of Mordvin languages on pages 401–402, and discussion of differential object marking, or DOM, in many chapters).

The clearest manifestation of this tendency is, however, Part III of this handbook that is dedicated to general issues and case studies of Uralic languages. This approach to Uralistics was not entertained in the previous handbooks, as is evident for example from the subtitle of Sinor (1988): “Description, history and foreign influences”. The section comprises in total 14 chapters on various phenomena in Uralic languages, ranging from phonology to clause combining. Some chapters consider from a typological perspective features typical of Uralic languages (e.g. consonant gradation, case, adpositions), while others look at topics that have gained general typological interest from the point of view of Uralic languages (e.g. TAM and evidentials, negation, nominal predication). Such a section is clearly warranted, as the typological data on Uralic languages tend to be more

or less inaccurate. For example, the analysis of nominal predication in Erzya (Stassen 2013) clearly shows a misunderstanding of the phenomenon in the Mordvin languages, not to mention that the analysis is based on a grammar that is over 150 years old, namely that of Wiedemann (1865).

On the other hand, a section on typologically oriented research can function as a showcase for Uralicists about the current diversity of research. It is certainly needed if the editors of the handbook thought that an introductory chapter is necessary for this part, when no such introduction was deemed necessary for Parts I and II that contain the historical and descriptive chapters. All in all, the typological orientation makes a fine addition to any Uralistics handbook and demonstrates alongside the historically and descriptively oriented research the full coverage of modern-day Uralistics research.

However, despite the large number of typological case studies, some very important issues related to the structure of Uralic languages, like the emergence/expansion of vowel harmony in individual subbranches, seem to be insufficiently addressed in the book whereas some of the issues addressed, like palatalization in Uralic, appear somewhat banal. It also appears

that the typological perspective has overridden considerations of areal and contact linguistics – there is not a single chapter devoted to either the different contact areas of Uralic (the Baltic, Middle Volga, Western Siberia, and the Sayan) or the contacts between Proto-Uralic or its daughter languages with neighboring languages and language families like Indo-European, Turkic, or Tungusic.

Terminology and transcription

As the editors expressed an aspiration to employ transparent and idiosyncrasy-free terminology (Introduction, pp. liv–lv), we dare to turn our focus now to this daunting topic. There is a problem in the handbook that is persistent in Uralistics in general, and that is the use of terminology for grammatical cases. Cases are named and then established names circulate from publication to publication without proper critical assessment. The most blatant example is the use of terms *inessive*, *elative*, and *illative* in the description of languages like the Mordvin or Permic languages, which do not make a distinction between inner and outer location in their case systems (for the meanings of these terms, cf. Creissels 2009; Haspelmath 2009). The problem with this practice is that terms

are not only empty name tags, they have their own connotations and implications, which can lead researchers astray if they are unaccustomed to the conventions of a certain field such as Uralistics. We are not saying here that changing the tradition should necessarily be the job of a handbook like the one under review here, as such volumes are usually meant to disseminate established views. However, this is a matter that should not be dismissed lightly, as conflicting use of terminology can result in problems and misinterpretations in comparative and typological work based on data discussed in the handbook.

The same applies, to some extent, to the terminology used for tenses, modals, and non-finite verb forms. How semantically similar are e.g. the Mordvin and Permic conditionals, and are they comparable with conditionals attested crosslinguistically? The terminology used for semantically more general categories like possessive or personal inflection does not suffer from this.

As explicitly stated (p. xlv), a choice was made to use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) for the transcription of linguistic material instead of the well-established Finno-Ugric Transcription (FUT) traditionally used in Uralic linguistics. This is a considerable

break from tradition, and by no means an unproblematic one. First of all, the IPA, as a *phonetic* alphabet in the strict sense, should not be used to present material detached from an actual speech situation or utterance to which phonetic notation can be applied. Using it for phonemic (i.e. abstracted) notation can create needless confusion.

It is also notable that in OGUL, the IPA is used not solely for languages without an official orthography but also for languages that employ a Cyrillic orthography instead of Latin. While this choice is understandable from the point of view of a potential reader who cannot be expected to master the Cyrillic alphabet, it does lead to a situation where major Uralic languages that all happen to use the Latin alphabet, are consistently presented using their official orthography, while a large proportion of minor Uralic languages get the IPA treatment, creating the impression that their official orthographies are somehow less important. An attempt has been made to remedy this by using the official orthography side-by-side with IPA in the transcription of examples, which, while perhaps being the least bad choice, often leads to up to three different orthographies being used in the same chapter for the same language, if there are examples quoted

using a third kind of orthography, as is the case for e.g. Tundra Nenets (cf. the review of the chapters on Samoyed for a more detailed discussion).

