

Review of *The Tungusic Languages*, edited by Alexander Vovin, José Andrés Alonso de la Fuente, and Juha Janhunen

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The Tungusic Languages, edited by Alexander Vovin, José Andrés Alonso de la Fuente, and Juha Janhunen. London and New York: Routledge, 2024. xxix + 543 pp. ISBN: 978-1-138-84503-9 (cloth), 978-1-315-72839-1 (e-book)

This book is by intention and definition a reference work, and it is a genuinely exceptional and invaluable source of knowledge for readers interested in learning about the Tungusic languages and the evolution of the fields exploring this subject from linguistic, historical, and sociological perspectives. The original chapters commissioned for this book project, which was initiated in 2003, were not published together, and three contributors passed away before the volume was finalized for publication. Despite the tremendous loss of talent and lengthy passage of time from its inception to completion, this 543-page book reflects the unparalleled investment and immeasurable expertise of the authors who represent diverse traditions of scholarship in Western and Central Europe, Russia, and Japan, as well as the interconnection of these approaches through the multilingual and international discourses about Tungusic cultures that they have fostered.

From the reader's standpoint, the volume can be considered as serving three purposes: 1) a rationalization of the argument that Tungusic is a legitimate language family, 2) a manual of linguistics who want to understand the "technical" characteristics of the featured languages, and 3) a repository of historical knowledge about languages facing eventual obsolescence, potentially even within the academic sphere.

The editors' choice and the press' acceptance to publish this volume as one of the Routledge Language Family Series may seem like indisputable proof of the Tungusic language family's coherence, given the commercial imprimatur and the shared framework for all the volumes in the series. Nevertheless, ample evidence of why all the member languages belong to a common family is laid out in the first four chapters, the

first aptly titled “Tungusic as a Language Family” (1–18) followed by Chapter 2, “Early Far Eastern Sources on Tungusic,” (19–25), Chapter 3, “Early Western Sources on Tungusic” (26–34), and Chapter 4 “Proto-Tungusic: (35–75).

These chapters build a chronology and biography for the language family. Some sections of these chapters stand out as attesting to the innate coherence of the language family, such as the grammatical framework (14–15) in Chapter 1 and lexical structure (71–72) in Chapter 4, perhaps not coincidentally given that Juha Janhunen wrote both chapters. Chapters 2 and 3 bolster the argument that the Tungusic language family developed as both an organic manifestation of human behavior and as a topic of intellectual investigation with a historiographical survey. This is divided into a section on “Early Far Eastern,” which is organized into subsections about Chinese, Korean, and Japanese sources, and a section on “Early Western,” which is also arranged in three subsections but begins with an overview about the types of sources, followed by parts summarizing sources generated during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although the terms “Eastern” and “Western” seem outdated and not explicitly problematized within the respective chapters, both describe how scholars formed layers of knowledge through ethnographic research and comparative analysis of the languages.

This publication’s second and arguably main function, as a manual providing facts about the languages that can be used for research or pedagogy, is fulfilled in Chapters 5–18. Each chapter is about one language, in order: Jurchen (76–102), Written Manchu (103–38), Siberian Ewenki (139–83), Orochen (184–205), Solon (206–33), Neghidal (234–59), Ewen (260–93), Oroch (294–325), Udihe (326–63), Nanai (364–406), Ulcha (407–35), Uilta (436–62), Spoken Manchu (463–82), and Sibe (483–500). These chapters largely adhere to a similar format, including sections about “Data and Sources,” “Lexicon and Language Contacts,” and “References and Further Reading” with numerals, pronouns, word formation segmental structure, phototactics and morphophonology, converbs, voice and aspect as some of the topics covered in many of them. Variations include sections that are in some but not all chapters, such as “Origins of the Jurchen Script” (84–87); “Complex Sentences” for Ewen (286–88), Uilta (454–55), and Spoken Manchu (477–79); and “Complex Predicates” for Udihe (356–57), Spoken Manchu (475–76), and Sibe (495–96). Although readers are likely to refer to one chapter at a time rather than reading through the whole volume, the similarity of section titles, although not consistently presented in the same order, will help those who want to compare characteristics of two or more languages.

Some details in this part of the volume may be notable to specialists and also pique the interest of readers exploring these languages without prior knowledge. The chapter on Jurchen is separate from those on Written Manchu and Spoken Manchu. The two Manchu chapters are likewise separate from the chapter on Sibe, but there is continuity

between the Spoken Manchu and Sibe chapters written by Veronika Zikmundová. The chapter on Siberian Ewenki concentrates on the characteristics of one Ewenki language and the varieties used in the historical and present-day locales inhabited by Ewenki communities. Readers of all backgrounds will appreciate the largely non-English references in each chapter that complement the English-language descriptions. The volume's utility as a handbook is further enhanced with the inclusion of a chart aligning the Manchu alphabet with four Romanization systems with references (xxiv–xxvi), a map that shows the relative distribution of the languages in their “maximal territories” from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries but has no overt geopolitical markers (xxvii–xxviii), numerous tables in each chapter, and non-Latin language terms in transliteration and their original scripts.

The volume's third purpose, as a repository of valuable knowledge that will probably be difficult to regain in the future, is evident in the last two chapters. Chapter 19 (501–16) by Nadezhda Mamontova places Tungusic languages in the sociocultural and political context in which they exist as of the time of publication, including their legal status in Russia (503), Ewenki as a North Asian language rather than one limited to particular regions of present-day nation-states (504–6) and Ewen as it is specifically in northeastern Siberia (506), as well as future prospects for the usage of the languages (513–14).

Chapter 20, abstractly titled “Tungusic in Time and Space,” is fittingly written by Juha Janhunen as the final chapter. It offers a retrospective view with sections about the “Protohistorical Setting” (527–29) and the “Stages of Expansion” (529–31) and ends with the sober conclusion that “the future of the Tungusic language family looks bleak” (532). These two chapters support the shared themes in the preceding chapters that Tungusic languages evolved through contact with each other as well as languages belonging to other language families and that similarities generated through such interaction may be more important than attempting to fit them into a clear genealogical framework. Janhunen critiques such frameworks for families such as the Altaic and Eurasiatic as being “based on a teleological interpretation of the data and . . . carried out without a sufficiently sophisticated methodology” (519).

Despite the many caveats that the authors reasonably offer for the limitations on their coverage of individual languages and broad subjects, this volume makes an extraordinary contribution with comprehensive descriptions based on authors' extensive fieldwork on spoken languages and examination of extant texts for languages with scripts. It complements other volumes in the series like *The Mongolic Languages*, edited by Juha Janhunen and published in 2003, and *The Uralic Languages* originally published in 1998 and with a second edition published in 2023, edited by Daniel Abondolo and Riitta-Liisa Valijärvi.

Readers should expect some peculiarities, such as using BZ (Before Zero) and AZ (After Zero) instead of BC and AD to mark dates. Although the volume may not quite satisfy the ambitious goal set in its abstract of providing information about “all the individual Tungusic languages,” this publication will have long-term value as not only a reference book but as part of the ongoing debates about how users of Tungusic languages have shaped the history, societies, and cultures of Northeast Asia.