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Sergej Starostin (1953-2005)

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This obituary is dedicated to the memory of Sergej Starostin (1953-2005).

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On Friday evening September 30, 2005, soon after finishing his lectures, Professor Sergej Anatol'evič Starostin passed away at the Russian State University of the Humanities in Moscow, at the age of 52. It was a sudden death, caused by coronary thrombosis. With due respect for the outstanding scholar he was, his ashes were interred on October 4, on Donskoe kladbišče, Moscow's most graceful cemetery. He is survived by his widow, Dr. Natalja Starostina, née Čalisova, and his sons Dr. George Starostin and Mr. Anatolij Starostin.

Sergej Starostin was born on March 24, 1953 in Moscow. After attending secondary school, he studied linguistics at the Moscow State University, where he obtained a Bachelor's degree in 1975. In 1978 he received a Master's degree in Linguistics from the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow, and in the following year he became *kandidat nauk* in Linguistics at the same institute. His candidate dissertation, comparable to a Ph.D. thesis, was titled *Rekonstrukcija drevnekitajskoj fonologičeskoj sistemy*. It served as the basis for his reference work on the reconstruction of Old Chinese phonology, published a decade later, in 1989.

Starostin worked as a research fellow at the department of Languages of the Oriental Institute from 1979 until 1985, when he became a senior researcher. Since 1987 he lectured in Comparative Linguistics at Moscow State University, at the department of Structural and Computational Linguistics. In 1988 he joined the editorial board of the journal *Voprosy jazykoznanija*. His doctorate in Linguistics, the Russian equivalent of habilitation, took place at the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow, in 1992. He earned this degree after the publication of *Altajskaja problema i proisxoždenie japonskogo jazyka* in 1991. In the year of his doctorate, he was appointed chair for Comparative Linguistics and Ancient Languages at the Russian State University of the Humanities in Moscow and he became a member of the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences.

In 1997, at the age of 44, Starostin was elected a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, a honour unparalleled by other scholars of the same age and of similar specialisation. He frequently gave guest lectures at the department of comparative linguistics at Leiden University in the Netherlands, where he took also part as a visiting scholar in Prof. Dr. F. Kortlandt's Spinoza Prize project in 1999. Since 2001 Starostin led an international research project on the linguistic prehistory of humanity, initiated by Nobel price winner Prof. Dr. M. Gell-Mann and coordinated by the Santa Fe Institute. Four months before his decease, on June 7, 2005, he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Leiden under promotorship of Prof. Dr. A. Lubotsky.

Though this obituary is not the adequate place for an evaluation of Starostin's prolific scholarly work, a brief summary of his major achievements along with a list of selected publications may be allowed. We remember Starostin as the leading figure of the Moscow school of comparative linguistics. This school takes an approach to comparative linguistics that somewhat differs from the traditional attitude. Although the Moscow school adheres to the same methodological criteria of regularity of sound change, they work on the problem of long-range genetic hypotheses like Nostratic and Dene-Caucasian. For Starostin's own description of the Moscow school and of the methodology of long-range comparison, I refer to respectively article 1995c and 1999b in the list of selected publications below.

The difference between Moscow and mainstream linguistics is not a methodological, but rather a practical one. Working at deeper time-depths, earlier than the 5th millennium B.C., there is a heavy reliance on reconstruction. The emphasis is on data-processing because the amount of data increases exponentially when a new linguistic family is added to a macro-family. This explains Starostin's particular interest in modern computer technology. For the development and management of a growing collection of etymological databases, Starostin developed a software package "Starling" (<http://starling.rinet.ru>). Masterminding the Tower of Babel project, he and his team compiled a hierarchical system of etymological databases and made them accessible through the Internet for anyone in the field. The databases are freely browseable on the Web and include Altaic, Dravidian, Caucasian, Yeni-seian, Sino-Tibetan, Indo-European, Austro-Asiatic, Chukchi-Kamchatkan, and Se-mitic. Contrary to

traditional comparative practice, the Moscow school relies on the application of statistical methods for subgrouping and for linguistic dating. A contribution to the field of lexicostatistics is Starostin's revision of Swadesh's glotto-chronological equation, described in an article written in Russian (1989b) and translated into English (1999a and 2000).

