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Michael Fortescue is well known among typologists for his grammar of West Greenlandic (1984) and his typological and comparative work on several Arctic languages. The book under review constitutes the culmination of decades of painstaking research on the languages of the Northern circumpolar region. The book is very rich in data, ideas, and analyses. Its basic thesis is that the four linguistic families Uralic, Yukagir, Chukotko-Kamchatkan, and Eskimo-Aleut are somehow historically related. Archaeological, genetic, and linguistic data are presented to defend this thesis. The linguistic argumentation builds on lexical and grammatical similarities between these families, the latter both in the form of grammatical markers and typological characteristics.

The four language families mentioned together make up what Fortescue calls the Uralo-Siberian languages. Fortescue is somewhat ambiguous whether one should consider this grouping a genetic grouping (family, stock) or not. He prefers to call it a “mesh”, which is his term for a set of languages that share part of their histories, either because they are genetically related or because they have influenced one another in other ways, for instance because they were spoken in adjacent areas or by bilingual groups. This concept thus combines genetic and areal features.

This “mesh” is discussed in a broader framework of the languages spoken, roughly, in the geographical area stretching from close to the Ural Mountains in Asia to beyond the Rocky Mountains in the Americas. The southern borders in Asia include Japan and Northern China, and in America the Plateau and California. This area covers languages of dozens of additional families and stocks, the most important of which are Salishan, Athabaskan, Algonquian, HOKan, Penutian in North America and Altaic, Tungusic, Turkic, Yeniseian,
and isolates such as Ainu and Nivkh in Asia. Fortescue argues that the Uralo-
Siberian languages share a number of typological traits that occur as a set. These traits are rare or absent in other language families, and they are the result of some shared history in the distant past.

The introductory chapter introduces the basic concepts and the broader genetic and typological context. The second chapter is an overview of proposals of genetic connections between the Uralo-Siberian languages, from early suggestions for the generally accepted families to lumping proposals of the families with each other and with other groupings. The third chapter is the typological core of the book. More than forty typological traits are discussed in which Uralo-Siberian languages often differ from other language families, even though more peripheral members such as Finnish deviate from more general typological patterns. I will come back to these traits below. The next two chapters document striking similarities in the form and function of grammatical morphemes of the Uralo-Siberian languages, whereas Chapter 6 discusses lexical similarities, including lexical reconstructions covering at least three of the families, based on regular sound correspondences. Fortescue uses both established (family) reconstructions and the results of his own research. Chapter 7 takes archaeological findings into consideration, and Fortescue tries to link language groupings and population migrations with specific archaeological sites in Asia. Chapter 8 discusses the most conspicuous similarities between languages on both sides of Bering Strait. In this chapter, the common traits discussed are almost exclusively of a typological nature. Some of the more challenging ideas that Fortescue puts forward here are a deep historical link between Wakashan/Salishan/Chimakuan (“Mosan”) on the one hand and Nivkh on the other, and a connection between Na-Dene and Ket (pp. 213 ff.).

The typological traits shared by the Uralo-Siberian languages range from phonological through morphological to syntactic traits, most of them not dependent on other phenomena, and only some of them common in the world’s languages. Uralo-Siberian languages have in common, among others, bisyllabic stems, a palatal series of consonants, voiceless stops but voiced fricatives, suffixing, agglutinative morphology, dual marking on nouns, simple case marking on nouns, no subordinating particles, indicative verb forms based on participles, basic SOV word order, and non-finite subordinate clauses (pp. 8–18, 220). Deviations from this pattern are, in most cases, demonstrably innovations in individual Uralo-Siberian languages. This set is not found in any of the neighboring families according to Fortescue.

These and other typological features are demonstrated in the text and visualized in more than 40 maps, showing among others also locations of languages with nominal and verbal classification, noun phrase order, initial /ŋ/, incorporation, and head/dependent marking. The result is a kind of mini-atlas of typological traits in adjacent parts of two continents that shows areal patterns.
What are the innovative elements in this book? I want to single out a few.
The concept of “mesh” is a useful step beyond current terminology in historical
linguistics. The inadequacies of classification in branching trees, which make
horizontal influences impossible, and the limitations of the wave theory are
overcome. Ultimately, it is the historical connections that count. Whether these
changes are internal within a language family or contact-induced changes due
to areal pressure is less important. Then, there is the concept of “bottleneck”.
Fortescue calls the Asian side of the Bering Strait a “bottleneck” because the
Asian populations moving eastward stranded more or less in the area, until they
ventured to cross the Straits to the American side. Bottlenecks differ from both
“spread zones” and “residual zones”, concepts proposed by Nichols (1992), in
that they show high linguistic diversity and areal influence on the “entry” side
(as in a residual zone) and more results of geographical spread on the other
side of the Gateway, where unusual typological features can be encountered
combined in families in larger geographical ranges. Chapter 8 contains a char-
acterization of bottlenecks, in which Bering Strait is compared with the Meso-
American isthmus and the passage into Northern Greenland from Ellesmere
Island. However, a global search on this reviewer’s part for other geographical
bottlenecks (e.g., Northern Queensland, Gibraltar Straits, the Sinai, the
Bosphorus) do not seem to display similar linguistic features.

