

Towards a New Reconstruction of the Proto-Yeniseian Sound System

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The Yeniseian (also Yeniseic, abbreviated: Yen.) language family consists of six members: Ket, Yugh, Pumpokol, Arin, Assan and Kott. Apart from Ket, which has very few competent speakers by now, all Yeniseian languages are extinct. Ket, Yugh and Kott are reasonably well-attested (cf. Werner 1997a,b, 1998; Vajda 2004; Georg 2007; Kotorova & Nefedov 2015), whereas our limited knowledge of Arin, Assan and Pumpokol is based on fragmentary word-lists of the 18th and 19th centuries (cf. Werner 2005). Lexical correspondences and striking similarities in the gender, case or verb systems (cf. I. Verner 1969; G. Verner 1988; G. Starostin 1995) bear witness to the genetic relatedness of these six languages; this shared grammatical and lexical basis must be explained as inheritance from a common ancestor, Proto-Yeniseian (PY). It is commonly assumed that the PY homeland was probably situated near the headwaters of the Yenisey, the Ob or the Irtyš rivers (to judge by toponymic data, see Dul'zon 1959a,b; Maloletko 1992), and that PY was spoken some 2000-2500 years ago (cf. e.g., Werner 2005: 15, Fortescue & Vajda 2022: 238-240, 277).

Hitherto, the reconstruction of Proto-Yeniseian has been mainly pursued with macro-comparative premises in mind. Particularly worthy of mention is the hypothetical “Dene-Yeniseian” language family linking the Old and the New World, cf. e.g., Trombetti (1923: 486, 511), Collins (1954: 35-36), Fortescue (1998), Ruhlen (1998), Vajda (2010a,b, 2019), Fortescue & Vajda (2022); this concept is but an abbreviated version of the much larger “Dene-Caucasian” macro-family (cf. S. Starostin 1982, 1984). Note, however, that the evidence presented so far is considered insufficient to prove beyond doubt the existence of these putative families (cf. Fortescue & Vajda 2022: 244, “an increasing body of comparative linguistic data supports the genealogical unity of Na-Dene and Yeniseian, though the totality of this evidence is still insufficient to conclusively demonstrate Dene-Yeniseian as a proven family”).

In this talk, we present correspondence sets involving word-initial consonants. The data can be used for a systematic application of the comparative method, implying both the reconstruction of proto-phonemes and subsequent phylogenetic research questions (intrafamilial subdivisions among the Yeniseian languages according to shared phonological innovations). We will demonstrate the rigor of the comparative method with a bottom-up approach, focusing here on but one aspect of the recoverable grammatical system of PY, namely phonology. In doing this, we strictly limit our efforts on Yeniseian data alone.¹

Key findings include (I) the discovery of an isogloss which separates Ket, Yugh and Pumpokol from Kott, Assan and Arin in terms of word-initial labial and dental plosives (voiced in the former group, voiceless in the other) and (II) the inference that Proto-Yeniseian probably had a two-layered system of plain voiced and plain voiceless stops. We do not see evidence for the postulation of lateral affricates and aspirated stops (unlike macro-comparatively inspired reconstructions of PY). In addition, there are three correspondences of sibilants and uvulars, respectively, but we cannot, as yet, plausibly posit proto-phonemes in these cases.

¹ Cf. Janhunen's (2020: 166) assessment of previous reconstructive attempts: “The Proto-Yeniseic reconstruction of Sergei Starostin (1982 with later versions) [...] is teleologically oriented towards external comparisons and would need to be redone with a stricter comparative methodology.”

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