Nostratic
Sifting the Evidence

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Offprint

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1996, with the announcement of possible signs of life found in a Martian rock from Antarctica and the public controversy that ensued, Daniel Goldin, the head of NASA, described his reaction as one of 'skeptical fascination'. So also with Nostratic, of late much in the public eye:[1] Some scholars pursue Nostratic vigorously, while many others — the editors among them — approach the topic with a reaction more akin to Goldin's. Our goal, therefore, in this book is to bring together historical linguists representing proponents of Nostratic and those not yet convinced by what they have seen, so as to let readers sift the evidence and decide for themselves.

1.   *What is Nostratic?*

'Nostratic' is the name given to a language hypothesized to be the common ancestor of a number of families of languages, including Indo-European, Uralic, and Afroasiatic. For a century now, various forms of this hypothesis[2] have produced one of the most enduring and sometimes intense controversies in linguistics. Largely, though, supporters of the hypothesis and those who reject it have seldom dealt directly with one another's arguments.

For at least several thousand years, people have speculated about the origins of human language and the historical relationships among languages.[3] The proposals that arose from these discussions were often theologically or ethnocentrically driven; even more enlightened attempts did not reach much beyond

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[1] Nostratic has been immensely popular: the *New York Times* and other publications which seldom note work in our field have recently shown interest in Nostratic and, following an article from the 27th of June, 1995 in the *New York Times*, we have received numerous letters from interested lay people. For the most recent contribution to the popular press, see Joseph (1997).

[2] Nostratic has been variously characterized as a 'theory' or 'hypothesis', and no doubt in other ways as well. In a technical sense, it may be neither, but we follow conventional looseness in allowing these multiple labels, as do numerous contributions to this volume.

[3] The Tower of Babel story is a familiar example. See Pedersen (1931) for a brief treatment of ancient Greek and Roman views on language origins, history and relationships. For a survey of current work on language origins, see Wind (1992) and other volumes in that series, as well as Aitchison (1996) and Eco (1995).

taxonomies based on the word for 'god' in various languages.[4] Then, two centuries ago, comparative linguistics succeeded in establishing solid and uncontroversial genetic relationships among such superficially diverse languages as English, Sanskrit, Greek and Irish.[5] Amid the vast differences among these languages, early comparativists were able to tease out a core of shared items in vocabulary and grammar on which elements of the common ancestor language, Indo-European, were proposed and have been refined ever since. Similar success with Finno-Ugric, Semitic and other families has repeatedly confirmed that the method is reliable and broadly applicable.[6] Still, efforts to move to a higher-level grouping, ones uniting the just-mentioned families, have been controversial.

Against this familiar background, it becomes a scientific obligation to press onward with the application of the techniques and principles to ever greater time depths, investigating deeper possible relationships. Historical linguists thus are driven to investigate Nostratic, and it seems that the time is ripe for a reevaluation of the central controversies that constitute the debate over Nostratic, including:

1) *Is there any there there?* The basic questions of whether Nostratic is a valid construct and how seriously the hypothesis should be taken continue to bring a wide range of answers. In the present volume, Vovin, who seems generally sympathetic to Nostratic, pleads that the hypothesis cannot be dismissed out of hand. Going a step further, Manaster Ramer, Michalove, Baertsch & Adams present cogent arguments that the assumption of Nostratic can yield solutions to language-particular problems in subgroups of Nostratic. On the other hand, Comrie baldly states, in answer to his own question of the relatedness of Altaic, Uralic and Indo-European pronominal systems, "I do not know". Other agnostics represented in this volume, such as Ringe, Vine, Campbell, and even Hamp, demonstrate that the hypothesis is being taken seriously indeed by skeptics specializing in Indo-European and Uralic, at least. While these scholars seek to test the hypothesis, Nostratic has been around long enough and has been discussed widely enough that some regard the genetic affiliations as established. As Bomhard puts it, "it is no longer reasonable to hold ... that Indo-European is

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[4] These efforts continue to this day, with just as little merit as their predecessors. For example, both Oak (1984) and Poonai (1994) claim Sanskrit as the source of numerous, if not all, human tongues.

