

Obituary
SERGEI ANATOLYEVICH STAROSTIN
(March 24, 1953 - September 30, 2005)

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On the last day of September 2005 the shocking news bulletin flew round the web: Sergei Starostin has died! Everybody who knew him was paralyzed. After a collective 37 (20+17) years of strong friendship, the authors of this obituary cannot keep any impersonal distance from this great scholar and still greater man. For an objective evaluation it is necessary to know his life and work.

Sergei Starostin was born on March 24, 1953, in Moscow. In 1970, when he was seventeen, he began his studies at the Department of Structural and Applied Linguistics of the Faculty of Philology of the Moscow State University. One of his best-known teachers of that time was A. A. Zaliznjak. At the same time he worked intensively with the Japanese research group. At this time he also began to participate in the so-called 'Nostratic Seminar', led by Aron Dolgopol'skij and Vladimir Dybo, once the closest collaborators with V. M. Illič-Svityč. In this time a strong generation of comparativists in various fields was nurtured here. Besides Starostin these included, for example, Ilya Peiros, specialist in Sino-Tibetan and Austro-Asiatic languages, and frequent co-author with Starostin, Evgenij Xelimskij [Eugene Helimski], specialist in Uralic and Slavic languages, Olga Stolbova, specialist in Afroasiatic, and especially in Chadic languages. In 1975 Starostin finished his undergraduate university study. He continued with postgraduate study at the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow, and after three years he found employment there. From 1987 he led a series of regular lectures at the Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics at the Faculty of Philology of the Moscow State University. On the basis of one of his courses, "Introduction to comparative linguistics", a useful textbook originated (2001; together with his former student, Svetlana Burlak). In 1992 he was invited to teach at the Faculty of Theoretical and Applied

Linguistics of the Russian State University of Humanities. He became a director of the Department of Comparative Linguistics and Ancient Languages. Thanks to Sergei, some of the best linguists in Moscow, for example, V. A. Dybo, A. V. Dybo, E. A. Xelimskij, and O. A. Mudrak, joined him in teaching at the State University of Humanities. After the dissolution of the Faculty of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics (2000), Starostin became a head of the Center of Comparative Studies at the Institute of Oriental Cultures of the Russian State University of Humanities. In this position he could continue in the tradition of the Nostratic seminar. In 1992 he was named a member-correspondent of the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences; in 1996 he became a member-correspondent of the Russian Academy of Sciences. It is necessary to stress that only eight years ago he had serious problems crossing borders. His first scientific journey abroad was allowed (thanks to the political thaw during Gorbachev's *perestrojka*) only in 1988, when Vitaly Shevoroshkin organized a magnificent conference – the Symposium on Language and Prehistory – at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where Starostin became the star of the greatest magnitude. He returned to the intensive cooperation with the American scholars in 2001, when Murray Gell-Mann, the laureate of the Nobel Prize for his theory of quarks in 1969 and founder of Institute of Santa Fe (New Mexico), invited him for a project mapping the prehistory of modern mankind on the basis of comparative linguistics, genetics and anthropology, archaeology and other sciences. It was an occasion for Sergei Starostin to present himself as an excellent manager, organizing conferences and workshops, where scholars representing various disciplines, had unique chances to meet and discuss.

Starostin was no 'desk-bound-scholar'. Beginning in 1974 he participated regularly in linguistic field expeditions to the North Caucasus organized by A. E. Kibrik. Here he found and described tones in various languages from the North and West Caucasus (Tindi, Abaza, Abxaz; the results were published in 1978). In 1979 he participated in an expedition to the island of Sakhalin to find the last speakers of Ainu. In its initial goal the foray was not successful, since by that time there were no Ainu-speakers left on Sakhalin. But Starostin found other tasks. He recorded the local dialects of the Japanese residents

of the island, and, together with Ilya Peiros, described the tones of the Sakhalin dialect of Nivx (= Gilyak; published in 1986). In 1994 Starostin organized an expedition to the tiny nation of Kets living east of the Yenisei River. The results were published in the last volume of the series *Ketskij sbornik* (1995). While in the Ket region of Siberia, notorious for its damp, unpleasant climate and swarms of mosquitoes, Sergei contracted a mysterious illness that plagued him for months after he went home.

The sheer number of Starostin's scientific works is not enormous, fewer than 70. But their fundamental content, consisting of original ideas in a variety of disciplines, allows us to compare his contribution to such giants of Indo-European comparative-historical linguistics as Karl Brugmann and Ferdinand de Saussure, or Antoine Meillet and Emile Benveniste, combined. In his work Starostin concentrated on the following language families: Indo-European (especially accentology); Altaic (particularly Japanese); North Caucasian; Yeniseian and other languages of Siberia; Sino-Tibetan; and the macro-families: Nostratic and Sino-Caucasian (a.k.a. Dene-Caucasian). Applying an approach that combined the classical comparative-historical method with statistics, he offered a unique new modification of glottochronology, giving much more convincing results than the classical method developed by Morris Swadesh. Along these lines he developed special computer programs (Starling), for determining the most probable phonetic correspondences between related languages, creating tree-diagrams, and calculating their absolute dates of divergence.

Starostin wrote his first scientific study in 1971. An abridged version of an article devoted to the reconstruction of Proto-Japanese was published in 1972, and the expanded version in 1975. Unlike his predecessors, he introduced data from the dialects of the Ryukyu Archipelago. In addition to Japanese Starostin studied Chinese, and in 1975 he defended his master's thesis devoted to the reconstruction of the Old Chinese initials. During the following four years he prepared a complete reconstruction of Old Chinese phonology, which was offered as his PhD. thesis. It was only because of non-scientific reasons that Sergei did not attain the PhD degree immediately. The thesis was published as a book in 1989, and it became the basis for the reconstruction of the Sino-Tibetan

protolanguage, in collaboration with Ilya Peiros. (See their Sino-Tibetan comparative dictionary, published in 6 volumes in Australia in 1996). In cooperation with Sergei Nikolaev, another pupil of Vladimir Dybo, they began to verify Trubetzkoy's hypothesis of the genetic relationship of the West and East Caucasian languages. The first step consisted in the formulation of phonetic laws. Their common work culminated in publication of *A North Caucasian Etymological Dictionary* (Moscow 1994), a monumental volume of more than 1400 pages. Parallel with his work on North Caucasian reconstruction, Starostin presented the first model of the reconstruction of the Yeniseian languages (1982), later defined with more precision (1995). Applying the methods of comparative-historical linguistics, he confirmed old hypotheses about the distant relationship between Yeniseian, North Caucasian and Sino-Tibetan languages, suggested earlier by G. J. Ramstedt, A. Trombetti, K. Bouda and others, but without a formulation of regular phonetic laws.

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