Nostratic Dictionary

By Aharon Dolgopolsky

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Preface

Colin Renfrew

Aharon Dolgopolsky is today the leading authority on the Nostratic macrofamily, and it is a privilege to be invited to write some words by way of introduction to his monumental *Nostratic Dictionary*. For it is, of course, something very much more than a dictionary. It is the most thorough and extensive demonstration and documentation so far of what may be termed the 'Nostratic hypothesis': that several of the world's best-known language families are related in their origin, their grammar and their lexicon, and that they belong together in a larger unit, of earlier origin, the Nostratic macrofamily.

It should at once be noted that several elements of this enterprise are controversial. For while the Nostratic hypothesis has many supporters, it has been criticized on rather fundamental grounds by a number of distinguished linguists. The matter was reviewed some years ago in a symposium held at the McDonald Institute (Renfrew & Nettle 1999), and positions remain very much polarized. It was a result of that meeting that the decision was taken to invite Aharon Dolgopolsky to publish his *Dictionary* — a much more substantial treatise than any work hitherto undertaken on the subject — at the McDonald Institute. For it became clear that the diversities of view expressed at that symposium were not likely to be resolved by further polemical exchanges. Instead, a substantial body of data was required, whose examination and evaluation could subsequently lead to more mature judgments. Those data are presented here, and that more mature evaluation can now proceed.

First, however, it may be worth clarifying why these issues are of such potential interest to archaeologists and to historians of culture as well as to historical linguists — which is why this work finds publication under the aegis of an institute for archaeological research. In recent years there have been attempts towards some rapprochement between the fields of prehistoric archaeology and historical linguistics (Renfrew 1987; Blench & Spriggs 1997–9; McConvell & Evans 1997; Kirch 2001), and the once rather neglected relationships between archaeology and language have again been vigorously debated.

That the widespread distributions over space of languages and of language families are likely to be amenable to historical explanation has been evident since the time of Sir William Jones (1786), and is widely accepted today (Nettle 1999; Dixon 1997). And the processes involved, which may include dispersals of population and other demographic effects, must in many cases go back before the time that written records are available, and therefore into prehistory. Such distributions demand some explanation in archaeological terms, and the archaeological record has much to offer about social and economic processes in early times. Indeed the developments of molecular genetics offer the possibility that archaeogenetics may have something to offer to the understanding of population histories. So the possibility arises of an 'emerging synthesis' (Renfrew 1991; 2000b) between the fields of historical linguistics, prehistoric archaeology and molecular genetics. The possibility exists, at least in theory, of writing an integrated history that will bring into play data from all three intersecting fields.

In this context the challenging claims implied by the Nostratic hypothesis are of considerable interest, carrying as they do, widespread implications if those claims be accepted. For the Nostratic hypothesis as first set out by Illich-Svitych (1989; 1990; see Bulatova 1989) and by Dolgopolsky (1973; 1998; 1999) proposes a relationship between several of the principal language families of Europe, Asia and Africa. The relationship implies a common origin for these families and their constituent languages, and presumably a Nostratic or Proto-Nostratic homeland, occupied by the speakers of the notional ancestral language at a date well prior to the formation of the daughter families and their languages.

The language families in question (see Fig. 1) are the Altaic family, the Afroasiatic family, the Indo-European family, the Kartvelian family (i.e. the South Caucasian languages) and the Dravidian family. The matter has already been set out clearly by Dolgopolsky (e.g. Dolgopolsky 1999; see also Kaiser & Shevoroshkin 1988) and is, of course, further discussed in the pages which follow here. Broadly
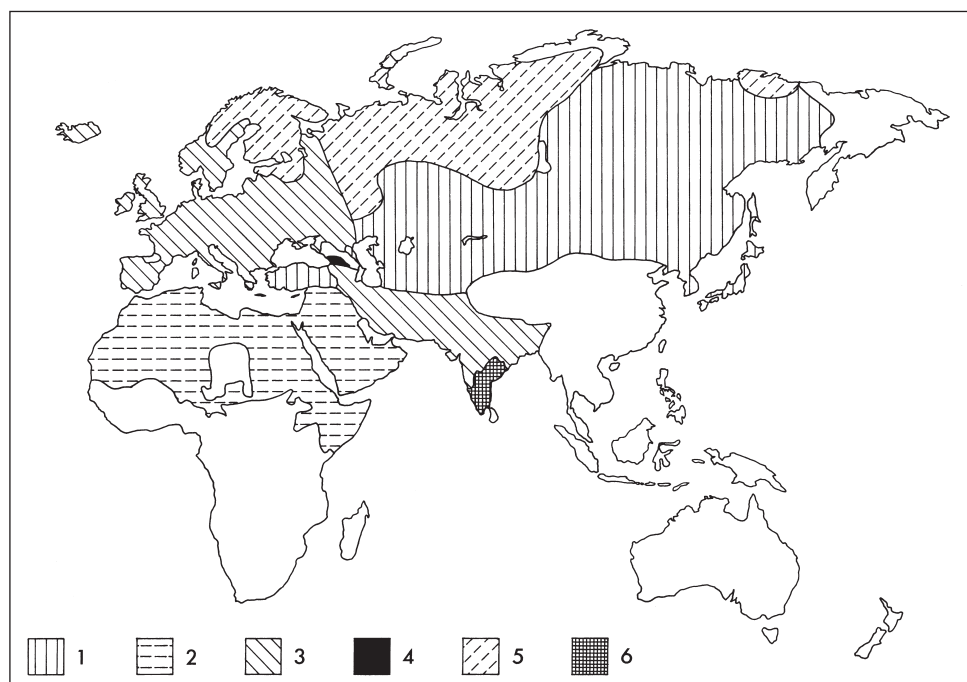
Figure 1. *The Nostratic macrofamily. The present-day distribution of the language groups within the Nostratic macrofamily. The consitutent language families are: (1) Altaic; (2) Afroasiatic; (3) Indo-European; (4) South Caucasian (Kartvelian); (5) Uralic; (6) Dravidian. (After Renfrew & Nettle 1999, 6, fig. 1.)*

