Comments on Ilija Čašule’s “Correlation of the Burushaski Pronominal System with Indo-European and Phonological and Grammatical Evidence for a Genetic Relationship”

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In our previous articles (Bengtson 2000; Bengtson & Blažek 2011), which Professor Čašule (henceforth “Č”) has not cited in his references, we have addressed in detail Č’s hypothesis that Burushaski (Bur) is genetically related to Indo-European. The most recent of these, in particular, devotes some three dozen pages to this critique, including phonology, grammar, and lexicon.

At this juncture we can only very briefly summarize the evidence pointing to an alternative hypothesis, the Sino-Caucasian origin of Bur.¹

In phonology Bur stands apart from Proto-IE, and from most IE languages, in several ways: the existence of a uvular series of consonants /q : qh : ɢ/, opposed to the velar series /k : kh : ɢ/; a trinary contrast of sibilants and sibilant affricates /s : ś : ŝ/ and /c : č : ć/;² and the peculiar

¹The Sino-Caucasian hypothesis is relatively young, and still controversial. However, it would be fair to say that few historical linguists are familiar with much of the evidence or with recent works on the subject. There is now a comparative phonology (Starostin 2005a), a comparative glossary (Starostin 2005b), and the beginning of a comparative grammar (Bengtson 2008).

²Some IE languages in the Greater Indian area (e.g. Sanskrit, Pashto) have this trinary contrast secondarily (probably from contact with Burushic languages), but outside of that area, and in Proto-Indo-European, the trinary contrast is unknown.
phoneme /y/ ("dotted y"). All of these distinctive features are ignored by Ç, who is unable to relate them to the phonology of PIE. In our 2011 article we discuss these features in detail and propose Sino-Caucasian origins for them.

In morphology Bur is again far removed from Proto-Indo-European, both in typology and in grammatical morphemes. Nouns are classified into four classes and some of them (about 150) are bound morphemes that require prefixes marking the possessor’s person and class, e.g. Yasin Bur a-yék ‘my name’, gu-yék ‘thy name’, and so on. (The same prefixes are used in the verbal template.) Noun plurals are formed with 70 different plural suffixes. The Bur verb has a templatic morphology with as many as four prefix positions, including pronominal and valence-changing morphemes preceding the verb stem. All of these features are alien to IE languages but are typical of Sino-Caucasian languages.

The Bur personal pronouns are suppletive, for example the second-person singular (2ps) ‘thou’ pronoun, for which Bur has the direct stem un, opposed to the oblique stem gu-. As Ç admits, “[t]he status of this pronoun in regard to Indo-European [*tuh₃.] is complex and tenuous, and requires extensive argumentation and further analysis.” On the other hand the comparison of the Bur suppletive forms un / gu- with the corresponding forms in some Sino-Caucasian languages is relatively straightforward, e.g. Khinalug (Caucasian) wï ‘thou’ (nom.) / oχ ‘(to) thee’ (dat.); or Ket ü ‘thou’ (nom.) / ük, uk

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3The precise quality of /y/ is elusive; according to reports its allomorphs range from retroflex glide to a retroflex fricative or sibilant, i.e. something like [ɣ ~ r~ ~ ɻ].
4For the sake of semantic clarity the archaic pronouns ‘thou/thee/thy’ are employed here to gloss 2ps forms.
5With variants un ~ um.
6With variants gú-, gó(o)-, -kó(o)-.
7Other East Caucasian languages have leveled the suppletion, but retain either the U(N) or GU form of ‘thou’, e.g. Archi and Udi un ‘thou’ (identical in form with Bur un) : Chechen o, Dargi u, Shinaz Rutul ɣu. In Tsakhur the direct forms wu and ɣu are in free variation, with genitive forms of the GU type. West Caucasian has generalized the U(N) type as *wa ‘thou’ (Nikolaev & Starostin 1994, pp. 483-484, 1014-1015).
‘thy’ (attrib.), ku- ‘2nd pers. sg. verbal prefix).

Indeed, the Ket 2ps verbal prefix ku- (e.g., bu u da-ku-tôŋ ‘she sees thee’) is phonetically and semantically homologous with the Bur 2ps verbal prefix gu-/ku-8 (e.g. gu-yâṭis nu-kôó-skarc ‘cutting off thy head’9). This precise paradigmatic parallel alone should spur any curious linguist to investigate the possibility of a genetic relationship between Bur and Ket (and by extension the Yeniseian language family). After extensive study of this question we can say that a significant amount of other morphological and lexical evidence supporting this relationship (see Bengtson 2010, Starostin 2010a). G. van Driem (2001) agrees with this linkage and has called it “Karasuk,” associating the linguistic group with the synonymous archaeological culture.10