The transcription choice seems even more illogical considering that there is an entire chapter (Chapter 6, pp. 91–100) by Johanna Laakso dedicated to the development of orthographies for Uralic minority languages, where the Finno-Ugric Transcription is also briefly presented. One could ask, then, whether FUT could have been used in the rest of the volume as well, where needed, instead of making a divorce from tradition for the sake of a perceived universality.

The history of the Uralic language family

Historical linguistics has traditionally occupied a central position in the field of Finno-Ugric studies, and it is not forgotten in this volume, either. The first section of OGUL begins with an introduction written by Ante Aikio to Proto-Uralic, the oldest reconstructible ancestor of all Uralic languages (pp. 4–27). This is followed by a chapter by Janne Saarikivi that focuses on the areal and cultural divergence of Proto-Uralic and each of its subfamilies (pp. 28–58).

The decision to divide the historical description into two parts that could be described as language-internal and language-external, is an appropriate one, even though there is some overlap between the disciplines. Due to the historical prominence of diachronic linguistics in the field of Uralic studies, these chapters are a very valuable addition to OGUL.

The introductory chapter by Aikio is a well-balanced, compact, up to date, and generally intelligibly written description of the Uralic proto-language as it is reconstructed by most contemporary scholars. The chapter works as a comprehensive introduction to the historical phonology, morphology, and syntax of Proto-Uralic for any reader familiar with the most basic principles of historical linguistics, but it can be used as a handy reference by the more experienced researcher as well. Aikio's vast knowledge of Uralic history, accumulated over two decades of research, is reflected clearly in this chapter, though he has not forgotten to include some differing opinions as well. In addition to historical phonology and lexicon, the most classical topics of Uralic historical research, the chapter also includes a treatment of the historical morphology of Proto-Uralic and syntax.

The second chapter by Janne Saarikivi provides an account of the external history (i.e. language geography, ethnohistory, and dating) of the Uralic languages. The chapter focuses on linguistic material, combining evidence from lexical loans, dialect geography and variation, toponymy, and lexical semantics. In his survey of the histories of individual branches, Saarikivi manages to focus on the most central findings, providing a compact introduction to what can be often a messy field of conflicting interpretations of complex evidence. The treatment of toponyms when discussing the location of each branch can be considered especially valuable, since toponymic research in Uralistics has previously been largely ignored outside of specialist circles.

Unfortunately, the section on Samoyed is missing some important references, most notably on the toponym *Yenisei* which forms an onomastic focal point in Samoyed language history (cf. Janhunen 2017), as well as Helimski's papers on general Samoyed ethnohistory (1989) and Enets onomastics (1981), both of which have been reprinted in Helimski (2000). Considering the overall scarcity of information widely available on Samoyed, drawing on the aforementioned

publications would have made a vital addition to the discussion. It would have been preferable to also include Janhunen's rather stark critique of the proposed contacts between Proto-Samoyed and Proto-Tungusic, since it does not focus on some minor details, but rather Janhunen maintains that the locating of Proto-Tungusic in fact makes any direct contact between it and Proto-Samoyed impossible (Janhunen 2013).

Especially welcome is the updated account of Uralic historical taxonomy and the discussion that has led scholars to gradually question the "traditional" binary-branching model of the Uralic family tree. Although the traditional model has been increasingly contested since at least the 1990s (cf. Salminen 1989; Häkkinen 2009; see also Grünthal et al. 2022: 491–492), that model which separates the Samoyed branch from the so-called Finno-Ugric and postulates a series of chronologically ordered branchings for the latter, was included in previous introductory volumes (i.e. Abondolo 1998)

and taught as the canonical view of Uralic historical taxonomy well into the 2010s. Thus, Aikio's rather agnostic and careful account of the branching of Proto-Uralic (pp. 3–4) represents an improvement over many previous treatises that have quite blindly followed the traditional stance. The debate is still ongoing, so its inclusion in the volume also fulfills the authors' goal of addressing contemporary topics in Uralistics.

To conclude, we would like to state that *The Oxford Guide to the Uralic Languages* is a work of great scope and significance. A project of this magnitude undoubtedly required an immense effort on the part of everyone involved, and the dedication of the authors and editors is apparent in many ways. With a work of such ambition, it would be a miracle were all expectations even met in the first place. By pointing out some of the most glaring issues involved with the volume, we hope to have further underscored the significance of this work for the field of Uralistics as a whole.

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