similar conclusions have been set out by Bomhard (1984; 1996). The Nostratic macrofamily may be compared with the Eurasiatic family, formulated by the American linguist Joseph Greenberg (2000; see Ruhlen 1991, 383). Nostratic and Eurasiatic, as so defined, share the Indo-European, Uralic and Altaic families and Gilyak, as well as Chukchi-Kamchatkan and Eskimo-Aleut (belonging to Nostratic according to Dolgopolsky, although not discussed in his dictionary). But Greenberg includes Ainu in his Eurasiatic macrofamily, while excluding the Afroasiatic, Kartvelian and Dravidian families.

The very validity of the concept of 'macrofamily' has been challenged by many mainstream linguists (e.g. Campbell 1999; Dixon 1997; see also Renfrew 2000a), where it is Greenberg's concept of 'Amerind' (Greenberg 1987) which has come in for the strongest criticism, although his earlier classification of the languages of Africa (Greenberg 1963) was more positively received. However it has been systematically applied in other areas, not least by Starostin (2000).

These debates make the publication of Dolgopolsky's *Nostratic Dictionary* all the more significant. For the matter can hardly be judged by the proposal of just one or two words in the reconstructed Nostratic language which find a number of descendents in the daughter languages. Individual cases may be open to discussion and doubt, and it is on the basis of a significant number of proposed roots and of their descendent counterparts that the matter must be judged. That sufficient sample is presented in the pages that follow.

The matter might relate in a number of ways to other current work. In the first place the Nostratic hypothesis as presented here could harmonize with the homeland for Proto-Indo-European proposed by the present author (Renfrew 1987), which finds many points of agreement with the important work of Gamkrelidze & Ivanov (1995), as Dolgopolsky himself (1987; 1993) has discussed. Moreover the early dates which Dolgopolsky (1998) has proposed for Nostratic would harmonize with the earlier chronology now emerging, notably for Proto-Indo-European, from the application of phylogenetic methods (Gray & Atkinson 2003; Forster & Renfrew 2006). The question of time depth in historical linguistics is under review at present (Dixon 1997; Renfrew, McMahon & Trask 2000; Forster & Renfrew 2006) and the implied chronology for Nostratic no longer looks so problematic in itself.

It is even possible to suggest a processual mechanism for the putative dispersal of at least some of the families which make up the Nostratic macrofamily. The farming/language dispersal hypothesis, first proposed for Indo-European (Renfrew 1987), has now been much more widely applied (Bellwood 1991; Bellwood & Renfrew 2002; Bellwood 2005). In particular it has been used to account for the dispersal of the Afroasiatic language family from a

'homeland' in the southern Levant (Renfrew 1991, 13 fig. 5; see Diakonoff 1990), and could thus be employed to account for the dispersal from a Nostratic homeland in western Asia of at least two of the constituent language families. Its application to the Dravidian family, however, looks more doubtful in the light of recent work on the origins and domestication of food plants in central and southern India (Fuller 2002).

In the last analysis, however, the matter is a linguistic one, and it is by historical linguists that it must be judged. The present work by Dolgopolsky represents a significant step in the further documentation of the case, which has now been set out with sufficient thoroughness to allow of systematic consideration and assessment by linguists. That process can now begin. We look forward to further discussion and debate on this important theme, of interest to prehistoric archaeology as well as to linguistics.

Acknowledgements

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