In 1984 Starostin proposed the Sino-Caucasian macro-family, comprising the North Caucasian, Sino-Tibetan and Yeniseian language families. Some years later, in 1988, his colleague Nikolaev argued for a relationship between Starostin's Sino-Caucasian and the Na-Dene languages of North America. After this, the term Dene-Caucasian came into use to describe the expanded macro-family. While Starostin insisted on the preliminary nature of the comparison, he considered wider connections between Nostratic and Sino-Caucasian (1989c).

Regardless of our appreciation of long-distance genetic comparison like Nostratic and Dene-Caucasian and regardless of our confidence in the application of statistical methods, we cannot but acknowledge Starostin's outstanding contributions to historical linguistics at shallower time-depths: North Caucasian, Old Chinese, Sino-Tibetan, and Altaic.

Since the beginning of the eighties Starostin and Nikolaev were co-operating on a massive comparative dictionary of the North Caucasian languages. Together they took part in linguistic expeditions to the Caucasus under direction of Kibrik. For political reasons, the North Caucasian etymological dictionary could not be published until 1994. And so, it was preceded by "Hurro-Urartian as an East Caucasian Language", co-authored by D'jakonov and published in Munich, in 1986.

Being a productive year, 1989 saw the publication of Starostin's monograph on the reconstruction of the Old Chinese phonological system. It is a revision of his doctoral dissertation (1979), published in Russian. Along with Baxter's handbook of Old Chinese phonology (1992), the book is used throughout linguistic literature as the dominant reference work on Old Chinese reconstruction. This work further provided an important source for the comparative dictionary of Sino-Tibetan languages, published in 1996 in co-authorship with Pejros.

For the readership of *Turkic Languages* Sergej Starostin will probably be best remembered for his contributions in relation to the Altaic hypothesis, including Japanese and Korean. A new stage in comparative Altaic studies is represented by his 1991 monograph on the Altaic problem and the origin of the Japanese language. The book is written in Russian, but translated into Korean under the title "*Alt'ai pigyo yŏngu*" in 1996. Starostin contributes hundreds of lexical comparisons of Turkic, Mongolic, Tungusic, Korean and Japanese not available in the earlier literature. In cooperation with a team of scholars, among whom Dybo and Mudrak, an Altaic database is made accessible via the Internet. The accumulation of etymologies in the database results in the monumental three volumes "Etymological Dictionary of the Altaic Languages" published in 2003. The dictionary presents 2800 Altaic etymologies and opens many new data for further consideration, refinement or refutation.

As a doctoral student at the department of comparative linguistics in Leiden, I was privileged to be mentored by professor Starostin. During his research funded by the Spinoza Prize project in 1999, we shared the same office. Later, in 2000, I was invited to his *alma mater* in Moscow, where I was so fortunate to attend some of the Altaic sessions in company of Dybo, Mudrak, Gruntov, Glumov and many other linguists who occasionally dropped by to contribute their ideas. It was in May and, although quite cold for the time of the year, the central heating in the institute had been turned off. Beating the cold with hats, caps, scarfs and traditional Russian drinks, we all gathered around one computer, discussing the material of the Altaic database. People with dictionaries opened on their laps, people brainstorming, people suggesting new etymologies and criticizing old ones. I was caught by the enthusiasm and impressed by the open atmosphere, free for anyone to enter the office or the debate. Sergej Starostin was a strong and inspiring man. He was a team worker. He would listen carefully to his colleagues' criticism. His counter-argumentation was well-built, vigorous and merciless, but it would never cross the border of respect. For me he will always be the man, who after a heated discussion, sighs, nods his head, proceeds to the balcony, lights a cigarette and then, disarmingly, starts a cosy chat about the weather. All in smiles.

