SERGEJ ANATOL′EVIČ STAROSTIN
MARCH 24, 1953 – SEPTEMBER 30, 2005

William Baxter
University of Michigan

On September 30, 2005, the Russian linguist Sergei Starostin died in Moscow, at the age of 52, of a sudden heart attack. Widely known to researchers on Chinese because of his work on the reconstruction of Old Chinese and Proto-Sino-Tibetan, and for his research on the Sino-Tibetan family, he did pathbreaking work on many other language families as well. His passing comes as a deep shock to friends and colleagues.

Sergei Anatol'evich Starostin was born in Moscow on 24 March 1953. His talent for languages must have become obvious at an early age. He was an early winner of the Moscow "Linguistic Olympics" (begun in 1965), a competition for schoolchildren involving the solution of a set of linguistic problems. As a teenager, he was in demand as a resource person for underground rock bands in Moscow who wanted to perform rock music from the US and the UK, because his English was good enough that he could understand the lyrics.

While still in his teens, he attended the university lectures of Aron Dolgopolsky on Nostratic comparative linguistics--Dolgopolsky having taken the place of V. M. Illich-Svitych, the other pioneer of modern Nostratic studies, who was killed in an automobile accident in 1966. (As formulated by Illich-Svitych, the Nostratic hypothesis holds that six language families of the Old World—Indo-European, Semitic, Uralic, Altaic, Kartvelian, and Dravidian—are members of a still older family called Nostratic.) I will not attempt to give an exhaustive list of the languages Starostin studied in the course of his education and career, but I know that they included at least Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, classical Chinese, and classical Japanese (among ancient languages) and English, German, Polish, French, modern Chinese, and modern Japanese.

It was Sergei's work on the reconstruction of Old Chinese which first brought him to my attention; in the 80's, he and I discovered that we had independently arrived at remarkably similar reconstructions of Old Chinese phonology, involving a system of six main vowels. (Essentially the same six-vowel system was also independently arrived at by the Chinese scholar Zhengzhang Shangfang 鄭張尚芳.) In 1987, Starostin visited Ann Arbor for a linguistic conference at the University of Michigan (organized by my colleague Vitalij Shevoroshkin), which brought the "Moscow school" to the attention of American linguists. He was to visit the US on many subsequent occasions.

In addition to the history of Chinese itself, Starostin also did important work on Sino-Tibetan and Altaic language families; and based on his own field research and that of others, he made contributions to both the description and the historical reconstruction of the North Caucasian language family. His most recent major publication is the *Etymological dictionary of the Altaic languages* (Starostin, Dybo, and Mudrak, 2003). This and some of his other major publications are included in the references below.

Starostin worked on the linguistic reconstruction of language families of different levels; see, for example, his reconstruction of the Kiranti family, a subset of Sino-Tibetan (available at http://ehl.santafe.edu/cgi-bin/main.cgi). However, he is probably best known for his support of hypotheses on more distant language relationships, such as Nostratic (described above) and Sino-Caucasian--a putative family including Sino-Tibetan, North Caucasian, and Yenisseian (to which the Siberian language Ket belongs). He believed that it is possible to identify and reconstruct very old language families such as these, without abandoning the traditional method of identifying regular sound correspondences in core vocabulary.

In recent years he has been a major figure in the Evolution of Human Languages project (http://ehl.santafe.edu/) of the interdisciplinary Santa Fe Institute (http://www.santafe.edu/). He also participated in research programs at Leiden University in the Netherlands (from which he received an honorary doctorate in June, 2005), and was the head of the Department of Comparative Linguistics and Ancient Languages at the Russian State University for the Humanities in Moscow. It was shortly after a lecture there that he collapsed and died.

Starostin was a skillful computer programmer, and designed many software tools for doing historical linguistics, including especially the STARLING package for retrieving and analyzing data on reconstructed languages. This package is available for download at his web site <http://starling.rinet.ru/>. The same site includes huge amounts of data on the linguistic reconstructions of many language families, and downloadable versions of many of his publications.

It is difficult for Starostin's friends (scattered around the world) to adequately describe our sense of loss at his death. Sergei was a great scientist, but above that he was a wonderfully kind, gentle man, with a brilliant sense of humor. It was always a great pleasure to be in his presence, and it is difficult to accept that we will not experience this pleasure again.

REFERENCES

D'iakonov, Igor' Mikhailovich, and S. A. Starostin. 1986. Hurro-Urartian as an Eastern Caucasian language. München: R. Kitzinger.

Peiros, Ilia, and S. A. Starostin. 1996. A comparative vocabulary of five Sino-Tibetan languages. 5 vols. Parkville, VIC: Univ. of Melbourne, Dept. of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics.

Starostin, S. A. 1989. Rekonstrukcija drevnekitajskoj fonologičeskoj sistemy [The reconstruction of the Old Chinese phonological system]. Moskva: "Nauka".

Starostin, S. A. 1991 Altajskaja problema i proisxoždenie japonskogo jazyka [The Altaic problem and the origin of the Japanese language]. Moskva: "Nauka".

Starostin, S. A., and S. L. Nikolayev. 1994. A North Caucasian etymological dictionary. Moscow: Asterisk Publishers.

Starostin, S. A., A. V. Dybo, and Mudrak, O. A. 2003. Etymological dictionary of the Altaic languages. 3 v. Leiden: Brill.