For example, consider the Bur word for ‘name’ and its morphology. The meaning ‘name’ is universally acknowledged to be one of the most basic and stable of all. It is ranked 10th in G. Starostin’s (2010b) inventory of the most stable words. The Bur word for ‘name’ is *yek (Yasin – yék, Hunza & Nager –îk),11 which is obviously unrelated to the common IE word for ‘name’, *(e)nomen-, a word which is retained to this day by almost all IE languages. But if we look to the northeast, to the same Yeniseian languages that have the suppletive 2ps pronoun and 2ps affix ku-described above, we find a word for ‘name’ that is reconstructed as *îG (attested as Ket í, Yug i, Kott ix, ix, Pumpokol i). In addition to the apparent cognation of these noun roots, there are also morphological similarities in the formation of plurals with a velar nasal suffix: Bur Yasin –yêkiŋ, -yêkičiŋ, Hunza & Nager –îkičiŋ ‘names’12: cf.

8With variants gú-, kú-, gó-, kó-, góo-, kóo-, depending upon tonal properties of the noun or verb.
9Lit. ‘2PS-head CONVERB-2PS-cut’, i.e. ‘thy head thy cutting (off)’, with both the noun stem and verb stem marked for 2ps. Example from Anderson (ms.).
10While we agree with van Driem’s linguistic link, we think it is far to old to be the language of the Karasuk culture.
11The hyphen informs like –yék and –îk indicates that these are bound morphemes that always require a possessive prefix, e.g. Yasin Bur a-yêk ‘my name’, gu-yêk ‘thy name’, etc.
12The -ičiŋ forms are a kind of reduplication, not uncommon in Bur
Ket, Yug ē’ŋ, Kott íky / ekŋ / eāky ‘names’.

Indeed when we investigate further we find that within the most basic and stable words Bur and IE have precious little in common. Thus for ‘to eat’ (25th in stability) Bur has nothing similar to the common IE *ed- ‘eat’ attested in most IE subgroups, but rather the root variants *ṣi / *ši / *šu, the use of which depends upon the class and number of the object, again an utterly non-IE characteristic.13 Yeniseian, again, has a similar root, *ṣi- ‘to eat’. And for ‘to give’ there is no trace of the common IE *dō(w)- ‘to give’, but instead Bur uses three different roots, again, as with ‘to eat’, determined by the class of the object: (1) *u- ‘to give’; (2) *chi- ‘to give’; (3) *un- ‘to give’.14 Sino-Caucasian parallels have been proposed for these three Bur roots (Bengtson & Blažek 2011: 57).

In the final analysis the best criticism of a hypothesis is to offer a more satisfactory alternative hypothesis. Our alternative hypothesis did not originate with us, but is a refined version of linguistic linkages proposed throughout the twentieth century by various scholars, the most prominent of which were K. Bouda, A. P. Dulsón, O. G. Tailleur, and V. N. Toporov. These early-to-mid twentieth century theories linked Bur with the Yeniseian languages, and sometimes also the (North) Caucasian languages and Basque.15

Within the past three decades these linkages have been given a much firmer theoretical basis, including phonetic correspondences, especially by Sergei A. Starostin. Recent lexicostatistical studies conducted by George Starostin of the Evolution of Human Language Project confirm the lexical affinity among the four language affixes.

13 I.e., *ṣi (with class I, II, III singular object) / *šu (with class I, II, III plural object) / *ši (with class IV object).
14 I.e., (1) *u- ‘to give’ (only with class I, II, III object), (2) *chi- ‘to give’ (only with class IV singular object); (3) *un- ‘to give’ (only with class IV plural object).
15 Some more remote linkages have also been proposed with the Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Burman family of Asia, and with the Na-Dene family of North America. Taken together this proposed macro-family is called “Sino-Caucasian” or “Dene-Caucasian.”
groups mentioned in the previous paragraphs, and also find that Burushaski and Yeniseian form a subfamily together, whose root is dated approximately to 6,570 BCE. 

Professor Čašule has presented a mass of interesting data. In our opinion the resemblances between Bur and IE can be accounted for by (a) loanwords (in both directions, as well as from other languages), (b) Wanderwörter, (c) chance resemblances, and (d) a small amount of archaic residue from a very old putative ancestor that some linguists call “Borean.” When these layers are peeled away from Burushaski we are left with a core that is incompatible with IE origin.

Bibliography


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16 *½* Basque, (North) Caucasian, Burushic, and Yeniseian. Sino-Tibetan (Tibeto-Burman) and Na-Dene are apparently related at a greater remove.
17 This tree has been published by Kassian (2009: 424).
18 As examples of this last category we suggest Bur *½* (Yasin –is, Hunza, Nager –sk) ‘human child, animal’s young’ vis-a-vis IE (*suH-nu*, *suH-yo*)
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