

Hunting for the Uralic accusative(s)

HONTI, LÁSZLÓ. 2022. *Az ősi uráli tárgyragok története és vesszőfutása: Accusatum et expulsum*. Budapest: Tinta Könyvkiadó. 283 pp.

Professor László Honti's career has spanned several decades and despite turning 80 this year, he has not slowed down: in the 2010s and 2020s Honti has – in addition to many articles – produced several monographs, the most recent of which, *Az ősi uráli tárgyragok története és vesszőfutása: Accusatum et expulsum*, is a scrutiny of the reconstruction of the Proto-Uralic accusative. The book is a thought-provoking monograph rich in detail, and in addition to the reconstruction of the accusative of Proto-Uralic, many other issues of historical-comparative Uralic morphophonology and morphosyntax are touched upon. Also, many questions of shallower time-depth, like the development and uses of various cases in individual Ob-Ugric and Samoyedic languages, are discussed. It is impossible to address all the points of the book in one review, so here I will give a brief

overview of the book and comment on its general conclusions as well as some details and claims that leave some problems open. Honti's book has also been recently reviewed by Maticsák (2022), who gives a rather detailed overview of the contents of the book and agrees with Honti's conclusions. I shall concentrate on some more problematic details here. I want to stress that my criticism of most of these points here does not mean that Honti's conclusions cannot be correct or plausible; his main points are quite well-argued. Nevertheless, for some problems discussed, different solutions are available. As is well known to specialists in Uralic studies, the historical-comparative reconstruction of Uralic morphology and morphosyntax is complicated and cannot be said to be on the same advanced level as that of phonology (cf. Aikio 2022: 3), and regarding the reconstruction and history of the object cases in various Uralic languages and in Proto-Uralic, much work remains to be done.

The research problem of the monograph, the reconstruction of the accusative in nominal and

pronominal paradigms in Proto-Uralic, is a question that has been frequently discussed in Uralic linguistics, but a consensus is lacking. Although the reconstruction of the *m accusative is universally accepted, the accusative of the personal pronouns in Proto-Uralic is a disputed issue. The issue has been discussed by, among others, Salminen (1997: 131) and Janhunen (2020: 387). In his recent handbook chapter on Proto-Uralic, Aikio (2022: 13) notes suppletive oblique case forms of personal pronouns in Hungarian, Mansi, and Samoyedic with diverse backgrounds, but he does not comment on the reconstruction in more detail.

The book opens with an introduction that involves an overview of research history and discussion of Proto-Uralic case system and numeral inflection (here not all the reconstructed cases are dealt with, however, despite the Proto-Uralic case system receiving a subchapter of its own). This is followed by the main part of the book that consists of the presentation and discussion of accusatives and other cases, and their use and origins in different branches of Uralic (Finnic, Saami, Mordvin, Mari, Permic, Ob-Ugric, Samoyedic). The inflection of personal pronouns is also presented in detail. The history of various Uralic cases as morphemes receives much attention; the problems in the

reconstruction of the function of the plural suffix *j in Proto-Uralic is discussed at length. Also, the origin and development of the objective conjugation in the Uralic languages is addressed. Many of these questions have been discussed by Honti in previous works and he refers copiously to his earlier research results, in some case also modifying some of his previous views.

Honti also discusses the uncertainties in the reconstruction of the accusative and other cases in the plural and dual in Proto-Uralic. The Proto-Uralic suffix *j receives a detailed treatment. This *j is reflected in Saami as the marker of the plural genitive and also as part of the plural suffix of other cases, and in Samoyedic as the plural accusative, and these are commonly assumed to represent Proto-Uralic inheritance, also reflected as the *i plural marker of the oblique cases in Finnic. (The Hungarian *i* in possessive plural forms like *fiai* ‘his/her sons’ is often assumed to reflect the same Proto-Uralic suffix – see Abondolo 1998: 21; Aikio 2022: 15 – but Honti does not discuss this possible Hungarian reflex.) The reconstruction of the exact function of this *j in Proto-Uralic has a long history; Salminen (1996: 27) assumed simply that *j was the marker of the oblique plural case form in Proto-Uralic. Honti concludes

here that *j was originally probably a collective suffix (*gyűjtőnévképző*).

Regarding Honti's detailed presentation of the accusatives and object cases in the various Uralic languages, one can note that in what detail the different "languages" or "dialects" are discussed varies. For example, South Estonian is not discussed separately in detail, despite its taxonomic importance, and the Saami languages are called "dialects" (*lapp nyelvjárások*) contrary to modern views and conventions in Uralic linguistics. Many Saami languages are discussed, but sometimes the naming of the languages is misleading and also varies. We find "Eastern Saami/Lapp" (*keleti lapp*), and North Saami is sometimes "northern Saami" (*északi lapp*), sometimes "Norwegian Saami" (*norvég lapp*) – this reflects the naming in different sources that are cited, but a non-specialist reader interested in, for example, the origin of the Hungarian accusative suffix might be easily led astray. The presentation of the Samoyedic languages is fraught with similar issues: Nenets, Enets, and Selkup are dealt with as single languages, and the forms in different "dialects" (such as Tundra Nenets and Forest Nenets) are not presented but simply "Nenets" paradigms are given (some Forest Nenets phenomena are briefly discussed

later in the book but mostly Honti speaks of simply *jurák* (Nenets), *jenyiszei* (Enets), etc.).