[5] For accessible discussion of the contributions of Bopp, Rask and other great early comparativists, see Pedersen (1931).

[6] It has sometimes, however, been claimed that the comparative method is not applicable to all language families of the world. See Hoenigswald (1991) for discussion.

a language isolate". Hodge, like Bomhard, is sufficiently convinced of the grouping to use Nostratic to shed light on the prehistory of lower-level groups. Nostratic has emerged then as a (perhaps even the) key seam in linguistic comparison between a universally accepted construct, like Indo-European, and one overwhelmingly rejected by historical linguists, like Proto-World.[7]

2) *If so, what is it?* Let us now return, though, to the difficult question of defining Nostratic, specifically the matter of which families belong under this rubric. Nostratic has overwhelmingly been portrayed as a monolithic proposal, most often including exactly the six groups considered in Illich-Svitych's dictionary, published beginning in 1971: Indo-European, Uralic, Altaic, Kartvelian, Afroasiatic and Dravidian. In fact, Nostratic is, as Campbell puts it, a 'shape-shifter'. At its narrowest, proposals uniting only two of these groups have been called 'Nostratic'. At its broadest — and, as Greenberg argues, this view is more widespread among orthodox Nostraticists than usually noted — Nostratic has been regarded as including various sets of languages stretching as far east as Eskimo-Aleut. For instance, both Greenberg's 'Eurasian' and Bomhard's view of Nostratic include links well beyond the traditional notion of 'Nostratic'.[8] It is thus perhaps small wonder that much work focuses on the relative strength or weakness of particular links within this complex web.

One of the earliest and most intensely pursued links has been that between Indo-European and Semitic, from Möller (1906, 1911), down to Bomhard (1984) and now Levin (1995). That tradition is represented here by Hodge, who calls his own version 'Lislakh'.[9] Within Nostratic circles and beyond, though, the status of the connection between Indo-European and Afroasiatic is now more often accorded the status of a deeper, more distant connection. Greenberg shows

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[7] The notion that we can uncover the ancestor of all human languages is hardly a new one; see Trombetti 1905. For recent proposals sympathetic to Proto-World, see Ruhlen (1994) and references given there; for counterarguments, see Hock (1994), Salmons (1992, 1997). Of course some languages cannot possibly be brought in under the umbrella of Proto-World, such as signed languages (e.g., American Sign Language) or artificial languages (e.g., Esperanto); cf. Hock & Joseph (1996:485–506).

We hasten to add that adherents of Nostratic are not necessarily committed to Proto-World investigations, or, indeed, to other distant genetic hypotheses. In fact, one strong claim made by at least some proponents of Nostratic is that there are clearly non-Nostratic languages, just as Indo-Europeanists talk about non-Indo-European languages.

[8] Another dimension to pinning down 'Nostratic' is the question of *whose* Nostratic, since — as is already apparent — different researchers see themselves as part of distinct traditions of Nostratic scholarship, with Illich-Svitych's 'Muscovite School' the usual central point of reference.

[9] See Hodge's contribution for an explanation of this name.

that this view of less immediate connections between Indo-European and Afroasiatic has a long history in Nostratic circles, where Indo-European has long been seen as more closely connected to Uralic. Indeed, most researchers, including those represented in this book, find the strongest case in a connection between Uralic and Indo-European. Indeed, Ringe, like a number of other Indo-Europeanists over the years have, accepts these as demonstrably, though weakly, related. Vovin accepts the Nostratic hypothesis but finds serious problems with the inclusion of Altaic, even while suggesting that Indo-European, Uralic and Altaic are related in some way. Yet more open to dispute is the internal structure of the Nostratic family tree. Vovin distinguishes 'northern' and 'southern' branches, the former including Indo-European, Uralic, Altaic, and the latter Kartvelian, Afroasiatic and Dravidian, while Bomhard and Greenberg now prefer to distinguish a 'Eurasiatic' group within Nostratic.

