

On July 20, 2012, the prominent linguist and semitologist Aharon Borisovitch Dolgopolsky, a specialist in ancient languages and comparative linguistics and one of the “founding fathers” of the Nostratic theory, had passed away in Haifa.

Comparative linguistics is one of most important branches in modern linguistics. It is a full-fledged academic discipline, operating in strictly formalized methods, including computer-based ones. Its main goal is to penetrate deeper into the history of languages and to reconstruct humanity’s proto-languages, increasingly more distant from today. Comparative linguistics is a part of the system of historical knowledge; it serves as one of the main methods in studying the history of illiterate and preliterate periods. With its help, even when “letters are silent”, we can obtain information on ethnogenesis, on ethnic contacts, and even – by reconstructing the linguistic world picture – on natural environment and cultural features of people, who used the more ancient language systems.

The Nostratic theory maintains the existence of a common ancestor for the six largest language families of the Old World – Indo-European, Afro-Asiatic, Uralic, Altaic, Kartvelian, and Dravidian. It was first proposed in 1903 by Danish linguist Holger Pedersen and first proven in 1967 in Moscow by the Jewish-Russian scientists Aharon Dolgopolsky and Vladislav Illich-Svitych. Since his move to Israel (1976), Dolgopolsky had been working on compiling the full dictionary of Proto-Nostratic language, which would systematize and summarize scientific knowledge on the early history of human languages, dating back to approximately thirteen thousand years B.C.

Dolgopolsky’s concentration on this work up until the last days of his life has been amazing. He meticulously picked out any crumbs of information and research on hundreds of languages from Eurasia and Africa, having put together an extensive library at his house. He spent almost all of his time in his study, behind his desk, literally surrounded by walls of books and journals, creating, complementing and putting together databases on hundreds of different languages from Europe, Asia and Africa.

The effort, which took A. Dolgopolsky almost forty years, brought a magnificent result.

In 2008, his Nostratic Dictionary, drafts of which had been cited by comparativists long before that, was at last published and became one of the largest works dealing with distant language relationship. The dictionary crowned Dolgopolsky's research, and though he often, even after the publication, regretted the "incompleteness" of the work, it is undoubtedly the most complete and carefully structured lexical and etymological database of the Nostratic languages.

Aharon's widow, Israeli composer with world fame Tsippi Fleischer, took it upon herself, as an idealistic labor of love, to preserve his working library and make it available to the public. She transferred this special collection, free of charge, to a separate room at the Jerusalem Russian Library. Later it found its location in the Library for the Humanities and Social Sciences (Mount Scopus). This project was made possible with the financial support of Lydia Podolsky, the widow of a prominent Israeli linguist Baruch Podolsky, who specialized in comparative linguistics as well as in Semitic linguistics.

A. Dolgopolsky had been collecting his library during sixty years of intense scientific research, first in the USSR, then in the West. It contains over ten thousand volumes of etymologic dictionaries, grammar descriptions, ethnolinguistic studies, books on history and anthropology, and on languages from all over the world. Specifically, it contains 1626 volumes of books published more than eighty years ago, including unique publications on indigenous peoples' languages, which have already disappeared by now. A. Dolgopolsky was a leading specialist in distant languages' relationship and ethnogenesis, and the library he compiled reflects his fields of interest. His library will be an immense support for many linguists working on different language families.