The higher levels of taxonomy, such as Proto-Ugric, are commented on to some extent, but there is no overview of the reconstruction of the accusative or other cases for these intermediary proto-languages. However, Honti seems to operate according to the traditional model of Uralic taxonomy, and also North and South Samoyedic exist as taxonomic units in Honti's treatment, despite the fact that these taxonomic nodes are disputed, cf. Janhunen (1998: 458–459).

The monograph ends in a rather brief chapter presenting conclusions, followed by a summary in German and the bibliography. The German summary presents the main contents and conclusions of the book in very informative way, but the concluding chapter does not really give a proper overview and one needs to browse through the book if one wants to know Honti's main arguments. The debated issues on the reconstruction of the Proto-Uralic accusative as well as the numeral markers are discussed in more detail in the first chapter of the book.

The basic conclusion that Honti reaches is that in Proto-Uralic, nouns and personal pronouns had different endings for accusatives, and

languages like Finnish and Khanty that show a similar *t accusative in personal pronouns reflect an archaic feature retained from Proto-Uralic. Honti also concludes that traces of the *t accusative are found in Mansi, Forest Nenets, and Selkup. The Hungarian *t*-accusative, for which several different origins have been suggested, is according to Honti generalized from the pronominal accusative. It is interesting that Zhivlov (2023: 153–154) has suggested a similar view very recently and this possibility is also mentioned by Abondolo & Valijärvi (2023: 208–209) in the same handbook (this book was published around the same time as Honti's book, so mutual references in either direction would have been impossible). Honti also assumes that in addition to the personal pronouns, *t might have been used as the accusative of animate nouns in Proto-Uralic (according to Honti, the *t* accusatives used of persons like *Kallet*, *Kertut* attested in some Finnish dialects might be relicts of such use).

Although the structure of the book is clear and it is easy to find information, there is unfortunately one major typesetting error: pages 61–62 are printed twice. Moreover, there are a couple of spelling mistakes. Here I will list points of criticism concerning the contents of the book, in addition to the issue of

glottonyms and taxonomical units mentioned above.

Although Honti describes the research history in detail and also quotes the views of many earlier works (including also the most important recent resources), some relevant recent references related to the reconstruction of the Uralic case system are missing (Salminen 1996; Ylikoski 2016; Janhunen 2020). This means that some counterarguments to Honti's claims are not taken into account.

A notable issue concerning the conclusions drawn by Honti, the reconstruction of nominal *m and pronominal *t accusatives for Proto-Uralic, is the origin of the inflection of personal pronouns in Hungarian and Mansi, namely the use of possessive suffixes in the accusative forms (*engēm* 'me (1SG.ACC)', *tégéd* 'you (2SG.ACC)'). Honti discusses the system in Hungarian and Mansi, but he assumes that the system might go back to Proto-Ugric, not considering the possibility that this might have been the Uralic system. As Honti refers to Helimski's (1982) discussion of the background of the Hungarian and Mansi pronouns, it would have been good to analyze the possibility of a Proto-Uralic origin of this system, especially as this idea has been supported by Salminen (1996: 26), a publication which is missing from Honti's references.

Honti does not comment on the idea expressed by Helimski that the suppletive inflection of personal pronouns in Samoyedic with possessive suffixes reflects a similar Proto-Uralic system. I am not claiming here that the idea of Helimski and Salminen is correct, but this issue should be addressed in more detail before the conclusions on the pronominal *t accusative can be accepted.

The issue of the origin of the *g* in Hungarian *engëm, tégëd* is a major, debated issue (see for example Abondolo 1998; Abondolo & Valijärvi 2023) and it is also discussed by Honti. Helimski (1982: 95–97) observes a similar system in Samoyedic and assumes that Proto-Uralic *ke ~ *ki is reflected by Hungarian *g* and the form *ket (in the modern Proto-Samoyedic reconstruction) appearing in the suppletive paradigm of the Northern Samoyedic personal pronouns. It remains unclear why Honti does not accept the common origin of Hu *g* and the Samoyed element with *k. Honti refers to Aikio's (2006) idea that the element *ket found in the Samoyed forms is a reflex of Proto-Uralic *keti 'skin' that has cognates in Finnic, Saami, and Mordvin. Honti discusses possible Permic and Ob-Ugric connections of this Proto-Uralic noun, but these are not very convincing in the light of historical

phonology; it is also difficult to understand Honti's comment that he has established a "new" Proto-Uralic word family when his etymology includes the same cognates already mentioned by Aikio.