3) *(How) has this hypothesis evolved?* Most of the authors provide their own perspectives on the history of the Nostratic hypothesis, inevitably beginning with Pedersen's first 1903 discussion and going down to Illich-Svitych. Campbell's discussion of the Slava cult underscores the tremendous reverence for Illich-Svitych and points up how this potentially hinders sober scientific evaluation of the hypothesis. Nonetheless, as this volume shows, Nostratic remains an evolving construct.

4) *How has this hypothesis been evaluated?* Disagreements reach even into the current state of evaluation of Nostratic and work on Nostratic. Vovin, for instance, regards the Moscow School as almost alone in its support for the hypothesis — Manaster Ramer providing the notable exception — while Bomhard sees broad and international support for Nostratic. More crucial yet is the question of how this hypothesis *can* be evaluated, and thus we turn to methodology.

2.   *Method as the central issue*
All of the above disagreements pale beside the fundamental matter of appropriate methodology. As elsewhere in science, methodological flaws can undermine reliability and replicability of results. Just as acoustic phonetic investigations can be fatally compromised by background noise or sociolinguistic studies can be felled by problems in representativeness of sampling, so too can comparative linguistic houses be built on methodological sand.[10] Specialists in individual

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[10] Pinker (1994:255–256) makes a similar point:

> As an experimental psycholinguist who deals with the noisy data of reaction times and speech errors, I have no problem with Greenberg's use of many loose correspondences, or

families work primarily on problems within those languages, tending to shy away, some would say, from confronting questions about the methodological underpinnings of the overall enterprise.[11] Under these circumstances, Nostratic provides us with an excellent opportunity to raise these important questions explicitly. Indeed, much of the present volume is dedicated to these questions and their import to the field. We will let the authors' work speak for them, but signal here some groupings of core issues that arise repeatedly in papers in this volume. To a certain extent, therefore, the method is the message.

Comparison
• Does Nostratic reflect application of the comparative method and comparative reconstruction in the same way that more accepted groupings do?
• Does time depth constrain the utility and validity of the comparative method?[12]

Other sources of similarity
• Could chance account for much or all of the corpus of proposed Nostratic comparanda?
• What role does borrowing play?

Standards of evidence
• What breadth of attestation across branches is required for inclusion in a proto-language?
• What kinds of data constitute evidence for proto-languages? What counts as a 'grammatical form'? Are some forms too small to be reliably compared?

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even with the fact that some of his data contain random errors. What bothers me more is his reliance on gut feelings of similarity rather than on actual statistics that control for the number of correspondences that might be expected by chance.

[11] Koerner (1989:1) has written:

Historical linguists have generally tended to be reticent about making theoretical statements regarding the practice of their field. Most of them have been avoiding laying bare the methodological principles which underlie their research or facing up to epistemological questions about what they are really doing. This observation is particularly true about one of the most essential aspects of their craft, the practice of reconstruction of unattested forms.

This has helped fuel the debate over whether long-distance relationships are posited on evidence and methods similar to those used by the earliest scholars working on Indo-European.

[12] Note, as food for thought, Bender's challenging comparison of longer-distance reconstruction with an attempt to recapture the original sound waves of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address in which one "would be defeated by the fact that the energy has long since been swamped by random variations in movements of air molecules. It is this same sort of effect on a smaller scale that operates in the case of language change" (1973:8).