List of selected publications

1984. Gipoteza o genetičeskix svjazjax sino-tibetskix jazykov s enisejskimi i severnokavkazskimi jazykami. In: *Lingvističeskaja rekonstrukcija i drevnejšaja istorija Vostoka*. 19-38.
- 1986a. [with I. M. D'jakonov] *Hurro-Urartian as an East Caucasian Language*. München: Kitzinger.
- 1986b. Problema genetičeskoj obščnosti altajskix jazykov. In: *Istoriko-kul'turnye kontakty narodov altajskoj jazykovoj obščnosti. Tezisy XXIX sessii PIAC* 2.104-12.
- 1989a. *Rekonstrukcija drevnekitajskoj fonologičeskoj sistemy*. Moscow: Nauka.
- 1989b. Sravitel'no-istoričeskoe jazykoznanie i leksikostatistika. In: *Lingvističeskaja rekonstrukcija i drevnejšaja istorija Vostoka*. 3-39.
- 1989c. Nostratic and Sino-Caucasian. In: *Explorations in language macrofamilies*. 42-67.
1991. *Altajskaja problema i proisxoždenie japonskogo jazyka*. Moscow: Nauka.
1994. [with S. L. Nikolaev] *A North Caucasian etymological dictionary*. Moscow: Asterisk Publishers.
- 1995a. Old Chinese basic vocabulary: a historical perspective. In: *The ancestry of Chinese language. Journal of Chinese Linguistics*. (Monograph series 8.) 292-404.
- 1995b. On vowel length and prosody in Altaic languages. *Moskovskij lingvističeskij žurnal* 1: 191-235.
- 1995c. O Moskovskoj škole sravnitel'nogo jazykoznanija. *Moskovskij lingvističeskij žurnal* 1: 10-13.
- 1996a. [with I. I. Pejros] *A comparative dictionary of Sino-Tibetan languages*. Melbourne: University Press.
- 1996b. *Alt'ai pigyo yōngu*. Seoul: Tosō ch'ulp'an.
- 1996c. Vokalizm altajskix jazykov. In: *90 let N. A. Baskakovu*. 197-209.

1997. On the “consonant splits” in Japanese. In: *Indo-European, Nostratic, and beyond: Festschrift for Vitalij V. Shevoroshkin. Journal of Indo-European Studies*. (Monograph series 22.) 326-342.
- 1999a. Comparative-historical linguistics and lexicostatistics. In: *Historical Linguistics and Lexicostatistics*, 3-50.
- 1999b. Methodology of long-range comparison. In: *Historical Linguistics and Lexicostatistics*, 61-67.
- 1999c. Subgrouping of Nostratic: comments on Aharon Dolgopolsky’s “The Nostratic macrofamily and linguistic paleontology”. In: *Nostratic: Examining a linguistic macrofamily*. 137-156.
- 1999d. The problem of genetic relationship and classification of Caucasian languages: basic vocabulary. In: *Studies in Caucasian Linguistics*, 79-95.
2000. Comparative-historical linguistics and lexicostatistics. In: *Time Depth in Historical Linguistics*, 223-259.
2002. Nostratic stops revisited. In: *Languages and their speakers in Ancient Eurasia*, 3-7.
- 2003a. [with A.V. Dybo & O. A. Mudrak] *Etymological dictionary of the Altaic languages*. Brill: Leiden.
- 2003b. [with A. Lubotsky] Turkic and Chinese loan words in Tocharian. In: Bauer, Brigitte L. M. & Pinault, Georges J. (eds.) *Language in time and space. A Festschrift for Werner Winter on the occasion of his 80th birthday*. (Trends in linguistics: Studies and monographs 144.) Berlin: de Gruyter. 257-269.