In his 2021 paper Honti discussed the issue of Proto-Uralic *keti in more detail and did not categorically rule out the possibility that Hungarian *g* might be in some way related to this Proto-Uralic word. There are no major phonological problems in Helimski's explanation of *engëm* from *ämVɲkVm or the like, but if the *kV element is related to *keti, the loss of *t would be admittedly problematic and would require more phonological research. This issue has not been, to my knowledge, properly addressed anywhere.

However, regardless of the origin of the *g and its relation to Samoyed *ke(t), it is true that Hungarian, Mansi, and Samoyedic do show a similar pattern of inflection of the personal pronouns. This distribution is obviously limited, but not more limited than the spread of the *t accusative, and it should be considered possible that this system reflects the most archaic Proto-Uralic situation, as has been argued by, for example, Salminen (1996: 26). It is true that in this case the origin of the *t accusative in Finnic and Khanty (as well as Hungarian)

would remain obscure. Obviously the situation with Hungarian first and second personal plural accusatives *minket*, *titeket* with the compulsory *-t* accusative (contrary to *engëm*, *tégëd* with only possessive suffixes) is a problem in this explanation – the issue is not properly addressed by Helimski (1982).

A related issue concerns the reconstruction of Proto-Uralic 2SG possessive suffixes, where Hungarian shows a voiced *d*, similarly as with the ending of the objective conjugation. The Proto-Uralic accusative 2SG ending is reconstructed as **mti* (see, for example, Janhunen 1982; Salminen 1996), which would regularly yield Hu *d*, but Honti prefers to explain the Hungarian *d* through sporadic voicing from **-t*. The origin of the Hungarian *d* is a debated issue, but the possibility to derive it from **mti* has gained some support (see Abondolo 1998). Honti's reluctance to accept **mti* > *d* is due to the morpheme order in Ugric: as the Ugric languages show predominantly a morpheme order of case suffix (Cx) + possessive suffix (Px), Honti argues that the accusative suffix **m* could not have preceded the possessive suffix in Pre-Hungarian. The “Finnish-type” morpheme order Px+Cx for Proto-Uralic has been supported by several scholars (for example, Nichols 1973: 234–235;

Janhunen 1982: 33; 2020: 388; Raun 1988: 561; Aikio 2022: 16) but Honti has argued also earlier (see e.g. Honti 2009) that Proto-Uralic had both orders, like Mari and Permian do today, and the unitary system in branches like Finnic is an innovation. His arguments are not entirely clear, for example Honti (2009: 174) notes that some Hungarian positions showing the “old” morpheme order show only “veraltete Kasussuffixe”, but it is difficult to understand why this would be a valid counterargument to assume the Px+Cx order for Proto-Ugric and Proto-Uralic. It would be difficult to explain the lack of traces of the “Ugric” type of order in Finnic, Saami, etc. if Proto-Uralic had both systems. Even if Proto-Uralic would have had both systems, as Honti claims, in the system of possessive declination the accusative marker would have in all probability come first, as an ending like 2SG **mti* can be reliably reconstructed based on comparative evidence, so the idea that *d* in the Hungarian 2SG endings reflects a cluster **mt* is totally acceptable.

Also, Honti addresses the origin of the Proto-Samoyed coaffix **kə* in his discussion of the history of the Samoyedic case system. It is true that there seems to be no commonly accepted origin of the Samoyedic coaffix (for example, Janhunen's

1998 presentation of Samoyedic does not comment on the issue). However, Mikola's old proposal has been criticized in more recent research and some alternatives have been suggested. Honti assumes that *kə could be derived from Proto-Samoyedic *kəj 'side', but he does not provide phonological arguments to back up this idea.

It should be noted that Ylikoski (2016: 47–48, 61) has criticized the lative origin and suggests that the possible connection of the Samoyedic coaffix with the Mari postposition *gâč* should be investigated. It is also good to note here that Gusev (2018) has also criticized the lative explanation in a conference presentation that is available online. He assumes a derivational origin of both Samoyedic coaffixes *-kə and *-ntə.

Although the lative explanation is indeed problematic, Honti's new

explanation lacks phonological details; the difference in vocalism cannot be easily explained and the solution must be considered rather hypothetical. Of course, also Ylikoski's recent remark on the possible connection of the Samoyedic coaffix and the Mari postposition is an idea that also needs further phonological scrutiny. The origin of the Samoyedic coaffix remains unclear for the time being.

Despite these points of criticism, Honti's monograph is a major contribution to historical-comparative Uralic morphology and his ideas and conclusions will certainly inspire and provoke discussion on many details of Uralic case system – and yielding further discussion is the main task of research. Honti presents interesting conclusions and future work on Uralic case systems will show whether he was on the right track.

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