Fortescue’s book is another product of the fruitful combination of typologi-
ral research with historical linguistics. Language contact is a central issue here,
and it is only fairly recently that typologists have become aware of the impor-
tance of language contact for their work. For example in sampling, it is only
in Bybee (1985), building on Perkins, that geographical bias first became a
serious issue. Further, enterprises like the EUROTYP project helped to make
typologists aware that neighboring languages may have a lot in common, even
if they are genetically only distantly related, or not at all. Many of the maps
in the EUROTYP book series show typological isoglosses that crosscut the ge-
etic lineages in Europe. Dixon’s pamphlet (1997) was also influential in this
respect.

Fortescue’s book is perhaps comparable with Johanson’s (1992) book, which
has not received the attention it should have had, especially from typologists.
Johanson studied one family, the Turkic languages, from the viewpoint of struc-
tural borrowing. Turkic languages are both prestige languages and dominated
languages depending on where they are spoken. Furthermore, they are in con-
tact with languages of a variety of language families and structural types. In
that way Johanson was able to come up with a number of structural or ty-
polological features that are never, rarely, often, or always borrowed between
Turkic languages and their neighbors.

Nichols (1992) went a step further, starting to use typological evidence in
estab...
tional methods. She studied a limited number of typological parameters both within geographical areas and within genetic lineages all over the world. In that way she determined a number of features that are highly stable within families, hence, features that are shared across genetic lineages, and other features that are easily borrowed. These typological features are of a rather abstract nature, in that the actual form of the features is not taken into consideration, whereas that is a basic tenet of the traditional comparative method. As some typological features apparently do not spread across language (family) boundaries, these can in principle be taken as evidence of a genetic connection if they are shared by languages not considered being part of the same lineage. In that way, Nichols is not only able to suggest deeper genetic connections, but also to reconstruct prehistoric migration patterns. Many features appeared to show geographical clines, suggesting very large linguistic areas. In short, areal features and language contact have finally received the attention they deserved in typological research.

It is no surprise that Fortescue’s book about the language relationship across Bering Strait was partly written at Nichols’ institution, and that her work was a source of inspiration. Fortescue’s book can be seen as a regional case study, in which a much wider range of typological similarities between languages are used to uncover earlier and deeper connections. The Bering Strait region is of course a very interesting area to look at, since received wisdom wants the ancestors of all of the population of the Americas to have come relatively recently (say, 12,000 years ago) to the continent, despite its enormous linguistic diversity (cf. Nettle 1999). Nevertheless, a genetic connection between the languages of Northeast Asia and the Americas could never be established. Thus, more deeply shared typological connections could be used to detect such historical connections, and Fortescue’s book is also an attempt to do that.

Even though Fortescue nowhere claims outright that the Uralo-Siberian languages constitute a family or a stock (he proposes it is a “mesh”), most of his book can be seen as an attempt to establish it as a family: the lexical and morphological constructions he presents are plausible reconstructions, and the semantic range of lexical meanings nowhere go beyond reason – unlike many other attempts to show deep genetic affiliations.

There are a couple of weak points, mostly of a formal nature. The quality of the 53 maps in the book is low. They are hand drawn, and many lines (presumably of different colors in the original) are hardly visible in print. The important typological isoglosses, however, are mostly clear, and therefore the maps never preclude understanding. Furthermore, a number of references in the text are missing from the list of references. More serious is the rather minimalist three-page index containing (some) languages names, geographical names, and structural features. I noticed many omissions, such as languages that were mentioned in the text but are missing in the index, even though these pages
sometimes contained substantial information. A good and detailed index is of utmost importance in a work so broad and rich in data as this one, with a very high information density.

As far as more content-related issues are concerned, language contact plays an important role, but in my view the actual processes involved could have been analysed with greater sophistication. Terms like ‘reverse creoloid’, ‘creolization’ (Mednyj Aleut), ‘language mixing’ (e.g., Itelmen), and ‘substrate’ (none of which figure in the index) are used regularly, but without a clear definition. No link is made between (certain types of) intermarriage and consequent language mixture (see Bakker & Mous 1994 for some examples of intertwining).

One point that has been puzzling me for a long time is why archaeologists and linguists insist on the presence of a Land Bridge to explain the movement of peoples from Asia to North America. From the Asian cape, one can see the Alaskan mountains on clear days, and the Aleutian Islands seem ideal for island hopping between the continents. In the historical period, all coastal peoples had ocean-going vessels. Why should earlier peoples have been forced to travel by land or, worse even, by ice? The insistence on “land” or “ice” seems rather ethnocentric, proposed by people who move by horse, carriage or car, even though traditionally most transportation in the area and elsewhere took place by water rather than land. After his discussion of the close to 100 lexical cognates of at least three Uralo-Siberian branches (pp. 50, 151–159), Fortescue actually concludes that the Mesolithic fishermen/hunters who were “speakers of Proto-Uralo-Siberian evidently also had boats to paddle” (p. 159), so “Bering Strait would have been easy enough for them to cross”. There seems to be no reason to assume that it would have been otherwise for earlier migrants.

This brings us to another point: the importance of cultural traits for the explanation of aberrant typological linguistic features. For instance, documented sound changes such as /p/ to /h/, or the absence of labial stops in certain languages or families may be correlated with the cultural trait of wearing labrets (pp. 186, 216). The intermarriage patterns mentioned above would be other examples.

Fortescue’s book is well researched, thought provoking and innovative. Its combination of linguistic data with archaeological and biological genetic findings sets new standards in research on language at levels of great time depth. Its interest goes beyond the area under consideration.

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