Proof
- Is it necessary to reconstruct in order to prove relatedness?
- Is it indeed possible to prove languages unrelated? Is the appropriate null hypothesis here that languages are related or that they are unrelated?[13]

Building on this last point, we note that the nature of proof of genetic relationship is fundamental to all the questions above, to all the papers in this volume, and to Nostratic in general. The depth of this problem is readily apparent from the fact that many scholars see connections between Indo-European and other families, for example, as having been 'successfully demonstrated' as far back as Illich-Svitych (Bomhard, with similar sentiments found in other papers in this volume and elsewhere), while many others find the evidence they have examined weak (Campbell, for instance). For the larger community of historical linguists, the responses to this issue, implicit and explicit, form one of the central, unifying themes of this volume. Maddeningly, of course, even if these or other sets of languages are related, their relations may not be demonstrable given the limits of our data and our methodological tools; sometimes, perhaps, we have to be agnostic, if nonetheless skeptically fascinated.

3.   *The conference and this volume*
This volume grows ultimately out of the Second Workshop on Comparative Linguistics, held at Eastern Michigan University in the fall of 1993. Here, for the record, is the schedule of that Workshop:[14]

> **Thursday, Oct. 21**
> 9:10 The Nostratic Enterprise. Moderator: Joe Salmons, University of Wisconsin/
>   Purdue University
> 9:20 "The Insider's View of Nostratic", Mark Kaiser, Illinois State University
> 10:00 "The Outsider's View of Nostratic", Alexis Manaster Ramer, Wayne State
>   University
> 11:10 Discussant: Brent Vine, Princeton University
> 11:30 Open discussion
> 1:30 Methodological & Historical issues. Moderator: Brian Joseph, The Ohio State
>   University

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[13] See footnote 7 above, on clearly unrelated languages.
[14] For a highly personal account of the conference, and one sympathetic to the Nostratic enterprise, see Hegedűs' conference report posted to the LINGUIST list, Vol-4-984, from the 23rd November 1993, available on their World Wide Web archive site (http://engserve. tamu.edu/files/linguistics/linguist/archives.html).

1:40 "The History of Nostratic Scholarship", Vitaly Shevoroshkin, University of Michigan

2:20 "The Convergence of Nostratic and Eurasiatic", Joseph Greenberg, Stanford University (read by Keith Denning)

3:30 Discussant: Mark Hale, Harvard University

3:50 Open discussion

Friday, Oct. 22

9:00 The role of chance. Moderator: Martha Ratliff, Wayne State University

9:10 "A Probabilistic Evaluation of Similarities among Very Dissimilar Languages", Robert Oswalt, California Indian Language Center

9:50 "A Probabilistic Evaluation of Indo-Uralic", Donald Ringe, University of Pennsylvania

11:00 Discussant: William Baxter, University of Michigan

11:20 Open discussion

1:00 Family-specific connections. Moderator: Anthony Aristar, Texas A&M University

1:10 "Implications of Lislakh for Nostratic", Carleton Hodge, Indiana University

1:50 "Nostratic and Altaic: The Level of Relationship", Alexander Vovin, University of Michigan

3:00 Discussant: William Rozycki, Indiana University

3:20 Discussant ("Some IE models for Nostratic"): Eric Hamp, University of Chicago

3:40 Open discussion

4:30 Panel Discussion: Final assessment of the Workshop

As part of the organizing committee for the Workshop and as neutral participants in it, it fell to us to see about editing a volume on this topic. We decided, after discussion of the idea of a Nostratic volume with CILT series editor Konrad Koerner, to solicit papers from all participants in the Workshop, but not all accepted the invitation. We also invited a number of other colleagues with an interest in Nostratic, as well as one who had been invited but unable to attend the Workshop, Lyle Campbell. Of those, Allan Bomhard and Bernard Comrie accepted, while Sergei Starostin chose not to contribute.

We attempted to follow the paper-with-response format of the Workshop to the extent possible and for that reason invited some responses by individuals not present at the Workshop. Thus the papers contained in this volume are substantially refined and further developed from the original conference. Throughout, we have tried to exercise as light an editorial hand as possible, allowing authors to present their views freely.

Finally, we want to thank our Editorial Assistant, Dave Holsinger, for his steady, hard and smart work over the long process of producing this volume. Dave has carried a heavy load throughout, including preparation of indices and we are grateful to him.

Let the sifting begin!

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